Waiting

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Kennedy was born in the United Kingdom and spent her childhood traveling between various Australian states and the U.K., due to her father being in the Air Force. After studying at the Canberra College of Advanced Education (which later became the University of Canberra) and the Australian National University, she worked as a freelance writer, a teacher, and a community arts worker. In the 1990s, she spent two years as a volunteer teaching reading and writing in central Mexico. This experience partially inspired 2001's *Signs of Other Fires*, her first poetry collection. She has since published several other volumes of poetry, one novel, and two short story collections, *Dark Roots* and *Like a House on Fire*. Many of her stories were first published individually in magazines and newspapers. All of her short story and poetry collections have won numerous awards and been nominated for many more. Kennedy lives in Victoria, Australia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In dealing with both the personal experience of pregnancy loss and the medical aspects of diagnosing a miscarriage, "Waiting" evokes a shift in how people talk about and diagnose miscarriages. Before medical professionals began using ultrasounds in the 1970s and 1980s, many pregnant people miscarried before they even knew they were pregnant. Prior to this point, miscarriages were often framed as a "blessing in disguise" because of the belief that something must have been wrong with the fetus. It wasn't until the 1980s that doctors began to acknowledge and validate that miscarrying can be a traumatic experience, emotionally in addition to physically. Today, medical organizations believe that somewhere between 10 and 20% of pregnancies end in miscarriage—though they also suspect that the total rate might be even higher, given that some pregnancies end before they're detected. Most people miscarry before the 12th week of pregnancy. Experiencing multiple miscarriages like the narrator in the story is known as recurrent pregnancy loss, and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists state that it affects only about 1% of women. In 50 to 75% of cases, doctors are unable to conclusively identify a cause.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A number of Kennedy's stories tackle issues of parenthood, family life, or the process of receiving medical care. "Tender," for instance, takes place on the night before a woman's scheduled biopsy; "Cake" follows a young woman on her first day back to work after having her first child; and "Laminex and Mirrors" is about a young woman dealing with professional standards that keep her and her fellow hospital employees from connecting with patients. As a writer of realist short fiction, Kennedy pays close attention to the mundane nature of everyday life. In this sense, her stories can be compared to that of other authors like Raymond Carver and John Steinbeck. She has also mentioned the Russian author Anton Chekhov in talking about her own work. At the time Kennedy published her first short story collection *Dark Roots* in 2006, there were almost no short story collections being published in Australia; most authors—including her—were publishing individual stories for competitions. Since then, a number of Australian short story writers have risen to prominence and published award-winning collections, including Ceridwen Dovey (*Only the Animals*) and Debra Adelaide (*Letter to George Clooney*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Waiting"
- **When Written:** 2009
- **Where Written:** Victoria, Australia
- **When Published:** "Waiting" was first published in 2009. It was later included in the 2012 collection *Like A House On Fire*.
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realist Short Story
- **Setting:** An Australian public hospital
- **Climax:** The narrator mentally tells Pete to give up and let the cows eat their struggling wheat crop
- **Antagonist:** Miscarriages, the callous and unfeeling male ultrasound techs, and the forces of nature
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Pregnancy Tests. While the narrator's mention of the "two blue lines" may be well-known shorthand for a positive result on a modern at-home pregnancy test, testing for pregnancy hasn't always been so simple. From the 1930s through the 1950s, a pregnancy test involved injecting a female lab animal with a woman's urine to see if the animal ovulated. The discovery that scientists could use Xenopus toads was revolutionary, as they didn't have to kill and dissect the toads to check for ovulation—the test was positive if the toad laid eggs.

PLOT SUMMARY

In "Waiting," the narrator flips through magazines in a hospital waiting room. She's about to have an ultrasound, which she knows will confirm that her pregnancy is lost. A magazine horoscope tells her that things will align when she least expects it, and in another magazine, a celebrity begs for privacy. The narrator thinks that if the celebrity really wants to be forgotten, then they should trade places.

The narrator hopes that today she will be assigned the hospital's only female ultrasound tech. During previous miscarriages, she has been given the male techs, whose bedside manner is cold and detached. They refuse to meet her eyes while they do the ultrasounds, and even when she asks if the baby is still alive, they refuse to tell her outright. At one previous appointment, though, the narrator had the female tech, who was honest that she couldn't find the heartbeat, touched the narrator's leg, and let her have some privacy to collect herself. This might be why the narrator hasn't seen the woman at the hospital in a while—maybe she took too long with her patients and got fired.

The narrator is sure that the ultrasound won't find a heartbeat today. Last Tuesday, when she hit 10 weeks, she noticed that her pregnancy symptoms had disappeared, which made her feel that her heart was a shallow dish of **water** threatening to spill over. Knowing that her husband Pete has enough to worry about already, she didn't tell him about her pregnancy, her suspicion that it is lost, or about today's appointment. She doesn't know exactly what Pete has been feeling about her repeated miscarriages, but she knows that it has been hard for him. His latest hardship is that the **wheat** he planted 10 weeks ago is dying. The narrator often sees him in the field, trying to decide when to give up and let the cows eat it.

Last March, the narrator made it all the way to 14 weeks before she miscarried and ended up in the hospital. As she lay in the hospital bed, they announced that visiting hours were over, and Pete hesitated. The narrator closed her eyes, bracing for him to say something. Instead, he undressed and climbed into bed with her, showing her that he truly understands her grief. That night, she woke up to him rubbing her arm in his sleep.

When the narrator talks to her doctor later, she'll decide not to have an inpatient procedure. Instead, she'll take "the natural course" and miscarry on her own time. She has done the "natural course" many times now, and it's devastating; it carves "erosion gullies" through her and Pete and pulls the rug from under them. She's still trying to make it make sense.

A male tech calls her name, and as she walks to the exam room, the narrator imagines Pete deciding to give up on the wheat and let the cows eat it. She knows how badly he wants a baby and she knows she can't give it to him. Her heavy dish of water feels like it's tipping as she sees Pete wipe his face and prepare to feed the wheat to the cows.

CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The unnamed narrator of the story is a working-class Australian woman who is married to a farmer named Pete. The narrator has already experienced at least four miscarriages—and in the story, she's waiting at the hospital for an ultrasound, certain that she's about to miscarry again. While her husband has tenderly supported her through miscarriages in the past, this time she has chosen to protect him from grief by keeping secret both her pregnancy and her suspicion that it's lost. As the narrator waits alone for her ultrasound, she reveals a little about her past medical experiences, from the brusque male ultrasound techs, to the logistics of paying for the procedure, to the heartbreak of receiving a disc of ultrasound images, even though the baby isn't viable. But what she doesn't reveal is much about herself. She doesn't dwell in her suffering, explain her desire to be a parent, or elaborate much on her relationship with Pete. Nonetheless, readers can intuit a few important things. For one, some of her silence about her grief seems self-protective—she doesn't talk about wanting to be a parent or even use the word "baby" to refer to her pregnancies, which suggests how painful these losses have been. Second, it becomes clear that she feels powerless in her life. The fate of her pregnancies and the success of her husband's crops are out of her hands and seem doomed to repeated destruction. What she's waiting for, it turns out, isn't just the doctor—it's for the chaos of her life to start making sense and for something to go her way.

Pete – Pete is the narrator's husband; he's a farmer who raises cattle and various crops in rural Australia. Though the narrator describes Pete as "undemonstrative" and suggests that he's a quiet, pragmatic, and stoic man, he's nevertheless empathetic and loving. After one of the narrator's miscarriages, for instance, he crawls into the hospital bed beside her, staying the night instead of leaving when visiting hours end. The narrator recognizes Pete's grief over her lost pregnancies and she can tell that he desperately wants to be a parent. This contributes to her decision not to tell him about this most recent pregnancy—she wants to spare him more grief. At the same time as Pete struggles to process the miscarriages, he's also struggling to make ends meet and be successful as a farmer. Earlier in the year he planted a **wheat** crop, and while he hoped for favorable weather, the wheat hasn't taken off. As the narrator waits for her ultrasound, she believes that Pete is at home, deciding that it's time to give up on the wheat. The narrator admires Pete's pragmatism in the face of failure and disappointment, the way he's always willing to pick up the pieces and do whatever needs to be done next.

The Woman – The woman is the only female radiographer at the narrator's public hospital. Unlike her male colleagues, the

woman showed the narrator compassion when she couldn't detect a heartbeat—she held the narrator's leg, told her she's sorry, and gave her time alone to process. Since the narrator hasn't seen the woman at the hospital at all during her last few visits, she wonders if the woman was fired for not being efficient enough with her patients.

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.

GRIEF AND LONELINESS

In "Waiting," a woman sits in a hospital waiting room, knowing exactly what her ultrasound will reveal: that she has lost yet another pregnancy. But as she grieves her lost pregnancies, she's conspicuously alone. She's at the doctor's office by herself, the staff barely acknowledge her humanity, and she never mentions any friends or family to lean on except her husband, Pete—but Pete isn't with her because she hasn't actually told him about this pregnancy, let alone her suspicion that it's lost. Throughout the story, Cate Kennedy shows how all this loneliness magnifies the narrator's suffering exponentially, making her grief harder to bear.

As the narrator navigates the trauma of her miscarriage, she remains totally alone. Most notably, she's at the doctor's office by herself. From her memories, she shows that this hasn't always been the case; after one miscarriage, for instance, Pete crawled into her hospital bed to keep her company. But now she's alone because she hasn't told him what's going on, which means that he can't help her grieve. Besides Pete, the narrator never mentions any family or friends who might help her. Her life seems isolated, and even though she references her mother and grandmother, she does so in passing without clarifying whether either one is alive or involved in her life. Because of this, the narrator appears to have no support system besides her husband, who isn't there. While the narrator doesn't dwell on her loneliness outright, she does mention it once. Looking at a magazine cover of a celebrity begging for privacy, she thinks "If you sincerely want the world to leave you alone until it forgets all about you, come and live at my place." This makes it clear just how alone and forgotten she feels as she waits for terrible news.

The narrator's interactions with the brusque and unkind hospital staff show most clearly how feeling alone intensifies her grief. At previous appointments, the male ultrasound techs never offered empathy or kindness, even as the narrator was learning the devastating news that her pregnancy was no longer viable. While examining her, they would never meet her eyes, they would refuse to tell her clearly what was going on, and they wouldn't give her time to collect herself afterwards. This lack of human connection between the narrator and the staff made an already crushing experience even more traumatic, giving her the sense that nobody understood or cared about her grief. One particular interaction clarifies this dynamic: at a previous appointment, a tech said that he wasn't giving her an ultrasound image because there's "Nothing to see [...] It's so tiny in these early stages." This comment might be factually true, but it implies that the narrator's pregnancy wasn't significant and assumes that she wouldn't want or need a memento, since the pregnancy was basically nothing at all. Of course, the grief of losing a pregnancy has little to do with the size of the fetus; it's the loss of hope for the future and the loss of a being that the narrator perhaps saw as her companion. For this tech to brush off the narrator's pregnancy as insignificant shows how alone she is with her feelings and makes her grief harder to bear.

Since feeling alone has been so devastating, her decision to keep her pregnancy from Pete is significant—it's possible to interpret this as an attempt to save her marriage, preserving the only human connection she seems to have. The narrator claims to have kept her pregnancy and miscarriage from Pete so that he wouldn't suffer more than he already has. This certainly seems like part of the truth—she has deep empathy for his struggles with farming and his grief over her previous miscarriages, so it's quite plausible that she wouldn't want to pile on. But there's good reason to be skeptical that this is the whole story. For one, Pete has been a supportive and loving partner during past miscarriages, and there's no reason to think that he wouldn't want to support her again (especially since his love and care would make her suffering so much easier to endure). Nonetheless, the narrator gives subtle clues that she's nervous that he might leave her, presumably because she's been unable to bear a child. For one, she laments at the end of the story that she knows "what [he] need[s]" but "can't give it to [him] and recalls his "thwarted tenderness when he pets the dog. This makes clear how badly she thinks Pete wants a child, and it subtly reveals her own sense of inadequacy for not being able to give him one. Furthermore, the narrator says that once while she was hospitalized after miscarrying, they announced the end of visiting hours and Pete "hesitat[ed]." The narrator believed he was "gathering his thoughts to say something," and she closed her eyes in preparation, seemingly bracing to hear something bad. Instead, he took off his shoes and crawled into bed with her. Pete's choice to overstay visiting hours implies that he's not a visitor in her life and that he's in it for the long haul. But the fact that she dreaded what he might say suggests that she might have been bracing for him to end their marriage, leaving her utterly alone.

In this light, the narrator's choice to keep this pregnancy from Pete seems potentially self-protective; she doesn't want to call more attention to her inability to give him a child and thereby risk him leaving her completely alone. But this secrecy is also self-destructive, as it leaves her isolated with her horrific grief. The narrator finds herself in a trap, then: the only person who might lessen her suffering is Pete, but if she shares what's going on, he might (at least in her mind) end their marriage and leave her even more alone than she already feels. This makes clear how much loneliness—and the fear of loneliness—magnify her grief.

NATURE, CHAOS, AND POWERLESSNESS

Throughout "Waiting," the narrator frames nature as a destructive force that stirs chaos throughout her life. Nature is responsible for her miscarriages, for her husband's crops failing, and—in general—for "whipping the rug out from under [them]" so many times in their lives. Amidst all this destructive chaos, the narrator and her husband wait eagerly, though powerlessly, for some kind of order to emerge or for something to go their way. In the end, though, it seems that all they can do is wait. In this way, Cate Kennedy suggests that people are generally powerless over their fates. Tragedy and chaos are always close at hand, and the only way forward is to accept this and try to pick up the pieces.

Cate Kennedy first shows nature's destructive power in the failure of Pete's **wheat** crop. Pete—and many other local farmers—planted wheat earlier in the spring, hoping for good weather. But hoping isn't enough to make nature cooperate. The spring has been too warm for wheat to thrive, and most neighboring farmers have already given up and fed their failed wheat to their cows. The narrator implies that Pete, too, will give up soon. This is a major loss—the weather is destroying not just the wheat, but also Pete's livelihood, showing how far-reaching and personal the cruelty of nature can be.

As nature takes its toll on Pete's wheat, the narrator also sees herself as a victim of nature. She shows this through the metaphors she uses for her miscarriages. For instance, when describing an ultrasound, she compares her body to a "human map" (likening herself to a landmass) and compares her imminent miscarriage to a "cyclone gathering its bleary force offshore." In this sense, the narrator explicitly sees miscarriage as a destructive natural event that she's powerless to prevent. She also frequently uses tidal imagery to describe her miscarriages ("an estuarine feeling ebbing away" or "that tide ebbing again"), which implies that she sees them as cyclical and inevitable, like the tides. All of this suggests the narrator's feeling of powerlessness over nature, which extends to her own body. No matter what she does, she cannot stop nature from destroying her pregnancies, just like it ruins the crops.

While the narrator has no control over chaos and destruction, she can control how she reacts to it. This is the basis of her pragmatism; instead of dwelling on her suffering (or being a "martyr," as she says), she simply does her best to carry on with her life. In the face of tragedy, she is "just someone who can see what needs doing, and does it." But pragmatism takes a toll on the narrator. She admits this subtly through her repeated description of feeling like she's carrying a "shallow bowl of **water**" in her chest while trying desperately to keep it from tipping. As water is associated with nature, the notion that she's struggling to keep it from spilling suggests that nature is always on the brink of overwhelming her. She says of the bowl of water that she "ache[s] with holding it steady," showing how her practical attempts to hold herself together in the face of tragedy are painful and perhaps impossible to sustain.

Pragmatism is how the narrator *acts* in the face of chaos, but she also carefully describes how she *thinks* about everything terrible that has happened to her. She articulates this most clearly near the end of the story when she's describing the "natural course" of her pregnancy (miscarriage) and lamenting that she's had enough of nature. "I'm waiting for something comprehensible," she says, "to jump out of this garbled mess and make sense to me." This moment frames the conflict between herself and nature as a conflict of order and chaos—and importantly, she seems to understand that she cannot *create* the order she desires, but must instead simply wait to see if it comes.

The "waiting" of the story's title, then, has two meanings: the narrator is waiting for her ultrasound appointment, but she's also waiting for something in her life to finally go her way. This insight helps to make sense of the magazine horoscope in the story's opening line, which tells the narrator that "everything will align" for her at a time when she least expects it. The language of alignment suggests order appearing from chaos—a line emerging from scattered points. But it's not clear whether this is truly an optimistic message: a horoscope ostensibly predicts the future, but this one insists that the future is impossible to predict. It's possible to see the horoscope as evidence that things might improve for the narrator—after all, she is currently in a moment where she doesn't expect things to get better, which the horoscope suggests might mean that alignment is near. However, the overall message of the horoscope is that nobody can force nature to cooperate, and that the narrator has no control over her fate. Order may emerge out of chaos—but all she can do is wait.

LOVE, CARE, AND SUFFERING

In "Waiting," the story's characters struggle to express love and care. The hospital staff have been taught a cold and alienating bedside manner, so they show no sympathy for the narrator's repeated miscarriages. Meanwhile, the narrator's husband, Pete, doesn't even know about her pregnancy, so he's not able to support her in her grief. And while the narrator claims not to have told Pete

about the pregnancy as an act of love (in order to spare him from suffering), she also admits that she has no idea how to help him process his sadness about her previous miscarriages. In this light, perhaps she doesn't feel equipped to tell him about this one and face his grief again. In depicting various characters struggling to support one another through grief, "Waiting" acknowledges how hard it is to be there for someone whose suffering can't be fixed, but the story also suggests that basic human kindness is the right place to start.

The most obvious instance of characters failing to be kind in the face of grief is the demeanor of the male hospital staff. The ultrasound techs have one of the most sensitive roles imaginable; they must determine whether the narrator's pregnancy is still viable. But over and over, they fail to do this in a humane way, refusing to meet her eyes, tell her honestly what's happening, or show her any sympathy at all. The narrator speculates that the hospital teaches them to act this way, which suggests something galling: that despite routinely handling the physical side of miscarriage, this clinic has no equivalent procedure for helping people through their grief. This gestures to a broader issue, that people often don't know what to do for those who are suffering, so they sometimes choose to do nothing at all.

Even for people who love each other, expressing love and care can be hard. The narrator, for instance, clearly has profound love for her husband. She's constantly empathizing with him, imagining his suffering over his failed **wheat** crop and finding in his gestures subtle signs that he's "worn down." And while she claims it was out of love that she didn't tell him that she was pregnant again (she didn't want to get his hopes up when he's already going though enough), it's possible to see this another way; perhaps she was trying to spare herself too, not only from the grief of disappointing him again, but also from the discomfort of watching him suffer and not knowing how to help. "I'm not pretending I know what it's like for him," she concedes, and then notes that the grief pamphlets that the hospital gives her never mention how to help her partner. It's plausible that she felt it was easier to not tell Pete about her pregnancy at all than to face his grief without knowing what to do or say.

While it's genuinely hard to know what to say to someone who's grieving, "Waiting" suggests that simple kindness makes a huge difference. The narrator first shows this through her recollection of the only time that a female tech performed her ultrasound. Unlike the aloof and inhumane male techs, this woman recognized that the narrator was going through something devastating and acted accordingly: she said she was sorry and squeezed the narrator's leg, placing "[h]er hand there for comfort. Warmth and pulse flowing between us, skin to skin." The female tech didn't do anything extraordinary; all she did was act with basic humanity to acknowledge the suffering of another person and treat her with kindness. But this made a significant impression on the narrator, who felt cared for and would consider it a "small mercy" to have this woman care for her again. The power of simple kindness is apparent, too, in the narrator's recollection of Pete climbing into her hospital bed. While the narrator seemed to brace for him to leave at the end of visiting hours, he instead hopped in beside her and stayed the night. Pete never said a word; all it took was him holding her to make her "see how much he understood," which shows how even a simple hug and the mere act of defying visiting hours made the narrator feel like someone loved her, helping to lessen her grief.

Of course, acts of kindness aren't a panacea for grief, and the story shows how difficult it is to love someone, particularly within a long marriage that's full of hardship. To show how love wears people down, Cate Kennedy repeats imagery of rubbing: for instance, the narrator's grandmother rubbed her wedding ring whenever she felt nervous about her husband doing dangerous work in the mines, which wore the metal down. The eroded ring is a physical embodiment of how loving someone under difficult circumstances wears on a person. But while this kind of love—the kind that wears on people—certainly contributes to suffering, the story suggests that it's also essential. The narrator articulates this most clearly while recalling Pete lying next to her in her hospital bed, rubbing her arm in his sleep. This gesture is a nervous tic that expresses his grief over her miscarriage, but it's also a sign of his love—even while he sleeps, he's still comforting her. In reaction, the narrator remarks that, "Oh, it wears us thin, marriage. It knocks the edges off us." What she means here is that while loving someone through grief is undeniably strenuous and painful, it's also worthwhile; love "knocks the edges off" of people, making them softer and making their suffering easier to bear.

GENDER, CLASS, AND HARDSHIP

Throughout "Waiting," the narrator's gender and social class make an already painful situation worse. While describing her experience of losing multiple pregnancies, the narrator repeatedly draws attention to how others overlook her pain because she's a working-class woman, implying that the situation might be different were she wealthy or if her hospital knew how to serve female patients. In this way, Cate Kennedy calls attention to the fact that while miscarriage is difficult for everyone touched by it, the pain is not equally distributed; the most vulnerable people suffer more than others.

The clearest indication that the narrator's gender hurts her is that her hospital is incompetent at providing miscarriage care—specifically, it seems, because the male staff struggle to empathize with women. While the hospital is perfectly equipped to handle the physical side of miscarriage, miscarriage is also devastating to *emotional* health. Despite this, the male staff make no effort to acknowledge the narrator's

grief or even her humanity. Instead of offering comfort, they awkwardly avoid looking at her, fail to provide her honest information, and treat her coldly, even while she's learning the horrible news that her pregnancy is no longer viable. Rather than helping to care for her emotionally, they make her suffering worse. In fact, the only indication that the hospital acknowledges grief at all is the narrator's brief reference to a pamphlet that she receives, presumably after each miscarriage. Beyond being a terribly impersonal way to help someone through emotional suffering, the pamphlet also appears woefully inadequate. It has vague instructions to "giv[e] yourself permission to grieve," but it doesn't answer the narrator's most pressing question: what effect miscarriage might have on her husband, Pete, and how to help him process his suffering. That the pamphlet never takes into account the effects of miscarriage on a person's partner shows the hospital's narrow perspective: they apparently consider miscarriage to be exclusively a female problem. And perhaps because of their discomfort with female pain, they fail to provide adequate emotional care, which makes an already devastating experience exponentially worse.

Similarly, the narrator has a worse experience of miscarriage because she's working-class rather than wealthy. Throughout the story, the narrator offers a number of clues about her financial situation: Pete is a farmer who seems to operate on tight margins, for instance, and the narrator's grandfather worked in the mines, so it seems that the family has been blue-collar for generations. Presumably because of their tight finances, the narrator goes to a public hospital for her prenatal care. (Public hospitals are cheaper than private hospitals, but they have a reputation for offering a lower standard of care.) And this hospital does appear somewhat substandard; there are long wait times for her appointment, for instance, and the staff seem to be rushing to see as many patients as possible. This rush means that they don't treat the narrator like a human being or give her time to grieve. In the story's opening, the narrator sardonically acknowledges how being working-class means that she's treated worse than others. While flipping past a magazine spread of a celebrity begging for privacy, the narrator scoffs: "If you sincerely want the world to leave you alone until it forgets all about you, come and live at my place." This celebrity makes buckets of money off of people playing close attention to her, while the narrator has the opposite experience: even the doctors that she *pays* to care about her don't give her much attention, and she doesn't have the money for a better hospital. From the narrator's perspective, the public scrutiny that celebrities face seems a small price to pay for a better life.

While "Waiting" offers no remedies for the classist and sexist society that it portrays, the story clearly shows how gender and class make the narrator's suffering worse. For someone like the narrator, who desperately wants to carry a pregnancy to term, miscarriage will always be painful—but her experience doesn't have to be as bad as the story portrays. It's easy to imagine a hospital treating female patients with kindness and empathy and offering resources (beyond a mere pamphlet) to help them process their grief. But such a hospital would likely be expensive, framing compassionate care as a luxury that working-class women can't afford. Because of that, women like the narrator must suffer twofold: grieving their lost pregnancy, and suffering through inhumane care during one of the most painful moments of their lives.

SYMBOLS

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

WHEAT

Pete's wheat crop symbolizes the narrator's pregnancy—but more broadly, it symbolizes people's inability to control nature. The story sets up the relationship between the wheat and the narrator's current pregnancy by noting that Pete planted the wheat 10 weeks ago, the same week that the narrator conceived. And just as the narrator knows that her pregnancy will soon end in another miscarriage, Pete is preparing to give up on the crop—which is doing poorly in the heat—and let the cattle eat it.

In both cases, neither the narrator nor Pete can control acts of nature that seem to make little sense. Pete, for his part, has no control over the weather, which will determine the success of his wheat. When the heat never breaks, which kills his crop, all Pete can do is accept his misfortune and try something else. Similarly, the narrator's recurrent miscarriages seem uncontrollable—no matter what the narrator does, nature seems to thwart her ability to carry a child. The course of her pregnancy follows much the same course as Pete's wheat: it begins with a glimmer of hope that things might work out this time, and it seems destined to end with the narrator feeling powerless and devastated. The narrator's final thought, in which she mentally tells Pete to let the cows eat the struggling wheat, suggests her disheartened acceptance that this pregnancy has failed.

WATER

Throughout the story, water represents nature's power to destroy the narrator's life. This is clearest in her use of water imagery to describe her miscarriages, a series of tragedies that have devastated her. The narrator often evokes the tides while describing her miscarriages; when realizing that she has lost her pregnancy, for instance, she describes "that tide ebbing again" and the "estuarine feeling of

something ebbing away." Not only does this suggest that her hopes of pregnancy are going out like the tide, but it also suggests just how powerless the narrator is to control her miscarriages, since they come—inevitably and cyclically—like the tides.

While the tidal imagery points to the predictability and inevitability of the miscarriages, other references suggest just how destructive these miscarriages are for the narrator. For instance, the narrator describes her miscarriages as "carving erosion gullies" through her. This suggests that her miscarriages are like water carving violently through the landscape (or, metaphorically, through the narrator), devastating her physically and emotionally, perhaps for good.

Finally, the narrator describes her heart as "a shallow dish of water" that she's trying to keep from tipping over. Her implication is that the water is always on the brink of spilling, just as nature is always on the brink of destroying her whole life. At times, keeping the dish steady is painful, which suggests how hard it is for the narrator to fight nature's impending chaos and hold everything together. By the end of the story, the narrator has not yet metaphorically let the bowl spill, but the future is uncertain, as nature continues to cyclically return.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribe edition of *Like a House on Fire* published in 2012.

Waiting Quotes

The horoscope page lying limp in my hands tells me everything will align for me at a time I least expect it, so I flip over to the page that's about cakes and slices ideal for school lunches, then back again [...]

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is sitting in a hospital waiting area, killing time until her ultrasound appointment. Her appointment will, she believes, confirm her fears that she's miscarrying yet again.

The narrator's quick flipping through the magazine reveals that she's not actually reading it; she's just looking at it to pass the time and distract herself. However, the distractions that the magazine offers are probably hard to swallow for the narrator. The horoscope's insistence that everything will fall into place when she least expects it may read as grating or even traumatizing, given how hopeless her tone is throughout the story. She seems to have totally given up on carrying a pregnancy to term, so the suggestion that things will work out someday comes off as glib and insensitive. Further, it's perhaps unsurprising that she'd flip so quickly past an article about school lunches. The narrator doesn't have a child to fix lunches for, so it's probably painful to come across an article reminding her of this.

While the narrator seems to reject the horoscope's prediction, the horoscope is subtly articulating a core idea of the story: that people have no control over their fates and instead must wait and see if things fall into place. The horoscope doesn't say this outright, but it's implied—the notion that things will fall into place when the narrator least expects it suggests that she can't control when this will happen, while the notion that she won't expect it when it does happen points to how chaotic and unpredictable her life will continue to be.

Finally, the horoscope also offers a possible indication that the narrator hasn't actually lost her baby. Now, when she believes she's already miscarrying, would be a time when she least expects things to align and fall into place. There's no indication at the end of the story that the narrator is still pregnant, though—so this possible reading of the horoscope is ambiguous.

Give us some privacy, says the caption, and I think, *Lady, if you want privacy, stop cashing the cheques. Stop posing there with your manicured hand on your skinny hip. If you sincerely want the world to leave you alone until it forgets all about you, come and live at my place.*

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

While the narrator waits for her ultrasound appointment, she flips through a magazine and comes across photographs of a female celebrity who is asking, in the caption, for privacy.

In this passage, the narrator offers some clues as to what her own life is like as she compares herself to this celebrity. Since this woman is featured in multiple magazines, the narrator sees how many people are interested in what's

going on in this celebrity's life and with her body. By contrast, the narrator implies that where she lives (presumably, a farm in rural Australia), no one cares about her or even remembers she exists. Her commentary here reveals her sense that people see her as unimportant and unworthy of attention; in the medical context, this will mean that her caregivers consistently overlook her suffering and give her substandard care.

It's also noteworthy that the celebrity's hypocrisy seems to irk the narrator. After all, this woman is profiting from all this media attention and then claiming not to want it. When the narrator says that if the celebrity truly wants privacy, then she should stop cashing checks and stop maintaining a photo-ready body (manicured hands, skinny hips), she's implying that the narrator's plea for privacy is disingenuous; of course this woman wants the money and the attention, no matter what she claims in the caption. After all, to the narrator, nobody in their right mind would want to feel as lonely and cash strapped as the narrator does.

But while the narrator is making a good point, it's worth also considering the celebrity's point of view. In another magazine, the narrator saw a zoomed-in picture of that celebrity's thigh, inviting speculation about whether she has cellulite. It's no doubt frustrating for this woman that people pore over every photo of her, looking for flaws to call out in front of everyone. And if she doesn't submit to this sexist scrutiny of her body, she'll lose her celebrity status and the money that comes with it. So this passage subtly points out the double-bind that women are in. The celebrity wants privacy from the vultures inspecting her cellulite, but she also presumably likes the freedom and status that her money and fame provide. Meanwhile, the narrator has her privacy, but it feels to her like she has *so much* privacy that she barely exists—nobody pays attention to her, good or bad, particularly as a female patient in a healthcare system that seems not to know how to care for women.

> What is surprising is that people have taken the time to painstakingly fill out the Find-a-Words and grade-four level Celebrity Crosswords, people sitting right here, maybe with a lot preying on their minds, their eyes searching over a grid of letters, forwards, backwards, diagonally, hunting those letters, waiting for a sequence to jump out at them and make sense and turn into a recognisable word.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator describes the magazines on offer in the hospital waiting area, she's surprised that other waiting patients have gone through and filled out all the word puzzles in the magazines. It presumably strikes her as odd that, in a waiting room meant for adult women, these easy puzzles, made at a child's level, are all filled out.

But the narrator quickly explains this phenomenon, and her explanation reveals her longing for sense in a world that seems senseless. For women like her, who are anxiously awaiting their appointments, seeing a recognizable word emerge from a chaotic jumble of letters gives them a sense of order, hope, and control. Presumably, while awaiting an ultrasound that could bring either joyful or devastating news, these women feel like their own lives are unpredictable and jumbled, and they're hoping that the ultrasound—like the word emerging from the word search—will provide the order and sense that they seek. These women can't control whether or not they get bad news about their pregnancies, but they can find all the words hidden in the word search. The puzzles, then, provide the waiting patients the sense that if they try hard enough, they can make their lives make sense.

It's also worth paying attention to the language Cate Kennedy uses. Saying that the waiting patients are "hunting" the words allows the patients to step into a role with some power. In contrast, a lot "prey[s]" on these women's minds. This casts the patients themselves as the prey—possibly, as the prey of the natural world, which can change the course of their pregnancies (and therefore their lives) in an instant. And while these patients may be able to feel more in control by making sense out of the word puzzles, they're nevertheless still at the mercy of nature.

> This careful professional detachment while they're gazing at the human map of you, the intimate, failed, faltering misstep, in ghostly black and white. White cloud coursing grainily over a black landmass, some cyclone gathering its bleary force offshore.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 198-99

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator points out how weird it is that the male techs are so cold and aloof while doing something so intimate: looking inside her body via the ultrasound.

The narrator makes it very clear that the techs' detached bedside manner makes the experience of finding out that she has miscarried even more traumatic. She describes the ultrasound image as portraying the "intimate, failed, faltering misstep," which could refer either to her body (which couldn't support the fetus) or to the deceased fetus itself. Either way, the language of failure that the narrator uses makes it seem as though these techs are pointing out something that she's done wrong instead of compassionately providing medical information. This makes the narrator feel particularly vulnerable and self-conscious, compounding her suffering.

It's also important to notice how the language of this passage equates the narrator's body to a landmass (as when she refers to herself as a "human map"). Going on to refer to her impending miscarriage as a "cyclone gathering its bleary force offshore" shows that the narrator thinks of herself as a landmass at the mercy of nature's destructive force—her miscarriage is coming, and there's nothing she can do to stop it. When it finally does arrive, it will have the force of a massive storm, which drives home how difficult and destructive these miscarriages are for the narrator. They upend her life and make her feel powerless, just as a cyclone might destroy a town.

❝ She moved the transducer and gazed at the screen and then her hand came out and squeezed my leg and she looked at me and said, I'm so sorry, I can't see a heartbeat.

Her hand there for comfort. Warmth and pulse flowing between us, skin to skin.

Related Characters: The Woman, The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator tells readers about a previous appointment when the hospital's only female tech performed her ultrasound. Unlike her male colleagues, the woman took the time to comfort the narrator when she couldn't find a heartbeat.

According to the narrator, this appointment was the only time in her many miscarriages that she experienced compassionate medical care. Elsewhere, she describes the male ultrasound techs and her doctor as having a clinical, detached bedside manner, refusing to acknowledge that not finding a heartbeat is a devastating turn of events. While learning about this miscarriage was still horrible, the woman's compassion made the narrator's suffering a little easier, since this time she didn't feel completely alone and overlooked.

But the fact that this female tech made such an impression on the narrator is an indictment of the standard of care at this hospital. After all, this woman didn't do anything extraordinary—her actions were what any humane person would do in a tragic situation: she made eye contact, for instance, and expressed sympathy. By contrast, the other staff don't seem to see miscarriage as anything but a routine medical event, which makes them callous and brusque to their patients in a particularly vulnerable moment. It seems that the female tech, as a woman, has a baseline level of empathy for what the narrator is going through, while the male techs lack any intuitive empathy or any training that would teach them to be humane.

❝ No nausea. Dull anguish like a bitter taste in my mouth, heart like a shallow dish of water I was desperate not to tip, filling my chest. That estuarine feeling of something ebbing away; those symptoms that had kept me so stupidly hopeful. Evaporating like a rainless cloud.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator describes how one morning last week, she suddenly realized that her pregnancy symptoms were gone, signaling that she was going to miscarry again.

Throughout this passage, the narrator uses imagery of water to talk about what's happening to her. Describing her impending miscarriage as "ebbing away" is a reference to the tides, which come and go on a predictable

schedule—much like the narrator inevitably miscarries whenever she gets pregnant. Similarly, insisting that her symptoms are "Evaporating like a rainless cloud" speaks to her sense of barrenness and powerlessness. Her womb, like the land under that cloud, is dry and barren—and nature won't cooperate and let her to carry a pregnancy to term.

This imagery of the tides and the rainless cloud link water to the relentless cruelty of nature. In this light, the narrator's description of her own heart as a "shallow dish of water" suggests that this destructive water is within her and might spill over at any moment, wrecking her life. Containing the water in a shallow dish speaks to how hard the narrator tries to hold everything together in the face of tragedy and how doomed that effort sometimes feels.

Finally, using the word "estuarine" speaks to the in-between state of the narrator's pregnancy. An estuary is where a river meets the sea; water there is a mix of salt and freshwater. Right now, the narrator is technically still pregnant since the fetus is still inside of her, but she doesn't believe it's still alive. Thus, she sees her body as existing in the same kind of in-between place as an estuary, where she's not pregnant, but she's not *not* pregnant either.

> It's funny, in the pamphlets they hand you they talk about giving yourself permission to grieve and taking time for yourself, but they never talk much about your partner. I'm not pretending I know what it's like for him, but I look at his face and I can see that he's worn down as it is, almost to the point of slippage, like a stripped screw.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Pete

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200-01

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator discusses how mundane and routine her miscarriage care has become, she notes that the pamphlets she regularly receives imply that she's the only one who matters—even though Pete is struggling with the miscarriages as well.

The simple fact that the narrator receives these pamphlets speaks to how impersonal and removed her medical care is. Instead of having conversations with her doctor about the emotional toll of these miscarriages or possibly being referred to a mental health provider, the narrator receives pamphlets. Giving out pamphlets means that the narrator's doctor doesn't have to do the hard work of attending to the narrator's emotional needs. It's possible that the narrator's hospital relies on pamphlets because it's a public institution—there might not be the time, money, or staffing to provide more individualized care. But still, this impersonal care clearly hurts the narrator who rarely feels that her medical providers see her as a human being or recognize her pain.

To make matters worse, the pamphlets totally ignore that the narrator isn't the only one trying to have a baby and suffering as a result of the miscarriages; her husband suffers, too. By ignoring Pete's pain, the pamphlets actually place even more responsibility on the narrator for managing the fallout of her miscarriages, since she now has to figure out all by herself what Pete might be feeling and how she might help him cope. In other words, not only is nobody helping her grieve, but she also has no roadmap for how to help her husband, which she seems to believe is her responsibility.

Noting that Pete is "worn down [...] almost to the point of slippage, like a stripped screw" makes it clear that this is extremely difficult for him. Pete is trying to hold their lives together by acting like a screw, which is meant to securely join boards to one another. But a stripped screw (one whose grooves are worn down) *can't* hold, implying that Pete is struggling to keep everything together. This evokes the narrator's previous comment that her heart is a "shallow dish of water" that she's straining to keep from tipping over. It's clear that both the narrator and Pete are working really hard to keep tragedy from overwhelming them, but like a stripped screw or a precarious bowl, it's not clear how long their efforts can last.

This sense of how much Pete and the narrator are struggling makes the pamphlets even more profane. It seems that if either of them had any support at all, they might be able to function better in all aspects of their lives. But by ignoring how miscarriages affect both partners, the medical system leaves them on their own to figure out how to get through this.

> I've watched him out there some mornings, stooping down, looking at the stalks, wondering where the point of non-recovery is, where it comes and what you do once you've decided. So this time I spared him. Kept the news of those two blue lines on the test to myself. I look at the calendar and think of him out there on the tractor sowing that wheat, ten weeks ago to the day.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Pete

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator explains her choice to keep her pregnancy a secret: Pete's crop of wheat is failing, which is already hard on him, and she didn't want to overwhelm him by getting his hopes up about this pregnancy. Implicitly, this suggests that she believes that she'll never carry a pregnancy to term, since she kept the pregnancy from Pete under the assumption that she would inevitably miscarry.

This passage firmly establishes the wheat as a symbol for the narrator's pregnancy. She states earlier in the story that her pregnancy is currently at about 10 weeks, which means that she would've conceived the same week that Pete planted his wheat. And in the present, both Pete and the narrator are getting ready to accept that neither the wheat nor her pregnancy are going to be successful. They're both failing at the same time.

The way that the narrator describes watching Pete and then choosing to keep this secret illustrates how deeply she loves him. It must be painful for her to watch Pete care for his failing crop. Though the story offers little information about how the farm is doing, it's reasonable to assume that Pete needs this wheat to survive in order to be financially successful. Losing it, then, isn't just a blow to Pete's ego; it will likely have dire consequences for his family and his business. Seeing him grapple with this is clearly difficult for the narrator, so this is why she chooses to "spare" him. By using the word "spare" to describe keeping her pregnancy a secret, she shows that she's doing him a kindness. It would, she seems to believe, be too painful for Pete to have to watch her spend a few short months pregnant, only to see her miscarry again.

This passage also suggests that in some ways, both the narrator and Pete are lonely. The narrator describes watching Pete in the fields from a distance, which suggests that she doesn't play an active role in his work. Where the wheat is concerned, Pete is on his own, even if the narrator cares about his success and his heartache. Then, when the narrator thinks about her pregnancy, she also feels alone. In the past, Pete has supported her through pregnancies and miscarriages, but this time he doesn't know, so the narrator experiences her symptoms and her grief all alone. She may be trying to spare Pete some sadness, but by doing so, she condemns herself to going through this painful ordeal entirely on her own.

> Understand, I'm not a martyr.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Pete

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

After explaining why she chose to keep her most recent pregnancy a secret from Pete, the narrator insists that she's not a martyr. This implies that the narrator doesn't think that she's sacrificing herself to spare him, but that doesn't seem like truth: after all, she has chosen to suffer alone instead of burdening Pete with her suspicion that her pregnancy is lost. So while she might not think of herself as a martyr, she's still making things harder for herself in an attempt to make things easier for Pete.

The story makes quite clear that while a miscarriage is painful under any circumstances, the narrator's grief is even worse when she feels alone. This is apparent when her doctors fail to acknowledge her humanity or suffering, instead treating her ultrasounds as routine medical procedures with no emotional weight. And, as the narrator later reveals, the time that Pete got into her hospital bed with her after a miscarriage offered her great comfort because it made her feel that he understood her. So it seems likely that, if the narrator told Pete about her pregnancy and her suspicion that it is lost, he would comfort her again, easing her grief by helping her feel less alone. In this light, even if the narrator insists that she's not sacrificing her own well-being for Pete's benefit, that's exactly what she's doing; she's choosing to carry both her and Pete's share of the grief, simply to spare him suffering. By refusing to call herself a martyr, then, the narrator is denying the significance of her own suffering, insisting that making herself grieve alone doesn't rise to the level of true sacrifice.

It's also possible, however, to read this situation in a different way. Later, the narrator will describe a moment after a miscarriage when she thought Pete was going to say something and she closed her eyes to brace for it, implying that she thought he would say something painful. It seems that she thought he might be ending their marriage, presumably because she couldn't carry the child he wanted. If the narrator does believe that Pete might leave her due to

her struggles with fertility, then her choice not to tell him about the pregnancy might be, in part, an act of self-preservation. After all, if she thinks he's on the brink of leaving, then disappointing him with yet another miscarriage might send him over the edge. So maybe when the narrator says that she's not a martyr, she's not papering over her own suffering, but rather hinting that her choice was about more than she has admitted outright. The story provides no conclusion about this, so it's possible to read this either way.

> My husband is an undemonstrative man and that gesture, as he fitted his warm arms and legs around me in the narrow bed, made me see how much he understood. I woke up in the night and felt his thumb, as he slept, absently rubbing the skin on my own arm. Oh, it wears us thin, marriage. It knocks the edges off us.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Pete

Related Themes:

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator describes spending a night in the hospital after a miscarriage, and it's one of the story's clearest indicators that actions speak louder than words. Pete never speaks at any point in the story, but here it seems like he almost doesn't need to. By getting into bed with the narrator, holding her close, and comforting her, he was able to "tell" her all sorts of things he might not have been able to voice: that he loves her, that he's sorry, and that he's grieving, too.

Importantly, the narrator notes that this moment showed her that Pete understands what she's feeling, implying that Pete is empathetic and caring. He seems to want to be there to support her—after all, he could have left the hospital when visiting hours ended, but he chose to crawl into bed and stay the night instead. With this, the story calls into question the narrator's choice to keep her most recent pregnancy from Pete. While she claims to want to spare him suffering, he himself might actually prefer to know so that he could help the narrator grieve, just as he has before. Much of what the narrator says about Pete casts him as a loving, supportive partner who would want to be involved.

Throughout the story, the narrator has usually equated rubbing something (the surface of the counter, her wedding ring, etc.) with feeling powerless to change or control the future. Until this moment, rubbing has seemed solely a gesture of anxiety, a nervous tic when things seem bad. But here, Pete rubbing the narrator's arm shifts the meaning of this gesture. Yes, it's probably a self-soothing behavior, a sign of Pete's grief over the miscarriage and perhaps his nervousness that the narrator won't be able to carry to term in the future. But it's also an act of love and care, showing the narrator that Pete is there for her in this horrible moment. The narrator underscores how this rubbing is both anxious and compassionate when she talks about marriage. First, she notes that marriage "wears us thin"—that is, that marriage can take a toll on couples, possibly through pain and grief. Then, she notes that marriage "knocks the edges off us," implying that marriage can also comfort and improve people. It might take the edge off their pain, for instance, by giving them a partner with which to share life's tragedies.

> The natural course. Nature's way. I'm baffled by it, I don't mind telling you. I've had a gutful of it. Carving its erosion gullies through us, whipping the rug out from under us, making us eat its dust. I'm waiting for something comprehensible to jump out of this garbled mess and make sense to me.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator shares that she's going to allow her miscarriage to proceed without medical intervention (which her doctor refers to as "the natural course"). This passage muses on the language "Nature's way" and "the natural course," suggesting that these are euphemisms that give the sense that miscarrying is something natural and normal. But the narrator has noted time and again that, even though her miscarriages have become routine, each one feels violent and devastating.

At various points throughout the story, the narrator has mentioned that miscarrying is bloody, painful, and makes her feel powerless. In this passage, her description escalates; rather than simply making her feel powerless, the miscarriage dominates her (and Pete too—using the pronoun "us" suggests he suffers alongside her). It "whip[s]

the rug out from under us," she says, suggesting that losing a pregnancy leaves the narrator and Pete lying flat on their backs with no warning. It then makes them "eat its dust" and "carv[es] its erosion gullies through us," showing how destructive and violent this process feels. The language of erosion is particularly important—erosion usually takes time to happen, so this speaks to the cumulative effects of miscarrying again and again, both on the narrator's body and mind. Overall, this passage ties miscarriage to the narrator's sense that all of nature is out to get her, and it shows how she has experienced her miscarriages as violent attacks from the natural world.

When the narrator mentions "waiting for something comprehensible to jump out of this garbled mess," she harkens back to the word puzzles she described in the story's first paragraphs. For hospital patients awaiting an appointment, it was comforting to see recognizable words appear from a jumble of nonsense letters—this mirrored the patients' hope that, despite their feeling of powerlessness, order and sense would soon appear in their lives. Now, the narrator is hoping that "this garbled mess" of her life is something akin to a word search. Hopefully, she'll one day be able to make sense of what's happened to her—but the story never indicates whether or not she will.

❝ He's making the decision to open the gate into the pasture with its desiccated, knee-high wheat. Can't stand its hopeful greenness struggling in that parched ground, knowing what three more days of this heat are going to do.

Let it go. Let the cows eat it.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Pete

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator walks from the waiting room to the exam room, she imagines what Pete must be doing at this moment.

Once again, the narrator draws parallels between her pregnancy and Pete's wheat. The "hopeful greenness" refers to new life—both the sprouts of Pete's wheat and the narrator's pregnancy. But the wheat and the narrator's pregnancy are in a similar limbo between life and destruction. The wheat crop is still a little green, indicating that it isn't dead yet, but the dry heat is expected to continue long enough to fully kill it—there's no way the wheat can survive. Similarly, the narrator believes that her fetus has already died, but she hasn't yet miscarried, so it's still inside of her. In this way, both the pregnancy and the wheat still exist, but they clearly aren't viable long term. It's this non-viability that hurts Pete so much; the "hopeful greenness" now feels like a taunt, a reminder of hope when the outcome is clearly tragedy. This offers a clue about the narrator's decision not to tell him she was pregnant; she apparently thinks he couldn't bear the false hope of another pregnancy either.

When Pete finally opens the gate to let the cattle eat the wheat, it's analogous to miscarrying—the moment when this limbo state gives way to destruction. The narrator frames this as the pragmatic choice. Instead of dwelling in their grief, she encourages him (in her mind) to use the wheat in the only way they can: feeding it to the cows before it fully dies. This is a difficult decision for Pete, but the narrator implies that it's the correct, forward-thinking choice, the way to make the best out of a bad situation. It's similar to how she will soon accept letting her miscarriage take the "natural course."

It's also significant to note that this is a moment of intense suffering for the narrator (she's about to confirm, once again, that her baby died), and yet her focus is on Pete's grief rather than her own. This shows how empathetic and loving the narrator is with Pete, since his grief seems to matter more than her own in this moment. On the other hand, though, it's possible that she's simply ignoring her own suffering because acknowledging it would be too much to bear. Since the narrator doesn't actually know what Pete is doing in this moment (this story about the wheat is all in her mind), it's plausible to read this not as an act of empathy exactly, but as a projection of her own emotions onto Pete. In other words, maybe she invented this story about Pete as a way to process her own grief at a distance, without acknowledging that she's describing herself.

❝ [...] oh, Pete, I know what you need and I can't give it to you; I can see it in the way you scratch the dog's tilting head just where he loves it, the thwarted tenderness of that gesture so familiar to me that I feel the heavy dish of water in my chest teeter and almost overbalance, and I ache with holding it steady.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Pete

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 203-04

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator follows the ultrasound tech back into the exam room, she becomes despondent for the first time in the story, thinking of how badly she believes Pete wants a baby and how it seems, after so many miscarriages, that she can't give him one.

When the narrator says that she "know[s] what [he] needs," she's talking about a baby. This is also what she means when she refers to the "thwarted tenderness" of Pete scratching the dog's head—his tenderness is "thwarted" because it's meant for a baby, not for a dog. Pete's clear desire for a child might help explain why the narrator chose to keep her pregnancy a secret: it not only spares Pete the grief of another miscarriage, but it also spares the narrator the grief of having disappointed him yet again.

In this passage, the narrator refers to something as "so familiar to me"—but it's not clear whether what's familiar to her is Pete's gesture (petting the dog) or his "thwarted tenderness." If it's about the gesture, then she's simply calling attention to how often Pete pets the dog and imagines that it's a baby, showing how she's constantly reminded of her failures. But if she's referring to the "thwarted tenderness" being familiar to her, then she likely means that this is something that she feels herself—that she, too, has a lot of pent-up love and she wants desperately to give it to a baby.

This is an intriguing possibility, since throughout the story, the narrator has never once admitted to wanting to be a parent. She certainly wants to carry a baby to term, but it's never clear whether she wants a child for herself or whether it's to give Pete "what he needs." Since the narrator has suddenly become so much more emotional than she was at any other point in the story, it's possible that this passage *is* her subtle confession that she wants a child just as badly as Pete and that his "thwarted tenderness" pains her both because she hates to see him suffer and because it reminds her of her own thwarted dreams of being a parent.

That the narrator brings up the "heavy dish of water" immediately after referencing the "thwarted tenderness" suggests that maybe she *is* to some extent talking about herself. The dish of water that the narrator struggles to keep from tipping represents her tremendous effort to keep her life from falling apart. This effort hurts her; she "ache[s] with holding it steady." It could be that her pain is just about how badly she wants to satisfy Pete, but the magnitude of her emotions here makes that doubtful—this passage seems instead to hint that she's struggling because she herself wants a child so badly and has yet again been thwarted.

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.

WAITING

The horoscopes in a magazine tell the narrator that "everything will align for [her] at a time [she] least expect[s] it," so she flips to an article about school lunches, then to an enlarged photo of a celebrity's thigh. The photo is so blown up that it's hard to tell if the thigh has cellulite or a shadow.

The horoscope's cryptic message proposes, right from the beginning, that it's impossible for people to control what, how, and when things happen to them—instead, they're powerless and simply have to wait for everything to "align." The language of "alignment" suggests a moment of order emerging from chaos (as in, a jumbled mess sorting itself into a line), and the desire to find order in chaos is something that plagues the narrator throughout the story. The narrator will soon reveal that she is in a hospital waiting room, trying to confirm that she miscarried yet again, so it's understandable why she might skip past the school lunches article. It may be too painful to be confronted with the article when she doesn't have a child to pack lunches for. Finally, the enlarged photo of the thigh shows the cruel way in which people examine women's bodies, which will reappear in the story when the narrator tells of her terrible experiences getting ultrasounds.

On the table next to the narrator is another magazine, slightly more recent, with the same celebrity on the cover—this time, she's asking for privacy. If the celebrity wants privacy, the narrator thinks, she ought to stop posing in swimsuits and cashing the checks. If she really wants to be left alone or forgotten, the narrator suggests that the celebrity "come and live at my place."

The celebrity is the narrator's opposite—while the narrator implies that she's working-class, the celebrity is wealthy; while the narrator goes unnoticed, the celebrity is smothered with attention. This passage implies that the narrator doesn't have much sympathy for the celebrity, since she benefits from all the publicity, good and bad. By contrast, the narrator implies that she herself has so much privacy that she's actually suffering—she's alone and unnoticed with no one to comfort her, even as she waits to receive devastating news. The narrator's tongue-in-cheek invitation to "live at my place" is, in part, a nod to her class background—where the narrator lives (presumably, rural Australia), it's easy to slip into obscurity. It's also a subtle acknowledgement of her loneliness, although she doesn't say so outright.

The narrator is only reading the magazines to kill time, knowing that she has a long wait ahead. The magazines are more than a year old—unsurprising for a public hospital waiting room. What does surprise her is that lots of people have filled out the crosswords and word searches. With a lot "preying on their minds," these people have stared at jumbles of words, searching for anything to make sense. The magazines feel grimy after being touched so much by nervous, sweaty hands.

It's significant that the narrator is receiving care at a public hospital. This clarifies that she's working-class, as she doesn't have the extra cash to pay for a private hospital. The public hospital, though, doesn't provide the highest level of care—it can't even offer nervous patients up-to-date magazines while they wait. And waiting for an ultrasound, the narrator suggests, is a universally nerve-wracking experience; the possibility of getting bad news "prey[s]" on these women's minds, imagery that makes them seem like animals whom nature is out to destroy. Their desire to do the word searches in a moment of powerlessness suggests that they're looking for something to seem orderly and reasonable. Seeing legible words emerge from a chaotic jumble of letters gives them a sense of control and mirrors their hope for their appointment: that their own uncertainty will give way to a certainty that their pregnancy is fine..

Once they call the narrator's name, she'll find out if she has the hospital's only woman staffer or one of its four men. If she has the woman, she'll feel grateful for this "small mercy." Whenever she gets the men, they squirt the gel on, apologize that it's cold, and stare intently at the screen while they move the transducer around. They never turn the screen around to the narrator, because they've read the ultrasound form and they know what she's here to find out. No matter how hard she stares at them, they almost never meet her eye.

This passage clarifies for the first time exactly what is going on: the implication is that the narrator already suspects that her pregnancy is not viable, and she's having an ultrasound to confirm that the baby has died. Compounding how devastating this is, it seems to have happened to her at least several times before. The narrator's description of the male techs casts them as cold and distant. They refuse to acknowledge her humanity or make her feel less alone—even by doing simple things like making eye contact with her in a moment of nervousness and grief. She frames their terrible bedside manner as a result of their gender (after all, getting the woman would be a "small mercy," implying that the woman might help lessen the narrator's grief). But as men, these techs seem not to understand her experience at all or care about her pain, which makes her feel even more alone.

Whenever the narrator "break[s]" and asks if it's still alive, the male techs say only what they've been taught to say: that the doctor will discuss the results. This detachment is ironic, since they're currently looking inside her body. They're always so cold and professional as they study the screen, watching the "black landmass" that is her body while a "cyclone gather[s] its bleary force offshore."

It's telling that the narrator considers it "break[ing]" to ask if the fetus is still alive—this suggests her belief that she cannot express her nervousness or pain. But to feel afraid of asking such an essential question shows how alienating this hospital experience is, making an already traumatic situation even worse. While the techs' cold, clinical manner may be very well be a requirement of the job, it shows a systemic disregard for the experiences and pain of female patients. In this passage, the narrator uses imagery that compares her body to land and her imminent miscarriage to a cyclone about to hit the shore. This shows that she thinks of herself as a victim of nature's destructive power, and that she's powerless to stop these miscarriages from coming and wreaking havoc on her life.

The narrator had the woman only once, and that time she didn't even have to ask—the woman squeezed the narrator's leg and said she was sorry, but she couldn't find a heartbeat. Afterwards, the woman let the narrator lie there for a bit to collect herself. This could be why the narrator hasn't seen the woman at the hospital lately; maybe the men resented that she wasn't very efficient in getting through the long lines of patients.

It's a tragedy that the narrator has only experienced compassionate medical care once, and it's telling how the female tech's basic gestures of decency and kindness made such a difference. Not feeling completely alone in her grief made this tragedy easier for the narrator to bear. But in wondering if the woman got pushed out of her job because of inefficiency (e.g. taking the time to be compassionate), the story leaves open the possibility that the public hospital system is simply not set up to treat patients as human beings. This harms working-class women like the narrator, who can't afford to go to a private hospital.

The last three ultrasounds were with men, though, so the narrator is used to it. Every time, she waits to "have her fears confirmed," either outright or when the techs brush her off. Then, she goes back to the waiting room, gets her printed report, and pays for the procedure. After she receives her Medicare refund, the ultrasound costs $75.

In this passage, the narrator shows that devastating ultrasound results have become regular occurrences for her. It seems that she's trying to be nonchalant, walking readers through the logistics of what happens each time she gets terrible news about her pregnancy, but never once saying how it makes her feel. *This is, of course, a conspicuous omission, and her refusal or inability to talk about her grief implies its enormity. The narrator will later stress how pragmatic she is, and here her pragmatism seems to be simply an attempt to push grief from her mind so it doesn't overwhelm her.*

The narrator no longer takes home the ultrasound films—at one point, a tech even told her that there was "*Nothing to see* [...] *It's so tiny in these early stages*." But once, the receptionist gave the narrator a DVD in addition to the receipt. The receptionist clearly didn't read the report—she must've thought that the narrator would go home to watch a healthy baby bouncing inside of her.

The techs' professionalism keeps them from treating the narrator kindly and acknowledging her pain. Suggesting that there's "nothing to see" because the fetus is so tiny in the first trimester of pregnancy may be an attempt at comfort, but if it is, it falls flat. Instead of comforting her, it makes it seem as though she doesn't have any right to grieve the miscarriage. Then, to make things even worse, the front office staff ends up behaving cruelly because they don't take the time to read the reports. This, again, may reflect that this is a public hospital that's trying to get through a high volume of patients and doesn't have time for individualized care. But the fact that nobody is taking the time to connect with her as a person in this awful moment clearly contributes to her suffering.

Today, the narrator already knows what's coming. Last Tuesday morning, when she hit 10 weeks, she stood in the kitchen while Pete fed the cattle, rubbing at a spot on the counter and trying to account for her sense of dread. Then, she realized she wasn't nauseous anymore. Her heart felt "like a shallow dish of **water**" that she was struggling to keep steady, and she had the "feeling of something ebbing away." The spot she was rubbing moved and she realized it was a dot of light reflected off of a bottle. Everything was silent. She knows they won't find a heartbeat today.

The narrator's husband being a farmer suggests that the family is working-class, which may explain why the narrator is going to a public hospital. And the absence of nausea tells her that she's lost her pregnancy, since morning sickness is a sign of healthy pregnancy. It's noteworthy that she's alone when she realizes this—this increases the sense of the narrator's emotional isolation, showing how she grieves alone. When she uses the phrase "ebbing away," she again compares miscarriage to a natural phenomenon. Before it was a cyclone, and now it's the tide, which shows that she's starting to give up hope that she'll ever carry to term—the tides, after all, are steady, cyclical, and inevitable, and that's how she sees her miscarriages. Further, when she's rubbing what at first seemed like a real spot on the counter and then realizes it was only a spot of light draws another parallel to the narrator's pregnancy. Like this spot, the narrator thought her pregnancy was real—but in this moment, she realizes that her pregnancy, like this spot, is immaterial and just a trick of the light. Describing her heart like a dish of water points to how hard the narrator is trying to hold things together in light of these constant tragedies. She associates water with the destructive power of nature (tides, cyclones), and the feeling that she has a precarious bowl of water in her chest shows how sees herself as barely containing chaos and destruction, but that everything could fall apart in an instant if she slips up. This might help make sense of how stoic she feels she must be about her grief—she needs to be emotionally steady, lest the water spill.

These days, the narrator's doctor just fills out a request form for the ultrasound without needing an appointment. And today, the narrator told Pete that she was going shopping; he has enough to worry about right now. The pamphlets the doctors send home with her talk a lot about giving herself time to grieve, but they never mention how a miscarriage affects a person's partner. She can tell that Pete is "worn down" already. He put in a crop of **wheat** recently, hoping the weather would break, but it hasn't.

The fact that the narrator's doctor no longer requires appointments to approve an ultrasound drives home how inevitable and routine these repeated miscarriages have begun to feel. And the fact that she has only pamphlets to help her grieve shows how impersonal her medical care has been. The narrator implies that she hasn't told Pete what's going on because she doesn't want to worry him when he's already fretting over his failing crop. But she also seems subtly to link her choice not to tell him to the fact that her doctors (and their pamphlets) don't give her any information on how Pete might be affected or how to help him grieve. Her medical providers don't acknowledge that he's also trying to have a baby and that he might need help processing these losses—something that seems confirmed in the narrator's sense that Pete is "worn down." It's sad that nobody can help the narrator address this with Pete, so she avoids it altogether and isolates herself in her grief.

Lately, the narrator can see that Pete is thinking about giving up on his **wheat** crop and letting the cows eat it, just like their neighbors have done. Some mornings she watches him out in the field, inspecting the stalks and trying to figure out when to call it quits. This is why she "spared" him when she found out she was pregnant again. He sowed the wheat ten weeks ago today.

As the narrator describes Pete's wheat crop, she establishes the wheat as a symbol for her pregnancy. Pete sowed the wheat at about the same time the narrator would have conceived (10 weeks ago), making the connection clear. Moreover, both Pete and the narrator are getting ready to accept defeat that either the crop or the pregnancy will bear fruit. Importantly, the narrator casts "sparing" Pete as an act of love, showing how deeply she cares for him. She wants to protect him from more difficulty, and in this case, that means going through this pregnancy and miscarriage alone.

The narrator clarifies that she's not a martyr. When she and Pete married, her mother passed down her grandmother's wedding ring. The back of the ring is worn thin because her grandmother nervously rubbed it while she waited for her husband to finish his shifts in the mines. These days, the narrator does the same thing.

Insisting that she's not a martyr suggests that the narrator doesn't think she's really sacrificing that much by not telling Pete—but it's not clear readers should believe her. The narrator is clearly upset and grieving, which is evident in her almost hollow tone and her sense of fear and hopelessness. Presumably, she would suffer less if Pete could help her grieve, so she has sacrificed herself in a martyrlike way to protect him. Rubbing the wedding ring just like her grandmother did also suggests that the narrator feels powerless. Like her grandmother—who couldn't guarantee that her husband would return from work unscathed—the narrator can't guarantee that she'll carry a pregnancy to term or that Pete's crops will succeed. All she can do is wait.

Last March, the narrator made it to 14 weeks. Pete had just started to look more relaxed when one day, while doing laundry, she felt "that tide ebbing again." She was powerless to stop it.

Most miscarriages happen before 12 weeks of pregnancy, which is likely why Pete thought he could relax—it seemed as though the narrator was out of the woods this time and might actually carry the baby to term. Referring to miscarrying as an "ebbing tide" that the narrator couldn't stop is another way for the narrator to show that she feels powerless in the face of unexplainable natural events. Even when things seem like they're going her way, nature can still step in and ruin it.

In the hospital afterwards, when they announced the end of visiting hours, Pete hesitated. The narrator closed her eyes, expecting him to say something. Instead, Pete undressed and climbed in bed next to her. Pete is normally "undemonstrative," and this gesture showed the narrator that he understood her grief.

When the hospital announces the end of visiting hours, the narrator seems to assume that Pete will leave, which positions him as a visitor in her life, or someone who might not be permanent. The narrator deepens the sense that he might leave her when she closes her eyes, seemingly bracing for him to say something difficult. The subtle implication (between the visiting hours and the eye-closing) is that the narrator may have worried that he was about to end their marriage, presumably because she hasn't been able to bear the child he wants. However, Pete climbing into bed with her is one of the most comforting, tender moments of the entire story. It suggests that the narrator's insecurity about her marriage might be incorrect—Pete doesn't *leave when visiting hours are over, signaling that he's in it for the long haul. And his ability to see her grief and his willingness to help her through it paints him as a loyal and loving partner. This makes it a little confusing that she didn't tell him that she was pregnant this time—it seems that he would have wanted to be there for her. However, if she's worried he might leave her, then perhaps her motives for keeping the pregnancy a secret aren't quite what she says: she might be worried that another miscarriage would tip him over the edge and destroy their marriage.*

That night, the narrator woke up to Pete rubbing her arm as he slept. Marriage, the narrator reflects, "wears us thin" and "knocks the edges off us." But still, she's not a martyr. Instead, she's just someone who does what needs to be done. She learned this from Pete.

Throughout the story, the narrator associates nervously rubbing something (such as her wedding ring or the countertop) with her sense of powerlessness over impending disaster. But here, that same kind of rubbing is also an act of care: Pete rubbing her arm in his sleep is both a nervous gesture born from fear and grief, and also a way to comfort the narrator. This duality between care and pain is also evident in the narrator's framing of marriage as something that both "wears us thin" (presumably through difficulty) and "knocks the edges off of us" ("taking the edge off" means lessening a person's nerves or suffering). Marriage, then, seems to simultaneously strain people and comfort them. The narrator's subsequent statement that she isn't a martyr implies that she's not sacrificing her own well-being to help her husband, but that's actually exactly what she seems to be doing. Instead of accepting that marriage is always simultaneously hard and rewarding, she wants to accept more than her share of hardship so her husband can have more than his share of comfort.

The narrator flips to an article listing the 10 steps to a "new me" and then to a photo of a skinny actress. An arrow points to the woman's flat stomach and asks, "baby bump?" Once her appointment is over, she'll get her Medicare refund, deposit it, and then go shop for something that she can pretend cost $75.

Rapidly flipping through the magazine again points to how anxious the narrator is. She's not really reading the magazine—she's just trying to distract herself from how bad she feels. But it's not a great distraction, since every page of the magazine seems to contain something that's traumatic to her—before it was school lunches and a horoscope giving false assurance that everything would work out, and now it's pregnancy speculation and the notion that one can easily become a new person. (In a few paragraphs, the narrator will revisit how insulting this feels during her walk to the exam room.)

The narrator knows that her doctor will offer her a procedure to clear her uterus or give her the option to "let things take their natural course." She'll choose the natural course, since it'll be harder to explain away a hospital procedure. However, she's still baffled by "Nature's way." She's experienced it many times now. It carves "erosion gullies through us" and makes her "eat its dust." She's still waiting for something to appear out "this garbled mess" and suddenly make sense.

Letting the pregnancy take its "natural course" means allowing the narrator to miscarry on her own time, rather than clearing her uterus at the hospital. This again associates miscarriages with nature, showing how the narrator feels that nature is out to destroy her. The narrator's description of nature as carving "erosion gullies" through her and making her "eat its dust" is one of the clearest indicators of how out-of-control and threatening she finds her whole life—it seems like she's talking about more than just her miscarriage now, since she's using the pronoun "us" and speaking in general terms. In this moment, like in the moment at the beginning with the word searches, she's hoping that out of all of this chaos, something will finally start to make sense. This is, in part, the "waiting" to which the title refers—she's both waiting for her appointment and waiting for something to finally go her way. But her feeling that she has to simply wait shows her powerlessness; she doesn't feel like she can affect her fate, only accept it and hope for something better.

The real "natural course" is the fact that now, a polite male radiographer is calling the narrator's name. She walks toward the examination room, counting her steps and thinking about the 10 steps to a "new me" or to a flatter stomach.

By calling the appearance of the radiographer the "natural course," the narrator frames the hospital as being just as cyclical and harmful as nature itself. She knows what the ultrasound tech is going to find, and she knows exactly how dehumanizing and upsetting her appointment is going to be. As she walks to the exam room, she reveals just how bitter she feels about the women's magazines in the waiting room. Each literal step she takes towards her ultrasound is, like the articles say, a step towards a "new me"—but not the "new me" that she wants, in which she has a healthy pregnancy. Furthermore, the magazines' focus on a flatter stomach feels perverse to her, since all she wants is a big stomach in which she's carrying a healthy baby to term. In this way, the magazines—like the hospital overall—do not understand her and therefore magnify her experience of grief.

The narrator knows that, back home, Pete is deciding to open the gate for the cows to eat the **wheat**. He can't stand to see the "hopeful greenness" struggle against the heat. The narrator agrees that he should "let it go." In her mind, he is putting off the decision for a moment while he scans the horizon for a final time.

As the narrator walks into her ultrasound, she imagines her husband's suffering as he decides to give up on his wheat. Once again, this symbolically links the wheat and her pregnancy—both are failing at the same moment, and referring to the wheat as "hopeful greenness" that is unable to survive the heat frames the wheat, like the narrator's pregnancy, as new life being destroyed by nature. This passage also shows the narrator's deep empathy for Pete. This is a moment of tremendous suffering for her, and instead of dwelling on her own grief, she's feeling sorry for her husband—this emphasizes the asymmetry in their grief. After all, Pete knows nothing of her grief, while she imagines his in detail, suffering on both of their behalves. Agreeing that Pete should "let it go" is an admission of their powerlessness and a surrender to nature. Nonetheless, she imagines him still scanning the horizon like the nervous women scan the word searches, hunting for order in chaos (a sign that the weather might break) even though that clearly won't happen.

The narrator knows what Pete needs—and she knows she can't give it to him. She can see it in the "thwarted tenderness" of him scratching the dog's head. The "heavy dish of **water**" in her chest feels like it's starting to tip, and it hurts to hold it steady. She thinks of Pete wiping his forehead with his hat and then putting it back on and straightening his back, ready to do what has to be done next.

The narrator does not say outright what it is that Pete needs, perhaps because it's too painful for her to explicitly state—but she's clearly implying that he wants a baby and it seems like she won't be able to have one. When she describes the "thwarted tenderness" of him petting the dog, she's implying that this love is meant for a baby and the dog is just a placeholder. Seeing this hurts her so much that she can barely hold it together. Again, she uses the imagery of a precarious "dish of water" inside her chest to describe the feeling that everything is about to fall apart, and she's trying so hard to keep this from happening that it's hurting her. But when she thinks of Pete straightening his back and moving on to the next task after losing his wheat, she seems to be taking strength. Even though he doesn't know what she's going through, he's trying to hold it together, too, which perhaps makes her feel less alone.

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