Parade

Rachel Cusk's *Parade* is a sharp and thought-provoking novel that dissects the nature of performance, identity, and art. Following a renowned theater director as she navigates a shifting landscape of creative ambition and personal disillusionment, the novel explores the tension between authenticity and artifice. As she engages with a cast of enigmatic characters—actors, critics, and admirers—her own sense of self begins to blur, raising profound questions about the roles we play in life. With Cusk’s signature precise prose and psychological depth, *Parade* is a mesmerizing meditation on the boundaries between reality and illusion.

The Stuntman

The chapter opens with the artist G, who begins painting upside down as a radical response to his artistic and existential crisis. Initially, his inverted paintings appear accidental, but their deliberate nature is confirmed by his signature. This innovation earns critical acclaim, reinforcing G’s reputation despite his lingering resentment toward the art world, which had harshly criticized his early work. G’s wife observes that his inversion technique inadvertently mirrors the "female condition"—a sense of fundamental wrongness beneath a surface of correctness. His paintings, particularly one of birch trees, evoke a paradoxical calmness and madness, suggesting a shelter in disorientation. G’s wife wonders if his marginal perspective stems from his own vulnerability, as he once confessed to relying on masturbation before their marriage, implying a relinquishment of traditional masculinity.

G’s early portraits and landscapes explore themes of violence and wholeness, with inverted imagery resolving the brutality of felling trees (and, metaphorically, people). His wife recognizes in his work a reflection of her own suppressed unhappiness, a "nameless female" anguish. The public avoids questioning whether G paints inverted scenes or merely flips finished works, a silence that underscores art’s complicity in obscuring truth. G’s wife becomes a reluctant confidante for others’ insecurities, reflecting on how nobility is eroded by unspoken confusion. Meanwhile, G openly discusses his technical challenges, abandoning photographs for larger, dreamlike abstractions. His belief that "women cannot be artists" reveals a gendered hierarchy: his wife muses that women’s artistic potential is stifled to preserve men’s creative oblivion, a privilege dependent on domestic labor. A female novelist’s awe at G’s work—exclaiming, "I want to write upside down"—hints at the appropriation of female experience by male artists.

The narrative shifts to an unnamed couple abruptly evicted from a borrowed apartment, a loss that destabilizes their sense of belonging. The apartment’s ornate mirror, which once framed the narrator proportionally within a larger world, becomes a symbol of lost orientation. Their subsequent homelessness—staying in transient, unsettling spaces—mirrors their psychological limbo. A pivotal moment occurs when the narrator is violently attacked by a deranged woman in broad daylight. The assault, both physically and existentially jarring, forces her to confront a "death-in-life" sensation tied to her femininity. She conceptualizes a "stuntman" self—a silent, sacrificial double who absorbs violence so her primary self can maintain coherence. The attack fractures this duality, exposing the stuntman’s role in sustaining the illusion of invulnerability.

The chapter closes with G’s failed attempt to paint his wife classically, as his inverted technique now reveals his latent hatred and objectification. Their visit to G’s tyrannical father in a retirement home underscores generational cycles of violence and forgiveness. G’s wife, moving through the room like a "striped wild beast" in slatted light, embodies his crippling awareness of her partial freedom and his own compromised masculinity. Meanwhile, the narrator, still reeling from her attack, visits

an exhibition by the sculptor G, whose genderless fabric forms suggest an escape from gendered violence. The narrator’s desire to retaliate—to "pass on" the violence she endured—highlights art’s dual role as both sanctuary and confrontation. The stuntman, now externalized, walks in her place, embodying the insanity of matter itself. The chapter weaves together themes of artistic inversion, gendered violence, and the unstable boundaries between self and other, reality and representation.



The Midwife

The chapter delves into the complex life of G, an artist whose early wild years in the city contrast sharply with her later conventional existence as a successful painter, wife, and mother. G’s studio in a gritty neighborhood symbolizes her rebellious past, where she lived in chaotic freedom, disconnected from her disapproving parents. Her art initially served as a raw, unfiltered expression of her inner turmoil, but as she gains recognition, her work evolves into more polished, somber pieces. This shift mirrors her personal transformation, as she enters a bourgeois marriage with a lawyer who critiques her art and life with moral disdain. G’s relationship with her husband is marked by a power dynamic where his authority and disapproval echo her parents’, drawing her into a cycle of submission and self-doubt.

A significant theme is G’s exploration of shame through her art, particularly in a series of autobiographical paintings that confront her bodily and sexual experiences. These works, initially grotesque and pornographic, eventually become a means of liberation, allowing her to externalize and dissolve her shame. Her gallerist, an ugly yet kind man, plays a pivotal role in legitimizing her work, helping her reframe her “unacceptability” as artistic strength. However, her marriage introduces new tensions, as her husband’s criticism severs her connection to her gallerist and isolates her from her artistic peers. G’s pregnancy and motherhood further complicate her identity, as she grapples with the societal expectations of femininity and the visceral bond with her daughter, which becomes both a source of revelation and conflict.

The narrative also shifts to Mann’s farm, a decaying yet mythic place where time seems suspended. The farm, once a utopian community, now reflects neglect and failed idealism, with Mann entangled in local politics while his wife maintains order amidst chaos. The descriptions of the landscape—wild, untamed, and watched by an ominous mountain—mirror G’s internal struggles. The farm’s disarray parallels G’s

studio in her wild years, suggesting a broader commentary on creativity and control. Johann, a German teacher living on the farm, recounts its history, emphasizing Mann’s futile battle against modernity and his wife’s quiet resilience. The farm becomes a metaphor for lost dreams and the tension between preservation and decay.

The chapter culminates in G’s fractured family life, where her husband usurps her role as a mother, leaving her alienated from her daughter. The kitchen becomes a stage for their performative domesticity, with G increasingly sidelined. Her art, once a refuge, now reflects her emotional exile, as she channels rage and competence into her work. The final scenes at Mann’s farm—with its eerie, observed landscapes—echo G’s sense of being scrutinized and judged, both by society and her own conscience. The chapter weaves together G’s artistic journey and the farm’s decline, illustrating how personal and creative autonomy are eroded by external expectations and the weight of history.

The Diver

The chapter opens with a tense domestic scene where the police arrive at G’s house, investigating photographs of her daughter that were flagged by a printer. G’s husband diffuses the situation with charm, convincing the officers it was a misunderstanding—he had merely complained about print quality. His performance shifts the officers from suspicion to acquiescence. However, once they leave, his facade collapses into violent rage. He shouts at G and their daughter, throws objects, and physically manhandles the child. G contemplates fleeing but is trapped by her husband’s threats: he asserts legal control over their home and child, leaving her financially and emotionally cornered. The scene underscores the duality of his character—publicly authoritative, privately abusive—and G’s powerless position as both witness and victim.

The narrative shifts to a dinner gathering at a hard-to-find restaurant, where Mauro, Julia, and others discuss the day’s events, including a suicide at a museum. The director, who witnessed the suicide, arrives late and recounts the traumatic incident. She describes how the man, dressed in black, leaped from a gallery railing while she was on a call with her ex-husband. The juxtaposition of her ex’s venomous words and the man’s silent fall blurs the lines between external violence and personal torment. The director reflects on her detachment during the event, realizing a newfound separation from her ex’s influence. Her stoic acceptance of death—rooted in her rural upbringing—contrasts with the group’s shock, framing the suicide as both a public tragedy and a private revelation.

Conversation at dinner turns to art, parenthood, and societal expectations. Mauro theorizes that female artists like G grapple with motherhood as both a creative and destructive force, citing his own mother’s failed artistic ambitions. Julia counters that parental idealization often stems from ego, recounting a mother at a school play who

filmed only her child, distorting reality. Betsy interjects with cynical humor, criticizing sanctimonious parenthood and praising G’s unvarnished portrayal of maternal conflict. David, G’s associate, offers fragmented insights into her children’s lives, suggesting G emotionally distanced herself from them. The debate highlights tensions between artistic integrity and familial duty, with G’s work serving as a focal point for these contradictions.

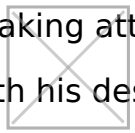
The chapter closes with the director’s decision to resign and move to an island, rejecting the artifice of the art world. She compares museums to churches, where art is either sanctified or voyeuristically consumed, and laments how photography diminishes original works. Her disillusionment mirrors G’s radical honesty in later life, which stripped away pretenses. As the group orders food, the director’s calm resignation contrasts with Betsy’s theatrics and Mauro’s intellectualizing. The scene dissolves into a cacophony of costumes and clattering dishes, mirroring the chaos of the parade outside. The chapter weaves together themes of violence, artistic truth, and the fragility of human connections, leaving characters—and readers—to grapple with the unresolved tensions between reality and perception.

The Spy

The chapter opens with a group of characters—Julia, Mauro, David, and Betsy—concluding a meal and preparing to leave. Betsy, struggling with mobility, leans on David for support, remarking on his steadiness despite his drinking. Their farewell is tinged with a sense of transience, encapsulated by Betsy's comment: "If it only happened once, it didn't happen at all." The scene shifts to a contemplative observation of the courtyard, where the remnants of the evening—elongated shadows, bare tables, and distant kitchen noises—create an atmosphere of quiet dissolution. The narrative then transitions abruptly to a reflection on the death of the narrator's mother, whose passing is marked by a lack of conventional grief. The coffin's entrance is described as more shocking than the death itself, highlighting the dissonance between the physical finality of the body and the lingering, unresolved presence of the mother in the lives of her children.

The narrator explores the aftermath of the mother's death, noting a paradoxical sense of lightness and unease. The mother's life is portrayed as a performance of suffering and control, her body a site of defiance against societal norms. Her decline—marked by self-inflicted ailments, a wheelchair, and eventual cancer—becomes a metaphor for her rejection of reality. Even in death, she haunts the narrator's dreams as a grotesque, unseeing figure, embodying the unresolved tension between her constructed identity and the truth. Meanwhile, the story shifts to G, a filmmaker who conceals his identity to escape familial and societal expectations. His films, characterized by naturalism and detachment, baffle audiences accustomed to authoritative storytelling. G's artistic vision is rooted in his childhood as the eldest sibling, bearing the brunt of his parents' rigid conventions, which he later evades through secrecy and reinvention.

G’s journey unfolds as he abandons teaching, moves to the city, and navigates the intellectual circles of his brother, who openly challenges their conservative upbringing. G, however, remains silent, his anonymity a shield against the burden of identity. His novel, published under a pseudonym, explores the alienation of youth in a bourgeois town, mirroring his own struggle with authenticity. The failure of his subsequent stories—rejected for their moralistic tone—reflects his isolation from contemporary trends. His filmmaking attempts are similarly fraught; the practical demands of the medium clash with his desire for passive observation. Yet, his reviews gain notice for their lack of subjectivity, embodying his belief that true perception requires the eradication of the self. The narrator parallels G’s evasion of identity with their mother’s lifelong performance, both resisting the constraints of reality.



The chapter concludes with the narrator’s meditation on the mother’s legacy: a fractured sense of self and a distrust of love and language. Her stories—mythologized tales of romantic and artistic near-misses—serve as a form of control, rewriting history to suit her narrative. The children, trapped in her constructed reality, inherit her aversion to truth and freedom. Her death offers a tentative liberation, yet the gap she instilled in them remains. G’s trajectory mirrors this tension; his artistic invisibility grants him freedom but consigns him to obscurity. Both narratives converge on the theme of authorship—whether of one’s life or art—and the impossibility of true autonomy. The mother’s defiance of reality and G’s refusal to claim his work underscore the chapter’s central question: Can one exist without being seen? The answer, suggested through their parallel struggles, is fraught with ambiguity.