

The Dream House



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CRAIG HIGGINSON

Craig Higginson was born in 1971 in the city of Salisbury (renamed Harare in 1982), the capital of the unrecognized Republic of Rhodesia (1965-1979), which is equivalent to modern Zimbabwe. In 1976, Higginson's family moved to Johannesburg, South Africa to escape the political conflict that came before Zimbabwe's independence. From ten to fourteen years of age, Craig Higginson attended a boarding school in KwaZulu-Natal, a province in eastern South Africa. Near the boarding school lived an elderly couple with a farmhouse; Higginson later used the couple as loose inspiration for Patricia and Richard Wiley in his play *Dream of the Dog* (2007) and his novel *The Dream House* (2015). After attending the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, Higginson moved to England, where he lived for a decade while working in theater. While in England he published his first novel, *Embodied Laughter* (1998). Since moving back to South Africa in 2004, he has published five more novels and written or co-written seven plays. Currently he lives in Johannesburg.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From the late 1940s to the early 1990s, South Africa enforced racial segregation and white supremacy through a set of laws known as apartheid. Under apartheid, South Africans were sorted into legally defined racial groups: white, Black/African, or "coloured" (i.e., mixed race or non-white and non-Black). Which racial group South Africans belonged to determined where they could live, where they could work, and whom they could pursue romantically—sex or marriage between white and non-white people was illegal in South Africa from 1949 to 1985. In the early 1990s, apartheid laws were slowly repealed. Then, from April 26 to April 29, 1994, South Africa held its first elections in which no restrictions were placed on voting according to voters' race. Famous anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela became South Africa's president—and the first Black person to be South Africa's head of state. Notably, *The Dream House* takes place after apartheid's end, but apartheid still affects the characters' lives. All the major characters grew up under apartheid. Of the major Black characters, only Looksmart, who received a good education due to white Patricia Wiley's intervention, has become economically successful after apartheid's end; the rest of the Black characters, without Looksmart's educational opportunities, have remained poor. Moreover, the apartheid-era violent death of Black farm worker Grace—never investigated, it is implied, due to white policemen's racism and indifference—hangs over

the post-apartheid events in the novel.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Dream House (2015) is a novelistic reworking of *Dream of the Dog* (2007), Craig Higginson's first solo play. Both the play's and the novel's plots center around characters' differing accounts and memories of a shocking crime. Higginson may have been inspired by Japanese writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa's 1922 short story "In A Bamboo Grove," which filmmaker Akira Kurosawa made internationally famous when he adapted it into the award-winning 1950 film *Rashomon*. Like *The Dream House*, "In A Bamboo Grove" retells the story of a murder through different characters' unreliable, conflicting accounts—without ever representing the murder directly or revealing to the reader whether any character's account is accurate. Another South African writer, Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014), who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991, may also have influenced *The Dream House*. Though the novel was published after Gordimer's death, she read and commented on it for Craig Higginson when it was in manuscript form. Moreover, Gordimer's sixth novel *The Conservationist* (1974), somewhat like *The Dream House*, dramatizes the relationship between a white South African farm owner and Black farm workers when a Black person dies on the farm.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Dream House
- **When Written:** 2007–2015
- **Where Written:** South Africa
- **When Published:** 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realism
- **Setting:** KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
- **Climax:** Beauty tells Patricia that Richard set his dog on Grace because Grace was pregnant with his child.
- **Antagonist:** Richard Wiley
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Very Meta. Early in *The Dream House*, farmer owner Patricia Wiley discovers an old ticket for a play called *Dream of the Dog* among her things. *Dream of the Dog* is Craig Higginson's first solo-authored play, on which *The Dream House* is based.

isiZulu. Zulu, also called isiZulu, is one of South Africa's official languages. Craig Higginson worked with two translators, Jacob

Ntshangase and Babongile Zulu, to make sure the isiZulu dialogue in *The Dream House* was accurate.



PLOT SUMMARY

Patricia Wiley, an elderly white South African woman, has sold the farm where she lives with her husband Richard (who suffers from dementia) to developers. The day before they're supposed to move, Patricia asks her Black servant Beauty to inform her driver, Bheki, that Patricia wants to visit John Ford. Bheki drives Patricia to John's in her **car**, an ancient Mercedes. While chatting with John, a retired headmaster, Patricia recalls how she first met and began an affair with him when she brought a Black boy from the farm, Looksmart, for a school interview. John gives Patricia a letter and asks her not to read it until she leaves town. Back home, Patricia sees Richard headed outside with a spade and worries he'll dig up Rachel's grave.

Looksmart, now an adult, works for the developers who have bought the Wileys' farm. Driving to visit the farm, he wonders whether he's going there to see the Wileys or Grace and whether he has enough hatred left for the encounter he's planning with Patricia.

In the evening, Patricia hears the **house's** back door open. Looksmart enters and is surprised to see that the Wileys still have the **dog**. Patricia, not recognizing him, asks which dog. When he says Chloe, Patricia tells him Chloe's dead—their current dog is no relation. Looksmart replies "it's still the same dog" and tells Patricia who he is. She cries out in happiness. Later, Beauty enters. After Looksmart begins talking to her, she admits she recognizes him—but she thinks that he, like the memory of her sister Grace, sickens her. She thinks if either he or Patricia would really look at her, they might see secret knowledge in her eyes—but they don't look. Beauty leaves to find Richard.

Looksmart says he knows the Wileys are moving and asks whether Richard is sad. Patricia tells Looksmart that Richard is losing his mind. Looksmart points out that though Patricia makes the Wileys' situation sound gloomy, they must have made money from the farm. Patricia says they're in debt—Richard was a bad farmer—and asks why Looksmart cares anymore. Looksmart asks whether Patricia thinks the past matters and. Then, noting how angry he is that Beauty still works for the Wileys after what happened, he asks whether Patricia remembers Grace. Patricia says Grace was a girl who died on the farm. Looksmart says Grace was murdered. The day she died, she was planning to ask the Wileys for time off work so she could get married. That afternoon, on the veranda, Looksmart and Patricia heard a scream and saw Richard's dog Chloe chasing Grace.

When Patricia asks Looksmart whether he was the person Grace planned to marry, he runs outside and vomits. Bheki

approaches, asking whether Looksmart is okay.

Looksmart—who feels secret contempt for Bheki's position as Patricia's servant—chats with him. When Bheki explains he's moving with the Wileys because he can't find help for his disabled son near the farm, Looksmart reveals he works for the developers who bought the farm and offers to help Bheki's son if Bheki takes a job with his company.

Looksmart sees Patricia has come out onto the veranda in a wheelchair. After wheeling her back inside, he says he can't forgive her because she didn't want Grace's blood getting on her Mercedes, which delayed getting Grace to the hospital. He reveals that as Grace was dying, she told him Richard set the dog on her after raping her in the dairy. Beauty witnessed it. Patricia denies she was worried about her car. When Looksmart insists Patricia's behavior toward Grace proves she never valued Looksmart, Patricia admits she doesn't remember what she was thinking the day Grace died.

When Beauty reenters the house, Patricia demands the whole truth about Grace's death. Haltingly, Beauty explains that she saw Richard and Grace on the dairy floor, Grace running away, and Richard unchaining the dog. Looksmart asks leading questions and adds his own embellishments to Beauty's story. Once she finishes, Patricia promises her she won't have to talk about Grace's death again.

In the kitchen of the Wileys' house, Beauty opens the door to find Richard standing there. She leads him away and hides him.

In the sitting room, Patricia asks Looksmart what he wants now. He says he wants her to remember Grace's death and not just retire happily. Patricia says she may understand Looksmart's grief. She married Richard because he'd impregnated her; she wasn't happy during her marriage until she started seeing to Looksmart's education and he began spending time around the farm. When Looksmart demands to know what happened to Patricia's son, Patricia—taken aback—says she had a daughter, Rachel, who was born dead. Patricia never had living children, yet Looksmart was like her son. She invites him to come visit her during her seaside retirement. Somewhat sadly, he says their odd, quasi-parent-child relationship shouldn't exist in the new South Africa.

Richard, remembering his goal of digging up Rachel, flees Beauty. He tries to unearth Rachel but can't find her. Later, he walks into the Wileys' house, finds Patricia and Looksmart, and tells a disturbing joke about his uncle raping his daughter. When Looksmart says he's glad never to meet this uncle, Richard says, once upon a time, he could have had Looksmart whipped. Rather than retaliate, Looksmart says goodbye to Patricia. She asks whether he'll visit her in retirement; he lies and says he will. Then he leaves. Patricia, furious, demands Richard say Rachel's and Grace's names and confess what he did to Grace. Richard says "she" lied and "it" didn't have a name. When Patricia tries to determine what he means, he calls her a slur. She yells at him to go.

The next morning, Patricia asks Beauty and Bheki to dig up Rachel's coffin and pack it so she can reinter it at a church. Bheki, disgusted at the task, is glad he's decided to take Looksmart up on his offer to get Bheki a new job. The same morning, Patricia receives a phone call asking her to go to John's—he killed himself and mentioned her in his note. At John's, Patricia talks to a policewoman, views the body, and leaves.

In his letter to Patricia, John wrote he regrets many things in his life, but not their affair, which seemed to him a truthful experience. Pondering the letter at home while Bheki loads the car, Patricia gets angry: her affair with John was *not* truthful, and he chose to be insincere in his final letter. When Beauty comes out onto the veranda, Patricia begs her to tell the whole truth. Beauty admits Grace never loved Looksmart and repeatedly had sex with Richard for money; Richard murdered her because he'd impregnated her and she wouldn't abort. Patricia asks why she should believe Beauty's version of events and not Looksmart's. Beauty replies that Patricia will have to decide for herself.

As Bheki drives Patricia, Richard, and Beauty away from the farm, they pass Looksmart's car in the driveway. The cars stop and roll down their windows. Patricia gives the house keys to Bheki, who tosses them to Looksmart; then the cars drive their separate ways.



CHARACTERS

Patricia Wiley – Patricia Wiley, one of *The Dream House's* three main characters, is a humorous, self-centered, elderly white woman living with her husband Richard Wiley on a farm in post-apartheid South Africa. She met Richard after her father hired him to manage the family's farm. Having only married Richard because he impregnated her, Patricia grew unhappy in her marriage due to her daughter Rachel's stillbirth and Richard's repeated affairs. Later, Patricia became emotionally invested in Looksmart, a Black child born on the farm, and arranged for his education—which is how she met John Ford, then an English teacher, with whom she began a long-term affair. Patricia's passionate attachments to Rachel and Looksmart contrast with her relative coolness to Richard and John, showing how Patricia feels maternal love much more strongly than romantic love. Looksmart left the farm and cut off contact with Patricia when he was 19, a decision Patricia fails to understand. When the novel begins, Looksmart returns and confronts Patricia with the claim that during apartheid, Richard raped and murdered a Black dairy worker named Grace, who was the sister of Patricia's domestic employee Beauty. Patricia's lack of suspicion about Grace's death—she thought it was an accident—shows how the racial and economic privilege she had under apartheid blinded her to reality and destroyed her relationship with Looksmart. When Patricia questions Beauty

about Grace, however, Beauty tells a slightly different story: Richard killed Grace not because she resisted his sexual assault, but because she was pregnant with his child after paid consensual sex and refused an abortion. Patricia's thwarted desire for the whole, unambiguous truth about the past shows how, in the novel, fallible memories and lies make the truth hard to access. Moreover, Patricia's failure at the novel's end to rekindle her relationship with Looksmart shows that the world of the novel believes that new beginnings can't exist because the past always impinges on the present.

Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu) – Looksmart, another of *The Dream House's* three main characters, is an intelligent, tormented Black man who lives in Johannesburg with his wife, daughters, and elderly mother. During apartheid, his mother moved to Patricia Wiley's farm while pregnant with him. As a child, Looksmart skipped so many grades that a teacher suggested he transfer to a better school. Patricia arranged the transfer and began treating him like a son. As a teenager, Looksmart fell in love with Grace, a Black dairy worker, and wanted to marry her—but then Richard Wiley set a **dog** on her, killing her. Knowing white Richard wouldn't face justice for killing Black Grace, Looksmart left the farm. After apartheid ended, he became economically successful, married, and had two daughters—but though he loves his daughters, he doesn't love his wife and remains haunted by Grace. After Patricia puts her farm up for sale, he goes to confront her and reveal what he believes to be the truth about Grace's death: Richard killed Grace because she ran away while he was raping her. Oddly, Looksmart seems less interested in holding Richard accountable for having killed Grace than in holding Patricia accountable for having hesitated before letting Looksmart drive Grace to the hospital in her new **car**. Patricia's hesitation destroyed Looksmart's confidence in Patricia's love; his focus on this, not the murder, suggests the loss of Patricia's maternal love traumatized him more than the loss of Grace. Together with Looksmart's love for his own daughters, his fixation on Patricia shows that parent-child love matters more to him than romance. Looksmart leaves the farm convinced he has forced Patricia to confront the whole truth. The next day, however, Beauty tells Patricia Grace never intended to marry Looksmart and was having sex with Richard for money—and that Richard killed Grace because she was pregnant and refused to have an abortion. Looksmart's and Beauty's conflicting stories suggest not only that truth about the past is difficult to access but that Looksmart's male privilege and educational privilege may have blinded him to who Grace was: a working-class person with a life and desires independent from his.

Beauty (Togo) – Beauty, the third of *The Dream House's* main characters, is a plain-looking Black South African woman in her late thirties who works for Patricia Wiley and Richard Wiley. Her family lives on the Wileys' farm, where she grew up. Her older, prettier sister Grace died after Richard's **dog** mauled her

when Beauty was a child. Beauty, who knows Richard set the dog on Grace, fears him. Yet she also cares for him as he descends into dementia and tries to protect him by hiding him from Grace's former suitor Looksmart when Looksmart returns to the farm after a long absence. Beauty is in love with Bheki, Patricia's driver. Though she knows he doesn't love her back, she isn't interested in a romantic relationship with anyone else and has reconciled herself to being alone. When Looksmart reappears the night before the Wileys are supposed to move away from the farm, both he and Patricia demand Beauty recount what she knows about Grace's death.

Looksmart—whom Beauty dislikes and finds arrogant—takes the fragmented, ambiguous story Beauty tells as confirmation of his own belief that Richard killed Grace because she ran away while he was raping her. When Patricia asks Beauty for the whole truth after Looksmart has left, however, Beauty says Grace had been having consensual sex with Richard for money and Richard killed her because she was pregnant and refused to have an abortion. When Patricia asks why Beauty didn't leave the farm after Richard killed Grace, Beauty replies that her family lived on the farm and her job there was good. Since Beauty's account of Grace's murder is the last word on the subject, the novel seems to suggest that Beauty, who lacks all social privilege due to her race, gender, and socioeconomic status, can see the truth more clearly than Patricia and Looksmart, whose privileges blind them. At the novel's end, Beauty moves with the Wileys to continue working for them in their retirement.

Richard Wiley – Richard Wiley is Patricia Wiley's husband, Beauty and Bheki's employer, and stillborn Rachel's father. He emigrated to South Africa from Yorkshire, England, got a job managing Patricia's father's farm, and began a sexual relationship with Patricia. Though Patricia found Richard attractive at the time—he was blond, blue-eyed, and adept at flattering women—they had little in common, and she only married him because he impregnated her. During their marriage, he pursued a series of young Englishwomen whom he hired to work in the farm's stables. Patricia knew about these affairs; though initially Richard's infidelity hurt her, she later used it to justify her affair with John Ford. Due to Richard's overt anti-Black racism, Patricia did not suspect he was also pursuing one of the farm's Black dairy workers, Beauty's older sister Grace. Toward apartheid's end, Richard set a **dog** on Grace that killed her. Looksmart—a Black man who grew up on the farm and loved Grace—believes Richard killed Grace because she escaped while he was raping her. Beauty, however, tells Patricia that Richard killed Grace because she became pregnant from consensual, paid sex and wouldn't have an abortion. By the time Patricia learns that Richard killed Grace, he can no longer tell her why—he's suffering from dementia and spends most of the novel instinctively attempting to dig up his baby Rachel's bones. Richard's memory loss highlights the novel's theme that memory is fallible and, making it difficult to

know the truth about the past. His occasional incoherent comments about “two dead children” on the farm, however, do imply that he knew Grace was pregnant when he killed her. If, as Beauty claims, Richard killed Grace because she was pregnant and not because she resisted his advances, that motive reinforces the novel's repeated suggestions that, deep down, people care more about parent-child relationships than they do about romance. At the novel's end, Patricia tells Beauty that she is going to put Richard in a home, implicitly as punishment for his murder of Grace.

Bheki – Bheki, Patricia Wiley's driver and gardener, is a taciturn, late-middle-aged Black man who wears “impeccable blue overalls.” According to Patricia, she offered to get him a good education while he was growing up on the Wileys' farm but, when he showed more interest in cars than school, taught him to drive instead. Bheki knows that the Wileys' domestic employee Beauty has been in love with him for a long time, and though he finds her adoration gratifying, he's not at all attracted to her and has never returned her affection. Late in life he married a woman named Phumelele, with whom he has a young disabled son, Bongani. At the novel's beginning, he is planning to move away to the city Durban with the Wileys, because he believes he'll be able to get help for Bongani in an urban area that isn't available near the Wileys' farm. Though successful, educated Looksmart holds Bheki in contempt for serving Patricia all his life, Looksmart nevertheless offers to help Bheki get a new job and help for Bongani on the farm so he doesn't have to keep working for the Wileys. Bheki is convinced by Looksmart's argument that Black South Africans should support each other rather than accept white people's charity. At the novel's end, Bheki drives the Wileys to Durban, though he plans to quit and return to the farm, where Looksmart will get him a job.

Grace (Noma) – Grace was a young Black dairy worker on Patricia Wiley's farm during the apartheid era. She was Beauty's sister and Looksmart's first love. Toward apartheid's end, Patricia's husband Richard Wiley killed her by unchaining a **dog** that mauled her. About 25 years later, Looksmart returns to the Wileys' farm to confront Patricia about Grace's death. Looksmart claims that as Grace was dying, she told him Richard murdered her because she escaped while he was raping her. Later, however, Beauty tells Patricia that Grace was accepting money from Richard in exchange for sex and that Richard murdered her because she wouldn't get an abortion after discovering she was pregnant. Patricia's longstanding ignorance about Grace's death, which she believed was an accident until Looksmart revealed otherwise, shows how Patricia's undeserved racial and economic privilege blind her to ugly realities. Meanwhile, Patricia's inability to discover exactly why Richard murdered Grace—Richard, suffering from dementia, won't or can't explain his past actions, while Looksmart's and Beauty's stories conflict—show how fallible

human memories and people's tendency to lie make it difficult to discover objective truths about the past.

John Ford – John Ford is an elderly white South African man, a retired former schoolteacher and headmaster, and the long-term adulterous lover of Patricia Wiley. They met and experienced an immediate attraction when Patricia brought Looksmart, a highly intelligent Black boy growing up on her farm, to interview with John in preparation for transferring to John's school. Shortly afterward, they began their affair and never really ended it, though they stopped having sex about 15 years in. Good-looking, well-read, and ostentatiously religious, John is also racist, hypocritical, and emotionally withholding. He hit and humiliated Looksmart during Looksmart's schoolyears to "put him in his place." He mocks Patricia's husband Richard Wiley to Patricia while keeping the topic of his own wife, who died during their affair, off-limits between them. When Patricia is preparing to move away, he gives her a letter but tells her not to open it until she's reached her destination—hiding from her that he's dying of cancer and plans to die by suicide. The morning Patricia intends to move, John's former secretary Mrs. Bell calls and tells Patricia that the police want to talk to her because John mentioned her in his suicide note. After answering the police's questions and viewing the body, Patricia reads John's letter—and ends up finding its false sentimentality and evasiveness infuriating. It may be John's avoidance of the truth, even in death, that motivates Patricia to demand the truth about Grace's death from Beauty one final time.

Looksmart's Mother – Looksmart's mother moved to Patricia Wiley's farm while pregnant with Looksmart. The other farm workers believed Looksmart's father was in prison for some heinous crime. When Looksmart's mother went into labor, Patricia helped midwife the birth. Afterward, Patricia came to visit baby Looksmart in Looksmart's mother's hut every day for weeks. Patricia stopped visiting because she sensed the visits, which "went against the way things were done" between Black and white South Africans during apartheid, made Looksmart's mother uncomfortable. Yet after Looksmart's teacher told his mother that Looksmart was too smart for his current school, Looksmart's mother asked for Patricia's help in arranging a better education for him. Looksmart never told his mother about his plans to marry Grace because he thought his mother would object to his marrying a mere dairy worker after all his education, especially at such a young age. When Looksmart fled the farm after Grace's death, however, Patricia believed Looksmart's mother knew his reasons and intentionally avoided answering Patricia's questions about them. Looksmart's mother herself left the Wileys' farm around 2000. During the novel's present, she lives in a cottage on Looksmart's house's property in Johannesburg.

Patricia's Father – Though dead for about half a century when the novel begins, Patricia's father remains a positive, emotional

memory for Patricia Wiley. She believes him to have been a good, hardworking, friendly man, though his generous love toward her may have left her naïve and unprepared for life's cruel realities. He hired Richard Wiley to manage his farm but disapproved of Richard's marriage to Patricia, agreeing to it only when he learned Patricia was pregnant. He gave Patricia the farm where she and Richard have spent their marriage as a wedding present.

Mrs. Bell – Mrs. Bell was John Ford's secretary when he was headmaster at the fancy school Looksmart attended. She knows about John and Patricia Wiley's long-term affair. After John's suicide, Mrs. Bell calls Patricia to inform her that the police want to speak with her because John mentioned her in his suicide note. Due to Mrs. Bell's nosiness and pleasure at Patricia's discomfort, Patricia wonders whether Mrs. Bell may have loved John or even had an affair with him herself.

Rachel – Rachel is Patricia Wiley and Richard Wiley's only child, born dead at seven months. They buried her near a stand of trees on their farm. Richard, suffering from dementia, spends much of the novel trying to locate Rachel's grave and dig up her bones—an obsessive quest that hints at his grief and guilt over Rachel herself and, possibly, over his murder of Grace while she was pregnant with his child. Toward the novel's end, Patricia asks Beauty and Bheki to disinter Rachel's coffin so that she can rebury Rachel where the Wileys are moving.



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.



PRIVILEGE, UNDERSTANDING, AND HISTORICAL CHANGE

In *The Dream House*, the more privilege characters have, the less perspective they seem to have on life. Patricia Wiley, for example, has lived a life of privilege: she inherited a farm and, despite the farm's lack of success, employs Black workers to attend to her and her husband Richard. She believes that the death of one employee, Black dairy worker Grace, was an accident and that the departure of Looksmart (a young Black man who grew up on the farm and whose education Patricia paid for) is an unrelated mystery. However, Looksmart returns one day when Patricia is in debt and has sold her house. He tells her that Grace's death was *not* an accident: Richard was raping Grace when she got away, so Richard sicced a dog on her. Looksmart loved Grace and planned to marry her but knew he couldn't get justice for her against a white man, which is why he left. Notably, Grace's

murder occurred during apartheid, South Africa's period of legally enforced segregation and white supremacy, but Looksmart doesn't tell Patricia about the murder until after apartheid has ended. It's therefore only after Patricia has lost some undeserved racial privilege due to apartheid's end (and economic privilege due to debt) that she's finally able to see that she has overlooked her husband's violence.

Yet Looksmart may not know the whole truth, either. His privilege as an educated man may have blinded him to what really happened to Grace. Looksmart dismisses Grace's sister Beauty because she's less pretty than Grace and because she continued working for the Wileys after Grace's death. He does not consider that she had fewer opportunities for outside employment than he did, as no one paid to have her educated. After Looksmart leaves, Beauty tells Patricia that Richard didn't rape Grace—he was paying Grace, who was poor and uninterested in marrying Looksmart, for a sexual relationship. He set the dog on her only after discovering she was pregnant. Beauty's version of events is the final version the novel offers, ultimately suggesting that Beauty—the least privileged character—is the only one capable of fully recognizing and understanding the ugly truth about what happened to her sister. In turn, the novel suggests that sometimes a sense of privilege or advantage can enable people to tell themselves narratives that serve their own purposes, thus conveniently deluding themselves as a way of avoiding difficult realities.



TRUTH, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND MEMORY

In *The Dream House*, characters can only hold themselves and each other accountable once they know the truth about the past. However, the characters can only make subjective judgments about what happened in the past, since memory often fails and—to complicate matters—people often lie. From the beginning, the novel makes clear that its characters' memories fail: aging white South African Patricia Wiley can't remember certain facts about her farm, while her husband Richard is losing his memory entirely. When Patricia receives a visit from Looksmart, a Black South African who grew up on the farm, they fight—and lie to each other—about their differing memories: whether Patricia took Looksmart fishing and what they did with the fish; what name Looksmart's mother gave him when he was born; and, most importantly, what happened the day a farm worker named Grace died. Looksmart says that Grace, whom he planned to marry, told him while dying that Richard set a **dog** on her after she escaped his sexual assault. Years later, Looksmart wants to hold Patricia accountable for hesitating to let him drive Grace to the hospital in her **car** because she didn't want blood on the seats. Patricia admits that she can't remember what she was thinking after Grace's attack—and since Looksmart is only inferring from his memories of Patricia's behavior that she

didn't want Grace's blood in her car, neither of them knows for certain how accountable Patricia is for the delay in getting Grace to the hospital, which may have contributed to her death.

Meanwhile, Grace's sister Beauty tells Patricia that Richard didn't sexually assault Grace: they were having consensual sex, for which Richard was paying Grace. Richard set the dog on Grace not because she escaped him, but because she was pregnant and said she wouldn't get an abortion. Beauty's account confirms that Richard is accountable for Grace's death but suggests that Looksmart misunderstood Grace, failing to see the truth because he desired her. When Patricia asks Beauty why Patricia should believe her story over Looksmart's, Beauty says Patricia "must find the truth for" herself. Patricia has to decide how to judge herself and Looksmart based on partial memories and conflicting accounts. In the end, the novel suggests that certain objective truths about the past *do* exist—since Grace really died and Richard really loosed the dog that killed her—but also that individuals have to make subjective judgments about what happened, which often leads to confusion and interpersonal conflict.



PARENTAL LOVE VS. ROMANTIC LOVE

The Dream House compares and contrasts parental love with romantic love, ultimately characterizing the former as substantial and meaningful and the latter as fickle and illusory. The primary relationship in the novel is between Patricia, an elderly white South African farm owner, and Looksmart, a Black South African man who grew up on Patricia's farm. Patricia only married her husband, Richard, because she was pregnant; after their baby Rachel was stillborn, she experienced no happiness with Richard until Looksmart was born to one of the farm workers, at which point Patricia found joy in arranging for his education and treating him like her son. Though Patricia has a long marriage with Richard and an affair with John Ford, her feelings for them are relatively cool—only in her grief for her dead baby and her maternal affection for Looksmart does she experience strong emotions. Initially, it seems that—by contrast—Looksmart has experienced life-changing *romantic* love, since he wanted to marry a Black farm worker, Grace, and ultimately fled the farm after her death. But Grace's sister, Beauty, contends that Looksmart and Grace's love was illusory—though Looksmart believed they were devoted to one another, Grace wasn't particularly interested in Looksmart. Interestingly, when Looksmart returns to the farm, he seems less interested in holding Richard accountable for killing Grace than he is in holding *Patricia* accountable for hesitating to let him drive Grace to the hospital in her **car**—a hesitation that hints at her anti-Black racism and thus destroyed his ability to believe in her unconditional maternal love for him. What has truly wounded Looksmart and fundamentally changed his inner life, the novel suggests, is not the death of his romantic love, Grace, but his

betrayal by his mother-figure, Patricia. The rest of Looksmart's life likewise suggests that he privileges parent-child love over romantic love; he has never really loved his wife and is cheating on her, but he's passionately devoted to his two daughters. By centering the quasi-adoptive mother-son relationship between Patricia and Looksmart, then, the novel suggests that love between parents and children is primary and enduring and that, by contrast, romantic love can be fleeting.



REBIRTH AND NEW BEGINNINGS

The Dream House examines the idea of “rebirth,” ultimately questioning whether or not new beginnings truly exist. Early in the novel,

Richard—the elderly husband of white South African Patricia—asks her whether they're already dead. The question shows Richard's dementia, but it also suggests that Richard and Patricia are dead in a metaphorical sense—emotionally, spiritually, or otherwise—and thus might be reborn. Indeed, as Richard loses his memories, he becomes more and more infantile: he calls Beauty (his employee) his mother, Beauty at one point mistakes him for a lost child, and he hallucinates that he is moving back in time to a period in which nobody has been born yet and everyone has “their whole lives ahead of them.” Like Richard, Patricia flirts with the possibility of rebirth—in her case, through having children. When her baby was born dead, Patricia failed to find happiness in anything until she took on a maternal role toward Looksmart, a Black South African child whose mother worked on Patricia's farm. Patricia sees Rachel's death as her own figurative death and Looksmart as her figurative rebirth. Yet both Richard's regression to childhood and Patricia's informal adoption of Looksmart are false rebirths: their past lives continue to impinge on their present after the “rebirth” occurs. Even as his memory disintegrates, Richard can't help but recall how he murdered dairy worker Grace while she was pregnant with his baby. His two dead children, by Patricia and by Grace, still haunt him. Meanwhile, Patricia's attempt to make Looksmart her son cannot survive either South Africa's white supremacist history or her own personal history, since she alienated herself from him by failing to help Grace—the woman he loved—get to the hospital in time to save her life. Thus, the novel implies that new beginnings are inherently hard to come by, since everything in life is impacted by the past. In the world of the novel, then, the idea of “rebirth” is little more than a false sense of hope for an impossibly blank slate.



HUMOR, IGNORANCE, AND DENIAL

Characters in *The Dream House* use humor to connect with one another but also to silence, deflect, or deny painful realities. Ultimately,

therefore, the novel suggests that humor should not be one's only mode of interacting with other people; to face reality, one

has to be serious sometimes. Two of the novel's central characters are the white South African farm owner Patricia Wiley and the Black South African man Looksmart, whose education Patricia paid for while he was growing up on her farm. Looksmart grew up during apartheid, a period of racial segregation and legally enforced white supremacy in South Africa. During Looksmart's childhood, strict laws and social mores surrounding racial hierarchies shaped how Patricia and Looksmart could interact. Patricia used humor and “teasing” to demonstrate her quasi-maternal love for Looksmart in place of overt affection, which was disallowed between white and non-white people. In turn, Looksmart learned to tease her back. Humor thus enabled them to connect with each other, but it also helped Patricia ignore how racism affected their relationship. Similarly, Patricia uses humor to “silence” her husband Richard, which helps her cope with his unpleasantness but also blinds her to how horrible he truly is. Patricia doesn't know that Richard murdered Grace, the girl that Looksmart loved—an event leading Looksmart to flee the farm. It is only after Looksmart returns many years later and has a serious conversation with Patricia about Grace—a conversation in which they laugh painfully or cynically at each other but never at each other's jokes—that Patricia can finally recognize the realities that shaped and ultimately ended her quasi-maternal relationship with Looksmart.



SYMBOLS

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



THE WILEYS' HOUSE

In *The Dream House*, the Wileys' farmhouse represents how the past inevitably affects the present; while people's lives do change, it's impossible for anyone to have a completely “fresh start.” As the novel begins, white South African farm owner Patricia Wiley notices mist creeping into her house, which she has lived in for years. The mist suggests Patricia cannot see the house clearly—and, by implication, that she cannot see her own past clearly. Shortly after, readers learn Patricia is selling her entire farm, including the house. By selling the house, Patricia is clearly trying to make a fresh start.

In addition, when the novel reveals that the house stands on the most elevated spot on the farm, literally allowing Patricia and her white English expatriate husband Richard to look down on the Black workers they employ, the novel reveals the house symbolizes not only the Wileys' past but also South Africa's past of white supremacy under apartheid. Patricia has sold the house to a development company that employs Looksmart, a Black man who grew up on the Wileys' farm during the last

years of apartheid. After entering the house uninvited—symbolically invading Patricia’s past, which she is trying to escape—Looksmart tells Patricia about Richard’s long-ago murder of Black farm worker Grace. Thus, Looksmart forces Patricia to confront her complicity in the violent racism her past contains.

At the novel’s end, Patricia gives the house keys to Looksmart and departs, a gesture that suggests real historical change has occurred: a Black person now controls the house and farm whose layout has symbolized racial inequality. Yet, as Looksmart explains to Patricia, Looksmart’s development company plans to renovate the Wileys’ house and build similar houses on their farmland for rich white people moving fleeing South African cities to avoid close contact with Black people. Although apartheid laws have been repealed, South Africa has not attained a “fresh start” or left racist attitudes and racial segregation in the past. Many white South Africans still indulge in racist attitudes and live in racially segregated areas, even if no one is legally enforcing the segregation—as the fate of the Wileys’ house demonstrates in miniature.



DOGS

In *The Dream House*, dogs symbolize how relations between Black and white South Africans have and haven’t changed after apartheid’s gradual repeal, which began in the early 1990s. Dogs first appear in the novel when white South African farm owner Patricia Wiley’s ancient Rottweiler, Ethunzini, begins barking at the milkman. Both Patricia and her Black domestic employee Beauty ignore the barking. Their indifference to the noisy dog symbolizes how some South Africans treat ongoing social inequality between white and Black people after apartheid—an inequality that Patricia and Grace’s employer-employee relationship embodies—as background noise, a fact not worthy of discussion. Yet not all characters demonstrate this indifference. When Looksmart, a Black man who grew up on the Wileys’ farm during apartheid, visits Patricia, he tells her Ethunzini is “still the same dog” as Chloe, an unrelated Rottweiler that belonged to Patricia’s husband Richard and killed Beauty’s sister Grace during apartheid. By equating Ethunzini with Chloe, Looksmart implicitly argues that post-apartheid South African racial relations aren’t so different than they were under apartheid. Then Looksmart reveals that Richard intentionally set Chloe on Grace to kill her, thus partially proving the point: privileged white Richard has never faced justice for his apartheid-era murder of poor Black Grace, even though apartheid is over.

The novel’s dog symbolism ends ambiguously. Near the novel’s end, Patricia asks her Black employee Bheki to euthanize Ethunzini. As Bheki is about to shoot Ethunzini, the dog looks imploringly at Patricia, who turns away—perhaps suggesting her disgust and shame at South African white supremacy as it

has played out in her own life. Bheki thinks the dog doesn’t understand how times have changed: they no longer live in a country where “a man like Bheki will always come second to a dog.” Bheki euthanizes Ethunzini, the Wileys’ last living dog, just before Looksmart receives the keys to [the Wileys’ house](#); both gestures suggest Black people have gained some social power in contemporary South Africa that apartheid denied them. Yet Ethunzini is literally not the dog that killed Grace, and Richard never faces justice for setting Chloe on her—two facts that suggest Ethunzini’s euthanasia in the present cannot rectify the violent racism of the past.



CARS

Cars represent the relationship between economic inequality and racial inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. Though some Black South Africans have wealth in the twenty-first century, many still lack opportunities for economic advancement. The first car that appears in the novel is Patricia Wiley’s beaten-up, 25-year-old Mercedes-Benz. The dilapidated luxury vehicle shows how Patricia, a white South African farm owner, had greater economic privilege and power during South Africa’s racially segregated apartheid era, which ended in the 1990s, than in the novel’s present. Looksmart, a Black man who grew up on the Wileys’ farm during apartheid, later suggests that Patricia’s pride in her then-new car led to her Black employee Grace’s death shortly before apartheid ended. Looksmart claims that years ago, under apartheid, Patricia hesitated to let him drive Grace to the hospital after a dog attacked Grace—for fear Grace would bleed on the car’s seats. Patricia’s hesitation may have contributed to Grace’s death. Thus, Patricia’s car represents how, during apartheid, white employers exploited and disregarded Black workers—even to death—to protect their own economic privilege.

In the post-apartheid era, Looksmart himself has bought a new Mercedes-Benz, which demonstrates that some Black South Africans now have access to economic privileges once reserved for whites. Yet when Grace’s sister Beauty—Patricia Wiley’s domestic employee—encounters Looksmart’s new car in the Wileys’ driveway, she can “barely imagine” the places the car has been, a detail revealing that many Black South Africans still have no opportunities for economic mobility. Moreover, when Looksmart encounters Beauty in [the Wileys’ house](#), he mentally compares her to homeless people in the city; he used to give money to these homeless people—but now he ignores them while driving past. These details suggest that economic privilege for a few Black South Africans like Looksmart will not lead to improved conditions for all Black South Africans. Thus, using cars as a symbol, the novel shows how contemporary South Africa still excludes many Black South Africans from wealth.




QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Picador Africa edition of *The Dream House* published in 2016.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ She doesn't know what possessed them to plant those trees. To protect them from the wind, the sun, the view? It hardly matters now. Soon the trees will be cut down and cleared away, along with everything else. The people who come to live here afterwards will know nothing about any of them, and maybe it will be better that way.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Richard Wiley, Grace (Noma)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Patricia Wiley is looking out her bedroom window and contemplating her family farm, which she has sold to developers. She and her husband Richard are about to leave the farm and retire to the seaside.

Patricia can't remember why she and Richard planted trees, which suggests that her memory is failing in her old age. When she asks "what possessed them"—with the word "possessed" suggesting demonic possession—her phrasing implies there is something bizarre or sinister about their having planted the trees. Her suggestion that they might have planted the trees to "protect" themselves from something, meanwhile, hints that the Wileys are fearful people. This combination of failing memory, sinister behavior, and fearfulness foreshadows later revelations in the novel: namely, that Patricia has misremembered and misunderstood the long-ago murder of her Black employee Grace, whom her husband Richard murdered because he feared she would give birth to his child.

Although Patricia misunderstands the past, she nevertheless recognizes that "maybe it will be better" if no one in the future remembers her and Richard. This recognition hints that Patricia knows she and her husband have lived their lives badly, even if she doesn't remember or understand the exact details. Yet her desire that no one remember her also suggests she wants to avoid accountability for her past actions—she doesn't want to be

remembered in a negative light.

☞ "Are we dead yet?"

"No."

"You will tell me when we're dead?"

"If I can, Roo, I will."

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Richard Wiley (speaker), Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Beauty (Togo), Grace (Noma)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Patricia and Richard Wiley are eating breakfast the day before they are supposed to move away from Patricia's family farm. Richard is suffering from some cognitive impairment, possibly dementia. He's had a dream that he and Patricia died and didn't realize it; now, he is asking Patricia for reassurance that they aren't dead.

Richard's dementia demonstrates that memory and cognition are frail: due to age, illness, or strong emotion, people can forget hugely important aspects of their lives or come under the influence of strange beliefs—such as the suspicion that they're dead without knowing it. The frailty of human memory is important to the novel's plot. Patricia, Looksmart, and Beauty will try to reconstruct what happened the day Richard murdered the Wileys' employee Grace, but due to Richard's dementia, he will no longer be able to provide them with crucial information.



Richard's suggestion that he and Patricia might be dead, though clearly symptomatic of his cognitive impairment, also implies that the Wileys are metaphorically dead: emotionally dead in their lack of love for one another, morally dead in their acceptance of South Africa's white-supremacist past, and so on. Richard's question subtly prompts the reader to wonder if the Wileys are indeed metaphorically dead and, if so, whether they can be reborn and achieve a fresh start in their retirement.

Finally, Patricia's response to her husband's strange questions and demands shows something about her relationship to humor. Her joking "if I can" demonstrates that she knows she won't be able to tell Richard anything once they're dead. That she makes a joke of Richard's disturbing cognitive symptoms reveals that she uses humor

to cope with unpleasant situations—but also, perhaps, that she doesn't care about her husband enough to be excessively disturbed by his mental decline.

☞ She has many strategies to silence him. One of them, and often the most effective, is wit.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Richard Wiley, Grace (Noma)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

At breakfast the day before the Wileys are supposed to move, Richard has continued to pester Patricia with questions about whether they are dead. To end the conversation, Patricia makes a joke about them being “not quite” dead yet.

That Patricia has developed “many strategies” to quiet her husband implies a number of negative things about their marriage. First, Patricia doesn't like to hear her husband speak, whether because he talks too much, because he says unpleasant things to her, or even because he says unpleasant things in front of other people that embarrass her. Second, despite his progressive cognitive impairment, Patricia does not seem to pity or sympathize with Richard but continues to find him unpleasant. Third, Patricia uses humor not only as a coping mechanism to deal with unpleasantness but as a weapon against Richard.

Later, the novel will reveal that Patricia is ignorant—culpably ignorant—of how Richard murdered their Black employee Grace when Grace wouldn't have an abortion after he impregnated her. In retrospect, the reader may wonder whether Patricia, rather than using “wit” to “silence” Richard, ought to have paid attention to and challenged the evil things he said and did in the past.

☞ “So you're off tomorrow,” he says, already knowing the answer.

“Straight after breakfast.”

“Without a backward glance, I hope.”

“In my experience, backward glances only crick the neck.”

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, John Ford (speaker),

Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Grace (Noma)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 18



Explanation and Analysis


Patricia has gone to visit retired headmaster John Ford, with whom she has had a decades-long extramarital affair. This passage makes clear that their affair no longer contains much passion, if it ever did. John casually refers to her leaving his orbit, perhaps forever, as her going “off,” carelessly asks her questions to which he “already know[s] the answer,” and expresses “hope” that she won't spare a “backward glance” for the past, though the past includes their entire sexual affair. Patricia, in turn, implicitly denies any interest in nostalgia or reminiscences about their shared history.

Patricia's claim that “backward glances only crick the neck”—in addition to implying that she won't think much about John once she's left—also reveals her beliefs about memory and the past early in the novel: she thinks dwelling on one's memories “only crick[s] the neck,” i.e. only causes pain and discomfort, so thinking too much about the past isn't worthwhile. Later, when Looksmart confronts Patricia about her complicity in Grace's death, Patricia will come to realize that personal memories and attention to the past are necessary for moral accountability. Thus her dismissal of memory here is the starting point from which her character will develop over the course of the novel.

☞ The problem of what to do with the past would have to carry on in the future.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Beauty (Togo), Richard Wiley, Grace (Noma)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

The day before Patricia and Richard are supposed to move, their employee Beauty is contemplating their half-packed things, many of which Patricia hasn't decided whether to keep or discard. In response to Patricia's indecisiveness and inattention, Beauty has begun secretly throwing some

things out; she also knows that movers are going to have to finish the packing job after the Wileys have already moved.


The accumulation of old objects in the Wileys' house suggests that the house and its contents represent "the past" and the continuation of the past's effects into the present and "the future." Patricia's thoughts and actions demonstrate her belief that one can simply ignore the past indefinitely—not only in her refusal to make decisions about which objects to pack, but also in her refusal to think about her long-ago behavior surrounding the death of Beauty's sister Grace. Beauty, by contrast, knows the past is a "problem" that must be dealt with. The difference between the two women's perspectives implies that privileged people like white, property-owning Patricia have the luxury of ignoring history, whereas non-privileged people like Black, working-class Beauty need to understand the past to survive.

That Beauty is secretly deciding to throw out a few of the Wileys' things—that, unbeknownst to Patricia, she is choosing which elements of the Wileys' "past" they will bring into their "future"—foreshadows the revelation that of all the characters, Beauty may have the clearest memories about what Richard did to Grace but has been withholding the truth from Patricia and others.

●● He has a shameful secret: even today, he's unaccustomed to the freedom he's been given to drive around the country and go wherever he likes. Whenever he sits down in a restaurant or cinema, surrounded by white people, a part of him still expects someone to ask him politely to leave. It is a thing he could never mention to his daughters or even his wife. They would laugh at him and accuse him of making it up. Yet it is a thing he feels: he is an intruder in his own land, condemned to arriving at places where he will never quite belong.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Richard Wiley

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Looksmart is driving toward Patricia and Richard's farm, where he grew up and which the development company he works for has purchased. Until the early 1990s, South Africa had a system of laws known as apartheid that

enforced white supremacy and racial segregation. Apartheid restricted where Black South African people like Looksmart could live, work, and travel. As Looksmart drives, he is contemplating how he's still "unaccustomed to the freedom" of South Africa's post-apartheid society.


This passage reveals three things about Looksmart. First, he has been economically and personally successful in post-apartheid South Africa. He has a car, a symbol of wealth and mobility, and has not only the legal right but the money "to drive around the country and go wherever he likes." He also has a wife and daughters who are free and socially secure enough not to feel haunted by South Africa's past. Yet, South Africa's white-supremacist past still haunts *Looksmart* despite the successful life he has led in post-apartheid South Africa. Finally, the way the past haunts Looksmart, affecting his present psychology, alienates him from other people: he feels it is a "shameful secret" he cannot even share with his family, as if his racial trauma somehow says something bad about him. Looksmart's historical and personal torment will motivate his actions throughout the remainder of the novel.

Chapter 2 Quotes

●● As she speaks, she recalls the times he used to tease her, when teasing—no doubt learned in part from her—was the mode between them. At the time, their world seemed to permit little else: it didn't even allow them to touch. But now there is no affection in this echo of their old style. Today everything between them seems to bristle with innuendo and hurt.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Looksmart has entered the Wileys' house without having been invited or having warned the Wileys he was coming. He has found Patricia in the sitting room, and they have been discussing Looksmart's life since he left the farm and their shared memories of Looksmart's childhood. When Patricia prompts Looksmart to remember a time she took him fishing, he responds with irony and sarcasm.

This passage characterizes the relationship that used to

exist between Patricia and Looksmart. Looksmart “learned in part from her” how to behave, which implies a quasi-mother/son dynamic and a power imbalance—Looksmart imitated Patricia, not the other way around. The power imbalance existed because he was a child and she was an adult, but also because he’s Black and she’s white. When Patricia recalls that their culture “didn’t even allow them to touch,” she is referring to apartheid-era laws that enforced racial segregation and white supremacy and were not repealed until the 1990s. Patricia and Looksmart used “teasing” to show their “affection” indirectly because a white woman overtly mothering a Black child was forbidden. Thus their teasing enabled their affection but also revealed the warping effects of racism on their relationship.

The passage suggests that Looksmart sees the warping effects of racism on their relationship more clearly than Patricia. Looksmart has trespassed on the Wileys’ house, which represents the effects of the past on the present, to force Patricia to see their ugly history more clearly. His words “bristle”—a verb suggesting defensiveness and danger—with “hurt” because he remembers the damaging effects of white supremacy on their relationship in a way that Patricia, at this point in the novel, does not.

“If I remember myself correctly,” he says, “I would have wanted to eat that fish.”

“But you were a gentle child, always wanting to please.”

He lets out a sound like laughter and turns away.

“Don’t you mean always wanting to please you?”

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu) (speaker), Looksmart’s Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Patricia is urging Looksmart to remember the time they went fishing together during Looksmart’s childhood. Telling the story to him, Patricia claims that young Looksmart decided to spare the life of the fish they caught.

Patricia is trying to reestablish a quasi-mother/son rapport with Looksmart by insisting on a shared history that includes positive memories. When Looksmart says “If I remember myself correctly,” he is rejecting Patricia’s attempts at rapport by implying he doesn’t remember the event, doesn’t share these memories with her. At the same

time, he’s admitting that every human memory, including his own, sometimes fails: he’s not sure he remembers “correctly.” When he says he “would have wanted to eat that fish,” meanwhile, he’s suggesting Patricia doesn’t understand or remember him correctly: his impulses were different than the ones she attributes to him.

When Patricia claims that young Looksmart was “always wanting to please,” Looksmart corrects her: he wanted to please Patricia specifically. This implies that Looksmart felt genuine affection for Patricia; he wanted her to think well of him and to enjoy his company. Yet it may also suggest that Patricia’s power over Looksmart—as an adult, as a white person, and as his mother’s employer—made Looksmart feel obligated to please her. Thus Looksmart is trying to revise Patricia’s memories of their relationship by pointing out the unjust racial and economic hierarchies that shaped their interactions.

“She might be cleverer, but he knows he has a far better memory than she: for while she was in the clouds, he has been on the ground, living amongst the rest of humanity, knowing all along how her particular kind of cleverness diminished them.

So naturally he remembers that day they went to fish. It was a thing that was impossible to forget: him learning to cast on the front lawn, weaving the line back and forth through the air, back and forth, and her perched up there on her stoep, ordering him about and laughing at him like he was her toy, her toy monkey, with a battery up its arse.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

During their long conversation, Looksmart and Patricia have begun fighting about whether the past matters. The language Looksmart uses to contrast his good memory with Patricia’s bad one suggests that those higher up in social hierarchies can’t understand the past, whereas those lower down can. In Looksmart’s view, Patricia is “in the clouds” or “perched up there on the stoep” while he himself is “on the ground” or down on the lawn—and his lower position indicates her racial and economic status but also his understanding of “the rest of humanity,” which she lacks.


While Looksmart's memory may be superior to Patricia's, the passage leaves open the possibility that he misinterprets Patricia's past attitudes due to trauma and internalized racism. South Africa's racist hierarchies have traumatized Looksmart; as such, he supposes Patricia can't value his humanity but only see him as a "toy," an animal (a "monkey"), and as a vulgarly violated object ("with a battery up its arse"). This supposition reflects Looksmart's experiences with anti-Black racists but also, perhaps, his inability to believe others that could value him (because anti-Black racism has taught him not to value himself). In contrast with Looksmart's supposition that Patricia viewed him as a "toy," the rest of the novel implies that despite Patricia's own unreflective racism, she loves Looksmart and wishes he were her son. Thus, this passage suggests yet another way people can misinterpret their memories and yet another way racism can warp interpersonal relationships.

☝☝ "Of course, you would have forgotten what a car right out of the box looks like, or smells like. The freshly stitched leather, the air of wealth that breathes out of the air conditioner. My car is like a racehorse—skittish, responding to my every thought, my lightest touch. But you wouldn't know anything about that. Not these days. What with that wreck of yours still sitting there under its tin roof."

Like a fat toad, he wants to add, at the heart of his life.

Related Characters: Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu) (speaker), Patricia Wiley, Grace (Noma), Looksmart's Mother

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

During Looksmart and Patricia's conversation, Looksmart has picked up an apple and a knife and mentioned it would be self-sabotaging for him to harm her, since he has a family and great economic success. By taking a knife and mentioning the possibility of harming her—even if to deny that he will—Looksmart is obviously trying to frighten Patricia. He then segues into bragging about his car and contrasting it with Patricia's old, beaten-up Mercedes.

In the novel, cars represent socioeconomic status. During

apartheid, when the Wileys were landowners at the height of their undeserved racial privilege, they bought a brand-new Mercedes. After apartheid, they have sold their farm to pay debts and no longer possess legally enforced racial privileges (though socioeconomic and cultural white privilege persists). Their old "wreck" of a car represents their change in status. Similarly, Looksmart's new car, which "breathes" an "air of wealth," represents how, after apartheid, some Black South African people have been able to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Looksmart's decision to rub Patricia's nose in his wealth and her own declining fortunes—coming after an implied physical threat—suggests he believes she's racist enough to be frightened by the existence of a Black man wealthier than she is.

Meanwhile, Looksmart's description of Patricia's Mercedes as a "fat toad" squatting "at the heart of his life" has at least two meanings. First, it foreshadows the later revelation that when Looksmart's lost love Grace was gravely injured and bleeding, Patricia hesitated before letting Looksmart drive Grace to the hospital in her car, possibly because Patricia worried about blood staining the seats. Grace died on the way to the hospital, and Patricia's hesitation may have contributed to Grace's death. The trauma of Grace's death has indelibly shaped Looksmart, which is why Patricia's car sits "at the heart of his life." Second, given that cars represent (racially unequal) access to wealth and status, Looksmart's claim that the car sits "at the heart of his life" implies that growing up as a poor employee's child in the white-supremacist environment of the Wileys' farm has also irreversibly traumatized him.

☝☝ "What exactly do you want me to be afraid about?"

"What you have always been afraid about: the truth."

"The truth?"

She says this as though the truth is a concept only children believe in, like dragons and houses made out of bread and cake.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu) (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Looksmart, peeling the apple with the knife he is taken, has asked whether he's scared Patricia. After she asks whether he wants to scare her, they have the above conversation.

The conversation reveals a couple things about Looksmart and Patricia.


First, though Looksmart has implicitly threatened Patricia by playing with her knife, he isn't really interested in physically harming. Instead, he wants "the truth" to scare her and believes it has "always" scared her—a belief suggesting Patricia's misunderstandings of and forgetfulness about the past are a subconscious attempt to deny accountability for past evils.

Second, Looksmart's invocation of "the truth" indicates that he views the truth as a real, objective thing. Patricia's questioning echo—"The truth?"—casts doubt on that view. If Patricia thinks the truth is like "houses made out of bread and cake," that suggests she sees the truth as a fairytale, part of a story, like the gingerbread house in "Hansel and Gretel."

Though the passage itself doesn't clarify why Patricia doubts the existence of the truth, readers can infer why she has doubts: due to her own spotty memory and strong opinions, Patricia believes the truth is always subjective, based on individual perspectives and perceptions. The two characters' different beliefs about what "truth" is, at this point in the novel, suggests why they have different attitudes toward the past: Looksmart believes they can discover the real objective truth about the past and act on it, whereas Patricia doesn't believe any such real objective truth exists.

●● But it is a nascent anger he is beginning to feel concerning Beauty—not pity. What did the girl expect by staying on in this place, especially after what happened to Grace? To remain on the farm was to condone what had happened here—and that was one thing he himself was never prepared to do. At the time, of course, Beauty can't have been older than thirteen, but she has had a good twenty-five years since that moment to develop some self-respect.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Beauty (Togo), Grace (Noma)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Beauty has entered the sitting room where Looksmart and Patricia are talking. After Beauty has left to fetch them tea and biscuits, Looksmart and Patricia discuss Beauty. When Patricia tells Looksmart that Beauty has neither a husband

nor children, Looksmart finds himself feeling "anger" rather than "pity."

Looksmart has come to the farm to confront Patricia about her privilege-induced blindness. Yet Looksmart's attitude toward Beauty reveals Looksmart's own blindness. He assumes that she "stay[ed] on" at the farm by free choice and thereby "condone[d]" her sister Grace's murder, as if Beauty had the same opportunities for employment outside the farm that Looksmart did. Looksmart fails to acknowledge that Patricia paid for his education—something Patricia did not do for Beauty—and thereby opened up employment possibilities for him outside the farm that Beauty does not have. His assumption that a lack of "self-respect" dictates Beauty's choices, rather than a lack of opportunity, betrays his blindness to her underprivileged status.


Looksmart's unjustified judgment of Beauty, here, foreshadows the later revelation that Beauty knows things about Grace's death she's never told to Looksmart. Just as Patricia's blindness to the reality of her employees' lives has prevented her from grasping how Grace died or why Looksmart left, Looksmart's blindness to Beauty's true situation—and the situation of her sister Grace, before Grace's death—leads him to jump to false conclusions about her.

Chapter 3 Quotes

●● He's never understood the workings of the house. The fact is it was never his house, but hers, handed down from her father. While he was there on good behaviour. Which is why he thinks he chose bad behaviour.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Richard Wiley, Grace (Noma), Patricia's Father, Rachel

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

Richard Wiley, suffering from dementia or some other cognitive impairment, has left the house and gone searching for the grave of his and Patricia's long-dead baby Rachel. As he wanders the farm, he encounters the new houses the developers have built on the farmland and mistakes them for his own house in various stages of disrepair.


Richard’s musings on his relationship to the house provide some psychological explanation, though by no means a justification, for what he calls his “bad behaviour.” If the house represents the past’s influence on the present, then Richard’s sense that “it was never his house” suggests that as an expatriate (he’s originally from England, not South Africa) and as a former employee rather than a long-time landowner (he met Patricia after he was hired to manage her father’s farm), he feels alienated from the house, the land, and the country’s history. Because he does not belong on the farm or in South Africa, he suspects that Patricia and her father would only accept him if he was “on good behaviour.” Angry at their lack of unconditional acceptance, he lashes out, cheating on Patricia, first with white stable girls hired from England, and then with Black farm employee Grace, whom he pays for sex.

Ironically, what Richard calls his “bad behaviour”—sexually targeting a poor Black employee and ultimately murdering her—proves that he did belong, in some sense, to the violent and white-supremacist culture of apartheid South Africa.

☞ He was a fool for coming here. But what did he expect? A miraculous transformation? People like her are still sitting in their houses. People like him are still looking in.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Grace (Noma)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

Looksmart has just told Patricia that the day Grace was murdered, she was walking up to the Wileys’ house to ask for time off work to get married. When Patricia asks whether Grace was planning to marry Looksmart, Looksmart runs from the house, vomits, and scolds himself as “a fool for coming here.”

This quotation sheds some light on Looksmart’s motivations both for visiting Patricia at all and for visiting her now, after so long, when she has sold the farm and is about to move out of her house. Though he invokes the possibility of “a miraculous transformation” sarcastically, that he brings up such a “transformation” at all reveals that he was secretly hoping for one—hoping that he could cure Patricia’s

privilege-induced blindness about her complicity in Grace’s death and thereby hold her accountable for the unpunished white-supremacist violence that took place on her farm.

His despairing claim that people like Patricia “are still sitting in their houses,” meanwhile, hints at one reason why he has decided to confront Patricia at this moment, after so long. Since the Wileys’ house represents the effects of the past on the present, Patricia’s need to sell the house symbolically represents that she and “people like her”—privileged white people—may no longer control South Africa’s stories about the past, its historical narrative. Yet Looksmart’s conclusion that despite large-scale social changes, “people like him are still looking in” from the outside reveals that, at this moment in the story, he has lost hope in his ability to change how Patricia views their shared past, despite his post-apartheid legal rights and high socioeconomic status.

☞ He knows that Bheki won’t refuse a cigarette, in spite of his veneer of dignity. Underneath, he’s as needy as the rest of them.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Bheki

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

When Looksmart flees his conversation with Patricia, running outside to vomit, Bheki sees him and asks whether he’s all right. They end up chatting about Looksmart’s visit and about Bheki’s plans to move with the Wileys to Durban so that his disabled son can get better services.

Later in the scene, Looksmart will offer to get Bheki a job on the farm and arrange local services for Bheki’s son so that Bheki won’t have to move and continue working for the Wileys. Externally, Looksmart’s offer seems like a gesture of kindness and solidarity. Yet his thoughts suggest he holds Bheki in contempt: when he offers Bheki an apparently companionable cigarette, he’s inwardly musing that Bheki’s “dignity” is only a “veneer” that hides how “needy” he is.

He also compares Bheki to “the rest of them.” Though Looksmart doesn’t explain who he means by “them,” context suggests that he’s referring to the Wileys’ other Black employees. In sum, the scene implies that Looksmart holds other Black people in contempt if they lack good opportunities and have to work for white people—and that

when he helps Bheki, he does so not out of sympathy for Bheki but out of a desire to spite Patricia by hiring away her employee.

☞ “You know what I can’t forgive?”


“Sorry?”

“It is that you wanted to protect your seats.”

“My what?”

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu) (speaker), Grace (Noma)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

Looksmart and Patricia, having gone back inside the house, resume their conversation about Grace’s death. Looksmart is trying to explain to Patricia why he blames her for Grace’s death and why he “can’t forgive” her, even though Patricia never directly harmed Grace.

As Looksmart remembers it, Patricia hesitated to let him drive Grace, who was bleeding badly, to the hospital in Patricia’s new car, because Patricia “wanted to protect [the car’s] seats” from bloodstains. Since throughout the novel cars have represented wealth and status, Patricia’s desire to protect her car symbolizes her desire to maintain her privilege—which, in the apartheid society where these events took place, inevitably means condoning white supremacy and violence against Black people. Even if Patricia didn’t directly contribute to Grace’s death, Looksmart believes she valued Grace’s life less than she valued her own racial and economic status. This suggests a level of anti-Black racism that casts into doubt Patricia’s maternal love for Looksmart himself, and this is what Looksmart cannot forgive.


Patricia’s startled questions in response to Looksmart’s comments—“Sorry?” and “My what?”—indicates that she doesn’t know how she wronged Looksmart and doesn’t remember the incident with her car—at least not in the way Looksmart does. Their differing memories shows how Patricia’s privilege has blinded her to the harm her subconscious racism has caused Looksmart. They also illustrate the difficulty of correctly recalling and interpreting


past events. Both Patricia’s privilege and the problem of fallible human memory will continue to generate conflict between Patricia and Looksmart as they fight about the past.

☞ Each time, the house is less built. Is it that he is going further back in time? Is he going backwards the more he runs? If so then when will he stop? What is he aimed at? He stands on the large concrete slab in the middle of nowhere and ponders this, and eventually he sits.

It is not so much that he is dead. It is more that no one appears to have been born. They still have their whole lives ahead of them. Nothing that needs to be undone has yet been done.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Beauty (Togo), Richard Wiley, Bheki

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 136-137

Explanation and Analysis


Richard Wiley, suffering from dementia and roaming the farm, keeps encountering new houses under construction and mistaking them for his own house under different stages of construction. Since the Wileys’ house represents the past and its effects on the present, Richard’s sense that he is traveling “back in time” implies that if the house is deconstructed, past events can be reversed—that, indeed, “nothing that needs to be undone has yet been done.”

The reader knows that Richard is suffering from a delusion. The Wileys’ house is not becoming “less built,” thereby reversing time—rather, new houses are being built for future occupants. Although “no one appears to have been born” yet, he and Patricia are in fact old enough to be contemplating their deaths and the people with whom they interact—Beauty, Bheki, and Looksmart, for instance—are middle-aged. By attributing this fantasy of time-reversal and rebirth to a character suffering from dementia, the novel suggests that the very concept of a rebirth or a fresh start is a cognitive mistake and a failure of human thinking: no matter how much we regret the past, we can never undo it or change the fact that it still affects our present.

“The first thing I saw on getting back from boarding school,” he says, “was a black puppy, playing in the garden, chewing a rubber ball to bits. The second was Grace, the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. As our love grew, that dog in the garden was growing too. My love and your fear, they grew together. And now, I can no longer separate them. When I think of one, I see the other. I see that double thing, that creature—the beast. Circling the garden, dripping blood.”

Related Characters: Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu) (speaker), Patricia Wiley, Beauty (Togo), Richard Wiley, Grace (Noma)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

Looksmart has just told Patricia that as Grace was dying, she whispered to him that Richard intentionally loosed his dog on her after Grace managed to escape from Richard, who was assaulting her, after realizing that Beauty was witnessing the assault. Now Looksmart is explaining to Patricia the psychological effects of this revelation on him.

The “black puppy” that Looksmart describes is Chloe, the dog that would eventually maul Grace to death at Richard’s behest. He describes this dog as “your fear.” It isn’t clear from context whether he means a singular “your”—Patricia’s fear—or a plural “your”—Richard and Patricia’s shared fear or perhaps the fear of white people in general. Regardless, by calling the dog that killed Grace “your fear,” Looksmart suggests that dogs symbolize white fear of Black people, a fear that leads to anti-Black violence.


When Looksmart says he can “no longer separate” white fear of Black people from his own “love,” it suggests two things. Most obviously, it suggests that losing his first romantic love, Grace, to anti-Black violence so deeply traumatized him that a “beast . . . dripping blood” now haunts his concept of romance. Given that Patricia and Looksmart had a close, quasi-mother/son relationship prior to Grace’s murder, Looksmart’s association of white fear with love may also suggest that his experience of Patricia’s racism-tainted affection has rendered him unable to conceive of any kind of love as entirely good or free from violence.

“No one knows what I saw.”

Beauty seems to say this with the knowledge that this statement, for the first time, is no longer true: two others now know what she saw. What she saw no longer belongs to her: it will become a part of the general story that is used to define her sister.

Related Characters: Beauty (Togo) (speaker), Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Richard Wiley, Grace (Noma)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

When Beauty returns to the sitting room to tell Patricia she still can’t find Richard, Patricia demands Beauty tell her and Looksmart what happened in the dairy the day Grace died. Eventually, Beauty confirms that she saw Richard and Grace together on the floor of the dairy, that Grace ran away when she realized Beauty had seen them, and that Richard unchained the dog that killed Grace. Patricia and Looksmart both take Beauty’s halting, elliptical story as confirmation of Looksmart’s belief that Richard was raping Grace and murdered her because she ran away.



Yet when Patricia asks Beauty whether Richard witnessed her watching, Beauty replies, “No one knows what I saw.” This response could mean one of two things. It could mean that Beauty communicated the honest, entire truth about what she saw but feels that Patricia and Looksmart still don’t fully understand her subjective experience because they weren’t there. Yet it could also mean that Patricia and Looksmart, having made assumptions about and personal additions to Beauty’s gap-filled story, are still fundamentally misunderstanding what Beauty saw happening—as later events in the novel reveal is the case: Richard was paying Grace for consensual sex and murdered her because she was pregnant and wouldn’t have an abortion.

Patricia misses the implication of Beauty’s words. Rather than assuming that Beauty means what she says, she supposes Beauty has said something “that is no longer true.” In this case, then, Patricia is an unreliable interpreter. Yet Patricia’s sense that Beauty has contributed to revising “the general story that is used to define her sister” is correct: due to Beauty’s intervention, Patricia and Looksmart have finally come to a provisional agreement—albeit a partly false one—about who Grace was, why she died, and what her

death meant.

☛ She had come to think of Beauty as her friend and she thought she knew everything there was to know about her—but, of course, that was only vanity, or laziness, or wishful thinking.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Beauty (Togo), Richard Wiley, Grace (Noma)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

After Beauty gives Patricia and Looksmart a partial account of what she saw Richard do to Grace the day Grace died, Patricia contemplates how little she actually knows about Beauty's inner life.

This passage includes two revelations about Patricia. First, Patricia considers Beauty her “friend.” Patricia is considerably older than Beauty, having known Beauty since Beauty's childhood, and her long-term employer. If she considers Beauty her “friend,” it means she hasn't previously considered how the power imbalance between them might impede real friendship. This lack of consideration underscores how Patricia's privilege often blinds her to the realities of others.

Yet Patricia's realization that it was “vanity, or laziness, or wishful thinking” to suppose she “knew everything there was to know about” Beauty is a major turning point for Patricia's character. Having accepted that her husband murdered one of their employees without her knowledge, Patricia is realizing that her ego or “vanity” has encouraged her to believe she understands others better than she does; her “laziness” has impeded her willingness to *work* to understand others; and her “wishful thinking” has made her underestimate how hard real understanding between people is to achieve.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☛ For the past six months, he has had a lover: a white woman with a daughter who attends the same school as his girls. She is wealthy and lives alone on a hill that overlooks the old city centre of Johannesburg. Her house is made almost entirely of pale blue glass, and yet she remains to him opaque. They are dipping their toes into the forbidden, as one might try out a new drug.

He doesn't even particularly like his lover—as a person, that is—but at the time he didn't have the right words to repel her. Nor did he have the inclination, in spite of not quite liking her: he was too curious, even flattered, to turn away.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Grace (Noma), Looksmart's Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

Toward the end of their conversation, Looksmart and Patricia begin to discuss the concept of marriage, and Patricia asks Looksmart about his wife. Looksmart answers briefly because he's afraid Patricia will figure out he doesn't love his wife and cheats on her. Yet Patricia's questions prompt him to think about his adulterous “lover” and how he became involved with her.


That Looksmart doesn't love his wife and “doesn't even particularly like his lover” might mean two things. It might mean the death of his first love, Grace, hurt him so badly that he has trouble forming new romantic relationships. Yet it might also mean romantic love simply matters less to Looksmart than parent-child love does: while he treats his wife badly, he adores his daughters, financially supports his aging mother, and still cares about his quasi-mother figure Patricia despite how badly she handled Grace's death.

Looksmart's affair with a white woman also illustrates that despite the historical changes toward greater racial equality that have occurred in South Africa since his childhood, his past subjection to white-supremacist ideology affects his present thinking. Though South Africa repealed laws illegalizing sex between white and non-white people in 1985, Looksmart still thinks of his sexual relationship with a white woman as “forbidden” and thus desirable, even addictive, like a “new drug.” Moreover, that Looksmart is “flattered” by the white woman's attention even though he doesn't like her “as a person” suggests that Looksmart has absorbed the white-supremacist idea that white people as a group are somehow inherently desirable.

●● It may be his dream house—this house transformed almost beyond recognition—but it still comes from her. Perhaps too much from her. Perhaps even today he’s too attached to his pain—and all he’s managing to do is reproduce it, with slight variations, all across the valley.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

The development company that Looksmart works for plans to renovate the Wileys’ house “almost beyond recognition” and to “reproduce” the architecture of the Wileys’ house in newly constructed houses across the Wileys’ farmland. As Looksmart and Patricia discuss these plans, Patricia worries they may be bad for Looksmart psychologically. The phrase “dream house” is an idiom referring to someone’s ideal house, the house they believe is perfect for them. Yet by calling the house a “dream house,” Patricia also suggests the house is somehow as unreal or illusory as a dream—it can’t be what Looksmart needs because “it still comes from her,” who hurt him, and thus still connects him too closely to his traumatic past.


Patricia’s worry that Looksmart is merely “reproduc[ing]” his pain and trauma by remaining involved with her and her house—because, despite her love for him, she knows she has harmed him—revises how the novel represents the relationship between past and present. Because the novel’s plot relies on the past coming back to haunt the present, the novel seems to insist that its characters can neither change the past nor escape it. Yet Patricia’s implied wish that Looksmart would do something different with the farmland than merely reproduce the Wileys’ house, which represents the effects of the past on the present, indicates that even if Looksmart can’t change or escape his past, he has some agency in choosing how much he allows it to dictate his future behavior.

●● Nothing has ever come back to her. Everything around her—and much that has been happening in the country at large has only confirmed this—has only ever held evidence of loss or decay.

But recently she has also been observing all the new buildings starting up out of the earth, and the green crops of weeds appearing in the most improbable places. A few days ago, when she and Bheki were driving into the village, she noticed a cloud of yellow butterflies hovering around the weeds and spilling over across their path. Bheki drove on through them as though they weren’t there, and neither of them said a word about it, but in that instant Patricia saw that there was an altogether different way of viewing the world: as an inexhaustible source of renewal and growth.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Richard Wiley, Grace (Noma), Looksmart’s Mother

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis


Patricia and Looksmart are discussing how the fancy education Patricia procured for him alienated him from his working-class mother when Patricia begins to contemplate her own experiences of “loss and decay,” particularly the deaths or departures of her loved ones. Mostly, the novel has poked fun at and rejected the concepts of rebirths and fresh starts. For example, Richard, suffering from dementia, mistakes houses under construction for his own house regressing to a time when he was an innocent fetus—a mistake that only reminds the reader of Richard’s unhealthy old age and the evils he had committed that he can’t undo, such as Grace’s murder. Patricia’s initial musing that “nothing has ever come back to her” is very much *simpatico* with the novel’s representation of rebirths and do-overs as impossible.

Yet Patricia’s subsequent perception of the world “as an inexhaustible source of renewal and growth” complicates the novel’s pessimistic outlook on rebirth. Patricia’s visions of renewal are social (“new buildings”) and natural (“green crops of weeds,” “a cloud of yellow butterflies”), not individual: her musings in no way suggest that particular people experience this “renewal” in their own lives. Yet even if individuals don’t get fresh starts, “renewal and growth” at the social and natural levels demonstrate the possibility both of historical change and of new, possibly better

individual lives. This passage thus leavens Patricia's frequently cynical take on life with some qualified optimism.

☞ “Ah, Madam,” he tells her. “This is a strange land we live in. After all this time, you still want to be the mother. And me, I must still be something like your child. But that relationship—it can have no place in the future of this country.”

Related Characters: Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu) (speaker), Patricia Wiley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

Near the end of Looksmart's visit, Patricia tells him she's happy that he came and that, after their revelatory conversation, she now understands him a bit better. Looksmart replies that she doesn't understand him and that their quasi-mother/son “relationship” has “no place in the future” of South Africa.

Though Looksmart doesn't explain why their relationship is impossible, his dialogue gives some hints. His description of South Africa as a “strange land” might allude to its complicated and disturbing history of colonization, segregation, and legal discrimination against its native Black population. When he says Patricia wants to be “the mother”—not *his* mother, not *a* mother, but *the* mother—his choice of words implies she wants to occupy the role of benevolent authority over him as a parent occupies a position of benevolent authority over a child. Even if Patricia's impulses are nurturing, her desire to wield authority over an independent Black adult like Looksmart perpetuates racism and inequality. For that reason, their relationship has “no place” in a more racially equal future.

Interestingly, though Looksmart denies his and Patricia's relationship has a future for political reasons, he implicitly admits his love for her when he describes himself to her as “something like your child.” Whereas he described Patricia as wanting to be “the mother,” he doesn't describe himself as *the* child but as *her* child. His choice of words suggests he doesn't see their relationship only in terms of racist, white-supremacist social dynamics—in which white Patricia plays the role of benevolent authority and Black Looksmart must accept the role of infantilized subordinate—but also in terms of their *individual* bond, which was shaped by a racist social system but still contained real personal affection.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ Looksmart has promised him a job and he has said he will send Bongani to a special school, so that his disabilities will not hold him back. Looksmart said it was time for black people to help each other. That the time of getting help from the whites is finished. And he agrees with this. He thinks it is time he walked away from this distasteful dance he has been engaged in for so long: where he has to disturb the grave of a child just because the Madam has decided it.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Beauty (Togo), Bheki, Rachel

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

The morning the Wileys are supposed to move, Bheki and Beauty have gone to dig up Rachel's coffin at Patricia's request so that Patricia can rebury Rachel in a churchyard in Durban. Bheki is contemplating his decision to accept Looksmart's offer of a job on the farm rather than to continue working for the Wileys after their move.


The agreement between Bheki and Looksmart represents historical change in South Africa after the end of apartheid, the country's system of white-supremacist laws enforcing racial segregation and discrimination against non-white South African people. Under apartheid, South Africa's white minority population dominated the country not only politically but economically. In the novel's present, a Black man like Looksmart can achieve economic success and thereby act out his principle that Black people should “help each other” by aiding Bheki and his son Bongani. Granted, Looksmart feels unspoken contempt for Bheki's subordinate social status and may have offered Bheki a job to spite Patricia—but even if Looksmart's thoughts about Bheki don't demonstrate racial solidarity, his actions do.

While Bheki “agrees” Black people should “help each other” and avoid “help from the whites,” parental and political feelings motivate his decision to accept Looksmart's offer and leave Patricia's employment. Looksmart is offering to help Bheki's disabled son matriculate at “a special school;” by contrast, Patricia has demanded Bheki “disturb the grave of a child.” Bheki's joint political-parental motives in this scene hint that concern for one's children's future may be a major motivation for historical change overall—a fact that partly explains the novel's focus on parent-child relationships.

As they labour along the road, the image of the black puppy keeps finding its way back into her head: the way it would run along the fence of the dog-run after the girls going toward the dairy, stumbling over its paws, while she sat back and laughed at it.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Richard Wiley, Bheki, Grace (Noma), John Ford

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

Patricia has just received a phone call informing her that John Ford, having committed suicide, mentioned her in his suicide note—which means the police want to talk to her at his house. As Bheki drives Patricia to John’s house, Patricia—shocked by John’s suicide—contemplates how little she has understood or tried to understand the people in her life. During this contemplation, a dog she used to own comes to mind. The “black puppy” Patricia remembers is likely Chloe, the Rottweiler her husband Richard used to murder the Wileys’ Black dairy worker Grace. Patricia “laughed” when the puppy tried to chase after the Wileys’ female dairy workers and “stumbl[ed] over its paws,” indicating she saw the puppy’s behavior as harmless and cute. Yet in retrospect, the puppy’s behavior is sinister, since as an adult dog it will chase after and kill Grace.

That Patricia found the puppy funny, not sinister, shows how her sense of humor—which she uses as a coping mechanism—sometimes leads her astray, making her treat serious issues as if they were frivolous. It also shows how Patricia’s racial and economic privilege led her to misunderstand her Black employees: as the dog’s owner, she expected the dog to eventually guard her. She didn’t consider that being chased by their employer’s Rottweiler, even as a puppy, might be a threatening experience for her young Black female employees.

At this point in the novel, Looksmart has left the farm—yet Patricia has not ceased reexamining and reconsidering her past, even in the absence of emotional pressure from him. That she continues to reexamine her past constitutes character development for her, as she used to think such rumination useless. It also foreshadows her final questioning of Beauty about Grace’s death, which reveals that there were aspects to the murder even Looksmart didn’t know.

“Beauty – please. You have to tell me the truth.”

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley (speaker), Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Beauty (Togo), Richard Wiley, Grace (Noma), John Ford

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 233-234

Explanation and Analysis

Patricia has returned from John Ford’s house and read the letter he gave her earlier in the novel, which she now realizes he asked her not to read until later because it would have revealed his intention to commit suicide. Patricia is disappointed and angry at the letter’s lack of emotional truthfulness, even though John wrote it knowing he was going to die. When Beauty walks up to her, Patricia begins talking to her again about Beauty’s sister Grace and begs Beauty to tell her the whole story of Grace’s death.

Asking the truth from Beauty represents significant character development for Patricia. Earlier, when Looksmart accused Patricia of being afraid of the truth, her ironic questioning of the word “truth” showed she believed that no such thing as objective truth existed. Now that she knows her husband Richard murdered their employee Grace, however, she has come to realize some objective truths do exist and are important for holding people accountable for their actions.

In addition, before learning about Grace’s murder, Patricia assumed she knew and understood Beauty perfectly well—even though, in her racial and economic privilege, she rarely thought about Beauty’s inner life or material circumstances. Now, however, Patricia has realized both that she doesn’t understand Beauty well and that Beauty knows far more than she does—and is therefore willing to beg Beauty to share what she knows. Though at this point in the novel Patricia remains somewhat ignorant, she is *aware* of her ignorance.

“But he said they loved each other desperately,” she says.
“He said she was good.”

“Good?”

The world hangs in the air like the word ‘truth’: simply as another way of presenting oneself to the world.

“She had nothing,” Beauty continues, “and uBass—he paid her. Sis’ Grace did not think about good or not good. Ubezama ukuphila.”

“She was trying to survive?”

Patricia has to repeat the phrase in English in order to accept it fully.

Related Characters: Patricia Wiley, Beauty (Togo) (speaker), Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Richard Wiley, Grace (Noma)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 234-235

Explanation and Analysis

After Patricia begs Beauty to tell her the truth, Beauty says Richard wasn’t raping Grace that day in the dairy: Richard and Grace had an arrangement where Richard paid Grace for sex. In addition, Grace never really wanted to marry Looksmart. Patricia and Beauty’s subsequent conversation about these claims reinforces both that romantic love is weak, even an illusion, and that more privileged people consistently misunderstand less privileged people.

When Patricia insists Looksmart said he and Grace loved each other “desperately,” the adverb “desperately” suggests cliché and hyperbole—the illusion of romance, not real love. Throughout the novel, characters have deceived themselves or others in their romantic lives. Patricia began her relationship with Richard because she tricked herself into thinking he was brave and decisive, though he wasn’t. Richard persistently cheated on Patricia, who later cheated on him. Looksmart is cheating on his own wife, whom he can’t love as an individual but only as an “idea.” It’s only Looksmart’s word against Beauty’s as to whether or not Grace loved Looksmart. However, given the pattern the novel has established of romantic love’s deceitfulness, weakness, and failure, the reader can infer that Beauty is more likely to be right.

Moreover, Beauty suggests that Looksmart misunderstood Grace due to his greater privilege. Whereas Patricia paid for Looksmart’s education, giving Looksmart access to socioeconomic opportunity, Grace “had nothing” and was just “trying to survive.” Due to Looksmart’s greater

opportunities—his educational privilege and perhaps his male privilege—he failed to see Grace’s desperate economic reality and only saw her as he wanted to see her, as the beautiful object of his desire.

“Mesis,” she says, “you must find the truth for yourself.”

Related Characters: Beauty (Togo) (speaker), Patricia Wiley, Looksmart (Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu), Richard Wiley, Grace (Noma)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

After Beauty tells Patricia that Richard killed Grace because Grace was pregnant with his child, Patricia asks why she should believe Beauty’s story about the murder rather than Looksmart’s. In response, Beauty calls Patricia “Mesis”—an isiZulu word meaning “Miss” or “Madam,” something domestic employees would call their employer—and tells Patricia she “must find the truth” herself.

Beauty calls Patricia “Mesis” at various points in the novel—yet that Beauty calls Patricia “Mesis” at this particular moment is still suggestive. Up to this point in the novel, Beauty has gone above and beyond the duties of an employee for Richard and Patricia. She has attempted to shield Richard from Looksmart’s anger and potential violence even though Richard killed her sister. Through her silence about Richard’s crime, she has also protected Patricia from painful truths about their shared past. In this moment, however, Beauty is refusing to go above and beyond—she won’t do the work of deciding what “the truth” is for Patricia but insists Patricia do that work herself. By calling Patricia “Mesis” at the moment of refusal, Beauty insists on the social and economic distance between them—and also, by implication, on her own personal boundaries.

Beauty’s claim that Patricia “must find the truth” herself indicates that she won’t do Patricia’s emotional and psychological labor for her—but additionally, it suggests that she *can’t*. While objective truths exist—Grace really is dead, for example—the inaccessibility of the past means that individuals always have to interpret what happened through their own subjective perspectives. Beauty’s subjective perspective is different from Patricia’s, so Beauty can’t decide what the truth is for Patricia—only Patricia can do that.



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.

CHAPTER 1

Patricia. Patricia looks out her window onto a stand of bloodwoods. She can't remember why the trees were planted, but they'll shortly be cut: "The people who come to live here afterwards will know nothing about any of them, and maybe it will be better that way." Though Patricia has sold the property, she hasn't said to Richard they're moving. She says they're traveling to the sea when he asks about the boxes.

Patricia calls Beauty, whom she knows will be on her way to help Richard put clothes on. Since Beauty rarely answers the first time, Patricia calls again. Beauty replies, "Mesis?" Patricia thinks once they reach Durban, Beauty should study English and learn to drive so she can find good employment. Once Patricia and Richard die, "the girl will need to move on."

Patricia asks Beauty to bring Richard out to eat with her. Glancing in the mirror, Patricia notices she's now too large to be entirely reflected. She says she needs to visit Mr. Ford. Beauty replies she'll inform Bheki. As Beauty fetches Patricia's walker, the Rottweiler Ethunzini barks outside—but the women ignore the noise, as the elderly **dog** barks at all sorts of things.

Patricia, entering the breakfast room, notes her elderly Alsatis used to greet her there. The week before, Patricia ordered them shot. Though she hasn't yet ordered Ethunzini shot, a grave has been dug. Patricia, who has always owned many **dogs**, resolved to sell the farm a year and a half earlier, when her final Chihuahua died. On that day, Patricia told Bheki to bury it among the bloodwoods, "where all the other dogs had been buried."

That Patricia can't remember why the trees were planted suggests she's old and her memory is failing. Her thought that "it will be better" if the people who move into her house "know nothing" about who lived there suggests that bad things have occurred in the house and that Patricia wants a fresh start. Patricia's deceit of Richard implies that there is some distance between them and that Richard is either very young or somehow cognitively impaired.



Mesis is an honorific in isiZulu, like "Miss" or "Madam." When Beauty speaks in isiZulu, it suggests she is an indigenous African person. Patricia's desire that Beauty study English and learn to drive suggests her concern for her employee—but also reveals that Beauty is underprivileged and that Patricia hasn't yet tried to help. Patricia's anticipation of her own death reveals her old age. It's unclear whether she calls Beauty "girl" due to a large age difference between them or to racism—if Beauty is a grown woman, then Patricia's language is infantilizing and possibly racist. Patricia's desire that Beauty "move on" hints she desires a new beginning not only for herself but also for the other people who live in her house.



That Patricia checks her appearance in the mirror immediately before telling Beauty that she wants to visit Mr. Ford suggests Patricia's physical self-consciousness. It also suggests that Patricia may have romantic feelings for Mr. Ford. Patricia's walker indicates Patricia is not only old but physically disabled. When Patricia and Beauty ignore the noisy dog, the reader can infer the two women are used to ignoring annoyances and other ugly realities of their situation.



The repeated references to Patricia's dogs suggest their symbolic importance. Since Patricia has always been a dog owner, their deaths indicate a dramatic change in her life, one that could mean a fresh start or could simply foreshadow her own death.



Noting a gas smell, Patricia muses how she has wished for the **house** to burn down “with all of them inside it.” Richard appears in pajamas and demands to bring the **dogs** to his father’s house. Patricia finds this funny. She reminds Richard his father died. Noticing Richard’s hands, she wonders how long it has been since he really touched her.

Patricia’s occasional desire that the house burn down indicates how violently she desires a fresh start—yet her desire that it burn down “with all of them inside it” hints that a fresh start is only possible through death. From Richard’s demand to visit his dead father and his assumption that they still own multiple dogs, the reader can infer Richard suffers from cognitive impairment, possibly dementia. That Patricia chooses to find Richard’s memory loss funny, meanwhile, shows how she uses humor as a coping mechanism. Finally, when Patricia wonders how long it’s been since she and Richard touched, the reader learns their marriage is strained.



Richard asks about their TV. Patricia reminds him it has been boxed up—they’re departing the next day. She expects Richard to yell or break something; instead, he asks whether they’re dead. When she denies it, he asks her to tell him once they are. She says: “If I can, Roo, I will.” Heaping sugar onto her oats, Patricia thinks it may kill her, but since she’ll die anyway, “it’s better to die of something you like.”

Richard’s question about whether he and Patricia are dead reveals the extent of his cognitive impairment, but it also suggests he and Patricia may be metaphorically “dead” too—for example, they may be emotionally or spiritually “dead.” Patricia’s jokes about death further show how she uses humor as a coping mechanism. Her ability to joke about Richard’s cognitive impairment, meanwhile, hints that she may not like him much.



Richard tells Patricia he dreamed they were dead but that no one had informed them. When he again asks whether they’re dead, she tells him, “Not quite.” She’s in the habit of using humor to shut him up. He tells her an ambulance is coming: “I said I have two dead children for you to pick up.” She replies: “What do you mean two?”

Patricia jokes that she and Richard are “not quite” dead to end his questions, revealing that she uses humor as a weapon against her husband as well as a coping mechanism. The exchange between Patricia and Richard about dead children is mysterious: her surprise that he’s talking about two dead children hints that at least one child has died on the farm.



The interior of Patricia’s 25-year-old Mercedes-Benz **car** has been badly damaged by her **dogs**—Patricia often leaves them in the back seat to “protect” the Mercedes while she and Bheki run errands. Though Patricia and Bheki are a fixture in the town near the farm, the town is gentrifying, and they and the damaged car no longer look like they belong.

Patricia’s car is a luxury brand, a Mercedes-Benz, but the car is old and damaged. These details imply that Patricia has lived a privileged life but lost wealth and status over time. That Patricia, Bheki, and the car don’t look like they belong in the gentrifying town reinforces this implication. That Patricia leaves the dogs to “protect” the car, which they then damage, suggests Patricia fears the wrong things: she thinks danger comes from outside, from strangers, when it actually comes from within.



Bheki has said he will continue to work for Patricia and Richard when they move to Durban. Though Patricia wanted to pay for Bheki's education when he was young, he cared more about **cars** and used to wash the Mercedes all the time. Noting this, Patricia taught him how to drive—and when she became too disabled to operate a car, he became her driver.

Durban is the third-largest city in South Africa, very different from the rural farm where the characters live. This difference again suggests Patricia is looking for a fresh start. Yet she is bringing along her driver, Bheki, which hints that she isn't making a completely fresh start. Patricia's story about Bheki's past may not be reliable. She believes he cared about cars more than school, but perhaps he cared about the wealth and status that cars represent. If so, paying for Bheki's education would have helped Bheki more than teaching him to drive.



Finding Bheki outside, Patricia tells him to drive her to Mr. Ford's and asks him to fill the gas tank while she's visiting, since they'll need it for the journey to Durban. Bheki rarely leaves the farm, and Patricia doesn't know how he feels about the move, since he discusses logistics with her but almost nothing else.

Patricia's lack of knowledge about Bheki's inner life hints at two ways her economic and racial privilege blind her to others' reality. First, as a rich white employer, Patricia doesn't need to understand her working-class Black employee to get him to do what she wants. This suggests that Patricia's privilege removes one major motive for her to understand her Black servants. Second, Bheki doesn't tell Patricia about himself. This could be because Bheki doesn't want to give Patricia any more power over him, suggesting that Bheki's lack of privilege motivates him to withhold the details of his inner lives from his privileged employer.



It's raining. As Bheki drives down the farm's muddy driveway—surrounded by construction—the **car** skids off the road. Patricia yells at Bheki to be careful. He gets back on the road and drives with “exaggerated” caution, which Patricia interprets as a tacit claim the accident was the fault of the road or the construction. She wonders whether Bheki is happy they're leaving.

The minor conflict between Bheki and Patricia over the car skidding illuminates the complicated racial and economic power dynamics that govern their relationship. The luxury car suggests wealth and mobility. Now that elderly white Patricia is too old to drive, it is her Black employee Bheki who actually controls the car—yet Patricia still feels empowered to criticize his driving from the backseat. If the reader views Patricia and Bheki's relationship as representative of racial relations in post-apartheid South Africa, this incident suggests that racial inequality lingers in South Africa, even after the end of apartheid gave Black South African people more legal rights and access to economic opportunity.



Patricia herself is mostly happy to leave. Her father gave her the farm after she married Richard—her “mismatch”—but it only made money after Patricia took it over from Richard in the 1970s and focused on breeding Welsh ponies. Until Richard got sick, he took care of chickens and a few cows. When Patricia asks Bheki whether her father would be unhappy about them selling the farm, Bheki says nothing. Patricia, used to Bheki's non-responses, “us[es] this vacant space to talk freely.”

Patricia thinks of Richard as her “mismatch”: she judges her marriage negatively despite its longevity. Patricia and Richard inherited wealth (the farm) from her father, but they managed the farm badly. This reveals both their economic privilege and their lack of know-how. That Patricia uses taciturn Bheki as a “vacant space” into which to pour her own thoughts, shows how her privilege and power over him allow her to ignore his inner life.



Patricia asks Bheki whether he recalls her father. When he says yes, she talks about her father’s “hard work,” care for his family, and the dinners he threw at the house in Durban. After Patricia mentions that you can see the harbor from the Durban house, Bheki quietly says he doesn’t like sea views. Patricia goes on speaking, saying her father didn’t like Richard but agreed to the marriage after he found out Patricia was pregnant. Bheki comments: “They say he was a good man.” Patricia replies: “The one good man in my life.”

Patricia praises her father’s “hard work,” which suggests she believes his wealth and success were due to his own efforts. Yet her father was a white landowner profiting off the labor of Black farm workers in a country that legally discriminated against Black people until the 1990s, when apartheid-era laws were repealed. This historical context reveals Patricia is misjudging the reasons for her family’s wealth. That she talks over Bheki when he finally does speak—to say he doesn’t like sea views—further demonstrates her blindness to those less privileged than she. Finally, Patricia’s claim that her father was “the one good man in [her] life” reveals her longstanding dissatisfaction with Richard.



Beauty. Beauty is still afraid of Richard, though he needs her to bathe and clothe him. Sometimes in the mornings, he has an erection, which she ignores. Though he mistakes Beauty for his mother and looks for things that aren’t there, they both know “he is the one with the power.”

Richard’s dependence on Beauty in his old age suggests a second infancy, a kind of rebirth; Richard’s habit of calling Beauty “mother” reinforces this idea. Yet Beauty’s fear of Richard and their shared knowledge that “he is the one with the power” due to his economic and racial privilege challenges this “rebirth.” Despite Richard’s dependence and dementia, his and Beauty’s shared past spoils their present interactions.



In the kitchen, Beauty drinks tea from a gold-rimmed cup with a faded image of the Queen of England on it. Meanwhile, Richard searches the boxes. Beauty muses that even before his decline, he searched for “bad news,” which strikes her as wrongheaded. She believes everything has a positive side, Richard included.

The faded teacup suggests Patricia and Richard used to have money but have fallen upon hard times. Beauty’s private judgments on Richard highlights that the old couple’s employees know and think things about their employers that their employers have never realized.



Beauty finds Richard, pantsless, holding a box. She asks him what he wants in isiZulu—the language she uses when they’re alone. She leads him to his room, gets him into pants, and asks him in English to zip up his fly. She recalls a joke the family’s employees tell: Richard “is the one who can never keep his zip up.” When he does nothing, Beauty zips his fly.

Patricia and Richard’s employees joke that Richard “can never keep his zip up”—a joke that hints Richard was repeatedly unfaithful to Patricia before his decline. The joke suggests the couple’s employees use humor as a coping mechanism to deal with their employers’ foibles; it also suggests that employees see their privileged employers far more clearly than their employers see them.



Patricia. Patricia and John Ford have been having an affair for more than 30 years, though without much physical contact in 15. They met when John was an English teacher at the village school. He became headmaster and then retired. Cancer killed his wife while he was headmaster. Patricia likes John because he’s well-read, whereas Richard is uneducated and resentful. Though an atheist, Patricia attended chapel to hear John sing and receive communion from him.

Patricia’s odd affair with John Ford reveals her tepid interest in romantic love—and her passivity. Though she explicitly likes John for being more educated than Richard, she seems never to have considered leaving Richard for John even after John’s own wife died. Yet she continues her affair with John for 15 years after they’ve stopped having sex, hinting that she’s not so much passionate about him as used to him.



Patricia comes to see John because he asked her to on the phone; she believed they'd already said their goodbyes. He meets her at his door. Using her walker, she follows him to the veranda. Once they stopped having sex, she stopped entering his bedroom; she believes he chose to stop, though she can't remember when or why. Patricia notices his dead wife Anna's roses need attention—but she doesn't mention it. She and John don't talk about Anna due to the "afterglow" tragic death has given her.

John asks whether Patricia is leaving "without a backward glance." She replies: "backward glances only crick the neck." When she asks why he called, he claims it was an emotional decision. She promises to call him weekly from Durban, though she suspects he'll enjoy solitude. She believes he's an arrogant man who "withhold[s] himself" from everyone. He tells her only to call if she has something to report; she says that won't happen, and they "sort of" laugh.

Patricia was taking an intelligent boy who lived on the farm, Looksmart, to interview at the school when she met John. Patricia immediately knew John was attracted to her. He got Looksmart a scholarship, talked to Patricia about Looksmart's education, and eventually began taking her to a hotel.

John suggests that Patricia should put Richard in a home in Durban. Patricia is annoyed at John's hypocrisy, disparaging her husband while worshipping his dead wife. She says she won't put Richard in a home but jokes that she'll hire a nurse so she'll only have to see him once in a while. John gives her a letter but asks her not to read it until she's reached Durban. As she leaves, she wonders why John called, perhaps to "explain why he never loved her as much as he loved his wife." Annoyed, she resolves not to read the letter.

Beauty. Beauty, noting Patricia doesn't have a plan for what to pack and what to leave, thinks: "The problem of what to do with the past would have to carry on in the future." Beauty has started throwing the Wileys' useless possessions away without their knowledge, believing they'll be thankful in the future.

Patricia can't remember when or why she and John stopped having sex, which reveals both her failing memory and her lack of emotional investment in her romantic life. That she and John never discuss John's dead wife Anna, meanwhile, hints that perhaps John cared more about Anna than Patricia cares about Richard.



Patricia's claim that "backward glances only crick the neck" implies she doesn't care about in the past—though her past-haunted relationships with Richard, John, Beauty, and Bheki suggest otherwise. Her negative judgement on John as someone who "withhold[s] himself" suggests she has found her affair as well as her marriage unsatisfying. Patricia and John's "sort of" laughter when Patricia denies anything worth reporting will happen to her in Durban implies that they're using humor to cope with their advanced age and the little life left to them.



John seduced Patricia by helping a child she was responsible for get an education. This fact hints that Patricia has strong maternal instincts and may be more emotionally invested in children than in her husband or her lover.



Again, Patricia makes a joke to hide from or cope with unpleasant feelings—in this case, annoyance at her lover for disparaging her husband. And again, her reactions to romantic disappointment are muted. When she thinks about how John "never loved her as much as he loved his wife," she's irritated—not devastated. This fact suggests she wishes John had loved her more due to her ego, not her own passionate love for him.



In contrast with Patricia, who has just claimed that "backward glances only crick the neck," Beauty knows that "the problem of what to do with the past would have to carry on in the future." Beauty knows this because, as a domestic employee, she is in charge of packing Patricia and Richard's possessions—their physical history—for the new house. That Beauty, Patricia's employee, recognizes the relevance of the past as Patricia does not is further evidence of Patricia's racial and economic privilege, which is what allows her to disregard the past.



After lunch, Beauty leaves the Wileys' house with the gold-rimmed Queen of England teacup. Though she tells herself that the cup is another possession the Wileys don't use, she knows she's stealing. Nevertheless, she finds the cup beautiful and "feels for it" because of how highly Patricia used to value it and how often she used to use it.

Construction workers have razed the rondavel where Beauty used to live. She now lives in a partially constructed house on the property that lacks electricity, plumbing, and doors. Beauty longs for her own house—for which Patricia started a savings account for her 15 years ago. Beauty will have everything she wants in the house except a husband: she loves Bheki, who doesn't love her. People on the farm call her "Inyumba"—"the barren one."

Bheki enters Beauty's room without seeming to notice the stolen teacup. Though Beauty has known Bheki her whole life, she has difficulty knowing what he's thinking. The one thing she's sure he cares about is his young disabled son Bongani. When she asks Bheki where he's been, he tells her about taking Patricia to see John. Beauty reflects Patricia will be glad to leave John, who belongs to her history.

Patricia. Patricia asks Richard where he's going with a spade and demands Bheki go with him. She believes Richard wants to dig up Rachel, buried near the bloodwoods. Rachel's headstone bears only one date, her birth- and death-date. Bheki often takes Patricia to the headstone, at her request. She asks Richard whether he remembers they're departing tomorrow.

Though this passage doesn't specify what Beauty "feels for" the cup, her desire to preserve it suggests she sympathizes with it somehow. Beauty's ability to sympathize with the cup—an object Patricia used to value but doesn't anymore—may explain why she can also sympathize with Patricia and Richard, two elderly white people who have largely lost their undeserved wealth and feel socially obsolete.



Though Patricia's decision to sell the farm caused construction workers to raze Beauty's rondavel, Patricia seems not to have considered letting Beauty stay in the main house. She may not even have considered where Beauty would stay in the interim between the farm's sale and the Wileys' moving day, revealing once again Patricia's blindness to the facts of her employees' lives. Patricia's lack of consideration is at odds with her having started a savings account for Beauty—which suggests Patricia wants to be considerate of others but doesn't always manage to do so. Beauty's unreciprocated love for Bheki and her insensitive nickname continues the novel's pattern of failed romantic attachments.



Beauty is sure that Bheki cares about his son, however she can't tell if he cares about his son's mother, which suggests a pattern in the novel: romances matter less than parent-child relationships. Beauty suspects Patricia doesn't want to see John anymore because he's part of her old life; this suspicion shows Beauty has correctly identified Patricia's desire for a fresh start and emphasizes that the Wileys' employees understand their employers far better than the Wileys' understand their employees.



This passage does not explain who Rachel is, but it contains several clues. That Rachel's birth- and death-date are the same implies that she's one of the "dead children" Richard and Patricia discussed at breakfast. Since Richard and Patricia both visit Rachel's grave, the reader can infer Rachel was their baby. The passage perhaps suggests that Patricia and Richard's marriage failed because their baby died. That Richard may want to dig Rachel up suggests the importance of rebirth and resurrection in the novel.



Patricia recalls a night she and Richard stayed out on the beach talking. He told her about his childhood in Yorkshire; she told him about hers in Durban. Both their mothers died young; that was the only thing they had in common. Before sunrise, they had sex because they had nothing else to say. After sex, they swam. Patricia thinks it was “paradise”; she and Richard “have never spoken in quite the same way since.”

At teatime, Richard puts his boots on. Patricia asks Beauty to go tell Bheki to accompany Richard. After Beauty leaves, Patricia suggests Richard remove his boots and take a bath. Instead, he leaves with the spade. Patricia thinks she might shoot him if she had a gun. She calls to him; he doesn't answer. She calls to Beauty; she doesn't answer either.

Looksmart. Looksmart, driving toward Dwaleni Farm, notices the sign is faded since the last time he saw it. Everything else looks the same. On his six-hour drive, he listened to 80s music, chatted to Noma about school, and had a fight with his wife. He contemplates how he still feels, when he travels in white spaces, like he's going to be asked to leave. Seeing the farm's ruined driveway, so unlike what he remembers from childhood, Looksmart isn't shocked: he's aware the farm has been under construction. Yet he feels “the project he has been managing for more than a year already appears to have failed and been discarded.”

Looksmart believes he's visiting the farm “out of nostalgia for a time when he could hate properly.” Though hatred fueled his early accomplishments, he's gained his later accomplishments, including his daughters, after his hatred burned out. Parking the car at the Wileys' house, he contemplates leaving and going to his hotel. He wonders whether the Wileys or Grace—who is dead, but whom he longs to see—have motivated his visit. He wonders, also, whether he “has enough hatred left in him for this encounter.” He resolves not to “spar[e]” either “the old woman” or himself.

Patricia. Patricia hears a **car** coming but is distracted by possessions she's examining, including a “used ticket stub for a play called *Dream of the Dog*.” Again, she contemplates burning the house down. Patricia calls to Beauty, tells her Richard has left the house carrying the spade, and suggests Beauty or Bheki get him. Beauty volunteers. Patricia thanks her in isiZulu and suggests she look at Rachel's grave before checking where the animals used to be kept. The **dog** Ethunzini barks. Beauty, looking out the window, tells Patricia there's a car outside. After Beauty leaves, Patricia calls for her when she hears the flyscreen in the back of the house open.

Early in their romance, Patricia and Richard bonded over their dead mothers. This one memory in all their unhappy marriage seems to Patricia “paradise,” and they've never managed to talk to each other “in quite the same way since”—showing again how parent-child relationships are centrally important in the novel.



Patricia's sudden desire to shoot Richard—like her occasional wish that her house would burn down—betrays both her dislike of her husband and her unexpressed feeling that only death or destruction can adequately change their lives.



Looksmart seems to have a bad relationship with his wife, with whom he fights. This detail reinforces the novel's pattern of failed romances. That Looksmart, who grew up on the farm, has been “managing [its development] for more than a year” yet hasn't visited until now suggests a past conflict between Looksmart and the Wileys that the narrative has yet to reveal. That Looksmart is still uncomfortable in white spaces long after South Africa repealed its laws enforcing racial segregation, meanwhile, illustrates how past injustices linger in the present.



That Looksmart is visiting the farm “out of nostalgia for a time when he could hate properly” suggests that when he lived on the farm, he hated someone there. His resolve not to spare “the old woman” suggests he hates Patricia—which is unexpected, since she remembers him as a child she cared for. Looksmart's tumultuous quasi-filial relationship to Patricia, together with his thoughts of his own daughters, again emphasizes the importance of parent-child bonds.



*Since Looksmart was driving toward the house in the previous scene, readers can infer it's his car Patricia hears. Previously, the novel has associated cars with wealth and status; Looksmart's car suggests he has come up in the world since he left the farm. The ticket stub for *Dream of the Dog* is a winking allusion to Craig Higginson's own work; he based this novel on his play, *Dream of the Dog* (2007). The suggestive name of the play, together with the dog barking at Looksmart's approach, foreshadows the importance of dogs to the coming meeting between Patricia and Looksmart.*



CHAPTER 2

Richard. Richard reaches the bloodwoods. He believes a dairy is on the other side of the trees, but when he gets there, he finds ruins. He wonders how much time has passed, where the animals have gone, and whether their absence is the fault of Patricia, whom he thinks of as “the old bitch.” He hopes Patricia has died—but realizes she hasn’t, since someone has been taking care of his boots. Thinking of Rachel, he asks himself where the others have “hidden” her. He has dreams about her, mostly as a newborn, but sometimes at other ages she never reached.

Looksmart. Since Looksmart encounters no security entering **the Wileys’ house** through the back, he considers whether the Wileys might have already moved. But he hears a Rottweiler barking and feels assured the Wileys wouldn’t have left behind this specific **dog**, which he’s surprised is still alive. Entering the kitchen, he finds it more modest than he expected. He hears Patricia calling for Beauty “like she’s calling one of her dogs” and thinks that if Richard is around, Richard will shoot him—but he doesn’t sense Richard. He hopes Richard has died.

As Looksmart walks down the hallway, Patricia calls out asking whether he’s Beauty. Looksmart notes Patricia sounds self-assured, not frightened. Light from the sitting room infiltrates the hallway, and Looksmart sees shadows of hooks to hang pictures on. He remembers photos of Patricia that used to hang there and, in particular, a photo of Richard posing, emotionless after “his casual act of violence,” with two leopards he’d shot. As a child, Looksmart coveted the leopard skins, which used to hang over sofas in the sitting room.

When Looksmart enters the sitting room, Patricia’s old and unwell appearance shocks him. Yet when she greets him, she sounds like the same humorous person: “She is always looking for the joke, Patricia [...] the thing to steer her gaze away from the unbearable present.”

Patricia asks who it is. Looksmart stays in the shadows, examining the room, noticing the boxes, the missing leopard skins, and an apple and knife on the table. Though he wonders whether having seen her deteriorating state might be “revenge enough,” it feels odd that she doesn’t know who he is—though he hasn’t seen her in nearly 25 years—because he was used to her total attention when they were together.

Richard’s confusion about how much time has passed and what has happened to the farm reminds the reader not only that Richard suffers from dementia but also that human memory is fallible. Richard’s obsessive focus on Rachel—implied to be his and Patricia’s dead baby—underlines the importance of parent-child relationships, while his derogatory thoughts about Patricia underline the novel’s pattern of failed romances.



Patricia is moving out of this house to make a fresh start. Thus, the house represents a past Patricia wants to forget. Entering the house after a long absence, Looksmart symbolically forces the house’s past into Patricia’s present awareness. His memory of the Wileys’ dogs, and his perception that Patricia calls Beauty like “one of her dogs,” hints that dogs may symbolize something negative about how white employers treat their Black employees.



That Patricia doesn’t sound scared, even though an unknown person is walking through her house, may suggest that privilege has insulated her life from danger. Looksmart’s memory of a photograph in which Richard feels nothing at his own “casual act of violence,” meanwhile, hints that Richard may have been violent at other times in the past.



Looksmart’s shock at Patricia’s appearance shows that a long time has passed since he last saw her—she doesn’t match his memories. Yet his recognition that she uses humor to avoid “the unbearable present” suggests he knows her well.



Here, readers learn that Looksmart wants “revenge” against Patricia, foreshadowing future revelations about some wrong she has committed. Yet it makes him uncomfortable when she doesn’t recognize him, which suggests he retains some emotional investment in the quasi-maternal attention she paid him when he was a child.



Patricia, still not recognizing Looksmart in the shadows, asks what he wants. Not knowing how to reply, he notes that they still have the **dog**. When Patricia asks which dog, he says the dog on the veranda—Chloe. Patricia says that dog is Ethunzini. Looksmart asks whether Ethunzini is Chloe’s puppy, and Patricia tells him that Chloe died before she had any puppies. He says: “It doesn’t matter [...] It’s still the same dog.” Patricia asks whether she knows him, and he steps out of the shadows into the light.

Patricia. Patricia hears a strange man’s footsteps, realizes something odd is happening, and sees a man wearing a suit (Looksmart) in the doorway. They discuss the barking **dog**, which the man believes is Chloe but which Patricia says is Ethunzini. Patricia recalls the man’s voice but, finding his presence hard to believe, asks whether she knows him. He replies, “You might have thought so once” and identifies himself as Looksmart. Patricia cries out that he’s come back. He tells her he’s a “different man.” When she notes that he’s wearing a suit, he seems insulted and says he does that.

Patricia admits she thought she’d never see Looksmart again and didn’t recognize him. He asks whether it’s because of the suit. Patricia thinks it’s “his way of wearing it”—like it’s a “disguise” or an insult. Patricia asks how long it’s been and notes that times have changed. Looksmart, seeming insulted, replies that times have changed but that Patricia has remained in place—though she seems less scary now. When Patricia protests she was never scary, Looksmart says he had to stare up at her when he was a child—and indicates his former height. Patricia points out he was much taller than that by the time of his departure.

Patricia was recently thinking about Looksmart. Searching through boxes in a guest bedroom, she noticed a fishing rod. Though the rod might have belonged to any number of boys who visited the farm, she examined the neatly knotted ribbons tying the rod’s holder together and realized they were Looksmart’s work. Then she recognized the rod as one she’d given him, which he’d only used once.

This novel was published in 2015. If Looksmart hasn’t seen Patricia in nearly 25 years, he last saw her in the early 1990s, just as South Africa was in the process of repealing their racist apartheid laws. Since dogs have previously represented the relationship between white employers and Black employees, when Looksmart claims the dog Patricia owned in the 1990s and the dog she has now are “the same,” he seems to imply that South African race relations didn’t really change after apartheid’s end.



Looksmart’s claim that Patricia “might have thought” she knew him implies that she never really did—that her privilege blinded her to his reality. His claim that he’s a “different man” suggests that he believes he has been somehow transformed or reborn since leaving the farm. Despite his standoffishness, Patricia seems to remember Looksmart fondly: she cries out with surprise and possibly joy at his return.



In the previous passage, Looksmart claimed he’s a “different man.” Yet here, Patricia sees his suit as a “disguise”—hinting that Looksmart hasn’t been reborn but is simply hiding his original self. When Patricia and Looksmart discuss how times have changed, they may be alluding to increasing legal equality in South Africa between different racial groups. Given their discussion of Looksmart’s childhood height, they are likely also discussing changes in their former quasi-parent/child relationship. By comparing historical changes in South Africa to changes in Patricia and Looksmart’s relationship, the novel hints that South African racial relations may be essential to understanding that relationship’s breakdown.



Patricia was able to identify the fishing rod as Looksmart’s based on the neatness of the ribbons attached, which demonstrates how familiar she was with him and how close their relationship was when he was a child.



Patricia asks whether Looksmart remembers catching his first fish and says she remembers “like it was yesterday.” When he repeats the phrase sarcastically, she recalls how they used to tease one another to show they cared because “their world seemed to permit little else: it didn’t even allow them to touch.” Yet Looksmart’s current sarcasm isn’t caring. Patricia reminds him she showed him how to use the rod in the front lawn and went to the dam with him. He claims not to remember.

Richard's dementia has demonstrated how memory can fail dramatically. Here, Patricia and Looksmart's differing memories about the fishing rod—she claims to remember it “like it was yesterday,” while he claims not to remember it at all—shows that even people with no cognitive impairment can remember things differently or fail to remember the same things. Recalling how she and Looksmart used teasing to show affection because their world “didn’t even allow them to touch,” Patricia reveals that apartheid racial relations constrained her quasi-maternal relationship with Looksmart even as she used humor to bond with him.



Patricia recounts how the fishhook got caught in Looksmart’s ear, among other places, but that he eventually caught a fish. As she remembers laughing with him, she wonders whether her memory is a combination of other trips with other boys: “Is it possible she has brought all her memories together into this one boy—the one boy who stood out?”

In calling Looksmart “the one boy who stood out,” Patricia betrays the depth of her maternal feelings for him. Her recognition that affection for him might have warped her memories suggests she may not be a reliable narrator of her own past.



Patricia begs Looksmart not to say he can’t remember. She describes how he decided to return the fish to the water. Looksmart tells Patricia he “would have wanted to eat that fish.” She protests he was “gentle” and “always wanting to please”; he replies: “Don’t you mean always wanting to please you?”

When Looksmart claims he “would have wanted to eat that fish,” he implies Patricia never knew him well—and perhaps that he suffered from food insecurity, something privileged Patricia might have been blind to. Looksmart’s remark that he “want[ed] to please” Patricia specifically suggests that he at one point returned her affection.



Beauty. Beauty approaches the **car** in the driveway. The car’s owner parked it where Patricia likes people to park, and he or she left the gate open—either the owner is unfamiliar with farms or knows the Wileys have sold their farm animals. When she looks into the car, its flashing lights seem to “give the car an air of importance, connecting it to places Beauty can barely imagine.” She leaves through the gate.

Looksmart's car's aura of “importance” and Beauty's acknowledgment that she can “barely imagine” the places it's been show the differences in economic status and social privilege between Beauty and Looksmart. Whereas Beauty has remained a domestic worker trapped on the Wileys' farm, Looksmart—who also grew up on the farm—has used his education to become wealthy and privileged.



Beauty has noticed the houses being constructed on the property are built on the model of **the Wileys' house**. She sleeps in what she thinks of as Richard’s room in the unfinished house where she and Bheki live. Bheki isn’t there—he often goes off alone since his son’s birth. People gossip that Bheki’s son is disabled due to “dark magic,” since his mother Phume’s father is “both a nyanga and a priest.” Beauty, suspicious of *nyangas* and church, disliked how Phume claimed the Wiley farm’s women were haunted by *tokoloshes*—hence their failure to bear live children. Phume’s father couldn’t cure her son.

Though Patricia is trying to get a fresh start by moving, the development company that bought the farm is replicating her house all across the farmland—symbolically suggesting how the past intrudes on the present. A nyanga is Zulu for a religious healer; tokoloshes are a kind of evil spirit in Zulu mythology. Beauty's skepticism of Phume's father suggests her lack of traditional Zulu or Christian religiosity.



Beauty wonders whether Bheki's child's disability has meaning and thinks maybe not. Maybe people's fates are random, and people have to invent both meaning and "justice" for themselves.

In her house, Beauty puts on an anorak she got from a "stable girl[]" from England—one of the ones [Patricia] never liked to talk about." When Beauty leaves and passes **the Wileys' house**, she hears a man laugh and knows it's not Richard, who's bad at laughing.

Beauty knows how to walk so Patricia can or can't hear her. She walks silently toward the sitting room and listens. The man's (Looksmart's) voice she hears reminds her of a lawyer or judge from TV. When he says, "Doesn't that mean always wanting to please you?", Beauty realizes who it is but has "no time to think of Grace" before she walks into the room.

Patricia asks Beauty whether she's found Richard. Beauty says she hasn't. Suddenly, Looksmart speaks to Beauty in isiZulu. Beauty thinks he's asking to be looked at, "no doubt expecting her to approve." Thinking people from around the farm aren't normally as "arrogant" as Looksmart or his mother, she recalls that they came to the farm after Looksmart's father was imprisoned for something terrible.

The thought of Looksmart, like the thought of Grace, makes Beauty want to vomit. She says she recognizes him. She notices him examining her body critically and reflects that they never liked each other. Looksmart asks whether that's all she'll say to him and comments to Patricia that she may be intimidated by his suit. Patricia thanks Beauty and tells her to go find Richard. Neither Looksmart nor Patricia is looking at Beauty anymore. Beauty thinks that if they did, they would perhaps see the "knowledge inside her eyes." Thinking this, Beauty leaves.

At various points in the novel, characters try to discover objective truths and meanings in past events. Here, Beauty wonders whether meaning, truth, and justice aren't just stories people invent to impose meaning on random events.



The novel has already implied that Richard was unfaithful to Patricia; since Patricia "never liked to talk about" the stable girls, the reader may infer that Richard pursued these girls sexually. Beauty can immediately tell the laughing man isn't Richard because Richard has a poor sense of humor. Since Patricia and Looksmart use humor for human connection and subtle emotional hostility, Richard's humorlessness suggests his emotional and psychological crudity compared to his wife and Looksmart.



Beauty knows exactly how to walk to avoid Patricia's notice, once more demonstrating how well the Wileys' employees know the Wileys. That Looksmart's voice reminds Beauty of someone important on TV, meanwhile, shows their radically different social statuses despite their shared past.



Beauty thinks Looksmart is "arrogant" and resents his assumption that she'll "approve" of him; internally, she responds by recalling Looksmart's troubled family history—suggesting she believes Looksmart should keep his underprivileged past in mind and not suppose himself superior to her.



Looksmart feels entitled to examine Beauty's body critically, demonstrating how his male privilege influences his reactions. His comment about his suit intimidating Beauty also emphasizes his higher economic status. Beauty's observation that Looksmart and Beauty fail to see the "knowledge inside her eyes" hints that the underprivileged Beauty has discovered something Looksmart and Patricia have overlooked due to their comparative privilege.



Patricia. After Looksmart left, Patricia felt listless and depressed. She asked Looksmart's mother about him, but his mother avoided explaining anything. A couple years after Looksmart left, shortly after South Africa held "its first democratic elections," Patricia commented to John—without knowing what she meant—that Looksmart's behavior was a bad omen for South Africa. Yet Patricia largely stopped thinking about the mystery of Looksmart's disappearance as time passed, and she hardly noticed when his mother also left without explanation around 2000.

In the present, Patricia watches Looksmart nervously roam the room. She notes the contrast between his size and his behavior, which reminds her of an anxious schoolboy. When she asks him about his economic gains, he tells her he didn't wear the suit for her. She mentions she's leaving the **house** the next day, and he says that he knows she has sold the farm. When she expresses surprise at his knowledge, he tells her it's his "business."

Patricia recognizes Looksmart may be a threat to her, but he doesn't scare her, because Patricia isn't sure her life is worth any more than her old junk. Instead of being scared, she's grieved by their changed relationship.

Looksmart asks what Patricia intends to do. She tells him she's moving back to her childhood home. When he asks whether her father is dead, she tells him yes, for about 50 years. After listening to her talk about the house in Durban, he asks whether she'll be sad to leave the farm. When she tells him that "backward glances only crick the neck," he replies that such a crick might be "exactly what the doctor orders." She tells him it isn't at her age—which seems to surprise him, as if he hadn't considered her age before.

Patricia tells Looksmart more about Durban and how "magical" her "childhood things" there now seem to her. When Looksmart tells her he associates her with the farm, she informs him she's not even from the region. He asks whether Richard will miss the farm, at which point she says Richard is sick. Happily, Looksmart asks whether he's had a heart attack. Patricia says no—Richard's losing his mind, and it's "far too late to find it." She muses that she and Looksmart often used to speak in a humorous tone about Richard without making an overt joke about him, since he was "a subject better laid to rest."

Patricia's depression after Looksmart left reveals her emotional investment in him. Yet her comment that his leaving was a bad omen for the country—a comment made after South Africa held "its first democratic elections," that is, the first elections where people of all races could vote—suggests she sees his disappearance as symbolic of South African race relations. She seems to resent his independence and lack of 'gratitude'—hinting that she thinks Black South African people should be dependent on and grateful to white people. Patricia's remark thus betrays her paternalistic and racist attitude.



Patricia knew Looksmart best when he was a child in school; those memories influence how she interprets his adult behavior. Yet the revelation that it's his "business" to know about her selling the house shows that much has changed: Looksmart is not a schoolboy but a white-collar worker with social power.



Patricia cares more that Looksmart lacks affection for her than that he might hurt her, suggesting both her deep desire for Looksmart's love and her indifference to life.



That Patricia is moving back to her childhood home hints that she wants a rebirth or second chance at life. When she repeats her claim that "backward glances only crick the neck," she shows her indifference to the past and her desire to forget. When Looksmart responds that this painful "crick" might be "what the doctor orders," he's proposing a different principle: it's important to remember even when memories are painful.



Patricia imputes "magic[]" to her "childhood things," again betraying her desire for rebirth and a second childhood. Looksmart's pleasure at the idea of Richard having a heart attack implies bad blood between the two men, while Patricia's musing that Richard is "a subject better laid to rest" through humor indicates how Patricia and Looksmart used to use humor not only to connect but also to skate past painful realities such as Patricia's unhappy marriage.



Looksmart protests that though Patricia makes her situation sound bad, the Wileys must be rich. Patricia says they're in debt. Her sale of ponies couldn't make up for the losses associated with Richard's animals. She concludes, nevertheless, that the Wileys "can't complain." Looksmart says that's unusual. She points out that Looksmart seems successful, and everyone can find something to complain about. Looksmart replies: "Like getting old? Like being rich?"

Patricia asks why Looksmart, with his future prospects, is bothering with the Wileys. In return, he asks whether she thinks the past is "unimportant." She says it likely doesn't "amount to much in the end." Musing, she thinks that somewhere in her life, she took a wrong turn and misplaced her sense of self. Looksmart gives her a flabbergasted look. Suddenly unsure whether she's been narrating her internal monologue, Patricia says: "Sorry, did I say something inappropriate?" When Looksmart tells her she doesn't have to apologize, she questions whether she did.

Richard. Richard sees a woman (Beauty) coming. Though she isn't his mother, he wants to call her Mother and ask what happened to the farm. Yet she'll return him to "the bitch" (Patricia), so he hides while she calls him. Fleeing, he wets his pants—a common occurrence. He thinks "there is too much to keep track of" and privately acknowledges the farm's deterioration is likely his fault, not Patricia's. He even dropped the spade and can't remember why he wanted it. Then he recalls Rachel and decides to dig her up without the spade, "like a **dog**."

Beauty. Beauty finds Bheki with the workmen around a fire in one of the half-built houses and asks him where Richard is in isiZulu. When Bheki acts embarrassed and dismissive, Beauty thinks it's because the other men may perceive him as "a woman, a nurse." Though ordinarily Beauty would retreat, she feels she can't leave Patricia and Looksmart together—she understands why Looksmart has come "better than even Looksmart does." In isiZulu, she tells Bheki that Looksmart is there and asks him to find Richard and hide him in her room. When Bheki asks why, she leaves without answering.

Looksmart's insistence that the Wileys are "rich," even when Patricia reveals otherwise, suggests that his perception of Patricia is stuck in the past—he remembers her as economically and racially privileged and can't incorporate new information about her debts into his old perception of her.



Looksmart accuses Patricia of thinking the past is "unimportant"—implying he himself thinks it's very important. Patricia thinks the past doesn't matter "in the end," maybe suggesting that she thinks herself too old and near death to do anything about the past now. When Patricia difficult remembering reveals that she, like Richard, has begun to have memory problems.



Richard's desire to call Beauty "Mother" suggests a kind of rebirth, a return to infancy, through his memory loss. His incontinence also suggests infancy. Yet his realization that "there is too much to keep track of" shows that he vaguely remembers being a functioning adult and knows he shouldn't be like this. His obsessive desire to dig up Rachel again emphasizes the emotional power of parent-child relationships. His decision to dig her up "like a dog," meanwhile, suggests that though the Wileys sometimes treat their Black employees worse than dogs, it is Richard who is really animalistic.



Beauty is the least privileged of the novel's main characters. Though she and Bheki have the same racial and economic backgrounds, Bheki still treats her rudely because he wants to maintain male privilege and not be considered "a woman." Yet the underprivileged Beauty knows more than the others: she understands "better than even Looksmart does" why he's returned and seems aware of some conflict between Looksmart and Richard that Bheki doesn't know about.



Looksmart. Looksmart tells Patricia that if the past doesn't matter, "there are no consequences to people's actions," an idea he hates. He asks whether she feels any guilt about the past. When she doesn't seem to catch what he's referring to, he reflects that she's ignorant. During previous periods of violence and social upheaval in South Africa, she only cared about Looksmart and the farm.

Looksmart suggests that only when we value the past can we ensure "people's actions" have "consequences." Together with his question about Patricia's guilt, this suggestion implies Patricia has done something very wrong that she may not even remember. His reflection that she cared only about him and the farm during violent historical changes, meanwhile, suggests that her maternal love for Looksmart was insular and self-indulgent: it ignored the larger context of political and racial violence in which young Black Looksmart lived.



Patricia questions whether there's such a thing as "a conscience about the past." Looksmart accuses her of excusing herself very readily; he reflects that while she may be smarter than he is, he remembers more. He does remember catching the fish; he thinks of her teaching him to use the rod and "laughing at him like he was her toy, her toy monkey, with a battery up its arse." At the time, he wanted to perform excellently to prove to her that he was better than other "natives."

When Looksmart accuses Patricia of forgiving herself prematurely, he suggests that people need a good memory to have a functioning "conscience." His own memories seem warped by self-hatred and internalized racism, however; he assumes that if Patricia was laughing, she must have been laughing "at him" and thinking of him as a "toy monkey," one that needed to show superiority over the other "natives." Moreover, that he lied reveals a larger problem with relying on individuals' memories for accountability—not only are people's own memories fallible, but people can lie about the past, too.



Looksmart tells Patricia he does remember the fish—Patricia told him to kill it with a rock. Patricia doubts his memory but suggest one ought to kill a fish quickly, for mercy. Looksmart laughs coldly and tells her that he's a better fisherman now. Then he picks up the apple and knife from the table. When Patricia notes that his words sound threatening, he laughs again and says he has reasons not to threaten her: his family and his financial success, for example.

It isn't clear whether Looksmart is lying about Patricia having told him to kill the fish or whether their memories differ. Either way, the passage emphasizes the unreliability of individuals' memories and stories as a guide to truth about the past. Looksmart's cold laughter at Patricia—in contrast with the affectionate teasing they shared before—shows how estranged they have become.



Looksmart asks whether Patricia wants to know how much his suit cost. When she says she doesn't care, he describes how excellent his **car** is and how Patricia couldn't imagine it, given her ancient car. "Like a fat toad, he wants to add, at the heart of my life."

Dwelling on his expensive new car, Looksmart rubs Patricia's nose in his new economic status and her economic decline. His inner description of Patricia's car as "a fat toad" sitting "at the heart of [his] life" may indicate how his childhood perception of the Wileys' white supremacy-based wealth warped his self-perception as a Black child. On the other hand, the novel may be foreshadowing some more specific revelation about the car's role in past events.



Patricia asks what Looksmart wants. He replies: “Patience is rewarded at the end to those who wait.” Noticing the mistakes in his English, he’s glad—he wants to show Patricia he’s “indifferent to getting her language right. And it doesn’t even matter that this isn’t true.” Finally seeming scared, Patricia says Richard will return. Though Looksmart pretends not to care, he isn’t sure what to do and knows Richard owns guns. He peels the apple with the knife.

When Patricia says she doesn’t know who Looksmart is now, he asks whether she’s changed. She gives him “that white person’s look, blank and faintly beaming, while inside she contemplates her long row of denigrating thoughts about him.” Looksmart discovered how to make this face by watching Patricia, though he has lacked the “courage” to use it on her. Patricia comments that South Africa has changed. When Looksmart asks her whether that makes her happy, she deflects the question by saying her reaction doesn’t matter—she says this in a way that suggests to Looksmart that she actually thinks her reaction matters quite a bit.

Patricia watches Looksmart peel the apple with the knife. When he asks whether she’s scared, she asks whether he wants her to be. He recognizes that he does—he wants her to be scared, and he himself wants to be hateful. Patricia asks what he wants her to be scared of. He replies: “What you have always been afraid of: the truth.” She echoes, “The truth?” Her tone suggests she doesn’t think the truth exists.

Patricia. Patricia acknowledges to herself that there are things she could be scared of. She recalls a woman, Fiona Johnson, with whom she went to boarding school and who lived near the Wileys’. A week previous, some men invaded Fiona’s farm during her husband’s absence, raped her, and murdered her.

Patricia tells Looksmart she doesn’t recognize the child she cared for in him. Looksmart protests that he lived at the farm until he was 19. When Patricia questions whether a 19-year-old is a man, Looksmart says she “made [him] to be a man.” When she suggests that’s a good thing, he replies she isn’t understanding him. She says he’s being “perverse,” and he asks whether she’s calling him a “pervert.” Patricia protests and wonders why his English has deteriorated since his youth; she speculates he doesn’t require “good English” in his current “circles.”

Knowing that Patricia arranged Looksmart’s education, Looksmart’s “indifferen[ce] to getting [Patricia’s] language right” suggests his wish to deny his past dependence on her. That “it doesn’t even matter that this isn’t true”—that Looksmart isn’t indifferent to his language usage—reveals that Looksmart may be less invested in getting to the truth than he claims. Looksmart’s repeated worries about Richard’s guns, meanwhile, hint again that Richard is a violent person.



Looksmart learned from Patricia how to put on a “white person’s look,” suggesting she not only arranged his formal education but also taught him how to act privileged—to be dismissive and blind to those lower on the social ladder. Their short dialogue about how South Africa has changed hints that each character may be wondering whether economic or racial privilege matters more now. Who has more power, indebted white Patricia or rich Black Looksmart?



Looksmart’s behavior may be threatening, but his claim that he wants Patricia to fear “the truth”—not, say, murder—suggests he won’t physically harm her. In a previous scene, Beauty wondered whether meaning (and by implication, truth) were things human beings had to invent. In this scene, Looksmart implies that truth is objective while Patricia suggests it doesn’t that truth doesn’t exist.



This passage emphasizes Patricia’s physical vulnerability as an elderly woman who lives in an isolated place; the description of Fiona Johnson’s violent end hints at the finality of death.



Though Looksmart lived on the farm until he was 19, Patricia seems to remember him as a child—maybe due to her maternal feelings, maybe due to anti-Black racism, which sometimes infantilizes Black adults. Looksmart’s claim that Patricia “made [him] to be a man” hints that she forced him to grow up too soon. Her speculation that he doesn’t require “good English” in his current “circles,” meanwhile, reveals her racist assumption that a successful Black South African would have an uneducated social set.



Looksmart puts the apple on the mantel and the knife in his pocket, finding it “frightening” yet “alluring” that he could kill Patricia. He asks whether she recalls the clay figurines he sculpted for her. She claims to, but he thinks she’s lying. He tells her he used to feel “proud” seeing them on the mantel—at which point Patricia’s face changes. Looksmart thinks she’s remembering but might just be enjoying the thought of such figurines. He invents details about them breaking, which he doesn’t remember—he only remembers her accepting them and praising him like he was a “toy monkey with the battery up its arse.” He recounts that the figurines abruptly disappeared.

Patricia asks whether Looksmart still makes art. He laughs painfully and denies he made art—he just wanted to “impress” Patricia. She claims his abilities were “magical.” Her sudden tenderness toward him makes him wary—he doesn’t want her to perceive his childhood self in him; that will impede his “progress.”

Patricia ponders aloud where Richard is. When Looksmart asks why she married Richard, she doesn’t reply. Looksmart thinks she never talked enough about Richard. Out of nowhere, Looksmart asks whether she’ll offer him tea and cake. Though Patricia seems insulted that he is asking for tea at an inappropriate time, she tells him they have tea but no cake, just biscuits.

Patricia calls Beauty. Looksmart intuits that Patricia is avoiding “call[ing] out the name in her usual way.” Instead, Patricia is calling more respectfully. Looksmart insists Patricia do it her usual way, “like [she’s] calling one of [her] **dogs**.” When Patricia protests to him talking to her “like—”, he interrupts with, “Like what? [...] Like a dog?” Again, he insists that Patricia do it her usual way.

Patricia. Patricia calls out: “Beau-ty!”

Looksmart is aware that he could stab Patricia to death. That he finds this idea “alluring” demonstrates how angry he is with her. The passage leaves ambiguous why he finds the idea “frightening”—maybe he’s afraid of legal consequences, or maybe he cares about Patricia despite his anger. His fabrications about the clay animals again demonstrate how lying complicates people’s ability to see the past clearly. Looksmart’s return to the image of himself as a “toy monkey” suggests he finds Patricia’s treatment of him dehumanizing in retrospect.



Looksmart laughs not to connect with Patricia but to reject her attempt at connection—humor, in the novel, has conflicting functions. That young Looksmart wanted to “impress” Patricia suggests that he cared about her. In turn, Patricia uses the same word—“magical”—to describe Looksmart’s art that she used to describe her own happy childhood in Durban, which implies that, as a child, Looksmart brought to the adult Patricia a kind of childish joy. Looksmart’s worry that Patricia’s affection for him will impede his “progress” foreshadows that he has a goal in mind for their conversation.



Looksmart is furious with Patricia, but his question about why she married Richard implies that Looksmart still thinks she’s too good for her husband—an opinion suggesting residual affection for her. Patricia’s nonresponse suggests there is a story behind her marriage that she doesn’t want to tell.



To treat someone “like a dog” is to treat them as less than human. Here, dogs represent the dehumanizing way white people treat Black South African people. Looksmart hears Patricia’s usual tone with Beauty as dehumanizing and seems to suspect Patricia is changing her tone out of shame and affection for him. By insisting she call Beauty in “the usual way,” Looksmart forces Patricia to see her own racism and rejects her affection.



The way Patricia’s dialogue is written—as a drawn-out call with a hyphen in the middle, “Beau-ty”—implies that Looksmart was right: Patricia does have a particular, dehumanizing way of calling Beauty.



Beauty. Beauty, entering the room, notes Patricia's helpless demeanor. Patricia asks after Richard. Beauty says she hasn't found him, thinking he shouldn't go near the house. At Patricia's nonreaction, Beauty wants to "shake" or "slap" her but feels "powerless to step in." Looksmart asks about tea; to Beauty, he resembles a "predator." Patricia asks Beauty to bring tea and biscuits. When Beauty points out that the biscuits have softened, Patricia tells her to bake them a little while.

Looksmart. Looksmart internally compares Beauty and the rural poor to panhandlers in Johannesburg. He used to keep money in his **car** to give panhandlers "to appease his guilt." Now his own thoughts distract him, so he doesn't even see them as he drives around.

Looksmart tells Patricia that Beauty hasn't changed. When he asks Patricia whether Beauty ever had children or a husband, Patricia says Beauty claims she isn't interested in either. Sarcastically, he replies, "I wonder why." He's furious at Beauty for continuing to work for the Wileys after what happened to Grace. He knows Beauty was only 13—at most—at the time, but he thinks she should have left in the subsequent 25 years. When Patricia mentions that Beauty and Bheki are moving with the Wileys, Looksmart again replies sarcastically: "Well, isn't that nice."

Looksmart asks whether Patricia remembers Grace, Beauty's prettier older sister. Patricia says Grace "was the girl from the dairy who died." Looksmart questions whether Grace wasn't, in fact, murdered. Patricia denies knowing what he means, though he believes she's lying. She tells him the child she remembers wouldn't act like this. He claims that she doesn't know anything about him—not even his name. Patricia retorts that she attended his birth and recalls "the exact moment" his mother named him.

CHAPTER 3

Patricia. In a flashback, Patricia is sitting alone at home when a worker comes to ask her to visit a woman in labor. Richard is gone, possibly loitering at a pub "with the latest stable girl from England." Though Patricia has attended many births—of animals, of humans, even of Rachel—she believes each one is distinctive, except that the mother is always separated from her observers by her pain.

Beauty's thought that Richard shouldn't go near the house again hints at some knowledge Beauty has about a possible violent conflict between Richard and Looksmart. Despite Beauty's knowledge, she feels "powerless" to influence Patricia and sees Looksmart as a "predator"—emphasizing Beauty's lack of privilege relative to the other two characters.



Cars represent unequal access to wealth. Looksmart used to feel "guilt" about his wealth in comparison to people like panhandlers, the rural poor, and Beauty, but now he has gotten used to driving around sealed off from people like them and thinks far less about economic inequality.



Looksmart's sarcastic "I wonder why" when Patricia says Beauty isn't interested in a family implies Beauty is too ugly to get married. His thoughts reveal he's angry at Beauty for still working for the Wileys. Looksmart seems not to have wondered whether Beauty, who didn't get the educational opportunities he did, would be able to get a good job if she left the Wileys' farm. In other words, he seems blind to the ways that his educational privilege have opened doors for him that remain closed to Beauty. Looksmart's repeated sarcasm in this passage again demonstrates how humor can create distance between people.



Here, the novel finally reveals who Grace was: Beauty's sister, a former worker on the Wileys' farm, who may have been murdered. Oddly, Looksmart and Patricia move quickly from discussing Grace to arguing over what Patricia remembers about Looksmart's birth—a segue suggesting that memory will be important as they fight about what happened to Grace.



Earlier, Beauty recalled inheriting an anorak from a stable girl whom Patricia didn't like to talk about. Together with this scene, the novel implies that Richard had affairs—showing again that the Wileys' marriage failed.



When Patricia arrives at the labor, Looksmart's mother says she's in pain. Patricia encourages her to view the pain as a helper in delivering the baby. After an hour, Looksmart's mother gives birth. Patricia says the baby, which repeatedly screams, will be a "strong little chap." The mother names him Looksmart. Patricia stays to watch the baby sleep and drink tea with his mother, though she doesn't ordinarily stay after births.

Patricia goes daily to visit baby Looksmart. She doesn't tell Richard, not only because she and Richard avoid talking about children, but also because her interest in the baby is similar to her affair with John: a movement "towards everything Richard was not—towards life."

Richard. In the present, Richard thinks that he has always felt alienated in the **farmhouse**, since it belonged to Patricia through her father, whereas he lived in it "on good behaviour" [sic], which made him want to be "bad."

As alienated as Richard feels from the farmhouse, it shocks him to find the driveway and gate gone. He sees a house with "the top half [...] removed," wonders whether it's really his **house**, and concludes it must be. Seeing "guests" in motley clothes, he thinks they don't look like Patricia's sort of people and wonders whether the "old bitch" is dead. He sees his dirty boots and concludes she must be. He decides to join the guests, pretending to be one of them. Yet as he approaches and hears their language, he decides he's afraid they might hurt him. He creeps toward his bedroom to sleep but finds a windowless, vacant place with a donkey where his bed used to be.

Patricia was telling Looksmart the truth when she said she attended his birth and heard his mother name him. That Patricia stayed to watch over Looksmart after his birth—unusual behavior for her—hints she may have been emotionally vulnerable at the time, which may in turn partly explain her intense attachment to Looksmart.



The novel has heavily implied that Patricia and Richard had a baby who died. When Looksmart was born, Patricia and Richard were avoiding talking about children, which suggests their baby died before Looksmart's birth. Patricia may have transferred her maternal feelings from her dead baby onto Looksmart, seeing him as a fresh start, a second chance to be a mother, and a movement "towards life" after her baby's death.



In previous scenes, the Wileys' house has symbolized how the past influences the present. This scene suggests that the backstory of the Wileys' marriage—in which Patricia came from economic privilege and Richard relied on her family wealth—made Richard resentful and desirous of being "bad." The novel has already suggested he cheated on Patricia repeatedly—but the reader is left to wonder what other "bad" things he's done.



Richard's mental state is deteriorating. He mistakes a new, half-constructed house for an old house with "the top half [...] removed" and concludes someone must have partially demolished the Wileys' farmhouse. He also mistakes the construction workers for "guests." Yet while the reader might view his memory loss as an opportunity to regain his innocence—a rebirth—he retains past hatreds and prejudices, referring to his wife as "the old bitch" and making the racist assumption that the construction workers—who are speaking a non-English language, presumably isiZulu—want to hurt him.



Beauty. When Beauty takes the biscuits from the oven, they're burned, but she hopes they'll divert Patricia and Looksmart from their conversation. As Beauty approaches, Looksmart says his parents named him "Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu" but called him Looksmart for Patricia's benefit. Then he says he came to talk about Grace, whom he loved. When Patricia denies knowing he loved Grace, he says she wouldn't have.

Patricia told Looksmart the truth when she said she remembered his mother naming him. Yet even an accurate memory may not be enough to know the truth about the past: Looksmart's parents, according to Looksmart, gave him an English name in front of Patricia and an isiZulu name in private. The revelation that Looksmart loved Grace suggests that, perhaps, romantic love has motivated him to seek justice for her murder. That Patricia never knew of his love may mean that Looksmart hid his feelings. But it could also be another example of her being unaware of other people's concerns.



When Beauty enters, Patricia asks whether Bheki is looking for Richard. Beauty says yes, gives Patricia tea, and turns to leave. Looksmart, calling Beauty "Togo," asks for his tea with milk. She carefully pours another cup, wanting to "insult" him with "excessive ritual." He demands she give him "three and a bit" of sugar. She puts in three spoons only "and declines to stir." When Patricia orders Beauty to continue searching, Beauty doesn't realize for a moment that Patricia is talking about Richard.

When Looksmart calls Beauty "Togo," it suggests that like Looksmart himself, Beauty has an English name and an isiZulu name. Calling her by her isiZulu name could be an attempt at solidarity—except that Looksmart subsequently orders her to serve him tea, flaunting that she's a servant while he's a guest. Beauty's desire to "insult" Looksmart, her refusal to give him all the sugar he wants, and her "declin[ing] to stir" all show that she resents him for flaunting his higher status.



Looksmart. Talking aloud, Looksmart compares Richard to a dry moth that Looksmart could crumble to dust between his fingers.

Looksmart hasn't seen Richard in years, which means he isn't comparing Richard to a dry moth because he's witnessed Richard's decline. Rather, he remembers Richard as desiccated and contemptible.



Though a teacher once told Looksmart he had poetic talent, Looksmart mistrusts words because people misuse them in real life. Patricia warns him against "mak[ing] a serious mistake," and he realizes he wants to take the chance of making such a mistake. Though he occasionally cheats on his wife and his taxes, he's otherwise lived an upright, profitable life—which makes him feel as though even his footsteps sound "like the words in a sentence that is known to be a lie." He demands Patricia admit all she remembers about Grace. Patricia protests that "it happened such a long time ago."

Looksmart's mistrust of words implies he's aware how easily people can lie and thus how hard it is to find out the truth about past events. When Patricia warns him against "a serious mistake," it isn't clear whether she's talking about his implied threat to harm her or his belief that Grace was murdered. Either way, Looksmart's life without serious mistakes seems to him like another "lie." That Looksmart doesn't consider cheating on his wife a serious mistake hints that he doesn't care about her—though whether that's because he still loves Grace or for some other reason isn't clear.



Looksmart recalls an afternoon, sitting on the veranda with Patricia, when from the dairy they heard a scream that “sound[ed] barely human.”

Grace used to work in the Wileys’ dairy, so readers can infer the scream Looksmart is remembering came from Grace the day she died. Since Looksmart has previously criticized Patricia for dehumanizing her Black employee Beauty, the description of Grace’s scream as “barely human” hints that her death resulted from inhumane treatment by her white employers.



Looksmart asks whether Patricia never questioned Grace’s torn clothes. When Patricia asks whether Grace was “half-dressed,” Looksmart asks why that fact didn’t make Patricia question what had happened. Patricia replies that that’s what the police were for.

Looksmart and Patricia’s memories agree: the day Grace died, her clothing was torn or removed. Yet their agreement about the facts of the death isn’t enough for them to determine who was morally accountable seeking justice for Grace: Looksmart believes Patricia was accountable, whereas Patricia assumed it was the police’s responsibility.



Looksmart reflects that he came to the Wileys’ to force Patricia to understand about him and Grace. He says that on that day, he was waiting for Grace to come to the house “because she wanted to get married.” When Patricia echoes, “Married?,” Looksmart thinks that to Patricia, Grace is someone “whose future husband is not even worth a thought.” He says Grace was going to ask for time off. Patricia asks what Looksmart is attempting to communicate. Looksmart thinks that day taught him how Patricia saw Grace as “less than human,” which changed his relationship to Patricia and started his hate.

Looksmart interprets Patricia’s echo of the word “married” as surprise, and he sees her surprise as a symptom of her ignorance of Grace’s humanity. Patricia never really thought about Grace and so never considered that Grace had a life and private desires. Tellingly, Looksmart sees this attitude not only as an insult to Grace but as an insult to Grace’s “future husband.” This scene reveals that Looksmart began hating Patricia because of her anti-Black racism, implicit in her attitude toward Grace.



Looksmart says when he saw Richard’s **dog** chasing Grace, he couldn’t trust his eyes. Then he perceived Grace as “half a woman, half a dog.” Grace screamed, and workers came running. Looksmart tried to get at the dog, but the dog kept moving so Grace’s body blocked his way. Patricia asks whether he’s all right, and Looksmart realizes he has begun screaming.

Looksmart’s memory of Grace as “half a woman, half a dog” describes the dog attacking her ferociously. Symbolically, the description suggests that the violence committed against Grace was dehumanizing.



Patricia. Patricia remembers Grace’s death, but she thought Looksmart was already gone by the time she died. She was angry at Grace because Richard told her Grace “provoked” the **dog** into biting and sprinted away, exciting its violent instincts. She wants Looksmart to “admit” Patricia herself pulled the dog away from Grace, got it into the house, and locked it in a bathroom. Afterward, Richard prevented Patricia from shooting the dog, claiming the dog was “only doing her job” and that the workers would never bother her again. Later, however, someone poisoned her.

That Patricia doesn’t remember Looksmart at Grace’s death suggests her memories of the event are vague. Her assumption that Richard told the truth about Grace “provok[ing]” the dog shows how subconsciously willing she is to blame her Black employee for the violence committed against her. Yet that Patricia wanted to kill the dog while Richard wanted to save it suggests that Patricia was far more horrified than Richard by Grace’s mauling.



Patricia asks Looksmart what his relationship to Grace was, though she has already figured it out—she prefers his painful speech to his crying. Then she asks whether Grace wanted to marry him.

Bheki. Bheki, in the rain, spies a man (Looksmart) sprinting onto the veranda “as if the whole **house** is on fire.”

Looksmart. Looksmart sprints onto the lawn and vomits. Reaching into his pocket, he feels the knife but not his keys and realizes he left them on the mantel. He plans to go fetch them and leave in silence, regretting his decision to come: “Nothing has changed. People like her are still sitting in their **houses**. People like him are still looking in.”

Bheki asks Looksmart whether he’s all right in isiZulu. As a child, Looksmart looked up to Bheki because Patricia let Bheki (and only Bheki) drive her **car**. As he grew older, however, he looked down on Bheki, seeing the car as the thing of value and Bheki as a “puppet” whose “strings” Patricia manipulated.

Bheki asks in isiZulu whether Looksmart needs help and who he is. Looksmart replies in English that he’s Phiwayinkosi, but Bheki should remember him by the name Looksmart. As Bheki asks more questions in isiZulu, Looksmart continues to reply in English, speculating to himself that he’s trying to communicate his own social improvement relative to Bheki.

Looksmart asks Bheki whether he’s moving with the Wileys to Durban and whether he has children. Bheki tells him about his son, Bongani. Looksmart takes cigarettes from his jacket and offers one to Bheki, thinking that “Bheki won’t refuse a cigarette [...] Underneath, he’s as needy as the rest of them.”

Patricia’s question makes explicit what readers have likely already assumed: on the day of Grace’s death, Looksmart was waiting for her to ask the Wileys for time off so she could marry him.



The Wileys’ house represents the continuation of the past into the present; remembering Grace’s death, Looksmart finds the past so painful it’s figuratively “on fire.” He feels the need to repress the past as one would flee a burning house.



Looksmart’s conclusion that “nothing has changed” suggests that when he first returned to the Wileys’, he thought perhaps something had changed—that his post-apartheid success would empower him to challenge white landowner Patricia’s narrative about their shared past. Since the Wileys’ house represents the influence of the past on the present, Looksmart’s sense that Patricia still occupies the house while he is outside it indicates that he has now decided she and landowning white people like her still control personal and historical narratives about the past.



In the novel, cars represent (racially) unequal access to wealth. Looksmart came to feel contempt for Bheki because Bheki only has indirect access to wealth through Patricia’s employment of him. Looksmart fails to consider how his educational privileges gave him access to wealth and employment opportunities that Bheki has never had.



Looksmart himself suspects he’s lording his privilege and status over Bheki by insisting on speaking in English, yet he keeps doing it—suggesting that in this moment of emotional stress, he’s losing self-control and indulging in immaturity.



Looksmart doesn’t specify who he means by “the rest of them,” but context suggests he’s talking about the Wileys’ Black employees. He seems to hold those employees in contempt, thinking them “needy,” even though his mother used to be one of them.



After they've smoked a bit, Looksmart asks whether Richard is really insane. Bheki switches to English to tell Looksmart that Richard's condition isn't as bad as that. When Looksmart asks whether Richard is "faking," Bheki replies that Richard usually comes home. Looksmart thinks they're using English to hide "their shared knowledge about the old man" because "for them, English remains the language of lies."

In isiZulu, Bheki is "carrying on" about his son; Bheki is moving to Durban with the Wileys because he hasn't been able to get good treatment for his son around the farm. Looksmart thinks Patricia must have promised to take care of the son if Bheki came with her, but Bheki has failed to appreciate how "when you have money on your side, you get to say what must happen." He tells Bheki he works with the people who bought the farm and, if Bheki wants, he'll get him a job and help his son so Bheki doesn't have to move.

Beauty. Beauty, preparing to serve soup to Patricia, hopes Looksmart has left. He was considered arrogant as a child, and Beauty thinks "people don't often change." Even Richard, having forgotten nearly everything, is "defending himself against the same hurt." When Beauty carries the soup into the sitting room, she asks Patricia where Looksmart is. Patricia asks whether his **car** is in the driveway. It is. Patricia asks Beauty to bring some soup for Looksmart too.

Patricia asks Beauty whether Looksmart loved Grace. Beauty claims not to know. Patricia stares at Beauty "as though she wants to see the world through Beauty's eyes" but soon stops; both women know it's impossible for Patricia to occupy Beauty's perspective: "even those who see each other every day are finally blind to one another."

Patricia says Looksmart claimed he was present for the **dog** attack, though she doesn't remember him there. Beauty, hoping Patricia will be content with "a small amount of truth," says he was present but left after. Patricia asks whether he left because of Grace. Beauty claims she was too young at the time to know.

The passage doesn't make clear what "shared knowledge" Bheki and Looksmart have about Richard, but if they have to lie about it, it can't be good. That Looksmart's portrayal of English, which was brought to South Africa by white colonizers, as "the language of lies" suggests that white supremacy is a fundamentally dishonest ideology that forces the people it oppresses to lie.



That Looksmart describes Bheki pejoratively as "carrying on" about his son reveals Looksmart's contempt for Bheki. Given this contempt, the reader can infer that Looksmart offers to help Bheki not out of kindness but to spite Patricia, poaching her employee to prove his own wealth and power—to prove that he has "money on [his] side" and so "get[s] to say what must happen."



Beauty's belief that "people don't often change" hints at another reason new beginnings are impossible: even when people desire a transformation, they can't transform. Beauty's belief that Richard is "defending himself against" some emotional wound is intriguing and strange: even though his dog killed her sister, Beauty can understand and sympathize with him to some degree in a way that other characters can't.



Patricia wants to understand other people, including Beauty—but wanting to understand others doesn't mean she can. In previous passages, understanding has often broken down along hierarchies of privilege: privileged characters have trouble understanding disadvantaged characters. Here, though, the novel suggests the problem may be more general: all people, even intimates, are "finally blind to each other."



Once Patricia realizes she can't trust her memory, she turns to Beauty's memory to discover the truth. Beauty's reaction demonstrates the problem with relying on others' memories: Beauty gives Patricia only "a small amount of truth," telling her as little as possible and thus—the reader infers—misleading Patricia.



Patricia asks what Beauty remembers about Grace's death. Beauty claims she remembers little. Patricia replies that Beauty can say "anything." Beauty thinks she could invent something but, unlike Looksmart, doesn't have much capacity for producing words. She says she saw Grace carried to the **car**; Bheki had left the farm to get married at that point, so Looksmart drove. Though Beauty knows Patricia "wants to think about anything but the moment of putting the girl in the car," Patricia asks whether Looksmart took Grace to the hospital. Beauty confirms it.

Patricia asks whether Beauty saw the **dog** attack Grace. When Beauty says she was at the dairy, Patricia replies, "So you didn't see anything." Beauty, silent, allows Patricia to believe this is true. In response to further questions from Patricia, Beauty says Looksmart and some stable workers put Grace in the car and Looksmart alone drove her to the hospital. Patricia thanks Beauty, claims they don't have to discuss the issue anymore, and silently dismisses her by turning her attention to the soup.

Looksmart. Looksmart, in the yard, sees Patricia sitting in a wheelchair on the veranda. They chat briefly about the weather; suddenly, Looksmart says he doesn't understand her "kind," who act like things are fine when they aren't. Though he's aware she may have faced similar criticisms in the past, he thinks she'll receive them differently from him, "the one who was once the receptacle of all her hope."

Looksmart wheels Patricia inside and sees his keys on the mantel beside a bowl of soup and speculates that "Togo" (i.e. Beauty) brought it. He recalls many girls in his childhood were called Beauty or Grace because "mothers wanted to raise their daughters up a bit, out of the dirt"—yet he disliked such names. Beauty's African name is Togo and Grace's was Noma, which is also the name of one of Looksmart's daughters. Patricia warns Looksmart the soup is vile, something she's never admitted to Beauty. Looksmart tries it and agrees,

By reassuring Beauty that she can say "anything," Patricia betrays her own knowledge that she, as Beauty's employer, can retaliate against Beauty if Beauty says something Patricia dislikes. Beauty believes Patricia "wants to think about anything" but loading Grace into the car, a belief that may foreshadow future revelations about the day Grace died.



Patricia's statement, "So you didn't see anything," assumes that since Beauty didn't see the dog kill Grace, she didn't see anything pertinent. By allowing Patricia to believe this is true, Beauty is clearly concealing something: she knows more than she says. Patricia, ignorant of her underprivileged employee's greater knowledge, dismisses her rudely. This illustrates the complicated relationship between the women, in which Beauty knows more but has much less power than Patricia.



When Looksmart thinks of himself as "the receptacle of all [Patricia's] hope," it reveals that he senses the depth of Patricia's maternal feelings for him. He speculates that her feelings will make his criticisms of her more effective—that their emotional relationship can counteract some of the blindness caused by Patricia's privilege.



Several Black South African characters in the novel have both isiZulu and English names. Looksmart believes that when Black mothers on the farm gave their daughters English names like "Beauty" or "Grace," they were doing so to try to "raise their daughters up." Yet Looksmart dislikes such names, perhaps because he knows English names for Black South African people are a legacy of colonization and white supremacy. By giving one of his daughters Grace's isiZulu name "Noma," he expresses grief for Grace and, perhaps, racial and cultural pride. Interestingly, Patricia and Looksmart bond by making fun of Beauty's cooking—which demonstrates that Patricia cares for Beauty somewhat (she wouldn't insult Beauty's cooking to her face) but also that Patricia and Looksmart share a condescending attitude toward Beauty.



Patricia. As Looksmart finishes his soup, Patricia sees that his tie is sticking out of his pocket, “giving the suit a tired look, as though it is panting.”

Earlier, Patricia compared Looksmart's suit to a disguise. Now the suit looks “tired” and “panting,” which suggests the disguise is falling away as he and Patricia speak more honestly and become more emotionally intimate.



Looksmart. Patricia says Beauty informed her Looksmart was present at the dog attack and took Grace to the hospital, but Beauty hadn't heard about Grace and Looksmart's relationship. Looksmart claims no one knew. When Patricia asks whether Looksmart's mother didn't know, Looksmart thinks he didn't tell his mother because of his age, the family's inability to afford the *lobola*, and Grace's social position—his mother would have thought her educated son was too good for a dairy maid. Looksmart repeats that no one knew—Patricia is the sole person he's informed. Patricia asks why. Looksmart replies: “Wait a bit.”

The isiZulu word lobola refers to a gift that a groom's family conventionally gives to the bride's family before a wedding. Up to this point, the novel has focused primarily on Patricia's maternal feelings for Looksmart; the reader hasn't learned much about Looksmart's actual mother. Now the novel reveals Looksmart's mother was ambitious for him: not only would she have thought that his youth and poverty disqualified him from an early marriage, but also that as an educationally privileged person, he had too much status to marry a manual laborer like Grace. When Looksmart tells Patricia to “wait a bit” to discover why he's telling her all this now, it foreshadows further revelations to come about Grace's death.



Looksmart asks whether Richard will come back and eat soup. Patricia jokes that he may, as Beauty's soup is infinite—but neither she nor Looksmart smiles.

During Looksmart's childhood, he and Patricia used humor and teasing to express their love in a racist society that disallowed overt affection between white and non-white people. Humor allowed them to connect, but it also obscured the true, oppressive context in which their relationship took place. Now that Looksmart is trying to force Patricia to see the whole truth of their past, their humor is fraught: they are not inclined to laugh at their own or each another's jokes.



Looksmart, standing and turning his back to Patricia, says he can't forgive her because she “wanted to protect [her] seats.” He says Patricia told him not to put Grace in the **car**. Though Patricia didn't say it, she was worried about Grace's blood getting on the back seat. She ordered him to take Grace to the “bakkie” in the dairy. When Looksmart reached the dairy, Richard had driven it away. Only after Looksmart came back did Patricia allow him to put Grace in the car. Grace died on the drive to the hospital.

Up to this point, cars have represented (racially) unequal access to wealth. When Looksmart attributes to Patricia a desire not to let Grace bleed on her car seats, it suggests Patricia was more interested in preserving her racial and economic privilege than in saving Grace's life—and that the delay this caused may have contributed to Grace's death. (A “bakkie” is a vehicle like a pickup truck.)



Patricia. Patricia recalls how she used to love visiting newborn Looksmart. She would walk to Looksmart's mother's hut with the **dogs**, and they would wait outside while Patricia visited. But after about three weeks, Patricia sensed Looksmart's mother didn't want her there; her presence wasn't "the way things were done." She stopped visiting. A few times after, Patricia asked Looksmart's mother to bring him up to the Wileys' house.

Looksmart. Looksmart tells Patricia that, so far, he's told her about things he witnessed. Yet there's more. As he carried the wounded Grace, she whispered something he's never revealed before: Richard caused her death. Patricia, shocked, asks how. Looksmart says Beauty came into the dairy and witnessed Richard raping Grace. Patricia says the story is "ridiculous," but without conviction. Looksmart says that when Grace saw Beauty, she screamed, escaped Richard, and ran away. When she ran, Richard unchained the **dog** Chloe and sicced her on Grace. Patricia asks whether Looksmart is accusing Richard of murder. He says he is.

Richard. Running through the night, Richard yells for his wife, whose name he's forgotten. When he sees a house barely beginning to be constructed, he stops. He wonders whether he's traveling back in time, since each time he sees a house, it's "less built." He decides that, rather than being dead, everyone is as yet unborn, with "their whole lives ahead of them."

Patricia. Looksmart watches Patricia. She wonders whether he wants to convince her what he's saying is true and thereby dispel any remaining questions he has. Patricia asks whether Looksmart talked to Beauty about what happened. He asks, rhetorically, whether the police would have believed him or Richard. Then he says that if he had stayed, he might have killed Richard. Patricia suggests Richard may be too much of a "bigot—," and Looksmart interrupts, "To fuck a black girl? Evidently not."

Throughout the novel, dogs have represented the fraught, violent relationship between white South African people and Black South African people. That Patricia brought her dogs with her to visit infant Looksmart shows that despite her love for him, her racial privilege always affected their relationship. Looksmart's mother's sense that Patricia's care for Looksmart violated "the way things were done" underscores the racial barriers to their relationship.



The novel has repeatedly implied that Richard was a violent man and that he was unfaithful to Patricia. These facts prime both Patricia—who calls Looksmart's story "ridiculous" but seems not to believe her own denial—and the reader to accept Looksmart's story. That Richard used a dog—animals that represent the racist relationship between white and Black South African people—as a murder weapon symbolically reinforces the violence of South Africa's white supremacist history.



Richard's confusion reinforces how Richard is losing his memory and grip on reality. Richard's confusion also undercuts his belief that everyone has "their whole lives ahead of them"—the reader suspects that such rebirths are impossible, not only for a murderer like Richard but for any of the novel's characters.



When Patricia asks whether Looksmart talked to Beauty, she's inquiring whether he sought out another witness's memory to find out the full truth. When Looksmart replies with a rhetorical question indicating that the police would have believed whatever rich, white Richard said, he's suggesting that what he and Beauty remembered wouldn't matter to the "official" story about what happened. Patricia and Looksmart's exchange about whether Richard is too much of a "bigot" to "fuck a black girl," meanwhile, suggests that he dehumanizes Black women even as he lusts after them.



Patricia knows Richard used to try to have sex with each stable girl the farm hired from England. Though his first affair wounded her, it allowed her to justify her subsequent affair with John Ford. She punished Richard with no sex, separate bedrooms, and a lack of companionship, until “finally she denied him her imagination”—which she may regret, “for what other acts had he committed during her absence?”

Patricia knew about Richard's affairs with the farm's white female employees—she's not surprised Richard would sexually target their employees, but that he would target a Black girl. Patricia's admission that she “denied him her imagination”—that she refused to think about him—reveals Patricia is sometimes intentionally blind to other people's inner lives and that this tactic backfires on her, because she then doesn't know what “acts” they have may have “committed.”



Patricia concedes Richard may have had sex with Grace, given his other affairs, but denies Looksmart can say Richard sicced the **dog** on Grace without “the facts.” When Looksmart asks about these “facts,” Patricia claims Grace was tormenting the dog when the dog freed itself. When he asks who told her that, Patricia admits Richard did. Looksmart laughs.

Patricia's admission that she believed Richard about Grace shows how racial privilege determines whose version of history is believed. Looksmart laughs not to connect with Patricia but to scorn her gullibility.



Patricia claims she never sent Looksmart to get the bakkie—he put Grace directly into Patricia's **car**. He points out that a moment ago, Patricia didn't even remember he was present, so how can she claim to remember about the bakkie? Patricia claims “it is all coming back,” feeling that her account is as accurate as Looksmart's—both of them are telling a story and papering over the things they don't remember.

Patricia's claim that “it is all coming back” is strictly a lie, but it reveals something true: namely, that in the absence of objective evidence, the characters are arguing for the version of events they want to believe, based on their own untrustworthy memories.



Looksmart says that if Patricia remembers, she'll remember him carrying Grace to the dairy while she “hid in the house.” Patricia claims she was locking up the **dog** or trying to find Richard, but she didn't care about the **car** seats. When Looksmart reacts incredulously, Patricia points out she “never even said it.” Looksmart insists that she “thought it”: otherwise, she would never have made Looksmart carry Grace to the bakkie or put down “flea-ridden blankets” in her back seat before letting him put Grace in her car.

Even when Looksmart and Patricia remember the same events, their interpretation of events differs. They both remember Patricia going into the house, but they have different memories of what Patricia did there. Looksmart's claim that he knows what Patricia was thinking about the car, even though she “never even said it,” suggests their closeness; at the same time, it suggests Patricia valued Grace less than she valued her dogs, since she allows her dogs to ride in the car but hesitated to let Looksmart put Grace there.



Patricia fights a lot with Richard and is accustomed to yelling. She would be able to appreciate this fight with Looksmart if it weren't for the subject, because it “reminds her of a world in which things matter [...] and where there are consequences to their actions.”

The reference to Patricia and Richard's fights reminds us that their marriage went bad a long time ago. That Patricia almost likes fighting with Looksmart because it suggests that “things matter” and “consequences” exist hints that on some level, Patricia wants to be held accountable for her bad “actions.”



Patricia asks Looksmart why he's bothering with her and with events long past when he's married with children and economically successful. He tells her he wants her to understand the same things he does.

Looksmart's claim that he wants Patricia to understand is ambiguous: he may want to punish her by taking away her privileged blindness to the harm she's caused, yet he may also want to reestablish their old closeness by helping her to see what he sees.



Beauty. Beauty runs along the path between the house and the dairy. Yelling for Bheki and Richard, she feels alone despite knowing Patricia and Looksmart, "ghosts [...] still blind to one another," are in the house. She longs for Bheki's physical presence but can't find him. She feels that she's been running the same path "since she was a girl, always in the opposite direction from Grace."

Beauty's description of Patricia and Looksmart as "ghosts [...] still blind to one another" shows that she sees them as stuck in the past and unable to understand each other's perspectives. Her sense that she's running the same path as Grace but "always in the opposite direction" suggests she felt close to her sister but that they were different people with different goals.



Looksmart. Looksmart tells Patricia he first saw both the **dog** as a puppy and Grace upon returning from school. His relationship with Grace and the dog—his "love" and Patricia's "fear"—matured simultaneously, so he sees them as one entity: "that double thing, that creature—the beast." He says Patricia should have saved Grace's life but instead retreated, which proved she never valued Looksmart but only her **car**. He imagines himself forever trapped with the beast. He thinks his wife noticed and then forgot that there was something wrong with him, while his daughters still assume he should be "complete" and are confused that he isn't.

When Looksmart describes the dog as Patricia's "fear," it suggests the dog represents white fear of Black people more generally—a racist fear that leads to white violence against Black people. Looksmart cannot separate his romance with Grace from the Wileys' dehumanization of her and Richard's violence against her. Thus, he remembers her as "that double thing" and "the beast." Looksmart saw Patricia's actions on the day of Grace's death as proof of her anti-Black racism and desire to maintain unearned racial and economic privilege (represented by the car). Patricia's racism, in Looksmart's view, reveals her maternal love for him to be a lie. He suspects that these traumas—Grace's violent death, Patricia's love revealed to be a lie—have alienated him from his wife and children.



Patricia admits she can't remember what she was thinking the day Grace died, so it's possible she was worried about her **car** seats and didn't do enough to help Grace. She asks why Looksmart can't accept the moment is "lost." Looksmart denies it's lost, because he remembers it "every day."

Memory is fallible. Patricia isn't sure what she was thinking about her car, so she has to admit she might have been protecting this symbol of her racial and economic privilege when she should have been helping Grace. Yet the past inevitably affects the present—Looksmart remembers his painful past "every day"—and so the characters have to care about their fallible memories and not give the past up for "lost," even though they can't be sure they know the truth about it.



Beauty. When Beauty returns to the **house** to tell Patricia she can't find Richard, Patricia demands the "truth" about Grace's death. Patricia notes that demanding truth seems to startle Grace, as if "such a thing has never been asked of her." When Patricia asks again what Beauty saw, she sees unprecedented fear in Beauty's face. In isiZulu, Beauty claims she saw nothing. Patricia asks why Beauty seems fearful.

In isiZulu, Looksmart tells Beauty not to be afraid; he and she know the truth. Patricia perceives "feigned compassion" in his tone. Beauty, irritated, tells him in English that he doesn't know the truth. Patricia tells Beauty not to be afraid and that, since Richard can't remember anything, Beauty has a responsibility as the one who remembers to tell the truth. When Beauty hesitates, Patricia promises not to "blame" her.

As Beauty speaks, Patricia senses her story is "only making a gesture in one general direction." Beauty explains she was cleaning in the dairy when she heard a noise. Looksmart asks whether Richard and Grace were on the floor. Beauty agrees. Looksmart adds: "His hand is over her mouth." Beauty says Grace saw her; then she trails off. Patricia asks whether Grace escaped. Beauty agrees. When Patricia asks whether Richard sicked the **dog** on Grace, Beauty begins "panting like a dog" or like "a woman trying to give birth." She says Richard unchained the dog, which ran. Looksmart adds: "He waits to see the dog catch her, doesn't he?" Beauty agrees.

Looksmart makes a "gesture of relief," but Patricia thinks his relief is false: rather than removing his own burden, he has only partly passed it to her. Patricia asks Beauty why she didn't tell the police. Beauty protests she was young and afraid of Richard. Patricia asks whether Richard knew Beauty had seen him. Beauty replies: "No one knows what I saw." Patricia senses Beauty feels this is now false: what she's told Looksmart and Patricia will "define her sister," Grace.

Beauty's return to the house, which represents the effects of the past on the present, gives Patricia another opportunity to question Beauty about the past. Beauty's surprise—as if the truth "has never been asked of her"—illustrates how prior to this point, Patricia has been blind to Beauty's inner life and hasn't considered her memories or opinions.



Looksmart thinks of English as the language of lies. When he speaks to Beauty in isiZulu, he may be trying to convey honesty—or racial and cultural solidarity. Yet Patricia's perception of his "feigned compassion" and Beauty's annoyance remind the reader that Looksmart has treated Beauty with hostility and lorded his higher status over her. Beauty's claim that Looksmart doesn't know the truth hints there's more to Grace's death than even he knows. Finally, Patricia's promise not to "blame" Beauty for what she says hints that both Patricia and Looksmart have more social privilege than Beauty—and so really could retaliate against her if she told them a truth they didn't want to hear.



Patricia's sense that Beauty is "only making a gesture" implies Beauty's story is a mere sketch of events, not a complete account. Her sense that Beauty is gesturing in "one general direction," meanwhile, implies Beauty is omitting details that might lead her listeners in another direction. Looksmart's interruptions, additions, and rhetorical questions during Beauty's story reveal that he simply wants her to confirm what he already believes. That Beauty begins "panting like a dog" suggests that Patricia and Looksmart's interrogation is dehumanizing and retraumatizing her—yet the other comparison, that she's panting like "a woman trying to give birth," implies she really is producing some new truth in the world, however painful the process may be.



Patricia dislikes Looksmart's "relief" because knowing the truth doesn't change the burden of what happened—it provides no rebirth or second chance, only spreads around the pain. When Beauty says, "No one knows what I saw," it implies that she still hasn't told the full truth about what she witnessed. Yet Patricia doesn't take Beauty at her word; she assumes Beauty is thinking about how she has, in some sense, "define[d] her sister" in a new way by rewriting their group memory of her.



When Beauty asks whether Patricia will tell Richard what she's said, Patricia pities her fear. She asks whether Richard made advances toward Beauty. Beauty denies it, claiming Grace "was the last one from the farm." Patricia ponders Beauty's inner life: while she used to think she understood Beauty extremely well, she now realizes "that was only vanity, or laziness, or wishful thinking." When Patricia says they won't discuss the matter again, Beauty asks about Richard. Patricia asks, "What about him?" Beauty responds by asking whether Patricia "still want[s]" him.

Beauty's claim that Grace was "the last one from the farm" indicates that Richard stopped sexually targeting his employees after he murdered Grace. Patricia's realization that her assumptions about Beauty's inner life were "vanity, or laziness, or wishful thinking" suggests that there are various reasons a person might think they know other people better than they do. Patricia and Beauty's final dialogue about Richard is suggestive. Patricia is still dismissive of Richard, but Beauty's question about whether Patricia "still want[s]" him makes clear that Patricia, his wife, has to decide what to do now that she knows he's a murderer.



CHAPTER 4

Beauty. Beauty finds Bheki sitting in the kitchen, sits down opposite, and asks about Richard. In isiZulu, Bheki says some workers spotted him and Bheki thought he'd come back to the house. Wondering whether Looksmart has killed Richard, Beauty suddenly hopes he has. She grabs Bheki's hand. When he asks what's wrong, she's scared to speak in case "too much truth spill[s] out." She asks whether he's talked to Looksmart. When he says yes, she asks what they talked about. Bheki, taking his hand from hers, won't say.

In previous scenes, Beauty has steered Richard away from the house to avoid a violent confrontation between Richard and Looksmart—yet now, she hopes Looksmart has killed Richard, suggesting her real anger about Richard's murder of her sister. Beauty's fear that "too much truth" may emerge if she speaks, meanwhile, implies she's still keeping some secrets from the others.



Beauty senses Bheki's loyalty has transferred from her to Looksmart. She gets up, opens the door, and sees what she thinks is a dirty child—before she realizes it's Richard. As Beauty stares, Bheki asks whether she's going to let Richard in. Instead, Beauty exits the house. Bheki asks what she's doing, but she just leads Richard away toward the dairy. Richard asks, "Mama?" She doesn't reply.

That Richard calls Beauty "Mama" suggests that his dementia has made him infantile and pitiable, even if it hasn't undone his evil adult actions. Though Beauty was just wishing Looksmart had killed Richard, she again leads Richard from the house to protect him. This decision may suggest that she sees his vulnerability too clearly to allow him to be hurt—or that she needs her job too badly, no matter how horribly the Wileys have treated her family.



Beauty takes Richard to her half-built house, dries him, and changes him into some of her clothes. He asks: "Is this our **house**?" She tells him it is. When he says he would like them to go home, she tells him they already are. Though she senses he knows she's lying, he doesn't care, since he feels "content."

Beauty removes Richard from his own house, which represents the effects of the past on the present, to protect him from the consequences of his actions. Richard can no longer fully differentiate past and present—but he may still sense Beauty is lying to him, though he's willing to accept both her deceit and her care.



Patricia. Patricia remembers when she met Richard, after her father hired him to manage the farm. When he ate with Patricia's family in Durban, he ogled her and the rich décor. Knowing he had traveled from England to South Africa, she appreciated his "boldness" without realizing "he had used it all up."

That Richard was Patricia's father's employee—and that he made eyes both at her and at her father's fancy furniture—indicates that Richard came from a less privileged economic background than Patricia, which made him both desire her and, perhaps, resent her. Patricia's projection of "boldness" onto Richard, though he "had used it all up," shows again how Patricia misunderstands other people's inner lives and true natures.



When Patricia tells Looksmart she thinks she should apologize to him, he replies, "You 'think'?"—but he admits the situation seems "too easy." Patricia denies that but says she can't alter Richard's actions or what she may or may not have been thinking while Grace died. Looksmart asks whether she's sorry, and Patricia realizes he's scared "she'll retract her small apology—not even give him that." When she insists she is sorry, he tells her he wants her to keep saying that to him forever. Thinking he might be joking, Patricia asks jokingly back whether he actually wants to keep seeing her. He replies, seriously, that he doesn't know what's possible now.

Looksmart's sarcastic response to Patricia's quasi-apology reveals they are still not at ease with each other, as does his serious response to Patricia's joke toward the end of the passage. His admission that Beauty's story seems "too easy" reveals his lingering doubts about what happened, and his anxiety that Patricia might "retract her small apology" shows both his unease about what really happened and his lingering attachment to Patricia. Even as Patricia apologizes, she insists they can't change the past, indicating her pessimistic understanding of history's irreversibility.



Patricia asks whether life will continue in the same way after she travels to Durban with Richard, Beauty, and Bheki. When Looksmart asks whether she wants it to, she asks what he wants—whether he can be "something new." When he asks what she means, she says she means "hope." He laughs cynically, as if "hope is a flag waved in a country that has yet to exist," and says he's already tried hope: that's why he has success and a family. Patricia tells him it's a "good start" and that he's lucky—she's childless.

Though Patricia has just insisted that they can't change the past, she seems hopeful that Looksmart might move past the trauma of Grace's death and be reborn as "something new." His laughter at Patricia's invocation of "hope," as if "hope is a flag waved in a country that has yet to exist," implies that in the South Africa that does exist, he cannot escape the trauma of anti-Black racist violence like Richard's murder of Grace. That Patricia doesn't understand this, Looksmart's cynical laughter suggests, means she still doesn't understand the context that has shaped their whole relationship. Patricia's belief that his family is a "good start" toward rebirth highlights how Patricia herself views children as second chances for the parent—which perhaps explains her intense grief at losing first her dead baby and then Looksmart.



Looksmart says, "There's more to a man than a suit." When Patricia asks whether he doesn't care about his success, he demands to know whether she wants gratitude. She insists he's had excellent chances; he replies he's "worked hard for every single thing." When she exclaims that she doesn't know what he wants, he tells her he wants her to "remember that **dog**" the way he does and not be able to retire to Durban "without a backward glance."

When Looksmart says, "There's more to a man than a suit," he means that his economic success can't make up for his past trauma. His claim that he "worked hard for every single thing" suggests his assumption that Patricia might take credit for his success merely because she funded his education. His exclamation that he wants her to remember the dog and not retire "without a backward glance" suggests that white South African people who have committed great wrongs against Black South African people ought not to seek out fresh starts and rebirths—they ought to remember what they have done and live with the truth.



Quietly, Patricia tells Looksmart she may understand: “I also know what it is. To die quietly.” She tells him she wouldn’t have married Richard if he hadn’t gotten her pregnant. Her pregnancy was the only reason her father agreed to the marriage. She lied to him that she was happy till he died, but she admits she wasn’t “happy again” until Looksmart started spending time at her house. Looksmart, pointing out she just told him she was childless, asks whether her child is still alive. Patricia deflects the question.

Patricia values parent-child love far more than romance: she married Richard only because he was the father of her child, pretended to be happy with Richard to keep her father from worrying about her, and became “happy again” only when she had the opportunity to act maternally toward Looksmart. Yet she is comparing her maternal grief to Looksmart’s romantic grief here: they both metaphorically “die[d] quietly” after their losses—Patricia’s loss of Rachel and Looksmart, Looksmart’s of Grace—and need some kind of rebirth.



Looksmart. Looksmart throws a box across the room and tells Patricia he wants to know about her child, since when he was a child, he thought her paying for his education meant she valued him: “you woke something up and then you killed it—you killed it as surely as you made me to kill that fish.” When Patricia insists they released the fish, Looksmart insists they didn’t. Patricia tells Looksmart she provided him with everything he desired. She reminds him how she paid for his school and wrote him letters every week. He reminds her that when he came back from school on holidays, he stayed in a “mud hut.”

Though Looksmart has told Patricia the truth about Grace’s death, they haven’t resolved their disputes about the past. Here, they continue to fight about whether they killed the fish. Looksmart compares the fish to the “something” Patricia “woke” in him, a comparison that suggests Patricia’s maternal affection gave Looksmart a greater capacity for love or joy—which Patricia then destroyed through her racist reaction to Grace’s death. When Patricia reminds Looksmart how she helped and cared for him as a child, he reminds her that he still lived in a “mud hut,” representing the racial and socioeconomic divisions between them.



Feeling “sheer relief” at yelling, Patricia and Looksmart continue their fight. She tells him she gave him work and taught him about the household; he contends that caring for her lawn and **car** doesn’t count as real work and that perhaps she should never have taken him out of the hut. At this, they feel they’re “freeing themselves from the small patch that has stood between them.” Patricia tells Looksmart that lots of children do household chores and that he used to like taking care of her car.

Patricia and Looksmart used to connect through humor; now they connect through honest anger. Finally expressing their feelings gives them “sheer relief” and removes the distance “that has stood between them.” Looksmart admits he found caring for Patricia’s car (a symbol of her racial and socioeconomic status) demeaning; Patricia shoots back that children do chores, implying she was treating him as a son, not a servant, when she gave him work.



Looksmart demands to know what happened to Patricia’s son. Patricia, horrified but seeming about to laugh, says: “Who said anything about a son?” When Looksmart acts baffled, she tells him she had a daughter who died. He demands to know more. After telling him there were “complications,” Patricia finally reveals the daughter, Rachel, was stillborn.

Looksmart’s assumption that Patricia had a son implies he’s jealous: he’s thinking of her child as someone similar enough to him to be a rival for her affection. Despite her horror, Patricia responds with near-laughter and a sarcastic rhetorical question; at this critical moment, she is once again using humor to suppress and control her emotions.



Patricia. Patricia's daughter Rachel was born dead at seven months. Patricia held the "forever dead" body in the hospital. Then nurses put the body in a box. Patricia can't remember whether Richard was with her. When she found out, after the stillbirth, that she was infertile, she felt like the rest of her life amounted to a straight trip toward death.

Looksmart asks how Richard dealt with the stillbirth. Patricia—recalling how Richard "crept away, a lame **dog**," from her gaze—says he didn't deal with it well. When Looksmart asks how she dealt with it, she thinks about how she sold horses "for other people's children"—but she only says that she focused on her garden. Intuiting the revelations about Rachel and Grace have put her and Looksmart on more even footing, Patricia tells him he was "the only child ever to be happy in this **house** [. . .]. You were like the sun [. . .]. My son."

Patricia remembers how she often got carrot cake for Looksmart when he returned home from boarding school because he loved carrot cake. They'd eat on the veranda while he told her about school. After that, she would tell him about the farm while omitting the Wileys' economic problems—not realizing that he might have started omitting things too.

Patricia says Looksmart started to look down on her—as when he would look scornfully at her photos. Looksmart says he particularly remembers a photo of Richard having shot two leopards. When Looksmart asks where the leopard skins are, Patricia says they're probably boxed up. She says she thought his looking down on her was just a transitory stage, but she was wrong. Looksmart agrees.

Patricia recalls asking John about her estrangement from Looksmart. John reassured her that though Looksmart wasn't her son, he'd return, because the time he'd spent with her was "too significant"; their temporary estrangement was due to the nature of boys.

The description of Rachel's body as "forever dead" implies the impossibility of rebirth in the face of literal death. That Patricia can't remember whether Richard was present shows not only her unreliable memory but also how unable Richard would have been to comfort her: her marriage means nothing to her in comparison to her lost opportunity for motherhood.



By comparing Richard to "a lame dog," the novel hints that while Richard used a dog to dehumanize and murder Grace, he is the one with really inhumane tendencies: he didn't even try to comfort his wife after their daughter's stillbirth. Patricia's recognition that she dealt with Rachel's death by raising horses "for other people's children" reveals she redirected her maternal feelings to other children as well as Looksmart. When Patricia associates Looksmart's childhood happiness with the house, which represents the effects of the past on the present, she is implicitly arguing that their shared history contains things other than violence and horror, like joy and love.



Patricia may have kept young Looksmart ignorant of her gradual loss of economic stability to keep him from worrying, but by denying him the truth, she created distance in their relationship. That she didn't realize he might be hiding important truths from her too demonstrates once again her difficulty imagining the inner lives of other people.



The photo of Richard with leopards he'd killed appeared earlier, foreshadowing his capacity for violence. Since his (racist) violence killed Grace, the novel seems to be implying here that in looking down on the Wileys' photos, Looksmart was beginning to notice the Wileys' racism and cruelty.



John was partly right and partly wrong: Looksmart did return—yet the time he spent with Patricia was "significant" not only due to her maternal affection for him but also because her racist reaction to Grace traumatized him. Looksmart has returned because Patricia is important to him but also because he wants to hold her accountable, and it isn't clear whether their estrangement will turn out to be temporary or permanent.



Patricia tells Looksmart she can't remember whether she ever linked his departure to Grace's death, but she began thinking of him "as another dead child." He shakes his head, and Patricia interprets him as rejecting the connection she's drawn between him and Rachel. She tells him: "I didn't want to think of you as taking from me and giving nothing back [. . .] You see, it went against my idea of you."

Looksmart. Looksmart loved his first school, though it was tiny and poorly insulated. He skipped so many grades that a teacher informed his mother he should apply to a better school. Looksmart's mother asked Patricia for help, which Patricia immediately gave. When Patricia brought Looksmart to John, Looksmart noticed the attraction between the adults. Though Looksmart knew about the affair, John didn't treat Looksmart better—instead, John "put him in his place." For example, John hit Looksmart on Looksmart's birthday for rocking in his chair while waiting for cake. This caused Looksmart to feel "what he would later come to know as his hate."

When Looksmart became a prefect in his final school year, he went to John's house every month for prefects' meetings. One time, they went outside together companionably to urinate, and Looksmart "could almost imagine liking" John if it weren't for John's violence and the hypocrisy of his religious services. Later in life, Looksmart ran into fellow graduates from the school; one became a coworker and treated him like a friend, though they never had been. Looksmart appreciated this treatment, which "gave him a dignity that stretched back."

Patricia tells Looksmart that if she'd known he wanted to marry Grace, she would have advised him against it: one shouldn't "marry below" oneself, like she did with Richard. Looksmart requests that they not talk about Richard. When Patricia agrees, Looksmart reflects that she always avoids the subject of her husband. She asks Looksmart what his wife is like. Looksmart claims she's "good," like Patricia's father, but hides his face to keep the "truth" hidden.

By comparing Looksmart's departure to Rachel's death, Patricia makes clear his absence devastated her. When she admits she thought of him as "another dead child" because it "went against [her] idea of" him to think of him as alive but refusing to return her affection, however, she reveals how she can be willfully blind to the truth about other people if acknowledging that truth would hurt her.



While Looksmart's mother was uncomfortable with Patricia's intense interest in Looksmart, she appealed to Patricia when Looksmart needed help, which suggests that she put Looksmart's wellbeing above her own feelings. That John decided to "put [Looksmart] in his place" shows both racism and, perhaps, guilt about his affair with Patricia, which Looksmart knew about. John's racist violence encouraged Looksmart's "hate," an emotional reaction to unjust racial hierarchies.



Looksmart could "imagine liking" John except for John's violence, because that violence betrays both John's individual racism and the larger racist social context in which they live. Yet this same social context—in which Looksmart is one of only a few Black South African people with a fancy education—gives Looksmart "a dignity that stretch[s] back," a status he has used to further his career and that other Black characters in the novel, like Beauty and Bheki, have not had the opportunity to access.



When Patricia says one shouldn't "marry below" oneself, she seems to advise against marrying someone less educated and perhaps less socioeconomically privileged. This advice betrays Patricia's snobbery. Looksmart's desire to hide the "truth" about his marriage from Patricia hints that after their earlier outbursts of honesty, they have retreated to deceit and denial.



Looksmart has never loved his wife, though he felt thankful to her after his daughters' births. At most, he sometimes loves "the idea of her—or the idea of himself with her." He's having an affair with a rich white woman whose daughter goes to school with his. Without liking or understanding this woman, he felt "curious" and "flattered" by her overtures. He tends to distrust others' love for him—except his daughters' love, which he reciprocates absolutely. He couldn't live without them.

Looksmart adores his daughters but doesn't love his wife, highlighting the importance of parent-child love in the novel and the comparative unimportance of romance. That he loves the "idea" of his wife "or the idea of himself with her" suggests that he, like Patricia, can be willfully blind to reality, overwriting it with his own ideas. His affair with a white woman he doesn't like, meanwhile, hints at internalized racism. In South Africa, sex between white and non-white people was illegal until 1985, and Black people were treated as legally inferior to white people. Only if you assume white people are inherently superior should a Black man be "flattered" by interest from a white woman he doesn't like—and yet Looksmart feels flattered, showing that South Africa's white-supremacist past haunts his thinking.



Looksmart thinks he can't tell Patricia about this aspect of his life because she would lecture him. She demands more self-awareness from others than she practices. He wonders whether she doesn't "value[] her own life enough" to examine it. Yet there is something he wants to tell her. Taking papers from his jacket, he tells her he works for the company that bought her farm. He tells her that, far from "reclaiming the land" for Black South African people, he's helping build a "gated community" for white people who want to avoid Black people.

Though Looksmart's belief that Patricia lacks self-awareness seems critical of her, his speculation that she doesn't "value[] her own life enough" demonstrates his curiosity about and sympathy for her—his feelings for her remain complex. It's somewhat unclear why he wants to tell her about his involvement in purchasing the Wileys' farm. While he might want to lord it over a racist white woman that a Black man now controls her former property, he's quite clear that the development project is itself racist: his company is helping white people avoid living near Black people. He is not bringing a fresh start to the farm, which has been a place of white supremacy and anti-Black violence.



Looksmart shows Patricia the papers, plans for the community. Patricia says she hopes the builders raze her **house**—a comment Looksmart thinks "aspire[s] to speak for him" but doesn't express his feelings. He gives her the speech he gives to collaborators, realizing he's always wanted to give it to her: the huts and farm structures will be removed to make room for versions of the Wiley house "reproduce[d ...] with slight variations, all across the valley." The Wiley house will be preserved but renovated "almost beyond recognition." Patricia tells him they "ought to have done all that years ago." He agrees.

As the Wileys' house represents the influence of the past on the present, Patricia's and Looksmart's attitudes toward the house reveal their attitudes toward the past. Patricia wants it forgotten and destroyed due to her own guilt and Looksmart's suffering. When Looksmart thinks Patricia is "aspir[ing] to speak for him," he's acknowledging that she wants the house destroyed partly out of concern for him. Yet his feelings aren't what she expects: rather than forgetting or destroying the past, he wants to renovate it "almost beyond recognition," changing it to suit his best interests. Looksmart's desire to renovate the Wileys' house, which represents the past, hints that he may not care about the truth as much about forwarding the version of the past he wants to believe in.



Patricia. Patricia wonders whether Looksmart's "dream house," the Wileys' **house** renovated and reproduced in other houses, is just a reproduction of Looksmart's suffering. Yet she likes his "attachment" to her house and hopes something positive may have come out of her and her father's residency there.

By using the phrase "dream house," Patricia implies there is something unreal or self-deceiving about Looksmart's renovation project—and, by implication, his desire to take control of his past. Her pleasure at his "attachment," on the other hand, indicates that she sees his desire to preserve the house as indicating some emotional investment in her.



Patricia asks how Looksmart ended up working on the project. He says that when he heard the Wileys were selling the farm, he got his company involved. She says she's glad he's involved and suggests that once she leaves the **house**, he'll be free of "everything—that's dead." He says he isn't sure; since coming to the farm, his feelings have changed. Patricia wishes he'd say he loved her—loved her more than his own mother—but "even if this were true," it wouldn't be characteristic of Patricia and Looksmart's relationship for him to make overt declarations like that.

When Patricia suggests that her leaving the house will free Looksmart of "everything—that's dead," she implies that Looksmart's trauma ultimately derives from her—her racism and its destruction of their relationship—not Grace's death. In this view, the end of their relationship will give Looksmart a fresh start. When Looksmart expresses doubt, Patricia hopes this means he still wants a relationship with her—indeed, she's so invested in their relationship that she's obviously jealous of Looksmart's biological mother. Yet because their relationship developed in a racist environment where they couldn't express affection openly, Patricia is sure they won't start expressing affection now "even if" Looksmart loves her.



Patricia asks after Looksmart's mother. Looksmart says she lives with his family in Johannesburg, in his house's "garden cottage." Patricia, jealous and glad, recalls how Looksmart began resenting his mother slightly prior to resenting Patricia—as if that were "safer" or as if he resented Patricia for making him look down on his mother. Patricia says she's glad he's taking care of her. Looksmart is annoyed Patricia would suppose he'd do anything else. He goes on to say his mother grows vegetables in his yard and ought to live in a rural area. When Patricia suggests he buy his mother one of the farms, he laughs—though Patricia wasn't joking.

Here the novel explicitly acknowledges Patricia's jealousy of Looksmart's mother, underscoring her maternal feelings for Looksmart. When Patricia speculates that he displaced his anger at Patricia onto his mother, it reveals that Patricia suspects how her racial and economic privilege harmed him: it was "safer" for Looksmart to hate his own mother than to hate Patricia, and the education Patricia arranged for him may have alienated him from his family. Despite Patricia's partial understanding, she and Looksmart are not in sync: Looksmart laughs at her serious suggestion.



Patricia tells Looksmart how proud his mother always was of him. When Looksmart replies, "Don't I know it!," Patricia detects "self-loathing" in his voice. She says that after he went to boarding school, she used to read his mother his school reports—and his mother, though mostly illiterate, would keep them. Patricia doesn't recall any of this; she just wants Looksmart to be aware of his mother, Patricia, and "all the women who have ever loved him in his life."

Looksmart's ironic exclamation and apparent "self-loathing" at his mother's pride suggest both that he thinks her pride is misplaced and that he feels his hard-won status has alienated him from his working-class mother. When Patricia lies to Looksmart to remind him of "all the women who have ever loved him," the novel reveals a new reason its characters may deceive each other: not only to hide their own bad actions, but also to make each other feel good and express love.



Looksmart tells Patricia that when he started boarding school, his mother began looking at him the same way she looked at Patricia—with “strange eyes.” By the time he graduated, he was no longer at home either with his mother or with Patricia. Patricia speculates that this is “the price we all had to pay.”

Looksmart’s education did, in fact, alienate him from his mother: he perceived her as looking at him with “strange eyes” as if he, like Patricia, were privileged—even white. Patricia doesn’t explain what she means when she suggests that alienation was “the price we all had to pay.” She may mean that greater racial equality in South Africa not only stripped white people of unearned privileges but also alienated older Black generations who lived their lives under legal oppression from younger Black generations who were freer.



Historically, Patricia has perceived life in terms of “loss and decay.” Everything she’s loved, she’s lost: her mother, her baby Rachel, her father, Richard, John, and Looksmart himself. Yet as she’s spotted new buildings being constructed and new plants growing, she’s perceived a “different way of viewing the world: as an inexhaustible source of renewal and growth.” That perception makes her momentarily joyful.

Patricia, an atheist, doesn’t believe any of her dead loved ones can be literally resurrected or reborn; she believes every individual life is traveling toward “loss and decay,” that is, death. Yet even if individual lives never get fresh starts, “renewal and growth” in the form of new lives being born do occur. When Patricia thinks at the historical or natural level rather than the individual level, she can happily perceive “inexhaustible” life.



Patricia asks whether Looksmart would visit her in Durban, without thinking he will or being sure she’d like it. Feeling suddenly dour, she says they could walk the old **dog** Ethunzini and play fetch. Looksmart, “seeming to understand her exactly,” laughs and says they could make the dog “jump through hoops.”

Dogs have previously symbolized white subordination of and violence against Black people. When Patricia says she and Looksmart could play fetch with Ethunzini, she is suggesting—perhaps without believing it’s possible—that she and Looksmart could behave as human equals while treating a dog like a pet, not a weapon, thus rejecting the racial hierarchy that has shaped their relationship. Though Looksmart “exactly” grasps the symbolic implications, he treats her suggestion as a joke: clearly they won’t be able to teach an old dog the new trick of “jump[ing] through hoops,” any more than they can undo the effects of South Africa’s white-supremacist past on their relationship.



Patricia wants to say Looksmart’s “the closest she ever got” to a son. She thinks about inviting his family to Durban and imagines them playing croquet. But then she thinks that children play on technology now, so what she could give Looksmart’s daughters would seem like “old junk” to them.

Patricia still wishes to express maternal feelings for Looksmart, hence her desire to tell him he’s “the closest she ever got” to a son. Yet when she thinks she has nothing to offer but “old junk” for Looksmart’s daughters, she’s expressing her sense that she—an old white woman who lived most of her life under apartheid—is a relic with nothing to give new generations.



Though Patricia wants to tell Looksmart she's going to be scared, she thinks that was one of his motives for visiting in the first place. She says she's glad he visited and that she's come to understand him better. Looksmart, regretfully, denies she knows him at all. He tells her that though she wants to mother him, their bond can't exist in South Africa's future.

Richard. Richard knows he's not in his **house** because "the black girl" (Beauty) is sitting on the bed. He feels as though he's done something terrible but can't remember what. He asks whether he's been to this house previously; Beauty in isiZulu reassures him he has. Spotting a spade, he remembers where he wanted to take it and asks, "Where did they bury you?" In isiZulu, Beauty says Patricia doesn't want him to go there. Richard heads for the spade, only to discover it's a stick. Nevertheless, he's sure he can get where he's going "if he doesn't pause to think."

Beauty. Beauty follows Richard out of her house but can't see him in the dark. When she goes to **the Wileys' house** check on Patricia, she finds the kitchen empty and Bheki gone. Laughter is coming from the sitting room. Though the laughter shocks her, she's able to infer from it that Richard isn't there.

Richard. Touching Rachel's headstone, Richard feels pressed for time because Beauty is looking for him and will take him away from the grave. He digs with his hands but can't find Rachel. Then he picks up a twig that looks "slim and firm as a chicken bone."

Patricia. The builders have promised not to cut down the bloodwoods by Rachel's grave, but Patricia is disturbed Looksmart hasn't mentioned them. She asks about her roses; he promises they'll preserve them. Pleased, though she thinks he's lying, she decides to have Rachel brought to Durban for reburial. Jokingly, she reminds Looksmart how to care for roses. Joking back, Looksmart reminds her how he watered them too much as a child—an incident they recall, for once, the same way.

Looksmart doesn't explain what he means when he says his and Patricia's relationship can't exist in South Africa's future. Yet the reader can speculate: since the parent-child relationship is an unequal one, with the parent having more power and responsibility, white adults like Patricia shouldn't try to 'parent' Black adults like Looksmart in a more racially equal society.



The Wileys' house represents the inevitable influence of the past on the present; when Richard recognizes he's not in his house because a "black girl" is on the bed, it suggests that the past carries with it racial hierarchies that Beauty's casual posture belies. Richard's dementia in this scene shows both the fragility of memory and the past's endurance: he knows he's done something evil, though not what, and "if he doesn't pause to think," he suspects he can still find Rachel's grave.



Though the characters use humor to hurt one another and deny their own feelings, they also use it to connect. Beauty can tell Richard isn't home because people are laughing there, which demonstrates his lack of human connections.



Given Richard's mental state, the reader isn't sure when he picks up a twig resembling a "chicken bone" whether it might, in fact, be part of Rachel's skeleton. His utter focus on Rachel despite his confusion shows his intense emotional investment in his stillborn daughter.



Patricia likes that Looksmart would lie to comfort her, demonstrating again her belief that people can lie out of love, not just to protect themselves. Patricia and Looksmart's shared joke coincides with their first completely compatible memory—showing that they have retained some of their ability to forge a flawed, somewhat deceitful personal connection through humor.



Richard. Richard enters the house carrying a stone “the size of a human skull.” He sees a well-dressed Black man (Looksmart) laughing with Patricia, which shocks him. Patricia asks him what he’s carrying. Richard says he thought he saw the **house** burning and that they’d finally die. He asks Patricia whether they’re dead. She says no. Looksmart “makes a sound like laughter that is not laughter.” When Richard demands to know who Looksmart is, Patricia says he works for the company that bought the farm and was just leaving.

Patricia. Patricia calls for Beauty, whom she heard enter the house earlier. Though Patricia is tired of intervening between Richard and Looksmart, she tries to summon Beauty calmly, as if “to suggest to the two men that nothing irreparable has happened yet.”

Looksmart. Richard looks greatly aged but recognizable to Looksmart. They shake hands, and Looksmart gives his name, Phiwayinkosi Ndlovu, but says Richard would remember him as Looksmart. Richard asks how they know each other. Looksmart says they knew each other on the farm. Richard, disturbed, asks about the name Looksmart. Looksmart says it’s a name “like Baas is a name.” Richard asks whether Looksmart is wearing his suit for a funeral; Looksmart, sensing Patricia’s desire that he “leave [Richard] to his ignominious fate,” says he visited the farm “to shed a bit of light.”

The description of Richard’s stone as “the size of a human skull” reminds the reader that Richard was just trying to dig up Rachel. Richard’s shock at seeing Patricia laughing with a Black man reminds the reader both of his racism and his exclusion from the human connections that humor provides. Notably, when Richard betrays his dementia by asking whether they’re dead, Looksmart reacts with “a sound like laughter that is not laughter”— suggesting that what Richard said might be morbidly funny, but that Looksmart won’t even laugh at Richard, let alone with him. Richard’s fear that the house is burning down may symbolize Richard’s loss of the past to dementia or his fear that historical change has irrevocably destroyed past social structures that benefited him, such as white supremacy.



Patricia is presumably worried Looksmart may kill Richard for murdering Grace. Given her affection for Looksmart and her distaste for Richard, she’s more likely worried about the legal consequences of murder for Looksmart than about Richard’s possible death.



Baas is a word in Afrikaans, the language spoken by white populations in South Africa descended from Dutch colonizers. It means “boss,” and the Wileys’ Black employees in the novel sometimes refer to Richard that way. When Looksmart says that Looksmart’s a name “like Baas is a name,” he seems to mean it’s a name that communicates a history of colonization and racial violence. When Richard asks whether Looksmart is dressed for a funeral, he conveys the racist assumption that a Black person could only wear nice clothes for some special occasion. Despite Richard’s crimes, Looksmart seems inclined to let him suffer the “ignominious fate” of cognitive decline and claims his visit’s purpose was “to shed a bit of light”—hinting that Patricia was correct to suppose Looksmart’s visit was primarily about her and the pain her racism and blindness caused him, not about Richard.



Richard says Looksmart reminds him of his Uncle Pete. His tone “suggest[s] that everything, in the end, can be reduced to nothing more than a joke.” He launches into a story: the last time Richard saw Uncle Pete, who was allergic to peanuts, Uncle Pete told him that every time he’d visited Richard, he had been sneaking into his daughter’s room and “fucking her.” Patricia interjects, “Your what?” Looksmart points out Richard doesn’t have a daughter. Richard goes on: he forgave Uncle Pete but admitted in turn that he snuck peanuts into their dessert. About to guffaw at his own joke, Richard begins to cough.

When Looksmart says he’s glad he doesn’t know Uncle Pete, Richard snaps: “Do you know there was a time I would have had you whipped?” Looksmart, aware everyone expects him to kill Richard, replies he knows everything Richard could tell him and he’s going to depart. Looksmart wishes Patricia goodnight; unable to smile at her, he thinks Richard “has ruined all that, as he always did.” Patricia asks whether Looksmart will make “a new start.” Dodging the question, Looksmart says he’ll devote himself to family and finances. When Patricia asks whether he’ll visit her, Looksmart lies and says he will. He leaves.

Bheki. *Bheki* sees Looksmart exit the house and catch sight of the **dog**, *Ethunzini*. Though Looksmart seems “ready to attack or be attacked,” the dog simply looks at him tiredly from inside its basket.

Patricia. Patricia and Richard stay silent, listening to Looksmart leave. Patricia notes it’s unusual that the **dog** doesn’t make any noise at Looksmart’s passage.

Though Patricia and Looksmart make jokes, both like the idea that actions have serious consequences. By contrast, the novel has characterized Richard as humorless, yet he now insinuates “everything, in the end, can be reduced to nothing more than a joke.” Notably, Richard’s joke is not only an offensive joke about sexual violence but cruel to Patricia, given that their real daughter was stillborn. This scene connects Richard’s lack of moral seriousness or sense to his single bad joke—at which no one laughs—and therefore implies that his evil actions and his inability to use humor to connect with others are related phenomena.



When Looksmart responds to Richard’s disgusting joke without laughter but with a cutting joke of his own, Richard reacts by referring to his former racial, economic, violent power over Looksmart as his mother’s employer in a white-supremacist country: Richard could have had Looksmart whipped because Richard was a white “boss” and Looksmart was a Black child. This reaction shows clearly that Richard wasn’t attempting to connect with Patricia or Looksmart through his joke but to attack them. Looksmart’s belief that Richard has “ruined” Looksmart’s goodbye with Patricia “as he always did” hints that while Looksmart blames Patricia for her racism, he believes their relationship failed in part due to Richard. As he leaves, Looksmart avoids Patricia’s question about “a new start,” which implies he doesn’t believe he’ll be granted even a metaphorical rebirth after these events.



Looksmart’s readiness “to attack or be attacked” by the Wileys’ dog shows he still fears white violence in general and what the Wileys can do to him specifically. Yet this old dog’s nonreaction to him suggests he has, in some sense, “won” his interaction with Patricia and Richard.



Patricia and Richard’s attentive listening to Looksmart’s exit, together with the dog’s silence, underscores that Looksmart has “won” the interaction—he has come away safe, having forcefully expressed his view of the Wileys’ past.



Richard asks who Looksmart was. Patricia, meanwhile, stares at the rock Richard put on the mantel. Recognizing it as basalt she used to decorate Rachel's grave, she demands to know what Richard has done. He says he couldn't find "it." When Patricia insists Rachel isn't an "it," Richard replies: "It wasn't a child. It was a joke. She was trying to provoke me."

Patricia demands Richard say Rachel's name. When he refuses, she demands he say Grace's name. He says doctors told him to abstain from "stress." Patricia stands—shocking Richard—and says she knows he recognized Looksmart. She asks whether his memory loss is even real. Richard says yes, he recognized Looksmart—and if Patricia had taken Richard's advice, she wouldn't have arranged for Looksmart's education and "giv[en] him ideas above himself." When Patricia points out Looksmart owns the farm now, Richard asks sarcastically whether Looksmart will "open a shebeen" on the property.

Patricia demands Richard admit what he did to Grace. Richard says, "it was a lie" and he "never believed a word." Exhausted, Patricia sits. She knows she'll hurt later and contemplates taking all her pain medication—she never thought she'd reach Durban anyway. Richard says, "There was no name [. . .]. No name for it." When she asks what he means, he asks whether she doesn't "actually know." Patricia says he killed Grace with the **dog**. When Richard asks whether "that's all," Patricia asks if he feels guilty. He sneers at her for judging him and calls her a misogynistic obscenity. She yells at him to leave.

After Richard leaves, Patricia stands with difficulty and calls for Looksmart. She gets into her wheelchair and wheels herself to the front door, where she sees the receding taillights of his **car**. Calling to him one more time, Patricia isn't sure what she's trying to accomplish. She just wants to keep talking to him and finding out more about his life, something she knows isn't going to happen. His taillights disappear. Beauty, now at Patricia's side, asks, "Mesis?" Patricia says she wanted to "thank" Looksmart, though she isn't sure what she means by that. Beauty, wheeling Patricia inside, says Looksmart "will understand."

When Richard says that some unnamed woman "was trying to provoke" him with a "joke," it reminds the reader Richard views humor only as a weapon. As the novel hasn't mentioned any "she" attempting to provoke Richard on the subject of Rachel, the reader is left to wonder whether there are more revelations to come about Rachel's death or whether, in digging around the bloodwoods, Richard was searching for some "it" other than Rachel's skeleton.



By demanding that Richard say both Rachel's and Grace's names, Patricia places her dead baby and Grace on the same level of importance, hinting she may regret her past racism against Grace. When Richard says that education gave Looksmart "ideas above himself," by contrast, he expresses the racist idea that Black people shouldn't aspire to learning or success. His joke suggesting that Looksmart might "open a shebeen"—an unlicensed bar—on the property is likewise racist, another example of humor Richard uses to wound.



When Patricia tries to talk to Richard about Grace, his disjointed responses about "a lie" and something with "no name"—together with his question about whether the murder is "all" Patricia has realized—suggest that there is more information about Grace's death that the novel has yet to reveal. Patricia's contemplation of suicide hints both that learning of Richard's crime has taken a terrible toll on her and that she doesn't really believe she's capable of a fresh start.



In the novel, cars represent unequal access to economic privilege so Looksmart's speedy vehicular departure suggests that his wealth has helped place him finally beyond Patricia's power, even if they still care about each other. As Patricia and Looksmart have failed to fully understand each other, Beauty's claim that Looksmart "will understand" that Patricia wanted to "thank" him seems more like a comforting lie than anything else.



Beauty. Beauty wheels Patricia into the bathroom. Once Patricia is done, Beauty reenters and flushes. Embarrassed, Patricia ignores Beauty while Beauty “make[s] herself as small as possible.” As Beauty gets Patricia into bed, she wonders whether Durban will be any different from the farm. When Beauty has put Patricia to bed, she goes to find Richard.

Though Patricia is physically dependent on Beauty, Patricia’s wealth and status as an employer mean that Beauty has to make “herself as small as possible” for Patricia’s comfort—thus, Patricia is still the one with the power. When Beauty wonders whether Durban will be any different than the farm, she seems implicitly to be wondering whether the move will bring any of them a fresh start.



CHAPTER 5

Patricia. The next morning, Patricia looks out her window at the bloodwoods and imagines their destruction. The night before, she dreamed the builders razed the Durban house while she and the others were living in it. Since the bloodwoods are standing, Patricia assumes Rachel’s grave is undisturbed. She muses that the ancient Egyptians probably knew no afterlife existed but wanted to be buried amongst their things to keep other people from having them.

Patricia’s dream that the Durban house was destroyed suggests she believes her life will be demolished, no matter where she moves. Her speculation that the ancient Egyptians didn’t believe their own religion but took objects to their graves out of possessiveness shows that Patricia not only doesn’t believe in a resurrection or afterlife but can’t believe that anyone else would believe it.



Patricia calls Beauty, who arrives wearing a dress. Patricia notices Beauty is angling herself toward Richard’s room. Patricia wonders whether they could stop caring for him—abandon him on the farm to fend for himself while they move to Durban. She asks Beauty to go with Bheki to pack Rachel’s coffin in a trunk; that way, Patricia can rebury Rachel in Durban where she herself was baptized and her parents are buried.

It’s unclear whether Patricia wants to abandon Richard to punish him for Grace’s murder or to forget her own complicity. Yet Patricia is clearly not trying to abandon her past entirely: she wants to bring Rachel with her, suggesting maternal love makes her cling to parts of the past, even if they’re painful.



Patricia goes into the kitchen for breakfast and notices the room looks rundown. She’s never renovated the **house**. She’s only recently realized life’s goodness is something she should have worked to maintain, not something she’d always have because her father gave it to her. Examining the house, she accepts that her “apathy” helped make it the way it is. Hearing Richard and Beauty from another room, Patricia marvels that Beauty never told anyone about what Richard did to Grace and cared for him rather than murdering him as Looksmart desired to do.

The Wileys’ house represents the effects of the past on the present. When Patricia acknowledges she hasn’t kept up the house as she should and her “apathy” led to its present dilapidated state, she is implicitly acknowledging her accountability for the events that occurred in the house’s past: Richard’s violence, Grace’s death, and the failure of her own relationship with Looksmart.



Richard enters the kitchen wearing a shirt but no bottoms. Patricia recalls how Looksmart compared Richard to a moth and realizes she’s going to perceive Richard through Looksmart’s eyes in the future. Patricia reminds Richard to eat before their journey—they’re traveling to the coast. When Richard says he can’t swim, Patricia tells him he must remember how.

Patricia now sees Richard the way Looksmart does, which indicates that Looksmart was at least partially successful in his mission to cure Patricia’s moral blindness and hold her accountable for past events.



Bheki. Bheki, standing with Beauty at Rachel's grave, sees something has dug up a **dog's** grave nearby. Carefully, Bheki moves the soil off Rachel's coffin. He muses that he's aware of Beauty's love for him, though—as much as he has enjoyed her affection—he's never desired her. He's decided not to tell her that he'll return to work for Looksmart once he's driven the Wileys to Durban. Looksmart has promised to get Bheki's disabled child into "a special school," because it's "time for black people to help each other" rather than "getting help from the whites." Bheki likes this idea; he's tired of this job, where Patricia can demand he dig up a dead baby.

Though Bheki believes his absence will break Beauty's heart, he thinks she'll just have to bear it. He now considers her and Patricia "two sides of the same thing," which he doesn't want to deal with anymore. As Bheki and Beauty lift the coffin, he remembers seeing it lowered into the grave. Though at the time he thought it a shame to bury the lovely coffin, its sturdiness is helpful now.

Bheki recalls the rumors that after Rachel's death, Looksmart was the only person who brought Patricia joy. Bheki respected how Looksmart used the Wileys' front door so casually. Looksmart improved Patricia because he "expected the best" of her. Bheki felt he and Patricia had nothing to say to one another after Looksmart left.

Bheki and Beauty put earth around the coffin inside its trunk. Beauty closes the trunk with a lock whose combination is a secret between her and Patricia. As Bheki and Beauty carry the trunk back to the house, they make a point of performing, for Patricia's benefit, the solemnity they feel. Bheki, carrying the coffin, realizes the Wileys are really moving away.

When Bheki sees a dug-up dog's grave, it suggests that Richard accidentally unearthed dog bones when he was trying to find Rachel—reminding the reader that, in his racist dehumanization of his Black employees, Richard has always had difficulty distinguishing between animals and humans. Bheki's decision to leave the Wileys and work for Looksmart indicates that real historical change has occurred post-apartheid: Looksmart, a successful Black man, can now help Bheki, another Black man, find a good job—neither needs to rely on condescending "help from the whites." Interestingly it is Bheki's love of his son that motivates his decision, suggesting that care for one's children's future is of primary importance in motivating social change.



Bheki's callous dismissal of Beauty's broken heart demonstrates again that most characters in the novel take romantic love less seriously than familial love. Bheki's belief that Beauty and Patricia are "two sides of the same thing," meanwhile, suggests that he thinks Beauty, as a loyal Black employee to undeserving white employers, enables an unjust racial hierarchy that Bheki wants to escape.



Patricia and Looksmart's quasi-parent/child relationship subverted racial hierarchies on the farm (symbolized by Looksmart, a Black child, using the front door rather than a back entrance) and bettered Patricia's behavior, making it easier for her to talk to her Black employees like Bheki. These changes in Patricia were not permanent, however—they halted after Looksmart's departure.



Patricia has told only Beauty the lock combination, a detail emphasizing how underprivileged employees end up understanding their employers' deepest secrets. That it takes the removal of Rachel's coffin compels Bheki to understand the Wileys' move emphasizes the importance of Rachel to the Wileys. It also reaffirms that the Wileys are carrying their past with them, not making an entirely fresh start in Durban.



Patricia. The phone is ringing inside the house. After Bheki and Beauty deposit the coffin in the sitting room, Patricia picks up the phone. The person on the other end identifies herself as “Mrs. Bell from the school.” From Mrs. Bell, Patricia learns John is dead and may have killed himself. Patricia’s aware that Mrs. Bell knows about her affair with John. When she asks whether Mrs. Bell wants her to go to John’s house, Mrs. Bell explains that the police want Patricia to come because John left a note.

Patricia takes out John’s letter and almost opens it; when she sees Bheki looking at her, she puts it in her purse instead. She tells Bheki that John has died. As Bheki drives her to John’s house, Patricia chastises herself for her “lack of imagination” with respect to Richard, Looksmart, and John. By focusing her on certain aspects of her history, Looksmart has changed how she sees her past. She remembers laughing at a black puppy **dog** that tried to chase the dairy girls.

In John’s driveway, Patricia sees an ambulance and a police **car** as well as someone’s Toyota. Bheki gets Patricia her walker but doesn’t accompany her into the house. As Patricia stands in John’s hallway, a young Indian policewoman approaches and says she’d like to talk to Patricia. Then Mrs. Bell comes up. When Patricia asks what happened, the policewoman says they suspect suicide. Patricia is surprised John would kill himself but reflects that the conversations they had with each other were shallow.

Patricia says John seemed fine when she saw him the day before. Mrs. Bell asks whether Patricia didn’t know about his cancer. Patricia, “humiliated,” says she didn’t. The policewoman gives Patricia John’s note, which asks that Patricia not be bothered with news of his suicide. The policewoman asks why he’d write that. Patricia hazards that he wrote it to “spare” her. Privately, she wonders whether he wanted to spare her “the opportunity to care—to feel extravagantly,” but she just says he knew she was moving and might not have wanted to delay her. When the policewoman asks whether John and Patricia were friends, Patricia says they were—perceiving a possible knowing smile on Mrs. Bell’s face as she does.

The policewoman asks whether Patricia would like to see John. Patricia, wanting to know “whether or not it is too late to care about him—to feel extravagantly,” agrees. When Mrs. Bell sniffs, Patricia wonders whether she too had an affair with John; she contemplates how she knew “nothing at all” about John, really. Patricia follows the policewoman down the hallway into John’s bedroom.

The reappearance of John, in death, near the novel’s end is unexpected—Patricia seems to have largely forgotten him after their goodbye, which indicates how much more she cares about her lost relationship with Looksmart than her long-term affair with John.



Patricia’s frustration at her own “lack of imagination” shows she has realized that her privilege has allowed her to be blind to other people’s realities. She thought it was funny when a dog chased the Wileys’ Black female employees because she never considered that, in the future, the dog might become not only a pet but also a weapon of white violence against Black victims. By revealing the truth to her and holding her accountable, however, Looksmart has made her see the past with new eyes.



In contrast with the extremely serious conversation Patricia has just had with Looksmart, all her conversations with John were superficial, demonstrating yet again how much more Patricia invests emotionally in parent-child relationships than romantic ones.



Patricia is “humiliated” not to have known about John’s cancer because, as his long-term lover, she feels she ought to have known him better than she did. Yet she seems to feel that John didn’t want her understanding or her passionate love—that he tried to hide his illness and suicide to deprive her of “the opportunity to care” or “to feel extravagantly,” a suspicion suggesting that John was as culpable as she for the coolness and emotional distance in their relationship.



Looksmart’s revelations have led Patricia to revise her perceptions on the past. Now, realizing that she understood “nothing at all” about her long-term lover, she wants to know “whether or not it is too late” for her to change the way she understands other people.



Patricia has seen dead bodies before, though she barely remembers her mother's. John's is different due to "the violence of his death." She can think about the man she knew, but she doesn't feel she knows the man who killed himself, who "insist[s] on the mystery that must run through all things." Disoriented, Patricia notices shaving cream under John's ear and wonders whether he was already planning to kill himself while shaving—and whether he "still believed in God" or found rejecting God as easy as suicide.

Patricia asks what happens next. The policewoman says Mrs. Bell has notified John's relatives. Patricia decides she doesn't want to witness John's children faking grief while bickering over who gets his things. She says, "Goodbye, John," and hears nothing in return. Outside, she encounters Mrs. Bell, whom she tells she'll be leaving for Durban and won't attend the funeral—John's children won't need her presence.

John. In his letter to Patricia, John writes that he'll leave behind some stories and two children who didn't want to speak to him. After wishing Patricia tranquility in Durban, he muses that he "lacked the patience" to treat his wife correctly as she died and that he didn't fulfill his other familial and social roles—and he asks why he felt such "anger." Unsure what he's trying to express, he thanks Patricia for her love and says he doesn't regret their affair, which was "a place of truth" that offered him relief and a glimpse at alternate possibilities. He hopes Patricia recalls him fondly, says he'll wait for her, and ends, "Think well of us—and of each of us."

Patricia. As Bheki packs the car and Richard wanders the garden, Patricia thinks about John's letter. It made her angry. Given his death, he "could have confessed to anything"—but he chose not to. Patricia never gave him "a place of truth"; neither of them understood the truth. The letter strikes her as syrupy, false. Moreover, she notes that he never told her he loved her.

Beauty comes onto the veranda, where Patricia sits with the letter. Patricia marvels that Beauty never revealed the truth and invites her to sit. Hesitantly, Beauty does. When Patricia asks why Beauty didn't leave the farm or tell anyone what happened, Beauty says the farm was her family's home and her job was decent. Patricia asks whether Beauty wasn't furious about Grace. Beauty replies she and her family consider Grace simply "lost."

Though Patricia still doesn't understand John, perceiving in him "the mystery that must run through all things," she at least realizes she doesn't understand him, his violent death, or his religious beliefs. This constitutes character development, since earlier in the novel, Patricia was assuming falsely that she understood the people around her.



Given the importance of parent-child relationships in the novel, John's apparent estrangement from his children suggests another reason he felt he had nothing to live for. Patricia's decision not even to attend John's funeral, meanwhile, hints that she believes it is too late for her to turn over a new leaf and "feel extravagantly" about him.



When John mentions his estrangement from his children, it strengthens the implication that one of his reasons for killing himself rather than living longer with cancer was the failure of his familial relationships. By describing his affair with Patricia as "a place of truth," he implies he received from understanding or insight from their relationship. Finally, his ending request that Patricia think well of "each of us" suggests he knows Patricia may have a more negative view of their affair than he does.



Patricia's disappointment with John, her belief he was dishonest when he "could have confessed to anything," and her denial that their affair was "a place of truth" demonstrate her development over the novel: she now cares about understanding the past and finding the truth, whereas before she wanted to dismiss the past and didn't believe in truth.



Beauty's explanation for why she stayed makes clear that she didn't have the privilege of anger: due to white-supremacist economic structures, Beauty and her whole family were economically dependent on the Wileys and had to consider Grace "lost" rather than murdered.



Patricia begs Beauty to tell her the truth. When Beauty asks why, apparently unsure of truth's nature or utility, Patricia replies, "Because that's all we have left." Beauty tells her that Richard and Grace had an ongoing sexual relationship, for which Richard paid Grace money. Grace didn't love or want to marry Looksmart, who was too young and too educated for her. When Patricia protests that Looksmart said Grace was "good," Beauty says Grace, very poor, "did not think about good or not good," but about survival.

Beauty says Richard had impregnated Grace. In the dairy, Grace told him she planned to keep the baby because abortion violated her cultural and religious beliefs. That's when Richard sicced the **dog** on her. Horrified, Patricia asks why Beauty didn't say this to Looksmart. Beauty says Looksmart couldn't have handled the facts. Patricia asks why she should believe Beauty's rather than Looksmart's narrative. Beauty says with finality that Patricia "must find the truth" herself.

Patricia remembers Richard talking about "two dead children" the night before. Aloud, she says he murdered his baby. When Beauty denies the pregnancy counted as a child to Richard, Patricia thinks but doesn't say that "Richard felt more about that child than he could ever have admitted." She tells Patricia that once they get to Durban, she plans to leave Richard in "a home that is for people who are sick."

Bheki. Bheki doesn't eavesdrop on Beauty and Patricia, not caring what they say to one another. When Beauty collects Richard, Bheki approaches the veranda carrying a gun. The **dog** growls, and Bheki thinks it's worried for Patricia when it should be worried for itself. Patricia tells Bheki, "I'm sorry to ask you to do it"—itself a request. Though the dog senses something wrong, Bheki thinks "it still believes that a man like Bheki will always come second to a dog, and that such a man will never be allowed to harm it."

Beauty's version of past events suggests that Looksmart's own privilege, as an educated man, prevented him from seeing Grace clearly. Whereas he and Patricia had the privilege to "think about good or not good," Grace (a poor girl without an education) did what she had to do to survive. Looksmart allowed his desire for Grace to blind him to that.



Though Beauty claims Grace thought only about survival, Grace refused to have an abortion on moral grounds, suggesting that while poor people focused on survival may not care about romance, they still have lines they won't cross when it comes to protecting their children. Beauty's claim that Patricia must "find the truth for herself," meanwhile, suggests that people won't always know the truth about the past and simply have to make personal, subjective guesses.



This passage reveals why Richard talked about "two dead children" and why he referenced "it" being a "joke" some unnamed "she" told him: he didn't want to believe Grace when she told him about her pregnancy. Patricia's speculation that "Richard felt more about the child than he could ever have admitted" suggests that Richard really wanted a baby—but was too violently racist to accept his baby would be half-Black, leading him to murder Grace. That Patricia decides to put Richard in "a home that is for people who are sick" after this revelation shows both her desire to punish Richard by abandoning him and her belief that only a "sick" man would kill a woman pregnant with his baby.



Throughout the novel, dogs have represented the relationship between white and Black South African people—specifically, white violence, white supremacy, and anti-Black racism. Bheki's thought that the dog falsely believes "a man like Bheki will always come second to a dog" suggests that Black South African people no longer do come second to dogs, as evidenced by Bheki, a Black man, euthanizing the Wileys' last pet. Yet Patricia is still the one requesting the euthanasia and controlling the action, showing that even though some historical change has occurred, unjust racial hierarchies continue.



Richard. A gunshot distracts Richard from the rose he's smelling in the garden, whose odor has made him reminisce about England. He sees a "long black man" (Bheki) carrying a dog and an "old woman" (Patricia) releasing a sheet of paper into the wind. He considers investigating, but the rose distracts him again.

Patricia. Patricia gets into the **car**. Bheki drives, while Beauty and Richard sit "as far apart as possible" in the back. Realizing she's left John's letter behind, Patricia decides not to retrieve it. Bheki comments it's stopped raining, in a tone "as if [...] a war or a plague" had ended. Patricia, though curious what Bheki realizes and believes about Looksmart's visit, thinks that in the future none of them will discuss what happened, "even if that double beast in the garden" always haunts them. Intending sarcasm, Patricia says it will be "a lovely day"—and realizes her comment "bristles with a range of meanings, some of them good."

As Bheki guides the car down the driveway, they see a **car** coming. Bheki moves aside to let it pass. It stops, and each driver rolls down his window. Looksmart, in the other car, greets them. Jokingly, Patricia asks whether he's checking that they've really vacated the **property**. Apparently not hearing her well, Looksmart apologizes, saying he didn't realize they'd still be here. Though Patricia and Looksmart try to see each other "through the gloom of the cars," they're indistinct to each other. Patricia gives the house keys to Bheki, who tosses them to Looksmart. The two cars go their separate ways.

Though historical changes have occurred and greater racial equality is coming, these changes cannot remedy past injustices. For instance, Richard, who murdered a Black girl with impunity, no longer remembers what he did or consistently recognizes the people involved and so cannot really be brought to justice.



Over the course of the novel, many things have not changed: Bheki still drives the car, a symbol of (racialized) wealth inequality, only as an employee of Patricia's. Beauty and Richard are still bound together by her economic dependence and his physical dependence, despite his crime against her sister. The "double beast in the garden"—the dog attacking Grace, which symbolizes white violence dehumanizing Black people—haunts them all. Yet despite these past injustices continuing into the present, Patricia realizes her claim that it will be "a lovely day" includes "good" possibilities—hinting that though the characters cannot change the pasts or achieve fresh starts, there may still be hope for their futures.



When Looksmart drives past the Wileys in his car (which symbolizes access to wealth), it suggests he is now equal or superior to Patricia and Richard in status. This new equality suggests some historical change, but since Bheki and Beauty are still economically subordinated, it also suggests these historical changes have failed to aid many Black South African people. In this final scene, Patricia tries and fails to joke with Looksmart, and the two characters try and fail to see each other—suggesting that despite their love for each other, their relationship is over. When Looksmart takes the keys to the Wileys' house, finally, his possession once again suggests partial, incomplete historical change: a Black man now controls the house that represents the characters' shared past, yet he controls it on behalf of a company allowing white people to flee Black neighbors even after legal segregation in South Africa has officially ended. Thus, even as historical change occurs, the past remains relevant.





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