

Water by the Spoonful



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUGHES

Quiara Alegría Hudes was born in Philadelphia in 1977. Although her biological father was Jewish, Hudes's mother and her stepfather are Puerto Rican, so she was raised in a Puerto Rican household. Hudes began writing and composing music at a young age, studying piano at a local branch of the Settlement Music School, music composition at Yale University, and finally playwriting at Brown University. Since then, she has written plays, musicals, and children's books, and is a visiting professor at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, though she is most widely recognized as a playwright. Her first career success *Yemaya's Belly* was published in 2003, winning multiple awards, and had its first stage production in 2004. *Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue*, the first in the Elliot trilogy, premiered in 2006 and was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2007. Hudes went on to collaborate with famed playwright and actor (and fellow Puerto Rican) Lin-Manuel Miranda, producing the children's musical *Barrio Grrrr!* and Broadway musical *In the Heights*, which won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 2008. Both musicals were also Pulitzer Prize finalists. Hudes won her first Pulitzer Prize for *Water by the Spoonful* in 2012, which revisited the soldier Elliot and became the second piece of the trilogy, which she finished with 2013's *The Happiest Song Plays Last*. Hudes continues to write plays, compose music, and even develop movie scripts. Her latest stage production is *Miss You Like Hell*, a piece the L.A. Times described as "an immigration musical for the new Trump era." Hudes lives in New York with her husband and children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Puerto Rico became a United States territory in 1898, as a result of Spain losing the Spanish-American War. Shortly after, many Puerto Ricans began migrating to the United States, settling mainly in New York City and Philadelphia and forming large communities there. The 1917 Jones-Shafroth Act declared all Puerto Ricans to be full US citizens, eliminating any barriers or restrictions on their immigration into the continental United States. Puerto Rican presence and influence steadily grew in America, resulting in widespread conflict between Puerto Rican immigrants and the dominant white culture in the United States. This dissonance is reflected in how the Puerto Rican characters in the play, particularly Yaz, feel about their blended Puerto Rican American identity. Yaz feels connected to her family and traditions, yet ashamed of the idiosyncrasies that make her culture stand out from the norm. Her initial decision to leave the barrio contrasts with her choice to step in as the new head of her family at the end of the play,

demonstrating a conscious decision to embrace her Puerto Rican roots rather than continue assimilating to American culture.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Water by the Spoonful is the second piece of Hudes's Elliot trilogy. It is preceded by *Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue*, in which 19-year-old Elliot returns from Iraq with a wound to his leg and grapples with the impact of war and military service on the past three generations of his Puerto Rican family, and followed by *The Happiest Song Plays Last*, which follows Yaz as she renovates the barrio and Elliot as he breaks into his acting career, shooting a film in the Middle East. Although the Elliot trilogy is hers alone, Hudes often collaborates with fellow Puerto Rican playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda, author and producer of *Hamilton* and *In the Heights*. In the way that she draws upon her ethnic heritage, Hudes's work also stands adjacent to the many plays of famed Puerto Rican playwright Jose Rivera, author of *Marisol* and *Boleros for the Disenchanted*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Water by the Spoonful
- **When Written:** 2008-2009
- **Where Written:** Hartford, Connecticut
- **When Published:** First premiered on stage on October 20, 2011; first printed in August 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Dramatic play
- **Setting:** Philadelphia, San Diego, Japan, and Puerto Rico in 2009
- **Climax:** Elliot wrestles with the Ghost, who leaves after searching through Elliot's wallet and gently touching his face.
- **Antagonist:**
- **Point of View:** Dramatic

EXTRA CREDIT

Composition Book. Each piece of the Elliot trilogy is thematically linked to a particular composer, which also becomes the musical score. In *Water by the Spoonful*, the dissonance John Coltrane's forms the thematic center.



PLOT SUMMARY

Elliot (a Puerto Rican American and injured Iraq war veteran) eats breakfast with his cousin Yaz (a newly-divorced musician)

in the cafeteria at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, where Yaz is a professor. One of Yaz's fellow professors arrives, whom Elliot has requested to translate an Arabic phrase that has been stuck in his head for years. The professor notes that Elliot was in the marines and has aspirations to be an actor and gives him the contact information for a friend who is directing a war film and needs a consultant. After Elliot takes the phone number, the professor tells him that the phrase loosely translates to, "Can I please have my passport back?"

Sitting in her living room, Odessa, Elliot's biological mother, logs onto an internet forum for recovering crack addicts, which she administrates under the moniker Haikumom. The forum's two other current members, Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders, log on as well. Orangutan has not checked in for three months and reveals that she has moved to Japan to teach English, where she was born before being adopted by Americans. Haikumom and Chutes&Ladders are relieved, having been worried about Orangutan in her absence, but Orangutan declares that she finally feels like a normal person and is happy and functional.

Elliot is at work at a Subway restaurant, trying to ignore the **Ghost** that constantly appears and stares at him while repeating the Arabic phrase the professor translated. Yaz is teaching her students about dissonance in jazz music. They are both notified that Mami Ginny, Elliot's aunt whom he considers to be his real mom since she raised him, is in the hospital on a breathing machine, about to die. Elliot breaks a mirror at work in anger, and Yaz comes to pick him up and take him to the hospital.

On the forum, a new member who calls himself Fountainhead makes his introduction. Fountainhead writes a long-winded, arrogant biography of himself as a wealthy entrepreneur with a fancy sports car and beautiful family. He admits that he is addicted to crack but insists he's not a real addict, since it's only a psychological issue for him, and he has come to the "experts" to learn their tips for not smoking crack. When he is done, Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders viciously mock Fountainhead for his egotism, causing Fountainhead to log off without a response.

Together, Elliot and Yaz sit in a flower shop to avoid their families and pick a funeral arrangement for Mami Ginny. They commiserate Mami Ginny's death and worry that without her there is no strong, central figure to lead the family and hold things together anymore. Watching the florist at work, Elliot and Yaz ponder what a "normal" life—one not filled with funeral and arrests—is like. Yaz reflects on how the normal life she built for herself (through her career and marrying into a white family) left her feeling conflicted about her identity and even ashamed of her Puerto Rican heritage. Elliot tries to move her away from her self-blame, but cannot, so they order the flowers and leave.

On the forum, Orangutan confides to Chutes&Ladders that she feels alone, empty, disconnected from the world with no real

"flesh-and-blood" relationships in her life. She asks Chutes&Ladders to come visit her in-person in Japan, but he is wary of the idea, afraid of unpredictability and worried that Orangutan will be disappointed by who he actually is. However, Haikumom sees their conversation and tells Chutes&Ladders that he should consider it. As they are chatting, Fountainhead reappears, telling the group that he relapsed the day before, though he still maintains that he only has a psychological problem with crack, not a full-blown physiological addiction. However, Chutes&Ladders badgers him relentlessly until Fountainhead breaks down and finally admits to being a "crackhead" at which point the group accepts him into their good graces.

Odessa and John (Fountainhead) meet for coffee and talk about addiction and recovery, where John admits that he lied initially and has actually been a daily crack user for two years. As they are speaking, Yaz and Elliot show up, angry at Odessa for not paying for her share of the flowers for Mami Ginny's funeral. Odessa is uncharacteristically combative with them, and Elliot obviously despises her. Although Yaz and Odessa try to stop him, Elliot tells John about how Odessa caused her own daughter and Elliot's sister's death when they were little through negligence caused by her crack addiction. Odessa is shamed, and after John leaves, tells Yaz and Elliot to pawn off her computer and use that money to help pay for flowers.

When Yaz and Elliot go to Odessa's house to retrieve her computer, Elliot finds the forum open and talks briefly with Orangutan, who reveals that she knows Elliot himself was addicted to pain pills when he was in a military hospital and overdosed three times. This is news to Yaz, and she is furious at Elliot for never telling her or allowing her to help. Elliot lets slip that the Ghost started appearing during that time, but when Yaz presses, Elliot begs her to never ask him about it again, pulls the cords out of the computer, and leaves with it.

Later, Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders are chatting again on the forum. Orangutan is excited to tell Chutes&Ladders that she is about to try to meet her birth mother, but Chutes&Ladders warns her not to, recounting his own rejection by his son and the pain that caused him as well as the drug relapse. Chutes&Ladders' lack of enthusiasm frustrates and angers Orangutan, who just wants to live a real life. She is so embittered that she threatens to never speak to Chutes&Ladders again and declares that she'll still go look for her real mother. After she logs off, Chutes&Ladders is so upset that he trashes his work office. However, Orangutan cannot bring herself to board the train to go look for her mother, and she falls asleep on the platform. At the same time, Chutes&Ladders sells his car so he can buy a plane ticket to Japan.

Yaz and Elliot conduct the funeral for Mami Ginny. Shortly after, when they are unable to get ahold of Odessa, they kick her front door in and find Odessa unconscious on the floor,

having overdosed—her first time using crack again after six years of sobriety. Elliot is enraged, nearly walking out. Yaz holds Odessa's body as they wait for the ambulance and has a brief vision of a shaft of light descending from above with Odessa floating in it. As she is having her vision, she tells Odessa that she can pass on if she needs to, and tells Elliot that he must forgive his biological mom.

After three days of silence, Orangutan logs back onto the forum and finds Chutes&Ladders waiting for her. She feels like a failure since she did not have the courage to get on the train, but her mood is quickly brightened when Chutes&Ladders tells her that he is coming to see her in Japan in only a few days. As they are chatting excitedly, Fountainhead logs on from a hospital computer and tells them that Haikumom has overdosed and he is there with her in the hospital, since she listed him as her emergency contact and no family has shown up. Chutes&Ladders makes Fountainhead promise he will stay with Odessa until she is out of the hospital and safely in rehabilitation.

From a hotel room in Puerto Rico, where Yaz and Elliot have travelled to spread Mami Ginny's ashes, Yaz introduces herself on the forum and asks if the forum members will allow her to operate in Haikumom's place. Elliot is upset that she is on the forum at all, but they quickly decide to leave for the waterfall where Mami Ginny asked to be laid to rest. Yaz goes to the hotel lobby to make a phone call and as soon as she has left, the Ghost appears. Rather than ignore it, Elliot fights with it, wrestling until the Ghost gets hold of his wallet, which he frantically searches through. When the Ghost does not find what he is searching for, he touches Elliot's face, freezing him in place, and gently but confidently explores every feature of his countenance.

In Odessa's bathroom, John helps her bathe and prepares her to be checked in to rehab. In a Japanese airport, Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders meet in person for the first time, embracing and telling each other their real names. In Puerto Rico, Yaz and Elliot throw Mami Ginny's ashes over the waterfall together. Yaz reveals to Elliot that she has decided to move back to their home neighborhood, buy Mami Ginny's house, and become the new head of the family and hold their community together. Meanwhile, Elliot has decided to move to Los Angeles and pursue his dream of being an actor, needing an escape from their family and its vices.

a young child, her crack-induced negligence caused the death of his little sister, and Odessa gave him up to be raised by Mami Ginny. He considers Ginny to be his true mom, demonstrating the dynamic nature of familial relationships. As a result, Elliot despises Odessa and the other crack addicts that she mentors, even though he was secretly addicted to painkillers himself for several months while he was in a military hospital. Elliot is plagued with guilt, which is manifested by **the Ghost**, both for a man he unnecessarily killed in Iraq as well as for all the ways he could have taken better care of his family. Elliot is also ashamed of how poor he and his Puerto Rican family are, making him an altogether miserable character. However, he is buoyed by his close relationship with Yaz and his aspirations to someday be an actor and escape all of the vices and addictions that plague his family. When Mami Ginny dies of cancer, Elliot—who'd been her caretaker—is given the freedom to leave home and move to Los Angeles to pursue his dream and escape the grim fate so many of his family members have met. Although Elliot never reconciles with or forgives Odessa, he does recognize his own guilt in the ways that he's hurt her by the end of the story and seems slightly more open to the possibility of reconciling someday in the future.

Yaz / Yazmin Ortiz – Yaz is Elliot's cousin, Odessa and Mami Ginny's niece, and William's ex-wife. She is 29 years old, a music composer, and a professor at the prestigious Swarthmore College. Although Yaz was born into the same extended family and circumstances as Elliot, her musical talents earned her an early scholarship to an all-white prep school, removing her from the barrio and propelling her on to a successful career and a marriage to a respectable white man. Though Elliot and many of their cousins view Yaz's life as a great success story, proof that one of them could actually make something of themselves, Yaz finds her life to be hollow and disappointing—her marriage ends when William wakes up and decides he simply doesn't love her anymore. Although Yaz was able to find freedom outside the barrio by building a "normal" life for herself, the dissonance between the Puerto Rican world she grew up in and the cultured, white, sophisticated world she inhabits causes her to have an identity conflict, alternately ashamed of her Puerto Rican blood or her attempts to inhabit a white world. To solve this dissonance, Yaz ultimately decides to move back into the barrio, stepping into the role of family leader left vacant by Mami Ginny's passing. While she once buried her Puerto Rican heritage and oriented her life around personal achievements, now Yaz opts to embrace who she is as a Puerto Rican and take responsibility for her family and her community.

Haikumom / Odessa Ortiz – Odessa is Elliot's biological mom, though she is only 39. She is also Yaz's aunt and Mami Ginny's sister. Odessa is a North Philadelphia custodian who isolates herself from most of the world, save for an internet crack recovery forum, which she moderates and runs under the moniker "Haikumom," occupying a gentle motherly role.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Elliot Ortiz – The protagonist of the play. Elliot is Yaz's cousin, Odessa's biological son, and Mami Ginny's adopted son. He is a 24-year-old, Puerto Rican, wounded Iraq War veteran who lives in North Philadelphia. Although Elliot lived with Odessa as

Haikumom's role as a mother is ironic: After her crack addiction caused her to be so negligent as to cause her own daughter's death, Odessa gave up Elliot and has been largely estranged from him for over a decade. Odessa was addicted to crack for seven years and has been clean for six, until Elliot takes her computer and tells John (another member of the recovery forum) about her daughter's death, sending her into such a depressive spiral that she relapses and overdoses, nearly killing herself. Estranged from her family, Odessa lists John as her emergency contact and he becomes her caretaker after she is discharged from the hospital, thus ending the play in a weakened, humbled state—but also in the physical company of another human being, which she has not had for many years. Odessa serves primarily to show the destructive impacts of substance addiction on oneself as well as the people around them, especially children.

Fountainhead / John – Fountainhead is the newest member of the recovery forum, a once-wealthy entrepreneur and family man. When Fountainhead first introduces himself to the other members, he trips over his own ego and treats his crack addiction as a very minor issue, a psychological habit rather than a physiological addiction. This raises the ire of the other members, who understand that one cannot fight an addiction when their ego is in the way or when they refuse to ask for help. Although Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders (other members of the forum) verbally attack Fountainhead, Fountainhead makes real progress and earns their respect when he finally breaks down and admits to being a “fucking crackhead” with a two-year addiction, again demonstrating the need for and power of honesty in such groups. After Odessa overdoses, John becomes her only caretaker, responsible for getting her home and cleaned up, since she is too weak even to stand. The play ends with John helping Odessa bathe and dress before checking her into rehab. Despite his initial egoism, John's final portrayed act is one of service and care for another human being, showing that he cares for her merely by being present.

Orangutan / Madeleine Mays – Orangutan is a member of the recovery forum, a 31-year-old Japanese American woman who has recently moved to Japan to teach English. Orangutan is fundamentally a passive individual—a self-described “looker,” rather than a participant in the world around her. However, after Orangutan moves to Japan and has three months of sobriety, she realizes that she is still isolated from anyone except the other members of the forum. Although she has had a consistent online friendship with Chutes&Ladders for three years, she discovers that online relationships are safe and anonymous and cannot take the place of actual human connection, which though risky, is also rewarding and fulfilling and gives life purpose. To this end, Orangutan asks Chutes&Ladders to come be with her in Japan. Although he is fearfully hesitant, he eventually joins her and they end the play locked in each other's embrace, no longer alone in the world,

presumably starting life anew in the company of another living breathing human being.

Chutes&Ladders / Clayton Wilkie – Chutes&Ladders is a member of the crack recovery forum that Haikumom, Fountainhead, and Orangutan also frequent. He is a 56-year-old IRS worker living in San Diego. Chutes&Ladders appears to have had the longest battle with crack out of any of the forum members, and thus is the most hesitant about disrupting the calm and predictability of his life which he uses to maintain his sobriety. Although Chutes&Ladders has a son and several grandchildren, his son rejected him because of the prior harm he'd done and will not even acknowledge Chutes&Ladders's existence to his own grandchildren. This experience has left Chutes&Ladders particularly fearful of physical human interactions and he relies on the safety and anonymity of digital relationships to feel safe. When Orangutan asks him to come see her, Chutes&Ladders is terrified that he will disappoint her or that she will somehow spurn him. However, once he realizes that he can be hurt in an online relationship just the same as in an in-person relationship, Chutes&Ladders bravely faces his fears and goes to Japan to see Orangutan, causing himself a severe anxiety attack in the process. When Chutes&Ladders finally meets Orangutan in person, they embrace, and the play ends with the potential of their new relationship and the life they may find in it hanging in the air.

Mami Ginny – Mami Ginny is Elliot's aunt and Odessa's sister, though she raises Elliot as her own son and Elliot thus considers her to be his real mom. Mami Ginny never appears onstage, dying of cancer before Scene Three, but is constantly referenced throughout. To Elliot, Mami Ginny is a model mother—a foil for Odessa's failure to take care of him. To Yaz, Mami Ginny is the elder of their extended family, the figure who holds everyone together, and an anchor of their Puerto Rican community. Mami Ginny thus represents the responsibility and embrace of ethnic heritage that Yaz left behind in pursuit of her “normal” life, and which she ultimately chooses to return to, replacing Mami Ginny as the new elder.

William – William is Yaz's white, bland ex-husband who has recently divorced her simply because he realized he no longer felt any love for her. William is never represented on-stage, but only spoken of to demonstrate the failure of Yaz's “normal” life, the conflict of identity it caused her, and the frailty of biological family.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Professor Aman – Professor Aman teaches at Swarthmore College, where Yaz works, and is present in the first scene only to translate the Arabic phrase for Elliot.

TERMS

Barrio – The barrio refers to the Puerto Rican community in North Philadelphia from which **Yaz** and **Elliot** both originated. Whenever Yaz and Elliot refer to the barrio, it carries the connotation of drugs, crime, violence, and hardship, but also of Puerto Rican ethnic pride and heritage.



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.



SUBSTANCE ADDICTION

Water by the Spoonful revolves around several characters' struggle with their addiction to crack cocaine. They are all connected to each other by an online support forum moderated by an individual who goes by Haikumom. Although each character is at a different stage in the recovery process, in each of their cases, the play depicts substance addiction as a destructive force that lingers long after an individual has stopped using drugs, and which can only be overcome through long struggle, honesty, and the support of other people.

The forum members' personal lives all demonstrate that substance addiction is destructive and very difficult to escape, costing them their personal welfare, their relationships, their careers—even their lives. The arrogant businessman Fountainhead, though once a wealthy entrepreneur, confesses that he wrecked an expensive car, lost his job, and has spent the last two years unemployed due to his crack addiction. His story demonstrates how substance addiction can wreck even the wealthy and lay waste to material success. Orangutan (a young Japanese woman) Chutes&Ladders (an aging IRS worker) and Haikumom (a Puerto Rican custodian) have all lost their familial and social relationships to their substance addiction and now live in isolation, emphasizing the wildly destructive impact of such addiction on one's relationships with friends and family. The deadly potential of substance addiction is underscored when it is revealed that Haikumom caused her young daughter's death many years before due to neglect; Haikumom left her daughter alone while she was sick so that she herself could smoke crack. Near the end of the story, Haikumom also overdoses and nearly dies, sending her body into cardiac arrest. Haikumom's story is a particularly vivid demonstration of how deadly substance addiction can be, both to addicted people and to those who are dependent on them.

As powerful as the ruinous effects of substance addiction are,

the forum members recognize it is a self-inflicted burden that can only be truly confronted when they take responsibility for their addiction and honestly call it what it is. Fountainhead, because of his ego, initially tries to convince the forum members that his crack addiction is only a small psychological problem, not a full-blown physiological addiction like heroin addiction. In this way, Fountainhead embodies the natural urge to distance oneself from addiction and not take full responsibility for it. However, Chutes&Ladders sees through Fountainhead's denial. To break through Fountainhead's façade, Chutes&Ladders ruthlessly challenges his self-diagnosis. Fountainhead finally breaks and admits to being a "fucking crackhead" like the rest of them. Once he does so, Chutes&Ladders suddenly becomes gentle and sympathetic, explaining that the only way he can deal with substance addiction is to lose all sense of pride or ego and take ownership of what he has become. In Chutes&Ladders's words: "If you're eating a shit sandwich, chances are you ordered it." After finally admitting to having brought his addiction upon himself, Fountainhead admits to Haikumom over coffee that he lied to the group in his introduction: he has actually been a daily crack user for two years. Haikumom sympathizes with his deception and tells him that now he's ready to start fighting it, again arguing that addiction cannot be fought until it is honestly confronted.

Fountainhead's learning process and Haikumom's relapse into crack addiction both suggest that, due to its overwhelming power, substance addiction cannot be successfully fought alone. Fountainhead is ashamed to tell his wife of his addiction and worries that it will worsen her already-severe depression. However, the other forum members warn him that he won't make it on his own. When Fountainhead tries to insist that he can overcome his addiction independently through his own determination, tenacity, and love for his family, Haikumom warns him that those things are "pitchforks against tanks," powerless against the ferocity of substance addiction. The group's reactions highlight that a single individual is powerless to face addiction without the support of others. This message is tragically reinforced when Haikumom, after her son Elliot vindictively takes her computer—thus taking away her connection to the other forum members and leaving her alone in her struggle—has her first relapse in six years, overdosing and nearly killing herself. However, the story ends on a relatively hopeful note with Fountainhead committing himself to caring for Haikumom through her recovery. Although she is hardly conscious, she is no longer alone, and for the first time in years has someone physically watching over her.

At the end of the story, there is no definitive victory over addiction—both Haikumom and Fountainhead are still addicts, and it is implied that Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders will both wrestle with their past addiction for the rest of their lives. The characters' situations at the end of the play reinforce the

destructive power of substance addiction. As Chutes&Ladders tells Fountainhead, “I’m a crackhead too, and I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.” Even so, Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders’s success in recovery, as well as Fountainhead and Haikumom’s bond with each other, implies that through honesty and interpersonal connection, people can still fight against substance addiction.



INTERNET COMMUNITIES AND HUMAN CONNECTION

For several of the play’s characters, the private, anonymous community of their internet forum gives them a critical resource in their struggle against addiction while also providing them a safe amount of distance from each other. However, Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders, members of an online crack recovery forum, discover that the safety of an internet relationship cannot replace the complex risk and reward of actual human connection. The play demonstrates how internet communities are both valuable and inherently limited.

The safety of the addiction forum suggests that, especially for vulnerable individuals, the anonymity of internet relationships provides needed security and predictability. For the forum members, connecting through the digital world provides accountability and mutual support without the fear and shame of face-to-face interactions. This dynamic is demonstrated by the forum members’ reticence to even reveal their real names to each other. Online, they are able to mutually support each other in their struggle with little risk of embarrassment or exposure, demonstrating the powerful benefit of internet communities for vulnerable people. This security seems to be particularly beneficial for people like Chutes&Ladders, who resist their addictions by keeping their lives contained, predictable, and easily controlled. He observes, “I went clean and all personality left my life [...] Stay in the box. Keep things in their place. It’s a simple, effective recipe for a clean ten years.” The anonymity and safe distance of Chutes&Ladders’s online friendships help him to draw on the support of others while maintaining a completely stable life. This emotional safety contrasts with the devastating rejection he received from his son years before, the pain of which drove him back to crack after five years of sobriety. For individuals like Fountainhead, concerned about their reputations, such anonymity is also a benefit. The forum allows him to seek help and invite other people into his struggle by degrees. This again demonstrates how internet communities can lessen one’s anxiety around seeking help from others, making it easier to initially reach out.

However, though digital relationships are safer, they lack the intimacy of a flesh-and-blood personal relationship and are ultimately unable to make up for the physical presence of another human being. Although Orangutan has achieved three months of sobriety due to Haikumom’s and Chutes&Ladders’s

help on the forum, the fact that her only relationships are through the internet causes her to feel disconnected, as if she doesn’t belong anywhere. She tells Chutes&Ladders, “I’m floating. I’m a cloud. My existence is one sustained out-of-body experience.” Early on in the play, she also admits, “I’m just a looker. I was never one to actually have an experience.” These words suggest that although her life is safe, it also feels empty, lacking color or firsthand experiences. When Orangutan asks Chutes&Ladders to come visit her in person—in Japan, to which she has recently moved—Chutes&Ladders is fearful and resistant, afraid that he will not live up to her expectations. He admits, “I’m a dashing concept; if you saw my flesh and blood, you’d be disappointed,” and believes that her human presence and unpredictability will disrupt his control over his life. However, she is insistent, saying that she wants relationships “with humans, not ones and zeroes” and that their online relationship is “superficial. It’s not real friendship.” Although Chutes&Ladders fears the risk of a human relationship, Orangutan declares that she wants a “challenge,” suggesting that such a risk is precisely what gives life and relationships substance. Orangutan’s desire for an in-person relationship underscores the human need to be in the presence of other people, to be physically seen and touched and known, and to have relationships that are challenging and tangible, rather than safe, anonymous, and digital.

The play suggests that such close personal connections, though frightening, ultimately make life worth living. Although internet forums can be a valuable tool, they cannot replace real human connection and in-person relationships. Although Chutes&Ladders works up the nerve to sell his car (suggesting that he does not intend to return for quite some time) and buys a plane ticket to Japan, his nervousness at meeting Orangutan in person gives him such an anxiety attack that he vomits uncontrollably both on the flight and after the plane lands, demonstrating his almost paralyzing fear. When they finally meet each other, they hug awkwardly at first but, according to the stage directions, quickly “melt into each other’s arms. A hug of basic survival and necessary friendship.” Despite Chutes&Ladders’s fears, he finds solace and comfort in Orangutan’s presence, not the rejection or disappointment that he feared. Although the depiction of their relationship ends with this scene, Orangutan declares that they have just entered “the land of the living,” implying that their lives as isolated individuals are over and they can begin living truer lives, connected to each other.

Although Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders have known each other for years through the forum, their meeting implies that both their relationship with each other and their individual lives are beginning again on the day that they meet in person. This underscores that, as powerful a tool as the internet can be to help people communicate, digital relationships cannot substitute for real human connection.



FAMILY

Every character in the play suffers from strained or entirely broken relationships with their biological family. In the absence of these healthy

relationships, most of the characters form strong familial bonds with people outside of their immediate biological families.

Water by the Spoonful thus argues that although biological families often fall apart or fail, individuals' real family members are the people they choose to love and invest themselves in.

Each character suffers from estranged relationships with various family members, demonstrating that biological families are fragile and prone to falling apart. Most of the members of the addiction forum—all except for Fountainhead—have been rejected or cut off by their families. Haikumom gave up her son Elliot after her crack-induced negligence resulted in the death of Elliot's sister; Orangutan's parents have cut her off and bought her a one-way ticket to leave the country; Chutes&Ladders's son refuses to acknowledge him and hides his existence from his own children. All of these estrangements reiterate how familial relationships often fall apart, especially when substance addiction is involved. Not only is Elliot estranged from his biological mom Odessa (Haikumom) due to her former crack addiction, he seems also to be distant from his dad, suggested by the fact that his only interactions with his dad are curt text messages that lack any affection whatsoever. Yaz, Elliot's cousin, is estranged from her ex-husband, who is in the process of divorcing her simply because he decided he did not love her anymore. The banality of Yaz's divorce and her husband's lack of a substantive reason reinforce the fragility of biological and marital families.

Although the dissolution of biological families is immensely painful, Elliot's improved life and Chutes&Ladders's son's success suggest that sometimes such separation and loss is the healthiest option. Although Elliot hates Odessa, partly for the death of his sister but also for abandoning him as a child, Yaz recognizes that Odessa's giving him up and stepping out of his life actually saved it. Since Odessa was not well enough to care for Elliot, and since being present in his life in the midst of her addiction might have pulled him into it, letting her biological family come apart was the best option Odessa had. In a similar manner, though Chutes&Ladders grieves his son's rejection of him, he too recognizes that his son has been able to lead a healthier, more normal life in his absence since. In his own words, Chutes&Ladders was using drugs and hurting the people in his life every day. However, the immense pain that Chutes&Ladders feels over the loss of—and rejection by—his son emphasizes that even when such separation is the healthiest option, the emotional wounds it inflicts are nonetheless severe.

In the breakdown of their biological families, each of the characters forms new familial connections with people outside of their immediate family, suggesting that family is ultimately

about whom one chooses to love and depend on. After Elliot is taken from Odessa, he is raised by his aunt Mami Ginny, whom he considers to be his real mom even while speaking with his biological mother. Elliot lives with and cares for Mami Ginny through her struggle with cancer and, after her death, he grieves the loss of his single true parent. Elliot's attachment to Mami Ginny demonstrates that family is a flexible, dynamic concept: one's true family is not who they are born to, but whom they love, care for, and invest themselves into. Though they are cousins, Yaz and Elliot form a sibling-like relationship over the course of the play—the closest between any two characters—now that she has lost her husband and he has lost his mom. This again reinforces the concept that family is mostly about whom one chooses to depend on and support. Even the forum, though its relationships are only digital, has a semblance of a family structure with Haikumom as the mothering figure. Since most of the forum members are estranged from their biological families, they divert that energy into caring for each other online by supporting and fretting over each other's wellbeing from a distance. Although this is not an entirely adequate substitute for a living, breathing family, it still creates the closest thing each of the forum members (aside from Fountainhead) has to family relationships.

Although the play's characters have broken family relationships, their ability to form familial bonds with people outside of their immediate biological families suggests that family is largely determined by the love that people have for each other.



FREEDOM, IDENTITY, AND DISSONANCE

As a music professor, Yaz teaches her students about John Coltrane's jazz, specifically his use of "dissonance"—the tension between two things that

don't fit together. Yaz explains that dissonance provides the most freedom to the notes, since they are no longer confined by what came before them, but dissonance also often descends into chaos. Yaz's commentary on Coltrane's use of dissonance directly parallels her own life, in which the upper-class academic lifestyle she has made for herself clashes with the poverty experienced by her Puerto Rican extended family, which she was born into. To solve the painful dissonance of her own life, Yaz decides to give up her own freedom and return to taking care of her Puerto Rican family. Through Yaz's story, the play suggests that individual freedom may be less important than embracing one's roots and fostering connections with other people.

Yaz leaves behind the the poverty of the barrio—her family's Puerto Rican neighborhood—to find her freedom and attempt to establish a "normal" life and new identity for herself, illustrating the common desire to be free of one's constraining circumstances and take on a new identity. Although everyone else in her family and in the barrio remains trapped by its

poverty, violence, and hardships, Yaz receives a scholarship for her musical talent and is sent away to an all-white prep school. Looking back, Yaz recalls that being the only Puerto Rican in a rich white prep school made her feel confused about who she was, demonstrating the dissonance of being caught between two different environments and identities. While everyone in the barrio is still in poverty, Yaz goes on to become a recognized composer and a professor at an elite college. To cement her “normal” life and identity, she buys an expensive Steinway **piano** and marries William, a white man whose family “has Quaker Oats for DNA,” implying that they are both wholesome and bland. The contrast established between Yaz’s new life and the world she was raised in—the world her family still lives in—is stark and increases her feelings of personal dissonance; she herself seems to be made of two things thrust together that don’t quite fit.

The dissonance Yaz feels between her dual identities begins to cause her shame and anxiety, suggesting that although she has found freedom and established a new life, that freedom’s foundation in dissonance is causing it to descend into chaos and noise. Yaz’s family is proud of her success and appreciated her now ex-husband. However, Yaz suspects that her ex-husband secretly sees her Puerto Rican family as “freaks” because of their eccentric cultural traditions and hard lives, and Yaz wonders if she herself began to see her family the same way. Every time Yaz returns home to the barrio to visit family as an adult, her husband remarks that she comes back “different,” and she finds herself guiltily wishing that she could “scoop the [Puerto Rican] blood out [of her] veins.” This demonstrates not only Yaz’s dissonant identity conflict, but also that she wishes to end that dissonance. Although Elliot knows she was working on her career and building her own life, Yaz feels guilty for not having been involved in the barrio or in her family’s lives, for not having helped take care of Mami Ginny—who held the extended family together for decades—while she was dying or supported Elliot when he became addicted to pain killers. Although Yaz’s freedom allowed her to create her the life she wanted, free of her family’s problems and poverty, her guilt suggests that, in her mind, the tradeoff was not worth it.

Yaz ultimately gives up her individual freedom and chooses to embrace who she is and where she came from, suggesting that her freedom is less important than remembering her roots and taking care of the people that she loves. It seems that for Yaz, the freedom was not worth the dissonance. Rather than maintain her “successful” life, Yaz chooses to sell her Steinway piano and use the money to buy Mami Ginny’s broken-down house in the barrio and replace her as the new anchor who holds the family together. This choice again suggests that, although she has tasted the freedom and comfort of defining her own life, Yaz decides that the dissonance is not worth it and chooses instead to embrace who she is and take responsibility for her family. Since Odessa (Haikumom) is now in inpatient

treatment for her drug overdose, Yaz even takes over moderating the addiction forum, even though she herself has no addiction history. In the same way that Yaz takes on the responsibility of holding the family together as Mami Ginny once did, Yaz also takes up the role of holding Odessa’s “family” together. This suggests that Yaz’s return to the barrio is more than simply going home; it is a new stage in her life defined by embracing her family’s work, however un-glamorous it may be. It is worth noting that Yaz’s decision to forsake her freedom and her material success in order to resolve the dissonance of her identity is not an absolute value statement—though she assumes that Elliot will go back to the barrio and live with her in Mami Ginny’s house, when he tells her that he is instead going to Hollywood to be an actor and find his freedom as well, she is supportive. However, Yaz pointedly tells Elliot that he will always have a home with her, just in case. Yaz’s response suggests that she understands the need to spread one’s wings and taste freedom. But if Elliot should make the same discovery that she did—that he belongs in the barrio taking care of his people—she will welcome him home.

Yaz’s decision to embrace her family and heritage, messy and poor as it may be, is not an absolute value statement on personal freedom or communal responsibility. It does suggest, however, that it is vital to remember one’s roots and be true to them, not ashamed of them.



SYMBOLS

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



THE GHOST

The Ghost primarily functions as symbol of the guilt that Elliot carries with him. The Ghost looks like the first man Elliot killed in Iraq, usually appearing and standing some distance away, watching Elliot and asking for his passport back in Arabic, which suggests that Elliot killed the man unnecessarily due to a misunderstanding. Although acutely, the Ghost represents Elliot’s guilt over the man he killed, it also more broadly comes to represent the guilt and shame Elliot feels about his life in general over his care for Mami Ginny, his hatred of Odessa, his dead-end job, his previous addiction to painkillers, and so on. Although the Ghost never touches or attacks Elliot of his own volition, when Elliot finally decides to attack the Ghost, they struggle until the Ghost gets hold of Elliot’s wallet and searches through its contents, further suggesting that what Elliot may have perceived as an attack when he shot the man was merely a misunderstanding. After the Ghost searches Elliot’s wallet, he touches Elliot’s face, exploring every feature with his fingertips. Elliot holds still, but terrified and seemingly making his peace with the Ghost by

accepting the guilt and responsibility for what he has done.



WATER

Water represents life—primarily as an individual’s capacity to give, sustain, and enjoy life. When

Odessa is a young mom, she cares for her children who have been dehydrated by the flu by giving them each a spoonful of water every five minutes—enough to keep them hydrated but small enough doses that their bodies can absorb it rather than reject it. Although Odessa manages this for a time, giving her children life a spoonful at a time, she eventually succumbs to her need to smoke crack, leaving her children alone and causing the death of her toddler daughter due to dehydration. After Elliot recounts this story and intentionally pushes Odessa to relapse for the first time in six years, Odessa sits on the floor of her living room and pours a cup of water onto the floor, spoonful by spoonful (an allusion to the play’s title), representing her own life being poured out onto the ground and wasted without offering life or sustenance to everyone else. In the final scene, when Elliot and Yaz are in Puerto Rico to spread Mami Ginny’s ashes, they stand perched above a waterfall and reveal to each other the major life changes they are each about to undertake. In this instance, the waterfall and its torrent of water represent the rushing onset of new life and reinvigoration that each of their new life paths will give them, as well as celebrating Mami Ginny’s life-giving legacy. Rather than water by the spoonful, both Yaz and Elliot experience a great surge of water and life.



YAZ’S PIANO

Yaz’s Steinway grand piano is both a literal and physical representation of the life she has built for

herself after leaving the barrio. It is the instrument she uses to express herself and compose her music, as well as an expensive, luxurious indulgence that represents just how successful she has become in her adulthood. Yaz’s decision to sell the piano in order to buy Mami Ginny’s house at the end of the play embodies the transformation of character that she undergoes, as she is willing to sacrifice the individual aspirations for which she worked so hard in order to become the new head of her family. The acquisition and requisition of this piano, then, come to signify Yaz’s transition from being ashamed of her Puerto Rican heritage to being proud of her identity and committed to her family and community.

Scene One Quotes

☞ YAZ: You wanna be my witness?


ELLIOT: To What?

YAZ: My now-legal failure. I’m divorced.

ELLIOT: Yaz. I don’t want to hear that.

YAZ: You’ve been saying that for months and I’ve been keeping my mouth closed. I just need a John Hancock.

Related Characters: Elliot Ortiz, Yaz / Yazmin Ortiz (speaker), William

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In the first scene, as Yaz and Elliot eat breakfast together, Yaz shares that her ex-husband “fell out of love” with her and they are officially divorced. This interaction helps to establish both characters and hints at the arc they will each follow. Yaz, who has spent the last decades building a normal, respectable life for herself has just lost her normal, respectable marriage to a pointedly non-Puerto Rican man. This is the earliest indication that the trappings of her life, of her freedom, are beginning to either fail or ring hollow for her, which will compel her to eventually return to the barrio and embrace her Puerto Rican identity and family, and all the chaos that comes with this. Meanwhile, Elliot’s refusal to address Yaz’s failed marriage indicates that he is an individual who avoids suffering and conflict. This is seen later in his refusal to even attempt to reconcile with his biological mother, choosing instead to simply block her out of his life.

Scene Two Quotes

☞ ORANGUTAN: The ocean reminds me of Maine. Cold water, very quiet, fisherman, boats, the breeze. I wouldn’t try swimming. I was never one to actually have an experience.

Related Characters: Orangutan / Madeleine Mays (speaker), Chutes&Ladders / Clayton Wilkie, Haikumom / Odessa Ortiz

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

In the first scene showing the forum for recovering crack



QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Theatre Communications Group edition of *Water by the Spoonful* published in 2017.

addicts, Orangutan tells the others about her new life in Japan, where she has just moved to start a career a teacher. Orangutan's blatant admission of only watching life happen, rather than participate in it, is notably self-aware and an early indication of her own longing to live her life actively, rather than passively. This desire to live actively in spite of her natural passivity will result in Orangutan's longing for physical human connection, rather than only internet relationships. It is worth noting that both Haikumom and Chutes&Ladders commiserate with Orangutan's admission that she only watches life, apparently sharing the same feelings, which reiterates the idea that a life lived online is not the same as a life lived in the real world.

Scene Three Quotes

●● YAZ: [...] The ugliness bore no promise of a happy ending. The ugliness became an end in itself. Coltrane democratized the notes. He said, they're all equal. Freedom. It was called Free Jazz but freedom is a hard thing to express musically with spinning into noise.

Related Characters: Yaz / Yazmin Ortiz (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Yaz teaches her students about the use of "dissonance" in John Coltrane's jazz music. Coltrane's music forms the soundtrack for most of the play and also sets dissonance—the clash of two things that do not naturally go together—as a thematic tone throughout the story. This is most true in Yaz's own life, where dissonance reflects the conflict she feels between her ethnic Puerto Rican heritage and her adult life as a sophisticated, Ivy League professor. For Yaz, removing herself from the barrio and her home community offered her the same sort of freedom as she hears in free jazz music; she was able to do unpredictable things and succeed in a way no one else in her family had. However, Yaz eventually discovers that such freedom brought "ugliness" as well in that she was not there to take care of her family when they needed help and she does not feel as if she has truly contributed anything. Despite her freedom, it "bore no promise of a happy ending." The end of her normalizing marriage signals that such a life has not brought her happiness, but only left her feeling conflicted about who she truly is, caught in the dissonance between the privileged life she leads and the struggling lives her family leads.



Scene Four Quotes

●● HAIKUMOM: So unless someone gets that desperate they don't deserve our noble company? "Suffer like me, or you ain't legit?"

ORANGUTAN: Haikumom's growing claws.

HAIKUMOM: Just don't act entitled because you got so low.

Related Characters: Orangutan / Madeleine Mays , Haikumom / Odessa Ortiz (speaker), Fountainhead / John, Chutes&Ladders / Clayton Wilkie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

After Fountainhead makes his braggadocios introduction to the other members of the forum, Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders mercilessly mock and ridicule him, especially for the fact that, as Fountainhead tells it, his crack addiction is pretty minor—hardly an issue at all. Haikumom's rebuttal of Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders is interesting, since their feeling of "entitlement" over their suffering suggests that their struggles with crack and their status as recovering addicts has become a central, formative aspect of their identity. Although they have obviously suffered greatly and assumedly wouldn't wish that on anyone else, their suffering also becomes a sort of badge, a marker of a truly hard life. Although Fountainhead is blatantly egotistical and filled with pride, it seems that the forum members also have their own form of quiet, subdued pride in the depths to which they've fallen, the amount of suffering they've endured. Even within a community of desperate, isolated individuals, the human ego adapts and finds new things to latch onto.

Scene Five Quotes

●● ELLIOT: All those have carnations. I don't want a carnation within a block of the church.

YAZ: You told me to eliminate seven. I eliminated seven. Close your eyes and point.



ELLIOT: Am I a particularly demanding person?

YAZ: Yes. What's so wrong with a carnation?

ELLIOT: You know what a carnation says to the world? That they were out of roses at the 7-Eleven.

Related Characters: Yaz / Yazmin Ortiz, Elliot Ortiz

(speaker), Mami Ginny

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

As Yaz and Elliot make preparations for Mami Ginny's funeral, they sit together at a flower shop, trying to choose an arrangement and opting to avoid their families. Elliot's insistence that there be no carnations reveal both his deep-rooted love and respect for Mami Ginny—even in commemorating her death, he wants what is best for her—as well as his shame at his family's poverty. Elliot refuses to be limited by his own environment and financial problems. This both sets up and foreshadows Elliot's own character arc within the play, at the end of which he will choose to escape his family and the barrio to look for his own freedom, following the same course that Yaz once took, until she realized that freedom was not an end in itself.

●● YAZ: [...] You know, [William's] been to four funerals in the Ortiz clan and I could feel it, there was a part of him, under it all, that was disgusted. The open casket. The prayers.



ELLIOT: It is disgusting.

YAZ: Sitting in the pew knowing what freaks we are.

ELLIOT: He's good people.

YAZ: I was probably at his side doing the same thing, thinking I'm removed, that I'm somehow different.

Related Characters: Yaz / Yazmin Ortiz, Elliot Ortiz (speaker), William

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

At the flower shop, Yaz asks Elliot to tell her ex-husband not to attend the funeral, recounting her own shame whenever he witnessed their Puerto Rican family customs. Yaz's shame at her own family and guilt over feeling that way reveal the painful dissonance between the life she has built for herself and the world that she came from. Both Yaz and Elliot express some level of disdain for the way their family handles funerals, yet that is part of being who they are. This moment, in which Yaz realizes and admits that she was running away from her true identity, family, and ethnic

heritage, mark a turning point in Yaz's character development. Now that she is able to express her feelings and recognize the guilt and grief that her dissonant freedom has wrought, she is able to raise the possibility that perhaps her success, high lifestyle, and sophistication were not worth it. Though painful, this is a vital step, inviting her to consider her options and the possibility of relinquishing her freedom for the sake of embracing her family and herself.

●● YAZ: [...] Look at that guy. Arranging his daisies like little treasures. What do you think it's like to be him? To be normal?

ELLIOT: Normal? A hundred bucks says that dude has a closet full of animal porno at home.

YAZ: I bet in his family, funerals are rare occasions. I bet he's never seen a cousin get arrested. Let alone one under the age of eighteen. I bet he never saw his eight-year-old cousin sipping rum through a twisty straw.

Related Characters: Yaz / Yazmin Ortiz, Elliot Ortiz (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33



Explanation and Analysis

Yaz and Elliot watch the florist at work in his flower shop and ponder what a normal life looks like. Yaz's depiction of their childhood in the barrio gives one of the few hints of the hardships they endured as children, establishing the pain that she sought to escape through her music career. Notably, although Yaz did manage to succeed and escape by becoming an accomplished musician and a professor at a good college, she still feels as if she is not normal and as if the world she came from is still inside of her. This suggests that seeking one's freedom by running from who they are and the people to whom they belong may potentially be a vain quest. Yaz's pondering of what a truly normal life looks like also reveals that for both she and Elliot, as with every character in the story, one of their primary desires is to simply achieve a normal life, to live like everyone else. This again indicates Yaz's shame over who she is and the place she comes from. However, Elliot wisely points out that "normal" doesn't truly exist—that everyone is strange in their own way.

Scene Six Quotes

●● ORANGUTAN: Everything in this country makes sense but me. The noodles in the soup makes sense. The woodpecker outside my window every evening? Completely logical. The girls getting out of school in their miniskirts and shy smiles? Perfectly natural. I'm floating. I'm a cloud. My existence is one sustained out-of-body experience. It doesn't matter if I change my shoes, there's not a pair I've ever been able to fill. I'm a baby in a basket on an endless river. Wherever I go I don't make sense there.

Related Characters: Orangutan / Madeleine Mays (speaker), Chutes&Ladders / Clayton Wilkie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis



Despite Orangutan's earlier claims that she finally feels like a normal person—clean from crack and at peace with herself—she finds herself feeling disconnected, out of place, and alone. While every mundane object around her seems to relate to the space around it, Orangutan's lack of friendship or community means that she has nothing to relate to in that same manner. Orangutan's listlessness and sadness are proof that, despite what Chutes&Ladders tries to believe, life requires more than simply sobriety and not hurting anyone else, it requires actual connection with other human beings. In this way, Orangutan's restlessness and desire to truly belong somewhere or be with someone creates a foil for Chutes&Ladders's overwhelming complacency and suggests that their friendships amidst the forums are not enough to replace “flash-and-bone” relationships. For both characters, Orangutan's realization that her life is still empty becomes a revelation and ultimately drives them together, to find life in each other's physical presence.

●● ORANGUTAN: Maybe we could hang out and have a relationship that has very little to do with crack or addiction or history. We could watch DVDs and microwave popcorn and take walks on the waterfront while we gossip about celebrities. It could be the land of the living.

CHUTES&LADDERS: Stay in the box. Keep things in their place. It's a simple, effective recipe for ten clean years.

ORANGUTAN: Forget simple. I want a goddamn challenge.

Related Characters: Chutes&Ladders / Clayton Wilkie, Orangutan / Madeleine Mays (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

On the addiction forum, Orangutan asks Chutes&Ladders to buy a plane ticket to Japan and come visit her so that they could have a real relationship. However, Chutes&Ladders is afraid of the risks of real human connection. This interaction typifies their relationship throughout the story. Both are alone, isolated, and feel that they have very little to show for their lives thus far. However, Orangutan decides that she still wants to live, while Chutes&Ladders has largely given up on life, opting for safety and security. In the thematic conflict between safe, anonymous internet relationships and risky human connection, Orangutan represents the want for real relationships with real people, while Chutes&Ladders exhibits the dependence on safety and anonymity that internet communities can foster. For all the good their recovery forum has brought, then, it seems that it has also had a crippling effect on Chutes&Ladders, giving him just enough human interaction to maintain his sanity while not providing any true connection. Thus, it seems, Chutes&Ladders has become enabled, allowed to have relationships at arm's length, and needs someone such as Orangutan to push him to venture back into the “land of the living.”

●● CHUTES&LADDERS: Fine, when your son has a tummy-ache in the middle of the night and walks in on you tweaking and geeking just tell him, “Don't worry, Junior, Daddy's sucking on a glass dick [...] but Daddy makes 300k and this is all a part of Daddy's plan!”

FOUNTAINHEAD: I'M A FUCKING CRACKHEAD. [...] Are you happy, Chutes&Ladders?

CHUTES&LADDERS: Absolutely not, my friend. I'm a crackhead, too, and I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.

Related Characters: Fountainhead / John, Chutes&Ladders / Clayton Wilkie (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

During Fountainhead's second interaction with the forum

members, Chutes&Ladders keeps pressing and badgering him until Fountainhead finally admits to being a crackhead. Chutes&Ladders's primary issue with Fountainhead isn't that he hasn't suffered enough, but that his ego is still too large for him to admit to what he truly is, which suggests that Chutes&Ladders knows from experience that a severe substance addiction cannot be fought until the addict lets go of their ego. The immediate manner in which Chutes&Ladders becomes friendly towards Fountainhead after triggering his emotional outburst further suggests that Chutes&Ladders did not bear any particular enmity towards Fountainhead beyond his clear lack of honesty with the group and with himself, rooted as it was in ego and self-aggrandizement. For Fountainhead, this moment of honesty is a critical step in his journey towards recovery, the first time he is even remotely honest about his own status and situation.

Scene Seven Quotes

☞ JOHN: I lied in my first post. I've been smoking crack for two years. I've tried quitting hundreds of times. Day two? Please, I'm in the seven-hundredth day of hell.

ODESSA: You got it out of your system. Most people lie at one time or another on the site. The good news is, two years in, there's still time.

Related Characters: Haikumom / Odessa Ortiz, Fountainhead / John (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

John and Odessa meet in person for the first time and begin discussing recovery. Odessa's complete lack of surprise or reaction to John's admission of lying indicates just how many times she has been through this process with other people and herself. Lying to protect one's ego then, though it angered the other forum members, seems to be a fairly natural, human response, suggesting that honestly admitting one's own weakness, especially in the case of substance addiction, is a difficult feat. Odessa's remark that "two years in" is not too late also suggests that such substance addictions can go on for an incredibly long time, feasibly much longer than a mere two years. If two years can be regarded as a small amount if time in the realm of crack addiction, the amount of life and time one loses to substance addiction thus seems staggering.



Scene Eight Quotes

☞ ELLIOT: Let's not act like this is some heroic sacrifice. Like this makes her the world's martyr.

YAZ: We're not going to get more than fifteen bucks for it.

ELLIOT: Symbols matter, Yaz. This isn't about the money. This is shaking hands. This is tipping your hat. This is holding the door open. This is the bare minimum. The least effort possible to earn the label "person."

Related Characters: Yaz / Yazmin Ortiz, Elliot Ortiz (speaker), Haikumom / Odessa Ortiz

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

When Odessa insists that she has no money to help pay for the funeral, she tells Elliot to pawn off her computer and put the money towards some flowers. For Odessa, her computer and her forum have been the keys to her recovery and her only connection to other people, a fact which is not lost on Elliot. In light of this, Elliot's insistence that they take the computer—and thus Odessa's wellbeing—is a symbol act that seems ruthlessly vindictive, almost as if he is trying to punish her for the death of his sister and the pain Odessa inflicted on him as a young child. Elliot's statement about Odessa earning her personhood by giving something furthers this notion, suggesting that he has dehumanized his own mother in his mind. This action characterizes Elliot as both a victim of his mother's addiction as well as an accomplice to it, since taking away her support group will very likely cause her to fall back into the addiction. Thus, as characters, Odessa and Elliot both hurt each other and are hurt by each other, demonstrating the destructive impact of substance addiction as well as the frailty and potential toxicity of biological families. With such enmity between them, it seems just as well that they did not participate in each other's lives.



☞ YAZ: Why wouldn't you ask me for help? Why would you deal with that alone?

ELLIOT: The opposite of alone. I seen barracks that looked like dope houses. It was four months in my life, it's over. We've chopped up a lot of shit together, Yaz, but we ain't gonna chop this up. This shit stays in the vault. You got me?

YAZ: No!

ELLIOT: Yaz. Please. Please.

Related Characters: Yaz / Yazmin Ortiz, Elliot Ortiz (speaker), Haikumom / Odessa Ortiz, Orangutan / Madeleine Mays

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

While talking with Elliot and Yaz on the forum, Orangutan lets slip that Elliot was addicted to painkillers while he was in the military hospital for his leg injury, and that he overdosed several times. Yaz did not know this and is furious. Both tragically and ironically, Elliot adopts many of the tendencies that he hates most in Odessa. He himself was briefly a drug addict, and like Odessa, he hides himself and his problems away from the rest of the world. Elliot's inability to even discuss the subject with Yaz suggests that despite his insistence, he has not gotten over the trauma and the harm of his addiction, bringing to mind for the reader the forum's collective insistence that addiction cannot be faced alone. Once again, Elliot is depicted as a pained and often hypocritical protagonist, an individual who despises his biological mother for her past addiction and weakness and yet fell into the same patterns and ruts as she did. Sadly, Elliot's own struggle with addiction, though not heavily explored in the play, demonstrates the generational impacts that substance addiction can have, affecting not only the addict but their children, as well, by establishing the same patterns of drug abuse and isolation.



Scene Nine Quotes

●● CHUTES&LADDERS: Live in the past, follow your ass.

ORANGUTAN: Don't you have the slightest ambition?

CHUTES&LADDERS: Yes, and I achieve it every day: Don't use and don't hurt anyone. Two things I used to do on a daily basis. I don't do them anymore. Done. Dream realized. No more dreaming.

Related Characters: Orangutan / Madeleine Mays, Chutes&Ladders / Clayton Wilkie (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

After Orangutan excitedly reveals that she is going to seek out her birth mother, Chutes&Ladders shoots down her


excitement, telling her that she'd be better off leaving it alone, which angers and disappoints her. Chutes&Ladders exhibits a general fear of living life, aiming for the low aspirations of getting through the day without harming others. Ironically, however, even as he claims not to hurt anyone else, he is hurting Orangutan's feelings by crushing her expectations. In living out his own personal fears, Chutes&Ladders unwittingly demonstrates that human relationships are fraught with risk and the possibility of harm—even the safe anonymity of an internet relationship cannot take that away. In this manner, Chutes&Ladders's self-imposed isolation seems like a useless cage, even if it has kept him clean and sober for several years, since it cannot truly stop him from hurting anyone else or being hurt by them. If it is the case that human relationships—even digital relationships, lacking the intimacy of true connection—still present inherent risk, then it seems foolish not to risk for real human connection in the physical, tangible world. It is fear, not safety, which holds Chutes&Ladders back from engaging in real relationship with Orangutan.

●● ORANGUTAN: You mean, gasp, I'll actually FEEL something?

CHUTES&LADDERS: What are you going to do if the address is wrong? What if the building's been bulldozed? What if some other tenant lives there? What if the woman who gave you birth then gave you away answers the door?

ORANGUTAN: I DON'T KNOW! A concept you clearly avoid at all costs. Learn how to live, that's all I'm goddamn trying to do!

Related Characters: Orangutan / Madeleine Mays, Chutes&Ladders / Clayton Wilkie (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders continue their argument about Orangutan meeting her birth parents. Orangutan's statement about learning to live is powerful, arguing that a life that is clean, sober, but safely cut away from all human connection or unpredictability is hardly a life at all. This condemns the purely digital relationship she has with Chutes&Ladders, since it is distant and anonymous—they won't even share their real names with each other—and lacking in any form of vulnerability. Recognizing that such emotional detachment takes all the color and flavor out of

life, Orangutan is reaching to make a change, to reclaim her life. Orangutan's initial willingness to risk heartbreak, failure, or rejection represent substantial character growth on her part, since, by her own admission, she "was never one to actually have an experience." By even attempting to do something terrifying, Orangutan demonstrates that she is taking steps towards not only being normal, but being more human.

Scene Twelve Quotes

ELLIOT: Titi, Odessa fucking OD'd and she's dying on her living room floor and I can't take this anymore! COME GET US before I walk off and leave her on the sofa.

YAZ: If you need to, go. No guilt. I got this.

ELLIOT: She's my *mom*. Can I be angry? Can you let me be angry?

Related Characters: Yaz / Yazmin Ortiz, Elliot Ortiz (speaker), Haikumom / Odessa Ortiz

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

After Mami Ginny's funeral, Yaz and Elliot find Odessa unconscious on her living room floor, having overdosed on crack—her first time using in six years. The exchange between Elliot and Yaz, where Yaz gives him permission to leave if he needs to, foreshadows the final scene of the play and the end of their character arcs within the story. Whereas Elliot has lived in the barrio, in the midst of the pain and the chaos and the death for his whole life, Yaz has escaped it for many years by keeping herself at a distance. Thus, when Elliot is overwhelmed and feels the need to escape, mentally exhausted, Yaz is able to provide stability and support, having had several years of stability in which to gather her strength. By the end of the story, these positions will be catalyzed: Elliot will go to L.A. to try to be an actor—but primarily to find his escape from the barrio and family pains—while Yaz will be the next one to stay, hold things together, and keep everyone alive. While Elliot's anger in the scene is certainly understandable, his ultimate decision to leave suggests that such anger threatens to consume him if he does not escape his current environment.

Scene Thirteen Quotes

CHUTES&LADDERS: Why are you there? Were you using with her?

FOUNTAINHEAD: No.

CHUTES&LADDERS: Did you sell her the stuff?

FOUNTAINHEAD: No, Jesus, of course not. She gave them my number. I'm her emergency contact. Why, I have no idea, we're practically strangers.

Related Characters: Fountainhead / John, Chutes&Ladders / Clayton Wilkie (speaker), Haikumom / Odessa Ortiz

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 78



Explanation and Analysis

After Odessa is taken to the hospital for her overdose, John (Fountainhead) logs onto the forum from a hospital computer to tell them the bad news. The fact that a near-stranger is her emergency contact underscores just how isolated Odessa is from anyone else in her life, including her own family. However, John's entrance into her life not just as a fellow addict, but now as a caretaker and a friend, appears to mark a sort of new beginning for Odessa as well. Where she was previously alone in the world aside from her digital relationships with the forum members, now she is in the constant physical presence and care of another human being. Although the circumstances are different, this beginning of Odessa's new relationship to John parallels the Orangutan's burgeoning in-person relationship with Chutes&Ladders, meaning that each member of the forum goes from personal physical isolation to the physical presence and connection of another human being. This effectively completes the character arcs of Odessa, John, Chutes&Ladders, and Orangutan, and solidifies the importance of in-person relationships over digital ones.

Scene Fourteen Quotes

YAZ: [...] I wrote a list [of achievements] on a piece of paper and dug a hole in Fairmount Park and put it in the ground and said, "When I turn thirty, I'll dig it up and cross it all off." And I promise you I'll never have the courage to go to that spot with a shovel and face my list full of crumbs, decoys, and band-aids.

Related Characters: Yaz / Yazmin Ortiz (speaker), Mami Ginny, Haikumom / Odessa Ortiz, Elliot Ortiz

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 83



Explanation and Analysis

Yaz and Elliot sit together in a hotel room in Puerto Rico (where they have come to scatter Mami Ginny's ashes) and Yaz reflects on all the things she did failed to do in her past. Poignantly, Yaz's guilt and regret are not strictly over the fact that she did not achieve certain things, but over the list of achievements themselves. Referring to such goals as "crumbs, decoys, and bandaids" is both insightful and revealing, suggesting that the goals were meant to cover the pain of her family's hardship and her own upbringing, as if she could wash away the bad memories by achieving material success and building a normal, stable life for herself. Yaz goes on to reflect that Mami Ginny, Elliot, and even Odessa have all done things and helped other people. In light of that reality, all of Yaz's accomplishments—which are substantial—seem meaningless and hollow, again suggesting that the freedom she won for herself by leaving the barrio behind was not worth it. This guilty realization sets Yaz up to make her decision to move home, bringing her character arc full-circle by resolving the dissonance that her freedom has created between her Puerto Rican family and her own sophisticated, disconnected life.

Scene Fifteen Quotes

●● CHUTES&LADDERS: I got sick on the flight. Totally embarrassing. I had a panic attack as the plane landed and I started tossing into the doggy bag right next to this nice old lady. I've been sitting on the bathroom floor emptying my stomach. Then I had to find a toothbrush and toothpaste and mouthwash because I didn't want to greet you with bad breath and all.

Related Characters: Chutes&Ladders / Clayton Wilkie (speaker), Orangutan / Madeleine Mays

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Chutes&Ladders meets Orangutan for the first time in person in an airport in Japan but shows up an hour later than everyone else on his flight. Chutes&Ladders' intense physical reaction to the anxiety of meeting Orangutan illustrates just how much fear he has of extending himself

and risking a human relationship, even though he's known Orangutan via the forum for three years. In facing that level of fear and anxiety and having the courage to meet Orangutan, Chutes&Ladders is actually depicted as quite heroic. This personal heroism not only underscores the fear and risk of human relationships, but also the manner in which addiction adjusts the parameters of one's life, where ostensibly normal behavior becomes its own achievement. Before Chutes&Ladders was addicted to crack and recovered by isolating himself from the world and making life as predictable as possible, meeting another human being would likely not have seemed to be such a great challenge. However, after all the suffering he has endured and the hardship and rejection he has felt, the unpredictability of human connection indeed becomes a great risk; facing it down becomes a great achievement.

●● ELLIOT: I wanted Mami Odessa to relapse, Yaz. I wanted her to pick up that needle. I knew precisely what to do, what buttons to push, I engineered that shit, I might as well have pushed the thing into her vein. Because I thought, Why would God take the good one? Yo, take the bad mom instead! I was like, Why wouldn't you take the bad fucking mom? If I stay in Philly, I'm gonna turn into it. I'm gonna become one of them. I'm already halfway there. You've got armor, you've got ideas, but I don't.

YAZ: Go. Go and don't you ever, ever look back.

Related Characters: Yaz / Yazmin Ortiz, Elliot Ortiz (speaker), Haikumom / Odessa Ortiz

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 91



Explanation and Analysis


While they are laying Mami Ginny to rest, Elliot admits to both Yaz and himself that he intentionally pushed Odessa back to crack out of spite, and that he needs to leave the barrio to keep from becoming destructive and vindictive like everyone else trapped there. This is the final moment of the play and the resolution of Elliot's character arc, as far as it is seen in the play. Once again, Elliot's journey follows the path that Yaz took decades before, when she first left to become a musician and find her own freedom. Although she eventually decides to give that freedom up, Yaz's acceptance and support of Elliot's decision to escape recognizes that it is an important and often-critical journey for an individual to make, especially when coming from

circumstances as difficult as theirs. For Elliot, the decision to leave is not simply selfishness, but survival, so that he is not dragged down by the same poverty and addiction as everyone else.

●● YAZ: I'm the elder now. I stay home. I hold down the fort.

Related Characters: Yaz / Yazmin Ortiz (speaker), Mami Ginny, Elliot Ortiz

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

As Elliot reveals he is leaving for L.A., Yaz reveals that she is moving back to the barrio, having sold her grand piano to buy Mami Ginny's house. Unlike Elliot, who is vulnerable to

the forces of the barrio since he has nothing to protect himself with, Yaz has already had her freedom, has established a life for herself outside of the barrio and their Puerto Rican community. Her decision to be the "elder," the new head of the family, signals that she is trading her personal freedom—which is an individualistic goal—for the responsibility of caring for her community and maintaining the family, both of which are selfless, community-focused goals. Buying Mami Ginny's house signals that she is quite literally stepping into the empty space left by her death, accepting the role of being a mother to the motherless and an anchor of the community. Rather than maintain her dissonant freedom, Yaz chooses to resolve the dissonance, put an end to the ugliness and noise, by returning to her roots and embracing who she is, despite the hard tasks that sets before her. However, it is important to recognize that Yaz fully supports Elliot's escape, seeing it as the necessary next step for him to flourish. Thus, Yaz's own decision is not an absolute value statement between embracing one's freedom and their cultural identity, but rather a personal decision.



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.

SCENE ONE

Elliot, a Puerto Rican Iraq War veteran who has a permanent limp and is wearing a Subway sandwich shop uniform, eats breakfast in a café at Swarthmore College with his cousin Yaz, who is a professor. Elliot and Yaz are waiting for someone, but Elliot needs to leave for work soon. As they wait, Elliot tells Yaz that he is having trouble getting his mom Mami Ginny to eat healthy to help her through the chemotherapy—she always wants to cook with heavy grease or bacon fat, like she used to in Puerto Rico.

In response, Yaz tells Elliot that she is finally signing the papers for her divorce from her husband William. Elliot is disappointed—everyone in the family was proud of Yaz for her marriage and stability—and says he doesn't want to hear about it, but Yaz tells him anyway. Although Elliot asks if either of them were having an affair, Yaz states that William simply woke up one day and didn't love her anymore, saying, "life is short, and you can only live in mediocrity for so long."

Professor Aman, the man who they'd been waiting for, arrives. Elliot asks Yaz to let them speak in private for a couple minutes. After she leaves, Elliot asks Professor Aman to translate a sentence from Arabic that he once heard and wrote down phonetically several years prior. Professor Aman presses Elliot on what the significance of the sentence is, gathering that he is a former Marine who was discharged after a leg wound, though Elliot is reluctant to share any of this information. Professor Aman asks Elliot if he'd be willing to help a friend of his work on a documentary-style film about Marines in L.A. Although Elliot refuses immediately, saying he's had enough of interviews and questionnaires, Professor Aman tells him that it would be a way to break into his acting career. Elliot reluctantly takes the filmmaker's phone number. Professor Aman tells him that the rough translation of his phrase is, "Can I please have my passport back?"

The contrast between Yaz and Elliot is immediately apparent, even though they are close cousins: Elliot is poor, disabled, and caring for a sick mother, while Yaz is an Ivy League professor. This contrasting characterization establishes the dissonance present throughout the story. Elliot represents the barrio and Yaz's poor Puerto Rican roots, while Yaz represents the possibility of freedom and escape into the normal world.



Elliot's attempt to avoid suffering by ignoring news of Yaz's divorce indicates that he runs away from pain. This will be seen again in his relationship with Odessa, whom he avoids as much as possible to avoid the pain, rather than ever seeking reconciliation. Also, the banality of Yaz's divorce—lacking any actual cause or motive—demonstrates the fragility of marriage and family.



Elliot's discharge from the service after being wounded again characterizes him as a tragic character who has served his country and has nothing to show for it other than a constant pain in his leg. The Arabic phrase will be revealed to be the last thing said by the first man Elliot killed in Iraq. That the man was merely asking for his passport, and Elliot did not realize this, suggests that it was a needless killing due to misunderstanding, giving Elliot yet another source of guilt that will plague him throughout the play. Although his shooting of the Arabic man is never condemned, it does affect the audience's perception of Elliot's military service—he regretful, rather than heroic.



SCENE TWO

Odessa sits in her apartment making coffee, computer on. On a screen, the audience sees that she logs onto an internet forum as Haikumom. She writes a morning greeting and then composes a haiku about planting flowers. Orangutan logs on and announces, “Ninety-one days.” Chutes&Ladders also logs on, and both he and Haikumom are relieved, having thought that Orangutan had “disappeared back to the jungle.” Chutes&Ladders gently chastises Orangutan for not logging on for three months, saying, “No news is bad news.”

However, Orangutan tells them that she moved from Maine to Japan to take a teaching job and that she had shown her parents, who had “completely cut [her] off,” the forum and everything she’d written; “for once, they understood,” and bought her a one-way ticket to Japan. Orangutan seems happy there, saying she feels more normal than she ever has and uses her paychecks to buy things that are completely legal, such as “ice cream, noodles, and socks.” She calls Japan her “homeland” revealing to the other two forum members that she is Japanese, though she was adopted by Americans from Maine and given a new English name, which she almost shares before thinking better of it. As she is telling her story, Chutes&Ladders makes a reference to “that little white rock.”

Orangutan mentions that from the Hokkaido café she sits in, she can see the ocean. When Haikumom asks if she ever goes swimming, Orangutan answers, “I’m just a looker. I was never one to actually have an experience.” Chutes&Ladders shares that he fears the ocean almost as much as “landing on a sliding board square,” sharing a story about the time that, as a younger man, he was at the beach with his friends when a rip tide pulled him out into the deep **water**. His lungs filled with water and he sank to the ocean floor, convinced he would die, when a lifeguard rescued him. After vomiting salt water, Chutes&Ladders stood up and the onlookers applauded him, celebrating the fact that he is alive. Chutes&Ladders decided on that day to turn his life around and get himself into group therapy. Orangutan is touched by the story, though maintains her sarcasm, while Haikumom promises that she is going to buy Chutes&Ladders a pair of water wings.

It is made immediately clear that the forum is a small, tight-knit community who are genuinely concerned for each other. This closeness will make Orangutan’s eventual realization that she needs real human connection, not just internet relationships, all the more potent. Haikumom’s name is apt, since she occupies a motherly role within the forum as the administrator.



Orangutan’s primary desire is simply to feel like a normal human being, which is a desire that will be expressed by most of the characters in the story at one time or another. It is notable that throughout the play, which deals heavily in human suffering, the characters are not joining the stereotypical struggle to “reach for your dreams” but merely trying to reestablish a baseline of normalcy. This indicates the way in which addiction, poverty, and its concurrent effects can derail an individual’s life to the point where normalcy is the greatest dream. “That little white rock” refers to crack cocaine, setting drug addiction as the context of the forum member’s relationships.



Orangutan’s admission of only being a “looker” establishes her as a fundamentally passive character. This sets the baseline from which her character arc will develop as she realizes that she wants real human connections and actively extends herself to pursue them. For another person, such an extension might not seem extraordinary. But for a character who identifies themselves as fundamentally passive, such an extension is courageous and even heroic. Once again, the applause Chutes&Ladders receives for merely being alive sets normalcy as the primary target that most characters aim for; Chutes&Ladders is not seeking any impressive achievements, merely to live. The crowd’s applause suggests that that is a worthy enough goal.



SCENE THREE

Elliot sits behind the counter of a Philadelphia Subway restaurant, answering the phone. A friend of his is placing an order. Elliot seems positive, but asks the customer to pick up his food at the shop, since his leg is giving him trouble. In the background, *A Love Supreme* by John Coltrane is playing.

At Swarthmore College, Yaz lectures to a class about John Coltrane's work. She explains that in 1964's *A Love Supreme*, although there is "dissonance," the notes are still structured, as one leads to the next and finds resolution. However, in 1965, Coltrane "democratized the notes" by making them equal. However, she notes, this freedom turns dissonance into chaos and an "ugliness" which serves as an abrupt ending without "the promise of happiness."

As Elliot is writing down the customer's order, a **Ghost** appears, speaking the same Arabic phrase that Elliot asked Professor Aman to translate. Elliot does his best to ignore the Ghost. As he is taking the order down, Elliot gets a text message and abruptly announces that he won't be able to fill the order; he just found out about a family emergency. Elliot leaves the store, limping.

Yaz tries to convince her students that although it seems academic, jazz is more interesting and important than they realize. As an assignment, she tells her students to recall and analyze the first time they became aware of dissonance. For her, it was when she was thirteen, after working in a factory all summer to save enough to hire a music teacher, to whom she announced she was a composer. After she played a piano piece she wrote for her teacher, he remarked that it was pretty but fit together too easily. Instead, he taught her to play one chord on the piano with her left hand and a contrasting chord with her right hand, creating a more interesting, dynamic sound.

Yaz receives a phone call and tells her class to take a short break. Elliot is on the phone, telling her that his dad just texted him to say, "Your mom is on the breathing machine." The curtness of a text message infuriates Elliot and he feels guilty for leaving his Mami Ginny alone that day. He tells Yaz that he was so upset he punched through a mirror at work. As Yaz is leaving to pick Elliot up and go to the hospital, she receives a text from Elliot's dad: "Waiting for Elliot till we turn off the machine."

Elliot's job at a Subway sandwich shop, even though he is in his mid-twenties and a war veteran, establishes him as a man caught in low-wage, low-end work. This is only compounded by the pain in his leg, a constant reminder of his military service and seemingly the only thing he received in return.



John Coltrane's jazz, which revolves around the concept of dissonance, forms the primary soundtrack of the play and is a fairly explicit parallel to Yaz's character development, reflecting the clash of two lifestyles that do not fit easily together. Yaz's recognition that freedom often devolves into chaos and ugliness foreshadow her own realization that her freedom from the barrio is ultimately meaningless if she cannot take care of her family and embrace who she is.



The physical pain of Elliot's limp nearly always mirrors his emotional pain and the guilt he carries. The Ghost thus operates as a symbol of that guilt, reflecting not only his shame over killing a man, but also the guilt he later expresses over his hatred for Odessa.



Once again, Yaz's focus on dissonance reflects her own life, where the contrast between her Ivy League professorship and her Puerto Rican roots cause a conflict of identity. Her music teacher's observation that her composition fits together too easily, not as novel as it could be, seems to reflect Yaz's aspirations for her life as a young girl. She did not want to simply fit in to her family and culture, rather to break free of it.



Elliot's relationship with his dad is never explored and he is only ever represented through the few text messages he sends. However, his absence from the story and Elliot's response to his messages suggests that he has a strained, minimal relationship with Elliot. This again suggests the frailty of biological family and explains why Elliot should form his familial bonds with people other than his biological parents.



SCENE FOUR

On the internet forum, a new member named Fountainhead is trying to introduce himself. He begins typing a self-conscious introduction, but deletes it. Instead, he proceeds to produce a long essay about his background as a medal-winning athlete, a wealthy entrepreneur with a Porsche, a beautiful wife, and several brilliant children. He says that he has a mild problem with crack, which he insists is only psychological and which he only takes in small, controlled doses. Fountainhead says he has come to the experts for their advice and tips on staying clean—he is their new student. Most importantly, his wife can never find out, which is why he is on an internet chat room rather than seeing a therapist or an accountability group.

Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders ruthlessly mock and ridicule Fountainhead's introduction for its arrogance and half-hearted admission of using crack buried amongst his list of personal accomplishments. Haikumom tries to hold the other two members back and censor their frequent. She offers a welcome and explains that she has lost her family to crack (as has Chutes&Ladders) but has been clean for six years. Fountainhead remains silent while Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders continue to mock him, saying that they will respect crack and its overwhelming power, but not someone who acts so egotistical or who has hardly suffered. Chutes&Ladders warns Fountainhead that he will never survive his addiction unless he learns how to set aside his own ego. Fountainhead logs off, but Haikumom tells him to email her if he would like to try starting again.

Fountainhead is immediately characterized as an egotistical fool and his long, bravado-infused monologue contrasts starkly with the painful honesty of the forum members and their striving to simply be normal people. Mired in the midst of Fountainhead's ego is his refusal to see his crack addiction for what it is, instead minimizing it as merely a bad habit. Fountainhead's ego and dishonesty demonstrate the common human habit of downplaying one's struggles, and this will be an obstacle to his recovery.



Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders' disdain for Fountainhead and his ego demonstrate the wide chasm between their own characters and his. The clash between a wealthy, arrogant businessman and the simple, even lowly members of the addiction forum once again suggest Coltrane's idea of dissonance. However, despite their ruthless attack on Fountainhead, Chutes&Ladders makes a critical point about addiction and recovery: if Fountainhead still holds onto his pride and has not suffered enough, there is no chance he will have the strength to break his addiction. This suggests that humility and self-awareness are critical to recovery.



SCENE FIVE

Yaz sits in a flower shop reading brochures. Elliot arrives, his limp even more pronounced. Elliot tells her that he blew off some steam at a boxing gym before showing up. When Yaz asks if Odessa has called him yet, Elliot answers that she keeps herself shut away from the rest of the world. Yaz talks about the funeral preparations, the relatives arriving from Puerto Rico, and the family fighting over Mami Ginny's possessions. To avoid it, Elliot suggests they just spend all day at the flower shop instead.

Together they deliberate on which floral arrangement to buy for the funeral, hoping for something that looks like Mami Ginny's garden. Elliot refuses to have anything with carnations since it makes them look poor. Although Yaz has already found the perfect piece, she tries to hide it from Elliot since it is much more expensive. As they look at it, both Yaz and Elliot feel guilty that they did not take care of Mami Ginny's garden, though Elliot was already serving as Ginny's caretaker before she died.

Odessa hiding herself from the world and even Elliot, who is her biological son, again nods to the theme of human connection and the disparity between internet relationships and real-world relationships. Although Odessa cares for her forum community as Haikumom, she neglects the rest of the world—even her own family.



Elliot is once again plagued by guilt and shame over being poor. Although Elliot's guilt is never substantively dealt with in the play, his shame over his own poverty informs the audience of the world that Yaz left behind when she became a successful musician and teacher. The guilt that Yaz carries over having left the barrio behind begins to show itself as well, hinting at her conflict of identity.



Elliot wants Yaz to conduct the funeral, since she speaks publicly all the time as a teacher. Yaz remarks that she only has to talk about ideas as a teacher, which is easier, and comments that, “Ideas don’t fill the void, they just help you articulate it.” Elliot remarks that she is the new “elder” of the family now that Mami Ginny is gone, a thought which unnerves Yaz since she is only twenty-nine.

Yaz agrees to conduct the service, so long as Elliot will call her ex-husband and tell him not to come to the funeral, since in her eyes he’s lost the right to be involved with their family. She reflects that William has been to four of their family’s funerals and that she thinks he secretly saw her family as freaks for their odd Puerto Rican traditions, and she wonders if she also began to see her family that way. Elliot intentionally cuts her off from this line of thought, though, and Yaz tells him that she wants to go to Puerto Rico with Elliot to spread Mami Ginny’s ashes.

Yaz and Elliot sit in the flower shop, wondering how they will pay for the arrangement and watching the florist do his work. Yaz comments, “What do you think it’s like to be him? To be normal?” Although Elliot doubts that anyone is normal, Yaz guesses that his family rarely has funerals and that he’s never watched his young cousins be arrested or seen children drinking rum. She recounts the day she realized her adult cousin, who graduated high school, doesn’t even know how to read.

Yaz feels guilty about this, since she has college degrees and a seventeen-thousand-dollar **piano** with a mortgage on it. While she was married to William, he would tell her that every time she came back from visiting her family in the barrio, she seemed different. In contrast, “his family has Quaker Oats for DNA. They play Pictionary on New Year’s.”

At the time, her relationship with William and his family made Yaz wish that she could get rid of all her Puerto Rican blood. But now, she wishes she’d never been given the prep-school scholarship and left the barrio. Although Elliot thinks it is better that she left, she worries that now that Mami Ginny is gone, no one will be there to hold the extended family together. Elliot is not sure what he will do now, but disingenuously poses the possibility of moving to Los Angeles to be an actor. Yaz surmises that she might just come with him and leave Philadelphia behind. They order their flowers from the florist.

Yaz’s wish to accompany Elliot to Puerto Rico to lay Mami Ginny to rest—and thus briefly leave her sophisticated Ivy League life—indicates that she is beginning to lean into her Puerto Rican identity once again and perhaps consider a role as the new head of the extended family.



This scene is the strongest portrayal of Yaz’s conflict of identity—her dissonance—and the pain and shame that it causes her. The admission that she found herself embarrassed and ashamed of her Puerto Rican heritage, makes her position as the new elder of the family an even greater burden.



Like the forum members, Yaz and Elliot primarily wish for normal lives, rather than reaching for any grand dreams. Yaz’s recollection of childhood tragedies and traumas indicates that their early lives were painful, surrounded by crime and poverty. This helps to depict, however briefly, the world that she escaped when she left the barrio and built a new life for herself.



Once again, Yaz’s material success creates a marked contrast to the poverty she has just described. While Yaz’s Puerto Rican family is chaotic, William’s family—and thus the life she led as an adult—is bland and wholesome, even boring.



Elliot’s lightly-held aspirations to be an actor in California sets him on an inverse character arc to Yaz’s: where Yaz is moving from freedom and dissonance back to embracing who she is and living in the barrio, Elliot is preparing to take his first steps from the barrio towards freedom. This inverse character arc suggests that the pursuit of freedom for oneself is not inherently wrong and is sometimes necessary to break free of the past. But, as Yaz discovers, it is just as often unfulfilling.



SCENE SIX

Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders are logged on to the forum. It's past 2 a.m. for Orangutan and she's sitting in a mixed bar and internet café, but Chutes&Ladders is chatting during his lunch hour at work in San Diego. Although she seemed previously happy, Orangutan is now upset, feeling as if she doesn't even belong in her own birth country, that she is truly not connected to anything or anyone. Chutes&Ladders is worried about her being in a bar, especially when she is vulnerable to relapse, and Orangutan admits that she "really really really want[s] to smoke crack." To distract herself, Orangutan asks Chutes&Ladders what he wants most in the world, but he doesn't have a real answer. When she asks about his son, he remarks that, "by all accounts, having me a stranger in his life these ten years has given him the best decade of his life."

Although Orangutan has known Chutes&Ladders for three years on the forum, she asks him what he does for work, an admittedly "personal question." When Chutes&Ladders tells her that he is an IRS worker and that he has plenty of vacation days backlogged, she asks him to come see her in Japan. Chute&Ladders seems fearful of this, worried that she will be disappointed by what she sees, though Orangutan retorts that she is disappointed by herself everyday already, so there is nothing to worry about. Chutes&Ladders continues to tell her that he is the most boring person imaginable, which is how he stays clean, but Orangutan insists that she wants the challenge and risk of a real human relationship, rather than remaining safely "anonymous and alone" as she always has. She tells him, "The invitation is open. Come tear my shyness open."

Haikumom appears on the forum and tells Chutes&Ladders that all Orangutan is asking for is to be his friend—even knowing all of his problems—and that he should consider it. She also finds his mailing address, and Chutes&Ladders gives her his last name, Wilkie, but won't offer anymore than that.

Despite their relationship on the forum, which is quite close, Orangutan's feelings of disconnection from the world around her suggests that such internet relationships are not enough to sustain one in life, that there is something fundamentally lacking in them. At the same time, Chutes&Ladders's recognition that his son's life has been better without him in it points to the painful reality that sometimes, due to one member's destructive influence or addictions, the separation of biological family may actually be for the best.



Orangutan's recognition that asking Chutes&Ladders about his occupation—a mundane question often asked between strangers—indicates the importance of anonymity between individuals in internet communities. On one hand, this distance and anonymity seems safe. But it also demonstrates how, despite knowing each other for three years, Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders actually know very little about each other. This demonstrates the limitation of such a relationship that involves neither risk nor reward.



Once again, Chutes&Ladders's reluctance to even share his last name demonstrates the emphasis on anonymity in their internet relationships, again suggesting that such relationships provide company and support, but not real human connection.



Fountainhead logs on, thanking them for the prior “warm two-by-four to my head.” He goes on to explain that last night, he broke down and smoked crack in his car. He’s disappointed by his failure, and Haikumom is sympathetic. However, Orangutan tells him he needs to tell his wife even though she’s already manic-depressive. Chutes&Ladders is still unimpressed since Fountainhead won’t even admit to having a full-blown addiction, still passing it off as a psychological issue. Chutes&Ladders presses him on this point, ruthlessly badgering him until Fountainhead finally admits “I’M A FUCKING CRACKHEAD” and that he’s been unemployed for a long time, though he was once wealthy. Once he admits this, the group immediately becomes much more tender and supportive of him, including Chutes&Ladders.

While the forum members share their favorite recovery slogans with each other, Elliot is in a boxing gym punching a bag, coaching himself to ignore the pain in his leg. The **Ghost** stands a short distance away, watching him, repeating the same Arabic phrase. As the forum members are chatting, Haikumom sees a picture of Mami Ginny, her sister. At first she is excited, until she realizes it is an obituary. The Ghost blows on Elliot, knocking him off his feet.

SCENE SEVEN

Odessa and John (Fountainhead) sit together in-person in a café booth, chatting about religion, family, addiction. When Odessa asks John how many days he’s been clean for, he tries to change the subject by talking about how much he loves going to Puerto Rico, assuming that Odessa has been there until she reveals that she’s never been farther from Philadelphia than Atlantic City. Odessa’s phone rings and she answers angrily, shouting at the caller and swearing while she tells them where she is. The outburst surprises John, but Odessa responds that her family knows how to get at her.

Odessa tells John about several therapy and rehab options until John admits that he lied in his forum post. He’s actually been a crack addict for two years and has never been clean—he’s in his “seven-hundredth day of hell.” Odessa understands the deception, and guesses correctly that his first dealer was a woman he had sex with. When she surmises that John actually doesn’t want to tell his wife about the crack because he feels guilty about the infidelity, he nearly leaves, but decides not to. Odessa herself was a crack addict for seven years, and has helped many people try to fight it after she got clean. She remarks that most of the people she has walked through recovery leave or disappear. Often they die.

Chutes&Ladders’ sharp transition from bullying Fountainhead to offering him gentle support demonstrates his belief that addiction can only be addressed when it’s admitted for what it is. Although admitting to being a “crackhead” feels shameful and lowly, the forum members see such brutal honesty as the only way to truly address the gravity of their addictions. Although this would be difficult for any individual, it seems to be even more difficult for someone such as Fountainhead, who has gone from material success to addicted failure. This reality illustrates addiction’s capacity to destroy anyone, regardless of economic or social background.



Once again, the physical pain in Elliot’s leg parallels the psychological pain and guilt he feels, embodied by the Ghost. However, in light of Mami Ginny’s passing and Odessa’s subsequent realization that her sister has died, this suggests that Elliot’s guilt is connected to every part of his life—his care for Ginny, his poverty, his family conflicts—and not just the man he killed.



Odessa’s angry and profane outburst contradicts the demeanor she maintains as Haikumom on the forum, suggesting a dissonance between her internet persona and her actual self. This once again highlights the difference between internet relationships and real human interactions, where one is not able to filter or moderate themselves through a keyboard.



Both Odessa’s knowledge about addiction and her admission that she’s walked with many people through recovery (often unsuccessfully) suggests that although she is removed from the world and cut off from her biological family, she has helped people in her own way. Even in isolation, Odessa finds ways to help others. Although Elliot will never truly recognize this, Yaz will, and comes to value it by the end of the play.



Yaz and Elliot enter and find Odessa, whom Elliot reveals to be his biological mom, though he was raised by Mami Ginny. Elliot and Yaz are angry at Odessa for not meeting them at the flower shop to pay her share of the fee, but Odessa makes excuses. Elliot is obviously spiteful towards Odessa. John introduces himself, but feels awkward being there for this family altercation. To try to end the tension between Elliot and Odessa, Yaz tells her that all they need is \$200 from her by the end of the day, but she is not even willing to give \$10, saying she is completely out of money. When John offers to pay for the flowers, Elliot coldly refuses, and John gets up to leave.

However, before John can leave, Elliot asks if he knows what happened to Odessa's daughter. Odessa is pained and angry, but resigned to what is about to happen. Yaz tries to leave, but Elliot makes her stay and hear the story, saying, "You were born with a silver spoon and you can't stand how it was for me." Elliot goes on to recall how, when he is little and his sister is a toddler, they both have the stomach flu so bad that they are at risk of dehydration, since they can't keep food or **water** down. The doctor tells Odessa to give them each a spoonful of water every five minutes; enough to keep them hydrated, but small enough that their bodies will absorb it rather than vomiting it up. Odessa takes her children home and spends part of the day spooning water into their mouths.

Despite how sick Elliot is, Odessa's tenderness and the attention she is paying his sister and him feel wonderful. He loves his mom in that moment. But Odessa is tempted away, needing her crack fix, leaving her children on their own. Elliot eventually blacks out. When he comes to, his little sister has died from dehydration. Stunned and embarrassed, John pays for his coffee and leaves. Yaz says that they never say Elliot's sister's name out loud: Mary Lou. She remembers how badly Odessa used to yell at her, even though she was tiny. Odessa gives Elliot her house key and tells him to pawn her computer off and use the money to buy some flowers.

SCENE EIGHT

On the forum, Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders are talking as Chutes&Ladders works up the nerve to call his son. He calls, but hangs up too quickly. Orangutan pushes him to call again. A man answers the phone on the second try, but as soon as he hears "hello," Chutes&Ladders hangs up and tells Orangutan that there was no answer. He logs off. Orangutan is annoyed that he jumped off the forum so quickly and asks if Haikumom is online yet.

Odessa's alienation from her own son once again underscores one of the many destructive effects of addiction, as well as reiterating that one's true family is not always the people with whom they share DNA. Elliot's cold refusal of John's generosity not only indicates that he is too proud to accept benevolence from strangers, but also that the money itself is not the issue. Rather, the problem is Odessa's unwillingness to extend herself or help the family to lay Mami Ginny to rest.



Odessa's online identity as Haikumom seems both particularly poignant and ironic: although she is a mothering figure to the people in her forum and to other addicts, she was not able to be a mother to her own biological children so many years ago. Although it would seem that Odessa is redeeming her own failure at motherhood through her work in the forum, her broken relationship with Elliot and inability to even truly face him or make any attempts toward restitution suggest that she has not entirely reckoned with her own guilt and pain.



The death of Elliot's sister is both tragic and horrifying, pointedly contradicting the depiction of Odessa thus far. Odessa's surrender of her computer, her lifeline to the forum and the support that she gives as well as receives, indicates that she is giving in to the pain that she has wrought. She knows that she is putting herself at risk of relapse in order to contribute what little she can to Mami Ginny's burial, and thus to alleviate the pain that Elliot is experiencing.



Chutes&Ladders' fear of human connection is not only apparent in his relationship with Orangutan and the forum members, but also in his relationship with his son, once again demonstrating both his dependence on the anonymity of internet relationships. It also shows that the anonymity and safety of the forum has hindered his real-world interactions.



In Odessa's living room, Elliot and Yaz look at Odessa's "stone age" computer. Yaz remarks that the computer is the most valuable thing Odessa has, and they'll still only get fifteen dollars for it, seeming hesitant to take it. However, Elliot mercilessly insists, saying that it's a symbol of Odessa doing the "bare minimum" to help with Mami Ginny's funeral and act like a human being. Before they unplug the wires, though, they notice the chat room and log in as Odessa—Yaz correctly guessing that her password is "Elliot."

Despite Yaz's hesitation, Elliot begins talking to Orangutan, posing as Haikumom, though Orangutan quickly realizes it's not her. When she realizes that she's talking to Haikumom's son, she tells him that there is a good forum for pain-medication addicts, tipping Yaz off to the fact that Elliot got hooked on pain pills while he was in the military hospital and even overdosed three times. Yaz is furious at Elliot for never telling her about it, since she would've helped him, but Elliot insists that the only thing left from those days are night terrors and the **Ghost**, and that he's not pathetic like the forum members. Yaz tries to press him, but he shuts down, begs her to stop asking, and rips the cords out of the computer to take it to the pawn shop.

SCENE NINE

Chutes&Ladders chats with Orangutan on the forum while talking to a woman on the phone from his work desk. Orangutan is excited, telling Chutes&Ladders that she is about to get on a train to visit the town where she was born and knock on the door of the house her birth mom once lived in. Although she expects Chutes&Ladders to share her excitement, he tells her to forget the address and give it up—better not to risk being upset. According to him, it's safer not to hope. Instead, he doesn't use crack, doesn't hurt anyone else, and lets that be enough accomplishment for his lifetime. The last time he extended himself by asking a co-worker on a date a few weeks ago, he only humiliated himself.

Orangutan is angry at Chutes&Ladders, having anticipated her trip and looked forward to sharing every detail of it with him. She calls him a coward and insists that she's just trying to figure out how to live a real life. To counter, Chutes&Ladders tells her about the time he discovered that he had grandchildren when he showed up on his son's doorstep, saw the kids playing in the living room, and his son pretended not to know him before politely asking him to leave. That rejection pushed Chutes&Ladders to use crack for the first time in five years.

Elliot's insistence that they pawn Odessa's computer seems more than symbolic—it seems vindictive. He is purposely taking away Odessa's connection to her support network, which has become her life's purpose. This need to punish and hurt his own biological mother—assumedly because she hurt him so long ago—demonstrates the destructive impact of addiction not only on the user, but also the people around them.



Elliot's insistence that he is somehow better or morally superior to the members of the forum and to Odessa, despite the fact that he himself was an addict, characterizes him as a hypocrite with a mountain of buried pain. However, the pain he experienced as the child of a drug addict and as a haunted war veteran makes him seem more tragic than despicable—a man trapped by years of guilt, shame, and anger. Elliot's own struggle with drugs suggests that the destructive impact of drug addiction can be passed down generationally.



Chutes&Ladders' hesitancy to interact with other people in the real world—or to encourage Orangutan to—again reiterates both the safety and limitations of internet relationships. Chutes&Ladders will never experience the same face-to-face shame or humiliation as he did with his coworker in an online relationship, and so views the internet a safe space in which to maintain relationships. However, this safety is enabling, allowing him to escape from the physical world and the people in it and develop a habitually-isolated lifestyle.



Chutes&Ladders' fear of real human interaction is understandable and his experience with his son is tremendously tragic, reinforcing his fear of real human connection. Even so, Orangutan's own desire to truly live her life argues that, however terrifying physical relationships with others may be, they are still the substance of life and cannot be replaced by digital relationships.



However, Orangutan is still furious with Chutes&Ladders, calling him a coward who is afraid to live. When he tells her how difficult is to be her friend when all she does is insult him, she tells him she harasses him for the same reason “little girls tease little boys on the playground at recess.” Though her disappearance from the forum for three months kept him sleepless with worry, she just wanted to impress him. However, now that she knows he’s just a coward “looking for cowards” she’s leaving the forum and taking that train, stating finally, “into the abyss I climb, looking for a flesh-and-blood hand to grasp onto.” She logs off. In anger, Chutes&Ladders throws his phone into the trash, throws all of his the material off his desk onto the floor until all that is left is an envelope from Haikumom with a deflated **water** wing inside.

Although it is never explored any further in the play, Orangutan’s comment about girls teasing boys at recess implies that she has feelings for Chutes&Ladders that run deeper than friendship. In any case, Chutes&Ladders’s physical reaction to Orangutan’s anger and rejection demonstrate that, although Chutes&Ladders hides from the risk of real relationships via the online world, even there he is not safe from emotional pain, rejection, or frustration. Since he cannot truly avoid such pain, it seems best to risk it for the sake of a real, fulfilling relationship rather than an anonymous friendship.



SCENE TEN

Yaz and Elliot stand together at the front of a church, conducting Mami Ginny’s funeral and commemorating her life: the public gardens she built, the community homes she refurbished, her twenty-two godchildren, the meals she always made available to any passer-by or stranger, and her one adopted son. Elliot is overcome by emotion and cannot finish speaking, so Yaz finishes for him, announcing that Elliot’s life is a testament to Mami Ginny’s care.

Mami Ginny’s presence in both her Puerto Rican community and in Elliot’s life paint an obvious and damning contrast to Odessa’s absence. This reiterates the way in which addiction can remove one from their own world. It also demonstrates why Elliot sees Mami Ginny as his true mom, and Odessa as merely an unfortunate blood relation.



As Yaz and Elliot are speaking, Odessa sits in her living room with a cup of **water** and a spoon, pouring the water onto the floor, spoonful by spoonful. At the same time, Orangutan stands on a Japanese train platform in Sapporo. Although the final boarding call comes over the loudspeaker, she remains frozen in place.

This passage alludes to the play’s title, Water by the Spoonful, and highlights the significance of Odessa’s actions in the throes of her addiction—for both herself and her family. Just as a spoonful of water kept her children alive while they were sick, Odessa’s spoonfuls of water poured upon the floor represent her own life being poured out, wasted on the floor until there is nothing left of it or her.



SCENE ELEVEN

Chutes&Ladders sits in his office with the **water** wing Haikumom sent sitting on his desk in front of him, inflated. He speaks to someone on the phone, trying to sell them his car, telling them they need to come look at it as soon as possible.

Although it is never explicitly stated how long Chutes&Ladders will be in Japan, the fact that he sells his car (a daily necessity) to pay for the ticket indicates that it will be a long stay.



SCENE TWELVE

Orangutan lies asleep on the train platform in Sapporo. At Odessa's house, Yaz and Elliot yell for her outside her locked door. When she does not answer, Elliot kicks the door in and they find her passed out on the floor, apparently having overdosed. They begin slapping her and yelling at her as they call an ambulance. Elliot feels a mix of pain, anger, and fear. At the emergency operator's instructions, they lift Odessa onto the couch, but as they do so, Odessa separates from her physical self in an out-of-body experience and stands to the side, watching them. Odessa briefly monologues about about being between flights, and recalls the single time she has been to the airport, when her father flew from Puerto Rico to meet her for the first time. His flight was late, and as she waited for him by the baggage claim, she watched one lone suitcase do circles around the carousel over and over again, "abandoned."

Yaz calls her own mom, since she will likely be faster than the ambulance, and Elliot grabs the phone and tells her that she needs to hurry and get here before he walks away and leaves Odessa to die on the couch. Yaz tells Elliot he can leave if he needs to, she understands, but Elliot insists that he just needs her to let him be angry, and he goes to another room and finds something to shatter in his anger.

In Sapporo, a policeman shines a bright light at Orangutan lying on the floor and tells her she cannot sleep there and that she must leave. Orangutan complies. In Odessa's house, as Yaz is sitting with her body, that same beaming light shines down from above, although only she can see it, like a vision of some sort. Yaz is overcome with emotion and tells Odessa that she is beautiful, good, and free to leave if she must. The light disappears as the ambulance arrives, and Yaz tells a confused Elliot that he must forgive his mom.

SCENE THIRTEEN

In the forum, Chutes&Ladders asks if anyone is online. Orangutan eventually answers; the first time she has shown herself in three days. She is depressed, revealing to Chutes&Ladders that she didn't even have the nerve to get on the train. However, her mood is brightened when Chutes&Ladders tells her that he sold his car and bought himself a ticket to Japan, saying that he hopes he has the courage to get on the plane. Orangutan is overjoyed that he did this for her.

The simultaneous occurrences of Orangutan lying on the train platform (having let her train—and thus her attempt at living a real life—pass by) and Odessa lying unresponsive on the floor are a nod to the parallel between these two characters' story arcs. In the same way that Orangutan failed to act and let her opportunity to meet her mother pass, Odessa relapsed, throwing away her sobriety or any chance she had to participate in Elliot's life or Ginny's death. Notably, however, Odessa's failings as an adult seem rooted in her own abandonment and broken relationship with her father, again demonstrating the generational impacts of broken relationships within a family.



When Elliot considers waking away from everything, Yaz gives him permission, knowing that she will stay to take care of things. This foreshadows their decisions at the end of the play when Yaz, who has already left the barrio and had her freedom, decides to return to take care of her family and "hold down the fort." Elliot, however, decides that he ultimately needs to leave in order to escape and find his freedom elsewhere.



Narratively, Yaz's brief vision seems odd, since Odessa does not leave, and Elliot does not truly forgive her within the confines of the play. However, it should be noted that Water by the Spoonful is only the second piece of a three-part series, so the entirety of Elliot or Yaz's development is not fully seen.



Narratively, Orangutan loses the possibility of one human relationship while gaining another. Since Chutes&Ladders already knows her and her history with drug addiction, it is more likely to be a healthy, successful relationship than she would have had with the mother who abandoned her.



Fountainhead appears in the forum, saying that he is on a hospital computer, and tells them that Haikumom overdosed. Although he is not certain why, Odessa listed Fountainhead as her emergency contact, so he is there with her. Nobody else has come to see her. Orangutan is floored, almost angry that she relapsed. Chutes&Ladders, however, tells Fountainhead that he has to promise to stay with Haikumom around the clock and get her into a rehab center, or he'll book a flight to Philadelphia and come do it himself, saying, "Your lifeboat has just arrived. Get on board or get out of the way."

Fountainhead is nervous, since he is on day one of his recovery still, but finally agrees. Before he logs off, he mentions that Haikumom, while she was briefly awake, asked that someone else take over as the forum's administrator. After logging off, Fountainhead calls his wife to tell her he won't be coming home. His wife seems to think it is because Fountainhead is having an affair and hangs up on him.

SCENE FOURTEEN

In a hotel room in Puerto Rico, Yaz types on her laptop, introducing herself to the forum members as Freedom&Noise and asking if they will let her be the new administrator in place of Haikumom. She admits that she does not have any drug history or experience with chat rooms, but remembers when Odessa disappeared from her life when she was a child, popping up again ten years later with a Narcotics Anonymous necklace. Meeting her again, Yaz realized that she had never done anything so difficult in her life as fight an addiction, so she wants to give back to the world and to Odessa. Yaz is in the midst of composing a haiku for the forum when Elliot enters.

Elliot tells her to close the computer; he doesn't want to be reminded of Philadelphia while he's in Puerto Rico. Yaz tells Elliot about a list of achievements she made as a little girl and buried in a park so she could dig it up when she was thirty and cross them all off. The goals were all for herself: be married with kids, tenure, perform concerts at Carnegie Hall, and compose original pieces of music. But now the goals seem worthless since she'll "never have the courage to go to that spot with a shovel and face [her] list full of crumbs, decoys, and bandaids."

Odessa's listing of John as her emergency contact, even though they hardly know each other, underscores just how isolated she is from her own family, with no relationships significant enough that she felt confident they would come take care of her. However, in listing John as her contact, Odessa has drawn them closely together. It is notable, then, that John is her only human contact described in the story aside from the brief, hostile interaction with Elliot and Yaz.



Near the end of their character arcs, John and Odessa are brought together to share their human connection much the same as Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders are, resolving the tension and inadequacy of online relationships.



Yaz taking on the role of administrator for the addiction forum signals that she will not only start taking responsibility for her extended Puerto Rican family, but even for Odessa's online family now that Odessa is out of commission. Her recognition that, despite being an accomplished musician and professor, she has never done anything so difficult as fight an addiction or care for other addicts suggests that her values are changing—rather than seeking fulfillment through professional milestones or achievements, Yaz is beginning to seek fulfillment in caring for family.



Yaz's recognition that her list of achievements and goals were fundamentally self-centered and only "decoys and bandaids" is remarkably self-aware, confirming her growth from a character who focuses on herself to a character who considers what she can offer to others. Her naming of those goals "bandaids" is particularly revealing, suggesting that personal accomplishments were her own way of trying to cover for the pains and losses of her childhood in the barrio.



Elliot thinks those goals sound okay, but Yaz denies it, especially compared to what Odessa did for other addicts and Ginny did for their community. She wasn't around to stop Elliot from being shot in the leg and she wasn't there to help him through his own addiction. Rather than a list of goals, she wants to dig a hole and bury a scream. Elliot tells her that for a second, it was as if he was talking to Mami Ginny, not Yaz. Yaz remarks that Odessa saved Elliot's life when she gave him up, and then begins gathering her things so that they can go spread Mami Ginny's ashes.

Yaz leaves the room to make a phone call, and as soon as she is gone, the **Ghost** appears. Elliot calls for Yaz but she does not return. As the Ghost reaches to touch Elliot, Elliot grabs him and they begin fighting. However, the Ghost is not trying to hurt Elliot, only looking for his wallet, and when he finds it begins rifling through it and emptying it onto the floor, searching for something. The Ghost reaches and touches Elliot's face, freezing him in place, and slides his fingers across Elliot's nose, eyes, mouth, as if he is "taking inventory." The Ghost disappears, leaving Elliot shaken. He pulls a bottle of pills from a pocket, puts one in his palm, and then pours the entire bottle into his palm, "wanting to throw them away."

SCENE FIFTEEN

In Odessa's bathroom, John gently helps her bathe, lifting each arm to sponge her off. Odessa is conscious but extremely weak, barely able to speak, though she manages to ask him if Chutes&Ladders got her **water** wings. John tells her that her rehab check-in time is not for several hours, so they have plenty of time to get her clean and dressed. Now that he has told his wife about his crack addiction, he suspects that Odessa may be his only remaining friend.

In a Japanese airport, Orangutan sits alone on floor, dejected, and gets up to leave when Chutes&Ladders arrives with his suitcase and waves to her. She is confused and a little angry, since he didn't have the courage to make his initial flight, rebooked, and even then did not arrive with the other passengers. However, he explains that he was so anxious he started vomiting on the plane and then in an airport bathroom after the plane landed, and he needed to find a toothbrush and toothpaste to get rid of the smell. Convinced, Orangutan hugs him and they tell each other their real names: Clayton Wilkie and Madeleine Mays. They both remark that meeting in person after knowing each other for so many years is strange, but Madeleine calls it "the land of the living." They hug again and "melt into each other arms."

Yaz's desire to bury a scream, rather than a list of things to accomplish, suggest that Yaz no longer wants to run from the problems of their family and community. Instead, she wants to embrace them and feel the pain and anger of being present, because at least then she will be there to help improve the situation.



Elliot's struggle with the Ghost—who is only looking for something in Elliot's wallet—confirms what the audience already suspects; the first man Elliot shot in Iraq was killed over a misunderstanding. He wanted his passport back, saying the Arabic phrase, which Elliot mistook as an act of aggression. This explains the heavy burden of guilt that Elliot carries. Although Elliot never finds redemption or even firm resolution, allowing the Ghost to touch his face does indicate that on some level, Elliot is at least willing to confront his actions.



John and Odessa's human connection, though forged over terrible circumstances, is the most positive relationship that Odessa has with any actual person over the course of the play; she is a little bit less alone in the world. Thematically, John and Odessa's new relationship together parallels Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders, as will immediately be seen.



The extreme anxiety Chutes&Ladders feels about meeting Orangutan, which he pushes through to have a real relationship with her, makes him seem rather heroic, in his own way. The revealing of their real human names, though a simply and necessary gesture, indicates that the years of safe anonymity between them are gone—now they will have to see and speak to each other as they actually are, accepting the risks and rewards of real human connection.



In Puerto Rico, Elliot stands on an outcropping overlooking a **waterfall**. Yaz is distracted, digging up plants and putting them in plastic bags. She says she's going to plant them in Mami Ginny's garden, though Elliot warns customs will snag her in the airport. Elliot receives a text from his dad telling him that Mami Ginny's house has already sold. Elliot is confused at how it could've sold so fast until Yaz reveals that she sold her Steinway **piano** and bought the house herself. She's moving back to the barrio, renovating Ginny's house, and she wants Elliot to live there with her.

Elliot is excited for her. However, as they get ready to toss Mami Ginny's ashes over the **waterfall**, he tells Yaz that he's not going back to Philadelphia, he's moving straight to Los Angeles to be an actor. Elliot tells Yaz that the night before he had a dream: he could feel someone behind him and thought it would be the **Ghost**, the first man he killed in Iraq, but instead it was Mami Ginny there to say goodbye. However, when she looked at his face, Mami Ginny started screaming.

Elliot confesses to Yaz that he wanted Odessa to relapse and overdose, and that he knew exactly which buttons to press to overwhelm her. It seemed wrong to him that God should kill the good mom and leave him with the bad one. Elliot feels like he needs to escape the barrio before he turns into the same thing as Odessa and all the rest. Yaz tells him she understands and that he should go, but he'll always have a place to live if he decides to come home. Yaz declares, "I'm the elder now. I stay home. I hold down the fort." Elliot declares, "I'm walking." Together, they toss Mami Ginny's ashes.

Just as the water Odessa poured onto the floor represented her own life and vitality, so the waterfall seems to represent the abundance of new life given by both Yaz and Elliot's decisions to make substantial changes. By exchanging her grand piano for Ginny's house, Yaz indicates that she is letting go of her sophisticated life to take Ginny's place as the head of the family and the anchor of the community.



Elliot's decision to leave, supported by Yaz, sets him upon the same path that Yaz herself took years before when she left the barrio to become a musician and composer. Elliot cannot truly be free of his guilt, shame, and likely his addiction, until he is free from the pressures of home and family. This reality demonstrates the justified need for individuals to spread their wings.



Yaz's shows support for Elliot's decision, while her offer of a place to stay if he should ever return also recognizes that for her, and perhaps for him, leaving and pursuing individual goals is not a permanent solution. Thus, Yaz and Elliot find themselves at different stages of the same journey, Yaz having taken the role of Mami Ginny and head of the family upon herself.





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