All Fours

Miranda July’s 2024 novel *All Fours* follows a 45-year-old semi-famous artist who disrupts her stable Los Angeles life with her husband and child by impulsively announcing a cross-country road trip. The journey becomes a catalyst for self-discovery as she grapples with midlife crises, sexual awakening, and perimenopause, culminating in an unexpected affair. Blending humor and poignancy, the novel explores themes of desire, identity, and the search for reinvention in middle age. July’s autofictional style and candid portrayal of female experience have drawn comparisons to a “perimenopause novel,” marking it as a distinctive entry in contemporary literature.

Chapter 1

The chapter opens with the narrator receiving a note from their neighbor, Brian, warning that someone may have been using a telephoto lens to photograph their home. The note’s apologetic tone—"Sorry to trouble you"—delights the narrator, who relishes the drama. The narrator reflects on their large, curtainless windows, through which they often observe their husband, Harris, and their child, Sam, with a sense of tender detachment. This moment underscores the narrator’s fascination with the gap between how things appear from a distance and how they feel up close.

Brian, identified as the "FBI neighbor," is known for conspicuously wearing his FBI vest, which becomes a source of mild amusement for the narrator and their family. Harris dismisses the note’s concern, brushing off the idea of a stranger photographing their home as unremarkable in the modern age. The narrator, however, feels unsettled and

abandoned when Harris doesn’t engage with their worry, highlighting the emotional distance in their marriage. Their relationship is described as cautious and formal, like two diplomats wary of each other, yet the narrator finds comfort in the idea that their patience might lead to a late-in-life honeymoon.

The narrator contrasts their marriage with those of their friends, particularly Cassie and Jordi, whose relationships seem either overly affectionate or oddly one-sided. These observations reveal the narrator’s preoccupation with understanding how other people navigate love and connection. They collect snippets of their friends’ lives—texts, emails, conversations—as if trying to grasp the elusive nature of human relationships. This quest for insight into others’ experiences reflects a deeper yearning to make sense of their own place in the world.

Ultimately, the narrator delays calling Brian, savoring the anticipation and the sense of being watched over. When they finally speak, Brian downplays the incident, suggesting the photographer might have simply admired their house. The narrator, disappointed, leans into false modesty, hinting at their public persona, only for Brian to remind them that surveillance is his job. The chapter closes with the narrator’s wry acknowledgment of their own self-importance, leaving the mystery of the photographer unresolved but the narrator’s curiosity undiminished.

Chapter 2

The chapter opens with the narrator reflecting on an unconventional decision to drive to New York instead of flying, prompted by a conversation at a party. Harris, the narrator's partner, introduces a theory dividing people into "Drivers" and "Parkers." Drivers, he explains, find joy in mundane activities and can endure long, uneventful tasks like cross-country drives, while Parkers thrive on challenging, applause-worthy tasks but often feel bored or disappointed otherwise. The narrator subtly reveals her identification as a Parker, hinting at underlying feelings of depression and disconnection from Harris's grounded demeanor.

Harris's theory sparks a lively debate among the party guests, with Sonja and her husband weighing in on their preferences. Sonja, initially resistant to being labeled a Driver, eventually embraces the idea, while Harris insists these roles are innate. The narrator observes Harris's unusual animation around Sonja, contrasting it with his typical reserved nature. This interaction highlights the narrator's sense of being an outsider, a theme reinforced by her tendency to mentally "step aside" when Harris connects with others, such as waitstaff or strangers.

The narrator shifts focus to her own behavior at the party, losing herself in dance with uninhibited, almost provocative movements. She becomes acutely aware of how others perceive her, from the amused host's father to Harris's likely disapproval. This moment underscores her internal conflict between self-expression and societal expectations, as well as her complicated relationship with Harris, who leans traditional despite their deep bond. A silent salute between them reveals a profound, unspoken loyalty that transcends fleeting emotions.

The chapter closes with the narrator retreating to the bathroom, contemplating the possibility of transforming from a Parker into a Driver—both metaphorically and literally. She imagines completing a cross-country drive, returning to Harris and their

child, Sam, with a sense of accomplishment. This fleeting fantasy hints at her desire for change and reconciliation, though the chapter leaves unresolved whether she will act on it. The narrative captures the tension between identity and relationships, blending introspection with vivid, relatable scenes.



Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, the protagonist and her friend Jordi share a candid conversation over milkshakes, revealing intimate details about their sex lives. The protagonist admits to using fantasies involving taboo scenarios, such as stepfather-stepdaughter dynamics, to maintain her marital sex life, which she approaches mechanically, like exercise. Jordi, in contrast, describes a more spontaneous and physically rooted approach with her partner, emphasizing raw, unfiltered intimacy. Their discussion highlights their differing attitudes toward sex—one cerebral and performative, the other instinctual and unrestrained.

The conversation takes a humorous yet revealing turn as they compare their experiences. The protagonist initiates sex weekly to preempt her husband’s expectations, while Jordi expresses envy at the frequency, lamenting her own less frequent encounters. The protagonist’s admission of relying on elaborate mental fantasies underscores her detachment during sex, whereas Jordi’s descriptions of sleepy, primal encounters with her partner emphasize a deeper physical connection. This contrast leaves the protagonist feeling inadequate, as if she’s "lost at life."

Jordi’s vivid portrayal of her sex life—messy, animalistic, and deeply connected—stuns the protagonist, who realizes her own experiences lack the same authenticity. The chapter’s tone shifts as the protagonist grapples with this revelation, feeling both envious and introspective. Their meeting ends with Jordi offering reassurance about the protagonist’s upcoming trip, suggesting that transformation isn’t obligatory, a comment that lingers in the protagonist’s mind.

The chapter closes with the protagonist returning home stealthily, mirroring her earlier sense of disconnection. The conversation with Jordi serves as a catalyst for self-reflection, exposing the protagonist’s dissatisfaction with her performative approach to intimacy. The contrast between their sexual dynamics underscores broader themes of

authenticity, desire, and the tension between societal expectations and personal fulfillment. The chapter leaves the protagonist questioning whether she’s overcomplicating her life and relationships.



Chapter 4

The chapter details the narrator's meticulous preparations for a cross-country road trip from California to New York, spanning six days each way. They outline a precise route, including stops in Las Vegas, Zion National Park, and Salina, Utah, with plans to stay at the Carlyle in New York. Practical concerns like cruise control, PowerBars for efficiency, and audiobooks for entertainment are weighed against anxieties about fatigue and safety. The narrator’s to-do list grows with items like car inspections and sun-protective clothing, reflecting both excitement and underlying stress about the journey.

A deeper emotional undercurrent emerges as the narrator grapples with the prospect of being away from their child, Sam, and partner, Harris, for over two weeks. They rationalize the separation by acknowledging Sam’s "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" nature but confess a fear of mutual forgetfulness—a theme reinforced by memories of their mother’s cognitive decline. This vulnerability contrasts with the practical logistics, revealing a tension between adventure and familial attachment. The narrator’s insomnia and reliance on Benadryl further underscore their emotional fragility beneath the trip’s structured surface.

The night before departure, a tender bath ritual with Sam highlights their bond. The child’s request for a dog upon the narrator’s return sparks a playful yet poignant exchange, revealing Sam’s perceptiveness and the narrator’s reluctance to make promises. Their conversation shifts to how the narrator differs from "other moms," with Sam teasingly critiquing their reserved praise. This moment blends humor and warmth, showcasing their unique dynamic while subtly addressing broader themes of parenting and identity.

The chapter closes with negotiations over trip souvenirs—Sam’s desire for toys clashes with the narrator’s preference for natural mementos like rocks or seedpods—a

metaphor for their contrasting perspectives. This mundane yet intimate disagreement encapsulates the chapter’s central conflict: balancing personal freedom with the responsibilities and emotional complexities of parenthood. The narrator’s journey, both literal and emotional, is framed by love, fear, and the inevitability of change.



Chapter 5

The chapter opens with the narrator embarking on a drive through familiar Los Angeles areas, initially feeling mundane but gradually becoming aware of the weight of solitary travel. They distract themselves with music and snacks, hesitating to start an audiobook too soon. The isolation prompts introspection, and an unexpected call from their father interrupts the monotony. Their father, using a loaner phone, launches into an eccentric monologue about his "new soul"—a metaphysical concept where his original essence has been replaced, leaving memories intact but devoid of emotional connection to his family. The narrator responds with detached amusement, reflecting their strained relationship.

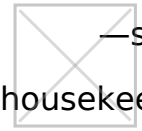
The father elaborates on his "walk-in" soul theory, explaining that these entities inhabit grown bodies to bypass childhood. He admits feeling nothing for his wife of fifty years or his daughter, though his behavior—always self-absorbed—hasn’t drastically changed. The narrator coldly acknowledges his claims, recalling how they once mirrored his anxieties but now maintain emotional distance. The conversation shifts to the "deathfield," the father’s term for a persistent state of depression and panic, which he endures with grim tenacity. He mentions meditating for hours daily, resigned to his existential turmoil. The narrator reflects on childhood moments shaped by his paranoia, like obsessively monitoring their mother’s flight for potential crashes.

During the call, the narrator notices their gas tank isn’t full and decides to refuel, using it as an excuse to end the conversation. At a Monrovia gas station, they overanalyze their tires and opt for a full-service check, striking up a awkward exchange with a bearded attendant about local restaurants. A young employee cleaning their windshield locks eyes with the narrator, creating a fleeting, surreal connection. The narrator oscillates between interpreting his expressions as meaningful and realizing he’s likely distracted by earbuds. The moment dissolves into ambiguity, leaving the

narrator momentarily disoriented before moving on.

The chapter closes with the narrator driving away, already forgetting the gas station encounter, yet the earlier interactions linger. The father’s bizarre soul theory and the stranger’s ambiguous gaze underscore themes of isolation and the elusive nature of human connection. The narrator’s journey—both physical and emotional—hints at a deeper search for meaning, punctuated by fleeting encounters and unresolved familial tensions. The prose balances wry humor with melancholy, capturing the protagonist’s detached yet observant perspective.

Chapter 6

The chapter opens with the protagonist lying motionless in a hotel bed, savoring the rare absence of responsibility. Freed from the daily demands of parenting—making meals,□□□□□□□□  —she embraces the weightlessness of solitude. Her reverie is interrupted by a housekeeper named Helen, who informs her she's overdue for checkout. Unfazed, the protagonist opts to pay for another day, declining housekeeping services. This scene underscores her deliberate withdrawal from routine and her reluctance to reengage with structure.

Later, she visits an antique mall, drawn to a luxurious salmon-colored bedspread from the 1920s. A negotiation with the older female seller sparks a surge of irrational hatred, which quickly shifts to grudging admiration. The protagonist's internal conflict reveals her insecurities about aging and self-worth. Despite initially lowballing the price, she pays the full $200, later reflecting on the seller's shrewdness and her own impulsive bargaining. The transaction becomes a metaphor for her broader struggles with desire and self-denial.

After purchasing the bedspread, she takes it to a dry cleaner, grounding her otherwise aimless day with a tangible commitment. The errand lends her a fleeting sense of purpose, though she muses on the fragility of her plans. Returning to the hotel, she unpacks, steaming her clothes and curating outfits that balance vintage and modern styles. Her meticulous attention to fashion reflects a deeper anxiety about being perceived as outdated or irrelevant, particularly by younger generations.

The chapter closes with her wandering Monrovia in a red shirtwaist dress, observing teenage girls with a mix of detachment and unease. Her self-consciousness about aging culminates in a performative act: pretending to be a foreigner to avoid judgment. This final gesture encapsulates her existential dissonance—caught between craving freedom and grappling with invisibility, between past desires and present

realities.



Chapter 7

The protagonist finds herself in a beautifully renovated motel room, yet she feels trapped in a state of emotional limbo. Despite the comfort of her surroundings, she struggles with a sense of displacement, neither at home nor fully present in her new location. She questions her purpose there, wondering if she should channel her energy into work, but feels uninspired and isolated. Her only sustenance is trail mix, and her communication with Harris, who expresses relief at her safe arrival, underscores her lingering uncertainty about the journey. The room’s beauty amplifies her inner turmoil, leaving her adrift in a fog of unresolved emotions.

Her solitude is interrupted by the sudden noise of a Memorial Day parade setting up outside her motel. The festive atmosphere contrasts sharply with her melancholic state, as she remains in bed, physically and emotionally drained. The disruption highlights her detachment from the world around her. The chapter then shifts to a poignant moment when Harris texts her on May 31st, Sam’s due date, a painful reminder of a shared loss. This brief exchange underscores the deep, unspoken grief that continues to bind them together, even as they navigate their separate struggles.

The narrative flashes back seven years to the traumatic birth of their baby, Sam. The protagonist recalls the urgency of the delivery, the emergency C-section, and the devastating realization that something was wrong. The clinical detachment of the medical staff contrasts with her visceral fear and desperation. She describes the surreal experience of seeing her tiny, pale baby on a tray, uncertain if it was alive, while the medical team worked frantically. The absence of clear answers and the rarity of the complication—fetal-maternal hemorrhage—leave her grasping for understanding, a need unmet by the dismissive nurse.

In the aftermath, the protagonist and Harris retreat into a private world of grief, their shared pain creating an unbreakable bond. They avoid sharing their ordeal with others,

preferring the sanctity of their mutual suffering. The chapter closes with her texting Harris in response to his message, a simple yet profound acknowledgment of their loss. Their silent solidarity and the weight of their unspoken grief linger, painting a haunting portrait of love, trauma, and the search for meaning in the face of inexplicable tragedy.



Chapter 8

The chapter opens with the narrator arriving early for a meeting, carefully dressed in a low-key but flattering outfit. She spots Davey waiting outside, looking freshly showered and dressed in a skater-style button-down shirt. Their encounter is interrupted by a young couple Davey knows, and the narrator feels awkward as they join the group. The woman in the couple, with long hair and a revealing outfit, seems to judge the narrator's attire, adding to her discomfort. The group heads inside, where the narrator observes the bar's clean, smoke-free environment, contrasting it with her memories of rowdier establishments.

Inside the bar, the narrator notes the absence of drunks, remarking that the patrons seem like coworkers unwinding after work. Davey teasingly questions how often she goes out, prompting her to reflect on her isolated life spent working in her garage for the past fifteen years. As they sit outside, she muses about Davey's physique, comparing it to classical art proportions, and feels a rare sense of relaxation. She tries to explain her creative process, describing it as a romance with life, where she captures its elusive essence through her work. The tequila and conversation make her appreciate the simplicity of socializing.

The tone shifts as the narrator playfully guesses Davey's secret passion, suggesting careers like chef or athlete. He reveals he's a hip-hop dancer, which initially amuses her, leading to a moment of tension when he assumes she finds him silly. She denies this, but the conversation takes a darker turn when Davey mentions her famous work, revealing he recognized her all along. The narrator realizes he's a fan who sought her out deliberately, shattering her illusion of a spontaneous connection.

The chapter concludes with the narrator grappling with the revelation that Davey is a stalker, not a chance acquaintance. He admits to tracking her movements from the gas station to the restaurant, leaving her feeling manipulated and vulnerable. Her

initial excitement about the encounter turns to unease as she processes the calculated nature of their interaction. The chapter ends on a note of disorientation, as the narrator confronts the unsettling reality of her fame and the boundaries it blurs in personal relationships.



Chapter 9

The chapter opens with the narrator waiting at a Hertz rental office, observing Davey interact with customers while feeling possessive and unsettled by his attentiveness to others. Her internal monologue reveals a tension between her professional stature and her current fixation on Davey, which overshadows her sense of self. A gray-haired woman seated beside her cryptically comments on her admiration for Davey's physique, leading to an awkward exchange. The narrator's discomfort escalates as the woman, later revealed to be Davey's mother Irene, continues to probe with unsettling familiarity, leaving the narrator flustered and defensive.

Irene's intrusive demeanor and intimate knowledge of the narrator's life—gleaned from Davey—create a sense of unease. Over minestrone soup at Sesame Grill, Irene divulges personal details about Davey, including his impending plans to have children with his partner Claire and his alleged dependence on her. The narrator is offended by Irene's portrayal of Davey as helpless, while Irene simultaneously reveals Davey's intense attraction to the narrator, framing it in spiritual terms like kundalini energy. The conversation takes a surreal turn as Irene boasts about her son's sexual education, further unsettling the narrator.

Irene's monologue becomes increasingly inappropriate as she recounts how she arranged for her friend Audra to introduce Davey to sex as a teenager, framing it as a responsible maternal act. The narrator's physical discomfort—hunching over the table—mirrors her emotional distress as Irene overshares about Davey's past. The chapter highlights the narrator's vulnerability and the invasive nature of Irene's probing, which blurs boundaries between private and public, past and present. The dynamic underscores the narrator's conflicted feelings for Davey, caught between attraction and the discomfort of his mother's revelations.

The chapter concludes with the narrator trapped in the conversation, unable to escape Irene’s relentless disclosures. Irene’s lack of filter and the narrator’s passive resistance create a darkly comedic tension, emphasizing the absurdity of the situation. The encounter leaves the narrator questioning how much Davey has shared about their relationship and what his mother’s motives might be. The chapter masterfully captures the awkwardness, intrusion, and underlying power struggle in this unexpected meeting, leaving the narrator—and reader—wondering what comes next.



Chapter 10

The chapter opens with the narrator traveling from Pennsylvania to Indiana, reflecting on her journey while anticipating a day with Davey, her lover. They drive into the hills, a secluded spot they hadn’t visited since before an earlier encounter referred to as "the Buccaneer." The setting is idyllic—a sunlit field dotted with tiny flowers—but the ground is uncomfortably prickly, prompting Davey to fetch makeshift bedding. As he returns, the narrator stretches toward the sky, and they share a moment of silent observation, struck by the novelty of seeing each other from a distance. The scene is intimate, charged with unspoken tension and the hum of bees in the warm, green-smelling air.

Lying side by side on a patchwork of jackets and towels, Davey breaks the silence by bringing up a past event involving Claire, his partner. He reveals that Claire had documented the narrator’s actions in a room, interpreting them as a gesture of care toward him and Claire. The narrator is surprised by this perspective, as her actions had felt impulsive at the time. Davey’s admiration for her generosity—particularly a financial contribution—leads him to call her "a good person," a label she finds absurd yet momentarily comforting. Their conversation dances around unspoken feelings, with Davey hinting at the narrator’s intentions while she deflects with humor and curiosity.

The mood shifts when Davey discloses that he and Claire are saving for a house and a baby, news that unsettles the narrator. She reacts with forced congratulations, masking her jealousy and sense of displacement. Davey’s life, anchored by tangible plans and commitments, contrasts sharply with her own vague, transient existence. The narrator’s internal monologue reveals her bitterness, imagining Claire’s future pregnancy as uncomplicated, unlike her own traumatic experience. Overwhelmed, she abruptly stands to leave, her emotions spiraling as Davey confesses his strong feelings

for her but acknowledges the boundaries he must maintain for Claire’s sake.

In a climactic moment, the narrator impulsively declares her love for Davey, breaking the unspoken rules of their affair. The words hang heavily between them, transforming their dynamic from playful to painfully real. Davey confronts her with the impossibility of their situation, asking if she would leave her husband for him. Her stunned silence serves as answer enough, highlighting the futility of their connection. The chapter ends with a poignant realization: their relationship exists in a liminal space, unable to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality.

Chapter 11

The chapter opens with an intimate conversation between the narrator and Davey, who shares a vivid sex dream about Aaron Bannister, a kind-hearted boy from his high school. Davey describes the dream with surprising openness, including explicit details, which contrasts with the narrator’s past experiences with older men who avoided admitting to such fantasies. The narrator reflects on generational differences, noting how Davey’s comfort with discussing gay eroticism highlights a cultural shift. Their playful dynamic continues as they search for Aaron online, with Davey expressing regret for not exploring a relationship with him in high school, suggesting a fluidity in his sexuality that fascinates the narrator.

As their emotional connection deepens, the narrator becomes overwhelmed with emotion, crying inexplicably when Davey comments on a photo of her first girlfriend. This moment underscores the complexity of their bond, blending nostalgia, vulnerability, and unspoken desires. The tension between them grows, with both acknowledging their mutual attraction but hesitating to act on it. Davey’s statement, “If I kissed you I’d have to fuck you,” reveals the intensity of their chemistry, yet they resist crossing that line, leaving their relationship in a tantalizing limbo.

The chapter takes a surreal turn when the narrator impulsively catches Davey’s urine in her hand during a bathroom visit. This act, both transgressive and intimate, shocks Davey but also arouses him, leading to a tender moment where he carefully washes her hand. Their conversation afterward explores the boundaries of their desires, with Davey expressing curiosity about reciprocating the experience. The narrator’s mixed feelings—horror, fascination, and a sense of connection—highlight the unpredictability of their interactions and the depth of their emotional and physical exploration.

The chapter concludes with another intimate moment as the narrator prepares to change her tampon, and Davey’s earnest but awkward attempt to assist breaks the

spell between them. His genuine yet clumsy effort to participate in her private routine contrasts with their earlier fluidity, creating a moment of tension and vulnerability. This scene encapsulates the chapter’s themes of desire, generational differences, and the messy, unpredictable nature of human connection, leaving their relationship poised between intimacy and restraint.



Chapter 12

The chapter opens with the protagonist driving home after an extended absence, consumed by anxiety about reintegrating into her domestic life. She obsesses over trivial details like the car's cleanliness and fabricates a neck injury to explain her strained demeanor. Her internal monologue reveals she’s been hiding a secret affair with a Hertz employee instead of traveling to New York as claimed. The familiarity of her neighborhood feels surreal, and a brief interaction with her neighbor Ken highlights her emotional disconnection. She fantasizes about confessing her turmoil to him, imagining a temporary refuge in his home, but ultimately returns to her own driveway, dreading the impending reunion with her family.

Upon entering her house, she notices subtle changes—new objects, a slight mess—that underscore her prolonged absence. She busies herself with unpacking, hoping to appear occupied when her family arrives. When they return, she hides in the basement, paralyzed by guilt and the impossibility of bridging her secret life with her domestic reality. The sounds of her child, Sam, and husband, Harris, amplify her emotional turmoil. She feels like a fragmented soul, torn between two irreconcilable worlds, unable to merge her identities. At the last moment, she emerges, feigning normalcy, and is swept into a tearful reunion, masking her inner chaos with exaggerated affection.

The next morning, the protagonist wakes up overwhelmed by despair, contrasting the joy of her affair with the monotony of her daily life. The mundane task of preparing Sam’s lunch becomes a Herculean effort, and she breaks down sobbing mid-task. Her usual coping mechanism—enduring hardship for future relief—fails her, leaving her trapped in the present with no escape. The chapter captures her profound dislocation, as she mechanically performs maternal duties while emotionally unraveling, unable to reconcile her desires with her responsibilities.

The chapter poignantly explores themes of duality, guilt, and the struggle to maintain appearances. The protagonist’s internal conflict is mirrored in her physical actions, from hiding in the basement to forcing herself through routines. Her fleeting moments of connection with her family are overshadowed by her secret, highlighting the isolating nature of deception. The narrative style, blending stream-of-consciousness with vivid imagery, immerses the reader in her psychological turmoil, making her emotional landscape as tangible as the domestic setting she both cherishes and resents.



Chapter 13

The chapter delves into the protagonist's emotional turmoil and strained relationship with her partner, Harris. She struggles to conceal her inner chaos, particularly her unresolved feelings for someone named Davey, while maintaining a facade of normalcy. Harris senses her distress, mistaking it for post-travel fatigue, but the protagonist deflects with a lie about menopause to avoid confrontation. This deception temporarily garners sympathy, creating a fragile moment of connection, though the underlying tension remains unresolved. The protagonist's internal conflict is palpable as she oscillates between guilt and relief, using distractions like cleaning and a rubber band habit to cope.

A pivotal scene unfolds during a walk to the dog park, where the protagonist attempts to appear wholesome for their child, Sam. She forces herself to engage with dogs and suppress thoughts of Davey, snapping the rubber band as a physical reminder to stay present. The outing takes an ironic turn when Sam discovers a chair labeled "Call me"—the same chair the protagonist's lover used to climb into her window. Harris's oblivious suggestion to take the chair home adds dark humor, highlighting the protagonist's fear of exposure. Her internal panic contrasts sharply with Harris's innocent enthusiasm, underscoring the fragility of her lies.

The chapter explores themes of deception and emotional labor, as the protagonist navigates her dual reality. Her lies—first about menopause, then about the chair—reveal her desperation to maintain control while avoiding vulnerability. Harris's attempts to understand and support her are met with deflection, illustrating the growing disconnect in their relationship. The protagonist's coping mechanisms, from compulsive cleaning to self-harm via the rubber band, reflect her escalating distress. Yet, these actions also provide a temporary sense of order amid her emotional chaos.

In the final moments, the protagonist's routine of alternating the rubber band between wrists symbolizes her futile pursuit of balance. Her obsessive cleaning and masturbation serve as distractions from her unresolved grief and guilt. The chapter ends on a note of uneasy stasis, with the protagonist clinging to rituals that neither heal nor conceal her pain. The narrative captures the dissonance between outward appearances and inner turmoil, leaving readers questioning how long her carefully constructed facade can hold.



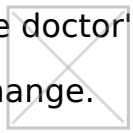
Chapter 14

The chapter opens with the narrator reflecting on mundane appointments like dental visits and oil changes, contrasting them with her current state of preoccupation with sexual desire. In a gynecologist's waiting room, she observes two other women: a pregnant woman absorbed in her magazine and an elderly woman scrolling on her phone. The narrator muses on the stark differences in their life stages, imagining the older woman's body with a mix of curiosity and pity, while envying the pregnant woman's sense of purpose and excitement. The shared space feels incongruous, prompting her to wish for a symbolic separation, like the fish tank divider at a pediatrician's office, to acknowledge their irreconcilable experiences.

During her gynecological exam, the narrator interacts with Dr. Mendoza, a holistic practitioner who remembers her traumatic birth experience. The doctor asks about her well-being, including flashbacks to the birth of her son, Davey, who was initially stillborn but survived. The narrator downplays her lingering trauma, surprised by the doctor's casual dismissal. The conversation shifts to her menstrual cycle, with the narrator hinting at unusual symptoms but avoiding mention of her heightened arousal, which she initially attributes to a non-existent polyp. The exam reveals no physical abnormalities, leaving her to confront her own desires without external justification.

The narrator reflects on the 17 days following Davey's birth, when she simultaneously cared for his living form in the NICU and mourned the "other" baby she felt had died. She describes the emotional complexity of loving both versions, though over time, tending to the memory of the lost baby began to feel performative. Flashbacks to the traumatic birth, while painful, provide a strange comfort, reaffirming her connection to that primal experience. The narrator compares these episodes to menstrual cramps—unwelcome yet grounding in their visceral inevitability.

The chapter closes with Dr. Mendoza probing perimenopausal symptoms, which the narrator dismisses despite admitting to insomnia and irregular bleeding. Her vague, uncertain answers highlight her disconnection from her own body and identity. The exam ends without resolution, leaving the narrator to grapple with the realization that her desires and anxieties are entirely her own, much like Dumbo's feather—a placebo she no longer needs. The rubber band on her wrist, a subtle marker of her emotional state, catches the doctor's eye, hinting at unresolved tensions beneath the surface of their clinical exchange.



Chapter 15

The chapter opens with the narrator's vivid fantasy of recording a seductive dance for Davey, intending to reveal more of herself than he’s seen before. She imagines the dance as a direct, uncomplicated invitation, bypassing moral hesitations. The act is framed as urgent, driven by a darkly humorous acknowledgment of her mortality—she wants to experience sex with him before facing the mundane reality of living for decades afterward. This sets the tone for her desperate, almost obsessive pursuit of Davey, blending desire with a sense of impending doom.

Upon recording herself, the narrator is shocked to discover her body has changed, her butt no longer matching the idealized image in her mind. This realization sparks a crisis, forcing her to confront her physical unpreparedness. She reflects on her historically sedentary lifestyle, mocking her own weakness but also questioning the value of investing time in a "temporary body." However, faced with a hormonal timeline suggesting she has only months before a metaphorical "cliff’s edge," she commits to a grueling three-month fitness regimen. The stakes are clear: success means sex with Davey; failure means lifelong regret.

The narrator joins a local gym, where trainers Scarlett and Brett guide her through punishing workouts. She endures the repetitive, exhausting process, fueled by alternating fantasies of Davey—sometimes as a lover, sometimes as someone she must save or even punish. The physical labor becomes a mental battleground, oscillating between desire, rage, and eventual numbness. The gym’s ethos of "failure as success" mirrors her emotional journey, where progress is measured in perpetual struggle rather than resolution. By the end of each session, she’s physically drained but euphoric, suggesting a temporary escape from her fixation.

In a conversation with Jordi, the narrator’s motivations are challenged. Jordi questions what happens after achieving her goal, comparing her pursuit to Wile E. Coyote’s futile

chase of the Road Runner. The metaphor hints that Davey might be an unattainable illusion, and catching him could leave her without purpose. The narrator dismisses this, but the exchange underscores the chapter’s central tension: whether her obsession is about Davey or the act of chasing itself. The chapter closes with her clinging to the fantasy, even as the cracks in its logic begin to show.



Chapter 16

The chapter opens with the narrator grappling with Harris's decision to work with Caro and the London Symphony Orchestra, leaving her alone with their child, Sam. She feels a mix of guilt and self-loathing, criticizing her own "disgusting, vain, profoundly selfish" inner life. While she manages to maintain a structured routine with Sam, she struggles to create a genuine family atmosphere, feeling it's all an act. Harris's absence highlights her emotional turmoil, though Sam's small encouragements during her workouts bring fleeting moments of warmth.

A conversation with Jordi delves into the narrator's performative identity, particularly how she presents a stable facade to Sam and Harris despite her inner chaos. Jordi challenges her to consider whether this "flattening" of herself is necessary, suggesting that erratic behavior doesn't equate to irresponsibility. Their discussion touches on the cyclical nature of women's lives versus men's hormonal constancy, symbolized by the phrase "Every day is Tuesday"—a metaphor for living by one's biological rhythms rather than societal norms.

When Harris returns, his presence disrupts the narrator's rigid routines but also injects energy into the household. She observes his seamless reintegration, though she questions whether he, too, is performing. Their reunion is awkward, with the narrator overcompensating with chatter before retreating to avoid further embarrassment. Their parallel jet lag-induced insomnia briefly connects them, but once Harris adjusts, she's left alone again with her restless thoughts.

The chapter closes with the narrator consulting Dr. Mendoza about hormone replacement therapy, motivated by vanity but also aware of its deeper health benefits. Her desire to "be dewy, almost reborn" for an upcoming event underscores her ongoing struggle with aging and self-image. The doctor's reassurance that bioidentical hormones protect both external and internal health offers a glimmer of hope, tying

back to the chapter's themes of transformation and the tension between appearance and reality.



Chapter 17

The chapter opens with the protagonist reflecting on her physical progress during a workout session with her trainer, Brett, and fellow gym-goer, Scarlett. She notes her increased strength, from lifting heavier weights to carrying groceries with ease, and observes subtle changes in her body. A moment of self-awareness strikes as she stands naked before a mirror with her partner, Sam, who remarks that she appears "taller," symbolizing her growing confidence and transformation.

Later, the protagonist plans a return trip to the Excelsior hotel, this time informing her husband, Harris, about her stay. Their conversation reveals the strained yet permissive dynamic in their relationship, as Harris, though puzzled, ultimately supports her decision. The protagonist rationalizes her actions as a temporary indulgence that might ultimately benefit their marriage, hinting at an underlying affair or personal exploration.

At the Excelsior, the hotel manager, Skip, surprises her by offering the room for free indefinitely, citing its popularity and unique design. This gesture unsettles her, exposing her discomfort with unearned privileges and moral ambiguity. Skip’s generosity contrasts with her guilt, as she grapples with the idea of recurring visits, which she associates with her secretive plans.

The chapter concludes with Skip humorously booking her for every Wednesday indefinitely, reinforcing the protagonist’s dual sense of excitement and unease. The recurring reservation symbolizes her commitment to the affair or personal project, blurring the lines between freedom and recklessness. The exchange underscores her internal conflict as she navigates desire, guilt, and the consequences of her choices.

Chapter 18

The chapter opens with the protagonist returning home to find her family unchanged, except for a pizza box in the fridge. Her child, Sam, excitedly shares details of a sleepover, while her husband, Harris, inquires about her day. The protagonist reflects on her recent sexual encounter, framing it as a necessary escape rather than a romantic pursuit. She feels no guilt, instead embracing the experience as a lifeline. The domestic scene contrasts sharply with her internal turmoil, hinting at the growing disconnect between her outward life and inner desires.

Tensions rise when Harris confronts her with a video of her dancing provocatively in a plaid shirt and underwear. He questions the appropriateness of her behavior, framing it as disrespectful to their marriage. The protagonist, however, defends her actions, asserting her autonomy and rejecting societal expectations. The argument escalates as she articulates her frustration with the constraints of her role as a wife and mother, lamenting the impending decline of her libido and the unfairness of gendered aging. Her outburst reveals a deep-seated rage against the systemic oppression she feels.

Harris responds with hurt and anger, accusing her of wasting the best years of his life. His words trigger a moment of clarity for the protagonist, who suddenly regrets her harshness and fears losing their long-standing bond. She attempts to apologize, but the damage is done. The chapter ends with Harris retreating to his bedroom, leaving the protagonist in a state of panic and uncertainty. This confrontation marks a turning point, forcing her to confront the consequences of her rebellion.

The chapter captures the protagonist’s struggle to reconcile her newfound freedom with the responsibilities of her marriage and motherhood. It explores themes of autonomy, desire, and societal expectations, culminating in a painful clash between personal fulfillment and relational commitment. The raw emotional exchange underscores the complexity of human relationships and the difficulty of balancing

individual identity with shared lives. The unresolved tension leaves the reader anticipating the next steps in the protagonist’s journey.



Chapter 19

The chapter opens with a strained domestic scene between the narrator and her husband, Harris, as they go through the motions of their routine with cold politeness. Their once-familiar interactions now feel hollow, and Harris announces he will spend one night a week in his office, mirroring the narrator's own behavior. The tension between them is palpable, particularly when Harris notices her new belt, hinting at unspoken conflicts. Their conversation about scheduling feels more like a negotiation between divorced parents than a married couple, underscoring the emotional distance that has grown between them.

The narrator confides in her friend Jordi, speculating that Harris might be having an affair with a younger woman, Caro. Though Jordi dismisses the idea as absurd, the narrator clings to it as a way to rationalize Harris's detachment. Their dialogue reveals the narrator's internal turmoil, oscillating between hope and despair. She compares their situation to a plane crash, with the aftermath still unfolding, while Jordi offers reassurance, quoting a Jungian self-help book about temporary reactions. The exchange highlights the narrator's struggle to reconcile her fears with the possibility of reconciliation.

On the night Harris spends away, the narrator throws herself into parenting, trying to distract both herself and her child, Sam, from the growing tension at home. Their playful attempts to disrupt routine are overshadowed by the eerie howls of coyotes, mirroring the narrator's unease. She briefly entertains the idea of hiring a detective to spy on Harris but dismisses it. When Harris returns, she scrutinizes him for signs of infidelity but finds none, leaving her uncertain about the true state of their relationship.

By midweek, the narrator realizes their separate nights may be the first steps toward divorce, a possibility that shocks her despite the mounting evidence. She reflects on

their shared history, particularly the challenges of parenthood, and mourns the potential loss of their intertwined lives. In a moment of emotional regression, she searches for an old flame, Davey, online, only to be confronted with jealousy over his new partner. The chapter ends with her picking up Sam from school, clinging to the normalcy of motherhood as a lifeline amidst her unraveling marriage.



Chapter 20

The chapter opens with the narrator reflecting on a two-week stalemate in her marriage after a devastating argument. Unlike past fights, this rift feels irreparable, as she likely meant the hurtful things she said. Her husband, Harris, avoids eye contact, and their tense environment worries her for their child's well-being. She feels trapped between the suffocating familiarity of her marriage and the daunting prospect of starting over as a divorced mother. The narrator's internal conflict is palpable as she grapples with the urgency to resolve the situation before it further impacts their family.

Seeking guidance, the narrator turns to her friend Jordi, who likens relationship struggles to the collaborative nature of open-source software. Intrigued, the narrator researches the concept and wonders if applying its principles—like community support and flexibility—could help her marital crisis. Inspired, she organizes a gathering of married friends at a hotel, hoping to pool their experiences and insights. The setup hints at her desperation for external perspectives to navigate her personal impasse, blending humor with her earnest quest for solutions.

The narrator's conversations with her friends reveal contrasting viewpoints. Cassie, a pragmatic fifty-three-year-old, advises her to "ride it out," warning against impulsive decisions that could lead to regret. She quotes Simone de Beauvoir to justify enduring unfulfilled desires for long-term stability. The narrator, however, struggles with the idea of suppressing her needs, typing Cassie's advice into her notes with skepticism. This interaction underscores the generational and ideological divides in how women approach marital dissatisfaction, leaving the narrator torn between conformity and self-actualization.

Later, the narrator probes Nazanin, who confesses to unfulfilled desires but dismisses them as "not enough to risk anything for." This candid exchange surprises the

narrator, who begins to quantify her own hidden longings in fractions, questioning their significance. The chapter ends with Isra suggesting the narrator embrace her “divine feminine” instincts, hinting at a potential path forward. Through these dialogues, the chapter explores themes of compromise, desire, and the search for authenticity within the constraints of marriage, leaving the narrator’s ultimate decision unresolved but deeply introspective.



Chapter 21

The chapter opens with the narrator caring for their child while Harris announces a brunch to celebrate Caro's new single. The narrator questions Harris's priorities, wondering if this event hints at his affair with Caro or is merely a public display. Their strained relationship is evident as Harris expresses frustration, wishing for a partner who genuinely wants to be present. The narrator reflects on their own emotional distance, imagining a more domestic, content version of herself that Harris might prefer, while observing their child's regression into bed-wetting, a sign of underlying stress in the household.

Later, during Harris's overnight absence, the narrator angrily masturbates to thoughts of him with Caro, then reaches out to Jordi for support. Jordi shares her own experience of sleeping in her studio, framing it as a liberating trend. Their conversation shifts to the narrator's crumbling marriage, with Jordi suggesting a "special place" for reconciliation. The narrator mentions their shared saluting ritual, a gesture of trust, but admits they lack deeper emotional connection. The chapter highlights the narrator's growing isolation and the absurdity of their attempts to rationalize Harris's behavior, such as his absence from Parent Night due to work with a "cellist from Japan."

The narrative then transitions to a poignant moment at Parent Night, where the narrator comforts their child, Sam, who dislikes their own artwork. The narrator texts the drawing to their father, an amateur geologist, sparking an unexpected conversation about the narrator's mother. The father reveals that the mother had temporarily left during her menopause, a detail the narrator had forgotten or repressed. This revelation adds another layer to the narrator's sense of instability, drawing parallels between their mother's past actions and their own current marital struggles.

The chapter closes with the narrator recalling their mother's brief independence in a small studio, a memory overshadowed by her eventual return due to health concerns. This reflection on familial patterns of upheaval and reconciliation mirrors the narrator's own wavering between wanting to salvage their marriage and desiring escape. The chapter underscores themes of emotional disconnection, the search for identity outside relationships, and the cyclical nature of personal and generational trauma.



Chapter 22

The chapter opens with a conversation between the narrator and Tim Yoon, who mentions his daughter's recent wedding. The narrator reveals they no longer need help with license plates, having solved the mystery of a telephotographer and a real estate card. The discussion shifts to Brian, a former neighbor who connected them, and the shocking revelation that Brian has died from kidney failure—not in the line of duty as assumed. This news adds a layer of melancholy, especially as the narrator reflects on Brian selling his truck while terminally ill. The exchange underscores the unpredictability of life and the fragility of assumptions.

Later, the narrator shares the discoveries with Harris, who responds with detached sympathy. Their conversation briefly touches on the real estate card's pricing and the eerie photo of the narrator taken by the telephotographer. Harris's terse reaction and sudden departure create tension, leaving the narrator confused. The dynamic between them is strained, with Harris's cryptic behavior hinting at unresolved issues. The narrator's decision to stand half-naked in the living room, almost defiantly, adds to the charged atmosphere, culminating in Harris's return and a shift toward an unsettling role-play scenario.

The interaction escalates as Harris assumes the persona of the telephotographer, showing the narrator photos he took of her through the window. The narrator, both aroused and uneasy, engages in the fantasy, though Harris's anger simmers beneath the surface. The role-play blurs lines between reality and imagination, with the narrator struggling to maintain the illusion while confronting Harris's palpable resentment. The scene is fraught with tension, as the narrator grapples with the dissonance between her desires and the underlying hostility in their relationship.

The chapter concludes with a raw and intense sexual encounter, where the narrator attempts to embody the "good-time girl" persona Harris seems to demand. The

physical act becomes a battleground of emotions, mixing pleasure with pain and submission with defiance. The narrator's internal monologue reveals her desperation to reconcile fantasy with reality, culminating in a moment of alchemical transformation—where body and mind merge into something new. The chapter ends on a note of unresolved tension, leaving the narrator and Harris's relationship in a precarious and ambiguous state.



Chapter 23

The chapter opens with the protagonist accompanying her friend Jordi to buy cigarettes after a shocking revelation. Jordi is incredulous about the protagonist's new arrangement with her husband, Harris, where each is allowed one night of freedom per week without ending their marriage. The protagonist explains she first confessed her desires to a telephotographer, which Jordi calls a "Third Thing"—a Quaker concept allowing indirect communication of difficult truths. The protagonist grapples with the surreal nature of this new freedom, questioning whether their marital structure can adapt or if it’s destined to unravel like childhood myths.

As the protagonist and Jordi discuss the implications of the arrangement, Jordi probes her about potential romantic interests, leading to a humorous yet revealing moment when the protagonist’s gaze lands on a card for an artist named Lore Estes. The conversation shifts to Harris’s potential dating life, with the protagonist speculating he might seek traditional relationships. She reflects on whether their marital crisis could have been avoided with a shared future project or if her artistic risks delayed an inevitable reckoning. The tone is introspective, blending humor with existential uncertainty.

The narrative jumps forward two months, revealing the couple’s cautious navigation of their new dynamic. The protagonist cherishes the daily thrill of freedom, but the fragility of their experiment is tested when Harris admits to a dinner date with another woman. Though shaken, she tries to rationalize the discomfort as the price of their agreement. The tension peaks when Harris reveals they became intimate, leaving the protagonist visibly rattled yet determined to avoid hypocrisy. Their interaction is charged with unspoken emotions, likened to two people suspended midair without support.

The chapter closes with Harris announcing the woman is now his girlfriend, a label that stings the protagonist. She mourns the loss of her own role as his girlfriend-turned-wife, cycling through anger, jealousy, and reluctant acceptance. The abrupt ending hints at the unresolved tension between their desire for freedom and the emotional fallout of redefining their relationship. The chapter masterfully captures the messy, raw emotions of love, autonomy, and the fear of change.



Chapter 24

The chapter follows the protagonist and Jordi as they attend a gallery opening in North Hollywood, hoping to see artist Lore Estes, who doesn’t show up. Instead, they encounter Kris, Lore’s ex-girlfriend and muse, whose artwork resembles Lore’s. A subtle, unspoken tension develops between the protagonist and Kris, marked by fleeting eye contact and mutual curiosity. Jordi encourages the protagonist to seize the moment, leading her to message Kris and ask her out. The bold move pays off when Kris responds affirmatively, sparking excitement and anticipation.

In preparation for the date, the protagonist meticulously plans every detail, from selecting the right cannabis strains to enhance intimacy to practicing seductive gestures like slowly unsnapping a skirt. She approaches the encounter with the same intensity as past significant life events, reflecting her desire to make a strong impression. Despite her thorough preparations, she feels an eerie calm just before Kris arrives, as if all her nerves have dissipated, leaving her emotionally detached.

The date begins awkwardly, with stilted conversation and uncertainty about mutual attraction. For hours, neither makes a move, leaving the protagonist questioning whether Kris sees this as a romantic encounter. Just as she resigns herself to disappointment, Kris admits her nervousness and breaks the tension by inviting physical closeness. This moment marks a turning point, as the protagonist shifts from performative seduction to genuine, exploratory intimacy.

As they finally connect physically, Kris declares her intention to “serve” the protagonist, creating a dynamic where the protagonist feels empowered to simply exist without pressure. She abandons her usual reliance on fantasy and performance, instead focusing on the raw sensation of touch and the novelty of their kisses. The experience feels revelatory, prompting her to reflect on her own past relationships and the universality of desire. The chapter captures the vulnerability and exhilaration of a

first encounter that defies expectations.



Chapter 25

The chapter opens with the narrator grappling with rumors about her marriage to Harris, as word spreads about their unconventional relationship dynamics. While she resents the assumption that they must be divorcing, she argues to her friend Jordi that marriage should be fluid, like parent-child relationships, rather than a rigid binary. Jordi, whose partnership with Mel remains her primary focus, gently reminds the narrator that her perspective may isolate her as a minority viewpoint. This exchange highlights the narrator's struggle to reconcile societal expectations with her personal beliefs about relationships.

During a visit to Jordi's art exhibition, the narrator observes how the gallery space fails to accommodate Jordi's large-scale sculptures, prompting Jordi to announce her decision to quit her advertising job. Their conversation shifts to hormonal changes and perimenopause, as they search online for a graph depicting hormonal decline—a metaphor for the narrator's evolving self-perception. The narrator reflects on how her preoccupation with hormonal shifts has faded, replaced by a detached curiosity, suggesting her personal growth has altered her relationship with her body.

A mundane grocery trip takes a surreal turn when the sounds of the store trigger a vivid flashback to the narrator's traumatic experience in the NICU with her newborn, Sam. The sudden sensory memory overwhelms her, and Jordi comforts her afterward. This episode underscores the lingering psychological impact of past trauma, which resurfaces unpredictably in daily life. The narrator's attempt to reconnect with an online support group for mothers who shared similar experiences fails when she discovers the forum has vanished, leaving her feeling untethered and isolated.

The chapter closes with the narrator's quiet resignation to these losses—both the tangible loss of her support community and the intangible erosion of certain fears and fixations. Her flashback and the vanished online space emphasize the impermanence

of comfort and the importance of cherishing fleeting connections. Meanwhile, her evolving views on marriage and hormones reflect a broader theme of personal transformation, as she navigates midlife changes with both resilience and vulnerability.



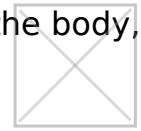
Chapter 26

The chapter opens with a breakfast conversation where Sam mentions a gymnastics classmate sharing the name of Papa’s best friend, prompting the narrator to realize it’s time to explain their unconventional family structure to their child. The couple meticulously prepares a script to navigate this delicate conversation, aiming to balance honesty with reassurance. Their dialogue reveals underlying anxieties about phrasing and the potential long-term implications of their words, reflecting both their care and the complexity of redefining familial relationships post-romance. The scene underscores the tension between planning for emotional clarity and the unpredictability of such vulnerable moments.

During the preparation, the couple grapples with existential questions about their future, including the possibility of divorce. The narrator reflects on how the concept of divorce has shifted from feeling emotionally charged to a mundane administrative process. Their collaborative effort to memorize and refine the script highlights their shared commitment to transparency while exposing their fears of failure. The mundane yet poignant details—like using a Popsicle as a cue—add levity to the weighty emotional labor of renegotiating family dynamics in a way their child can understand.

A parallel narrative follows the narrator’s visit to Dr. Mendoza, where she confronts anxieties about perimenopause and aging. The doctor reframes “freaking out” as a natural part of transitions, comparing it to the trauma of birth that prepares a baby for life. This metaphor resonates with the narrator, who begins to view her emotional turmoil as a necessary step toward a new phase. The clinical setting contrasts with the intimacy of the family conversation, yet both scenarios explore themes of change, acceptance, and the search for stability amid upheaval.

The chapter concludes with the narrator seeking positive perspectives on menopause by texting older women. Their responses—ranging from physical relief to newfound freedom and self-discovery—challenge her earlier fears. The rapid, varied replies paint a nuanced picture of post-reproductive life, emphasizing empowerment rather than decline. This collective wisdom, juxtaposed with the earlier familial and medical anxieties, weaves together the chapter’s central theme: transformation, whether in relationships or the body, demands vulnerability but can lead to unexpected liberation.



Chapter 27

The chapter opens with the narrator flying to Oakland to visit Kris, reminiscing about a playful game they used to play with their toddler, Sam. This memory sparks an idea: could they recreate a similar dynamic with Kris, using role-play to explore emotional vulnerability? The narrator imagines a scenario where Kris confesses to a fictional affair, allowing them to enact a dramatic reconciliation. This fantasy highlights the narrator's desire for intense emotional connection and their confidence in Kris's willingness to engage in such games.

Upon arrival, the narrator notices Kris's unusual mood, marked by detachment and avoidance. Their usual rituals, like grocery shopping, feel strained, and Kris's indifference to treats or eye contact signals deeper unrest. The tension escalates when Kris admits feeling hopeless about their compatibility, citing a trivial incident involving lipstick as emblematic of larger issues. The narrator is baffled, dismissing the concern as irrational, but Kris's silence and avoidance suggest a more serious rift.

The situation reaches a breaking point when Kris suggests taking time apart, leaving the narrator stunned and desperate. In a dramatic gesture, the narrator removes a symbolic ring and storms out, hoping Kris will chase after them. When this doesn’t happen, they return to Kris's cottage, only to be met with cold indifference. Kris's showered and changed appearance, along with her readiness to go out, underscores the finality of the moment, leaving the narrator reeling.

The next morning, the narrator attempts to reconcile, texting Kris with apologies and a request to reunite. Kris agrees but warns she may not be able to talk, which the narrator interprets as a positive sign. However, Kris's subsequent text—revealing she had sex with Elsa, the very role-play character the narrator had imagined—shatters any hope of reconciliation. The chapter ends with the narrator in shock, the reality of the breakup sinking in amidst the cruel irony of their earlier fantasy.

Chapter 28

The narrator attends a potluck with Jordi, feeling emotionally fragile and socially adrift. After Jordi leaves to move her car, the narrator is approached by Tara, a former assistant to the elusive Arkanda, who reveals a surprising connection: Arkanda had reached out due to their shared experience with Fetal-maternal Hemorrhage (FMH). Tara explains that Arkanda's nanny, Jess, facilitated this connection, leaving the narrator stunned by the revelation and the unexpected personal link to the celebrity. This encounter shifts the narrator's focus from their recent breakup to the looming mystery of Arkanda's intentions.

With Tara and Liza's help, a meeting with Arkanda is arranged, though the narrator remains wary of another cancellation. The choice of location—a discreet motel in Monrovia—becomes a point of negotiation, as the narrator insists on its suitability despite Arkanda's team's concerns about privacy. The narrator's emotional state is palpable as they oscillate between vulnerability and determination, even considering a gift basket as a peace offering. Meanwhile, Jordi's obliviousness to the narrator's turmoil is highlighted by her focus on her latest sculpture, a headless woman on all fours, which she describes as a symbol of stability.

The chapter delves into the narrator's internal struggle, marked by their father's grim metaphor of the "deathfield"—a state of existential awareness they can no longer ignore. The narrator's attempt to compartmentalize their pain is juxtaposed with their growing fixation on the upcoming meeting with Arkanda, which holds the promise of closure or further confusion. The green marble sculpture, a recurring but unnoticed presence, serves as a haunting metaphor for the narrator's own fragmented state, both exposed and resilient.

The chapter culminates in the narrator's arrival at the motel, where Arkanda's entourage has already secured the room. The narrator's nervous anticipation is

tempered by a sense of surreal familiarity, as they knock on the door of a room designed to mimic luxury yet hidden in plain sight. The unresolved tension—both personal and professional—hangs in the air, leaving the reader questioning whether this encounter will bring clarity or deepen the narrator’s sense of disorientation. The motel, like the narrator’s emotional landscape, is a paradox of concealment and revelation.



Chapter 29

The chapter opens with the narrator reflecting on her delayed journey to New York, which took four years instead of the anticipated six days. Now 49, she questions whether her odyssey—marked by symbolic elements like cliffs, caves, and a golden ring—has truly transformed her. She longs for a test to prove her growth, contrasting her current self with who she was four years ago. As she flies to Brooklyn for her book tour, she grapples with unresolved feelings, scrolling through old photos and hesitantly reaching out to an old flame, Davey, before finally sending a casual yet loaded text.

Mid-flight, the narrator's exchange with Davey becomes increasingly awkward and nostalgic. He responds warmly, revealing he's also in New York and invites her to an event he's hosting. Their conversation dances around the past, with both avoiding direct references to their shared history. The narrator agrees to attend, masking her nervousness with enthusiasm. Upon landing, her anxiety manifests physically during a slow cab ride into the city, where hunger and an unidentified unease unsettle her.

Back in her hotel room, the narrator's discomfort escalates into a bizarre physical ordeal: every time she closes her eyes, she experiences a terrifying sensation of falling. Panicked and unable to sleep, she reaches out to her friend Jordi for help. Jordi diagnoses the symptoms as vertigo, possibly caused by air pressure changes or hormonal fluctuations, and guides her through the Epley maneuver—a series of head movements to reposition a dislodged ear crystal. The narrator attempts the exercise, comparing it to a choreographed dance.

As the chapter concludes, the narrator's vertigo becomes a metaphor for her emotional turbulence. The physical disorientation mirrors her unresolved feelings about Davey and the uncertainties of her new relationship. The chapter blends humor and vulnerability, capturing the narrator's struggle to navigate past and present while confronting the unexpected challenges of middle age. The cliffhanger leaves her mid-

maneuver, symbolizing her ongoing journey toward balance and clarity.



Chapter 30

The chapter opens with the narrator arriving at a crowded venue for Davey and Dev's performance, feeling physically recovered from prior vertigo but emotionally exposed. Dressed inappropriately for the event, they encounter acquaintances while navigating the ticket line, revealing their privileged access to the show. The narrator reflects on Davey's rise to fame after years of obscurity, noting how his past at Hertz contrasts with his current success. There's an underlying tension as the narrator suspects Davey might be watching them, heightening their self-consciousness.

Inside the venue, the narrator adopts a detached demeanor to contrast with the audience's excitement. The performance begins with Dev, whose dynamic movements gradually introduce Davey in a dramatic reveal. The audience's collective adoration for Davey becomes palpable, particularly during a shirtless sequence that leaves them in awed silence. The narrator, however, feels a mix of jealousy and resentment, privately scornful of the crowd's worship and longing for Davey's attention.

The performance escalates with a participatory chant—"All hands on the function!"—which the audience enthusiastically joins, creating a hypnotic synergy with the dancers. The narrator, excluded from this shared moment, grows increasingly bitter, hoping for a misstep that would diminish Davey's allure. They fixate on Davey, comparing his current artistry to their past interactions, which now feel insignificant. The narrator's internal conflict peaks as they oscillate between disdain and desperate longing for recognition.

The chapter concludes with a sudden shift—a thunderous clap interrupts the chant, plunging the room into silence. A somber musical transition accompanies Davey and Dev's intricate, gravity-defying movements. The narrator, physically leaning forward, is consumed by the spectacle, their earlier resentment momentarily eclipsed by awe. The performance's intensity underscores the narrator's isolation, leaving them grappling

with the disparity between Davey's radiant present and their own unresolved past.

