

# Chapter 16

The chapter opens with the narrator, Theo, receiving an invitation from his ex-wife Helena to visit her and her new partner, Rupert, to see their cat Mathilda's newborn kittens. Theo reflects on the societal rituals surrounding the birth of domestic animals, noting the bittersweet nature of such events due to strict regulations requiring sterilization or culling of most offspring. This sets a tone of melancholy and detachment, underscored by Theo's realization that the date marks exactly one year since Helena left him for Rupert.

Theo's visit to Helena and Rupert's home prompts introspection about their failed marriage. He cynically critiques their new life together, imagining it as a facade of domestic bliss. His thoughts drift to their past intimacy, questioning whether Helena discusses their sexual history with Rupert. Theo admits to his own shortcomings in their relationship, acknowledging that their marriage was built on superficial attractions—social status, academic pretenses, and physical desire—rather than genuine love. The death of their child, Natalie, ultimately exposed the emptiness of their union.

The narrative shifts to a broader commentary on the decline of sexual pleasure and intimacy in a world where procreation is no longer possible. Theo observes that sex has become mechanical and unsatisfying, devoid of its former emotional and physical significance. Women's magazines lament painful orgasms, and relationships are strained by unmet expectations. Despite government efforts to stimulate desire, the chapter paints a bleak picture of human connection, where love and marriage persist but lack depth and fulfillment.

Theo's visit concludes with a subdued interaction at Helena's home, where he meets Mathilda and her kittens. The scene is tinged with nostalgia and resignation, as Theo accepts the loss of his former life. The chapter ends with a description of the house,

symbolizing Helena's efforts to erase the past and create a new identity with Rupert. Theo's detachment and bitterness linger, reflecting the broader themes of decay and disillusionment that permeate the chapter.

