

Static



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Born in 1963 in England, Cate Kennedy moved around with her parents throughout childhood, living in different parts of the U.K. and eventually settling in Australia. She graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of Canberra and has since gone on to teach writing at several universities. Kennedy also worked as a community arts coordinator in Victoria, Australia, and spent two years teaching adult literacy in Mexico with Australian Volunteers International in the 1990s. Kennedy is the author of the award-winning novel *The World Beneath*, as well as a number of poetry and short-story collections, including *Like a House on Fire* (in which "Static" appears). Her short stories have also been appeared in publications like *The New Yorker* and *Harvard Review*. Kennedy is the recipient of numerous literary awards, including the Age Short Story Award, the NSW Premier's People's Choice Award, and the Stella Prize. She currently lives in Victoria.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though the exact setting of "Static" is unspecified, it likely takes place in Australia sometime in the mid-2000s or early 2010s, as Anthony gives his nephew Tom a Nintendo Wii video game console (which was released in 2006) for Christmas in the story. At this time, gadgets like iPods, smartphones, and handheld video game consoles were relatively new and extremely popular, particularly among children and teenagers. This is perhaps why Anthony's mother frets that Tom won't like the walkie-talkie set she got him for Christmas—it might seem antiquated compared to something like the Wii. The story also touches on medical fertility treatments, which Anthony and Marie have begun to seek out as they try to conceive a baby. Australia's first baby conceived through in vitro fertilization (IVF) was born in 1980, and in 1984, Victoria, Australia, passed the world's first comprehensive government regulation of IVF. As of 2020, nearly five percent of Australian babies are conceived through IVF. By the time the story is set, then, IVF would already have been a fairly common treatment—though Anthony humorously notes that "conception enhancement" sounds more like the Scientology religion than medicine to him.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Static" is part of Cate Kennedy's short story compilation *Like a House on Fire*. It's similar to "Flexion" and "Ashes" (two other stories in the collection), in that each features a protagonist who feels stifled and alienated as they quietly suffer with a

troubled marriage and/or a strained family dynamic. Acclaimed short story writer Raymond Carver's body of work is also similar to Kennedy's, as both writers gravitate toward themes like loneliness and grief, the simultaneous pain and joy of family relationships, and the mysterious nature of love. Kennedy has also cited Anton Chekov ("Gooseberries"), often hailed as the creator of the modern short story, as an influence on her own writing. Contemporary short story writer Jhumpa Lahiri (*Interpreter of Maladies*) is another inspiration of hers, and well as Roald Dahl (*Matilda*), whose storytelling she greatly admired.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Static
- **Where Written:** Australia
- **When Published:** 2012 in *Like a House on Fire*
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Australia
- **Climax:** Anthony looks into the kitchen window at Marie and realizes that he can never bring himself to have a child with her.
- **Antagonist:** Marie; Anthony's Mother
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

On the Job. Cate Kennedy once worked for the Australian Customs Service, which inspired her short story "Habit," about a protagonist who devises a scheme to smuggle cocaine into the country.



PLOT SUMMARY

At Anthony's family Christmas party, his mother turns her nose up at the punch that Anthony's wife, Marie, made. When his father, Frank, briefly leaves the lounge room to get a beer instead, Anthony feels suffocated around his mother and his wife. He can sense their hostile glances (which he calls "Evil Rays") as they try to make him feel guilty, even though he bought everything in this room—including the new lounge suite they're sitting on.

When Anthony suggests that they open Christmas presents, his mother reminds him that his sister Margaret, her husband Ian, and their children Tom and Hannah aren't there yet. Anthony bitterly thinks that his niece and nephew will be used to deflect today's Evil Rays; Marie hadn't wanted to invite the children, but Anthony insisted. Presently, he decides to help

Marie with the food—but his mother refuses to eat the appetizers he serves her, and his father only eats one to be polite.

Anthony and his mother make small talk about how crowded the stores are at Christmastime. Anthony remembers that when he went to the market the night before, the person ahead of him was buying simple prepackaged food; he'd felt the urge to follow them out and go home with them. Anthony's mother then tells him about the expensive walkie-talkie set she got Tom this year, and Anthony assures her that Tom will love it. But really, he knows that his niece and nephew will be more excited about the Nintendo Wii console he got them.

Anthony escapes his mother by going to help Marie in the kitchen. As she prepares the Christmas ham, she orders Anthony to pit cherries for lunch. Anthony tells her that he'll pit them in the lounge room to annoy his mother, which makes Marie flash a genuine smile that Anthony misses. Over time, she's trained herself to show a different smile, one that's close-lipped and artificially calm. Anthony thinks back to last week, when he and Marie went to their first fertility specialist appointment. Marie had stubbornly told the doctor that she was doing everything right, and that they were ready for "conception enhancement."

As Anthony pits cherries in the lounge room, he remembers eating cherries with Margaret as children and using the pits to play a rhyming game about who they'd marry. Anthony would add more pits to Margaret's pile so that she'd end up with "poor man" at the end of the rhyme, and Anthony thinks that this came true—Margaret and Ian are struggling financially. Anthony, who has an expensive new house, feels guilty about this. Then, he begins to think about how the cherry pits look like the ball of wax that a doctor once extracted from his ear after a bad cold. He'd been surprised at how something like that had accumulated in his body, and at how clearly he could hear after it was removed.

Anthony's mother interrupts his thoughts when she makes an underhanded comment about how Marie and Anthony are hard to shop for because they already have so much. This makes Anthony remember that Marie used to call him "Ant" before they bought this house, and how panicked and sick he'd felt when he signed the mortgage. Suddenly, the doorbell rings, and Anthony rushes to greet Margaret, Ian, and the kids.

After lunch, Anthony looks at his family through his digital camera's viewfinder and notices that Marie looks beautiful from one angle but miserable from another. Similarly, Margaret looks sad and chubby from one angle but happy and warm from another. Hannah and Tom, meanwhile, have on trained, polite smiles as they pose for the photo. After snapping the picture, Anthony takes Tom aside and asks him to play with the present Anthony's mother got him instead of the one Anthony got him. He can tell that Tom is trying hard to behave today, and Anthony has to stop himself from hugging his nephew.

When the family exchanges gifts, Tom enthusiastically thanks Anthony's mother for the walkie-talkies, but she just lectures Tom about being careful with the expensive toys. Meanwhile, Anthony looks over at Marie and wonders if she loves him. He eagerly volunteers to join Tom outside to test the walkie-talkies, though he knows his mother will criticize him in his absence. From opposite sides of the yard, Anthony and Tom begin to play a spy game over the walkie-talkies. But suddenly, Anthony thinks he hears Marie's voice instead of Tom's coming through the walkie-talkie: he hears her accuse him of not wanting to have a baby, which leaves him speechless.

As the walkie-talkie begins emitting **static**, Anthony looks at Marie through the kitchen window and feels something shift inside him. The static clears, and he suddenly realizes that he can never have a baby with Marie. Just then, Tom's voice comes clearly to ask if Anthony is there, before more static overtakes the line. All Anthony can manage to say is "Man down. Mayday," and he knows Tom will come looking for him in a few moments. But instead of composing himself, Anthony reaches over to a potted succulent on the porch and pricks his finger with one of its spines, watching a blood droplet form as "proof that such things are real."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Anthony – Anthony is the protagonist of "Static." He's Marie's husband, Margaret's brother, and Tom and Hannah's uncle. Throughout the family Christmas party that takes place during the story, readers learn that Anthony has strained, closed-off relationships with his wife, his mother, and his father. Although he has a "high-powered job" and all the material trappings of success, Anthony feels dissatisfied with and misunderstood by his family. In particular, his mother believes that "he'll never grow up," while Marie resents him for not wanting to have a baby as much as she does. Anthony also sees his affluent lifestyle as a betrayal of who he is rather than something to be proud of. His nephew Tom is the only member of his family he seems to genuinely connect with—indeed, the only point in the story when he seems genuinely happy is when they play with walkie-talkies together outside. The story implies that Anthony wants a family that's unconditionally loving, supportive, and effortless, much like his easy connection with Tom. The fun that he has with his nephew is enough to make Anthony realize that he doesn't want to have a child with Marie—a sudden epiphany that is so profound for Anthony that it literally brings him to his knees at the end of the story. In this way, Anthony is a man who's felt stifled and controlled by other people for so long that he doesn't know what he actually wants until a clear alternative presents itself.

Marie – Marie is Anthony's wife; she's a lawyer whom Anthony

describes as an “immaculate blonde” but also “cold and stick-thin.” The couple doesn’t have a particularly happy marriage, primarily because Marie has become controlling and emotionally closed-off over the years. Throughout the story, Marie is preoccupied with creating the perfect Christmas meal for their family, intent on replicating the same picture-perfect, affluent lifestyle she sees advertised in her many magazines. She has a precise idea of what she wants her and Anthony’s life to look like, and she gets upset when things don’t go her way—when she thinks their new sofa is the wrong shade of taupe, for instance, or when conceiving a baby is taking longer than she wants it to. This fixation on perfection and control leads Marie to freeze Anthony out, leaving him to wonder whose side Marie will take when his mother criticizes him. At one point, he even questions if Marie loves him at all. Near the end of the story, Anthony has an epiphany that he doesn’t want to have a child with Marie—or, it’s implied, to be with her at all. In this way, Marie’s artificially “trained” persona and high expectations backfire, as these qualities result in a lack of communication and intimacy that destroys the couple’s relationship.

Anthony’s Mother – Anthony describes his and his sister Margaret’s mother as “hyper-conservative.” There’s a great deal of tension between her and Anthony during their family Christmas party, and it’s implied that her relationship with her children has been strained and distant for some time—at one point during the party, she reflects that they’re rarely “all together like this.” Anthony’s fraught relationship with his mother seems to stem from the fact that nothing he does is good enough for her: his mother thinks that “he’ll never grow up” despite the clear success he’s achieved in his life, and she often looks him with “contempt, accusation, disdain, puzzled faux-innocence, the works.” Anthony, on the other hand, is determined to “thwart her” with politeness during the party rather than standing up for himself or confronting his mother about her rude behavior. In this way, Anthony and his mother’s dynamic is riddled with unspoken hurt and resentment, which seems to have eroded their relationship over time. Anthony’s mother is also notably preoccupied with gifts and other material objects. She makes Anthony feel guilty about his expensive new house, and she lectures Margaret’s son, Tom, about the expensive walkie-talkie set she got him for Christmas rather than simply letting him enjoy his new toy. Together, these tendencies characterize Anthony’s mother as materialistic, unsupportive, and out of touch with her family members.

Tom – Tom is Anthony’s 10-year-old nephew, Margaret and Ian’s son, and Hannah’s younger brother. He’s a sweet, thoughtful boy who tries hard to do as he’s told. During their family Christmas party, Anthony has the strong urge to hug Tom, whom he describes as “[t]oo troubled for a ten-year-old”—perhaps because his parents are struggling financially. At

one point, Tom thanks his grandmother (Anthony and Margaret’s mother) for the walkie-talkie set she got him, but she hardly notices when he kisses her on the cheek. From this, readers can gather that Anthony and his nephew are similar: they both try to win their family members’ approval, though neither of them receives much recognition or affection for their efforts. This may be why Anthony and Tom seem to effortlessly connect with each other when they go outside to test the walkie-talkies: they seem to be similarly alienated in their family, and Tom is the only person whom Anthony is able to let loose with. The brief moment of lighthearted fun that Anthony has with Tom is perhaps what leads him to the epiphany that he doesn’t want to have a baby with his wife, Marie—seemingly because he realizes that he wants all of his family relationships to be as natural and easy as his bond with Tom.

Margaret – Margaret is Anthony’s sister, Ian’s wife, and Tom and Hannah’s mother. Margaret is the only adult in Anthony’s family who’s firmly on his side: whereas Anthony describes their mother and his wife, Marie, as judgmental and controlling, he thinks of Margaret as “loyal” and warm. He knows that only Margaret will defend him against his mother’s snide remarks when he leaves the room, which is a testament to how strong their sibling bond is despite rarely seeing each other outside of holidays. But Anthony also feels guilty about the fact that Margaret and Ian are in “dire financial straits,” whereas he and Marie are well-off and can seemingly afford anything they want. During the Christmas party, Anthony notices that Margaret and Ian look happy and in love—a stark contrast to his and Marie’s own miserable relationship. In this way, Margaret’s character represents the idea that money doesn’t necessarily give people happiness or fulfillment, as her and Ian’s marriage seems much more rewarding than Anthony and Marie’s despite their financial difficulties.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Frank – Frank is Anthony’s father. He’s only briefly mentioned in the story, as he spends the Christmas party watching a televised cricket match and seemingly trying to stay out of the conflict between Anthony, Marie, and Anthony’s mother.

Ian – Ian is Anthony’s brother-in-law, Margaret’s husband, and Tom and Hannah’s father.

Hannah – Hannah is Anthony’s 12-year-old niece, Margaret and Ian’s daughter, and Tom’s older sister.



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.



FAMILY, MARRIAGE, AND DISSATISFACTION

Anthony, the protagonist of “Static,” is a man struggling to negotiate between what his family expects of him and what he wants out of life. While he longs for a supportive family and seems to like children, he feels trapped rather than excited by his wife, Marie’s, businesslike approach to marriage and conceiving a baby. He also has a fraught and unsupportive relationship with his mother, which readers see play out during the family Christmas party that takes place during the story. Anthony’s interactions with his family members, as well as his private thoughts, suggest that a family is only a source of joy and fulfillment when it’s rooted in unconditional love and genuine connection. Otherwise, marriage and family relationships can be intensely stifling and dissatisfying.

Anthony’s relationships with his mother and Marie are characterized by criticism and hostility rather than love and acceptance. Anthony’s mother makes numerous underhanded remarks to him during the party, subtly criticizing everything from the appetizers to his choice of home décor. Anthony knows that she thinks “he’ll never grow up, no matter what sort of high-powered job he seems to find for himself,” discounting the major life milestones (i.e., getting married, cultivating a successful career, buying a home) that her son has achieved. Rather than supporting Anthony, his mother is highly critical of him and places high expectations on him, making him feel like nothing he does is good enough.

Anthony’s marriage is similarly strained, as he misses who his wife used to be before she became controlling and antagonistic. Marie desperately wants a child, obsessively researching fertility and conception “like someone gathering evidence for a case they have to win,” and she resents Anthony because she doesn’t think he wants a baby as much as she does. This conflict in their relationship causes Marie to act coldly toward him: at the party, she looks at him “murderous[ly]” and makes demands of him rather than asking him for help. At one point, Anthony looks across the room at her and wonders if she even loves him. Although one might assume that Anthony’s wife and mother are the two women he should be closest to, they don’t seem to love him unconditionally—and so his relationships with them are stressful and dissatisfying rather than comforting and fulfilling.

Despite his troubled relationships, Anthony does seem to want a family—but one that’s easygoing, supportive, and loving. On the night of Christmas Eve, Anthony rushes to the supermarket to get a last-minute ingredient for Christmas lunch. He notices that the person in front of him in the checkout line is buying simple premade food, which is quite the contrast to the elaborate feast that Marie insists on making for the party. This is enough to make him feel “an overwhelming, childish longing to follow them out and curl up in the back of their car and go

home to their place,” suggesting that he feels trapped in his own family and wants to be part of one that’s more laidback and doesn’t put so much pressure on him. Anthony’s positive relationships with his sister Margaret and her son Tom provide further insight as to what he wants in a family. He fondly thinks of Margaret as warm and “loyal” for always defending him against their mother’s snide comments, whereas he’s not sure whose side Marie will take when he leaves the room. In addition, the one point in the story when Anthony seems genuinely happy is when he and Tom go outside to play with the walkie-talkie set that Tom got for Christmas. From these relationships, readers can glean that Anthony simply wants all of his family members to support and love him unconditionally, the way his sister does. Furthermore, if he’s going to be a father, he likely wants it to feel organic and effortless—like his interactions with Tom—rather than forced.

Yet Anthony doesn’t seem to consciously realize what he wants out of life until the end of the story, which is a testament to how limiting and emotionally deadening dysfunctional family relationships can be. While Anthony and Tom are joyfully playing outside, Anthony looks at Marie through the kitchen window. His walkie-talkie has been emitting deafening **static** up until this point, symbolizing how Anthony’s controlling wife and mother have left him figuratively deaf to his own desires and his ability to make decisions for himself. But as he gazes at his wife, “something dislodges in him with a delicate gush of pressure, something shifts to let bright sound in”—the static dissipates, and Anthony suddenly understands that “nothing of him” could ever grow inside Marie. That is, he can never bring himself to have a child with her. Tom’s voice comes through the walkie-talkie clearly just after this—“the clearest thing [Anthony has] ever heard.” This moment represents a turning point for Anthony, as the effortless connection he shares with his nephew seems to free him and help him realize that his relationship with Marie is a dead end, devoid of any real care or affection. The static, both literal and figurative, has given way to clarity: Anthony can now see that while he couldn’t choose the family he was born into, he does have a choice when it comes to marriage and fatherhood. The story ends on a somewhat optimistic note, then, as Anthony realizes (at least momentarily) that he isn’t trapped in his dissatisfying life—he’s free to create the kind of family he wants.



COMMUNICATION AND AUTHENTICITY

Throughout Anthony’s family Christmas party, it becomes clear that his relationships with his family members are far from close. The family rarely gathers together, and when they do, they’re emotionally closed off from one another. None of them say what they actually think: Anthony’s mother expresses herself through subtle passive-aggression and judgmental glances; his wife, Marie, has an entirely contrived personality and mannerisms; and Anthony

and his father avoid conflict by keeping their thoughts and feelings private. As a result, the family doesn't communicate openly, and so they aren't able to genuinely connect and bond with one another. Through a series of tense and forced interactions, the story shows how ineffective communication and artificial personas can erode relationships and isolate people from one another.

Both Anthony's mother and Marie put on false personas around other people, which makes Anthony feel like he can't have a real relationship with either of them. Both women primarily communicate not through words, but through harsh, judgmental looks that Anthony calls "Evil Rays." His mother's Evil Rays are particularly full of "contempt, accusation, disdain, puzzled faux-innocence." Alongside this, she makes comments throughout the story (about Anthony and Marie's choice of home decor, for instance) that sound polite but are actually meant as subtle insults. In this way, Anthony's mother never outright says what she thinks—instead, she conveys her true feelings through passive-aggressive compliments or nonverbally through facial expressions. And, as a result, Anthony feels like they can't be open or trust each other.

Marie, too, is emotionally closed-off and inauthentic. Anthony remembers how, years ago, Marie used to have a "broad and unselfconscious" grin. Now, however, she has a different smile. It's a "trained one—lips closed and chin raised like a model of cool serenity, a perfected study of herself." Instead of openly expressing what she feels, Marie appears "trained" and "cool" at all times; she speaks and emotes in a measured, polite way, even when she's angry. Anthony can't stand this, as her artificial persona prevents the couple from hashing out their problems and leaves Anthony feeling resentful and distant from his wife.

Anthony and his father also fail to openly express themselves, which further compounds the family's rift in communication. As a result of his mother and Marie's behavior, Anthony, too, feels pressured to put on a faux-polite persona and mediate his family's disagreements. In particular, he wants to "thwart [his mother] with unrelenting good cheer" rather than stand up for himself or stoop to her level during the Christmas gathering. He also passively accepts that whenever he leaves the room, his mother will openly criticize him in front of the rest of the family, and Marie may or may not defend him. In essence, Anthony quietly endures his mother and Marie's snide remarks and "murderous[]" looks, and so they continue to treat him like this throughout the party. His silent toleration of his wife and mother's mistreatment prevents him from truly resolving conflicts with either of them. Anthony's father, meanwhile, is similarly passive. Readers aren't given insight into his thoughts, and he's only mentioned a briefly, when the narration describes him watching a televised cricket game and good-naturedly eating one of Marie's appetizers to "keep the peace" during the party. He never challenges Anthony's mother's rude behavior or plays an active role in any of the family's conversations. This

suggests that he, like Anthony, has chosen to stay quiet rather than involve himself in conflict—which further impedes the family's ability to communicate and meaningfully connect.

These issues of emotional repression and poor communication have caused Anthony's relationships to suffer over time, which leaves him feeling isolated even when surrounded by family. Anthony reflects that, before the party, he told Marie that his parents wouldn't come to Christmas lunch unless they invited his sister Margaret and her husband and children. Moreover, during the party, Anthony's mother points out that "There's so few occasions we're all together like this." All of this hints that Anthony's family relationships are deeply broken, so much so that his parents aren't interested in seeing him and Marie, only Margaret's side of the family. They're all estranged from one another and rarely make an effort to gather together, likely as a direct result of their failure to open up and genuinely connect.

Later that afternoon, while the family is opening gifts, Anthony looks over at Marie and wonders, "Does she love him? She lets him see her in the morning without makeup, does that count?" His uncertainty suggests that the lack of openness and authenticity in the couple's relationship has left them completely alienated from each other, to the point that Marie going makeup-free around Anthony is as intimate and vulnerable as they get. As a result of these strained relationships, Anthony feels completely alone, even on Christmas in a room full of his closest relatives. Any time there's a task or activity for him to do in another room, he "eagerly" jumps up and rushes to escape the "deoxygenated" feeling of being around his family. With this, the story suggests that a relationship devoid of authentic communication isn't much of a relationship at all—it's merely an obligation, one that's suffocating and emotionally exhausting rather than fulfilling.



HAPPINESS, CONSUMERISM, AND GUILT

Anthony's family prioritizes money and what it can buy—large houses, fancy food, expensive gifts—over personal relationships. At the family Christmas party that takes place during "Static," Anthony's wife, Marie, and his mother talk and act in ways that suggest they look to material goods for happiness, and that they value what the media tells them they should. Yet Anthony is unhappy despite having achieved an affluent lifestyle and being able to buy anything he wants—in fact, his wealth and success make him feel empty and guilty rather than fulfilled. With this, the story suggests that consumerism is a poor substitute for genuinely engaging with other people, and that money can be a source of stress and shame rather than happiness.

Characters like Marie and Anthony's mother seem to think that money can buy happiness, and that emulating what they see in the media will give them the sort of life they want. At the Christmas party, Marie is fixated not on connecting with

Anthony's family, but on creating an elaborate, multi-course meal that will impress the guests. She gathers recipes from "a pile of magazines hawking sunshine and patios and people in uncrushed white linen shirts," suggesting that these magazines are peddling not just recipes, but an entire lifestyle brand that Marie is trying to replicate. But Anthony warned her ahead of time that his "hyper-conservative" parents wouldn't like the fancy appetizers and cocktails she was planning to make, and indeed they don't. In this way, Marie is buying into a manufactured ideal of what advertisements suggest her life should look like, rather than accepting her life for what it is and catering to the people in it.

Similarly, Anthony's mother harps on the expensive price of the gifts she bought Anthony's niece and nephew, Hannah and Tom, rather than viewing Christmas as an opportunity to be generous and genuinely connect with her grandchildren. It's possible that she, like Marie, bases her buying decisions on the media (in this case, advertisements for toys) because she assumes this will make her and her loved ones happy. After she gives Tom a walkie-talkie set, she lectures him about how much it cost and accepts his thanks and kiss on the cheek "without even looking at him, not really." This shows that Anthony's mother views gift-giving as a way to buy love and affection in lieu of genuine care and emotional involvement in her grandchildren's lives.

But money certainly doesn't buy happiness in Anthony's case, as his affluent lifestyle actually makes him miserable. During the party, Anthony thinks back on signing the mortgage for his and Marie's new house. He'd felt "a brief swooping dizzy spell of nauseated disbelief, and he thinks of that title document now stacked away in some bank vault somewhere, his signature slumping below the dotted line like a failing ECG." This language, evoking physical illness and a flatlined heartbeat, likens buying the house to a kind of death for Anthony. He also remembers how Marie used to affectionately call him "Ant" before they got the new house, but now she calls him Anthony—"a new name [...] to go with the new granite-topped Italianate kitchen bench and the whole brand spanking new house." Rather than making him happy, his wealth and material possessions have only made him feel empty and disconnected from who he really is. It's also clear that Anthony and Marie have a broken marriage—at one point in the story, Anthony wonders if Marie loves him at all. Anthony's "high-powered job" and Marie's career as a lawyer don't seem to have given them anything besides material items like their large home and upscale furnishings. And these things don't create lasting happiness for the couple—their beautiful environment only makes their unpleasant relationship all the more apparent.

Anthony's wealth even makes him feel guilty, and it drives a wedge between himself and his loved ones. At several points in the story, Anthony's mother makes subtle digs at Anthony and Marie's lifestyle. For instance, she tells Marie that she got her a

"funny little present" for Christmas because "you're so hard to buy for, the two of you—I mean, my goodness, there's really absolutely nothing else you need, is there?" Anthony has previously described his mother as being full of "contempt" and "puzzled faux-innocence," so it's likely that her comment is meant as a passive-aggressive insult rather than a compliment. In this way, Anthony can't seem to win: he tries to appease Marie by buying her what she wants, but this makes his mother resent him for his perceived success. Anthony also feels guilty because he knows his sister Margaret and her husband, Ian, "are in some dire financial straits." This makes him feel like he has to "overcompensate" by giving his niece and nephew an expensive Christmas present (a Nintendo Wii console) and even offering Margaret and Ian one of his many plasma TVs to replace their outdated set. From this, it's clear that Anthony's affluence doesn't guarantee him happiness—in fact, it just seems to strain his relationships and make his life more complicated.

At one point during the gathering, Anthony looks through his digital camera's viewfinder as he prepares to take a snapshot of his family. Through the camera, he notices how Margaret looks "overweight and worn and dowdy" next to the beautiful Marie. But from another angle, she looks "kind and comfortable, touching Ian's arm and smiling warmly," while Marie looks "cold" and unhappy by comparison. In essence, Anthony can see both "how [Margaret] sees them and how they see her, this life and that life." With this, the story suggests that people like Anthony and Marie, who have all the material trappings of success, may not be as happy as they seem. And by the same token, lasting happiness and fulfillment is found through meaningful connections, like the one Margaret and Ian seem to share, rather than money and consumption.



SYMBOLS

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



STATIC



The titular static that emits from Anthony's walkie-talkie near the end of the story represents the rift in understanding between him and his family members, as well as between himself and what he truly wants. Throughout the family Christmas party that takes place during "Static," it becomes clear that Anthony has a strained relationship with his family. Though his mother and his wife, Marie, are highly controlling and critical of Anthony, they express their contempt through passive-aggressive comments or subtly hostile glances rather than overt insults. Anthony and his father, meanwhile, silently tolerate the women's behavior rather than openly expressing their opinions or trying to solve conflicts. In this way,

Anthony's family dynamic is clouded by inauthenticity, unspoken resentment, and repressed emotions. And, as a result, Anthony feels stifled and misunderstood by his family, and out of touch with what he actually wants out of his relationships.

Toward the end of the party, Anthony's communication with Tom, his young nephew, is more literally clouded: when the two of them go outside to play with the new walkie-talkie set Tom got for Christmas, the connection between them is obscured by a deafening "snow of static." But when Anthony looks in at Marie through the kitchen window, the static abruptly clears: "something dislodges in him with a delicate gush of pressure, something shifts to let bright sound in." Then, Anthony suddenly realizes that he doesn't want to have a baby with Marie, even though they've been trying to conceive for some time.

In this moment, the static clears both literally and figuratively: the carefree fun that Anthony is having with Tom seems to awaken his repressed longing for a genuinely loving family, a fulfilling marriage, and fatherhood that feels natural rather than forced. In this way, static symbolizes Anthony's inability to openly communicate with his family or even to honestly confront his own true emotions and desires. The fact that the static dissipates at the exact moment Anthony has an epiphany about his marriage suggests that he's now able to hear the "bright sound" of his own inner voice, unencumbered by "static"—that is, his family's disapproval, and the pressure they put on him that figuratively deafens him to his own desires. The static does return after this brief moment, however, which creates ambiguity as to whether Anthony's epiphany will be a lasting change, or if the obligation he feels to please his family will overtake him once more.

Related Characters: Anthony's Mother, Marie, Frank, Anthony

Related Themes:  

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Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the story, Anthony offers his mother and father some of the melon punch that his wife, Marie, made for their family Christmas party. But both of his parents silently refuse to drink it, and his father, Frank, gets up to get a beer from the kitchen instead. The language that the story uses here is important: the chair gives an "asthmatic wheeze" when Frank gets up, and Anthony senses a "deoxygenated silence" when he's alone with his mother and Marie. Both of these descriptions connote suffocation, which hints that Anthony feels figuratively suffocated—unable to speak or act freely—around his family.

Moreover, Anthony imagines that his mother and Marie are shooting "Evil Rays" at Frank, which is to say that they're directing harsh, judgmental glances toward him. This further characterizes Anthony's family dynamic as hostile and difficult to navigate, making an event like this Christmas party a source of stress rather than an opportunity to genuinely connect with one another. Anthony even thinks of his mother and Marie as his "archenemies." In this way, the story begins to suggest that while family is a source of comfort and fulfillment for many people, it can be stifling and unfulfilling if one's family members aren't unconditionally loving and supportive.

Importantly, though, none of this tension is voiced directly—it either plays out in Anthony's private thoughts or comes out nonverbally. (Anthony's father leaves the room without saying anything, for instance, while Anthony's mother and Marie communicate through facial expressions). Throughout the story, this lack of communication deepens the tension between Anthony and his family members and ensures that any conflicts go unsolved, demonstrating how a lack of openness can erode relationships and make people feel misunderstood and unable to be themselves.

●● She can get every secret weapon into those rays—contempt, accusation, disdain, puzzled faux-innocence, the works. Anthony is determined, fully determined, to thwart her with unrelenting good cheer today.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Read How You Want edition of *Like a House on Fire* published in 2013.

Static Quotes

●● Anthony listens to the asthmatic wheeze of the leather chair his father's just vacated, sucking back air into itself as if desperate for breath, the only noise in the room for a few seconds. In the deoxygenated silence, he feels what he thinks of as Evil Rays, like something in one of his old comics, jagged lightning bolts shooting across the room. They're crackling from the fingertips of the archenemies seated on either side of him. *Take that, Ice Maiden! No, you take THAT, Bitch Crone!*

Related Characters: Anthony's Mother, Anthony

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 207



Explanation and Analysis

Here, Anthony explains his mother's "Evil Rays"—his nickname for the judgmental looks she often gives him. According to Anthony, the rays contain "contempt, accusation, disdain, [and] puzzled faux-innocence," which is to say that his mother expresses her hostility nonverbally and passive-aggressively rather than saying what she thinks. This creates a dynamic in which Anthony is essentially paralyzed: he knows that his mother disapproves of him but can't do anything to defend himself or placate her, since she rarely says anything outrightly rude.

Notably, Anthony decides to "thwart [his mother] with unrelenting good cheer" rather than confronting her about her behavior. In this way, kindness becomes something that Anthony uses strategically rather than something he genuinely feels. The story thus shows how a lack of open communication can make for tense, emotionally fraught relationships where problems are left to fester instead of being tackled head-on. If left unchecked, this can create a dynamic where family members use even kind gestures as weapons rather than honest expressions of love, as Anthony conspires to do here.

●● She flashes him a smile as she heads for the door. The ghost of an old smile, one he misses; she's trained herself not to do it because it shows the tooth she's convinced is crooked. He's told her he loves that tooth, but she just rolls her eyes. In every one of their wedding photos, stored over there in the handtooled leather albums, she has on the other smile, the trained one—lips closed and chin raised like a model of cool serenity, a perfected study of herself. But somewhere in a drawer, Anthony has an old photo of her, pulling off her mask and snorkel at the Great Barrier Reef, just out of the water and her grin broad and unselfconscious. Years ago.

Related Characters: Anthony's Mother, Marie, Anthony

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 211-212

Explanation and Analysis

When Anthony makes a joke about wanting to make his

mother angry, his wife, Marie, flashes him a rare "ghost of an old smile." He then describes how Marie has trained herself to smile in a more guarded, poised way over the years in order to hide her crooked tooth (and, along with it, her true emotions). This has resulted in Marie's smile—as well as her personality more generally—becoming "a perfected study of herself" rather than the genuine, authentic person she used to be "[y]ears ago."

In essence, Marie has become someone who conceals her true emotions—even positive emotions—which has left Anthony missing the woman she used to be. This is another example of how a lack of vulnerability and clear communication can damage relationships over time, as this sort of dynamic prevents even spouses or close relatives from genuinely connecting with each other. This, along with his fraught relationship with his mother, is why Anthony feels so lonely and dissatisfied with his family, as he's unable to give or receive the emotional support and meaningful connection that he craves.

●● She used to call him Ant. He can't put his finger on when it started being Anthony. It was like his attention had waned momentarily, and then there it was, a new name and a new smile, to go with the new granite-topped Italianate kitchen bench and the whole brand spanking new house. He'd closed his eyes signing the mortgage on the house, suffering a brief swooping dizzy spell of nauseated disbelief, and he thinks of that title document now stacked away in some bank vault somewhere, his signature slumping below the dotted line like a failing ECG.

Related Characters: Marie, Anthony

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 214-215

Explanation and Analysis


Anthony reflects how, before he and Marie bought their expensive new house, she used to affectionately call him by the nickname "Ant." This changed at some point: she began calling him Anthony, "a new name" to match "the whole brand spanking new house." While this may seem like a subtle difference, it suggests that Anthony feels disconnected from his true self, which he associates with that casual nickname. In this sense, Anthony's wealth—which, of course, enabled him to buy this house—is a source of stress and alienation rather than happiness for him, since living this affluent lifestyle has made him feel out

of touch with who he used to be.

Furthermore, Anthony remembers feeling “a brief swooping dizzy spell of nauseated disbelief” when he signed the mortgage, and now he thinks of his signature as a “failing ECG,” or a flatlined heartbeat. This language implies that buying the new house represented a figurative death for Anthony—essentially, the death of “Ant” and the more modest life he led prior to this. Thus, while money can certainly provide new opportunities and a sense of security, Anthony’s experience suggests that pursuing a certain lifestyle for the sake of appearances (or in his case, for the sake of appeasing Marie) can be intensely dissatisfying and alienating.

●● Anthony stands tilting the camera a few millimetres back and forth, mesmerised, as the group arranges itself before him. The pixellated image oscillates, scanning and reading the shifts of light and shade. One moment he sees his sister, overweight and worn and dowdy in her Target outfit, frumpy beside the immaculate blonde Marie, who outshines them all. The next he sees Margaret, kind and comfortable, touching Ian’s arm and smiling warmly, with Marie pale and cold and stick-thin, face grimaced into a close-mouthed rictus. Back and forth the shimmering image goes; how she sees them and how they see her, this life and that life, with Anthony in the middle, trying to hold the camera steady and depress the button for autofocus at the same moment.

Related Characters: Ian, Margaret, Marie, Anthony

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis



After Christmas lunch, Anthony looks at his family through his digital camera’s viewfinder. He notices that from one angle, Marie looks “immaculate,” but from another she looks “pale and cold and stick-thin.” Similarly, Margaret looks “overweight and worn and dowdy” from one angle but “kind and comfortable” from another. In this way, he’s able to see the way he and Marie usually perceive Margaret *and* the way that she likely perceives Anthony and Marie.

Prior to this, the story revealed that Anthony and Marie are much wealthier than Margaret and her husband, Ian, and this passage suggests that they may be more conventionally attractive as well. But while an onlooker might assume that Anthony and Marie are happier, this may not actually be the

case. In fact, Marie’s face is “grimaced into a closed-mouth rictus,” whereas Margaret is “touching Ian’s arm and smiling warmly,” a contrast that suggests Anthony’s sister and her husband are more content and fulfilled in life and marriage than Anthony and Marie are, despite seemingly having less. This speaks to the idea that money doesn’t guarantee happiness, as being wealthy doesn’t solve any of Anthony and Marie’s relationship problems or make them any more satisfied than they would be otherwise.

●● How to broach it with Margaret, how to offer? Tell her he never uses the one in the bedroom? Yeah, tell her it’s been sitting in the guest bedroom gathering dust, be great if she could take it off his hands. A loan. As long as they’d like it. His fault for buying the gadget. Anthony has to squeeze his hands together between his knees to stop himself grabbing Tom and hugging him as hard as he can. A thin boy. Too troubled for a ten-year-old. Reading out those stupid knock-knock jokes at the table, trying his best to do just what’s expected of him, to decipher all those signals and stand in the firing line of all those deadly rays.

Related Characters: Marie, Anthony’s Mother, Ian, Tom, Margaret, Anthony

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

When Anthony’s young nephew, Tom, correctly guesses that Anthony got him a Wii video game console for Christmas, he tells his uncle that their TV at home probably doesn’t have the right attachment since it’s too old. This makes Anthony think that he should offer one of his many expensive televisions to his sister, Margaret, and her husband, Ian, and he deliberates about how to go about this. This, combined with Anthony’s regret about “buying the gadget” in the first place, shows that money is a source of conflict and guilt in Anthony’s life rather than something that makes him and his loved ones happy. Whereas other characters in the story, like Anthony’s mother and Marie, are heavily focused on maintaining appearances and buying expensive items, this incident suggests that money can actually create more problems than it solves.

It’s also notable that Anthony feels the urge to hug his nephew. He reflects that Tom is “too troubled for a ten-year-old”—perhaps because his parents are struggling financially—and that he’s been trying to behave during the

Christmas party in the midst of his mother’s “deadly rays” (i.e., severe, passive-aggressive glances). In this way, Anthony probably sees himself in Tom, as both of them are trying in vain to navigate their difficult family dynamic. Yet rather than being openly empathetic or affectionate with Tom, Anthony stops himself from hugging him by “squeez[ing] his hands together between his knees.” This shows how a lack of open communication in a family can have a detrimental impact on relationships, as this can make even those who want to connect more deeply with their family members feel too uncomfortable or intimidated to do so.

Anthony also thinks that by the time his mother’s children and grandchildren have reached Tom and Hannah’s ages (10 and 12, respectively), “they’ve learned to be wary and submissive and not to trust her.” With this, the story suggests that trust and support are crucial in family bonds—and that a lack of trust renders people unable to act authentically or express genuine affection. In a dynamic like this, people may feel alienated by and dissatisfied with their relationships rather than comforted and fulfilled by them—which is exactly how Anthony (and perhaps Tom, too) feels around his mother.

☛ [...] Anthony’s praying for her to just shut up for a minute, just one fucking minute for once in her life, but she can’t, of course, she has to start in on how he’s got to look after it because it cost a lot of money and he can’t take it to school, it’s just to be played with at his house, and she accepts Tom’s muted kiss on the cheek without even looking at him, not really, because what she wants are babies, she only likes them when they’re babies, by the time they’re Tom’s and Hannah’s age they’ve learned to be wary and submissive and not to trust her, and who can blame them?

☛ Anthony squeezes his hands between his knees again and looks over at Marie clasping her gift basket of toiletries. He thinks of the kilometres she tries to cover each night on that stationary bike, the endless net surfing she’s done on sperm motility and ovarian cysts, like someone gathering evidence for a case they have to win. Does she love him? She lets him see her in the morning without makeup, does that count?

Related Characters: Marie, Anthony’s Mother, Hannah, Tom, Anthony



Related Themes:   

Page Number: 218-219

Explanation and Analysis

After Anthony’s mother gives her grandson Tom a walkie-talkie set for Christmas, Anthony hopes that she’ll be quiet and let Tom enjoy the present—but instead, she proceeds to lecture him about how expensive the walkie-talkies are. Earlier in the story, she told Anthony that she had no idea what her grandchildren wanted for Christmas, but that she spent a great deal of money on the walkie-talkies. Together, these exchanges suggest that Anthony’s mother isn’t particularly close with her grandchildren—though she seems to hope that giving them expensive presents will effectively buy their affection. But here, when Tom tries to connect with his grandmother by giving her a “muted kiss on the cheek,” she hardly notices him. In this way, money seems to be an impediment in their relationship rather than something that brings them closer, as Anthony’s mother’s preoccupation with what she paid for the gift closes her off to her grandson’s overtures.

Related Characters: Marie, Anthony

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

While Anthony’s family is exchanging presents at their Christmas party, he looks over at his wife, Marie, and thinks about how she obsessively exercises and researches information about fertility. This speaks to Marie’s desire for a sense of control—she’s seemingly fixated on achieving a certain milage on her stationary bike each night, and she treats conceiving a baby like “a case they have to win” rather than an organic process. The story previously revealed that Marie is a lawyer, and Anthony’s descriptions here suggest that she approaches the rest of her life in the same way that she would approach a case at work: in an orderly, businesslike manner. In essence, she tries to suppress her feelings through outlets like exercise rather than discussing them with Anthony. Moreover, she tries to turn a complicated, emotional process like conception into something straightforward, cold, and analytical.

As a result, Anthony feels disconnected from the conception process and alienated in their marriage, to the point that he questions, “Does [Marie] even love him?” He wonders (seemingly sarcastically) if “let[ting] him see her in the morning without makeup” counts as love, suggesting that their relationship is devoid of true emotional intimacy


or vulnerability. This speaks to how a lack of authenticity and openness, particularly in a marriage, can effectively destroy a relationship and make people feel stifled and lonely. And because of this, marriage and fatherhood feel more like obligations to Anthony than milestones to be excited about.

●● He watches as Marie takes the sifter and starts dusting the pies with icing sugar and something dislodges in him with a delicate gush of pressure, something shifts to let bright sound in.

He watches her wrists flex, the air going out of him, certain, all of a sudden, that nothing of him will ever take root inside that thin, tightly wound body, nothing. Tom's voice comes through the handset again. Clear as a bell now, the clearest thing he's ever heard.

Related Characters: Tom, Marie, Anthony

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

Toward the end of the story, Anthony goes outside with his nephew, Tom, to test out the new walkie-talkie set Tom got for Christmas. As they're playing a spy game over the walkie-talkies, Anthony notices that he can see Marie preparing dessert through the kitchen window. At that moment, that static that was previously emitting from Anthony's walkie-talkie clears, and "something dislodges in him with a delicate gush of pressure, something shifts to let bright sound in." At the same time, he suddenly realizes that "nothing of him will ever take root inside of" Marie—that is, he can never bring himself to have a baby with her.

The static, which literally obscures Anthony's hearing and his and Tom's communication, symbolizes the broader gap in communication and understanding between Anthony and his family members. As a result of this rift, Anthony has long been figuratively deaf to his own desires due to the way his family stifles him and puts pressure on him to act in a certain way. The fact that the static dissipates at the exact moment that he has an epiphany about not wanting to have a child with Marie suggests that Anthony is experiencing newfound clarity about what he does and doesn't want in life, which parallels the sudden clarity of sound that he

experiences.

Tom's voice comes through the walkie-talkie right after this, "[c]lear as a bell now, the clearest thing he's ever heard," which perhaps suggests that Anthony's pleasant, effortless connection with Tom is what's allowed him to come to this sudden realization about his life. Whereas his relationship with Marie is fraught with high expectations and unspoken resentment, his bond with Tom is easy and organic. This is seemingly the way Anthony wants fatherhood to be: the exact opposite of how Marie approaches conception as something to be controlled and forced. And indeed, this sort of ease and mutual enjoyment seems to be what Anthony wants from his family more generally—a stark contrast to the tense interactions between Anthony and his family members that readers have witnessed throughout the story.

●● But he finds, in the luxury of those seconds, that he can't take his eyes off the cacti in their pots. They don't seem to have grown an inch since they were planted there at the advice of the landscaper six long months ago. Totally unchanged. Zero care.

Anthony puts the handset down onto the stones and gazes at the plants, so steely and barbed and implacable, something that even neglect and drought put together can't seem to kill. He reaches out with a fascinated finger to press a curved spike, hard, against the cushion of skin. He just wants to see a dot of hot, red blood well reliably up, as if he needs proof that such things are real.

Related Characters: Marie, Anthony

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 223-224

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, Anthony finds himself fixated on the potted cacti in his garden. He observes that these plants are "unchanged" since they were planted, and that they require "[z]ero care" because they're invulnerable to "neglect and drought." In this way, the cacti symbolize his relationship with Marie: the story implies that their marriage has been stagnant and lacking intimacy for some time, just as the cacti don't seem to have grown or changed at all in six months. But, like the cacti, Anthony and Marie's relationship has withstood both of them neglecting the other person and

avoiding their problems rather than confronting them head-on. And now, Anthony feels trapped in his marriage despite feeling deeply dissatisfied with it.

Anthony's gesture of reaching out to pierce his finger with the cacti's spine, then, represents his desire to remind himself that he's alive—that he isn't unfeeling and

impervious to mistreatment, and that he's still an individual with his own emotions and desires. With this, the story shows how uncommunicative, unsupportive relationships can deeply hurt people, to the point that they feel emotionally deadened and disconnected from their loved ones and themselves.



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.

STATIC

Anthony's mother asks him what they're drinking. Marie chose this melon punch from a magazine full of Christmas recipes that she'd thoroughly annotated with Post-it notes. She'd brushed off Anthony's concern when he warned her that his "hyper-conservative" parents wouldn't like the drink. Now, his mother looks repulsed as Anthony tells her that it's punch; his father, Frank, goes to get a beer from the kitchen instead. When he gets up from the leather chair, it gives an "asthmatic wheeze" and seems to suck all the air out of the room.

In the "deoxygenated silence," Anthony feels his mother and Marie shooting "Evil Rays," like bolts of lightning in a comic book, in his father's direction. Then they turn the Evil Rays on Anthony, as if trying to make him feel guilty, even though he paid for all of the refreshments at this gathering. He also paid for the new lounge suite they're sitting on, which Marie has already begun complaining is the wrong shade of taupe. As Anthony sips punch, he thinks that shades of taupe, rather than fire, are what torment people in hell.

Anthony suggests that they open presents, but his mother reminds him that his niece Hannah and nephew Tom (his sister's children) haven't arrived yet. He thinks that they'll be desperate to go play with the Wii video game console he bought them, and that they'll be used as "shields" against today's Evil Rays and "emotional blackmail." Marie hadn't wanted the children to come because of the mess they'd make and the special menu she'd have to plan for them. But Anthony insisted that his parents wouldn't show up if his sister and her husband and kids weren't there. At this, Marie stormed off to the study and "channeled her fury" into a ride on her exercise bike.

The dynamic between Anthony and his parents is tense, seemingly because his mother and father communicate their disapproval nonverbally rather than openly voicing their thoughts. This puts Anthony in a difficult position: he can neither stand his ground nor try to placate his parents, since they haven't said anything overtly rude or given him a problem to solve. The story uses language that connotes suffocation (the chair lets out an "asthmatic wheeze"), which suggests that Anthony feels like he can't breathe—let alone behave authentically—around his "hyper-conservative" parents.



Anthony's mother and Marie communicate their disapproval passive-aggressively rather than directly—which, again, makes Anthony feel as though the room is "deoxygenated" and suffocating. It's unclear why they're looking at him this way, but that fact that Anthony already has a nickname for their harsh glances ("Evil Rays") implies that the women often make him feel criticized and guilty in this way. Because of this, family gatherings seem to be a source of stress for Anthony rather than an opportunity for celebration and bonding. Meanwhile, the detail about the lounge suite hints that having an aesthetically pleasing home is very important to Marie—perhaps even more important than Anthony's happiness.



Anthony's mother's "emotional blackmail" indicates that she's subtly cruel and manipulative. As a result, Anthony doesn't seem excited about his niece and nephew coming over, since he knows they'll be caught in the crossfire of his mother's wrath. This again shows how family relationships can be a source of emotional pain and stress if they aren't unconditionally loving and supportive. Marie makes matters even more tense, as Anthony knows that she doesn't want Hannah and Tom to come—seemingly because she's uncomfortable with messiness or imperfection. The fact that she "channeled her fury" into exercise after this spat with Anthony is another example of poor communication, as Marie chooses to vent her anger privately rather than compromising and resolving the problem together.



Now, as Anthony carries out a platter of smoked salmon blinis, he feels Marie's Evil Rays as he leaves the kitchen and his mother's when he enters the lounge room. His mother looks disgustedly at the appetizers, and Anthony thinks that she can convey anything—"contempt, accusation, disdain, puzzled faux-innocence"—through her rays. He's resolved to "thwart" her with politeness today.

Anthony's father eats a blini to "keep the peace" while he watches a cricket match on TV, but his mother refuses. Anthony scarfs down several appetizers so that Marie will think everyone has been enjoying them. He wonders where she is; her many magazines promise that their "easy-peasy" recipes will free up the hostess from the kitchen. Anthony asks his father who's winning the match, thinking to himself how painfully boring cricket is.

Anthony's mother comments that she finished all her Christmas shopping early because of how crowded the stores get, and Anthony agrees that they're packed. Last night, he'd frantically searched for cranberries in syrup at the grocery store. He noticed the person ahead of him in the checkout line buying premade barbecue food and felt the overwhelming urge to follow them out, curl up in their backseat, and go home with them.

Anthony's mother shares that she got Tom a walkie-talkie set for Christmas this year. Anthony tells her that's great, but she immediately asks if he thinks it's not a good idea—she spent a lot on them, she says, and she doesn't know what children want nowadays. Anthony reassures her, but he knows that Tom will cast the walkie-talkies aside as soon as he opens the Wii.

Again, Anthony's mother expresses her "contempt, accusation, disdain, [and] puzzled faux-innocence" through indirect means (like facial expressions) rather than directly through conversation. As a result, Anthony doesn't feel like he can openly express himself in return, and so kindness becomes a weaponized way to "thwart" his mother rather than something genuine. In this way, the lack of clear communication between mother and son drives a wedge in their relationship.



Anthony's father probably notices the tension between Anthony and his mother, but he chooses to "keep the peace" and focus on the cricket match rather than get involved. This is similar to Anthony's determination to be polite to his mother, as neither man seems to want to risk speaking up and making matters worse. But, crucially, this means that unspoken conflict in Anthony's family is never clearly articulated or solved, since none of them are willing to confront one another or openly discuss even minor problems.



The stranger at the grocery store was buying simple, prepackaged food for their Christmas meal, a stark contrast to the elaborate menu that Marie insists on making for Anthony's family. Though this difference may seem minor, it could imply—at least in Anthony's mind—that this person and their family are more focused on spending time together than on impressing one another. His family, on the other hand, is highly critical and difficult to please. Given that Anthony longed to go home with the stranger, this seems to be the sort of easygoing family he wishes he could be part of. In particular, his description of wanting to curl up in the backseat is similar to the way that a child, or even a dog, might ride in a car. This subtly implies that Anthony wants to be unconditionally loved and nurtured in the way people tend to treat young children or beloved pets—treatment that his parents and Marie don't seem willing to give him.



Anthony's mother has no idea what her grandchildren want for Christmas, which implies that she doesn't have a particularly close relationship with them—or, by extension, with Anthony's sister. The way she frets over how expensive the gift is (rather than if it's personal or heartfelt enough) perhaps suggests that she hopes to buy Tom's affection if she gives him an extravagant enough present.



Wanting to escape the conversation, Anthony goes to help Marie in the kitchen; she looks furious as she orders him to pit some cherries. Her hand is wrist-deep inside a Christmas ham, and she explains that she's removing the fat and skin to rid the meal of cholesterol. "Disgusting," she says as she throws the fat in the trash. Anthony can hear that Marie's voice is edging toward high-pitched "hysteria"—once their guests have gone home, her anger will boil over. He gently tells her to calm down and offers to arrange the ham on a platter so that she can sit down. But Marie just scrubs the grease off her hands and tells him that she hates the color of the lounge suite.

Marie refuses to go back into the lounge room alone, even though she stands alone in front of a courtroom all week. Anthony, determined to stay positive, offers to accompany her and pit the cherries out there instead. He jokes that this will make his mother happy, since it'll give her something to criticize, and Marie flashes him "the ghost of an old smile." Anthony misses this genuine smile, which Marie rarely shows because she hates her crooked tooth. In all of their wedding pictures, Marie has on "the other smile," close-lipped and composed, that she's trained herself to do. Anthony still has an old vacation photo of her somewhere, wearing a snorkel mask and grinning unabashedly.

Last week, when Anthony and Marie had their first appointment with a fertility specialist, Marie told the doctor, "I'm doing everything right: diet, exercise, monitoring ovulation." She sounded artificially calm. The specialist explained that conception can take time, but Marie firmly told him that they were ready for "conception enhancement." To Anthony, this sounded more like converting to Scientology than conceiving a child.

Marie's "hysteria" over the Christmas meal again characterizes her as someone who needs to feel in control—and when she doesn't, she suppresses her emotions until her anger finally erupts. This tense dynamic shuts down any productive communication between her and Anthony, further adding to the responsibility Anthony feels to remain calm and keep the peace between them. In addition, Marie's comment about the lounge suite again shows that she's preoccupied with curating an image that's well-manicured and enviable to other people. Yet, judging by this bitter exchange between her and Anthony, their relationship doesn't match up with the appearance Marie wants to present—and buying a different color lounge suite won't solve their problems.



That Anthony misses Marie's "old smile" suggests that he also misses what the smile represents: the happy, unselfconscious woman Marie used to be. Now, Marie has adopted an artificially cold, composed persona that makes it difficult for her and Anthony to authentically connect. Their relationship is no longer founded on genuineness and vulnerability, and as a result, Anthony longs for who Marie used to be rather than enjoying his relationship with her in the present.



Just prior to this passage, the story alluded to the fact that Marie is a lawyer—and her approach to conceiving a baby isn't all that different from a legal battle. She seems to believe that she'll be guaranteed the outcome she wants as long as she does "everything right" and presents a strong case to the doctor. This, of course, isn't realistic, since fertility issues are often complex and difficult to treat. Trying to control the conception process makes it seem forced and unnatural rather than exciting, which is perhaps why "conception enhancement" sounds so foreign and even sinister to Anthony. Notably, though, Anthony doesn't voice his own opinion about their fertility problems or about parenthood more generally, which raises the question of if he even wants to have a child. It's possible that he's going along with the fertility treatments because he feels trapped and unable to contradict Marie, much like his dynamic with his mother.



Presently, Anthony takes the bowl of cherries into the lounge room and begins pitting the fruit at the dining table. As Marie rifles for a suitable CD to play, Anthony's mother warns him not to stain his shirt with cherry juice; then, unable to resist interfering, she offers to pit the cherries for him. But Anthony says that he's enjoying it, and he begins to daydream as he does the meditative task.

Anthony remembers eating cherries on the back step with his sister, Margaret, when they were children. They'd collect the pits to play a rhyming game about who they'd marry, using the song "Tinker, Tailor." Margaret would count out just enough pits to get through "tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor" to "rich man" in the song, but Anthony would sneakily add more to her pile so that she'd get "poor man" instead. Now, Anthony thinks that the rhyme came true: Margaret and her husband, Ian, are struggling financially, which Anthony has promised to keep secret from their parents. He feels guilty about his big new house, which is probably why he's overcompensating with Christmas presents this year.

As Anthony continues pitting cherries, he thinks that the pits are like gallbladder stones. He remembers how once, when he'd had a bad cold, he got the fluid in his ears syringed out at the doctor. A hard ball of earwax—the same shape and size as a cherry pit—fell out and audibly plopped onto the dish next to his ear. He'd been shocked that something so solid could have been stuck and slowly accumulating inside his body for so long, and even more surprised by the new clarity of sound as the water drained out of his ear.

Presently, Anthony's mother apologizes to Marie for the "silly little gift" they got her—Marie and Anthony are difficult to buy for, she says, since they already have everything they need. Marie gives a "gracious, close-lipped smile" and says that they worked hard to furnish the house to their liking. Anthony absentmindedly agrees and then thinks that kids today wouldn't understand the "Tinker, Tailor" song—they'd have to modernize it to "[IT, banker, accountant, defence-force personnel...human-resources manager.](#)"

Again, although Anthony's mother isn't overtly rude here, her warning implies that she doesn't think Anthony is competent enough to complete a simple task like pitting cherries. This is another example of how Anthony's mother criticizes her son even while putting forth a veneer of polite concern, likely making him feel infantilized and disrespected.



This memory harkens back to Anthony's desire to go home with the person ahead of him in line at the grocery store. Both indicate that he finds comfort in the ease and simplicity of childhood, perhaps because his current family dynamic is so stifling and difficult to navigate. Judging by Marie's career as a lawyer (as well as details like the new lounge suite and the elaborate food Marie is making), she and Anthony seem to be quite well-off. Yet their marriage is far from perfect, and in fact, their wealth makes Anthony feel guilty rather than happy or fulfilled. This begins to suggest that money can't buy happiness—and, in fact, it can be a major source of shame.



Although the blockage in Anthony's ear was literal, his memory of it alludes to figurative obstacles in his life. The wax that built up in his ear is similar to how his problems have subtly and gradually accumulated over time—now, he's ended up with a family, a marriage, and indeed an entire lifestyle that don't seem to suit him. These things muffle Anthony's own sense of self, much like the blockage in his ear muffled sound.



Anthony's mother's comment about Marie and Anthony having everything they need could be taken as a joke or even a compliment on the surface. But given Anthony's previous description of her "puzzled faux-innocence," it's likely that she intends this as a veiled insult, perhaps insinuating that Marie and Anthony's wealth makes them shallow or arrogant. In this sense, money is again shown to be a source of guilt and conflict in Anthony's family. Readers also know from Anthony's thoughts earlier in the story that Marie's "gracious, close-lipped smile" isn't genuine. Both Marie and Anthony's mother, then, are hiding what they really mean behind a veneer of politeness, adding another layer of unspoken tension to this family gathering. Meanwhile, Anthony's reflection about "Tinker, Tailor" hints that he's cynical about modern career paths (as opposed to the more traditional professions in the original song), perhaps because he's dissatisfied with his own job.



Then, Anthony remembers how Marie used to call him “Ant,” and he wonders when it switched to Anthony; the new name matches their fancy new house. He’d felt “nauseating disbelief” when he signed the mortgage, and he thinks of his signature on the title to the house “slumping below the dotted lines like a failing ECG.” Just then, the doorbell rings, and Anthony eagerly goes to greet Margaret, Ian, Hannah, and Tom.

Anthony seems to miss the nickname “Ant,” which he associates with the person he was before he and Marie purchased their new, expensive home. In this sense, achieving the material trappings of success has made Anthony unhappy rather than fulfilled. Equating signing the mortgage with illness and a flatlined heartbeat even suggests that living this lifestyle has brought about a kind of emotional or spiritual death for Anthony. He no longer feels like his true self, just as he no longer feels like Marie is the same joyful, authentic person she was years ago.



Later that afternoon, when lunch is almost finished, Anthony feels more relaxed. Through the viewfinder of his digital camera, he looks at his family sitting around the dining room table. His mother (who’s become “maudlin” after a few drinks) encourages him to turn on the camera’s timer and pose for the photo with the rest of them, since they rarely get together like this. She dabs a tear away and muses, “Time goes so fast.”

Anthony’s mother only becomes “maudlin” (oversentimental) when she’s drunk, which contrasts with how closed-off and unaffectionate she is when she’s sober. She’s seemingly upset about the fact that she doesn’t see her children and grandchildren very often and that time seems to be running out. Yet readers know that this dynamic is, at least in part, a result of her refusal to openly share her emotions—instead, she manipulates her loved ones into feeling guilty or incompetent. This implies that if Anthony’s mother were to be open with her emotions and show her family unconditional love rather than disapproval, they would perhaps be closer than they are.



Anthony stares through the viewfinder and shifts the camera around. From one angle, Margaret looks frumpy and sad compared to the beautiful Marie; from another, she looks easygoing and warm next to Marie’s cold expression. As the image moves back and forth, it shows “how she sees them and how they see her, this life and that life, with Anthony in the middle.” As Anthony takes the picture, he notices Hannah and Tom’s strained, obedient smiles and wonders where people learn to do that.

When Anthony looks through the camera’s viewfinder, he’s able to see his family from “the middle”—that is, from an impartial outsider’s perspective. He perceives “how [Margaret] sees [Anthony and Marie] and how they see her.” In other words, he can see both how one might view Anthony and Marie as happier and better-off than Margaret (since they have more money and are perhaps more conventionally attractive), but also how Margaret looks genuinely happy while Marie actually looks miserable. That Anthony is able to recognize this perhaps hints that he longs for the sort of genuine warmth that Marie lacks, and that Margaret emanates. Moreover, his reflection about Hannah and Tom’s posed smiles suggests that he feels disillusioned by people’s tendency to be inauthentic for the sake of maintaining appearances and pleasing other people.



After lunch, Anthony takes Tom aside to talk “man to man.” Anthony notices that Tom is trying hard to behave. His heart wrenches when he realizes that the “good clothes” his niece and nephew are wearing are probably what they got for Christmas that morning. He asks Tom to play with the gift Anthony’s mother got him instead of the one Anthony got him. Tom asks why, and Anthony wonders why, too—his mother, after all, has behaved rudely all day.

Nevertheless, Anthony explains that his mother tried hard to get Tom something he’ll like, and that he can play with the present Anthony got him any time after today. When Anthony mentions that the gift he got Tom requires a TV, Tom says that if it’s a Wii, their TV at home probably doesn’t have the right attachment because it’s too old. At this, Anthony starts brainstorming ways to gently suggest that Margaret take one of the many plasma TVs he owns. He has to stop himself from hugging Tom, who’s “too troubled for a ten-year-old” and is clearly trying to act properly in this midst of “all those deadly rays.”

Later, when the family exchanges gifts, Anthony winks at Tom as he opens the walkie-talkies and enthusiastically thanks his grandmother. Anthony hopes that his mother will keep quiet, but of course, she begins to lecture Tom about being careful with the expensive toys. She hardly notices when Tom gives her a “muted kiss” on her cheek, and Anthony thinks that she only likes babies, since they haven’t learned not to trust her yet.

The fact that Tom and Hannah likely got “good clothes” for Christmas is indicative of Margaret and Ian’s financial struggles, since they have to prioritize basic necessities like clothing over toys or other presents. Anthony’s emotional reaction to this again implies that his wealth makes him feel guilty, especially when he realizes how much more he has than his sister and her children. On another note, Anthony’s “man to man” talk with Tom suggests that he feels a unique kinship with his nephew, given that he hasn’t spoken candidly with any of his other family members during this party.



Anthony sees himself as the family peacekeeper, so he wants to placate his mother and ensure that her feelings aren’t hurt. This could be interpreted as an act of kindness, but it also ensures that his mother won’t be confronted about her hurtful behavior and thus perpetuates the family’s pattern of inauthentic communication. In this way, what Anthony is asking of Tom is a short-term solution, not a long-term one. The dilemma about the TV, meanwhile, is yet another instance in which Anthony’s affluence becomes a source of guilt and tension rather than something that brings him happiness. His reflections about Tom being “too troubled for a ten-year-old” amid “all those deadly rays” perhaps hints that he sees himself in his nephew: both of them are “troubled” by things that shouldn’t necessarily be their responsibility, and both fall victim to Anthony’s mother and Marie’s “deadly rays.” But Anthony feels that he has to stop himself from hugging Tom, perhaps because his family’s closed-off, unaffectionate dynamic makes any intimate gesture seem off-limits.



Tom’s affection toward Anthony’s mother is “muted” and dutiful rather than genuine, perhaps because he senses that his grandmother isn’t particularly interested in him—only in letting everyone know how much she spent on the gift. In this way, money is hindrance rather than an asset to their relationship, as it overshadows any genuine connection they could potentially have. Meanwhile, Anthony suggests that his mother is only interested in babies, not older children—and it’s possible that knowing this makes Anthony feel pressured to have a baby of his own, regardless of whether or not he wants to be a father. His reflection that people learn not to trust his mother is yet another indication that Anthony’s relationship with her is devoid of honesty and authenticity, which makes their relationship stressful rather than comforting and fulfilling.



Then, Anthony looks over at Marie and thinks about her endless kilometers on the exercise bike and obsessive research about sperm motility, as though conception is “a case they have to win.” He wonders if she even loves him.

Again, Marie vents her anger privately (here, through exercise) rather than openly discussing problems with Anthony, which has clearly strained their relationship. Marie researches their fertility issues as though it's “a case they have to win,” meaning that she's approaching conception in the same methodical, businesslike way that she would approach her work as a lawyer. In this way, she's trying to do the impossible: taking the emotional aspect out of an undertaking that's inherently emotional and personal. This makes Anthony even more alienated from their conception process and from Marie, to the point that he feels entirely unloved and dissatisfied with their relationship.



Suddenly realizing that the walkie-talkies need batteries, Anthony slyly tears into one corner of the wrapped Wii and takes out the batteries he included in there for the remote. Hannah doesn't want to play with Tom, so Anthony jumps up and eagerly volunteers to join his nephew. He knows that, in his absence, the conversation will center on him: Margaret will “keep the peace[]” and say that Anthony is “great with kids,” while his mother will criticize him for his immaturity despite his career success. He doesn't know which side Marie will take.

Anthony's eagerness to escape the party again speaks to how stifled he feels around his family due to their lack of support or open communication. He knows that Margaret will have to “keep the peace” when he leaves the room, as his mother (and likely Marie) will be critical rather than supportive of him in his absence. Playing with Tom appeals to him, though, seemingly because his nephew is one of the few family members he can genuinely connect with. Furthermore, Margaret thinks that Anthony is “great with kids,” which perhaps suggests that Anthony does want to become a father—but not in the forced, controlled way that Marie wants him to.



Outside, Anthony and Tom rush outside to opposite ends of the property. Anthony staggers awkwardly across the rocks that they paid a landscaper to lay down in the garden, thinking that the promise of “zero care” proved right. He and Tom both switch on their walkie-talkies, and he giddily addresses Tom as “Agent Two.” Anthony moves his arm to clear the **static** emitting from his handset, and he thinks that “Rays [...] are holding them together.” Tom replies, “Reading you, Uncle Ant,” and laughs.

Anthony's reflection about the garden needing “zero care” is a subtle parallel to his life with Marie. Despite looking expensive and manicured on the surface, their entire relationship (much like their home and garden) is low-effort and devoid of any real care. His thought that “Rays” are connecting him with Tom points back to his mother and Marie's “Evil Rays,” glances that convey everything that goes unsaid in Anthony's interactions with them. This perhaps hints that his interactions with Tom over the walkie-talkie will similarly convey things that usually go unsaid in Anthony's life.



Anthony asks “Agent Two” for more information about code name “Uncle Ant.” But as he holds up the walkie-talkie to hear “the smile again in his nephew’s voice,” he thinks that he hears Marie’s grating voice instead of Tom’s. He hears her talking to him from her side of their bed, asking him to tell her if he doesn’t actually want a baby so that she can stop wasting her time. His chest tightens as he tries to think of what to say. But then, Tom’s giggling voice comes through again. Anthony looks at the stones under his feet and then at the potted succulents on the patio. He feels his throat close up—he can’t speak.

Anthony then hears “**static** and space” on the walkie-talkie, “a sound like the inside of a shell.” From where he’s standing, he can see into the kitchen, where Marie is arranging mince pies on a platter. Looking at her tense face, he thinks of her voice on the walkie-talkie. At the sudden sound of his own gasp coming through the headset, Anthony thinks, “*pull yourself together.*”

But as Anthony watches Marie dust powdered sugar on the pies, the **static** stops: “something dislodges in him with a delicate gush of pressure, something shifts to let bright sound in.” He’s suddenly sure that no part of him could ever grow inside of Marie’s thin, stiff body.

Anthony’s desire to hear “the smile again in his nephew’s voice” suggests that he feels an easy, enjoyable connection with Tom that he doesn’t experience with his other family members. This hints that Anthony does like children, as Margaret believes, and that he may want to be a father. But from Anthony’s imaginary (or perhaps remembered) exchange with Marie, readers learn that he doesn’t seem to want to have a baby as much as she does. This could be because he has doubts about becoming a parent, which is arguably justified given his strained relationship with his own parents. But more likely, it’s because he has doubts about his marriage. Anthony’s speechlessness after this shows how difficult it is for him to openly express himself even about things that matter deeply to him—likely because Marie and his mother have made him feel like he doesn’t have the option to do so.



Here, the “static and space” on the walkie-talkie hearken back to Anthony’s memory of his blocked ear, which is anatomically similar to “the inside of a shell.” The static, like the wax that was lodged in Anthony’s ear, prevents him from hearing clearly. This symbolizes the gap in communication between Anthony and his family members, which prevents him from “hearing”—that is, perceiving and understanding—his relationships or his own desires clearly.



Here, Anthony experiences a sensation that’s very similar to when the doctor removed the built-up wax from his ear: in both cases, a blockage is dislodged to “let bright sound in.” It’s important that the static on the walkie-talkie dissipates at the same moment he realizes that he’ll never be able to have a baby with Marie. This suggests that just as Anthony is able to literally hear more clearly, he’s also able to figuratively hear his own desires with newfound clarity. Up until this point, Anthony has felt criticized and pressured by his mother and Marie to believe certain things about himself (that he’ll “never grow up” or that he has to have a child on Marie’s terms, for instance). Now, just as Anthony can suddenly hear more clearly, he has a sudden moment of clarity that he is, in fact, in control of his own life.



Tom's voice, now crystal-clear, comes through on the walkie-talkie again, asking, "Agent One?" He sounds as though he's wondering if Anthony has given up on their game. As Anthony watches Marie douse the pies with far too much sugar, he hastily replies that he's been ambushed and needs assistance. But Tom says that he can't hear Anthony clearly, and more **static** emits from the line.

Anthony thinks he hears Tom ask if they can go inside and play with the Wii now. He wants to say yes—he wants to end the day meaningfully by "los[ing] himself" in video games with the kids and taking Margaret and Ian aside to offer them the TV. But all he can say is "Man down. Mayday."

Anthony knows that Tom will come looking for him in a few seconds; he needs to stand up and get himself together so that he can "blame the **static**" for his spotty communication. But he's suddenly fixated on the succulents on the patio: they look exactly the same as when they were planted six months ago, as if they haven't grown. "Zero care," Anthony thinks again. The plants are tough and unforgiving, impervious to "neglect and drought." Setting his walkie-talkie down, Anthony reaches a finger out and presses down hard on one of the sharp spines. He wants to see a drop of blood well up like it's supposed to, "as if he needs proof that such things are real."

Anthony hears Tom's voice immediately after his epiphany, which could imply that his connection with his nephew is what led him to realize that he doesn't want to have a child with Marie. It seems that Anthony may have recognized (at least subconsciously) that this sort of effortless, authentic dynamic is what he wants in a family—as opposed to the forced, closed-off, controlling dynamic he has with Marie and his mother. The powdered sugar that Marie is heaping onto the pies can be read as a symbol of the more figurative sweetness and faux politeness that Marie and Anthony's mother tend to express in lieu of their true feelings. The static on the walkie-talkie returns just after Anthony notices this, which suggests that Marie's tendency to figuratively sugarcoat things and sweep problems under the rug plays a role in deafening Anthony to his own desires.



Simple gestures like playing video games with his niece and nephew, or offering a TV to Margaret and Ian, are meaningful to Anthony. In this way, he seems to want a family that simply enjoys supporting and spending quality time with one another—a stark contrast to the dynamic that readers have seen play out in the story. But again, Anthony has felt so stifled for so long that he is unable to express what he wants.



The succulents require "zero care"—they, just like the rocks in Anthony and Marie's garden, represent Anthony and Marie's neglected relationship. The succulents are seemingly unflappable and can't be hurt by "neglect and drought," which is similar to how unfeeling Marie is on the surface—even in the face of major struggles like infertility. Moreover, the plants, like Anthony and Marie's relationship, have stagnated in their growth. Anthony pricks his finger with the succulent to draw blood "as if he needs proof that such things are real." In other words, he wants to remind himself that he's alive, since he feels so stifled in his marriage and in his family that he's become numb. And while Anthony realizes that he feels this way and that he doesn't want to have a child with Marie, his instinct is to "blame the static" for his strange behavior, which implies that he's still keeping his feelings hidden and acting as the peacekeeper in his family. The story ends on ambiguous note, then: it's unclear whether Anthony's epiphany will stick and encourage him to pursue creating a family that makes him genuinely happy, or if he'll continue to repress his emotions and remain dissatisfied.





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