

The Immortalists



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHLOE BENJAMIN

Chloe Benjamin was born and raised in San Francisco, California. She graduated from Vassar College in New York in 2010 and pursued and received an MFA in fiction at the University of Wisconsin. Benjamin's first novel, *The Anatomy of Dreams*, was published in 2014. It received the Edna Ferber Fiction Book Award and was long listed for the 2014 Center for Fiction First Novel Prize. Her second novel, *The Immortalists*, was published in 2018 and became a *New York Times* Best Seller. She currently lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with her husband.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Simon's section of the book takes place just as the AIDS crisis is tearing through San Francisco. In the early 1980s, cases of a rare lung infection were found in five young, otherwise healthy gay men in Los Angeles, and around the same time, there were reports of a group of men in New York and California with an aggressive cancer called Kaposi's Sarcoma. By the end of the year, there were 337 reported cases of severe immune deficiency among gay men, and 130 of them had died. By June 1982—the summer that Simon dies in the book—a group of cases among gay men led doctors to believe that the disease was sexually transmitted, and it was initially called gay-related immune deficiency (GRID). By September of that year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognized that the term was misleading because the disease had been contracted by people other than gay men, and the organization used the term AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) for the first time. By 1984, there were 3,064 diagnosed cases of AIDS, and 1,292 people had died. By 1995, complications from AIDS was the leading cause of death for adults 25 to 44 years old, and 50,000 Americans had died of AIDS-related causes. The first treatment for HIV was introduced in 1987, and in 1997, a new therapy called HAART became the treatment standard, causing a 47% decline in death rates.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In *The Immortalists*, the fortune teller's reference to Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher who was active around 500 BCE, points to ancient Greek plays that center on fate and choice, such as [Oedipus Rex](#), [Antigone](#), and [Agamemnon](#). Another classic play that focuses on the themes of fate and choice is Shakespeare's [Macbeth](#). Like *The Immortalists*, all of these plays involve prophecies and illustrate how characters take actions or make

choices that lead to the fulfillment of those prophecies. Benjamin has also cited *Hiding the Elephant* as a major resource for the section of her book that focuses on magic. Other contemporary books that center on fractured family lives include Celeste Ng's [Everything I Never Told You](#) and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Immortalists
- **When Written:** 2014-2018
- **Where Written:** Madison, Wisconsin
- **When Published:** January 9, 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** New York City, 1969-1979; San Francisco, 1979-1981; Albany, 1990-2006; San Francisco, 2006-2010.
- **Climax:** Varya ruins her primate research and reconnects with Luke.
- **Antagonist:** Fate, death, the fortune teller
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Limited (each section is from the point of view of one of the four protagonists)

EXTRA CREDIT

The True Immortalist. Originally, Benjamin intended Varya's research subject to be the "immortal jellyfish," which is one of the few known animals that can revert to a younger stage, rendering it biologically immortal. In an interview, Benjamin explained that because scientists still don't understand exactly how the jellyfish accomplish this feat, she decided to shift Varya's research to primates.

Close to Home. Benjamin, who grew up in San Francisco, has stated that she was partially raised by gay parents and trained as a ballet dancer until college, and so the issues in Simon's section of the book were very close to her heart.



PLOT SUMMARY

In the summer of 1969, the four Gold children—Varya, Daniel, Klara, and Simon—go to a fortune teller who claims that she can predict when a person will die. The woman tells Varya that she will die on January 21st, 2044, when Varya is 88 years old. Varya soon discovers that her siblings are unsettled by their predictions, though none of them reveal exactly what the woman said.

The first section of the book is told from Simon's perspective.

Nine years after seeing the fortune teller, when Simon is 16, the Golds' father Saul dies of a heart attack at 45. Simon is supposed to take over his father's tailoring business, but because the fortune teller told Simon he would die at 20 years old, Simon doesn't want to waste his life preparing for a job he doesn't want. He is also gay, and since he doesn't feel that he can be open about it in his home city of New York, he runs away with Klara to San Francisco.

In San Francisco, Simon finds a job dancing at a club and attends ballet classes during the day. He is thrilled to be able to have sex with whomever he wants, and even though he is initially hesitant about learning ballet, he finds that it empowers him and makes him feel like he can fly. He begins a relationship with another ballet dancer, and he rises in the ranks of the ballet company. But after Simon has been living in San Francisco for four years, AIDS begins to tear through the city. Simon refuses to quarantine, since he believes that he will die in six months anyway and he wants to enjoy what's left of his life. In having sex with many different people, he contracts the disease and, on June 21st, the day the fortune teller predicted, Simon dies.

After Simon's death, Klara mourns with her family and then returns to San Francisco. She is a magician who specializes in sleight of hand tricks, and she also performs a trick called the Jaws of Life, which involves her hanging from a rope by her teeth. Klara loves magic because it expands people's sense of wonder and possibility. After she reconnects with a man, Raj, whom she met during her first days in San Francisco, they become business partners and later romantic partners.

As Klara expands her show, she also starts to have strange experiences. She drinks frequently and often blacks out. She also starts to hear "knocks," which she attributes to Simon trying to communicate with her from beyond the grave. She starts to time the knocks in order to see if they spell out words, and they consistently spell out "MEET ME."

In 1998, Klara and Raj are married, and soon after they have a daughter named Ruby. Klara is exhausted by the grind of performing and finding bookings, and Raj convinces her to go to Las Vegas because they can have more stability and higher pay there. Klara and Raj audition for The Mirage hotel, and they book a show after she stuns executives by making a strawberry appear in her hand. Afterward, however, she tells Raj that she doesn't know where the strawberry came from. Raj is frustrated and a little frightened that Klara appears to believe in her own magic.

Klara drinks more and more, and she yearns to communicate with Simon. She also grows nervous because her predicted date of death is the opening night of her show in Las Vegas. A few days before, she realized that even if she dies, she'll be able to communicate with the living just as Simon communicates with her. Furthermore, she realizes that if she dies on the day that the fortune teller predicted, it will prove that magic is real.

On her opening night, Klara decides to hang herself.

After Klara's death, the family once again gathers to mourn. At the memorial service, Daniel meets Eddie O'Donoghue—Eddie had seen Klara's act several times and was in love with her. He was also the one to discover Klara after she hanged herself, because he planned to see her opening night show. Eddie tells Daniel that he is investigating Klara's death in case it wasn't a simple suicide, and Daniel reveals the story of the fortune teller in case she may have had something to do with it.

Fourteen years later, a few weeks before Thanksgiving, 2006, Daniel is suspended from his job as a military doctor in Albany, New York. His job is to determine whether men are healthy enough to go to war, and his supervisor thinks that he is turning too many people away. Daniel is frustrated because he believes fully in free will, and he feels that Colonel Bertram is hobbling his ability to make decisions. Faced with a two-week break before returning to work, Daniel decides to invite Raj and Ruby to Thanksgiving. Following Klara's death, Raj started to teach Ruby Klara's act, and they have since become extremely successful. When Raj and Ruby arrive, Daniel enjoys bonding with Ruby, particularly because he and his wife Mira have no children.

A few days before Thanksgiving, Daniel receives a call from Eddie, who tells him that they have connected the fortune teller to five suicides. Daniel grows obsessed with the idea that the fortune teller's prediction may have prompted Klara to kill herself, and he looks up information about the woman's whereabouts.

The day after Thanksgiving is Daniel's predicted death day, and Eddie O'Donoghue calls Daniel, explaining that the FBI has cleared the fortune teller. Daniel is furious. Feeling helpless, he takes a gun and drives 10 hours to in order to find the fortune teller and get her to confess that she caused the deaths of his siblings. When he arrives, the fortune teller simply explains that she thought that giving people knowledge would help them live the life they wanted to. When Daniel threatens to kill the fortune teller, Eddie arrives on the scene—Mira had called him and told him where Daniel was going. Daniel is in a frenzy and refuses to back down, forcing Eddie to shoot him.

The final section follows Varya, now 53, who has become a biologist. She is working on a 20-year study that theorizes that a severely restricted diet will increase the lifespan of monkeys. Varya is also an extreme germophobe; since the fortune teller's prediction, she has been fastidious about remaining healthy, which limits her ability to experience the world. In addition, because she didn't want anything bad to happen to her siblings, she kept a distance from them for most of her life and cut herself off from all relationships.

Varya explains her research to a young journalist named Luke. During the week he is at the lab, Varya is dismayed that one of the monkeys, **Frida**, has become so miserable because of the

captivity and lack of food that she has started to hurt herself—biting her own leg and plucking out her fur.

At the end of Luke’s time at the lab, he reveals that he is actually the child Varya had when she was 27 and decided to give up for adoption. Varya explains to him that she had an affair with a visiting professor when she was in grad school and got pregnant. She decided to give Luke up for adoption because she was too afraid to take care of him—too worried that she would lose him. Luke also learns that Varya has been restricting her own diet for years in an effort to increase her longevity, just like the monkeys. He is sad that she is making herself miserable, arguing that a longer life isn’t necessarily a better one.

After Luke leaves, Varya returns to the lab, extremely upset. She discovers that Frida has been chewing on her own arm and is very weak. She tries to get Frida to eat—even giving her food that Varya isn’t supposed to give her—but Frida throws up the food and bites Varya on the chin. Varya is sent to the hospital and fired for compromising the experiment. But afterwards, she starts to make changes in her life. She eats more, decides to teach, and tries to rebuild her relationship with Luke.

The book ends a few weeks later, when Varya and Ruby visit Gertie—the Gold family matriarch—at her assisted living facility. Ruby is in college and plans to become a doctor. Watching Ruby, Varya is amazed at her skill and wishes that Klara could see her. And while she’s sad that Ruby plans to give up performing, she knows that magic and medicine are simply different ways to “keep people alive.”

eventually achieves. He also starts a relationship with a fellow ballet dancer named Robert, his first and only love. When AIDS starts to spread through the city in 1981, Robert argues that they should quarantine, but Simon instead feels that he needs to take advantage of the little time he has left. Simon then begins to have sex with multiple partners outside of his relationship and soon contracts the disease. He dies of AIDS on the day the fortune teller predicted, underscoring how both fate and his choices led to his death.

Klara Gold – Klara is the second youngest Gold sibling. She devotes her life to performing as a magician. As a young child, Klara falls in love with magic because she feels that it expands the audience’s sense of wonder and possibility, a great service to people’s lives. At age nine, when the siblings visit the fortune teller, Klara learns that she will die at 31 years old and that her younger brother Simon, with whom she is very close, will also die young. After graduating from high school, Klara decides to move to San Francisco with Simon so they can take advantage of the relatively short lives that they have. After Simon dies of AIDS, however, Klara feels guilty that her choice to bring him to San Francisco may have contributed to his fate. Sometimes, she tries to obscure these thoughts by drinking to the point where she blacks out. Meanwhile, Klara meets Raj, a mechanic who begins helping her expand her magic show. Klara and Raj quickly become romantic partners, and soon they have a daughter named Ruby. Shortly after Ruby is born, they realize they need more money and decide to travel to Las Vegas in hopes of booking a show there. Klara is able to convince the executives at The Mirage to put on her show, particularly after she does an impressive trick with a strawberry. When she explains to Raj that she’s unsure where the strawberry came from, he grows afraid that she seems to believe in her own magic. Klara’s opening night is set for the date when the fortune teller predicted she would die. As this date approaches, Klara grows obsessed with the idea that Simon is communicating with her from beyond the grave, and she wants to communicate back to him. Klara also wants to prove that magic is real, and she thinks that the best way to do this is to prove the fortune teller right and kill herself on the day the woman predicted. Thus, her death was caused by a combination of fate and choice.

Daniel Gold – Daniel is the second oldest Gold sibling, after Varya. He is 11 years old when the siblings visit a local fortune teller, who tells him he will die at 48. Unlike Simon and Klara, Daniel refuses to believe that the woman’s prediction is real and he develops a philosophy that people create their future through personal choice, not fate. When Simon and Klara choose to run away from home, Daniel is hurt, particularly because this forces him to return home and take care of their mother Gertie. Daniel goes on to become a military doctor, where he is responsible for determining whether young enlistees are healthy enough to go to war. Years after Simon



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Simon Gold – Simon is the youngest Gold sibling, a dancer who dies from AIDS at age 20. When Simon was seven, he and his siblings—Varya, Daniel, and Klara—visited the fortune teller, who predicted Simon’s exact date of death. Knowing that he will die young, Simon chooses to live his life to the fullest. As a teenager, he realizes that he is gay, but he doesn’t tell anyone in his family except Klara, the sibling with whom he is closest. After their father Saul dies unexpectedly when Simon is 16, Klara asks him to run away to San Francisco with her so that he can live openly as a gay man. Rather than doing what is expected of him (taking over his father’s tailoring business), Simon agrees and leaves without telling his family, which estranges them for the rest of his life. Simon spends the next four years taking advantage of his life, since he believes that he does not have long to live. He takes immense pleasure in being able to have sex with whomever he wants, and he also gets a job dancing at a club called Purp, which leads him to discover his passion for dance. When he begins taking ballet lessons, Simon feels suddenly as though he can fly, and he devotes himself to earning a place in the dance company as a performer, which he

and Klara's deaths, he reconnects with Ruby and Raj over Thanksgiving, a few days before his predicted death date. He enjoys looking at photo albums with Ruby and communing over their shared loss of Klara, who died when Ruby was still a baby. At the same time, Daniel hears from Eddie O'Donoghue, an FBI agent who is investigating Klara's death. When he learns that other suicides have been linked to the fortune teller, Daniel grows obsessed with the idea that the woman caused Klara to kill herself and spurred Simon to act recklessly. On Daniel's predicted date of death, Eddie calls to tell him that the fortune teller has been cleared, and Daniel decides to take matters into his own hands. He takes a gun and drives 10 hours from his home in upstate New York to the fortune teller, who lives in West Milton, Ohio. He maniacally tries to get her to confess that she caused Simon and Klara's deaths, trashing her RV and threatening to kill her. He soon discovers that Eddie O'Donoghue has followed him, and Eddie shoots and kills Daniel when Daniel refuses to drop his weapon. Daniel thus has the opposite impulse from Klara—he wants to prove that the fortune teller cannot predict fate—but his actions still lead to his death. In this way, even though Daniel does not believe in fate, he still makes choices that fulfill his predicted fate, just like his siblings.

Varya Gold – Varya is the eldest Gold sibling, a cautious and anxious person throughout the novel. She is 13 when she and her siblings visit the fortune teller, who tells Varya that she is going to die at 88. From that point, Varya becomes obsessively clean, hoping to keep herself healthy and thereby ensure that the woman's prediction is correct. She also distances herself from the rest of her family because they are predicted to die at much younger ages than she is, and she develops irrational worries about causing their deaths. Varya subsequently cuts herself off from all relationships. Her only romantic relationship occurs when she is 27 years old. She sleeps with a professor at her graduate school, and when she becomes pregnant, she decides to give up the baby for adoption. Varya then goes to graduate school to become a biologist, and her research focuses on longevity. When she is in her 50s, Varya works at the Drake Institute and studies monkeys, leading a study that theorizes that a severely restricted diet will lead to a longer life. Varya even tries to follow this philosophy herself—she eats very little in the hopes of increasing her own lifespan. During Varya's research, a young journalist named Luke writes a story on the study, but he soon reveals that he is the child that Varya gave up for adoption. As he learns more about her life, he points out that a longer life doesn't necessarily mean a happier one. This becomes particularly evident to Varya when one of the monkeys, **Frida**, begins to harm herself due to her misery in captivity and her lack of food. When Varya sees that Frida has started to chew her own arm, Varya breaks down and tries to give Frida as much food as possible. However, Frida throws up the food and bites Varya on the chin. Following Varya's breakdown and a stay in the

hospital, she tries to make changes in her life. She eats more, reconnects with Luke, and turns to teaching instead, acknowledging that she cares more about finding meaning and happiness than about living to the fortune teller's predicted date.

The Fortune Teller/Bruna Costello – The Gold children hear about the fortune teller in the summer of 1969. She is a Romani woman who lives in their neighborhood on the lower east side of Manhattan, and they hear that she can tell people when they will die. They decide to visit her, and she tells each of them the date of their death: Simon will die at 20, Klara at 31, Daniel at 48, and Varya at 88. This knowledge plagues the Gold children, and they each live their lives differently based on the prediction that she gave them. Later in life, Daniel learns that the fortune teller has been linked to five suicides, including Klara's. He becomes obsessed with getting revenge on her for the havoc she wreaked on his family, so he goes to her home on his predicted date of death and threatens her at gunpoint. The fortune teller simply says that when people know their fates, they can make informed decisions about their lives. In this way, she argues that people's lives are determined by a combination of fate and choice. When Daniel threatens to kill her, Eddie O'Donoghue arrives on the scene and shoots and kills Daniel, while the fortune teller's own fate is left unclear.

Eddie O'Donoghue – Eddie is a police officer who weaves in and out of the Golds' lives. He first appears in San Francisco when he tracks down Simon, who has run away from home. After Eddie takes Simon to the police station so that Gertie can talk to him on the phone, Klara comes to rescue Simon and Eddie becomes instantly enamored of her. He attends several of her magic shows and tells her how much her performance means to him, but when he tries to kiss her, she rejects him. Years later, after Eddie becomes an FBI agent, he decides to go to Klara's opening night in Las Vegas. He's the person who discovers her body after she hangs herself the next day. When Eddie meets Daniel at her memorial service, Daniel tells him about the fortune teller, which leads Eddie to investigate. He informs Daniel that she has been linked to five suicides, but ultimately the FBI clears her of wrongdoing. This causes Daniel to try to get revenge on the fortune teller for prompting Klara to kill herself, but Eddie follows him to the fortune teller's home. When Daniel threatens to kill the fortune teller and refuses to back down, Eddie shoots and kills Daniel.

Raj Chamar – Raj is Klara's husband and business partner. Raj was born to a very poor family in India and came to the United States with his father's cousin when he was 10 years old. He becomes a mechanic, and he and Klara meet through a mutual friend during her first days in San Francisco. Years later, Raj sees her show and they reconnect. He helps build bigger tricks for Klara's show and becomes her assistant. Soon into their business partnership, they become romantically involved as well. They get married and have a daughter named Ruby

together. After Ruby is born, they tour around in an RV and then book a show in Las Vegas. Soon after, Raj starts to become afraid of Klara: she drinks to the point where she blacks out, she tries to speak to Simon from beyond the grave, and she maintains that her magic is real. Raj tries to get her to stay grounded in reality, but on their opening night in Las Vegas, Klara hangs herself. Afterward, when Ruby grows up, he teaches her Klara's magic act in the hope of keeping Klara's memory alive.

Luke Van Galder – Luke is Varya's son whom she gave up for adoption when he was an infant. As an adult, he tracks Varya down, hoping to learn about his past. Initially, Luke poses as a journalist with the *San Francisco Chronicle* to write a story about Varya's primate research. After he spends a week at the Drake Institute, Luke reveals his true identity, which rattles Varya. While Luke has never met Varya before, he's quite perceptive and frank—he's the first person to explicitly tell her that her life choices aren't making her happy, and that by obsessing over her own longevity, she's sacrificing the things that make life fulfilling and meaningful. Luke also shares some of Varya's OCD. He is afraid of accidentally killing people, which stems from the fact that when Luke was a toddler, he was supposed to stand guard as his older brother Asher checked a grain bin on their farm. Instead, Luke ran and hid, and Asher sank into the grain and suffocated. Luke and Varya connect over their fear of loss, and the two keep in touch after he tells Varya who he really is. His appearance in her life helps her to re-evaluate her priorities and change her future.

Robert – Robert is Simon's boyfriend. Simon meets Robert in ballet class in San Francisco, though Robert is initially standoffish toward the other dancers because he is the only Black dancer in the class. When Simon confronts Robert and tells him he should be friendlier, Robert kisses Simon and their relationship begins. They quickly move in together, and as Simon rises through the ranks of the ballet company, they also perform together. Robert is more cautious than Simon, and so when AIDS begins to spread throughout San Francisco, Robert suggests that they quarantine because they don't yet know how the disease is spread. Simon refuses to do this, and he subsequently starts sleeping with other partners. Simon and Robert then both contract AIDS, and Robert stays with Simon while he dies. After Simon's death, Robert begins a ballet company in Chicago. At the end of the novel, he reconnects with Varya to share some of his memories of Simon with her.

Ruby – Ruby is Klara and Raj's daughter. When Ruby is born, Klara and Raj decide to go on the road and then settle in Vegas, hoping that they can make enough money to give Ruby a more stable life. Ruby is still a baby when Klara dies, and when Ruby is a preteen, Raj begins to teach her Klara's act. Ruby and Raj subsequently book the main act at The Mirage hotel and become very successful—Ruby is the youngest millionaire in Las Vegas. Ruby enjoys reconnecting with Daniel and Gertie

over Thanksgiving, particularly when she and Daniel look at old photos of the family together. Ruby also aspires to be a doctor—like Simon, she feels the burden of keeping up her mother's legacy and instead wants to be her own person.

Gertie Gold – Gertie is the Gold family matriarch. While Gertie's life is long, it's also full of loss; her mother, Klara Sr., died when she was six years old, and her husband Saul dies at the age of 45. Immediately afterwards, her youngest son Simon runs away and then dies four years later. Her next youngest, Klara, dies nine years after that. Following Klara's death, Gertie moves in with her son Daniel and his wife Mira. After Daniel dies in 2006, Gertie has a stroke and she moves to an assisted living facility near her oldest child Varya in San Francisco. Gertie is often overbearing, but she loves bringing the family together whenever she can. She adores Ruby, particularly when Ruby performs her magic show in Gertie's assisted living facility. Gertie helps Varya to understand that merely living to an advanced age does not make life meaningful; joy and fulfillment come from love, family, and feeling connected to others.

Saul Gold – Saul is Varya, Daniel, Klara, and Simon's father, as well as Gertie's husband. After inheriting his tailoring business from his father Lev, Saul devotes his life to working and raising his children. Since his older children have other interests, Saul plans to pass on the business to Simon (which Simon rejects after Saul's death). Saul is a very religious man: Klara remembers him studying the Talmud endlessly. He also enjoys watching Klara's magic tricks, and she believes that they have a kinship because they view magic and religion in the same way: as a means of understanding the supernatural aspects of life. Saul dies unexpectedly of a heart attack when he is only 45.

Mira – Mira is Daniel's wife, whom he marries shortly after Klara's death. Mira studies Jewish art and tracks artworks recovered from the Nazis. When Daniel accepts his job in Albany, Mira becomes a professor at SUNY New Paltz. When Daniel asks Mira to marry him, she informs him that she cannot have children and does not want to adopt, and so they never have children together. Following Daniel's death, she remains close friends with Varya and remarries a man who lost his wife to cancer.

Klara Sr. – Klara Sr. is Gertie's mother and Klara's maternal grandmother, for whom she is named. When Klara is young, she discovers photos of Klara Sr. wearing a leotard while riding a horse and performing the Jaws of Life. Klara vows to live up to Klara Sr.'s name, and this is one of the reasons that she becomes so interested in magic. Later, Klara learns that Klara Sr. died performing the Jaws of Life in 1941.

Commander Colonel Bertram – Colonel Bertram is Daniel's supervisor at the Military Entrance Processing Station. Colonel Bertram questions whether Daniel is too selective when determining whether enlistees are healthy enough to go to war. He places Daniel on two weeks' suspension and threatens

Daniel with a citation that could mean the end of his career if Daniel doesn't write more waivers for people with minor health issues.

Asher – Asher was Luke's older brother. Luke tells Varya that when Asher was a teenager and Luke was a toddler, he caused Asher's death. Luke was meant to watch Asher as he checked for clumps in the grain bins on their farm. Instead, Luke ran away to hide and Asher sank into the grain bin and suffocated.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lev Gold – Lev is Saul's father and the Gold siblings' paternal grandfather. Lev fled the Russian pogroms with his family in 1905 and worked in a garment factory in New York. By 1930, he opened his own business, Gold's Tailor and Dressmaking, which he subsequently left to Saul to run.

Adrian – Adrian is a coworker of Simon's at Purp. As AIDS spreads through the gay community and Robert wants to quarantine, Simon refuses to do so and subsequently begins hooking up with Adrian.

Baksheesh Khalsa – Baksheesh Khalsa is a boy who attended Simon and Klara's high school. They stay with him for a few days when they initially arrive in San Francisco. Raj is one of his roommates.

Arthur Milavetz – Arthur is Saul's business partner at Gold's Tailor and Dressmaking. After Saul dies and Simon runs away from home, Arthur takes over the business and renames it "Milavetz's."

Richie – Richie is one of Simon's coworkers at Purp. He is one of the first people Simon knows to die of AIDS.

Ilya Hlavacek – Ilya is the owner of a magic shop, and he becomes Klara's mentor and trains her for nine years in magic.

Ian – Ian is the first man that Simon sleeps with after arriving in San Francisco.

Gali – Gali is Simon's ballet teacher and the choreographer of Corps.

Benny – Benny is owner of the Purp club and Simon's boss.

Lady – Lady is drag queen who works with Simon at Purp.

Annie Kim – Annie is Varya's coworker at the Drake Institute.

TERMS

HIV/AIDS – AIDS is an acronym for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, and is a set of conditions caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The disease interferes with the immune system, greatly increasing the risk of fatal infections and tumors that rarely affect those with normal immune systems. HIV/AIDS is primarily transmitted by sex, contaminated blood transfusions, hypodermic needles, and from mother to child during pregnancy. HIV was first reported

in the United States in 1981; at the time, it spread primarily through the gay community and was called GRID (gay-related immune deficiency). However, after determining that AIDS was not isolated to the gay community, the term AIDS was adopted instead. In *The Immortalists*, both **Simon** and **Robert** contract HIV and develop AIDS, and Simon dies from the disease in June 1982.

OCD – OCD stands for obsessive compulsive disorder. It is a mental disorder in which a person feels the need to perform certain routines (compulsions) repeatedly or has certain thoughts (obsessions) repeatedly. These activities become so necessary that it negatively affects a person's daily life, often taking up a large amount of time and energy. Many people with OCD understand that their behaviors are illogical, even as they continue to feel compelled to engage in them. In *The Immortalists*, **Varya** suffers from OCD—she is obsessively clean and constantly modifies her behaviors to avoid any risk. She also describes compulsions like avoiding cracks on the sidewalk or blowing out all her birthday candles as quickly as possible in order to protect her siblings from potential danger.

Shiva – In Judaism, shiva is a seven-day mourning period for relatives of someone who has died. During this period, mourners remain at home and family and friends visit those in mourning to pray and grieve with them. Common customs include covering mirrors so that mourners focus on grieving rather than themselves; reading the book of Job while sitting on the ground or low stools; and reciting prayers like the kaddish and the mourner's prayer. In *The Immortalists*, the Golds observe shiva following **Saul's** death.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FATE VS. CHOICE

The Immortalists follows the four Gold siblings—Simon, Klara, Daniel, and Varya—who when the novel begins are part of a Jewish family living in Manhattan in the 1960s. In the book's opening scene, the siblings visit a local fortune teller, who predicts the exact date of each child's death. Simon's and Klara's deaths are predicted to happen when they're relatively young, so they try to take advantage of the little time they have left and leave home as teenagers. Daniel, who is predicted to die at 48, seeks out the fortune teller in his adulthood to prove her wrong. And Varya, who is prophesied to live to 88, tries to ensure this fate through obsessive behavior, avoiding germs, washing

constantly, and so on. Varya's fate is left ambiguous, but for all of the other siblings, their actions lead them to die exactly on their predicted death date. Through these outcomes, author Chloe Benjamin suggests that while fate and choice may seem like opposite concepts, they often go hand in hand. As the Gold siblings demonstrate, knowing one's fate causes a person to make certain choices that actually contribute to the fulfillment of their fate.

Simon's decision to take advantage of his short life leads him to act recklessly and consequently die of AIDS at a young age. When Simon is 16 years old, he runs away with Klara to San Francisco. Concerned that he may die at a mere 20 years old, he thinks, "What if the [fortune teller] is right? The mere thought turns his life a different color; it makes everything feel urgent, glittering, precious." Staying at home would mean that he might squander the rest of his life in school, working toward a future that he would never achieve. Knowing his fate spurs him to want to make the most of what little time he has, which necessarily involves leaving home. In San Francisco, Simon feels liberated living as an openly gay man and a dancer. But when AIDS tears through San Francisco a few years later, Simon soon realizes that he has it, too. As he lies in the hospital, dying, he explains to Klara that if he hadn't known his fate, he would "probably still be home, waiting for [his] life to begin." While there is no way of knowing what might have happened if Simon hadn't left home—if he really would have died at a young age as per the fortune teller's prediction—Simon's knowledge of his fate allowed him to live out his life in the way he wanted, even if his actions contributed to that fate.

Klara also ushers in her own fate through her choices: knowing she will die at 31, she actively chooses to commit suicide on that date to prove the fortune teller's predictions. Like Simon, Klara is also predicted to die fairly young, and so she leaves home with him to make the most of her remaining years. She travels to San Francisco to be a professional magician, enamored of the idea that she can alter people's perceptions of their reality. But although Klara truly believes in magic, her partner, Raj, is skeptical of it. In order to prove that the fortune teller's magic is real, Klara decides to hang herself on her exact death date, thus fulfilling the prediction. Benjamin writes, "[Klara's] been waiting for something to prove that the woman's prophecies were right. But this is the trick: Klara must prove it herself." In other words, knowing about her fate makes Klara actively choose to bring it about, again highlighting how fate and choice are interconnected.

Though Daniel does not believe in the fortune teller's predictions, his choice to prove the woman wrong leads to the fulfillment of the prophecy—illustrating that even those who do not believe in fate can still make choices that bring it about. Daniel trusts the power of free will and refuses to believe the fortune teller when she tells him when he'll die. He holds that Simon and Klara wouldn't have died if they hadn't known about

their prophecies. To him, it was purely Simon's and Klara's actions (their free will) that led to their deaths. Daniel chooses to seek out the fortune teller on his predicted death date to confront her about the detrimental effect that her prophecy has had on his siblings. He holds her at gunpoint in her home, and when an officer arrives on the scene, the officer shoots Daniel as he threatens the fortune teller. Daniel has the opposite impulse from Klara—trying to *avoid* his fate and prove the fortune teller wrong. Yet he, too, falls victim to his knowledge. Because of his hubris in seeking her out on his death date and his determination to prove her wrong, he inadvertently fulfills her prediction. Daniel's outcome thus suggests that fate and choice are both at play; even when a person doesn't believe in fate, they can still make choices that contribute to it.

Although the novel doesn't confirm if she makes it to age 88, the obsessively healthy lifestyle that Varya adopts nonetheless reinforces the idea that her knowledge and choices contribute to the fulfillment of her prophecy. The novel doesn't ultimately reveal whether Varya dies on her exact day, but she does live much longer than Daniel, Klara, and Simon, as the fortune teller predicted. Reflecting on the prediction, Varya recognizes that the prophecy of her death "worked inside her like a virus," and that it did the same thing to her that it did to her siblings. Varya's recognition points to the novel's more subtle thematic arguments about the twining of fate and life: it isn't *just* that a knowledge of their fates resulted in the Gold children ultimately fulfilling those fates, but, more broadly, that their knowledge of their fate transforms the very way that they live their lives. The fact that fate in the novel finds ways to fulfill itself is a neat kind of trick. But the way that fate fulfills itself, through the characters' struggles to embrace or escape that fate, offers a kind of portrait of humanity, of the ways that *all* people make choices about how to live their lives in the light of their own eventual fate of death.



FAMILY AND SHARED HISTORY

At its heart, *The Immortalists* is a story about fractured family life that weaves together each of the Gold siblings' unique perspectives. Throughout much of the siblings' adult lives, Varya, Daniel, Klara, and Simon are estranged from one another, frustrated with each other's choices and flaws. Despite the estrangement, though, the siblings and various members of their family often reconnect after long periods of time to share memories or overcome grief. In this way, the novel suggests that family can be a source of conflict and disagreement, which can pull a family apart, but that family members nonetheless remain connected to one another other because of their shared history and experiences. The siblings view their family as a constant source of tension, and as a result they try to find ways to escape it. Simon, the youngest sibling, is frustrated by the fact that his parents, Saul

and Gertie, expect him to inherit the family tailoring business. These expectations are a source of great anxiety for Simon, particularly because he worries that he will waste his life by conforming to them. He decides to run away to San Francisco with Klara to pursue his dreams of living openly as a gay man, illustrating how the burden of family literally repels him from it. Simon and Klara's decision to run away causes further rifts and tension in the family. Daniel is furious with his siblings because he has to leave his semester at college partway through to tend to their mother after they run away. He then refuses to talk to or visit Simon and Klara for years, even when Simon is battling AIDS. For Daniel, the frustration that Simon and Klara cause makes him want to separate himself from them even further. Varya pulls away from the family for different reasons. Armed with a fortune teller's prediction that she will outlive all of her siblings by at least 40 years, she simultaneously frets over the fact that she might be the cause of their deaths and also wants to stave off the potential grief that she might feel. As a result, she avoids her siblings for years at a time.

Despite all that keeps them apart, the Golds find comfort in supporting each other through shared grief or in recounting their memories—their common experiences are what bond them as a family and bring them back together. After Simon dies in 1982, the three remaining siblings gather in New York City to mourn. Klara is particularly nervous because she hasn't seen her family since she moved to San Francisco with Simon years earlier. When she arrives, however, Klara immediately flings herself into Varya's arms and thinks, "the time apart did not matter, not yet. They were sisters." The embrace happens immediately, before the effects of the time apart can interfere. In this way, the novel depicts how the bonds of family come first and endure, despite any individual tensions that might buffet them. Further, the novel shows how this power of family comes to the forefront in moments of shared grief, and how that shared grief itself affirms the power and reality of family. One of the reasons that Simon's death is so painful for Klara is because his death robs her of some of these shared experiences. She thinks that with his death, she is losing "whole chunks of life that only Simon had witnessed." After Simon's death, Klara partially gives up her estrangement and for a few years Klara returns home to share the High Holy Days with her family. She, Varya, and Daniel talk about Simon, and she expresses how it is "least agonizing to be with people who loved Simon, too." They also laugh about a time when their mother wanted to perform a religious ritual at their father's funeral, which involved swinging a chicken over her head. As the siblings draw on common memories and experiences, Klara realizes that "she had not felt so close to her siblings in years." It is the feeling of solidarity that pulls them closer together and prompts her to keep visiting despite their many differences.

Shared family history can even bring together family members who don't know each other well. Years after Klara commits

suicide in 1991, Daniel connects with Klara's husband, Raj, and teenage daughter, Ruby, over Thanksgiving. Daniel finds solace in talking to Ruby, who looks a lot like Klara. Ruby, too, grows excited when Daniel is able to show her pictures of Klara—who died when she was a baby—that Ruby has never seen. Daniel feels "so contented" sitting and looking at the pictures with Ruby, and Ruby is grateful for the opportunity learn more about her family. Even though they don't really know each other, they take comfort in communing over shared history and bond further as a result. At another point in the novel, Varya also discovers how insuppressible the bond of shared history is. When Varya is 53, a young man named Luke interviews her at work, but she soon discovers this is a ruse and that he is actually her biological son, whom she gave up for adoption when she was 27. Luke seeks her out because he wants to understand his origins. He asks Varya about his father and how he looked as a child. Varya is moved by his questions, thinking of the "memory of the nine months they shared a body and the breathtaking, anguished forty-eight hours that followed." Even though the memory of putting her son up for adoption is a painful one, Varya is nonetheless glad to share this experience with Luke, and she becomes more involved in Luke's life afterward. Though *The Immortalists* is full of examples of the conflict and differences of opinion that naturally pull family members apart, it also shows how the shared memories and experiences of family nonetheless endure, and offer connection that the conflicts can never destroy.



OBSESSION

Several of the central Gold siblings are plagued by obsessive thoughts. Klara believes that her younger brother Simon and father Saul are trying to speak to her from beyond the grave; Daniel fixates on the fortune teller who predicted his and his siblings' dates of death; and Varya is consumed by anxiety about avoiding any kind of harm or disease. In each case, these obsessive, all-consuming thoughts lead the characters to ruin—and in some cases end their lives. Through Klara, Daniel, and Varya, the book emphasizes that obsession is uncontrollable and can inflict irreparable damage on a person's life.

The novel links Klara's obsession with communicating with the dead to her eventual decision to commit suicide, illustrating how obsession can become so uncontrollable as to be deadly. On the fourth anniversary of Simon's death, Klara hears "knocks," which she interprets as Simon trying to talk to her. Klara is consumed by the idea that he is communicating with her, and when she continues to hear the knocks, she starts to time them. Each minute that passes corresponds to a letter of the alphabet: one for A, two for B, and so on. She starts to think that Simon is saying "Meet me." She also views the message as proof that magic is real, and that Simon hasn't fully left her. Ultimately, the knocks lead her to conclude that if she were to

die, she would be able to communicate from beyond the grave as well. She decides to commit suicide on the night of the opening of her show in Las Vegas. She hears rapid knocks as she prepares to hang herself in the penthouse of *The Mirage* hotel and concludes that Simon is beckoning her to him. Even though the knocks are actually coming from someone who is worried about Klara's safety, Klara's obsessive thoughts take on a life of their own, fueling her decision to end her life.

Daniel is plagued by the desire to get revenge on the fortune teller for her predictions, and because his actions in confronting the fortune teller lead to his death, the novel further reinforces the danger in obsession. Following the deaths of Simon and Klara, Daniel is determined to find the fortune teller. He believes that Simon and Klara's deaths were prompted by the woman's predictions, and therefore he wants to get revenge on her. He looks up her background, figures out where she lives, and finds her on the very day that she predicted his death would occur because he is determined to prove her wrong. He is so possessed by the idea of getting revenge on her and proving that she caused his siblings' deaths that he even takes a gun, hoping that she will confess that her predictions were the cause of Simon and Klara's deaths. When an officer arrives on the scene, Daniel irrationally holds the fortune teller at gunpoint and refuses to back down, obsessed with ensuring that she pays for the harm she caused. But instead, the officer kills Daniel—his own obsessive need for vengeance led to his own death.

Varya also exemplifies how uncontrollable obsession can be, as her concern over remaining healthy and protecting her siblings leads her to ruin her relationships with them. The fortune teller predicts that Varya will live at least 40 years after the death of her other siblings. From then on, Varya notes, thinking about the prophecy is like a "virus." She begins avoiding cracks in the sidewalk; on her 14th birthday, she feels it is "imperative to blow out all her candles as quickly as possible, because something awful would happen to Simon if she didn't." She misses three candles, and when Simon blows them out, she yells at him. Later in life, she decides to avoid her family because she is worried about causing their deaths. These thoughts are illogical, but it is precisely their uncontrollable nature that leads her to act irrationally and damage her relationships. Varya continues her obsessive thinking, aiming to protect not only her siblings but also the people around her. She describes to her therapist that "There was a period when the thought of killing a bicyclist while making a right turn caused Varya to follow any bicyclist for blocks, checking again and again to make sure she hadn't." This deep obsession with protecting others causes her to change her behavior in ways that paralyze her; when she grows older, she doesn't have a meaningful relationship with any of her siblings, nor with anyone else. Her need to protect others is so great that she has cut herself off from everyone. Her obsession thus does more

damage than the objects of her fears.

Before his death, Daniel writes a Jewish proverb on a piece of paper: "thoughts have wings." When Varya finds this paper, she understands the "power of the human mind" and recognizes the irreparable harm that she and her siblings' minds have caused them. The proverb suggests, as the book does, that thoughts can act of their own accord, hovering until they can no longer be ignored and wreaking havoc on a person's life.



DEATH, MEANING, AND LEGACY

Throughout *The Immortalists*, death is at the forefront of the Gold family's lives, particularly after a fortune teller provides each of the four Gold children with their exact date of death. Yet the fortune teller simply raises awareness of what all humans know to be true: every person's time on earth is limited. As the book's characters grapple with their mortality, the book suggests that finding meaning in life lies not in trying to stave off death, but rather in leaving a legacy that will allow one's impact to be felt *beyond* death.

Varya, for instance, aspires to leave a legacy through her career, finding meaning in the idea that she might have an impact on future generations. Varya, who lives the longest of the four Gold children, becomes a scientist. She works on a research project that aims to increase the human lifespan. It is unlikely that the impact of Varya's research will be felt in her lifetime, but she views this work as "her contribution to the world" and finds meaning in it because of the impact that it will have on people *beyond* her lifetime. Even after Varya stops working on the research project, she turns to teaching. She finds teaching "invigorating," because she relishes getting "all those upturned faces" interested in her line of work. Not only does she find meaning in her contribution to research, but also in the legacy of ensuring future generations will carry out her work as well.

The novel emphasizes that children can meaningfully carry on the characters' legacies because children contribute to the world following their parents' deaths and in some cases build on their parents' work. Saul, the Gold siblings' father, is very concerned with his legacy. Saul inherited Gold's Tailor and Dressmaking from his parents, and he hopes to pass it on to Simon. Saul teaches Simon about clothing from the time Simon is a child, "bounc[ing] Simon on one knee as he demonstrate[s] how to cut patterns and sew samples." Following Saul's death, Simon recognizes that for his mother (Gertie) and Saul's business partner (Arthur), he represents the hope of continuing the tailor shop. Thus, Simon is intended to serve as a legacy in two ways: carrying on both his father's genes and the family business. Ruby, Klara's daughter, fulfills the same purpose—carrying on her family's work and her mother's genes. Klara dies when Ruby is just a baby, but when Ruby gets to her preteen years, Klara's husband Raj teaches Klara's magic act to Ruby. Raj says that in doing so, he's trying to honor

Klara's memory and continue the legacy of a show that gave people so much joy. Varya acknowledges this legacy when she sees Ruby perform. She observes how comfortable Ruby looks onstage and thinks, "Oh, Klara [...] If you could see your child." Ruby continues Klara's legacy, both by carrying on Klara's genetics past her death and by building on the work that Klara loved so much. Varya has a child when she is 27 years old, following an affair with a professor at her graduate school. She considers getting an abortion, but decides instead to give the baby up for adoption. When Varya is 53, her child, Luke—now 26—seeks her out to ask about her decision. She tells him that she decided not to have an abortion because she was very cut off from the world and hoped Luke would engage in life more fully than she did. Varya found meaning in the idea that her child would build on her life, contributing to the world in a way in which she did not.

By contrast, Daniel's wife, Mira, cannot have children and doesn't want to adopt, and Daniel mourns the fact that he will never be a father. Additionally, when Daniel is 48, he is on the verge of losing his job as a military doctor. The prospect of this throws him into despair, as he thinks, "Without a job, who would he be?" While the other characters value the legacies of their work and children, Daniel's inability to have either one leaves him feeling that his life may not have meaning. Daniel's death after a violent confrontation can be seen as a manifestation of the dead-end of meaning in which he had found himself.

Through the stories of the Gold children, the novel explores the various ways that meaning and legacies can be pursued, how legacies can be both a burden and a release, and how a sense of thwarted meaning or legacy can be debilitating.



SURVIVING VS. LIVING

The Immortalists explores whether a longer life is necessarily a better one. Varya investigates this question specifically through her work as a biologist, studying primates in order to find ways to extend the human lifespan. Varya even tries to follow some of the experiment's hypotheses herself: she severely limits her diet in the hopes that it will help her live longer, and she tries to avoid all potential diseases and germs. Yet over time, Varya realizes that this life-lengthening routine is actually making her miserable, because it restricts her ability to engage in life's basic pleasures and build meaningful relationships. In this way, the story suggests that a longer life is not necessarily a happier one, and that the cost of *surviving* should not be so high as to prevent a person from truly *living*.

In order to live a longer life, both Varya and the monkeys she researches have to engage in lifestyles that make them miserable. The chapters that focus on Varya center on her primate research, which hypothesizes that a severely low-calorie diet will lead to longer life expectancies. Halfway

through the 20-year study, the restricted diet monkeys look much healthier than the control group. However, Varya finds other issues with them. One day, Varya discovers one monkey, **Frida**, has started to pull her own hair out, bite herself, and rock herself in her cage. Even though the monkeys live biologically healthier lives, the despondence caused by lack of food does more harm than good. Varya's life mirrors that of the monkeys she studies. After the fortune teller predicts that she will live to age 88, Varya grows determined to ensure this fate. She follows a restricted, low-calorie diet. She also keeps her home impeccably clean, washes her hands obsessively, and even avoids physical contact with others. However, this obsession creates severe anxiety and unhappiness in her life. When a journalist named Luke, who is writing a story on her research, visits her home, he feels pity for what he views as her miserable life. He says, "to see you like this breaks my fucking heart. You cleared the decks: you had no husband, no kids. You could have done anything. But you're just like your monkeys, locked up and underfed. The point is that you have to live a lesser life in order to live a longer one." Luke's explicit tying of Varya to the monkeys illustrates that she, too, is sacrificing happiness in order to live for a long time. His criticism also implies that a shorter but fuller life would be more satisfying than a longer, empty one.

Simon, Varya's younger brother, represents a counterpoint to Varya's journey, as he chooses to pursue happiness as a sexually liberated gay man at the potential cost of his survival in the midst of the AIDS crisis. When AIDS is first tearing through San Francisco, Simon and his boyfriend, Robert, watch their friends contract the disease. Because so little is known about how it spreads, Robert suggests that they do not leave the apartment. But Simon is terrified at the thought of quarantine, thinking that he "already feels cut off from the world, and he refuses to hide, refuses to believe this is the end." Simon will not give up the liberation of living as an openly gay man and the pleasure of having sex with whomever he wants, and so he chooses to have sex with many partners in addition to Robert. Knowing that this could cut his life short, he still chooses to prioritize a meaningful life over a long one. Decades after Simon's death due to AIDS, Varya meets with Robert and asks him about that period of crisis. Robert explains his and Simon's perspective: "When doctors said we should be celibate, it didn't feel like they were telling us to choose between sex and death. It felt like they were asking us to choose between death and life. And no one who worked that hard to live life authentically, to have sex authentically, was willing to give it up." Even though the community collectively knew that there was danger in having sex, Robert implies in this quote that the cost of giving up such a meaningful part of their life and their identity was too high.

Varya gradually recognizes this perspective, and she also understands that it is more important to find meaning and happiness in life than to cut out all joy in order to survive for a

long time. After discovering that Frida is trying to chew her own arm in hunger and unhappiness, Varya breaks down. She ruins the decade-long study by giving Frida as much food as she wants. Her sympathy—even at the cost of her own research—illustrates Varya’s acknowledgement that what the scientists are doing to the monkeys does not actually provide them with a healthier, better life. Instead, it only provides them with a longer one. After this breakdown, Varya makes changes in her own life: she eats more, allows people to touch her, and finds joy in reconnecting with family members that she’s kept at a distance for a long time. Notably, while the novel makes clear that all of the other Gold children did indeed die when the fortune teller predicted, the novel does not reveal whether Varya dies at the predicted age of 88. This purposeful omission in the narrative implies that it no longer matters to Varya whether she survives to that age; rather, it is more important that she has regained happiness and meaning in living.



MAGIC, RELIGION, DANCE, AND POSSIBILITY

Magic, religion, and dance are integral to several of the Gold family members’ lives: Klara is awed by magic and illusion; Saul finds comfort in religious ritual; and Simon is inspired by ballet. Although each of these activities seem totally dissimilar on the surface, the novel illustrates that the power of religion, magic, and dance lies in the fact that they each enable people to understand life’s greatest mysteries and imagine new possibilities in their lives and the world.

Klara loves magic because it often defies logic and physics, thus expanding people’s perceptions of reality. For Klara, magic is not about deception. Rather, her goal is to “impart a different kind of knowledge, an expanded sense of possibility” on her audience. Magic thus represents the idea that there could be alternative explanations besides sheer logic and fact in the illusions that she performs. Klara also recognizes that magic can fill everyday life with wonder. Once, when the Golds are on vacation on a beach, they see that the water looks completely red. Simon posits that it looks like ketchup; Saul says it looks like the Nile. Years later, in school, Klara learns that it’s really because of algae blooms, but “This knowledge [makes] her feel curiously empty.” Preserving the mystery around the ocean’s red color is more appealing to her than understanding facts, because she likes the ambiguity and wonder in believing that something could have many different explanations. The fact that Klara believes in her own magic asks readers to consider alternate possibilities as well. When Klara produces a **strawberry** in her hand in a magic trick but has no idea where it came from, the novel invites readers to consider mysterious explanations for how Klara acquired the strawberry.

Religion—specifically Judaism—underpins the Gold family’s life, and the characters recognize that it is powerful because it, like magic, explores the world’s mysteries and allows for

explanations beyond reason and fact. Saul is the most devout Jew in the family, and Klara describes him as having read the Talmud “every which way,” sometimes even staring at a single page for days. She understands that for Saul, Judaism is both “a way of living lawfully” but also “a placeholder for what we don’t know.” In other words, religion enables Saul—enables people—to engage in life’s mysteries because it allows them to have faith in a supernatural explanation for things that lie beyond humans’ capacity to understand. In Hebrew school, Klara loves the stories of Judaism, like that of Daniel, a prophet who disobeyed the king and was thrown into the lion’s den as punishment. Miraculously, the lions left him alone. As Klara notes, stories like this “suggest[] that she could do anything,” reinforcing the idea that religious stories expand life’s possibilities. Klara even relates her magic specifically to religion. She explains to an audience that for a long time, she thought magic and religion were opposites—that religion was formal while magic was interested in breaking rules. Yet gradually, she recognizes a deeper similarity between them: that they both believed in “a space where the impossible becomes possible.” Thus, Klara’s comparison of religion and magic reinforces that both require people to suspend their disbelief and consider more supernatural explanations for life’s mysteries.

Dance also expands possibilities for Simon, allowing him to imagine the way the world could be or what he might be able to achieve. When Simon moves to San Francisco as a teenager, he starts taking ballet lessons at a local academy, which houses a company called Corps. Simon notes that unlike other companies, where “male dancers act as bland fairy-tale princes,” the men at this company dance with each other and the movements are modern and acrobatic. For Simon, who is gay, this is appealing, as the company’s routines enable him to envision a world where he can partner with men romantically, not just in dance. Taking dance lessons also enables Simon to find new potential in himself. He expresses how it’s “mysterious” to him, but when he leaps, it’s “as if he’s sprouted wings.” Dance gives him a sense of achievement and freedom, elevating him to a state that he never thought possible. The combination of the words “mysterious” and “wings” also relates Simon’s movement to angels, which further connects dance and religion. Just like magic for Klara and religion for Saul, the power of dance expands his notions of what is possible.



SYMBOLS

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



FRIDA

Frida, one of the monkeys in Varya’s primate

research, symbolizes the idea that a longer, empty life is less meaningful than a shorter, fuller one. Frida is part of a study in which a group of monkeys eat a severely restricted diet to see if this lengthens their life. While Frida does live a biologically healthier life, it quickly becomes clear that she is miserable in captivity. She bites herself, plucks out her fur, and towards the end of the book, starts to chew her own arm. Thus, just because she is theoretically able to live a much longer life, the novel suggests that it comes at the expense of her happiness. In this way, Frida also becomes a stand-in for Varya, because Varya makes the exact same choices: she chooses to restrict her diet and cut herself off from the world in the hopes that it will allow her to live longer, not realizing that it makes her miserable, too. Yet the end of Frida's arc is crucially different from Varya's. Seeing Frida so miserable, Varya gives her much more food than she is supposed to have. Thus, Varya admits that the life these monkeys live might be longer, but it's horrible. Varya, on the other hand, starts to make changes in her own life after this incident—she reconnects with her son Luke, starts to eat more, and is less obsessive about germs. These changes may mean that Varya doesn't live to 88 as the fortune teller predicted, but the years that she has left will be more meaningful.



SAUL'S GOLD WATCH

Saul's gold watch represents the Golds' awareness of their mortality. After Saul dies, his watch is passed down to Simon, followed by Klara, Daniel, and then Varya—the exact order in which the Gold children are predicted to die. Watches are inherent reminders of time, and therefore it is apt that the watch follows this order of ownership; the watch always belongs to the Gold sibling who has the least time left to live and is therefore most aware of time passing. Saul died at 45 and was likely unable to take full advantage of his life because he died so unexpectedly young. Thus, when the watch passed to Simon, who *does* know that he will die young, it becomes a constant reminder of his little remaining time.

When Simon dies and the watch passes to Klara, she also uses the watch to time “knocks” that she thinks Simon is using to communicate with her from beyond the grave. Thus, the watch is a constant reminder that Simon is dead, but it also indicates that Klara is trying to subvert mortality in using the watch to communicate with him. After Klara's death, the watch passes to Daniel, but he immediately gives it to Varya instead. This suggests that Daniel doesn't want to think about his death, an apt decision for his character because he doesn't believe in the fortune teller's prophecy. Giving up the watch indicates that he is actively trying to remain unaware of the time he has left, because he is insistent that he has more time than the fortune teller predicted.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the G. P. Putnam edition of *The Immortalists* published in 2019.

Prologue Quotes

“What are you looking for?” Varya asks.

“Your character. Ever heard of Heraclitus?” Varya shakes her head. “Greek philosopher. Character is fate—that's what he said. They're bound up, those two, like brothers and sisters. You wanna know the future?” She points at Varya with her free hand. “Look in the mirror.”

Related Characters: The Fortune Teller/Bruna Costello, Varya Gold (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15-16

Explanation and Analysis

When the fortune teller examines Varya's hand to deliver her fortune, the fortune teller explains that she's really looking for Varya's character, since it's her character that will determine her fate. This exchange establishes a key theme in the story: the idea that both fate and choice contribute to a person's life path. Varya has already noted that she hates germs, and when she returns home from school (even at only 13 years old) she washes her hands until they're raw. This supports the idea that Varya's character is equivalent to—or at least can provide an indication of—her fate. There is already a basis for the fortune teller to believe that Varya will live a long time because she is obsessively clean. Yet at the same time, telling Varya that she will live to age 88, as the fortune teller does, only exacerbates this behavior, as Varya tries to ensure that the prediction will come true, leading her to become even more obsessive about germs and other health risks. Thus, knowledge of her fate leads her to act in a way that only further ensures her fate.



The fortune teller's reference to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus also harkens back to the classic ancient Greek plays, many of which center on the same themes as *The Immortalists*. In *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, for example, Oedipus and Creon learn of prophecies about themselves and—despite trying to reject the prophecies—they inadvertently take actions that wind up fulfilling their destinies. These tragic figures' choices and personalities thus lead them to meet their fates even when trying to avoid those fates, foreshadowing how the Golds

will do the same thing.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ All the while, something loomed larger, closer, until Simon was forced to see it in all its terrible majesty: his future. Daniel had always planned to be a doctor, which left one son—Simon, impatient and uncomfortable in his skin, let alone in a double-breasted suit. By the time he was a teenager, the women's clothing bored him and the wools made him itch. He resented the tenuousness of Saul's attention, which he sensed would not last his departure from the business, if such a thing were even possible.

Related Characters: Lev Gold, Daniel Gold, Saul Gold, Simon Gold

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Following Saul's death, Simon thinks about how he loved his father's tailor shop as a child—until he realized that he would be expected to take over the business, which is not what he wanted. The passage establishes Simon's importance to Saul, since Saul expects Simon to carry on his legacy. Not only is Simon Saul's child (thereby a genetic extension of Saul), but Simon is also meant to carry on the business that Saul inherited from his own father, Lev. The passage suggests that Saul wants to make sure that the legacy of this family business continues on past his death, and Simon is expected to maintain that legacy.

Yet the passage also provides Simon's countering perspective. Simon relates how his father's expectations are anxiety-inducing for him, because he doesn't want to spend his life at the tailor shop. His relationship with his father is particularly complicated because, as Simon implies here, he isn't sure if his father loves him and attends to him simply because of who Simon is, or if it is because of what he represents (the future of the family line and family business). Simon and his father's relationship thus illustrates how even loving families can be sources of conflict and tension.

Additionally, the passage hints at Simon's identity as a gay man, which has not yet been revealed at this point. Simon's discomfort at lying to his family about his identity is made literal in the language about clothing. Simon doesn't feel comfortable as a straight businessman in a suit like his

father's, nor does he find the women's clothing interesting. That this clothing literally makes him itch is analogous to his discomfort with his own identity at home—it's this discomfort that leads him to flee to San Francisco.

☞ In New York, he would live for them, but in San Francisco, he could live for himself. And though he does not like to think about it, though he in fact avoids the subject pathologically, he allows himself to think it now: What if the woman on Hester Street is right? The mere thought turns his life a different color; it makes everything feel urgent, glittering, precious.

Related Characters: Saul Gold, The Fortune Teller/Bruna Costello, Klara Gold, Simon Gold

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis


On the last night of Saul's shiva, Klara suggests to Simon that they run away to San Francisco together even though Simon is only 16. This quote reveals how Simon is plagued by the fortune teller's prediction. Simon clearly tries to avoid thinking about it, but the meandering language and insistence that he *doesn't* want to think about the prophecy only confirms its importance in his mind. The more he tries not to think about it, the more he can't help but do so, affirming the idea that his thoughts and plans are somewhat controlled by what he's been told about his fate.

The passage's conclusion only confirms how powerful thoughts can be. The more he thinks about the fortune teller's prophecy, the more worried he becomes that she might be right that he only has a few more years to live. The urgency that Simon feels as a result of that knowledge is what fuels his decision to go with Klara to San Francisco. However, it is possible that this action is not a response to his impending death but rather the *cause* of his death: in San Francisco he is able to live openly as a gay man, and he subsequently dies of complications from AIDS. Thus, this passage demonstrates how fate and choice are intertwined in the Gold siblings' lives. It's not clear whether it's Simon's fate to die young or whether the choices that he makes in light of his *belief* in that fate are to blame for his death.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☛ What can Simon tell her? It's mysterious to him, too, how something he thought nothing of before, something that makes him feel pain and exhaustion and quite frequently embarrassment, has turned out to be a gateway to another thing entirely. When he points his foot, his leg grows by inches. During leaps, he hovers midair for minutes, as if he's sprouted wings.

Related Characters: Gertie Gold, Simon Gold

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

When Simon finally talks to Gertie on the phone after he runs away, he isn't sure how to explain his newfound love of dance. This quote illustrates how dancing has become something beyond a practice or even an artform for Simon. Instead, dancing is a way of expanding his idea of what he can be and what he can achieve. Dancing is a key part of his identity now—like his being gay, dancing has transformed from something that made him feel ashamed or upset to something that empowers him. The description of how his legs and movements have improved his body implies that he feels superhuman while dancing—like a better version of himself.

The diction used here also ties into later discussions of religion and magic, as Benjamin illustrates commonalities among religion, magic, and dance throughout the book. The fact that Simon's love of dance is "mysterious" to him implies that it isn't something that can be explained by logic or fact, just as religion and magic rely on explanations beyond logic or fact. And Simon's description of himself as having sprouted wings associates him with an angel figure, reinforcing dance's connection to religion.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☛ It occurs to Simon that he would like to have a life like this: a career, a house, a partner. He's always assumed that these things are not for him—that he's designed for something less lucky, less straight. In truth, it is not only Simon's gayness that makes him feel this way. It's the prophecy, too, something he would very much like to forget but has instead dragged behind him all these years. He hates the woman for giving it to him, and he hates himself for believing her. If the prophecy is a ball, his belief is its chain; it is the voice in his head that says *Hurry*, says *Faster*, says *Run*.

Related Characters: Gali, Robert, The Fortune Teller/ Bruna Costello, Simon Gold

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

After Simon starts performing with Corps, he, Robert, and other dancers return to Gali's house one day to celebrate one of their shows. This passage tracks how much Simon's belief in the prophecy continues to affect him. The metaphor of the ball and chain demonstrates that Simon could ignore the prophecy, but the fact that he believes in it weighs him down and gives him urgency, just as he described in Chapter 1.

Here, the novel connects Simon's urgency to his running. Throughout the early part of the book, Simon defines himself as a runner, and here that interest is tied to the speed at which Simon tries to live his life. The faster he goes, the more he can accomplish, and so he tries to make choices that will allow him to take full advantage of his short life.

The irony is that, because of Simon's knowledge of his fate—and the fact that he puts so much stock in the fortune teller's prediction—he then makes choices that lead him into that very fate. In seeking to take full advantage of the time he has left, Simon chooses to have sex with many different partners, and he subsequently dies from AIDS. Thus it is the very knowledge of his death, and the choices he makes as a result, that leads him to death.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ In the final piece, *The Myth of Icarus*, Simon will perform his first starring role: he is Icarus, and Robert is the Sun.

On opening night, he soars around Robert. He orbits closer. He wears a pair of large wings, made of wax and feathers, like those Daedalus fashioned for Icarus. The physics of dancing with twenty pounds on his back compounds his dizziness, so he is grateful when Robert removes them, even though this means that they have melted, and that Simon, as Icarus, will die.

Related Characters: Robert, Simon Gold

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

When Simon is 18, he lands his first starring role in a Corps

piece, enacting the myth of Icarus. The myth of Icarus as depicted in the ballet is an allegory for Simon's relationships with men. In the myth, Daedalus builds his son Icarus a pair of wings made of wax and feathers and warns him not to fly too close to the sun. As Icarus flies higher and higher, the sun melts the wax wings and he plummets to his death.

Just as the desire to reach new heights is Icarus's fatal flaw, Simon's desire to pursue as much pleasure as possible is his fatal flaw. Aptly, Robert—Simon's most significant relationship and the primary object of his desire—plays the sun, which Icarus pursues when he tries to fly. In both cases, the very thing that Simon and Icarus are pursuing leads to their downfall. Simon's growing obsession with seeking out sexual pleasure leads him to contract AIDS. The fact that Robert (as the sun) takes away Simon's wings and causes him to die foreshadows that Simon's relationships are what will cause his death.

That Simon is grateful when Robert takes off his wings, even though it represents Icarus's death, also has metaphorical meaning. The action suggests that Simon actively chooses to pursue a fuller life and is grateful for the chance to form meaningful relationships, even though they ultimately cut his life short.

quarantine to keep himself healthy (thereby denying himself the pleasure that has made his life worth living) or he can refuse to quarantine and risk dying. Simon clearly comes down on the side of living a more meaningful life, even if it means living a shorter one. While he doesn't know for certain if he will die on June 21st, the possibility of this fate makes life particularly precious for him. To cut himself off from the world when he only has about six months to live is disconcerting to him, and therefore he chooses to engage with the world as much as possible, despite the risk.

Later in the book, Varya asks Robert if he was terrified at the prospect of dying as a result of having sex. In response, Robert makes Simon's argument for him, explaining that the ability for Simon to have sex with who he wanted was integral to his identity and one of the reasons he came to San Francisco in the first place. Thus, to take that away from Simon meant taking away one of the most meaningful parts of his life.



However, the passage leaves open the question that Simon's decision to leave the apartment and to continue having sex with multiple partners might be exactly the thing that sealed his fate. The tragic irony of his situation is that he fears not taking advantage of his life, but Simon's fate and his choices conspire to cause his death.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ Robert paces the apartment. "We need to stay here," he says. They have enough food for two weeks. Neither of them has slept in days.

But Simon is panicked by the thought of quarantine. He already feels cut off from the world, and he refuses to hide, refuses to believe this is the end. He's not dead yet. And yet he knows, of course he knows, or at least he fears—the thin line between fear and intuition; how one so easily masquerades as the other—that the woman is right, and that by June 21st, the first day of summer, he'll be gone, too.

Related Characters: Varya Gold, The Fortune Teller/Bruna Costello, Robert, Simon Gold

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

When AIDS first tears through San Francisco, Robert and Simon are frightened—particularly because no one knows yet how the disease is transmitted. This places Simon in a predicament that establishes the conflict between living a long life and living a meaningful one: he can either

Chapter 9 Quotes


☝☝ "I wish—I wish..."

"Don't wish it. Look what she gave me."

"This!" says Klara, looking at the lesions on his arms, his sharp ribs. Even his blond mane has thinned: after an aide helps him bathe, the drain is matted with curls.

"No," says Simon, "this," and he points at the window. "I would never have come to San Francisco if it weren't for her. I wouldn't have met Robert. I'd never have learned how to dance. I'd probably still be home, waiting for my life to begin."

Related Characters: Simon Gold, Klara Gold (speaker), Robert, The Fortune Teller/Bruna Costello

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

As Simon is dying in the hospital, he tells Klara that he's not mad at the fortune teller because she gave him the permission to live his life in the way that he wanted to. Yet Simon's statements demonstrate the complicated nature of

how fate and choice interact. Because the fortune teller predicted that Simon would die at 20 years old, he made the choice to take advantage of the short life that he had. Yet in doing so, as Klara notes, he may have inadvertently fulfilled his fate—if he had not gone to San Francisco, he may not have contracted HIV. While the book leaves open the possibility that Simon may have died even if he had remained at home, Simon and Klara’s points illustrate that both fate and choice contributed to Simon’s death.


Simon also points out that without the fortune teller, he might still be waiting at home for his life to begin and would never have had the experiences that he wanted. This again supports the idea that Simon would rather have a fuller life than a longer one. If he had remained at home, he would have spent his life preparing for a job as a tailor. But this way, he was able to pursue his passions, even if it meant that his life was cut short.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☛☛ Years later, in school, Klara learned of a phenomenon called red tide: algae blooms multiply, making coastal waters toxic and discolored. This knowledge made her feel curiously empty. She no longer had reason to wonder about the red sea or marvel at its mystery. She recognized that something had been given to her, but something else—the magic of transformation—had been taken away.

When Klara plucks a coin from inside someone’s ear or turns a ball into a lemon, she hopes not to deceive but to impart a different kind of knowledge, an expanded sense of possibility.

Related Characters: Raj Chamar, Klara Gold

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 111-112

Explanation and Analysis

In explaining her love of magic, Klara recounts a beach vacation that her family took where the ocean looked completely red. They each posited possible explanations for the phenomenon, but they didn’t learn the answer until later. Once Klara did learn the scientific reason for the ocean’s color, she felt disappointed—she preferred to wonder about how the ocean could do something so unexpected and strange than to know, logically, how and why it happened. For Klara, the appeal of magic is similar; it allows people to consider that the world might be more mysterious and more full of possibility than they previously imagined and it frees people from the constraints of logic

and reason. Consequently, as Klara notes here, learning about the algae blooms strips the phenomenon of its mystery and wonder. Knowing the reason for the algal bloom doesn’t enrich her life in any way, but not knowing did because it made her feel excited and alive.

Relating the story of the ocean to Klara’s own magic tricks illustrates what Klara wants from her performances. She is not trying to “trick” people with her magic; instead, she is allowing them to wonder and marvel about how she might be accomplishing her feats. Even as the audience understands that there is likely a technical explanation for her tricks, her magic allows people to envision a world in which someone might be able to accomplish something supernatural. Just like the ocean’s redness, Klara’s magic allows for different, more mysterious possibilities, which can enhance people’s lives.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☛☛ In Hebrew school, she loved the stories. Miriam, embittered prophet, whose rolling rock provided water during forty years of wandering! Daniel, unharmed in the lions’ den! They suggested that she could do anything...

Related Characters: Saul Gold, Klara Gold

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 118-119

Explanation and Analysis


When Klara explains why she loved the stories of Judaism growing up, she demonstrates that her love of the religion is linked to her love of magic. Miriam’s story takes place in the book of Exodus, when the Jews were freed from Egypt and roamed the desert for 40 years in search of a new home. In that time, Miriam’s rock traveled with the Jews and provided them with water. This is the kind of inexplicable miracle to which Klara is drawn, because it allows her to believe in events that have no logical explanation.

Likewise, Daniel’s story—drawn from the book of Daniel—defies logic. Daniel was a prophet who disobeyed the king and was thrown into the lion’s den for a night as a death sentence. Miraculously, the lions left him untouched and he emerged from the den the next day. The fact that Klara cites these two stories as the basis for her love of religion illustrates how, in her eyes, religion and magic accomplish similar things. Both introduce supernatural elements into the world, creating ambiguity and wonder.

And for Klara, the magic goes beyond Biblical times—she applies these lessons to herself, envisioning a world in which she can accomplish the same kinds of miraculous feats as those in the Bible, foreshadowing her true belief in her own magical abilities.

Still, Klara could not explain to anyone what it meant for her to lose Simon. She'd lost both him and herself, the person she was in relation to him. She had lost time, too, whole chunks of life that only Simon had witnessed: Mastering her first coin trick at eight, pulling quarters from Simon's ears while he giggled. Nights when they crawled down the fire escape to go dancing in the hot, packed clubs of the Village—nights when she saw him looking at men, when he let her see him looking.

Related Characters: Simon Gold, Klara Gold

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 127-128

Explanation and Analysis

After Simon's death, Klara returns to New York City several times to be with her family, and even though they comfort her in her time of grief, she still stresses how much she misses her brother. In this quote, Klara supports the idea that the strongest bond between family members derives from their shared experiences. For Klara and Simon, this began from the time they were young, when she shared her love of magic with him and she understood his love of men when nobody else did. Being able to share these memories with someone is crucial for her, because they were foundational moments in both siblings' lives. Even when she and Simon fought occasionally, they always came back to each other because of the strength of the bond they had built growing up.

This is part of what makes losing a family member so painful. With Simon gone, Klara not only loses her best friend, but also a version of herself. Simon knew Klara's formative experiences, he saw who she was at her core, and without him, nobody else knows Klara quite as well. This makes her feel lost and adrift, as having a brother who shared these experiences with her anchored her in her own identity. This also reinforces why it is so vital for Klara to keep in touch with her other family members. They too, remember other aspects of her life that no one else can share, and this is the glue that keeps them all together.

Chapter 15 Quotes

Thirteen years later, the woman was right about Simon, just as Klara had feared. But this is the problem: was the woman as powerful as she seemed, or did Klara take steps that made the prophecy come true? Which would be worse? If Simon's death was preventable, a fraud, then Klara is at fault—and perhaps she's a fraud, too. After all, if magic exists alongside reality—two faces gazing in different directions, like the head of Janus—then Klara can't be the only one able to access it. If she doubts the woman, then she has to doubt herself. And if she doubts herself, she must doubt everything she believes, including Simon's knocks.

Related Characters: Simon Gold, The Fortune Teller/Bruna Costello, Raj Chamar, Klara Gold

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

As Klara and Raj tour the country together and perform, Klara begins to dwell on the fortune teller's prediction for her. The first section of this passage emphasizes how much she *wants* to believe in fate. Believing that choice factored into Simon's death would mean that Klara was partially to blame, as she suggested that he come to San Francisco with her.

Klara expresses another reason that she is interested in proving that fate exists: to believe in fate, and that the woman can predict it, would mean that magic is real. The structure of this passage illustrates how obsessive Klara is becoming over believing the woman's predictions. Filled with questions and seemingly logical statements, the passage communicates Klara's breathless worries over whether magic—and subsequently Simon's knocks—are real. This is perhaps the greatest appeal for Klara in believing magic is real: it allows her to believe that Simon is communicating with her from beyond the grave. However, her conclusions are filled with logical fallacies: just because the woman may be a fraud doesn't necessarily mean that Klara is a fraud or that magic is false. But Klara is so consumed by her worries and her desperation that she isn't thinking completely logically.

Additionally, the reference to the Roman god Janus is an apt representation for how Klara thinks of magic and reality. Klara uses the two-faced god to argue that magic and reality are simply two sides of the same coin—magic is just one way of looking at the world, reality another. But the fact that Janus is also the god of beginnings, transitions, and time ties into the idea that Klara has little time left until her own


predicted death day.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ “It’s not enough to explain what we don’t understand.” She lifts the ball and holds it tight in her fist. “It’s not enough to account for the inconsistencies we see and hear and feel.” When she opens her fist, the ball has vanished. “It’s not enough on which to pin our hopes, our dreams—our faith.” She raises the steel cup to reveal the ball beneath it. “Some magicians say that magic shatters your worldview. But I think magic holds the world together. It’s dark matter; it’s the glue of reality, the putty that fills the holes between everything we know to be true. And it takes magic to reveal how inadequate”—she puts the cup down—“reality”—she makes a fist—“is.”

When she opens her fist, the red ball isn’t there. What’s there is a full, perfect strawberry.

Related Characters: Klara Gold (speaker), Raj Chamar

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

When Klara and Raj are auditioning for an act at The Mirage hotel, she performs a sleight of hand trick in which she makes a strawberry appear while describing how inadequate logic is at explaining the world. Her monologue and trick simultaneously prove the same concept: that magic can provide an alternative to reason, a way of affirming—rather than ignoring—a person’s sense that the world might be more than it appears. In noting that the things “we know to be true” (in other words, our rational sense of reality) have “holes” that require the “glue” of magic, Klara suggests that everyone—no matter how rational—has experiences that they can’t understand. Rather than ignoring the pervasive sense that experiences or observations transcend reality, Klara uses magic to ask people to pay attention to their intuition that the world might be more exciting or mysterious than it seems. To Klara, this isn’t deception—it’s life giving. It provides her audience with a sense of possibility and wonder. This also illustrates the connection between magic and religion. Like magic, religion enables people to understand their lives in ways that reach beyond logic and science into the sublime.

The power of Klara’s trick is enhanced by the fact that, immediately following its conclusion, the executive asks when she can start performing at the hotel (whereas previously they had been somewhat bored by her

performance). They, too, recognize the appeal of encountering something that they cannot explain. The appearance of the strawberry also poses the question of faith and magic on a broader scale: Klara later explains that she didn’t know where the strawberry came from, and that it just appeared in her hand. This invites readers to assess their own beliefs, as they are forced to consider the possible explanations for how the strawberry came to be in Klara’s hand and whether they believe in her magic, as she does.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ Klara’s arms begin to shake. Sixty more seconds and she’ll give it up. Sixty more seconds and she’ll pack her rope, return to Raj and perform.

And then it comes.

Her breath is uneven, her chest shuddering; she cries thick, sloppy tears. The knocks are insistent now, they’re coming fast as hail. Yes, they tell her. Yes, yes, yes.

“Ma’am?”

Someone is at the door, but Klara doesn’t pause.

Related Characters: Eddie O’Donoghue (speaker), Raj Chamar, Simon Gold, Klara Gold

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

After Klara decides to hang herself on her opening night, she waits to hear a knock from Simon before following through. This sequence illustrates how Klara’s obsession with speaking to the dead proves fatal for her. The irony is that the knocks actually come from Eddie O’Donoghue, who is trying to make sure that Klara is all right. Yet Klara doesn’t connect the knocks to the person at the door. She has become so convinced that any knocking is a sign from Simon, beckoning her to him, that she doesn’t pause to consider a more logical explanation for the knocks. Instead, she only considers a supernatural one.

Klara’s thoughts thus take on a life of their own, fueling her decision to end her life. Part of her motivation to commit suicide is also to prove that the fortune teller’s powers—and therefore magic—are real. The fact that Klara chooses to hang herself on the very day that she was told she would die illustrates how fate and choice intertwine. She would not have killed herself on this day if the fortune teller had not predicted her fate, but she also would not have died if she

hadn't made the choice to do so. Thus, fate and choice equally contribute to Klara's demise.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☝ In a way, I see religion as a pinnacle of human achievement. In inventing God, we've developed the ability to consider our own straits—and we've equipped Him with the kind of handy loopholes that enable us to believe we only have so much control. The truth is that most people enjoy a certain level of impotence. But I think we do have control—so much that it scares us to death. As a species, God might be the greatest gift we've ever given ourselves. The gift of sanity.

Related Characters: Daniel Gold (speaker), The Fortune Teller/Bruna Costello, Klara Gold, Mira

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 179-180

Explanation and Analysis

When Daniel meets Mira for the first time, he explains his philosophy on God and religion. Daniel's quote clarifies the philosophy that underpins his entire character: he is adamant that people have control over their own lives. This is part of the reason that he enjoys his job as a military doctor, because he chooses who is healthy enough to go to war and who is not. It is also one of the reasons that he values his relationship with Mira, because she *chose* to strike up a conversation with him at his lunch table in this moment, rather than meeting him simply by coincidence.

Daniel's insistence on free will over fate stems from his experience with the fortune teller. Unlike Simon and particularly Klara, he refuses to resign himself to the fate that the fortune teller lays out for him and instead holds that only his choices matter in life. It follows that he then eschews religion: he has no need for a higher being to explain the aspects of his life that he doesn't understand, because he thinks that everything can be explained by people's choices.

The fact that Daniel references God as giving people "the gift of sanity" also foreshadows how without this belief in God—or, at least, without a belief that some things happen outside of anyone's control—Daniel will not retain his sanity. He will become so obsessed with his own choices and with getting revenge on the fortune teller for the harm she caused his family that he will literally descend into madness, and so his quote hints at the danger of believing too much in freewill.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☝ At dinner that evening, he told the story of the near-drowning with pomp, but inside, he glowed with renewed attachment to his family. For the rest of the vacation, he forgave Varya her most sustained sleep-babbling. He let Klara take the first shower when they returned from the beach, even though her showers took so long that Gertie once banged on the door to ask why, if she needed this much water, Klara did not bring a bar of soap into the ocean. Years later, when Simon and Klara left home—and after that, when even Varya pulled away from him—Daniel could not understand why they didn't feel what he had: the regret of separation, and the bliss of being returned. He waited.

After all, what could he say? Don't drift too far. You'll miss us. But as the years passed and they did not, he became wounded and despairing, then bitter.

Related Characters: Gertie Gold, Varya Gold, Simon Gold, Klara Gold, Daniel Gold

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

Daniel recalls a childhood vacation during which he almost drowned in the ocean; afterward, he felt a new sense of forgiveness and attachment towards his family, because briefly believing that he'd lost them made him realize what they meant to him. This episode is formative for Daniel, as it shapes his attitude towards the family's subsequent drift apart. For many years, as the siblings go their separate ways, he assumes that everyone else also understands the value of family and intends to return to being close some day, despite their differences. When nobody else strives to return to the family unit, however, it makes Daniel feel betrayed.

It seems that the difference in attitude between Daniel and his siblings has several sources. For one, none of his siblings had the same experience of nearly drowning and then feeling unparalleled joy at being returned to the family. Perhaps his siblings simply don't understand what fulfillment family could bring them if they reunited. But it's also more complicated. For instance, while Daniel was unconditionally supported by his family, Simon felt that his family only loved him because he was expected to take over his father's business. Furthermore, he wasn't comfortable being out as gay with his family, which meant that he almost certainly did not feel that being reunited with his estranged family would bring him joy. And for Varya, separation from her siblings was self-protective; she loved them so much



that she didn't want to be destroyed by their fated early deaths. So Daniel's assumption that all of his siblings experience family in the way that he does is a bit self-centered, but his siblings are also a bit self-centered in their inability to see how much Daniel wants to be close with them.

When Klara, Simon, and Varya start to pull away from Daniel, this leaves him feeling hurt and abandoned. His bitterness only compounds the separation, as it creates further divisions between himself and his siblings. Ironically, over the years, each of the siblings expresses many of the same feelings as Daniel—that they too feel “the bliss of being returned” in instances when they find themselves momentarily back inside the family's fold. Thus, for each of the siblings, they experience both the tension and frustration of family as well as the comfort that being close to their family provides, just as Daniel describes here.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☝☝ He could not bear to contemplate his return to work on Monday, and what might happen if he holds his ground when it comes to the waivers. Days earlier, he submitted a request to review his case with the Local Area Defense Counsel, a military attorney who provides representation for accused service members. He knows that Mira is right—it's best to be aware of what options he has to defend himself—but the request alone was humiliating. Without a job, who would he be? Someone who sat on a bath mat with his back against the toilet, reading about his brother-in-law's solarium, he thought—an image terrible enough to force him to bed, so that he could fall asleep and stop seeing it.

Related Characters: Mira, Daniel Gold, Ruby, Raj Chamar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis



On the night Ruby and Raj arrive at Daniel's for Thanksgiving, Daniel spends much of the evening googling information about their wealth before slipping into despair regarding his own return to work. Daniel's thoughts here underscore the two aspects of his dilemma that are most frustrating. First, returning to work and agreeing to be more lenient about issuing waivers removes his feeling of power and responsibility. This is the aspect of his work that is most important to him, because it grants him a sense of power and makes him feel that exercising his freewill has an effect

on the world.

But the alternative—losing his job in its entirety—is “humiliating” to him for other reasons. Daniel does not have children, and his job is his primary source of meaning in life. Without either of those things, Daniel feels completely purposeless and impotent. This feeling is highlighted by his observation that he has just been sitting in his bathroom looking up information about Raj's solarium. His vision of himself in that moment is someone who lives vicariously through others and has nothing propelling themselves. In contrast to a person like Raj who has both a meaningful job and a child, Daniel feels that without either, his life is empty.

☝☝ He saw that a thought could move molecules in the body, that the body races to actualize the reality of the brain. By this logic, Eddie's theory makes perfect sense: Klara and Simon believed they had taken pills with the power to change their lives, not knowing they had taken a placebo—not knowing that the consequences originated in their own minds.

Related Characters: The Fortune Teller/Bruna Costello, Klara Gold, Simon Gold, Eddie O'Donoghue, Daniel Gold

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

After Eddie explains that the fortune teller has been linked to a number of suicides, Daniel starts to understand how she might have caused Simon and Klara to fulfill their prophecies. Here he uses the analogy of the placebo effect to explain what happened to them. The placebo effect is usually used to explain how a body can heal when a person simply *thinks* they are being given medicine, even if the medicine is fake. With Simon and Klara, the opposite became true: because they *thought* they were going to die, they created their own deaths.

In addition, Daniel's theory again highlights the power of thoughts and obsession. For Simon, who wanted to take advantage of the time that he had, and for Klara, who wanted to prove that magic was real and that she could speak to the dead, their obsessions became the very thing that ruined their lives. Yet this passage also highlights how the same phenomenon is plaguing Daniel. The more he believes that the fortune teller caused Simon and Klara's deaths, the more bent he is on revenge. And because his decision to seek revenge leads to his death, Daniel also proves how obsessive thoughts can take on a life of their



own and harm people's lives irreparably.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☞ ...Bruna is looking at him with a dubiousness that suggests another narrative: one in which he did not come intentionally at all but was compelled by the very same factors as Simon and Klara. One in which his decision was rigged from the start, because the woman has some foresight he can't understand, or because he is weak enough to believe this.

No. Simon and Klara were pulled magnetically, unconsciously; Daniel is in full possession of his faculties. Still, the two narratives float like an optical illusion—a vase or two faces?—each as convincing as the other, one perspective sliding out of prominence as soon as he relaxes his hold on it.

Related Characters: Eddie O'Donoghue, Klara Gold, Simon Gold, The Fortune Teller/Bruna Costello, Daniel Gold

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 256-257

Explanation and Analysis

After Daniel breaks into Bruna's RV and threatens to kill her, she suddenly realizes that he has sought her out because it is the day that she predicted his death. In this moment, Daniel begins to recognize that fate compelled him as much as it did Klara and Simon. This is a large shift in his character, because he has up until this point been adamant that he is only acting of his own volition. Additionally, the use of the optical illusion in this passage implies that fate and choice may not necessarily be opposites, as they are often thought to be. Instead, they can be contained within the same image, suggesting that they both can contribute to a person's destiny. Certainly, Daniel's journey to the fortune teller has relied on fate: if Eddie had not called him a few weeks prior with news about the fortune teller, if Daniel had not been suspended from his job, if he had not fought with Raj the night before, none of this would have happened. Yet at the same time, Daniel chose to pursue the fortune teller on this exact day and he chose to take a gun, which also certainly contributed to his death.

The additional irony in Daniel's actions is that he is so obsessed with proving the fortune teller wrong that he seeks her out on the very day she predicted his death. But it is exactly this hubris and impulsivity—visiting her on his date of death, driving 10 hours, taking a gun, leaving a trail behind him for Eddie O'Donoghue to follow—that leads to his death at the end of this chapter. This places him in

contrast with Klara: while she wanted to prove that magic and fate existed, Daniel wanted to prove the exact opposite. And yet in doing so, he too reinforced that both fate and choice play a role in the outcome of his story.

Chapter 31 Quotes

☞ When did it begin? She had always been anxious, but something changed after her visit to the woman on Hester Street. Sitting in the rishika's apartment, Varya was sure she was a fraud, but when she went home the prophecy worked inside her like a virus. She saw it do the same thing to her siblings: it was evident in Simon's sprints, in Daniel's tendency toward anger, in the way Klara unlatched and drifted away from them.

Perhaps they had always been like this. Or perhaps they would have developed in these ways regardless. But no: Varya would have already seen them, her siblings' inevitable, future selves. She would have known.

Related Characters: Klara Gold, Daniel Gold, Simon Gold, The Fortune Teller/Bruna Costello, Varya Gold

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

A few days after Daniel's death, Varya recalls her and her siblings' reaction to the fortune teller's predictions. Varya's description here emphasizes how much the knowledge of their fates changed the way they behaved. Varya became obsessively clean to ensure that she could live to 88, as the fortune teller predicted. Her description that the prophecy worked inside her like a "virus" implies that it harmed her from the inside. Instead of protecting her, Varya's obsessive cleanliness and compulsions have paralyzed her and cost her relationships.

Her descriptions of how her siblings changed also illustrates what became their defining traits. Simon was defined by his running—he developed a sense of urgency in life that then led him to run away and take advantage of the time he had left. Daniel, meanwhile, became angry at the power the woman had over him and resolved not to let it affect him. Klara slipped away from them and ultimately detached from reality.

These descriptions call back to the fortune teller's assessment that "character is fate." In each of the Gold siblings, she saw traits already inside them. For example,

Varya notes that she was already anxious, and Klara was already interested in magic. But what the fortune teller did was seal some of these characteristics and make them more prominent. Even if their fates weren't inevitable, the characteristics that they developed as a result of knowing their fates made their destinies inescapable.

☛ She no longer believed that Daniel died of a bullet meant for the pelvis but which entered his thigh, rupturing the femoral artery, so that all his blood was lost in less than ten minutes. His death did not point to the failure of the body. It pointed to the power of the human mind, an entirely different adversary—to the fact that thoughts have wings.

Related Characters: The Fortune Teller/Bruna Costello, Eddie O'Donoghue, Daniel Gold, Varya Gold

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

After Varya learns that Eddie O'Donoghue was cleared of all wrongdoing in Daniel's death, she realizes that what really killed Daniel was his own mind. Daniel was obsessed with proving the fortune teller wrong and insisting that fate did not exist. Varya thus acknowledges the problem with obsessive thoughts, as they ultimately led to his downfall.


Varya communicates the insidious nature of these thoughts through the proverb that Daniel had written down: "thoughts have wings." This figurative language implies that these thoughts are uncontrollable; they have a mobility of their own. In addition, they can hover until a person is forced to confront them, just as Daniel was forced to address his belief that the fortune teller caused his siblings' deaths. Varya's pointed repetition of the proverb indicates that she sees the same issues in herself—she has been diagnosed with OCD and therefore also falls victim to the ruinous nature of obsession.

Chapter 34 Quotes

☛ "Because I'm sad," says Luke, thickly. "Because to see you like this breaks my fucking heart. You cleared the decks: you had no husband, no kids. You could have done anything. But you're just like your monkeys, locked up and underfed. The point is that you have to live a lesser life in order to live a longer one. Don't you see that? The point is that you're willing to make that bargain, you *have* made that bargain, but to what end? At what cost?"

Related Characters: Luke Van Galder (speaker), Varya Gold

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

When Luke and Varya speak together at her condo, Luke opens her fridge and realizes that she follows a restricted diet just as her monkeys do. His response to this discovery supports the argument that living a much longer life does not necessarily mean that a person lives a better life. He observes that because Varya follows this diet and takes other precautions to lengthen her life, she is cutting herself off from many meaningful parts of life. She can't have good food, she doesn't enjoy restaurants, she cuts herself off from relationships, and she lives in a dark and bare condo. In comparing Varya to her monkeys, he is essentially arguing that she lives in captivity, cutting herself off from the world.


In questioning what the cost is of living a life like this, Luke also foreshadows Frida's tragic end and Varya's breakdown. Frida becomes so miserable in captivity that she harms herself and essentially loses the will to live. Likewise, Varya recognizes the misery of the life she is leading and understands that living for a long time isn't worth the cost of cutting out the things that make life meaningful.

Chapter 35 Quotes

☛ "The thought that you could die from sex," Varya says, haltingly. "You weren't terrified?"

"No, not then. Because it didn't feel that way. When doctors said we should be celibate, it didn't feel like they were telling us to choose between sex and death. It felt like they were asking us to choose between death and life. And no one who worked that hard to live life authentically, to have sex authentically, was willing to give it up."

Related Characters: Varya Gold (speaker), Simon Gold, Robert

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 332

Explanation and Analysis

Three months after Varya loses her job, she reconnects with Robert in order to talk to him about his memories of Simon.



His thoughts on the AIDS crisis illustrate a counterpoint to how Varya has lived most of her life. Whereas she focused on living for a long time at the expense of having meaningful experiences, Robert describes the opposite. He suggests that for many people in the gay community at the time, the cost of giving up sex—something that was vital to their identity—was too high.

This calls back to some of Simon's thoughts at the time. Even though Simon knew he might be cutting his life short, his freedom and the ability to have sex with whomever he wanted was vital to his life. While Varya chose surviving for a long time over truly living, Simon chose to retain a meaningful part of his life even at the expense of losing his life earlier than he might have otherwise.

Chapter 36 Quotes

“I think I might like to teach,” she says. In graduate school, she taught undergrads in exchange for tuition remission. She hadn't thought she could do such a thing—before her first class, she vomited in a sink in the women's restroom, unable to reach the toilet—she soon found it invigorating: all those upturned faces, waiting to see what she had up her sleeve. Of course, some of the faces were not upturned but sleeping, and secretly, those were the ones she liked best. She was determined to wake them up.

Related Characters: Varya Gold (speaker), The Fortune Teller/Bruna Costello, Gertie Gold

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 339

Explanation and Analysis

After Varya is forced to resign from the Drake Institute, she tells Gertie that she might want to teach. This is a big step for Varya because it represents another way in which she is reconnecting with the world. Rather than hiding herself away in her office and studying monkeys, Varya wants to interact with other people and share her love of research. After years in which her anxieties led her to cut herself off from others, this step demonstrates that Varya is trying to reengage with the world. And while it certainly still retains a degree of anxiety for her—like vomiting in nervousness—it also gives her an excitement that she has not yet displayed in the book.

Because Varya's research was always meant to be her contribution to the world, now she is trying to leave behind a legacy in a different way. She wants to get the next generation of students invested in her area of research so that they can continue on the work that she has begun. Thus, Varya's priorities have shifted: instead of trying to live for a long time, she is focusing on the legacy that she wants to leave beyond her time on earth. The fact that the novel doesn't reveal whether Varya dies at 88, as the fortune teller predicted, suggests that Varya doesn't care about her date of death anymore. Instead, she is focusing on finding meaning in her present life.



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.

PROLOGUE

The four Gold children—Varya (13), Daniel (11), Klara (9), and Simon (7)—walk through their neighborhood in New York City, in July 1969. The children stop in front of an old building on Hester Street, and a young man opens the door and lets them in. The narration flashes back to the week prior. Daniel hears two boys talking about a woman on Hester Street who can tell fortunes. When he reports this to his siblings, Klara perks up, as she has spent the summer teaching herself one of Houdini's card tricks. Apparently, the fortune teller can also tell when a person will die.

The children argue about whether it is possible for the fortune teller to know a person's date of death. Varya says that she wouldn't want to know her death date, because the fortune teller might say that she will die at a young age. Daniel replies that he would want to know if this were the case so that he could accomplish everything he wanted to before he died. With this argument, Klara, Simon, and Varya agree to go, especially because this is one of the last summers that they will spend all together—next year they will all disperse to different activities.

When the children ask around about the fortune teller, the owner of a local magic shop (Ilya) tells Klara that he's heard of her. The Hindu family who lives above the Golds call the woman a *rashika*. The daughter of the family, Ruby Singh, tells Varya that the fortune teller predicted the exact date of her grandmother's death, which allowed the family to be with her when she died. Ruby says they were glad to have the chance to say goodbye. Varya also asks the men who work at Katz's deli about the woman, but they say that kids shouldn't get involved in something like that.

From the outset, the Gold children—particularly Klara and Daniel—are drawn to magic. Daniel is interested in knowing a normally unanswerable mystery: his fate. He displays a childish innocence about this, not seeming to understand how weighty it would be to know when he will die. Klara, too, likes the idea of connecting with someone who shares her interest in magic and mystery.



As the oldest, Varya recognizes the risk of knowing one's own death in advance. Daniel, on the other hand, frames it as a risk not to know when he will die, since he wants to have a timeframe for his goals. While Daniel certainly underplays the emotional weight of learning about his own death, his argument here foreshadows the Gold siblings' need to find meaning in life before their deaths, especially if they know that they are going to die young. Additionally, knowing that they will soon separate, the Gold children's desire to spend time together underscores the importance of shared experiences in family bonds.



Ruby's story highlights the potential advantages of knowing one's death date, because it enabled the people close to her grandmother to adequately prepare for her death. However, the men who work at Katz's Deli foreshadow how knowing one's date of death could be very different for children, who have their entire life to consider their fate and live their lives according to that fate.



The boys that Daniel overheard talking about the fortune teller give him the woman's address. Varya, Klara, Daniel, and Simon collect their allowances together and hope it will be enough to pay her. Next to Varya's bed she keeps photos of her family members, and she likes noticing the traits that they all share. Her grandfather, Lev, came to New York in 1905 to escape the pogroms in Russia and he worked in a garment factory. By 1930, he opened his own business, Gold's Tailor and Dressmaking, in an apartment on Hester Street, which their father Saul now runs.

Varya is named for Saul's mother, and Klara is named for their mother Gertie's mother. Once, Klara and Varya snuck into Gertie's bedroom and found old photos of their grandparents. Klara Sr. was pictured in a leotard—in one picture she rode a horse, and in another picture she was suspended from a rope, hanging on only by her teeth. When Gertie isn't home, Klara looks at the pictures, vowing to live up to her namesake.

The story returns to the building on Hester Street. Varya, Daniel, Klara, and Simon mount the stairs and knock on the fortune teller's apartment. Behind the door, the woman tells them that they must come in one at a time. Klara goes first. Daniel and Simon nervously follow. None of the children return the same way they came, and Varya is relieved when the fortune teller finally lets her into the apartment. Varya observes various knickknacks, charts, and tarot cards.

The fortune teller examines Varya's palm. Varya can't remember the last time she touched a stranger; after she returns from school each day, Varya washes her hands until they're raw. As the woman looks over Varya's hand, Varya asks what she is looking for. The fortune teller replies that she's looking for Varya's character. She cites Heraclitus, "Character is fate." When Varya says she could change, the woman replies that most people don't. The fortune teller then announces Varya's date: January 21st, 2044, which would make her 88. Varya is relieved, but she realizes that the woman is probably a phony. The woman tells her everything is going to work out okay for her, and Varya leaves out the fire escape.

Lev passing on the family business to Saul introduces the theme of legacy and illustrates how both having children and investing in work allowed Lev to establish a legacy that outlives him, since Saul continues both Lev's family line and the business that his father worked so hard to build. Varya also highlights the importance of shared history in families, knowing that she is shaped by the genetic traits of her grandfather as well as his choice to immigrate to America.



Klara's connection to her grandmother, even though she never knew her, illustrates the pull of shared familial history. Klara is so taken by the woman for whom she is named that she pursues the same line of work and even vows to carry on her grandmother's legacy of performing death-defying acts.



The fact that the children grow very nervous when they are forced to separate highlights the sense of comfort and protection that family bonds can afford. Having individual predictions inherently separates them from each other: without their siblings to share their experience, the children become very afraid of what they might hear.



The fortune teller's citing of an ancient Greek philosopher calls up other ancient Greek texts surrounding fate: plays like Antigone or Oedipus. In those stories, characters who are aware of their fate in advance take dramatic actions to defy that fate but end up adhering to fate nonetheless. In this way, this passage foreshadows how the Golds' choices throughout their lives will, regardless of their intentions, wind up fulfilling the fortune teller's prophecies. The fact that Varya already demonstrates her obsessively germophobic nature (washing her hands until they're raw every day) supports the fortune teller's theory that character is fate, as this impulse towards cleanliness will allow her to live a long life.



When Varya reaches the alley, she sees that Klara has been crying. Varya tells Klara not to believe what the fortune teller said to them—that she made it up. Daniel agrees and says that they should leave. Varya notices that Simon still has the money—he forgot to pay the woman. Daniel says that the woman doesn't deserve their money and angrily starts to walk away. At home, Simon doesn't eat dinner. Gertie asks why he's not eating and Saul tells him to eat. Simon cries out that he hates them all.

Even before the other siblings reveal the woman's predictions for them, Simon, Klara, and Daniel's reactions make it clear that her predictions have upset them deeply. Even as they try to convince themselves that she simply made up the predictions, knowing their fates changes the way they interact with each other and the choices they will make throughout their lives.



CHAPTER 1

Nine years later, Saul dies of a heart attack. All four of the Gold siblings are shocked. Varya returns from Vassar, and Daniel from SUNY Binghamton. The funeral takes place two days later, and Gertie must be dragged through it. In the synagogue and at the cemetery, Simon laments silently that he'll never see his father's face again. Varya and Klara cry, but Simon is unable to. He feels that he has lost not only his father but the person that Saul might have become.

The fact that the Gold siblings reconvene for Saul's funeral establishes how important their familial bond is in times of grief. They are able to comfort each other and Gertie because of this solidarity. Saul's unexpected death at a relatively young age also illustrates the downside to not knowing one's fate. Because Saul died relatively young, Simon becomes aware that his father may not have accomplished all he wanted to before he died.



With Saul gone, the family's roles shift. Varya hides away, and Daniel, only 20, greets guests and leads prayers in their home during the shiva. Klara cleans the kitchen, and Simon takes care of Gertie. Gertie sits shiva with a new devoutness—she always believed in superstition more than God. But now, she practices every rule to the letter, reciting the Kaddish on the floor and trying to read the book of Job. Many of the guests are Saul's longtime employees, including his junior partner, Arthur.

Saul's funeral demonstrates how Judaism becomes a way of understanding life's mysteries through stories and rituals. The book of Job describes a wealthy man with a large family who loses everything, but in the end still believes in the justice and knowledge of God. The story suggests that suffering is a test of faith and thus gives some meaning to Saul's passing and the Golds' grief.



Simon loved to visit Saul's shop as a child, when Saul showed Simon patterns and sewing techniques. But gradually, Simon realized that the shop represented an inescapable future. Daniel planned to be a doctor, which left only Simon to take up the family business. By the time Simon was a teenager, he realized that Saul's attention to him was contingent on Simon's involvement in the business. At the shiva, Arthur and Gertie grieve together, but they thank God for Simon.

While families can be a source of comfort in times of shared grief, here Simon acknowledges that his family has been a source of tension as well, because he had always felt obligated to take up tailoring. Saul viewed Simon as a way of continuing his legacy in building his tailoring business, but he seemed not to consider what Simon himself might want for his future.



On the last night of shiva, the siblings gather together in the attic while Gertie sleeps. Daniel and Varya are leaving the next day to return to college—Varya is studying biology and Daniel hopes to be a military doctor. In two weeks, Klara will graduate from high school. Rather than go to college, she plans to become a professional magician. She has been studying under Ilya Hlavacek since she met him at the magic shop nine years earlier.

Klara's interest in magic has only grown since her encounter with the fortune teller. Magic not only represents a way for her to understand life's mysteries but also to create new possibilities for herself. Rather than take on a traditional life, Klara pursues a more unconventional route.



Varya and Daniel are shocked by Klara's decision to leave, especially with Gertie still grieving. Simon thinks that Varya has always been rigid—on her 14th birthday she yelled at Simon for blowing out three of her birthday candles. Klara says she had always planned to leave, even though she doesn't know where she wants to go yet. She also says that Simon will be there to take care of Gertie, though this bothers Simon greatly. He dreads the prospect of being alone with Gertie, of taking over the business, and of losing Klara, his greatest ally.

Simon supports Klara's decision, though, telling Daniel and Varya that they only have one life. Klara then brings up the fortune teller, daring her siblings to admit the dates on which the woman predicted they would die. Varya goes first: January 21st, 2044. Klara is surprised—she says the woman told her she'd be 31. Daniel says he doesn't believe the woman, but he admits his date: November 24th, 2006, when he is 48.

Klara asks Simon about his date. He simply replies, "young," and refuses to say anything more. Varya states that the fortune teller only has power over them if they give it to her and that obviously the woman was a fraud. Varya says she's sorry that they went to the woman, and Klara blames Daniel for making them go. As they start to argue, Simon grows furious. He's frustrated that they all get to escape while he has to remain. He yells at them to shut up.

Varya and Daniel sleep in their beds and leave the next morning, but Klara and Simon climb up to the roof. In the morning, Simon asks Klara not to leave. She instead suggests that he come with her to San Francisco. Simon is stunned. Only Klara has ever known that he is gay—together they sneak out to clubs where Simon can be himself. It was at one of these clubs that a go-go dancer told him about San Francisco, where gay people can live openly. Klara acknowledges that Gertie would be angry, but that going to San Francisco would let him start his life. This idea seduces Simon. Though he often tries to avoid the thought, he wonders if the fortune teller is right. Simon agrees to go and tells Klara how much he loves her.

Simon's memories reveal some of the anxieties his family brings him, from petty tensions over blowing out birthday candles to greater divisions regarding their life paths. Having to stay in New York City, care for Gertie, and take up the family business while being abandoned by his siblings imbues all of Simon's family interactions with a sense of obligation and frustration.



Klara's reaction to her age at death reveals the burden of knowing one's fate. Even though Varya and Daniel deny believing the woman's prediction, the possibility that she might be right causes Klara to doubt her life path and potentially encourages her to make bolder choices. While Varya and Daniel are taking a more traditional route in life and going to college, Klara doesn't because she understands that she may not live long enough to pursue long-term goals.



The book seems to agree with Varya's philosophy—that the woman only has power if they believe in her. Varya means that they won't be anxious if they don't give into their fear that the woman might be right, hinting at the danger in obsessing over the woman's predictions. But the book proposes another interpretation: by giving power to the woman and changing their actions according to her predictions, they may actually fulfill the woman's prophecies.



Simon and Klara do exactly what Varya just noted—give the woman power by believing her. Because both are worried about dying relatively young, they decide to run away together to take advantage of their lives, fearing that their time left may be short. In Simon's case, the desire to make the most of his time is also prompted by the anxiety and obligation surrounding the family. Because of this tension, he feels the need to escape—to live for himself rather than to fulfill his family's expectations of him.



CHAPTER 2

Two weeks later, Klara finishes her last class. She chooses not to walk at graduation and packs her suitcase. Simon also packs discreetly, choosing to leave behind most of his belongings. He takes a few pieces of clothing, **Saul's gold watch**, and his running shoes. Klara's suitcase is larger—it includes a magic box that turns into a table, which was handed down from Ilya. She packs it with her tools: silk scarves, silver rings, quarters, cups, balls, and a very worn deck of cards.

That night, Simon lies awake for hours. He feels guilty about abandoning Gertie and the business. He comforts himself by imagining that he is a salmon, swimming away from his stream to the ocean, then returning home years later. Early the next morning, Klara wakes and says goodbye to Gertie. As Simon tiptoes out the door following her, Gertie appears and asks where he's going. He says that he's going to get a sandwich, adding that he has to live his life. She lets him go but tells him to stop by the shop after school. He chokes out an agreement and flies down the stairs.

Simon and Klara take a bus to San Francisco, and when they arrive, Simon feels elated. They stay for a few days with a boy from their high school who now goes by Baksheesh Khalsa as well as his two roommates, Susie and Raj. Simon and Klara look for apartments in the Castro, one of the first gay neighborhoods in the United States. They find a very small apartment above a club called Purp. They can just afford the first month's rent and decide to take it.

To celebrate their new home, Simon and Klara go dancing and take LSD. At the club, Simon kisses a man (Ian) covered in green glitter. Simon and Ian take a cab back to Ian's apartment, a modern place in the financial district. Simon is nervous—this is his first romantic encounter of any kind. Ian gives Simon a blow job, and then the two have sex. Simon is stunned—the pleasure is better than he could have imagined.

The next morning, Ian leaves for work. Alone in the apartment, Simon calls Gertie in New York—it's been six days since he left. Daniel picks up, startling Simon. Daniel angrily berates Simon for running away: he had to return to comfort Gertie and will be taking incompletes for the semester. Daniel tells Simon that he should get on the bus that afternoon to come home. Simon replies that he's not coming back and starts crying. Daniel softens, explaining that Gertie and the business need Simon. He says that Gertie is thinking about calling the police because Simon is technically a runaway. Simon hangs up.

Saul's gold watch symbolizes the Gold children's awareness of their mortality, as it is a constant reminder of the time that they have left on earth. The fact that it begins the story with Simon is apt; of his siblings, he has the least amount of time left and therefore he is the most aware of his mortality.



Simon's vision of the salmon demonstrates that even though he knows he is about to cause conflict and even estrangement between himself and his mother, he can always find comfort in returning home to his family. Simon's final exchange with his mother encapsulates his concern about staying in New York City—that he will be forced to take on the burden of carrying on his father's legacy when he wants to be able to live his own life.



Fueled with the knowledge that they are going to die young, Simon and Klara are able to make impulsive decisions like moving into a place with very little money. They're not planning to make long-term financial decisions or be prudent about taking risks because they believe that they will die soon. It's not clear whether their decisions will actually cause their fate, though, or whether they merely result from their knowledge of the future.



Simon's first few days in San Francisco illustrate how knowing his fate enables him to find fulfillment in ways he never could have achieved in New York. No longer hampered by the expectations of family, Simon is able to be who he wants to be and find greater meaning and satisfaction in his own life.



Here, Simon gets a taste of how his decisions have affected his family. Not only has he abandoned the business that his father wanted him to inherit, but he is also placing additional burdens on Daniel who has to put his own goals on hold to be there to comfort his mother. Simon's decisions cause a great degree of estrangement between him and Daniel, as Daniel's fury at Simon causes him, in turn, to pull away from Simon.



CHAPTER 3

Simon starts looking for work, and he asks about a job at the club under their apartment, Purp. Benny, the owner, suggests that Simon can dance on a pillar, as one of his dancers quit the week prior. Simon agrees. That night, Simon and five other men put on purple makeup from head to toe. Lady, a drag queen, helps Simon with his makeup. Simon gleefully strips and puts on a purple thong. When the club opens, Simon stands on his pedestal and starts awkwardly moving his hips. Lady coaches him, telling him to be looser. He starts to relax his muscles and tosses his head. He feels electric.

At Simon's shift the next day, Benny says that Simon needs to keep up with the other men—he looked too awkward. Simon says that he's not in bad shape because he runs. Benny responds that dancers don't run; they fly. Because they're artists. Benny suggests that Simon take a ballet class at a nearby dance school. Simon is hesitant at first, but he eventually agrees.

For Simon, dancing represents his ability to be who he wants to be, as he would never have the freedom to get a job like this had he stayed in New York City. Additionally, dancing at Purp—nearly naked—is an extension of Simon's sexual liberation, and the two become inextricably tied in Simon's mind. Thus, dancing at the club enables Simon to imagine new possibilities in his life and to pursue pleasure in new ways.



The story frequently references the fact that Simon is a runner. This piece of his character is something of a metaphor, as Simon is racing against time and his impending death. Of course, he does this when he runs away from home, but here, Benny suggests that his athleticism opens up new kinds of possibilities for Simon, since dancing means being able to find new joy in his life.



CHAPTER 4

Simon nervously enters the Ballet Academy of San Francisco and finds a pair of slippers in the lost and found. The Israeli instructor, Gali, starts to lead the class, calling out various ballet positions. By the time the warm-up ends, Simon's legs are burning and his toes cramp. When the class finishes, he runs to the bathroom and throws up in the toilet. Another dancer, Robert, comes into the bathroom and asks if Simon is okay. Simon nods and stumbles out into the street. He is filled with a desire to become like the other male dancers: "expert, majestic, invincibly strong."

In June, the Castro hosts a Freedom Parade, and Simon is stunned to see 240,000 gay people celebrating together. Harvey Milk shouts on a bullhorn about ensuring rights for gay people, and Simon kisses several of Purp's other dancers. He's thrilled at being able to date and have sex with whomever he wants. Klara, meanwhile, starts working at a temp agency, and when she returns each day she's moody until she's had her first drink. There are also daily voice messages from Gertie, Daniel, and Varya, desperately asking Simon to come home. Varya says that if he doesn't come back, she'll have to put off graduate school. Klara tries to placate them while Simon simply avoids talking to them.

Even though Simon is hesitant about taking the ballet class, dancing at Academy quickly becomes a meaningful endeavor for Simon. The knowledge that he will die young leads Simon to make the opposite choice from someone like Varya or Daniel. Rather than wasting time in college or trying to set up a future career for himself, Simon wants to find meaning and fulfillment in doing something purely for his own benefit.



Simon's choices continue to exacerbate the tension between himself and his family. He wants to be able to choose his own life and is afraid of wasting it, but he is also slowly becoming obsessed with his feelings of liberation. Meanwhile, Daniel and Varya, both of whom have considerably more time than Simon does, are trying to prepare for the future by completing school. Each sibling is trying to live their life based on the knowledge that the fortune teller gave them. Additionally, here Benjamin foreshadows Klara's alcoholism and how she uses drinking as a coping mechanism for her unhappy and obsessive thoughts.



One day when Simon returns from Academy, Klara is practicing with her scarves. She says she's quitting the temp agency and starting her own show. Simon says it's ridiculous to think that she'll make money that way. Klara is frustrated that Simon gets to do what he wants while she has to get a temp job. She says that he doesn't think about anyone but himself. Simon reminds her that she was the one who asked him to come to San Francisco. He says if she's feeling so bad, she could go back to New York. Klara seethes and washes dishes.

Simon knows he has been selfish, but he thinks that that's why he goes to Academy—to maintain some discipline and pursue self-betterment. By the end of the summer, his body has stopped hurting and Academy feels like a home. Academy also has its own company, Corps, which Simon likes because the male dancers don't act as "bland fairy-tale princes." Instead, Gali's choreography is modern and acrobatic.

Robert is in Corps. Simon hasn't spoken to Robert since he saw Simon throwing up in the bathroom. Robert warms up alone, and the other men aren't sure if he's gay. Robert stands out not only because he is solitary but also because he is a Black ballet dancer. When Simon helps Gali with Corps rehearsals, he watches Robert dance. One day after rehearsal, he smokes with Robert and compliments his dancing. When Robert asks what he could do better, Simon says that Robert could be friendlier. Robert concedes the point and suddenly leans in and kisses Simon.

CHAPTER 5

Simon thinks about Robert's kiss the whole train ride home. But just before he gets through his door, a cop (Eddie O'Donoghue) stops him and asks if he's Simon Gold. When Simon says yes, the cop puts him in the car and takes him to a nearby police station. Once there, the cop hands him a phone, and Simon hears Gertie on the other end. Gertie sobs, asking why Simon left. Simon apologizes, but he says that he has to live the life he wants. Gertie then informs Simon that Arthur took over the business—it's now called Milavetz's—and Simon feels ashamed.

When Gertie asks about Simon's dancing, Simon doesn't know how to explain it. He thinks that dancing makes him feel like he has wings. Gertie then tells Simon that if he doesn't want to come back, she doesn't want to see him anymore. They hang up. Simon is stunned, feeling suddenly that he is without a safety net. The cop takes Simon outside by the shirt collar. He yells at Simon, saying that people like him just live off the city like parasites. Suddenly, Klara appears and rescues Simon. She asks the cop's name, and he gives it—Eddie O'Donoghue. She says she'll remember that and pulls Simon away.

Klara emphasizes that magic does for her what dancing does for Simon; both disciplines allow them to find meaning in ways that they aren't fully able to quantify. They feel purposeful when following their passion, and it expands the possibilities of what they can achieve in their lives. Simon's words hurt Klara so deeply because he is questioning what she'll be able to accomplish in her magic.



This is another example of how dancing opens up new possibilities for Simon. Rather than reinforcing the role of men as "fairy-tale princes" who presumably partner with women, Corps enables Simon to envision a world in which he can partner with other men both in dance partnerships and romantic ones.



Robert and Simon's relationship fulfills the vision of a dancing partner that he referenced in the previous passage. He is not a fairy-tale prince who has to support a beautiful princess like in most dances; instead, he is able to achieve an equal relationship with another man.



Simon understands the ramifications of his decision most fully here, learning that the family business no longer belongs to their family. In leaving, he eradicated the part of his father's legacy that Saul hoped Simon would continue after his death. However, as Simon notes, taking over the business would have come at the expense of Simon's own happiness and ability to find meaning in life.



This passage shows the dual nature of family. Families can be sources of tension and anger, which is what causes the estrangement between Gertie and Simon here. But families can also be protective. Despite the fact that Klara and Simon have just had a heated fight, she still protects him when he needs her. Also, even if he can't fully express it, Simon reiterates how dancing makes him feel as though he has supernatural abilities, imbuing dancing with magic and significance.



CHAPTER 6

In October, Robert and Simon's relationship is still tentative, and they haven't yet had sex. Robert is frustrated at Simon's crudeness and worries that Simon is ashamed of what they're doing. In November, Harvey Milk and the mayor of San Francisco are shot and killed. The city grows somber, and thousands of people march in a vigil for them that evening. The Gay Men's Chorus sings a hymn. As he walks, Simon wonders what God thinks of him—according to Leviticus, he's an "abomination." Simon concludes that he must either be a mistake, or that there's no God at all. Simon scans the crowd. He and Robert lock eyes and they reach for each other.

Simon and Robert return to Robert's apartment and have sex—first aggressively, then more tenderly. Afterwards, they sit in bed and smoke. Robert says that he met Harvey Milk once, and that the world needs more optimistic people like Harvey. However, Robert himself isn't optimistic—he often feels out of place as a gay black man in San Francisco. Robert asks why Simon doesn't go to the bathhouses, and Simon explains that they scare him. Inwardly, Simon worries that he would get too caught up in their pleasure and that he'd never leave.

Robert then tells the story of how he came to San Francisco. He grew up in Los Angeles and played football in high school, hoping to get a scholarship to play in college. But he was really close with another guy on the team, Dante, and they both could tell that they were different from the other guys. One day after practice, they had sex in the locker room. Someone must have seen them, because the next day Robert got kicked off the team and Dante lost his scholarship. Both of them got beat up badly by teammates, and Dante was left tied to a fence and died. So Robert came to San Francisco and started taking dance, because no one would kick him out for being queer. Simon holds Robert to comfort him.

In April, Gali calls Simon. He urgently tells him that one of the dancers in Corps is injured, and Gali asks Simon to stand in for the dancer that night in their performance. Simon agrees. That night, Simon tries to ignore the audience as he performs and focuses instead on his movements. After they bow, Simon grabs Robert and kisses him in ecstasy; the other men cheer.

Leviticus 18:22 is often interpreted to prohibit homosexuality, implying as Simon notes here that homosexuality is an "abomination." In this way, Simon can only conclude that he has no place in Judaism. Thus, part of the reason that Simon does not feel the same pull towards religion that Saul did is that religion undermines his ability to value himself, rather than helping him love and accept himself (as dance does).



While Simon is glad to have his relationship with Robert, another part of him is drawn to the unending pleasures that he could find in bathhouses, implying that he fears that his love of sex could consume his life if he didn't keep it in check. These thoughts foreshadow Simon's eventual obsession with cruising, even at the cost of his happiness with Robert.



Robert's story demonstrates how romantic relationships can create the same kind of closeness shared by family. Robert and Dante grew close because of their shared experience as gay men and the discrimination they faced as a result. This is also why Simon and Robert grow close. Although Simon never faced the same kind of violence, he came to San Francisco in part to be able to escape discrimination, just as Robert did. It is this bond that keeps them together, and it enables them to provide comfort for each other through difficult experiences.



Again, dancing gives Simon a newfound confidence. Previously he has described it like flying, and here his performance literally elevates him to a new plane of happiness and possibility in his relationship.



That fall, Simon is given a role in *The Naughty Nut*, which is Corps's version of *The Nutcracker*. It's a huge success, and Gali throws a party at his house to celebrate the company. Simon is amazed at Gali's home and thinks he would love to have a career, a house, and a partner. He's always assumed that these things are not for him, not only because he's not straight, but also because of the prophecy. He's frustrated that he believes the fortune teller, but the prediction gives his life a sense of urgency. At the party, Robert tells Simon that he got a new apartment, and Simon floats the idea of becoming roommates, admitting that he likes Robert.

CHAPTER 7

In January 1980, Klara helps Simon and Robert move into their new apartment. After she leaves, Simon and Robert kiss, happy to have a place to themselves. Simon rises through the ranks at Corps and becomes a full company member. Klara returns to the dentist's office, working as a receptionist in the day and a restaurant hostess at night. She keeps every bit of savings for her show.

On Sundays, Klara and Simon have dinner together, and she shows him a picture of Klara Sr. in a burlesque show. She says that Klara Sr. arrived at Ellis Island in 1913 from Hungary as an orphan. She married Otto Gorski, a Wild West Rider with Barnum and Bailey. She shows Simon the photo of Klara Sr. suspended from a rope by her teeth, which she called the Jaws of Life. Klara explains that she's training herself to perform the feat, which she says was not a trick—she just hung on.

Klara goes on to say that Otto was killed in a riding accident in 1936, and Klara Sr. moved back to New York with Gertie. In 1941, she performed the Jaws of Life in Times Square, but she fell and died. Klara knows that Gertie, who was six at the time, doesn't like to talk about it. Simon is worried that Klara wants to perform the Jaws of Life. Klara says she's not going to die—she refuses to. Simon points out that everyone who lives says that. He then asks what her act is called; she replies, "the Immortalist."

Even when Simon is at his happiest, the prophecy lingers in the back of his mind. Knowing that he will die young completely shifts his priorities: he doesn't want to waste time setting up a future that he will never achieve. Thus, not only has the fortune teller's prediction led him to come to San Francisco, but it also spurs him to try to find as much pleasure as possible while he still can.



While Simon is able to take advantage of his life in the short term, Klara works to be able to do the same. Like Simon, rather than putting savings toward a distant future, she tries to ensure that she can follow her dreams of becoming a professional magician in the near future.



Klara reaffirms her connection to her late grandmother due to their shared name and interests. Klara's desire to model her tricks after her grandmother illustrates the power of family bonds even among members who never knew each other. Klara also intends to continue on the legacy of her grandmother's work by recreating her feats. Lastly, the fact that the Jaws of Life didn't have a "trick" encapsulates Klara's philosophy of magic—that it's a way of enlarging a person's notion of what's possible, not an act of deception.



Klara's connection to her grandmother suggests that she might have a similar fate. In addition, Klara naming her act "The Immortalist" illustrates that she is concerned with her legacy, implying that her act and her name live on after her death.



Simon feels like his happiness is too good to last. By the summer after next, he'll be 20, and the fortune teller's predicted date is getting closer. In the winter, Simon has a starring role in *The Myth of Icarus*: he plays Icarus, while Robert is the sun. When he performs, Simon "soars" in a pair of large wings made of wax and feathers. He is relieved when Robert removes his wings in the piece, even though this means that Icarus will die. When Robert carries him to center stage at the end of the piece, he whispers that he loves Robert. Robert sets him down on the stage and covers him with the wings. They spend the next two years in easy bliss, growing comfortable in their relationship.

The Myth of Icarus is an allegory for Simon's relationships with men. Like Icarus, Simon wants to fly higher and higher, excited at the prospect of finding pleasure and the freedom to do what he wants. And yet, the story foreshadows that this is exactly what proves to be his downfall. Whether or not Simon's fate is sealed when the fortune teller predicted his death, his choices—like Icarus' choices—lead to his death. Robert covering Simon with the wings to represent Icarus's death foreshadows Simon's own fate.



CHAPTER 8

In dance class one day, Gali picks on Simon regarding his alignment. Afterward, Simon commiserates with Tommy and Beau, two other guys in the class, and he goes out to lunch with them. Robert doesn't join, and he glares at Simon when Tommy puts his arm around Simon's shoulder as they walk away. Simon tells himself that he's not doing anything wrong. Most of the men at Academy are flirtatious, and it's not his fault if Robert doesn't join in. After lunch, Simon and Tommy see a flier tacked up on a pharmacy window. It reads "THE GAY CANCER" and has photos of a young man with purple splotches over his body and mouth. For the rest of the day, Simon can't get the images out of his head.

Simon continues to exhibit an obsession with being able to be romantically involved with whomever he wants. At the same time, the book foreshadows how this obsession could be his downfall. At this time, in 1981, the world is just discovering the "gay cancer"—which is soon known as AIDS. This moment in the novel is filled with dramatic irony, because the AIDS is now known to be transmitted through sex. This gives Simon's fate a feeling of inevitability, particularly given the fact that he is so invested in his sexual liberation.



In the winter of 1981, Richie, one of Simon's coworkers at Purp, goes to the doctor for an eye issue, and Simon covers his shift. The next day, Richie is back in the club, laughing and dancing, but a few weeks later, Richie is dead. Soon, the hospital fills up with gay men and newspaper articles describe the cancer, but no one knows how it's transmitted yet. As the disease becomes more widespread, Robert tells Simon that they should stay in the apartment. Simon is panicked by the thought of quarantine, as he refuses to be cut off from the world. He's also worried that the fortune teller may be right, and that he'll die by June 21st.

Simon continues to usher in his own fate. Afraid that he might die by June 21st regardless of his actions, he chooses to continue to live normally. Yet this is the very thing which leads to his death, proving how the knowledge of his fate causes him once again to make choices that bring him closer to that fate. Additionally, Simon's choices introduce another theme: the idea of living rather than surviving. Knowing that he could be cutting his life short, Simon still chooses to do what is most meaningful to him, rather than choosing to cut himself off from the joy of dancing or being with others.



Robert tells Simon that he shouldn't work at Purp anymore. Simon says he needs the money, but Robert counters, pointing out that he makes money at Corps and that working at Purp is just a vice for Simon. Robert says that all Simon really wants is to be able to have sex with whomever he desires. Simon leaves the apartment, ashamed and angry. Soon after, Simon and his coworker Adrian go out together. When Adrian drives Simon home, Simon reaches out to touch Adrian and they begin an affair.

Simon's decision to have sex with Adrian only proves Robert's point and illustrates how, even in the midst of an epidemic, Simon refuses to give up any of the freedom that he has found. His obsession with maintaining a sexually liberated lifestyle therefore may come even at the cost of surviving.



A few weeks later, Simon goes to see Klara's show in a small bar. She performs skillfully, but her tricks are humble. Only a few people remain in the bar when she performs the Jaws of Life. Hanging onto a rope by her teeth, Klara rises to the second story windows and then floats back down again. Simon knows there's no trick—just strength and lightness. It reminds Simon of both a levitation and a hanging.

Afterward, Simon meets up with Klara in the green room. He watches as the manager shakes her hand and gropes her. When he leaves, Klara steals a wad of bills from the manager's jacket. Simon rebukes her for stealing, but she rebuts that he isn't one to talk. She heard that he started screwing around with Adrian, and she scolds him for cheating on Robert. Simon waves Klara off, but he admits inwardly that Klara doesn't know the half of it. He's been fooling around with strangers in parks, restrooms, and movie theaters.

On the first day of June, Simon notices a dark mark on his abdomen. He sits in the shower and sobs. When he stands, he notices that Robert has come in. Simon tries to hide the mark, but Robert won't let him. Simon apologizes profusely and says they should be getting to the theater. Robert disagrees and hails a cab.

CHAPTER 9

Simon lays in a bed in San Francisco General Hospital. The glands in his neck are swollen; he has bad nerve pain and can't sleep. Klara and Robert alternately stay overnight in Simon's room. One night, when he is alone, Simon decides to call Daniel. He tells Daniel that he's sick, but Daniel only stiffly responds that he's sorry to hear that. Simon asks about Daniel's life. Daniel says that he's in medical school and just got home from class. Daniel asks if there's anything he can do for Simon, and Simon says no.

By June 13th, Simon has become very weak. He tells Robert about the fortune teller, explaining that she told him he would die young, and that's why he ran away. When Robert leaves for a moment, Klara lies in bed with Simon. Klara asks what date the woman gave, and Simon says Sunday. He says he's not angry with her—without her, he wouldn't have come to San Francisco, met Robert, or learned to dance. Simon realizes that Klara suggested they go to San Francisco because of him. She explains that when he said he was going to die young, she wanted him to be able to have the life he wanted.

Just like dance, Klara's ability to hang on to the rope with her teeth expands Simon's idea of what is possible for the human body to achieve. Like Simon's descriptions of himself "flying," here Klara does the same thing. His reference to a hanging, however, foreshadows the potential danger in the trick.



Simon's escapades underscore how much of an obsession with pleasure he has cultivated. He is so desperate to take advantage of the remaining time he has that he relentlessly pursues sex. But as the AIDS epidemic lurks in the background, Simon's actions are reckless and leave open the possibility that if he does die in the next few months, he likely brought it upon himself.



Here, the consequences of Simon's actions become evident. While it is uncertain whether Simon might have avoided his fate if he made different choices, the knowledge of his fate led him to make choices that sealed it.



Simon and Daniel's exchange illustrates how their conflict has naturally pulled them apart, to the point where Simon doesn't know what Daniel has been doing in his life, while Daniel doesn't know that Simon is dying. Still, Simon reaches out to Daniel in this moment because, as family, they have an unassailable bond that pulls them back together.



Bringing up the fortune teller in this moment demonstrates the profound effect that her fortune had on Simon and Klara. As both of them knew that they were going to die young, they wanted to take advantage of the short time that they had. But there is still a possibility that Simon coming to San Francisco is actually what prompted his death, reaffirming that knowing his fate led him to make choices that ultimately sealed that fate.



Over the next few days, Robert and Simon lay together watching videos of great male dancers. Simon thinks how lucky he was to know Robert. He makes Klara promise to get Robert into a trial for a new experimental drug if Robert has the disease. Klara promises. Simon says he loves Robert over and over, and when Robert says it back, Simon is finally able to sleep.

Simon's final moments encapsulate how he took advantage of the little time he had: he built a meaningful relationship and pursued his passions. Even if he didn't live a full life, he wanted to find meaning within it, illustrating that sometimes short, full lives can be more satisfying than long, empty ones.



CHAPTER 10

Klara has become an expert at many tricks, but what she cannot do—what she won't stop trying to do—is bring Simon back. When Klara arrives for a gig, she rigs her rope for the Jaws of Life. She prefers to perform in clubs, particularly because she likes performing for adults. Most adults claim not to believe in magic, but Klara knows this isn't true—the trick is to get them to *admit* they believe in magic. Two years ago, Klara began to perform the Breakaway in the Jaws of Life. Rather than floating back down to the ground, she plunges, eliciting gasps from audience members who think something has gone wrong. But the rope catches just before she reaches the ground. When she bows, she whispers to the audience, “I love you all,” a mantra inspired by Howard Thurston.

The opening passage of Klara's section of the book foreshadows Klara's obsession: trying to remain connected with Simon following his death. Klara's performance in the Breakaway also expands her audience's worldview and gives them other explanations for the feats she is performing. While they believe that Klara must have made a mistake, she demonstrates that she really has a superhuman ability to hang on to the rope.



CHAPTER 11

In February 1988, Klara performs in a Cabaret theater to an unreceptive audience. But afterward, a man approaches her, and she recognizes him as Raj, one of the first people she met in San Francisco. They go out to a café and start talking. When Raj asks about Simon, she explains that he died of AIDS when he was 20 years old. She's grateful that now she has a name for what happened, but she quickly changes the subject because talking about Simon upsets her.

Even six years after Simon's death, Klara is still grieving him deeply. At the same time, Klara feels connected to Raj because of the memories of Simon that they share, reinforcing how shared experiences can pull people back together even after they have not seen each other for long periods of time.



Klara asks about Raj, who is a mechanic. He explains that when he was growing poor up in India, his dad wanted him to be a surgeon, and Raj moved to the U.S. when he was ten with his dad's cousin. He says he quickly figured out that he preferred fixing things instead of people. Klara talks about her own journey, explaining that initially the grind of performing was exciting, but now she's tired of doing it alone and constantly trying to get bookings. She does still get excited about changing the way people see the world, though.

Raj demonstrates how his own father, like Simon's, viewed him as a means of ensuring the family legacy. Raj's father hoped that he would achieve more than he had and would build upon his hard work to make a better life in America. Additionally, even though Klara is tired of the practical aspects of producing her magic shows, she still appreciates how magic can expand a person's worldview.



Raj suggests that Klara cut the small magic in her act and perform bigger tricks. She says that she'd have to get real equipment and an assistant. She starts explaining a few tricks she'd like to do—one where a cage with a bird completely disappears in the magician's hand. The Proteus cabinet is another: it is a cabinet on casters that's shown to be completely empty, and then after it's closed, a knock comes from inside and a person appears. Raj suggests that the tricks are accomplished through a collapsible cage and mirrors. Klara agrees but says that the mechanics have to be flawless to achieve the illusions.

Klara goes on, explaining that her favorite trick is Second Sight, invented by Charles Morritt. He asked for objects from audience members and then his assistant, who was blindfolded and facing a wall, would identify the objects. Raj suggests a few solutions, all of which Klara debunks, saying that she's thought about it for years. Raj says they'll just have to think harder.

The illusions that Klara cites provide examples of how magic can alter and expand someone's worldview. When audiences don't understand how something is done, there is a sense of wonder and possibility when they can consider that an illusion might have many different explanations. Klara herself finds wonder in attempting to figure out how the illusions are done.



Second Sight is another example of the excitement and wonder that can result from trying to figure out how illusions are done—even in someone who is very familiar with magic. In describing the trick without providing the solution initially, the novel also invites the reader to play into this wonder and consider their own possible explanations for the mystery.



CHAPTER 12

Once, on a family beach trip in New Jersey, the Golds discovered that the ocean looked completely red. Simon suggested that it was ketchup, and Saul suggested that it looked like the Nile. Years later, Klara learned that the color was due to algae blooms, but she was disappointed that the explanation took the mystery away. When Klara performs, she hopes to impart this same kind of mystery, adding to people's perceptions of reality and expanding their sense of possibility.

In the 8th century B.C.E., Homer wrote about Proteus, a sea god who could tell the future, but who would change shape to avoid people asking about their fortunes. Almost 3,000 years later, Raj builds a Proteus cabinet for Klara. He sets up the mirrors precisely so that when the doors are open, Klara is hidden and the mirrors reflect a side wall. The illusion is perfect.

Raj reinvents himself as a magician as he and Klara become both business partners and romantic partners. He starts teaching himself tricks like the East Indian Needle Trick, in which he swallows loose needles and thread, then regurgitates them strung. He helps Klara book new venues, and he builds her a mechanical bird for the Vanishing Birdcage that she can animate. She loves how he fills her life with energy.

The red ocean is an early example of Klara's attraction to magic. Her disappointment in learning the scientific reason behind the ocean's color highlights how she prefers the ambiguity and wonder in believing that something could have many different explanations.



The reference to Proteus again emphasizes the appeal of maintaining a sense of mystery, as he changes shape in order to avoid people who are desperate to understand one of the mysteries of life. Klara does the same thing in the cabinet, transforming reality and instilling a sense of mystery. Additionally, Proteus's ability to see the future ties back to the fortune teller, emphasizing the potential danger of learning one's fortune and implying that it should be avoided.



Klara is drawn to Raj because he enables her to pursue her dreams. He recognizes the value in trying to fill others' lives with wonder just as Klara does, and he builds on her show with his own tricks. Just as Simon and Robert connected over dance, Klara and Raj find common love and meaning in magic.



One day in May, Klara thinks back to a time when people thought they could speak to the dead. She recalls a story of the two Fox sisters who claimed they heard rapping sounds from the dead and used a code based on counting to translate the signals. Thinking about this, Klara has a revelation about Second Sight: that Morrilt and his assistant used a code based on time—the amount of silence between the words to indicate what kind of object it was. She and Raj start to practice the trick together. Years later, even after they've had a daughter, Klara never feels as close to Raj as when they perform Second Sight.

Two days before their opening at Teatro ZinZanni, Raj asks if Klara picked up a wire to finish the Vanishing Birdcage. Klara says she thinks she forgot. The day before, she had been plagued by Simon and Saul's absence and Gertie's disappointment, so she drank until she blacked out. Raj is worried that she's lying about forgetting to pick up the wire, or that she doesn't care about the show as much as he does. Klara assures him that she cares about the show more than anything.

CHAPTER 13

The narration flashes back six years, just after Simon's death. Klara returns to New York City. Despite the time she spent away from her family, she is grateful to hug Varya and see Daniel again. Gertie insists on a Jewish burial for Simon. Growing up, Klara enjoyed the stories of Judaism, if not its rules—she likes the story of Miriam, whose rolling rock provided water for 40 years, or Daniel in the lion's den. The stories suggest that she can do anything. But praying with her family at Simon's funeral fills her with a new appreciation for the prayers: they connect Simon and Saul to the living Golds.

Three months after Simon's death, Klara returns to New York for the High Holy Days. It is still difficult to be around people, but it is most comforting to be with people who also loved Simon. Still, soon into her visit, she and her siblings start to grow angry with each other. Daniel is frustrated that Simon cut them out of his life and that Klara didn't call them when Simon got sick. Klara said it wasn't her right to call, but inwardly she burns with guilt. She wonders what might have happened to Simon if she hadn't suggested he go to San Francisco.

Klara's thoughts about the Fox sisters foreshadow her own fixation with speaking to the dead. Additionally, Raj and Klara's shared experience of performing Second Sight gives them an unbreakable bond. Klara even believes that the trick is a greater bond than having a daughter together, demonstrating how powerful a shared experience and passion can be.



Klara uses alcohol-induced blackouts as a remedy for her uncontrollable thoughts. Yet even trying to stop the thoughts creates tension between her and Raj, demonstrating how obsessive thoughts are causing problems in her relationships and preventing her from accomplishing her dreams.



When Klara comes home, the fact that she and Varya are able to provide each other with a comforting embrace in a time of shared grief is what draws them back together despite their previous estrangement. Klara also relates religion to magic here, exposing their similarities. Daniel was a prophet who disobeyed the king and was thrown into the lion's den for a night as a death sentence. But miraculously, the lions left him alone and he emerged unscathed. In Miriam's story, she had a sieve-shaped rock that traveled with the Jews when they were exiled from Egypt and roamed the desert for 40 years. Over that time the rock provided them with water. In both cases, the stories introduce supernatural explanations for some of life's mysteries.



Klara's return home demonstrates both the comfort and the frustration of being around family. She is glad to be around people who have shared the experience of losing their brother, but at the same time, she is annoyed that Daniel is picking on Simon for leaving and remaining estranged. Klara's thoughts here also acknowledge her own role in Simon's death—that she chose to go to San Francisco and take Simon with her, which may have set his fate in motion.



Klara also feels guilty that Varya is staying home to take care of Gertie. Varya put off grad school and is working as an administrative assistant at a pharmaceutical company. One night, Klara sees Gertie hugging Varya in Gertie's room. Klara is ashamed, feeling that Varya has earned their mother's love and she has not. Gertie, meanwhile, spends the Days of Repentance in misery, guilty that she turned Simon away. She prays, begging Simon to forgive her.

Four months later, in January 1983, Klara notices Eddie O'Donoghue in one of her audiences—then she notices him at two more shows. After the third show, she confronts him. He says that he saw Simon's picture in the paper after he died and wanted to apologize for being so hard on him. Eddie also tells Klara how much he loves her show—how it gives him faith. Her show reminds him of superheroes, how it's "possible to be more than you [are]." Klara is amazed at his sincerity and she starts to cry. Suddenly, Eddie leans in to kiss Klara. She protests, and when he does not stop after a few seconds she shoves him backwards and runs away.

That fall, Klara returns to New York once again for the High Holy days. Daniel is in med school at the University of Chicago now, and Varya is studying molecular biology and disease at NYU's graduate school. Klara feels very close to her siblings, and even Gertie seems lighter. Gertie suggests that the Golds perform a ritual in which they swing a live chicken over their heads, causing them all the burst into laughter.

Still, Klara is still pained when she thinks of Simon. There were whole chunks of her life that only Simon had witnessed, like mastering her tricks as a child, nights sneaking out to clubs in New York, and their life in San Francisco. They were always the closest of the siblings. One day while she is visiting New York, in September of 1983, Simon knocks for Klara, like the ghosts rapping for the Fox sisters. When she hears the knock, she is stunned—but then she thinks that she is just getting carried away.

On the fourth anniversary of Simon's death, June 21st, 1986, Klara decides to walk to the Castro. Many of the gay clubs have closed, but Purp is still standing. Klara kept in touch with Robert until 1985; she had gotten Robert into the trial for the experimental medication, but the pills made him sick and he stopped taking it. By October, every patient in the trial was dead, and Robert moved back to L.A. When Klara returns home from the Castro, she takes a bath. Suddenly, she hears the same crack that she heard in New York. She says, "if it's you, do it again," and the crack sounds again.

Klara's disappointment and jealousy knowing that Varya has earned Gertie's love illustrates that family members' bonds are based on their shared experiences. While Klara was in San Francisco, Varya stayed at home to take care of Gertie following Simon's death, and living together and comforting each other through a time of grief strengthened that bond.



Eddie's monologue illustrates that his passionate response to Klara's show is based on Klara's exact philosophy. Klara loves magic because it enables people to expand their worldview and imagine that more is possible than they once believed. Eddie's comparison of her show to comic books—to heroes with supernatural abilities—supports this view of magic.



Despite the conflict that arises between them, shared experiences and joy are what bring Klara back together with her family. Sometimes they aren't as close, particularly because they now all live very far from each other. Yet the common ground between them pulls them back to their home.



One of the reasons that Simon's death is so painful for Klara is because she has lost the one witness to some of her most important life experiences. It is her desire to regain their bond that makes Klara think she is receiving some kind of communication from Simon—and it's why she ultimately becomes obsessed with speaking to the dead.



Unlike the previous knock in 1983, this time Klara begins to give credence to the idea that Simon is communicating with her from beyond the grave. Just as magic expands Klara's worldview, it enables her to believe in these supernatural knocks. This incident sows the seeds of her obsession with the knocks, as she tries to discern their meaning.



CHAPTER 14

In June 1988, Klara and Raj perform at Teatro ZinZanni—the nicest theater she’s ever played in. On a monitor, Klara watches Raj as he performs, explaining that life isn’t about defying death, but about transforming. As long as a person can transform, they cannot die. In the act, Second Sight is a success, as is the Vanishing Birdcage. She and Raj are booked for ten more shows.

Three months later, Klara flies to New York for the High Holidays once again. She tells Varya gleefully that she thinks she and Raj might get married. Secretly, Klara knows that they plan to go to City Hall when she returns from New York—and that Klara is also going to have a baby. It’s a surprise, but she’s excited to have a baby with the man she loves, which she describes as “turning one scarf into two.”

Klara stops drinking. By the third trimester, her mind is clear, but there’s too much time for Klara to sit and think. She imagines the baby, sure that it’s a boy and that they’ll name him Simon. But when Klara gives birth in May, the baby is a girl. She and Raj name the baby Rubina and call her Ruby.

Varya, Daniel, and Gertie visit in June. Klara shows them the Castro and the ballet. Daniel tells Klara about his new girlfriend, Mira. Gertie adores Ruby, and Varya has lots of advice. She and Gertie are surprised to find that Raj and Klara don’t have basic things like a binky or childproofing equipment for their apartment. Raj assures them that they have everything that they need. Klara is annoyed at her family, but when they leave the next day, she misses them. With them in San Francisco, she was able to ignore that Simon and Saul were missing.

In October, Klara continues to hear Simon knocking. Ruby is startled by the knocks, but Raj doesn’t hear them and gets frustrated at Klara’s insistence that they are there. One day, Raj suggests that they go to Vegas and expand their show. Klara is hesitant, thinking that Vegas is too gaudy. She says she’d rather travel around together. Raj agrees to this plan, simply insisting that they leave behind the ghosts of San Francisco.

Raj’s speech ties into the idea of legacy: that rather than defying death, one can outlive death through a legacy. However, Raj’s speech also foreshadows Klara’s own thoughts on her death—that she doesn’t want to try to avoid the fortune teller’s prediction, because the point of life is not to defy death.



The metaphor Klara uses for having a baby—of turning one scarf into two—suggests that having a child with someone she loves fills her world with as much wonder and meaning as magic does.



Benjamin hints at the disruptive nature of obsessive thoughts here. Having too much time to think makes Klara anxious, and it is one of the things that spurs her to drink after Ruby is born.



Each time Klara’s family visits, Klara finds ways in which they are exasperating. Yet at the same time, she values that they continue to return to each other, particularly because she can’t reconnect with Saul and Simon, so connecting with family is the next best thing.



Klara’s obsession with the knocking continues to the point where she believes that Ruby can hear them, too. At the same time, her belief in the knocks sows division between her and Raj. His reference to the ghosts of San Francisco—meaning Simon in particular—foreshadows how her obsession with remaining connected to Simon will drive a wedge in their relationship.



That night, Klara wakes and drinks while practicing her smaller magic tricks. She remembers practicing late at night as a teenager, too. She often found Saul sitting in the living room in the middle of the night. Klara recalls that he would read the Talmud again and again, sometimes staring at a single page for days. While he read, she practiced, and Saul enjoyed watching her tricks. Klara felt that they shared a sensibility. She thinks that it was Judaism that taught her it was possible to turn rock into water and water into blood.

Klara thinks of one of Saul's stories: when he was a young boy, the state of Israel had just formed, and his father Lev told him that this meant he would always have a home. Klara realizes that their culture was their home, not the two-bedroom apartment in New York. Klara thinks the same now—that home isn't a physical place, but instead it's wherever Ruby and Raj are.

CHAPTER 15

In November, Klara and Raj buy a motor home and head north. They perform in Santa Rosa and Tahoe, then in L.A. Klara hates performing in casinos, where people mistake her for Raj's assistant and often belligerently call out how she is accomplishing her feats. During the day, while Raj is at pitch meetings, Klara pours vodka into her coffee and reads to Ruby. Before Raj comes home, she brushes her teeth to mask the smell. She no longer has blackouts, but the vodka allows her to keep her thoughts at a distance.

During Hanukkah, Klara calls home and realizes how much she misses Daniel. She has kept Simon's knocks hidden from her family, as well as the fact that Simon's death date aligned with his prophecy. The knowledge unsettles Klara. She hadn't really wanted to know her date of death—she had only wanted to meet the fortune teller. When she marveled over the fortune teller's charts and calendars, the woman told her they were just for show. She didn't need props, she said. She just knew. Looking at Klara, the fortune teller knew that Klara understood magic as well.

Here Klara references two other stories in Judaism. "Rock into water" refers to when Moses led the Jews through the desert for 40 years after fleeing enslavement in Egypt. God instructed Moses to strike a rock so that water would flow from it and they could drink. "Water into blood" refers the ten plagues, which God set upon Egypt so that the Pharaoh would free the Jews. In the first plague, God turned all of the water in Egypt to blood. Each reference thus entails a miracle and illustrates the connection between magic and religion as a source of wonder.



Klara recognizes that a "home" is an extension of the bonds of family. Homes are built not out of physical places or objects, but instead out of shared history like a common culture, or the common experience of touring around the country together as Raj, Ruby, and Klara are about to do.



Klara's obsessive thoughts continue to be so uncontrollable that she turns to alcohol in order to keep them at bay. Meanwhile, she hides her issues from Raj who might otherwise be able to help her work through them in a healthy way. Klara's frustration with her shows stems from the fact that people are unreceptive to mystery—the very thing she loves most about magic.



The fact that Klara knows not only her own death date but also that Simon's death date was accurate adds to Klara's anxiety, particularly because Klara wants to believe in the fortune teller's magic. Affirming that the woman has magical powers gives credence to the idea that Klara, too, has true magical abilities, because the woman expressed confidence in Klara's magical talent.



When the fortune teller gave Klara's prediction, the spell was broken. Klara cried as she went into the alley. Thirteen years later, Simon's prediction came true—but Klara wondered if she had taken steps that made the prophecy come true. She goes down a spiral of conclusions: if Simon's death was preventable, then Klara was at fault. If Simon could have died on another day, then the woman may not have magical abilities. And if she doubts magic, then she has to doubt everything she believes, like Simon's knocks.

In May 1990, Klara decides to time the knocks, like the code in Second Sight. Each minute that passes represents a letter: one minute passing means "A," two minutes means "B," and so on. She picks up **Saul's gold watch**, which she received following Simon's death, and counts. When the knocks come, they start to spell "ME—" but then Ruby wakes up, and Raj gets up to calm her.

Klara tells Raj that she isn't happy and wonders if they should get more stable jobs. She and Raj want Ruby to be able to have a house and neighbors and a dog if she wants. Raj argues that Klara is brilliantly talented and that they shouldn't give up yet. She's touched by his words, thinking that she's always wanted to be a bridge between reality and illusion. Raj once again suggests Vegas, saying that she could be great there. He tells her that she's been doing much better since she stopped drinking—that she's only weak when she gets in her head. He tells her to focus on what's real, like Ruby and the show.

Klara tells Gertie and Varya that she's moving to Vegas. They simply hope that she's happy. That night, Klara wakes in the middle of the night, hearing Raj's voice. He is telling Ruby the stories of his father and family—the swamps, the shanties, and his experience being extremely poor. Klara is surprised—Raj never told her about these things. He says that his father would be proud of Ruby and that she should be proud of him.

CHAPTER 16

In Vegas, Klara and Raj rent a car and drive to the strip. They walk into The Mirage hotel and see that Siegfried and Roy have just started a show. They sneak in to watch the men perform with dozens of exotic animals and women in shell bikinis. It's exactly what Klara doesn't want, but performing there means that they can make more money. Forty years earlier, Siegfried and Roy fled postwar Germany, and now they have a cast and crew of 250 people.

Here Klara grapples with how much her own choices added to Simon's fate, acknowledging that her decision to take him to San Francisco might have sealed his fate more than the fortune teller's prophecy. Yet this leads her down an obsessive spiral, as she worries that this means that magic isn't real and that she might not actually be able to communicate with Simon from beyond the grave. Her desperation leads her to a catch-22: she wants to believe in magic and the woman's abilities, but she doesn't want to die at 31 years old.



The fact that Simon's watch passed from Klara to Saul reinforces its connection to mortality. As Klara is the next of her siblings to die, she has become the most aware of her remaining time. The fact that she uses the watch to try to communicate with the dead illustrates her hope that she, too, might be able to live beyond her death.



Klara again highlights that the appeal of magic for her lies in its ability to bring wonder into the world and to provide alternate visions of reality beyond logic and fact. In addition, Raj suggests that Klara's drinking doesn't remedy her obsessive thoughts; instead, they merely cause her to obsess over things that aren't real—like Simon's knocks. For Klara, however, Simon's knocks are real, as magic enables her to be a bridge between the living and the dead.



Like the Golds, Raj also finds comfort in having a shared history with someone. While he is unable to relate to Klara regarding his history and his rise from poverty, Ruby represents a connection to that history. She also builds on the legacy of hard work and mobility that Raj's father began.



To others, magic is simply a job and a way of providing entertainment. But Klara views it as more than that. From her humble beginnings performing in clubs, she has emphasized intimacy over gaudiness, because her goal is to expand people's perceptions of reality and not just provide a spectacle.



A few days later, Klara hears the knocks again. Using **Saul's gold watch**, Klara determines that the knocks spell "MEET." Klara is stunned, thinking that perhaps Simon isn't completely dead. Perhaps he, and even Saul, can communicate with her. Meanwhile, Raj meets with different contacts at the casinos, and he returns one day with a phone number.

Here the novel plants the seeds of Klara's instability. Not only does she think that Simon is communicating with her, but her obsession with understanding what he might be saying leads her to think that she might be able to meet with him physically.



CHAPTER 17

Klara and Raj get an audition at The Mirage's theater. As they perform the Proteus Cabinet, Second Sight, and the Jaws of Life, the executives look bored. They ask Klara if she has any other tricks, and Klara feels that they have failed. But then she remembers Ilya's box and how she always preferred sleight of hand tricks. Klara takes out the box and performs two card tricks, including a particularly difficult one called Raise Rise. She asks one man to sign a card and put it in the middle of the deck, but several times in a row she is able to pull the card off the top of the pile. Klara hasn't practiced in years, and she's amazed that she's able to do it. She feels like something is helping her.

Klara's audition adds to the idea that magic can provide alternative explanations for logic and fact. Klara doesn't fully understand how she is pulling off her old tricks given the fact that she hasn't performed them in a long time. In thinking that something outside of her control is helping her, Klara starts to believe in her own magic, defying logic and enabling her to succeed. Thus, Klara finds magic even in her own illusions, despite knowing the actual mechanics of her tricks.



Klara then executes another trick with coins. She shows her hand to be empty before making a quarter appear between her fingers, from the man's collar, shirt pocket, and ears, and even several from her mouth when she coughs. When she does this, another executive finally looks up from his pager.

Klara's intimate magic, which relies on cleverness rather than the awe of her bigger tricks, is what gets the executives' attention. This affirms Klara's own philosophy of magic—that spectacle isn't always important to making people believe in magic and wonder.



Klara addresses the man who looked up, noting that he is religious because of the cross he wears. She explains that her father Saul was religious as well, and she often thought that magic and religion were opposed. But she realized that they believed in the same thing: that God and magic are "a placeholder for what we don't know. A space where the impossible becomes possible."

Here Klara directly relates her magic to religion, illustrating that one of the commonalities between them is that they provide supernatural explanations for the mysteries of the world and expand a person's sense of possibility.



As Klara speaks, she retrieves a cup and ball, making the ball vanish from her fist and appear underneath the cup. She explains that magic doesn't shatter a person's worldview, it fills in reality's holes. She says that it takes magic to reveal how inadequate reality is. On this final point, she puts the cup over the ball and makes a full, perfect strawberry appear in her fist. The men are stunned, and Raj starts to clap. The man with the cross asks when she can start. They agree to set opening night in four months.

Klara's act continues to explore the appeal of magic. Where most people believe that magic is meant to deceive or detract from reality, Klara again emphasizes that magic simply provides alternate explanations for reality, and the strawberry represents this concept. The executives are stunned at seeing the strawberry, having no idea where it could have come from. That this is what changes the producers' mind about hiring Klara illustrates how appealing it is to buy into a sense of wonder.



When they leave the theater, Raj is amazed. He says she doesn't know how she pulled off the trick with the strawberry. Klara says she doesn't know either—she's never seen it before and has no idea where it came from. Klara wonders if her blackouts have come back, but even so she doesn't drive the rental car and there's no grocery store nearby, so it's still not clear where the strawberry could have come from. Raj is taken aback, asking if she believes in her own tricks. She realizes that he's afraid of her.

CHAPTER 18

Raj works with the production team to rig the Jaws of Life and stage Second Sight. Ruby is starting to speak, and Raj wants to rent an apartment and look at preschools. Meanwhile, Klara knows that if the fortune teller is right, she will die in two months. One day, when Klara is out shopping with Ruby, she notices a man who looks exactly like Eddie O'Donoghue in the parking lot. She starts to run away, then slams into a woman whom she mistakes as the fortune teller. Klara is terrified and runs back to The Mirage.

An hour before Klara's first dress rehearsal, she hears Simon's knocks again when she is in the bathroom, but this time they spell out "MEET ME. US." Klara lowers her head, dizzy. She feels Saul and Simon pulling her toward them, but at the same time she hears Ruby calling her. Raj bangs on the bathroom door, and when he enters he discovers that Ruby has been eating soap from the dispenser. He is furious at Klara and helps Ruby wash out her mouth.

Raj asks if Klara has been talking to Simon, and he smells alcohol on her breath. He warns her against throwing away what they've built by drinking again, and Klara says that Raj is controlling. Raj replies that if he hadn't found her, she'd be a drunk and a failure. Klara says he doesn't know what it's like in her head—or what she's lost.

Raj argues with Klara, explaining that he's lost a lot too, and that her family has it good. Klara argues that Simon and Saul didn't have it good, and Raj says that just because they didn't live until 90 doesn't mean they didn't have it good. He says that she doesn't have any space in her head for anyone's problems except her own. Raj says as soon as they get a day off, he's taking her to see a doctor.

The fact that not even Klara knows where the strawberry came from invites readers to consider their own perspective on magic. They could buy into Klara's more logical explanation that perhaps her blackouts have returned, or they could believe that Klara really was aided by magic, as she concludes herself.



This chapter tracks the deep toll that Klara's obsessions begin to take on her. Her thoughts are completely out of her control as she is haunted by the ghosts of her past and plagued by the idea that she might die in two months. These thoughts and visions terrify her, and her panic illustrates the damage that her mind is starting to cause in her life.



Again, the chapter continues to track how dangerous Klara's thoughts are becoming. She is so caught up in the idea that can communicate with Saul and Simon that she ignores her own baby daughter. This is to the detriment of both Klara and Ruby, as Ruby needs Klara's protection and Klara's negligence is driving a wedge between herself and Raj.



Both Klara and Raj acknowledge here that Klara's obsessive thoughts are destroying her. Raj tries to get her to control them, whereas Klara believes that they're uncontrollable since they stem from experiences that she cannot forget.



Raj's argument touches on the theme of living versus surviving. He argues, as the book ultimately suggests, that surviving to an old age doesn't necessarily mean having a better life, and that shorter lives can sometimes be more satisfying or meaningful. Even though Simon and Saul's lives were cut short, they were able to pursue their passions and build meaningful relationships.



December 28th, 1990. If the fortune teller is right, Klara will die in four days, on her opening night. Klara thinks that there must be a trap door that will allow her to escape her fate. She suddenly has a revelation, however. She thinks that if Simon and Saul can contact Klara, then death is an illusion. She thinks that even if she dies, she can communicate with Ruby—she can cross boundaries, as she always dreamed.

Klara's obsession takes on a new depth here. She believes in magic and its ability to explain things that she does not understand, but here she extends that belief to cover death. Her insistence that she can communicate with Saul and Simon prompts her to conclude that death is inconsequential because she can exist beyond death. While it is tempting to have this kind of belief in magic, ultimately these thoughts reveal Klara's instability and hint at the potential harm in believing that death doesn't matter.



CHAPTER 19

It's Klara and Raj's opening night—New Year's Eve—and the show won't begin until 11:00 P.M. Before Klara leaves to drop Ruby off at daycare, Raj says he's proud of Klara. He tells her he loves her, but when she presses him on whether he believes in magic, he says that he believes in *her* instead—that she's a star. He hugs Klara and Ruby together, and Klara thinks that they feel like ghosts.

Klara's obsession with proving that magic exists and that she can communicate with the dead grows worse and worse. It completely flips her reality, to the point where her living family feels like ghosts, while the dead members of her family feel more alive and real.



Klara drops off Ruby at daycare, kissing her and saying she'll see her soon. Klara then rides the elevator to the penthouse to see the view, sneaking into the suite after a maid leaves. Klara calls Gertie. Gertie congratulates her on her opening, and Varya gets on the phone to say that Daniel's engaged to Mira. Klara is excited to hear that the family will soon gain a new member, and she hangs up.

Klara calling her family in this moment affirms the comfort that she finds in their bond. She also appreciates the shared joy in celebrating her success, or in welcoming a new member of the family. At the same time, she is equally pulled by Simon and Saul, and she wants to remain bonded with them as well.



Klara pulls a rope out of her purse—the first one she used for the Jaws of Life. She's been waiting for something to prove the fortune teller's prophecy, but Klara realizes that she must prove it herself. She ties the rope around the overhead light fixture and stands on the table. She's terrified when she thinks about Ruby in daycare, and she decides to wait until she hears a knock. Two minutes pass, then five. She almost decides to pack up the rope, and then she hears a knock.

Klara's obsession with proving that magic is real leads her to choose to kill herself, illustrating how these uncontrollable obsessions can even prove fatal. In addition, Klara is actively choosing to fulfill the fate that the fortune teller gave her. Like Simon's death, Klara's demise is due to a combination of both fate and choice.



Hearing the knock, Klara replaces the table with a stool. More knocks come, and someone shouts, "Ma'am?" but Klara doesn't stop. She stands on the stool and puts the rope around her neck. There is more knocking, and a familiar voice calls for Klara. She looks outside at the view. The voice shouts again, clearly panicked. On January 1st, 1991, as the fortune teller predicted, Klara hangs herself and becomes "a star."

Klara's fate is particularly tragic because it is clear the knocks are coming from someone who is worried about her and trying to find her. Yet because of Klara's obsession, she instead interprets the knocks as Simon calling her to him, reinforcing how her thoughts take on a life of their own and lead her to kill herself. Benjamin's use of the word "star" also has a double meaning here—Klara isn't a star in the sense of celebrity or popular stage performer, but instead the word implies that in death, her consciousness leaves her body and returns to the universe.



CHAPTER 20

Mira and Daniel meet for the first time in May 1987, though Daniel noticed her across campus a few times prior. One afternoon, Mira sits at his table in the student café while he is having lunch, despite the fact that there are many empty tables around. She begins to work, ignoring him, until Daniel finally asks her what she studies. She explains that she studies Jewish art. Daniel awkwardly tells her that he's ancestrally Jewish. Daniel hasn't prayed since Simon's death, and he tells Mira that he sees value in religious tradition but isn't religious anymore. He says that God is a way of enabling people to believe that they don't have control in their lives, but he thinks that they have more control than they believe.

Mira explains that she tracks pieces of Nazi stolen art, and she talks about a Van Gogh painting that was seized by the Nazis in 1937. Afterward, it was sold to a Jewish banker in New York who fled the Holocaust. Mira says it's remarkable, the path that the artworks sometimes take. Mira then concludes that she believes people need God for the same reason they need art: because it shows people "what's possible." Daniel rejects this notion, but he's still drawn to Mira and they start dating.

At Daniel and Mira's wedding, he feels peaceful when he looks at her. That night, lying naked next to a sleeping Mira, Daniel prays, asking God for his happiness to last. Years earlier, after visiting the fortune teller, he had been ashamed at trying to know the unknowable. He didn't want anyone to have the power over him that the fortune teller had. But now he realizes that believing in God doesn't mean he has to stop believing in choice. He begins to think of God as a father, gently nudging him in the right direction. Years after their wedding, Daniel asks Mira if she intentionally sat beside him in the dining hall when they met. She says she knew exactly what she was doing.

CHAPTER 21

Ten days before Thanksgiving, 2006—when Daniel is 48—he meets with Commander Colonel Bertram, his supervisor at the Military Entrance Processing Station. After medical school, Daniel worked at a hospital in West Point, but after ten years, he felt depleted by the high stakes work and the suffering he saw. Now, his job is to confirm that young people are healthy enough to go to war. He sees himself as a guardian, separating those who are ready for war from those who are not.

Daniel's section of the book focuses on his belief in the idea of choice and free will rather than fate, which is immediately established here. Unlike Simon, who believed wholeheartedly in his fate and made choices based on that belief, Daniel wants to ensure that he can control his life and subvert the fortune teller's prophecy. He views God as an extension of the misguided belief in fate, arguing that a belief in God allows people to give up their sense of control.



Mira relates visual art to religion in the same way that Klara relates magic to religion. Using the words "what's possible" directly calls back to Klara's own words when she was auditioning at The Mirage—that both magic and religion make the impossible seem possible. Mira and Klara both understand art and religion simply as different modes of expanding people's worldviews.



At his wedding, Daniel finds a renewed faith in God, particularly because he realizes that believing in God doesn't necessarily mean believing in fate—that he can still have free will. Instead, God simply helps explain some of the more mysterious or supernatural aspects of life. The fact that Mira confirms that she deliberately chose to sit next to Daniel when they met only affirms his worldview. It wasn't simply a coincidence or destiny that led her there—it was her own choice.



Daniel's job aligns with his belief in choice over fate. His choices have a direct impact on many young men's lives as he determines whether they are ready to go to war. Daniel's desire to take on the role of a protector also likely stems from his guilt about not being able to protect Simon and Klara from their fates—something that he will fixate on throughout the chapter.



Colonel Bertram says that it's time that Daniel took a break—he thinks Daniel is turning too many people away. The Colonel says that Daniel needs to write more waivers for guys who want to enlist but might have a bad knee or a cough. Daniel says he writes waivers when they're warranted. Colonel Bertram replies that Daniel doesn't want an Article 15 in his file, which would end his career and may even lead to his being discharged. Daniel is furious at the threat, but he knows he needs his job—Mira works at a public university and living expenses for Gertie and for Mira's father's have swallowed much of their savings. Colonel Bertram suspends Daniel's duty for two weeks.

As Daniel drives home from Albany to Kingston, he wonders what he will tell Mira. Before today, he felt like an oracle, and now he feels like a priest without his robes. When Daniel explains what happened, Mira is furious at the Colonel's unethical behavior and says they'll use the next two weeks to build his case. She suggests that he could get in touch with his family and spend some time with them.

Years earlier, Mira asked why Daniel wasn't close with his siblings. At times, Daniel thinks of his siblings with deep love because he's known them from the beginning of his life. But when he is with them, he is resentful of the smallest things. Daniel recalls a time when he almost drowned in the ocean on one of their beach vacations and Gertie rescued him. Afterward, Daniel felt a new attachment to his family. But as his siblings drifted apart over the years, he grew wounded and bitter, wondering why they didn't want to be connected as he did.

At 2:00 a.m., Daniel visits Raj and Ruby's website. They now perform together in Las Vegas, and as Daniel scans the site, he observes that their show looks gaudy. Raj has largely kept Ruby away from the Golds. The last time he saw Ruby, when she was a preteen, Raj was teaching her the Jaws of Life. Daniel didn't understand why Raj would want to re-create the image of Klara hanging from a rope, but Raj argued that he was keeping Klara's memory alive. Still, Daniel regrets not being closer to Ruby, just as he regretted not being closer to Klara. Noticing that Raj and Ruby will begin a monthlong run in New York City in two weeks, Daniel writes Raj a rather formal email, inviting them to Thanksgiving in Albany.

Daniel's fury doesn't only stem from the fact that he may lose his job and that he needs the money. If he keeps his job and allows himself to be pushed around by the Colonel, he will no longer have the same liberty to which he's accustomed. He prides himself on his free will and his ability to make crucial decisions in his job, and without that ability his job loses its appeal and meaning.



Daniel comparing himself to an oracle or a priest demonstrates how his job makes him feel powerful and influential, almost to the point of supernatural ability, and now he has been stripped of that influence. Daniel's concern over potentially losing his job illustrates how much he values it, and these thoughts begin to reveal his obsession with free will.



Just as Klara and Simon expressed in their chapters, Daniel also finds family to be a source of both comfort and distress. Daniel's story about the time that he almost drowned reveals why he was so hurt by Klara and Simon going to San Francisco. His feeling that they did not want to be connected to him led him, in turn, to pull away from them.



Even as Raj and Daniel have fought in the past, their shared history draws them back together. Though Daniel doesn't know Ruby very well, her connection to Klara represents an unbreakable bond that holds them together. Additionally, the fact that Ruby has taken up Klara's acts demonstrates the legacy that Klara has left behind. Ruby not only carries on Klara's life through her genes, but she also builds on her mother's work. Raj acknowledges this in saying that Ruby keeps Klara's memory alive.



The next morning, the phone wakes Daniel, who has slept in until 11:00 a.m. It's Eddie O'Donoghue, the FBI agent assigned to Klara's case. Eddie asks to meet Daniel that afternoon, saying that he has a few things to share. Daniel agrees to meet. When Daniel hangs up, Gertie appears in his room, asking who he was talking to. Daniel says no one and tells her that he's been suspended. He's frustrated that she can still make him feel like a child.

Gertie moved in with Daniel in the fall of 2003, after he visited her in New York in May. In her apartment, he found a load of prescription pills for various ailments, he noticed a glass of wine on the counter surrounded by fruit flies, and he saw all the windows were covered in packing paper. Seeing the house in such disarray, he insisted that Gertie move in with him, and she agreed. Varya was living in California, but she came home to help clean out the furniture, from Saul's pea-green velvet chair to the bunk beds.

As Daniel and Varya packed up Gertie's apartment, Daniel found Varya crying in her old bunk bed. He wished he could touch her—for a long time, he felt hurt by her habit of refusing to touch and her general distance. She said she was thinking about when she used to sleep there. When she tried to climb down, the ladder broke off, and Daniel held his arms out to help lower her to the floor.

CHAPTER 22

The narration flashes back to 1991, when the family gathers at Klara's memorial service in San Francisco. Daniel and Mira just moved to Kingston. Mira started working at SUNY New Paltz, Daniel's new job starts in a month, and he and Mira will be married in six months. Still, Daniel feels desolate. After the memorial, Daniel goes to a pub and weeps. He mutters that everyone is dying, and the man next to him commiserates with him. The man introduces himself as Eddie O'Donoghue and explains that he's investigating Klara's death with the FBI.

Daniel asks why the FBI is investigating Klara's death. Eddie explains that he was in love with Klara. He tells the story of how he took Simon into the station, and then how he met up with Klara after one of her shows. Later, when he moved to Vegas, he saw her one day in a parking lot. He decided to go to her opening, and he got to the Mirage early. He followed her up the elevator and watched as she slipped into the penthouse. When she stayed in the room for a long time, he knocked on the door and shouted for her. Then he got a key from the front desk and found her hanging. He tried to perform CPR, but she was dead. Daniel asks not to hear any more.

This moment emphasizes how, without his job, Daniel feels lost. He sleeps in and his mother prods him about what he's doing, making him feel as though he has reverted to being a child. For many of the characters, work represents a major source of meaning in their lives, and so without it Daniel feels purposeless and unfulfilled.



Packing up their home illustrates how objects can reveal the bonds of family and shared experiences. In the absence of their father, the pea-green chair reminds them of the memories they shared with him. Likewise, the bunk beds hold memories of the four children together, even though the four kids have not been together since last night of Saul's shiva.



Varya's obsession with cleanliness and protecting others, which is explored more fully in her own section of the book, clearly hurts her relationships, as it creates distance between herself and Daniel.



Just like Simon's death, Klara's death highlights the family's bonds. They all return to comfort one another in times of shared grief, illustrating how their common experiences pull them together. And part of Daniel's desolation lies in knowing that while he will be moving into a new phase of his life, he won't be able to have his sister in his life as he does so.



Eddie's story reveals that he was the man on the other side of the door when Klara killed herself, and that he was in fact in the parking lot when Klara thought she saw him—she wasn't simply being haunted by the ghosts of her past. His story also adds to the power of shared experiences—the fact that he interacted with both Simon and Klara and loved Klara deeply gives him and Daniel common ground.



Eddie asks Daniel if he has any suspicions about Klara's death, prompting him about Raj. Daniel says he doesn't really know Raj, but he always felt Raj was controlling. Daniel also mentions what happened with the fortune teller, acknowledging that it may be crazy to think she was involved somehow. Eddie says he'll look into it, but six months later, Klara's death is ruled a suicide. Daniel isn't surprised, knowing the simplest hypothesis is usually right.

Fourteen years later, Daniel meets up with Eddie O'Donoghue once more. Eddie shows him pictures of the Costellos, a Romani family convicted of 14 federal crimes who ran a fortune-telling fraud. They often convinced vulnerable, sick, and grieving people that the best way to solve their problems was through buying the family's remedies. When the family was found, their assets totaled \$50 million, and they were convicted of grand larceny, tax evasion, and money laundering.

Eddie explains that one woman was not convicted and shows Daniel a picture of the fortune teller. Eddie says that she seems to be estranged from her family, but she does the same thing, working under aliases and traveling across the country. Eddie then tells Daniel that they've linked the fortune teller to five suicides, including Klara. Eddie asks if the woman said anything to push the idea on Daniel or Klara. Daniel says he never felt pressured, but he knows that Klara was a little unstable and believed what the woman said.

Daniel says that if the fortune teller had something to do with Klara and Simon's deaths, then he also blames himself for bringing them to see the woman. Eddie replies that that's blaming the victim. He notes that it must not have been easy for Daniel to hear his date of death, too. Daniel hasn't forgotten his date—November 24th of this year—but he still thinks it is superstition. Eddie asks if the fortune teller predicted Simon's death, too, and Daniel responds that he doesn't know—Simon was a gay man living in San Francisco who contracted AIDS. Eddie thanks Daniel for his information and leaves.

Daniel drives home. He is disturbed by revisiting the story of the fortune teller in detail. He believes in choices and bad luck, and he doesn't buy the woman's claims. Still, the memory of the woman gives him anxiety. He has never told Mira about the experience, as he doesn't want her to worry about him. And he doesn't want Mira to think that he is like Klara: eccentric, unreasonable, and ill.

Here Daniel's rationality contrasts with his later obsession. Even though he brings up the fortune teller, he acknowledges here that believing that she was responsible for Klara's death is illogical. He is particularly inclined to believe Klara was responsible for her death because of to his strong belief in free will.



Eddie's story about the Costello family provides evidence for the idea that fate does not actually exist, and that fortune tellers are simply profiting off of people who do believe in what the fortune tellers say. Eddie's story illustrates that sometimes this belief ultimately does massive financial or mental damage to the people who visit the fortune tellers—just as it did for Simon and Klara.



Here, Daniel starts to believe that the fortune teller maliciously manipulated his family. Daniel is so willing to buy into the idea because of his emphasis on free will. He doesn't believe that the fortune teller could actually predict a person's date of death, but Klara's willingness to believe in fate is what drove her to choose to commit suicide.



Daniel worries that his actions played a part in Simon and Klara's deaths, just as Klara worried that her actions prompted Simon's death. Daniel additionally emphasizes his belief in free choice by noting Simon's own role in his death. Daniel implies that Simon's choice to have sex while AIDS was breaking out in San Francisco is what led to his death, not the fortune teller's prediction.



Again, Daniel continues to maintain the idea that he doesn't believe in fate, and that choice was the only contributing factor to Klara's and Simon's deaths. Additionally, his worry about becoming like Klara foreshadows how he too, will allow an obsession to take hold of him.



CHAPTER 23

Raj and Ruby agree to come for Thanksgiving. When they arrive on the Tuesday night before the holiday, Daniel greets them. He sees how adult Ruby is and initially calls her “Rubina” even though he knows she rarely uses that name. She has Klara’s smile. Daniel also notes that Raj is fitter than he remembers and neatly groomed. Raj has a nice watch and Ruby has a Louis Vuitton suitcase. He gets Raj settled in the guest bedroom, while Ruby will stay on a fold-out couch in his office.

The next morning, Daniel wakes at 10:00 a.m. The previous night had gone very well—a relaxed two-hour dinner with Raj, Ruby, Mira, Gertie, and Daniel. After dinner, Daniel stayed up and Googled Ruby and Raj, his curiosity piqued by their expensive accessories. In 2003, Raj and Ruby replaced Siegfried and Roy as The Mirage’s main act. Their estate had been profiled in *Luxury Las Vegas*, and Ruby is the youngest millionaire in Las Vegas. Raj bought her a pony when she was 13. Daniel was shocked that he didn’t know any of this and embarrassed at the state of his own modest home in comparison.

Daniel then thought about the possibility of returning to work on Monday, and what might happen if he held his ground on writing the waivers. He worried that without a job, he wouldn’t know who he is. Daniel was struck by the image of himself sitting in the bathroom while he looked up information about his brother-in-law’s wealth, and he promptly went to bed.

Daniel gets up and sees that Raj and Ruby are already eating. He apologizes for his lateness. Raj says casually that they always get up early because Ruby’s school starts at 7:30 a.m.—unless it’s a performance day, when she has school at home. Ruby and Raj argue briefly over whether this is a complicated system. Meanwhile, Daniel tries to make a cup of coffee, which Mira usually makes, but he can’t get the machine to work until Mira comes into the kitchen and points out that it’s unplugged. Ruby asks about Daniel’s work as a doctor. He explains that he really likes his work, but inside he burns with humiliation over the prospect of losing his career.

Mira changes the subject to Raj and Ruby’s work, and Raj says that she and Daniel are welcome to visit Vegas anytime—they perform four nights a week. Mira comments that it must be exhausting, and Raj says that he doesn’t think so, but “Rubina” does. Ruby says not to call her that, and Daniel apologizes for calling her Rubina the previous night. Ruby says it’s okay, because he’s a “stranger”—then she apologizes for using the word. Raj tells her not to worry and that everyone understands what she meant.

Daniel doesn’t know Ruby very well, which he makes clear by using Ruby’s full name and remarking on how adult she looks compared to the last time he saw her. At the same time, he feels bonded to her because of their shared relationship with Klara, which he notes instantly in her appearance.



Raj and Ruby’s affluence is a marker of Klara’s legacy. The lives that they have built call back to the time when Klara wanted to make sure that Ruby had a house to live in, neighbors, or a dog if she wanted it. Even though Klara didn’t live to see their success, her show lives on and gave her family opportunities that she never could have dreamed of.



Raj and Ruby’s success only highlights the contrast between Klara’s branch of the family and Daniel. Daniel is in danger of losing his job and he has no children, calling into question what gives his life meaning.



Raj and Ruby’s argument hints at Ruby’s own sense of obligation to her family. Her interest in Daniel’s work foreshadows the fact that she doesn’t want to perform forever and instead wants to become a doctor. Meanwhile, Daniel continues to feel a sense of purposelessness in the wake of potentially losing his job. That Daniel can’t make a simple cup of coffee only heightens his sense of uselessness.



Calling Daniel a “stranger” emphasizes that families can be full of conflict and differences of opinion that naturally pull them apart. At the same time, the chapter as a whole emphasizes how commonalities among the family continue to pull them back together despite their previous estrangement.



Daniel, Mira, Gertie, Raj, and Ruby drive to the maritime museum and take a hike through a preserve. Daniel enjoys racing with Ruby across a field, and Ruby seems sincerely interested in hearing about Gertie's ailments. Gertie is delighted, and Daniel is grateful for Ruby's interest.

That night, Daniel thinks about Eddie's question—whether the fortune teller predicted Simon's death. Daniel doesn't know when the fortune teller claimed Simon would die—but he remembers that Simon said “young.” Daniel burns with guilt: he feels that he had not protected Simon. He wishes he had tried harder to bring Simon back to New York and he thinks that, like Klara, Simon was vulnerable.

Daniel wonders if what happened to Simon and Klara was like the placebo effect. People who believe they have taken sleeping pills—even if the pills are fake—fall asleep immediately. It's possible that Klara and Simon experienced the fortune teller as though they had taken pills with the power to change their lives, but in reality they had taken a placebo and the consequences had originated in their own minds. Daniel feels sorrow and empathy for Simon and Klara, and he wants to call Eddie, whose card is in Daniel's office.

Daniel knocks on the office door and finds Ruby listening to music and reading. Daniel grabs the card, but before he leaves, Ruby asks if he has any pictures of Klara. He does, and he digs out his old albums to show them to her. As he retrieves them, he thinks how strange it is to have Ruby there. He and Mira never had children—when he asked her to marry him, she told him she couldn't have children and didn't want to adopt. Daniel didn't want to say goodbye to Mira, but privately he mourned—he had always imagined himself as a father.

Daniel returns to the office with the albums. As he shows Ruby the pictures, he recounts different memories of Klara, Varya, Simon, and Gertie. Daniel is shocked when he hears Ruby call Klara “my mom,” Simon “Uncle Simon,” and Gertie “Grandma.” He is touched by the fact that Ruby thinks of the Golds as her family. Ruby asks Daniel to tell her something about Saul that she doesn't know. When he says that Saul could eat a whole jar of miniature pickles in one sitting, Ruby is delighted, as she says that she likes to put pickles on peanut butter sandwiches. She and Daniel laugh together. He is very contented sitting with her.

Despite Ruby's previous assertion that the Golds are like “strangers” to her, their shared history is a glue that pulls them back together and bonds them.



Here, Daniel illustrates the problem with believing completely in choice. He becomes obsessed with what he could have done differently—how he could have protected Simon or Klara from their own deaths.



The placebo effect emphasizes how powerful the human mind can be, to the point where it overtakes the logic of the human body. Thoughts, Daniel argues, can be incredibly powerful. Klara's story suggested this as well, as she believed that she could speak to the dead. Daniel's increasing fixation on his siblings' deaths and the fortune teller's role in them provides another example of the power of thought.



Ruby's presence makes Daniel more aware of the fact that he doesn't have children. This is a loss for Daniel, because he believes that he would have found meaning in being a father. While Ruby carries on Klara's memory, Daniel has no one to do the same for him. His sense of loss is only exacerbated by the prospect of losing his job as well—another major source of meaning for him.



Looking at the albums together illustrates how shared family history can even connect people who don't know each other well. Ruby is grateful for the opportunity to learn more about her family and find commonalities with herself, while Daniel is comforted by the fact that she shares in his loss of Klara. Even though they have spent very little time together, they are bonded by their shared history.



After Daniel leaves Ruby, he calls Eddie. He explains that he remembers Simon said he would die “young.” Daniel says that if Simon was rattled by the prophecy, it makes sense that he would act recklessly. Eddie isn’t very affected by Daniel’s information, and Daniel is disappointed by Eddie’s tepid response. Daniel then asks the fortune teller’s name, and Eddie gives it: Bruna Costello. But when Daniel asks where Bruna is now, Eddie says he’ll call Daniel when the investigation’s over.

Daniel builds on his revelation about the placebo effect here, affirming that because Simon believed in his fate, he decided that he must act recklessly. Running away to San Francisco and pursuing his dreams then contributed to his prophesied early death. Daniel’s frustration at Eddie’s response and his desire to know more also hints at how his own beliefs are starting to spur him to seek justice without Eddie.



CHAPTER 24

The next morning, Thanksgiving, Daniel Googles Bruna Costello’s name and finds that she’s on the FBI’s Most Wanted List. The website gives her likely location in West Milton, Ohio and says she travels by RV. Daniel is bothered by the fact that Eddie didn’t just tell him the information. He wonders if Eddie thinks he’s bent on revenge—then he wonders if he *is* bent on revenge.

Daniel’s fixation on the fortune teller escalates here. The more he thinks about her, the more he starts to get irrational impulses to find out more information—or even to get revenge.



The family works on Thanksgiving dinner together throughout the afternoon, then everyone disperses before dinner. Daniel sits in the living room, researching the Romani. When he comes across an old Romani proverb, “our language is our strength,” he writes it down, alongside a Jewish proverb he remembers, “Thoughts have wings.” A year earlier, he explored Jewish theology, but he was disappointed when he found little on the topics of death and immortality. Jews, he noted, were more concerned with living than dying.

The Jewish proverb that Daniel writes down, “thoughts have wings,” perfectly encapsulates how his obsession has taken on a life of its own. It hovers in his mind until he has no choice but to act on it, and he continues to do so by researching the Romani and finding out more information on Bruna.



Ruby, who’s been working on a Sudoku puzzle, strikes up a conversation with Daniel. She tells him that that she doesn’t want to perform forever: she wants to go to college, become a doctor, and be a “real person.” Daniel says Klara didn’t want to be a real person, but he immediately backtracks. He says that Klara was special, but that doesn’t mean that Ruby has to be like her. Ruby says dully that everyone tells her that, and she leaves to take a walk in the snow outside.

Ruby acknowledges the anxiety of family expectations here. As much as her similarity to Klara bonds Ruby and Daniel, it also places the burden of carrying on Klara’s legacy on Ruby. Just as Simon didn’t want to be tied to his father’s tailoring business, Ruby wants to be able to pursue her own dreams and be her own person.



CHAPTER 25

At dinner, the family digs in. Ruby and Raj are leaving early the next morning, and Mira asks shyly for them to explain a trick that she once saw a street magician perform, in which she picked a card and the magician guessed what it was. Ruby and Raj explain that the magician manipulated her decisions so that she would pick the card that he wanted her to. Mira confesses that she feels disappointed that the explanation is so rational. Raj says that magicians have to be analytical to deceive people. Daniel argues with Raj, saying that Klara didn’t want to deceive people; she wanted to reveal a greater truth.

This exchange revives Klara’s fundamental argument with Raj over magic. Raj believes that magic is about deception, but Klara believed that magic was meant to add wonder to the world. In explaining the trick to Mira, he and Ruby have removed the possibility for other, more mysterious explanations. As Daniel notes, Klara believed that magic’s appeal lies in its ability to expand people’s worldviews.



Raj confesses to Daniel that he doesn't believe in his own tricks, but his career means as much to him as Daniel's does. He criticizes the paradox of Daniel's job: that he makes sure men are healthy enough to go to war. Daniel and Raj then get into a heated argument about the war in Iraq and Raj condemns Israel's support for it. As soon as Raj mentions Israel, the Golds pull together. Mira points out that Raj is scapegoating the Jews. Raj counters that the Jews act like victims and use this mindset to oppress others. Gertie ends the conversation, and Daniel and Raj leave to take a walk. Ruby is almost in tears.

Outside, Daniel accuses Raj of making empty accusations when he's sitting in a mansion doing magic tricks. Daniel also accuses Raj of stealing Klara's act. Raj counters, saying that he was Klara's partner, and he took care of her when she was sick. Raj says that Daniel wasn't there for Klara like he was and that he never felt welcomed by the family. He starts to walk away, then adds that all Daniel does is watch other people do his dirty work, while he's too afraid to take action. He says Klara may have killed herself, but she was still braver than Daniel.

CHAPTER 26

Raj and Ruby leave early in the morning. They barely speak to Daniel as they say goodbye. Daniel is upset at the prospect of losing a relationship with Ruby, and he worries about returning to work on Monday, feeling like he has lost his power to make decisions. Then, as Daniel eats breakfast, his cell phone rings: it's Eddie O'Donoghue. He tells Daniel that they've cleared Bruna Costello of all charges, explaining that there wasn't enough evidence to argue that she caused the suicides. Daniel is furious, upset that she might continue to cause more suicides and that Eddie couldn't get justice. Daniel tells Eddie that today is the day she predicted his own death. Eddie tells Daniel to take care of himself.

After hanging up, Daniel throws his phone against the wall and thinks about the last time he talked to Simon, when Simon was sick. He asked Simon what he could do to help, and now he has the answer. Daniel decides to find the fortune teller on the very day she predicted his death and force her to confess that she caused his siblings' deaths. He remembers Bruna's location from the FBI posting—West Milton, Ohio—and he researches a neighborhood in the town where the fortune teller likely lives. West Milton is a ten-hour drive from Kingston, and he thinks it wouldn't be hard to find an RV.

Raj's criticism of Daniel's work further destabilizes Daniel's insecurity about whether he is doing something meaningful with his life. In addition, the argument about the war proves that there is another element of shared history that bonds people together: common religion and common oppression. The Golds immediately band together in the conversation to support Israel because of their shared heritage with many Israeli people.



Raj's criticisms play on all of Daniel's insecurities: first, that he isn't doing anything meaningful with his life. Second, that he didn't take action to help his siblings when they were in need of his help. And third, Raj's assessment that Klara was braver than Daniel foreshadows Daniel's obsession with trying to take action and avenge his siblings' deaths.



Although Daniel's philosophy is based entirely on choice, there are also many events out of his control that contribute to his instability in this moment: the fact that Raj and Ruby are leaving after a fight, the fact that he was put on leave two weeks prior, and the fact that Eddie contacted him 14 years after they first met—only a few days before Daniel's predicted date of death. Thus, the story emphasizes that fate and choice work in tandem, even when a person doesn't believe in fate.



Even though Daniel is adamant that fate doesn't exist, the knowledge of his fate has a big effect on his choices, too. Knowing that his predicted date of death is that very day, Daniel chooses to pursue the fortune teller to achieve some kind of poetic justice. Without knowing his fate, then, it is possible that he wouldn't have fulfilled the prophecy. It also shows how Daniel's obsession with the idea of proving free will is leading him to act irrationally.



The phone rings in the kitchen, and Daniel picks up—it's Varya. She couldn't come to Thanksgiving because she was at a conference in Amsterdam. He says he knows why she's calling. She asks him what he's doing that day, and when he replies that he's going to find the fortune teller and force her to apologize for what she did to the family, Varya says that isn't funny. Daniel grows angry with her for calling on this day but not any other. He tells her that he's fine and hangs up.

Varya's distance only enrages Daniel further because he feels that she is checking in on him to make sure he is all right on the day of his prediction, but she doesn't want to remain connected to him otherwise. Her calling also implies that she believes in his fate or is worried that he may do something that will fulfill it.



Daniel grabs the keys to his car. Before he can leave, Gertie stops him and asks where he's going. He replies that he's going to the office. She says she's worried about him, but he brushes her off. When she says he shouldn't work on Shabbat, Daniel says that God doesn't care. Daniel kisses her cheek and then leaves. He retrieves a small handgun from his shed and gets into the car. By the time he realizes he forgot to clear his browser history, he's in Pennsylvania.

Daniel continues to make choices that tempt fate: pursuing the fortune teller, carrying a gun, and choosing to drive ten hours to try to find her on his predicted death date are all risky actions to take. In addition, Gertie's attempt to stop Daniel, particularly by invoking Shabbat, calls back to Daniel's earlier assertion that God doesn't control people's actions, but he does try and nudge people in the right direction. If Daniel had not disregarded God so completely here, he might have made a better decision (to not pursue the fortune teller).



CHAPTER 27

Daniel arrives in West Milton at 10:30 p.m. He scans the neighborhood and can't find the RV—but he sees a nearby gorge that could serve as a good hiding spot. He gets out of the car and takes the gun with him. As he walks toward the gorge, he slips on a slick rock and is soaked in a stream. He wonders why he thought this was a good idea and realizes that he could turn around and tell Mira he fell asleep at the office. Instead, he decides to continue on toward the gorge and sees an RV.

Daniel recognizes his ability to choose a different outcome when he slips and falls. And yet his obsession with trying to force a confession out of the fortune teller compels him onward, illustrating both the harm in obsessive thoughts and the fact that knowing one's fate can deeply affect one's actions.



The door to the RV is unlocked. Daniel walks into the RV's bedroom and sees Bruna asleep. He tells her to get up and says he has a gun. He brings her into the living area. She recognizes him from when he was a child, and Daniel tells her that Simon and Klara are dead. He asks her why she tells fortunes. When Bruna refuses to say anything, Daniel fires two gunshots into the floor and asks about her upbringing.

Daniel's threats of violence reveal how his obsessive thoughts have completely overtaken him. Initially, he thought that it was crazy to think that the fortune teller had anything to do with his siblings' deaths. Now, he is so convinced that she was the reason for their deaths that he might kill her for it.



Bruna tells Daniel that she left home when she was young because she didn't want to be a wife or mother. While she wanted to be a nurse, she didn't have any education, so instead she did what she knew how to do: she gave readings. Bruna wanted to help people, like nurses do. She says that nurses help people who suffer, because people don't know what's going to happen to them. But, she says, if they know when they'll die, then they can live.

Bruna's reasoning echoes what Daniel said when he and his siblings were deciding whether to go to the fortune teller: that he'd rather know when he would die so that he could do all he wanted to do beforehand. They both understand that knowledge of fate allows people to make choices accordingly.



Daniel says that Bruna should have turned him and his siblings away—they were children. She says that he can just live like he doesn't believe her. He affirms that he does live like that, but his head starts to grow cloudy—he's exhausted from the drive. He asks her if she knows her own death, and she says no. He tells her it could be today and aims his gun at her. Bruna realizes then that it's Daniel's predicted day, and that's why he came. Daniel suddenly worries that he didn't come intentionally but was compelled by the same forces that led Simon and Klara to their deaths.

Suddenly, Daniel and Bruna hear footsteps outside the RV. Eddie's voice calls out to Daniel, and he realizes that Mira must have found Eddie's business card and Daniel's search history. Daniel grows furious, and he slams a folding table into the wall. Daniel is very afraid, but he can't stop himself. He knocks some religious icons from the counter beside the sink. Daniel grabs Bruna and points his gun at her.

The door of the RV swings open, and Eddie appears with his gun drawn. He tells Daniel to drop his weapon. Daniel shakes his head; he feels for the first time that he is acting with courage. Killing Bruna would be an act of faith—faith in his own agency, faith in the idea of choice. Eddie threatens to shoot Daniel, and Daniel raises the gun to Bruna's temple. Eddie tries to reason with Daniel, but instead Daniel cocks the gun. Bruna says a prayer as Eddie fires.

CHAPTER 28

When Varya enters the lab to feed the monkeys, most of them are excited by her arrival and scramble for the feeders. But one monkey named **Frida** doesn't eat, even though Varya knows that Frida is hungry. The monkey simply barks at Varya. Varya heads into her office. As she takes off her mask, shield, scrubs, gloves, hair and shoe covers, she informs her coworker, Annie, that Frida is still on a hunger strike. Varya then scrubs her hands three times. Annie says that Frida unsettles her.

Afterward, Varya goes to meet with a journalist named Luke in the lab's public marmoset exhibit. As she greets him, she assures him that the marmosets' piercing calls are just communication—though she knows that their whistling noises are calls of distress. She also notes that Luke looks very young—in his mid-twenties. He puts out his hand, and when Varya shakes it, she thinks that she'll have to wash her right hand later. Varya takes Luke on a tour of the building, the Drake Institute for Research on Aging. Varya is 10 years into a 20-year study, about which Luke is writing a piece for *The San Francisco Chronicle*. He'll be at the Institute for the week.

While Daniel has up until this point been completely certain that everything he is doing has been of his own volition, now he begins to doubt. He would not have come to find Bruna if she had not told him that he would die on that day, and therefore he is just as much affected by fate as his siblings, even if he doesn't believe it.



Daniel's thoughts have so overcome him that he no longer seems in control of his body anymore. His fear of being out of control of his fate has ironically made him so distressed that he becomes completely volatile.



Daniel's assessment that he is acting with courage harkens back to Raj's statement that Klara was more fearless than Daniel. The irony in this statement is that Daniel's bravery, like Klara's, is the very thing that kills him. And like Simon and Klara, Daniel's knowledge of his fate leads him to fulfill it, illustrating how both fate and choice led to his demise.



The opening of Varya's section of the book establishes her obsession with cleanliness through her rigorous handwashing and the amount of equipment that she wears. Varya's obsession has been foreshadowed from the very first chapter when she noted that she washed her hands thoroughly every day after school.



Varya's first exchange with Luke continues to establish her obsession with cleanliness, as she can't even stand shaking another person's hand without making sure to wash her own hand later. Additionally, Varya's lie here illustrates that she understands that monkeys are not as happy in captivity, even when she later tries to justify their captivity in believing that it allows the monkeys to live longer. The monkeys are a metaphor for the idea that simply surviving for a long time doesn't necessarily provide a person with a better life.



Varya guides Luke into the atrium of the Drake and they sit at a café. As she sits, only her lower back touches the back of the chair. Varya remembers when, as a child, she propped a dirty foot on the ceiling and left a dark imprint on the paint. That night, Varya was so worried about the tiny particles of dirt drifting down over her that she stayed awake all night to make sure the particles didn't fall on her.

Varya tells Luke about her research on longevity, which aims to increase the quality of late life. Luke points out that some people think a human life is long enough, and that potential issues of increasing lifespan include food shortages, overpopulation, and disease. She counters his point, asking if they shouldn't treat HIV or if they should cut off access to health care for the elderly. She says her research's goal is to reduce human suffering.

CHAPTER 29

After work, Varya visits Gertie at her assisted living facility. In the months following Daniel's death, Gertie stayed with Mira in Kingston, but in May 2007 Mira came home and found Gertie collapsed in the garden. Soon Mira discovered that Gertie could stand on her own, and later doctors labeled the incident a stroke. Varya was furious that Gertie hadn't called for help, but Varya realized that Gertie thought she was dying and probably wanted to die. After the incident, Gertie experienced complications and became easily confused, so Varya found an assisted living facility in California, where Gertie has lived for two years.

In the beginning Gertie hated the facility, but after taking antidepressants, her mood improved and she made new friends. In the present, Varya still doesn't like the home very much. Gertie's friends respond with shock and pity when they hear that Varya is childless and unmarried, and they show little interest in her research.

Varya brings Gertie a book of poems, dill pickles, and a vase of lilies. Gertie also asks to see a picture of **Frida**, though Varya is technically not supposed to share photographs of her research. But Gertie is so excited by photos and videos of Frida that she can't stop. Still, Varya comforts herself with knowing that the videos she shows are old, recycled ones. Gertie doesn't remember the old videos, and Frida isn't as happy as she used to be. As she watches, Gertie asks why Varya keeps Frida in a cage.

The novel again reinforces Varya's obsession with cleanliness. Varya isn't just cautious about dirt and germs—they are literally anxiety-inducing. Varya is so obsessed that she even loses sleep or shifts her behaviors (like her sitting posture) in order to avoid germs.



Varya's research mimics her primary concern in life: living a long time. The fact that she mentions HIV—the virus that causes AIDS—relates her research back to Simon. She hopes to provide people with better, longer lives, because Simon did not benefit from scientific research when he contracted AIDS. She hopes that she can make a difference for someone in the future.



Gertie's incident underscores why Varya's research on aging is so important to her. The point of her work is to ensure that people have a better life in their old age. Gertie's perspective, however, is slightly different. Just because she can live longer doesn't necessarily mean that the end of her life will be meaningful or satisfying, particularly after losing three of her four children.



Gertie's friends' judgements imply that having a partner and children is one of the things that provides a person with meaning in life. Yet for Varya, her work has always been the source of her meaning and her intended legacy.



The fact that Varya uses her work as a replacement for meaningful relationships with a partner or children is made explicit here. While Varya isn't able to show Gertie any pictures of grandchildren, she instead shows her pictures of the monkey that she is helping to raise in her study at the Drake.



CHAPTER 30

The next day, Varya explains the two major theories about what prolongs life to Luke: the first is to suppress the reproductive system, and the second is to suppress caloric intake, which is the focus of her study. The people of Okinawa, she relays, have the highest life expectancy in the world because their diet is very nutritious and low in calories. On a restricted diet, the body is constantly dealing with low-level stress, which teaches it how to deal with stress long-term. Luke replies that that doesn't sound very enjoyable, and that it sounds like Varya is saying people can choose to live or choose to survive.

Varya brings Luke into the primate lab and helps him into protective gear. Luke then asks why she studies primates. Varya explains that she had been working with yeast, but that primates are much more analogous to humans. She remembers when she agreed to take the job: despite her fears of contracting disease from the monkeys, she hoped this research would be her contribution to the world in place of having a partner or children.

Varya brings Luke into the monkeys' enclosure, which simulates their natural environment. She knows the monkeys would rather be out in the wild, particularly because they only receive a few hours in the enclosure each week. She also thinks that the point of their research isn't to test a new drug but to keep the monkeys alive, and that there can't be any harm in that. Still, she knows that seeing the cages can give visitors the idea that the monkeys are unhappy.

Varya shows Luke the calorie-restricted group and the control group. Luke takes photos of each group as they scream at the sight of a person they don't recognize. Varya explains that the control group is more prone to early onset diabetes and their risk of disease is three times higher. The calorie-restricted group also looks younger—the control group is balding more. It's the midpoint of the study—too soon to assess lifespan—but the results are promising and Varya's thesis is likely to be proven.

Varya and Luke's exchange evokes the primary theme of her section: living versus surviving. Here Luke posits that the cost of being able to live a long time may be too high if it requires severely restricting one's caloric intake or placing the body constantly under stress. Just because a person lives longer, he implies, does not necessarily mean they live a better or more enjoyable life.



Varya sees her work as her contribution to the world particularly because it will outlast her. It's unlikely that her research will have any direct benefits for Gertie or for herself, and so she finds meaning in being able to leave a mark on the world through her research. Additionally, Benjamin continues to highlight Varya's excessive fear of germs and disease, to the point where it might have prohibited her from being able to take an important research job.



The monkey's captivity is a metaphor for the book's implication that a longer life isn't necessarily a better one. Even though the lab offers the monkeys protection relative to the danger of the wild, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are happier in cages.



The research on the monkeys initially builds the argument that a longer life—one that is filled with less disease—is in fact a better one. This ties into Varya's own life, as she tries to avoid illness and germs as much as possible. In this way, Varya's experiment on longevity is her life's work and the foundation of her legacy, but it also has a personal stake—she wants to affirm the value of her life and choices.



When Luke leaves, Varya retrieves **Frida** from the isolation chamber. She had placed Frida there so that Luke wouldn't see her. Varya remembers when Frida arrived—just a week after Varya herself. Her arrival had been delayed, and Varya had to personally transfer Frida from a van to her new cage. She was terrified when she opened the cage and the monkey clung to her; she thought she could get hepatitis. But she also found comfort in the animal clinging to her, and she rocked Frida throughout the night. She thought of Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Monkey* and decided to name her Frida.

The fact that Varya is hiding Frida from Luke hints at the fact that not all of the restricted-calorie monkeys are necessarily healthier because they are a part of the experiment. Additionally, Benjamin continues to paint Frida as a surrogate child for Varya. She holds Frida and rocks her throughout her first night, implying that Varya's top priority is her work and she pours all of her energy into that legacy.



CHAPTER 31

The narrative returns to three and a half years earlier, days after Daniel's death. Mira shows Varya the picture of the fortune teller and asks why Daniel pursued her. When Varya tells her the story of the woman, Mira is stunned that something that happened so long ago could have such a profound effect on the Gold siblings.

Mira's shock reinforces the idea that each of the Gold children became obsessed with what the fortune teller had told them. In Simon's case, he wanted to take advantage of the short life he had; in Klara's case, she wanted to prove that magic was real; and in Daniel's, he wanted to prove that the fortune teller was wrong. But in each case, these obsessive thoughts led to their demise.



That night, Varya sits in Daniel's chair. She had lied about going to Amsterdam over Thanksgiving—she was just too anxious about being there on Daniel's predicted death date to visit. She was worried that she would feel responsible if something bad happened. She had felt this way for a long time, pulling away from her siblings so as not to cause them harm. Varya sees a note next to Daniel's computer with the words "Our language is our strength" and "thoughts have wings."

Like her siblings, Varya's obsession is borne of what the fortune teller told her. This information not only led her to become obsessed with staying clean (so as to ensure her predicted date would come true), but also to remove herself from her siblings' lives in the hopes that it would protect them. This explains much of the distance that her siblings—particularly Daniel—felt from her over the years. She didn't want to be the cause of their deaths, but by pulling away she only ruined her relationships with them.



When Varya was in graduate school, she saw a therapist and tried to explain that if she didn't feel something was clean, she worried that something bad would happen. She was always anxious, but after the visit to the fortune teller, she felt the prophecy work inside her like a "virus" and saw it do the same in her siblings. She felt that avoiding cracks in the sidewalk could prevent something bad from happening to Klara. Once, she yelled at Simon for blowing out three of her birthday candles, because she thought that if she didn't do it, something awful would happen to him.

This passage shows Varya's understanding that the prophecy caused her and her siblings to change their behavior. In Varya's case, she became obsessed with the idea of protecting herself and her siblings. The fact that her thoughts are so illogical—avoiding cracks on the sidewalk will not protect Klara from death—illustrates how much power those thoughts have over her and how they overtake her actions.



At age 30, Varya was diagnosed with OCD. Years later, a different therapist asked what she was afraid of. She replied cancer, climate change, dying in a car crash, causing a car crash, dirt, insects—the list went on and on. But she admitted that this really masked her fear of losing the people she loved. The therapist pointed out that she'd already been through so much loss, but Varya acknowledged that with this loss she also lost parts of herself, like bravery and desire.

Varya hadn't always been without desire: when she was 27, she had an affair with one of her graduate school professors. A few months later, she realized that she was pregnant. She was terrified, knowing that a baby would make her feel too vulnerable. She made an appointment at Planned Parenthood for an abortion. She wanted to relieve herself of something that caused her so much fear and anxiety.

Varya knows that her rituals are simply a trick to tell herself that she's warding off harm, but still, she can't help but do them. The narration returns to May 2007, six months after Daniel's death. Mira tells Varya that Eddie O'Donoghue was cleared of any wrongdoing. Varya doesn't cry. She knows that what killed Daniel was not a bullet but the human mind—the fact that “thoughts have wings.”

CHAPTER 32

For two more days, Luke helps out at the lab as he gets more material for his story. Varya is surprised at Luke's skill with the monkeys, and he explains that he grew up on a farm. He asks her if she thinks of the monkeys as individuals. She says initially she did, but she tries not to so that she can remain unemotional about her research. She remembers the beginning of the study, when **Frida** shamelessly called for more food, and Varya had to turn away from her. She says that the monkeys aren't as valuable as the potential medical advances they can provide.

The next day, Friday, is also Luke's last day, and Luke asks Varya to go for dinner or a drink after work to thank her for her help on the article. Varya agrees—she's tired of cutting herself off from people. They go to a wine bar, but Varya doesn't eat at restaurants, so she only drinks. He tells her about his family, who owned a cherry farm in Wisconsin. Varya tells him that her elder brother was a doctor, her younger brother was a dancer, and her sister was a magician. When Luke points out that she used past tense, she admits that all three are dead.

Varya's formal diagnosis with OCD—obsessive compulsive disorder—is clinical proof of the fact that Varya's thoughts are very powerful. She is so plagued by the idea that she might lose the people she loves that she has to undergo all of these cleaning rituals as a result of her obsession.



Varya's obsessive thoughts are so harmful that she even cuts out what could have been a truly meaningful part of her life. The fear borne of the fortune teller's prediction has become so great that Varya chooses to give up every significant relationship in her life.



Varya acknowledges that her behaviors can't actually protect her and those around her, illustrating how her obsession goes beyond her own understanding of logic. By repeating Daniel's proverb, “thoughts have wings,” Varya understands that both her and her brother's lives have been ruined by their obsessive minds.



Varya again hints at the idea that just because monkeys like Frida are going to have a longer life doesn't mean that they live a necessarily happy one. Frida barked in hunger initially in the study, and she continues to feel the effects of so little food even 10 years into the experiment. Yet at this point Varya argues that the animals' longevity—which will then allow for more research in human longevity—is more important than Frida's well-being.



Varya recognizes how her distance, even though it was meant to protect those around her, has really only succeeded in cutting her off from meaningful relationships. Varya then shows her desire to start overcoming some of her anxieties. Even though she doesn't eat at the restaurant, she still agrees to go and participate in the world in a way in which she rarely does.



Luke starts to ask if Varya's siblings' deaths are why she chose her field of study, but when he mentions Klara's name—without Varya having said it—she becomes afraid. Varya gets up to leave, but the wine has made her unsteady and she falls. Luke tries to put his hand on Varya's, but she tells him not to touch her. He says that she shouldn't drive home and asks her where she lives. At this question, she runs out of the restaurant and finds her car.

Luke connects Varya's research to her life. Part of her obsession with protecting her siblings has now morphed into trying to figure out what she could have done in order to extend their lives, even if it's too late for her to save them.



CHAPTER 33

Varya wakes in her car the next morning, still in the parking lot. She is hung over and very hungry. She drives home and cleans herself up before driving to the lab. When she arrives, she learns from a coworker that **Frida** is in isolation because she's been plucking out her fur. Varya goes to the isolation chamber and sees that Frida has pulled her own hair out. She is sitting in a layer of her own urine and rocking herself. Varya tries to soothe her, but Frida does not stop. Two weeks prior, Frida bit her left thigh so badly she needed stitches.

Frida's self-harm becomes the first sign that surviving for a long time is not necessarily better than having a shorter, more fulfilling life. Even though Frida's restricted calorie diet and captivity make her biologically healthier, they also cause her to be miserable. This misery, in turn, negates all the positive health effects of her diet, since she is hurting herself so badly. In Frida's case, the cost of surviving for a longer period of time is not worth its benefit.



Suddenly, Luke enters the room with the isolation chamber. He is still wearing his clothes from the day before, and his hair is matted and greasy. Varya asks what he's doing there, and he says he needs to talk to her. He snaps a photo of **Frida**, and when she says he wasn't authorized to take the photo, he cowers. Varya realizes that Luke isn't actually a journalist and asks who he is. He tells her that she named him Solomon. Varya reels as she realizes that Luke is her baby—the baby she ultimately decided not to abort.

The revelation that Luke is Varya's child adds another example of family members being pulled toward one another despite great estrangement. Varya gave Luke up for adoption, and yet he wanted to try to find her because of the shared connection they have and his desire to know their shared history.



CHAPTER 34

Varya runs through the lobby and out into the parking lot, hoping to put as much distance between her and Luke as possible. He shouts after her, threatening to sell his photos to an animal rights organization if she doesn't talk to him. He says he doesn't want to blackmail her—he only wanted to meet her. Luke explains that it took him years to find her, because his records had been sealed at the adoption agency. Varya starts to cry, and Luke offers her a handkerchief. He tells her that it's clean and reveals that he shares some of her fears—he's afraid of killing people accidentally. Varya knows exactly what he means.

Even though Varya gave up Luke for adoption, the story illustrates that family members remain connected to one another other because they find value in their shared history and experiences. Luke seeks Varya out because he wants to know the details of his origins. Luke also shares some of Varya's OCD, which shows how family can be a good and bad influence, even without ever meeting.



Varya drives to her condo while Luke follows. Seeing her condo through Luke's eyes, she realizes how dark and ugly and bare it is. She keeps it that way so that she can clean it easily but won't see every speck of dirt. Luke asks what it was like on the day he was born—August 11th, 1984. She says it was sweltering, and she had only her mother Gertie for company. After she gave Luke over, she said that they couldn't talk about it ever again. Gertie has never raised the subject, though it underlies many of their conversations.

Here many of Varya's exchanges with Gertie take on new meanings, like Gertie's friends criticizing Varya for never having a partner or children. These comments affect Varya not because she has never had the opportunity to have a partner or children, but because she could have had that opportunity and instead chose to give it up. In addition, Varya's thoughts about her apartment reveal how Varya herself is more concerned with surviving than living. Her home décor isn't based on any aesthetic choices—it's deliberately bleak to cater to her OCD and anxiety.



Luke asks about his father. Varya explains that he was a visiting professor at her grad school. They slept together a few times but he never knew she was pregnant. She tried to contact him to see if he wanted to raise Luke, but when he never responded, she stopped trying. Varya is stunned she didn't recognize Luke, remembering the nine months they shared a body and the anguished birth that followed.

Varya illustrates how she, too, is glad to reconnect with Luke, even though the memory of putting her son up for adoption is a painful one. She still shares an experience with him that she shares with no other person, and this gives them an unbreakable bond.



Luke asks what he was like as a baby; Varya responds that he had black hair and blue eyes—noting that now Luke has blond hair and his eyes have turned brown. Luke asks why she didn't keep him. She says that she was afraid of having a child and becoming attached to another person. He then asks why she didn't get an abortion. Varya explains that she made an appointment, but she couldn't go through with it. She says that she was trying to compensate for the fact that she didn't fully engage in life, and she hoped he would.

Varya's explanation for why she didn't have an abortion implies that she viewed Luke as a kind of legacy. Varya found meaning in the idea that her child would build on her life, contributing to the world in a way in which she did not. In addition, it is again clear how much Varya's obsession costs her, because her fear of becoming attached to or harming another person led her to cut off her relationship with her only child.



Luke asks if Varya has been married or had another child. She says no—she hasn't had a relationship since the professor. Luke then gets up and goes to the kitchen, leaning over the sink. Varya notices **Saul's gold watch** on the windowsill in front of the sink. Daniel had collected it from Raj after Klara's death, but he hadn't wanted it. Varya understood that it unsettled him, and so she took it instead.

The watch's journey continues to have symbolic significance. The fact that Daniel did not want Saul's watch is apt for his character. Unlike Klara and Simon, who were troubled by their limited time, Daniel instead tried to ignore his impending death. For this reason, he chose to avoid the watch, which reminds each Gold of their mortality.



Luke then reaches for the fridge, and before Varya can stop him, he sees her prepacked meals: fruit with two tablespoons of cereal; nuts with beans, or a slab of tofu or tuna. On the side of the refrigerator is an Excel spreadsheet with the caloric content. Varya, too, follows a restricted diet. In the first year of her restriction, Varya lost 15% of her body weight.

The revelation that Varya is restricting her own diet suggests that Varya values surviving for a long time over "living"—or being able to enjoy the things that life has to offer. The restricted diet is yet another way in which Varya is trying to ensure that she can live a long life and fulfill the prophecy, but it doesn't necessarily make her happier.



Luke asks why Varya does this to herself. He says it makes him sad that she is like her monkeys, “locked up and underfed.” She says that she—and the monkeys—will have a longer life, but Luke responds that this doesn’t mean they’ll have a *better* life. She angrily asks if she should live her life like Simon or Klara, and Luke says it’s silly for her to think that there’s any way to truly stop death—she’s convinced herself that she’ll live longer because of her careful behavior, when in reality it’s simply random. Varya protests, telling Luke not to lecture her. She says that he knows nothing because he’s a child, and that he hasn’t experienced what she has.

Luke says that he’s experienced loss, too. He says that his older brother Asher died when Asher was a teenager and Luke was a toddler. One day, they visited the grain bins on their farm to check for clumps. Asher went into the bin, and Luke was supposed to stand lookout in case anything went wrong. Instead, Luke ran away and hid. After a few minutes, when Asher didn’t come out to find him, Luke knew something was wrong. But he just hid. Later they found Asher under the grain: he had sunk and suffocated. Varya asks Luke to leave. Luke is amazed that this is all she has to say, and he shoves past her and out the door.

Varya climbs into her car, intending to follow Luke, but she loses her nerve and drives to the lab, though everyone has left for the night. Varya finds that **Frida** has started to gnaw at her own arm, leaving a mangled gash of blood and tissue around her bone. Varya tries to coax her out, but Frida refuses to come. Instead, Varya ties a leash around her neck and pulls her out of the cage. The monkey keels over and starts to choke, and Varya goes over and lifts Frida, despite the fact that she’s not wearing any protective gear.

Varya carries **Frida** over to the bins for the unrestricted monkeys, letting her eat as much as she wants. But Frida is weak, and when she reaches for the raisins, she instead brings her arm back to her face and chews at her wound. Varya pulls Frida’s hand away and sobs, bringing raisins to Frida’s mouth. Frida eats from Varya’s hand, and Varya is relieved. Then, suddenly, Frida vomits. Varya holds her, unsure of what to do. Frida struggles to get away, but Varya clings to the monkey. Then, Frida bites Varya’s chin.

Finally, Luke explicitly states that a longer life doesn’t necessarily mean a better one, which is the central idea of Varya’s section of the novel. Varya is sacrificing happiness in order to survive for a long time, just as the monkeys live a longer life in captivity but not necessarily a fuller or happier one. Simon’s life, on the other hand, is a counterpoint to Varya’s, as he prioritized finding meaning and pleasure in his life, even at the cost of living for a long time.



Here Luke reveals why he is terrified of accidentally hurting people—because he accidentally contributed to the death of his older brother. This is similar to Varya’s own obsession: she wants to avoid loss not only because of what she feared would happen, but also because of she has already experienced so much loss. Even though Varya doesn’t react to Luke’s story here, she still shares the experience of not being able to protect those closest to her.



Frida’s ordeal again supports the argument that a longer life does not mean a better one. She is supposed to be part of the healthier group of monkeys, and yet the captivity and lack of food have made her so miserable that she is trying to hurt herself and has completely lost the will to live.



Varya sympathizes with Frida and is terrified to see her harm herself. The fact that Varya ruins the experiment to try to help Frida illustrates Varya’s own acknowledgement that what they are doing to the monkeys does not actually provide them with a better life—simply a longer one. Varya’s concern is so powerful that she even overcomes her fear of disease, choosing to hold Frida even though she is not wearing protective gear.



CHAPTER 35

Annie finds Varya and **Frida** the next morning. When Varya goes to the hospital, she fears that she's going to die, but Frida has neither hepatitis nor tuberculosis. Each day Varya eats the hospital food and grows more alert. She knows that her actions have irreparably ruined the study. Frida is taken to an animal hospital. Her bone is cracked, and so a surgeon amputates her arm. Varya meets Annie at a café two weeks later, where Varya eats a vegetarian wrap. Annie says that the Drake will allow Varya to resign voluntarily. Varya is grateful, but she knows that the story of her breakdown will get out eventually.

That evening, Varya wakes at midnight feeling empty—her work was meant to be her contribution to the world. But even though she has lost so much, she feels like she now has little to lose. She calls Luke. When he picks up, she explains that she's sorry for what happened to him and Asher. She tells him he can't go through life convinced it was his fault, because he won't survive otherwise. He says that he'd be like her.

Three months later, Varya meets a man she has only seen in photos: Robert. She started searching for him that summer and discovered that he runs a dance company in Chicago. She contacted him, and they agreed to meet when he traveled to San Francisco for a dance festival. Varya tells him how happy she is to meet him, that Klara would have been happy to know he's alive. He says he still has HIV, but that he made it long enough for treatment to become available.

Varya says she's never forgiven herself for not visiting Simon after he left home—she was too angry with him, and she thought he would grow up. Robert puts his hand on hers, and she lets him. He tells her not to blame herself, that she couldn't have known what would happen. Varya asks if he was terrified, knowing he could die from sex. Robert explains that it felt like doctors were telling them to choose between life and death, because they had worked so hard to live life authentically and to have sex authentically.

Robert says that he loved that Simon was fearless—Simon moved to San Francisco and became a dancer just because he wanted to. Varya says that without her job, she feels adrift, and Robert tells her to be fearless like Simon. Varya thinks that she's begun to do that in small ways, like sitting back in chairs and taking walks in the city.

The aftermath of Frida biting Varya continues to show the cost of choosing to survive for a long time over building a full life. Frida's misery led to irreparable damage because her arm has been amputated. Varya, too, compromised the entire experiment because she felt so miserable about what was happening to Frida. At the same time, Varya is starting to rebuild her life in a way that avoids her previous misery—eating more and trying to engage in life more fully.



The novel again raises the issue of legacy for Varya. Since her work was meant to be her contribution to the world, without it she has to find meaning in other ways. Thus, she turns to her relationships. In counseling Luke not to dwell on what happened to his brother, she is also trying to overcome her own sadness over the loss of her siblings. In addition, she is trying to overcome her fear of attachment by re-forging her relationship with her son.



Even though Robert isn't strictly family, Varya reaches out to him as a surrogate for her family members, since Robert was there for Simon and Klara at a time when she chose to remain distant. It is the shared experience of knowing her siblings that draws Varya to Robert.



Robert's story is a counterpoint to Varya's own life. Robert's explanation that many people chose to continue having sex despite the risk of getting HIV ties into the argument that a longer life isn't necessarily a better one. For many gay people, the notion of not having sex after fighting so hard to be authentic about their sexuality would strip meaning from their lives. Because of this, some chose to live a fuller life despite knowing that those choices could come at the cost of a longer life.



Varya's obsessive behaviors were another way of cutting herself off from a meaningful life. As Robert notes, fearful thoughts are paralyzing, and Varya understands that getting rid of these habits will allow her to build stronger relationships and make her feel freer.



When Varya returns to her condo, she has an email from Mira, asking to meet on December 11th. Mira is getting remarried to a man who had lost his wife to cancer. To Varya, it seems miraculous that Mira is able to move on. Varya wishes that she could tell her younger self not to try to live forever, but instead to stop worrying. She would tell herself to take advantage of the time she had with her siblings. Varya thinks of some of the “miracles” that her colleagues are trying to recreate in their labs, like a jellyfish that ages in reverse, or cicadas, which hibernate for 17 years before emerging from the soil and singing together.

The story continues to track Varya’s acknowledgement that what she wanted was not a long life, but one that was free from her obsessive worrying. The fact that her siblings were all predicted to die before her made her want to distance herself from them. Now she recognizes that loss is inherent in relationships, and that her obsession with avoiding loss only made her feel guilty after the fact and ruined her relationships with her siblings. The final image of the cicadas, however, offers hope that Varya can overcome her years of “hibernation” and cutting herself off from others, implying that she can still reconnect with those around her.



CHAPTER 36

In the first week of July, Varya and Ruby visit Gertie. Soon Ruby will begin her senior year of college at UCLA. Gertie asks Varya what she plans to do now—Varya has only told her that she made a critical mistake in the research and is leaving the Drake. She hasn’t told Gertie about Luke or that the two keep in touch. Luke occasionally sends pictures with his new girlfriend, Yuko, and once Varya sent Luke a jar of cherries.

The final chapter begins with family reconnecting in many different forms. Even though families can break apart because of conflict and disagreement, they can nonetheless remain connected to one another other because of their shared history and experiences.



Gertie says that Varya can’t sit around all day, eating pickles. Immediately Varya hears Klara, Daniel, and Simon’s voices in her head, making sarcastic retorts to Gertie’s comment. For so long, she suppressed their memories, but letting them in, she feels like the parts of her that she shut off are turning on again. She tells Gertie that she thinks she wants to teach. She taught a class while she was in graduate school, and even though it made her nervous, she found the “upturned faces” invigorating.

Even after leaving the Drake, Varya still wants to do work that leaves a legacy behind her. In turning to teaching, Varya finds meaning in ensuring that future generations will get excited in her area of study and build upon the work she has done in her career.



On the last night of Ruby’s visit, Ruby performs a magic show for the residents. While Ruby is setting up, Varya decides to tell Gertie about the fortune teller and the siblings’ conversation on the last night of Saul’s shiva—the last night the four of them were together. Gertie is aghast at how they could believe the fortune teller. Varya points out that Gertie is superstitious, reminding Gertie that she wanted to swing a live chicken around in the air after Saul died. Gertie says she didn’t want Varya to end up like her.

Gertie’s superstition implies that she, too, is worried about acting in accordance with fate. And yet at the same time, she acknowledges the potential harm in believing so fully in fate because it can deeply affect one’s actions, and Gertie hoped that her children wouldn’t share her superstition.



Varya knows that Gertie was nine when German forces invaded Hungary, and Gertie's mother's parents and siblings were sent to Auschwitz. The Shoah had diminished her belief in God, and looking to the future felt like tempting fate for her. In seeking to know the future, Varya and her siblings only solidified their fates. Gertie asks when the fortune teller said Varya would die. When Varya replies 88, Gertie asks what she's so worried about.

At 7:30, the magic show starts. The dining hall is teeming, and when Ruby enters, the stage transforms. Ruby has an easy grin, and her confidence never wavers even when she makes a mistake. Ruby looks more comfortable than Klara ever did, and Varya wishes that Klara could have seen Ruby perform. The crowd loves her.

After the show, Ruby wheels Gertie back to her room. Varya knows that stopping aging is unrealistic, but still she wants to keep Gertie around as long as possible. Soon, Ruby will be learning how to perform surgery or deliver a child. Raj asks why she wants to be a doctor when she brings people so much joy, but Ruby knows that magic is only one way to keep people alive. When Ruby was little, Raj told her Klara's mantra, and she repeats it every time she performs. Before the show at the home, she stood behind the makeshift curtain and repeated "I love you all" before stepping through it to join them.

In comparing herself to her mother, Varya recognizes that there is an appeal in not knowing one's fate and in planning for a future that one may not achieve. Her parents, by contrast, felt that any plan for the future meant that they surely wouldn't survive to see it, because of how much hardship they'd endured. Gertie also points out the irony in Varya thinking that she has to constantly worry when she was given a good fortune. Both women acknowledge that fate isn't set in stone, and that knowing one's fate can be harmful because it causes people to change their actions—often unnecessarily.



Varya acknowledges that Ruby has built on Klara's legacy in so many ways—not only in continuing Klara's genes, but also in making Klara's performance better because Ruby displays a confidence that Klara never truly had.



Ruby understands the benefit that magic can provide for people, just as her mother did, but she also knows that there are other ways to improve people's lives. Ending the novel with Klara's mantra illustrates that even if Ruby isn't always going to carry on Klara's legacy of magic, she does want to provide people with meaning and a sense of possibility, just as all four of the Gold siblings did.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Emanuel, Lizzy. "The Immortalists." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 Aug 2020. Web. 25 Aug 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Emanuel, Lizzy. "The Immortalists." LitCharts LLC, August 25, 2020. Retrieved August 25, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-immortalists>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Immortalists* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Benjamin, Chloe. *The Immortalists*. G. P. Putnam. 2019.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Benjamin, Chloe. *The Immortalists*. New York: G. P. Putnam. 2019.