The Management of Grief

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

Bharati Mukherjee was the author of several novels, short story collections, and works of nonfiction. She was born in 1940 in Calcutta, India, where her father ran a pharmaceutical company while her mother was a homemaker. When Mukherjee was eight years old, the family moved to Europe, and she studied in Basel and London before the family returned to Calcutta three years later. She graduated from the University of Calcutta in 1959 with a degree in English, received a master's degree from the University of Baroda, and was then accepted into the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, where she studied with Philip Roth, among others. She received her MFA in 1963 and completed a PhD in comparative literature, also at the University of Iowa, in 1969. In 1966, Mukherjee moved to Montreal to teach at McGill University, and she briefly lived in Toronto in the late 1970s before returning to the United States in 1980. Beginning in 1989, she taught postcolonial and world literature at the University of California, Berkeley. She died in New York City in 2017.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Management of Grief" is a fictional account of the terrorist bombing of Air India Flight 182 on June 23, 1985. The flight was initially bound from Montreal to Mumbai with stops planned in London and Delhi along the way, but the bomb—which was planted by Canadian Sikh terrorists—exploded before the plane reached London. The attack was part of a global plot that involved a second bombing of Air India Flight 301 at New Tokyo International airport (now Narita International Airport). That bomb exploded before it was placed on the plane, killing two baggage handlers. The attack on Air India Flight 182 killed all 329 people on board and remains the deadliest terrorist attack in Canadian history.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Along with "The Management of Grief," several works of fiction have been written about the bombing of Air India Flight 182, including the novels *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* by Anita Rau Badami and *All Inclusive* by Farzana Doctor. Before the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, the bombing of Air India Flight 182 was the deadliest aviation terror attack in history. Similar to "The Management of Grief," which was written in the aftermath of the attack, many works of fiction have attempted to grapple with the September 11th attacks and their aftermath. Some of those works include *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, *The Emperor's Children* by Claire Messud, and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid. Though dealt with more tangentially, Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* also considers the September 11th attacks. On another note, Mukherjee's other work often touched on the triumphs and struggles of immigrants living in Canada and the United States. Her novel, *Jasmine*, in particular tells the story of a woman born in India who is widowed after her husband is killed in a bomb attack; the novel then traces the protagonist's story as she moves from India to Florida, then to New York City, and finally to Iowa.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Management of Grief
- **When Published:** 1988
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story, Literary Fiction
- **Setting:** Toronto, Ireland, India
- **Climax:** Shaila tells Judith to pull over the car and then leaves, slamming the door without further explanation.
- **Antagonist:** Judith Templeton, the terrorists who bombed the plane
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Sorrow and Terror. Mukherjee and her husband, the writer Clark Blaise, cowrote a nonfiction book about the terrorist bombing of Air India Flight 182 titled *The Sorrow and the Terror*, published in 1987.

NBCC Award. The story collection in which "The Management of Grief" initially appeared, *The Middleman and Other Stories*, won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1988.

PLOT SUMMARY

After a tragic plane crash just off the coast of Ireland, members of Shaila Bhave's community gather in her house in Toronto. Shaila's husband and two sons were killed in the crash, as were the husband and youngest daughter of Shaila's friend and neighbor, Kusum. The majority of the people on board the plane were of Indian descent. At first, no one knows who or what to blame for the crash, but they eventually find out that Sikh terrorists planted and detonated a bomb. Shaila is in shock and uses Valium prescribed by a doctor to assuage her

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emotions.

Judith Templeton, a well-meaning but culturally incompetent Canadian social worker, asks Shaila to help communicate with relatives of those killed by the attack. Judith explains that she has been unsuccessful in communicating with some relatives and thinks Shaila will be an asset because of her calmness and strength. Shaila views her own calmness with suspicion and says others will view her similarly. She tells Judith that everyone must grieve in their own way, but she also tells Judith that she will call her when she returns to Ireland.

Shaila—along with other relatives of those killed in the attack, including Dr. Ranganathan and Kusum—travel to Ireland to identify the bodies of their loved ones. Kusum identifies her husband and daughter quickly and then travels to India to prepare their funerals. Shaila feels buoyed by hope and optimism after Dr. Ranganathan, a renowned electrical engineer who lost his entire family in the attack, tells her that a strong swimmer might have been able to survive the crash and swim to shore. She leaves Ireland for India without having identified her husband and sons.

In India, Shaila stays with her parents for a few months and then travels throughout the country. Six months into her travels, she sees a vision of her husband in a temple in a small Himalayan village. In the vision, her husband, Vikram Bhave, tells her she must "finish alone what we started together." Shaila returns to Canada, while Kusum sells her house to move to an ashram in the Indian city of Haridwar (referred to in the story as Hardwar) to pursue inner peace. Dr. Ranganathan turns his house into a shrine to the family he lost before eventually selling that house and moving to Texas, where no one will know his story.

When Shaila returns to Toronto, Judith Templeton asks her to help reach out to relatives of the attack with whom she has had trouble communicating. Together, they visit an elderly couple. Judith wants Shaila to help get the couple to sign a paper that will ensure they receive benefits from the Canadian government. The couple is reluctant to sign the paper, convinced that it would mean giving up hope that they would see their sons again, and Judith and Shaila leave without convincing them to sign. As they travel to their next appointment, Judith complains about the person they're about to meet. Shaila, unable to bear Judith's complaining, asks to stop the car and then leaves without explaining to Judith why.

Shaila sells her house and moves to an apartment in downtown Toronto. On a rare sunny day in winter, she walks in a park and sees a vision of her family for the last time. In the vision, her family tells her that her "time has come" and to "go, be brave."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Shaila Bhave – Shaila Bhave is the story's protagonist. Her husband, Vikram Bhave, and her two sons, Vinod Bhave and Mithun Bhave, have just been killed in a plane bombing. The tragedy puts Shaila into a state of shock, and she takes Valium to help her through her grief. The shock and Valium make Shaila appear calm to outside observers like Judith Templeton, but—in reality—she wishes she could "scream" or jump from a bridge"; that is, she would do anything to feel her emotions more fully. When Shaila travels to Ireland, she's unable to identify the bodies of her family members, but instead of feeling grief, she feels optimistic and clings to the hope that they might still be alive. She finds further solace when she begins to see visions of her husband and sons, and as she grieves, she feels that her "family surrounds [her]." Even in their deaths, Shaila feels comforted by her family members. To Shaila, it seems hopeless to try and communicate these complexities of grief to Judith, whose knowledge of grieving seems limited to charts and textbooks. What's more, Shaila's path through grief is presented alongside those of Kusum and Dr. Ranganathan, who both also lost family members in the attack. After Shaila sees one final vision of her family, she moves into a different phase of life, one less defined by the immediacy of grief.

Judith Templeton – Judith Templeton is a Canadian social worker in charge of carrying out government communications with the people who lost loved ones in the terrorist attack. Judith says the government has to distribute money to some people and get others to sign legal documents. She wants Shaila Bhave to help her in this process because, though the government has translators, Judith thinks they're missing a "human touch." Some of the people she's trying to reach, Judith says, don't speak English and have never dealt with money—others, she says, are simply "hysterical" or depressed. She thus identifies Shaila as a potential emissary, mistaking Shaila's calmness for stoic strength. Judith's knowledge of grief seems to come exclusively from textbooks, and she says that six months after the tragedy, only a few relatives of those who have died have reached the "correct" stage of grief. In this way, the story presents her as out of touch and culturally incompetent, unwilling and unable to accept and understand people who are different from her. It's arguable that the story's title, "The Management of Grief," can be read as Judith's attempt to shoehorn the deepest, most profound and difficult human experiences into a sterile, bureaucratic model of coping that doesn't address the needs of the people it claims to serve. Shaila eventually grows tired of Judith's cluelessness and stops assisting her without explaining why.

Kusum – Kusum is Shaila Bhave's friend and neighbor, whose husband and youngest daughter were killed in the attack. At Shaila's house just after the attack, Kusum gets into an argument with her oldest daughter, Pam. Pam accuses Kusum of wishing that she was dead instead of her sister, who she says is Kusum's favorite child. Kusum travels with Shaila to Ireland

and identifies her family members quickly before traveling to India to arrange funeral proceedings. Her journey through grief is presented alongside Shaila's—while Shaila finds herself in shock and turns to Valium to process her grief, Kusum turns to religion. Overlooking the bay where the plane crashed, Kusum paraphrases her swami (a religious teacher in Hinduism) and tells Shaila that fate led everyone to be on the plane that day and that they should be happy because their family members have gone to a better place. Kusum eventually sells her house in Toronto to move to an ashram run by her swami in the Indian city of Haridwar (referred in the story to Hardwar), where she plans to pursue inner peace.

Dr. Ranganathan – Dr. Ranganathan is a world-renowned electrical engineer who lost a large family in the bombing. When he and Shaila Bhave first meet in Ireland, he says that a strong swimmer might have been able to survive the crash and swim to shore. Dr. Ranganathan's optimism, pragmatism, and sense of friendship and authority give Shaila a jolt of hope, and he tells Shaila that it's "a parent's duty to hope." His journey through grief is presented alongside those of Shaila and Kusum. After he returns to Canada, Dr. Ranganathan begins a job in Ottawa but can't bring himself to sell his house in Toronto, which he has turned into a "shrine" to the family members he lost. Eventually, he takes an academic job in Texas, where "no one knows his story and he has vowed not to tell it." He and Shaila continue to talk on the phone about once a week.

Elderly Couple – When Shaila Bhave agrees to help Judith Templeton, they visit an elderly Sikh couple whose two sons were killed in the attack. The couple is reluctant to sign the papers Judith wants them to sign because they believe that "God will provide" for them instead of the government. By signing, they worry they'll be giving up hope that they might see their sons again. After they leave the couple's apartment without getting them to sign the papers, Shaila wants to tell Judith, "*In our culture, it is a parent's duty to hope.*" Instead, after Judith complains about the couple's "stubbornness and ignorance"—and after Judith begins to complain about the next person they have an appointment with—Shaila leaves without explaining why.

Pam – Pam is Kusum's older daughter who is "always in trouble." She "dates Canadian boys and hangs out at the mall," unlike her "goody goody" younger sister, who was killed in the attack and was on the plane on her way to spend time with her grandparents because Pam wouldn't go. Pam would rather spend her time working at McDonald's and accuses Kusum of wishing that she, Pam, had died on the plane instead of her sister. After the attack, Pam sets out for California but ends up in Vancouver, where she works in a department store.

Vikram Bhave – Vikram Bhave was Shaila's husband, who was killed in the plane bombing. Shaila Bhave and Kusum talk about how they both wish they had spoken more openly to their husbands before the men were killed in the terrorist attack. When overlooking the bay in Ireland where the plane crashed, Shaila puts a poem that she wrote into the water, expressing to Vikram how she feels. Vikram appears to Shaila in visions, encouraging her to continue with the journey that they began together.

Vinod Bhave – Vinod Bhave was Shaila Bhave's older son, who was killed in the terror attack. He was about to turn 14 years old when he was killed. Shaila tells Dr. Ranganathan that Vinod was a strong swimmer who looked out for his younger brother, Mithun Bhave. The two brothers were very close. Shaila brings Vinod's pocket calculator to Ireland and lets it float away in the water.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mithun Bhave – Mithun Bhave is Shaila Bhave's younger son, who was killed in the terror attack. He was very close with his older brother, Vinod Bhave. Shaila brings a half-painted model B-52 plane to Ireland to let float away in the water for Mithun.

Dr. Sharma The treasurer of the Indo-Canadian society.

THEMES

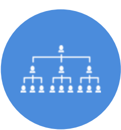
In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MANAGING VERSUS EXPERIENCING GRIEF

The central conflict of "The Management of Grief" is between those directly experiencing grief (represented by the protagonist Shaila Bhave) and those who know about grief secondhand (represented by Judith Templeton, a Canadian government official who manages the government benefits for the family members of those killed in the plane bombing at the story's center). Judith reads textbooks on "grief management" and insists that there are proper steps—"rejection, depression, acceptance, reconstruction"—to manage grief. But Shaila, who lost her husband and two sons in the bombing, experiences grief as something much more mysterious and overwhelming. Sometimes Shaila's grief threatens to tear her apart, while at other times she has visions of her absent loved ones, who comfort her in her pain and ultimately bless her to continue the adventure they began together. In that sense, the story presents grief as something more like an uncontrollable storm, something that must be experienced, not controlled or managed.

Shaila struggles to explain these more potent, unpredictable

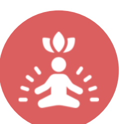
aspects of grief to Judith, and she eventually stops helping Judith communicate with the other families affected by the plane bombing because she's so frustrated that Judith can't understand. In that rejection of Judith—and in the peace that Shaila finally finds—the story suggests that Judith's approach to "managing" a supposedly predictable kind of grief is ineffective. Instead, as Shaila demonstrates, processing grief requires fully experiencing it without knowing where it might lead.



BUREAUCRACY

Judith Templeton's approach to grief exemplifies a kind of bureaucratic coldness that the story condemns. At the beginning of the story, Judith—a white Canadian woman—enlists Shaila to help her navigate "the complications of culture, language, and customs" that she faces when she meets with grieving families who immigrated from India. Judith seems, on the one hand, aware of her own shortcomings—and, by extension, those of the Canadian government—when communicating with families affected by the tragedy. But she also views cultures, languages, and customs different than her own first and foremost as complications that can be bureaucratically solved.

That perspective, and its deleterious effects, become clear when Shaila accompanies Judith to meet with a Sikh couple who lost their sons in the plane bombing. Judith aims to persuade the couple, with Shaila's assistance, to sign papers that will ensure they receive benefits from the Canadian government. The couple insists, though, that God will provide for them, not the government, and that their sons, who were killed in the attack, will help them when they return. After Judith and Shaila leave without getting the couple to sign the papers, Judith says to Shaila, "You see what I'm up against? … Their stubbornness and ignorance is driving me crazy." Shaila thinks of pointing out the shortsightedness of Judith's approach by telling her, "In our culture, it is a parent's duty to hope." She refrains from doing so, though, because it has become futile to try to effectively communicate with Judith. Judith has become rigidly attached to a bureaucratic mode of understanding the world, which organizes grief into predictable stages and sees people grieving the death of their sons as obstacles to be overcome and complications to be untangled, not human beings to be understood.



SECULAR VS. SPIRITUAL

The story presents two divergent approaches to grieving loved ones lost in the plane bombing: a secular approach (represented by calmness in the face of grief) and a spiritual one, in which families find peace. Judith, a representative of the secular world of the Canadian government, first identifies Shaila as a potential community intermediary because she admires that Shaila reacted to the tragedy with extraordinary calmness. But Shaila views this calmness as somewhat unnatural and unnerving—it's "not peace, just a deadening quiet," she reflects, and she calls her reaction a "terrible calm that will not go away." Shaila apparently seeks a deeper kind of peace than the superficial calmness brought on by shock and Valium—a spiritual solace that she's initially not able to access.

The three main characters who lost members of their families in the attack—Shaila, Kusum, and Dr. Ranganathan—each seek communion with a spiritual realm to move through their grief. Shaila is both comforted and thrilled by visions of her family, and, ultimately, a vision of her family guides her to continue bravely down the path they all began together when they moved to Canada. Kusum explicitly seeks spiritual peace by moving, at her swami's suggestion, to an ashram in India where she also experiences visions of her lost family members. And even Dr. Ranganathan, a paragon of reason and pragmatism, turns his house into "a temple," the master bedroom "a shrine," while he sleeps on a cot and becomes "a devotee" to the family he lost. While Judith's list of grief management steps doesn't include any of these approaches, the story presents them as necessary for Shaila, Kusum, and Dr. Ranganathan to try to find peace. In this way, the story juxtaposes a mysterious spiritual peace with the false calmness offered by valium and prized by characters like Judith Templeton.

HOPE, DUTY, AND DESPAIR

The phrase "a parent's duty is to hope" comes up multiple times throughout the story. Dr. Ranganathan first says it when he suggests that Shaila's sons, and others on the plane, may have been able to swim to safety. "It's a parent's duty to hope," he says, and Shaila is flooded with relief. She later says that she packed the suitcase she brought to Ireland, where she has gone to identify the bodies of her husband and sons, "with dry clothes for [her] boys." That action—bringing dry clothes for her sons, even though all evidence suggests they have already died—conveys not just the love Shaila has for her lost family members, but also a kind of hope that tethers her to her lost family members and keeps them alive to her when their fates remain unknown.

That same phrase—"a parent's duty is to hope"—comes up again when Judith and Shaila visit the Sikh couple to try to persuade them to sign papers so they will receive government benefits. Judith thinks that signing the papers is important for the couple because it will help them afford food and pay utility bills. But she also sees signing the papers as a kind of emotional imperative for the couple because signing will, in her view, enable them to accept the death of their sons and begin "reconstructing" their lives. When the couple decides not to sign the papers, Shaila wants to explain their refusal by telling Judith, "In our culture, a parent's duty is to hope," meaning that it is not right to ask this couple to abandon hope that their sons will return alive. Abandoning that hope would mean, for them,

to abandon a central duty of being a good parent. By repeating the phrase "a parent's duty is to hope throughout the story," and by having that idea play a central role in Shaila's decision to leave Judith, the story suggests that hope not only buoys people in crisis, helping them remain above the surface of despair, but that it also enables people in grief to stay meaningfully connected to their loved ones, even when all obvious or tangible reasons for hope have been exhausted. In this way, attempting to sever that connection, or argue against that hope, is grievously misguided.

NAVIGATING CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

When Judith initially asks for Shaila's assistance, Shaila responds by saying that she won't be able to help and that "we must all grieve in our own way." Each person's "own way" to grieve depends, the story suggests, on both their culture and their own personal, lived experience. For example, the Sikh couple maintains hope that their sons will return. Dr. Ranganathan finds refuge first in a kind of optimistic pragmatism and then by physically distancing himself from emotional tragedy by moving to Texas, where no one will know his story. Kusum moves to an ashram in Hardwar to pursue spiritual peace. Shaila seeks direction and wisdom in visions of her loved ones. By portraying the complexities of how grief is understood across different cultures, and the nuances of how people from the same culture perceive the same issues very differently, the story serves as a testament against the one-size-fits-all mentality advocated by Judith and the Canadian government. Instead, the story maintains the importance of trying to understand people as both influenced by their culture and their personal experiences, as an individual who must be taken on their own terms if someone wants to begin to understand them or enter into meaningful communication with them.

SYMBOLS

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

JUDITH TEMPLETON'S TEXTBOOK

Judith Templeton's textbook is a symbol of bureaucratic incompetence and the lack of emotion that many governments show when dealing with human loss. On a personal level, the textbook embodies Judith's insensitivity and her inability to truly empathize with people who have experienced profound tragedy. More broadly, though, it also symbolizes a sterile and overly programmatic bureaucratic approach to grief—an approach that relies on schematics and carefully charted stages of grief while ignoring the humanity of the people who are actually dealing with the agonizing consequences of such a harrowing loss. Judith's textbook is juxtaposed with the real-life, lived experiences of grief that Shaila Bhave, Kusum, Dr. Ranganathan, and the elderly couple all experience. Those characters' experiences of grief are all shown to be deeply personal, varied, messy, and impossible to predict, ultimately illustrating how ineffective a procedural textbook is when it comes to addressing the many difficulties of true loss and sorrow.

SHAILA'S PACKAGE

Shaila Bhave's package represents the habitual weight of grief that Shaila carries. On a sunny winter day, Shaila runs a small errand to Yonge Street, where she picks up a package. While walking back home through the park, she notices something rustling in the trees. She looks up and sees one final vision of her family, and they tell her that her "time has come" and to "go, be brave." She does not know where the voyage will end and doesn't know what direction she'll take, but she drops the package on a park bench and starts walking. It's clear, then, that the package doesn't consume her attention or excessively weigh her down, similar to how her grief doesn't necessarily occupy all of her attention or emotional energy but is still with her wherever she goes. The fact that she leaves the package behind when her family urges her to "go, be brave" doesn't mean she leaves her grief—or the memory of her family—behind, but that she is beginning to move toward a new mode of life that will perhaps make it possible for her to find some kind of normalcy once again. In other words, she lets herself begin to come back to life after being devastated by grief. In turn, the package itself represents the idea that it's necessary, at some point, to stop carrying around certain emotions in order to move on, even if doing so seems impossible.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *The Middleman and Other Stories* published in 1999.

The Management of Grief Quotes

❝❝ Dr. Sharma, the treasurer of the Indo-Canada society, pulls me into the hallway. He wants to know if I am worried about money. His wife, who has just come up from the basement with a tray of empty cups and glasses, scolds him. "Don't bother Mrs. Bhave with mundane details."

Related Characters: Shaila Bhave (speaker), Dr. Sharma, Judith Templeton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the beginning of the story, after there has been a tragedy involving a plane that was carrying Shaila's husband and two sons. Shaila's house is full of strangers who have come to try and support her in her grief. Dr. Sharma, introduced with a bureaucratic-sounding title—treasurer of the Indo-Canada society—asks Shaila if she is worried about money, and his wife scolds him for bothering Shaila with mundane details. Dr. Sharma is ostensibly well-meaning and looking out for Shaila's best interests, but he does so, arguably, by overlooking the seriousness of her grief and focusing instead on, as his wife says, mundane details. Notably, his wife is busy taking care of other small details—making sure there are cups and glasses for everyone—without bothering Shaila with those details.

This small interaction will be played out, with different characters playing these roles, again at the climax of the story, when Shaila visits the elderly couple with Judith Templeton. In that scenario, Judith plays the role of Dr. Sharma, a theoretically well-meaning bureaucrat who seems oblivious to the profound grief of the people around her. The elderly couple they visit don't want to worry about money; instead, they want to maintain their hope and spiritual connection with their sons. Like Dr. Sharma's wife, Shaila is then in a position to scold Judith for her insensitivity, but she thinks better of it and leaves Judith instead.

I wonder if pills alone explain this calm. Not peace, just a deadening quiet… Sound can reach me, but my body is tensed, ready to scream. I hear their voices all around me. I hear my boys and Vikram cry, "Mommy, Shaila!" and their screams insulate me, like headphones.

Related Characters: Shaila Bhave (speaker), Vikram Bhave, Vinod Bhave, Mithun Bhave

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Shaila's house is full of people who have come to try and support her in her grief after news of the plane crash has reached them. Instead of feeling what she might expect—an outpouring of emotion—Shaila feels a strange kind of calm, a "deadening quiet." In that quiet, though, the cries of her husband and children transport her to a different world, and sound from her bustling house reaches her muffled, as if the cries of her family members are headphones she wears amid the commotion.

Shaila's transportation foreshadows the visions that she will later have of her family. Those later visions often provide Shaila with hope or a path forward, but this initial vision communicates her loved ones' pain and fear. In some ways, Shaila wants to reciprocate that pain and fear, to have an emotional reaction that is equal to it, but, instead, she feels calm. That calmness might come in part from the Valium she uses to manage her grief, as she says. But it also seems to come from a sense that her emotions are too overwhelming to experience at the moment—they are a scream, coiled in her tense body—so that her mind, in a sense, short-circuits and shuts down, leaving her with just a strange calm, that deadening quiet.

"Why does God give us so much if all along He intends to take it away?" Kusum asks me.

Related Characters: Shaila Bhave, Kusum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

Shaila is in her house surrounded by strangers and friends after the plane crash. One of those friends is Kusum, who lives across the street and who lost her husband and younger daughter in the crash. "The Management of Grief" as a whole presents different people's ways of processing grief, whether it's Shaila, Kusum, Dr. Ranganathan, or Judith Templeton. Kusum consistently looks to religion to make sense of her grief, and her first line in the story highlights her connection to her spirituality.

When Kusum asks Shaila the question—why does God give so much only to take it away—Shaila only nods. Whether one believes in God or not, the question seems to get to the heart of the tragedy by asking, Why are we here? What are we doing? Why are we here if the people we love can disappear in an instant? These questions, and the depth of emotion behind them, are the kinds of questions (along with

questions of empathy and cultural awareness) that make Judith's textbook model of managing grief, and her bureaucratic approach to the world, seem woefully misguided.

Kusum's question also foreshadows the journey Kusum will take through grief. By the end of the story, she has moved to an ashram in Hardwar to pursue inner peace. In a sense, peace might mean finding an answer to her original question—"Why does God give us so much if all along He intends to take it away?"—or it might mean accepting the impossibility of such an answer.

"Nothing I can do will make any difference," I say. "We must all grieve in our own way."

Related Characters: Shaila Bhave (speaker), Judith Templeton

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

Shaila makes this comment to Judith the first time that they meet. Judith has asked Shaila for help talking with loved ones of those killed in the plane bombing. Judith is specifically looking for help navigating the "complications of culture, language, and customs." Shaila responds by saying that she won't be able to make a difference and that everyone must grieve in their own way. The first half of what Shaila says seems like an understatement, and it's not clear if she entirely believes it either, as Shaila tells Judith they can continue their conversation when she returns from Ireland.

The second half of that statement, though, functions as a kind of thesis statement of the story, especially when juxtaposed against Judith's one-size-fits-all approach to grief. Shaila states the idea straightforwardly: Everyone must grieve in their own way. From that point, the story—by showing readers Kusum, Dr. Ranganathan, the elderly couple, and Shaila's journeys through grief—proceeds to demonstrate exactly that.

"It's a parent's duty to hope," [Dr. Ranganathan] says. "It is foolish to rule out possibilities that have not been tested. I myself have not surrendered hope."

Related Characters: Dr. Ranganathan (speaker), Shaila Bhave

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. Ranganathan says this to Shaila when they are in Ireland, overlooking the bay where the plane crashed. Dr. Ranganathan tells Shaila that a strong swimmer might have been able to reach shore, and also might have been able to carry someone with him. Dr. Ranganathan's optimism heartens Shaila, and she feels that his words carry extra weight because, as a renowned electrical engineer, he might have insight into "important secrets of the universe," insight that is unavailable to her.

The hope Dr. Ranganathan describes operates in a few different ways. In one way, Dr. Ranganathan advocates for a scientific openness to possibility, refusing to believe one truth unless other likely possibilities have been tested and ruled out. That kind of scientific openness, though, doesn't fully explain his statement that "it's a parent's duty to hope."

Shaila later repeats the phrase right after meeting the elderly couple that refuses to give up hope for their sons, and the repetition, at that time, highlights the "duty" aspect of that hope. If hope is a duty, then maintaining it means committing oneself to a moral purpose. Abandoning it would then mean surrendering that moral purpose and letting go of something that is essential to being a good parent, and a good person.

Kusum and I take the same direct flight to Bombay, so I can help her clear customs quickly. But we have to argue with a man with a uniform... Kusum won't let her coffins out of sight, and I shan't desert her though I know that my parents, elderly and diabetic, must be waiting in a stuffy car in a scorching lot.

"You bastard!" I scream at the man... "You think we're smuggling contraband in these coffins!"

Related Characters: Shaila Bhave (speaker), Kusum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

After Kusum has identified the bodies of her family members in Ireland, she and Shaila travel to India together,

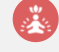
where the funerals will be held. First, though, they must "argue with a man with a uniform." The man in question, a customs official, is identified first and foremost by his position and uniform, placing him squarely within what turns out to be an intractable and shortsighted bureaucratic establishment.

In this case, that shortsightedness leads the customs official to not think about the human cost of his actions, like stranding Shaila's ailing parents in a scorching car. Even more significantly, the customs official implicitly seems to accuse Kusum and Shaila of smuggling contraband past airport officials, which is what the terrorists who killed their family members did, family members who are in the coffins right in front of the customs official.

Over and over again, throughout the story, individuals operating in bureaucratic capacities—whether it's this customs official, Dr. Sharma, or Judith Templeton—fail to acknowledge, recognize, or meet the humanity of the people right in front of them.

> [My mother] grew up a rationalist. My parents abhor mindless mortification.
>
> The zamindar's daughter [my grandmother] kept stubborn faith in Vedic rituals; my parents rebelled. I am trapped between two modes of knowledge… like my husband's spirit, I flutter between worlds.

Related Characters: Shaila Bhave (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 189

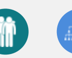
Explanation and Analysis

Shaila makes this observation when she is staying with her parents in India after traveling there with Kusum. Soon after she makes this observation, she sees a vision of her husband, who tells her that she must finish alone what the two of them started together. Throughout the story, Shaila has difficulty explaining the potency and meaning of these kinds of visions to other people. Immediately after her husband descends to her, she hides the vision from her mother, the rationalist.

Shaila is similarly reticent with Judith Templeton about those visions. As Judith clings fastidiously to a linear, easy-to-diagram understanding of human emotion, Shaila experiences visions of her family that are just as real and vivid to her as day-to-day life. Shaila sees the difficulty in communicating the legitimacy of that other mode of knowledge—a spiritual, intuitive, and seemingly otherworldly mode—to someone so invested in a rational, grounded, and strictly scientific worldview. Shaila's ability to understand both modes of knowledge gives her insight into people as different as her mother, Judith, and Kusum, but she also gets frustrated by people like Judith, who fail to see or make room for a more spiritual mode of understanding the world.

> "In the textbooks on grief management," [Judith] replies—I am her confidante, I realize, one of the few whose grief has not sprung bizarre obsessions—"there are stages to pass through: rejection, depression, acceptance, reconstruction." She has compiled a chart and finds that six months after the tragedy, none of us still reject reality, but only a handful are reconstructing. "Depressed Acceptance" is the plateau we've reached.

Related Characters: Shaila Bhave, Judith Templeton (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

Judith enlists Shaila to accompany her to visit the loved ones of those killed in the plane bombing. Because of Shaila's exterior calmness, Judith seems to think she's found something of a kindred spirit, someone who can look skeptically at what Judith thinks of as the extravagances of grief. Shaila, though, cannot explain to Judith that her family, like creatures in epics, change shapes to appear to her and that her days and nights are thrilling because of it.

Judith's insistence on a neat path through profound grief, one charted and graphed, seems absurd when it's compared to the actual lived experience of grieving people. However, because of her position with the Canadian government, Judith has some authority and power. In that role, she foists this outlook onto people she is ostensibly trying to help and becomes frustrated when they don't accept it.

That "reconstruction" is the pinnacle phase according to Judith's model of grief is also worth considering. Reconstructing evokes images of buildings damaged or objects destroyed that must then be rebuilt. The

comparison to people laid bare by profound loss and grief is understandable, but it also seems to situate those people in the context of manufacturing projects. Because Judith's main purpose is adjudicating financial benefits, the idea of "reconstruction," and imagining people as manufacturing projects, can also make it seem like the end goal of Judith's grief model is to help people rejoin the economy. The shortcomings of that model become even clearer when considered in that way, since it fails so spectacularly to take holistic account of the people it supposedly is designed to help.

"God provides and God takes away," he says.

I want to say, But only men destroy and give back nothing. "My boys and my husband are not coming back," I say. "We have to understand that."

Now the old woman responds. "But who is to say? Man alone does not decide these things." To this her husband adds his agreement.

Related Characters: Shaila Bhave, Elderly Couple (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

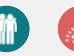
Shaila has gone to visit an elderly couple with Judith Templeton. The couple has been reluctant to sign Judith's documents, but they seem especially in need of this assistance: the phone has been shut off, and soon electricity, gas, and water will be shut off as well. When Shaila tries to explain the government benefits they're entitled to, the man responds that "God provides and God takes away" and that "God will provide, not government."

For a second, Shaila pushes back, saying that her boys and husband are not coming back, and they all have to understand that. By the time Shaila leaves, though, she wants to tell the couple that "my boys and my husband are with me too, more than ever."

In a way, the first interaction in the story, between Shaila, Dr. Sharma, and Dr. Sharma's wife, is replayed here. Judith has become the bureaucrat who wants to worry the couple with mundane things, and Shaila will soon be in a position to scold Judith. Shaila, though, decides to stay silent. She doesn't try to explain the couple to Judith, or tell Judith that a parent's duty is to hope. She doesn't explain that what Judith perceives as the couple's "stubbornness" and "ignorance" is their radical hope, their selfless commitment to their sons, and their belief in something more than the money the government can give them.

I do not know where this voyage I have begun will end. I do not know which direction I will take. I dropped the package on a park bench and started walking.

Related Characters: Shaila Bhave (speaker), Vikram Bhave, Vinod Bhave, Mithun Bhave

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, Shaila has one final vision of her family. While walking home holding a package from an errand, she hears her family tell her, "Your time has come… Go, be brave."

In the first vision that Shaila has, her husband tells her to "finish alone what we started together." Before that, Shaila observes that she is 36, "too old to start over and too young to give up" and that, like her husband's spirit, she "flutter[s] between worlds."

The story ends on a hopeful note when Shaila decides neither to start over nor give up. Instead, she continues on the journey that she began with her family. The story also ends with one final, implicit reproach to Judith Templeton. Unlike Judith's carefully charted diagrams or textbook steps, true courage, the story suggests, means embracing the unknown. Shaila exemplifies that bravery at the end of the story by choosing, after everything she has been through, to walk forward without knowing which direction she will take or where the journey will lead.

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.

THE MANAGEMENT OF GRIEF

Shaila Bhave's house is full of strangers—someone is boiling tea in her kitchen, and others are rummaging in the pantry to make her food. Dr. Sharma, the treasurer of the Indo-Canadian society, pulls Shaila aside to ask if she's worried about money, but his wife scolds him not to trouble Shaila with "mundane details" right now. The treasurer's wife asks one of her sons what the "official word" is, and he replies that it was either an accident or terrorism—possibly carried out by someone who is Sikh.

Shaila is in the throes of shock and grief when Dr. Sharma asks her about money, a question that foreshadows the conflict Shaila will later have with Judith Templeton. Similar to Judith, Dr. Sharma has an official, bureaucratic role (Judith is in charge of liaising with family members of victims of the tragedy, while Dr. Sharma is the treasurer of the Indo-Canadian society), and both seem to prioritize material goods and financial concerns over the holistic well-being of people in grief. Dr. Sharma's wife scolds him in this case, while Shaila will later admonish Judith for doing the same. This is also the first mention of Sikh terrorists; throughout the story, Shaila will navigate her relationships with and prejudices against people who are Sikh in the aftermath of the tragedy.

In Shaila's house, two radios play the news, plus the TV is on. A doctor has given Shaila calming pills, which may be why she feels a "deadening quiet," even though her body is so tense. She imagines the voices of "my boys and Vikram" crying out for her. The woman boiling water says she heard the news early in the morning—at first, they said the plane simply disappeared from the radar, then there were rumors of a hijacking. Many of their neighbors were on that plane, including Shaila's husband and sons.

While there are plenty of news sources (two radios, the TV, the people in Shaila's house), none seem to relay reliable information about the plane's disappearance. Instead, there are different accounts, many of them conflicting, which leave Shaila, and other loved ones of those on the plane, in a state of limbo, not knowing what might have happened, why it happened, or if they'll ever see their loved ones again. Shaila copes with this lack of clarity and closure by taking pills that deaden her emotions, establishing a conflict between Shaila's attempts to experience her grief and manage that grief, a conflict that will animate the rest of the story.

Shaila sits on the stairs with her neighbor, Kusum, whose husband and youngest daughter were on the plane. Kusum's other daughter, Pam, runs by to tell her mother that she needs to get dressed to meet a reporter. Pam is the more westernized of Kusum's daughters—the daughter on the plane was heading to India to spend the summer with her grandparents, while Pam chose to stay home and work at McDonald's. Kusum says she isn't going to talk to the reporter and that if she didn't have to look after Pam, she would hang herself. Pam spits back that her mother wishes Pam were the daughter who was killed.

Pam and Kusum have different responses to being members of the Indian diaspora in Canada. Pam dates Canadian boys, works at McDonald's, hangs out at the mall, and chose to stay home instead of visit her grandparents. It appears, then, that Pam navigates differences between Indian culture and Canadian culture by, in part, throwing herself into Canadian culture, but Pam's mother seems to resent her for making those choices, taking them, in some ways, as Pam turning her back on Kusum, her family, and her family's connection to India. Kusum, in her grief, says that if she didn't have to look after Pam, she would hang herself, showing not just the depth of her grief, but also that she, in some ways, views Pam as an obligation, someone she is bound by duty to take care of, not someone she takes care of out of joy or because it sustains her.

Judith Templeton, a Canadian government official, visits Shaila's house. Shaila offers tea and slightly stale biscuits, which Judith refuses out of politeness, but Shaila insists. Judith says she has a degree in social work and has worked with accident victims before, but never on the scale of this tragedy.

Judith's reference to her degree in social work is the first hint that her knowledge might come from textbooks and classrooms, rather than from lived experience or engaged empathy.

Judith needs to reach hundreds of people, some of whom, she says, "speak no English." Others are widows who have "never handled money or gone on a bus" or wives who are "still hysterical" and husbands "in shock and profound depression." She tells Shaila that the government wants to distribute money to some and have others sign legal documents, and she asks for Shaila's help in reaching out to people with whom she has struggled to communicate, explaining that she would like assistance navigating "the complications of culture, language, and customs."

Judith is the bureaucratic liaison between the Canadian government and relatives of those who died in the tragedy. Her descriptions of people she is supposed to help verge on disparaging: people "speak no English," have "never handled money or gone on a bus," are "still hysterical." Though early in the story, there is a sense of exasperation in what Judith says, a sense that comes to the forefront when Judith explains that she is asking for assistance navigating the "complications of culture, language, and customs." To Judith, that's exactly what people with different cultures, languages, and customs are: complications. Her bureaucratic coldness and cultural ineptitude combine to make her the story's antagonist.

Judith tells Shaila that everyone she has talked to has remarked on Shaila's strength—Shaila has responded to the tragedy with extraordinary calm, Judith reasons. If others talked with Shaila, maybe it would help them. Shaila thinks of her calmness as strange and painful, believing herself to be "a freak." She wishes she could "scream, starve, jump from a bridge," anything to feel her emotions fully. That calmness would also seem bad and odd to the people Judith calls "hysterical." Shaila tells Judith that she won't be any help to her and that everyone must grieve in their own way, but Shaila agrees to let Judith call after Shaila returns from her trip to Ireland.

Instead of feeling comforted by her calmness, or seeing it as a sign of strength, Shaila feels trapped in it. Instead of managing her grief with medication, Shaila wants to experience it fully and feel it completely, even if that experience is painful. Shaila tries to explain that others will also be suspicious of her calmness, but Judith cannot see outside of her own narrow perspective and worldview, identifying calmness in the face of tragedy with strength and holding unwaveringly to that view, without apparent reflection.

Four days later, Shaila is in Ireland, where she sees Kusum sitting on a rock overlooking the bay. Shaila thinks of her sons and husband lost in that ocean and of Kusum stumbling and screaming onto her lawn after she first heard of the tragedy. Shaila says police and diplomats have kept relatives informed of developments in the tragedy because they believe "knowledge is helpful to the grieving." Shaila says maybe that's true, but that other people she knows seek solace in their own versions of events: that the plane split in two, unconsciousness was instantaneous, and no one suffered. Kusum tells Shaila that "we can't escape our fate." She says that her swami told her that fate led everyone, no matter their religion, on that plane to die. Shaila says that, for her part, she has her Valium.

Shaila describes how loved ones of those killed in the tragedy are navigating their grief. Some invent more palatable, less upsetting stories about what happened. Some, like Kusum, seek solace in religion and spiritual explanations of what happened. Shaila, on the other hand, manages her more overwhelming emotions with Valium. In contradiction to the one-size-fits-all textbook models of grief management later espoused by Judith Templeton, Shaila seems to observe that there are as many ways to process grief as there are people grieving. And, similar to Judith, though the police are not experiencing the grief of the people they are ostensibly helping, they also have their own ideas and opinions about how that grief should be "managed."

Shaila and Kusum, along with other relatives of those lost in the tragedy, have traveled to Ireland to identify the bodies of their loved ones. While on the shore, Kusum tells Shaila how warm the water is. Shaila says that they can't give in to their grief, that they have to wait for their own time to come. Shaila hasn't eaten or brushed her teeth in four days. Kusum's swami has told her that it's selfish to grieve for her husband and daughter; instead, she should be thrilled for them because they are in a better place. Shaila wonders if she's selfish as she runs along the shore, thinking that maybe her sons hadn't been trapped under the plane a mile under the ocean surface, maybe the current had dragged them to shore, especially since they had been good swimmers.

Kusum continues to reflect on the advice and insight her swami offered, which might provide a spiritual path for processing her grief. Kusum doesn't seem to be in a place where she can accept or believe what her swami tells her, though. When Kusum says the water feels warm, Shaila senses a longing for relief, that Kusum wants to let herself be swept away by the waves, and Shaila tells her, gently, that they can't seek that kind of solace; they have to wait for healing to come. Shaila feels a surge of hope, too, when she begins to let herself think that maybe her sons haven't drowned, that maybe they are still alive.

Dr. Ranganathan, an electrical engineer who lost a large family in the tragedy, joins Shaila and Kusum on the shore. He tells Shaila that, with some luck, someone might have survived the plane crash by swimming to any number of small islands. Shaila points out that her older son, Vinod, was a strong swimmer. Dr. Ranganathan says a strong swimmer could pull a younger boy, like Shaila's younger son, to safety, which fills Shaila with hope. Dr. Ranganathan adds that it "is a parent's duty to hope."

Dr. Ranganathan tells Shaila that it is "a parent's duty to hope," meaning that a parent must maintain a connection to their children through that hope. Shaila feels buoyed by the hope that her sons might have survived, and that hope allows her sons to remain meaningfully alive, if not in the tangible, material world, then in Shaila's internal, spiritual world. Shaila later struggles to explain to Judith that this world is just as vivid, real, and meaningful to her as the material world.

Shaila thinks that Dr. Ranganathan's world-renowned work in electrical engineering gives him special insight into the inner workings of the universe. He is carrying roses in his pockets and asks Shaila if she would like to let some float away in the ocean in honor of her family members. Instead, Shaila has brought a pocket calculator for her son Vinod, a half-painted model B-52 for her son Mithun, and a poem she wrote for her husband to let him know her true feelings. She lets each object float away in the ocean before boarding the bus to return to the hospital.

Shaila is comforted not just by Dr. Ranganathan's guidance that hope is still meaningful, but by the authority that has been conferred on him by the scientific community. Importantly, Dr. Ranganathan's scientific pragmatism comes alongside his lived experience grieving his family, as well as deep reserves of empathy, as he comforts Shaila. Shaila then lets an object for each of her lost family members float away in the ocean, showing the complexity of Shaila's grief, as she clings to hope that they might be alive while simultaneously performing a ritual that might let them rest, in their passing, a little more peacefully.

Shaila says that Kusum is one of the "lucky ones": she has quickly identified her loved ones so can fly to India to give them a proper burial. Shaila still hasn't identified her husband or sons. Dr. Ranganathan accompanies her to the hospital to look at photos. Police show Shaila a photo of a boy who resembles Vinod, but Shaila says that it is not him. The police officer says that after people have been in the water for a while, they look heavier. Shaila still insists that the boy in the photo is not her son. Instead of feeling discouraged after the encounter, Shaila feels "ecstatic" with the hope that her family might still be alive. The suitcase in her hotel room is packed with dry clothes for her sons.

The police, the supposed authorities in this setting, seem convinced that the boy in one of their photos is Shaila's son, while Shaila repeatedly tells them that it's not. The moment when she walks out of the hospital feeling ecstatic and hopeful foreshadows the interaction that Shaila and Judith will later have with the elderly Sikh couple, where Judith, the supposed authority in that situation, exhausts all available options to try and get the couple to acknowledge that their sons have passed away. The couple, similar to Shaila at the police station, refuses to do so, clinging to a kind of hope not necessarily grounded in the concrete world, but one that is essential to the duty they feel toward their children.

From Ireland, Shaila and Kusum travel to India to arrange funerals for their family members. At the Bombay airport, a customs official won't let Kusum and Shaila pass because his boss isn't present. Frustrated, Shaila yells at the man, "You bastard… you think we're smuggling contraband in these coffins!"

Shaila confronts a customs official who prioritizes bureaucratic procedures (waiting for his boss) over the well-being of grieving people directly in front of him. He not only blocks Shaila and Kusum's path, but he also implicitly suggests that they might be doing the same thing as what terrorists who killed their family members did, smuggling contraband past airport authorities. That suggestion, combined with the pointlessness of the bureaucratic holdup, irritates Shaila beyond what she can stand, foreshadowing the kind of frustration that she will later feel toward Judith.

In India, Shaila stays with her parents. Friends and family members come to visit, some of whom are Sikh, and Shaila finds herself involuntarily recoiling from those Sikh visitors. She points out that her parents don't do the same, that they are progressive people who wouldn't blame communities for the actions of individuals. Shaila's mother wants her to stay longer in India, and she stays for three months, then another month after that. Shaila's mother is a "rationalist," while her grandmother had "kept stubborn faith in Vedic rituals," and Shaila feels trapped between these two modes of knowledge.

Shaila finds herself involuntarily recoiling from Sikh visitors, while she also observes that her parents don't do the same, that they don't paint entire communities with one wide swath. This tendency to recoil puts into perspective Shaila's own shortcomings in conversation with Judith, who seems to understand everyone involved in the attack as "Indian," or, more to the point, as "other," no matter how different they might be, or how different the cultures they come from might be. Without meaning to, Shaila thinks in a similar kind of way about Sikh people after the attack, painting them with a broad and inaccurate brush. This kind of prejudice, which blows past complexity, nuance, empathy, and understanding, is juxtaposed against Shaila's nuanced description of her own background and the push and pull she feels between the secular and spiritual worlds.

Shaila travels through India, playing contract bridge in gymkhana clubs and visiting holy sites she hasn't visited before. People who have become widowers through the tragedy are being shown candidates for new brides. Shaila counts herself lucky that no one thinks of arranging a husband for her, an "unlucky widow." Six months into her travels, in a temple in a Himalayan town, she sees a vision of her husband. Her husband descends to her, taking her hand in his before telling her that she must "finish alone what [they] started together." When Shaila's mother, who doesn't believe in ghosts or visions, asks Shaila if she noticed anything strange in the temple, Shaila says no.

The push and pull Shaila feels between the secular and spiritual worlds comes to a head when Shaila sees a vision of her husband when she visits the Himalayan temple. Shaila keeps the vision a secret from her mother, assuming her mother wouldn't understand. For Shaila, though, this vision (and the ones that follow) become central to her journey to navigate grief, just as real, meaningful, and deserving of consideration as anything that might fit within her mother's "rational" worldview.

Shaila returns to Canada. Kusum has put her house up for sale and plans to pursue inner peace in an ashram in Hardwar run by her swami. Shaila stays in touch with others who lost loved ones in the tragedy. The tragedy brought them together, "melted down and recast [them] as a new tribe." Kusum's daughter, Pam, has left for California. Dr. Ranganathan calls Shaila twice a week from Montreal but has recently gotten a job in Ottawa. Still, he can't bring himself to sell his house, which he has turned into a "temple" to the family he lost, the master bedroom a "shrine," while he, "a devotee," sleeps on a cot.

Shaila, Kusum, and Dr. Ranganathan are exemplars of different ways that grief affects people and the different ways people move through that grief. Shaila points out that both Kusum and Dr. Ranganathan process their grief spiritually. Kusum does so directly by moving to an ashram and seeking inner peace, and Dr. Ranganathan more subtly, though apparently no less passionately, by becoming a "devotee" in the shrine he has built for his departed family.

Judith Templeton enlists Shaila to visit an elderly couple, who is Sikh, and whose sons were on the plane. The couple has not yet signed papers that would ensure they receive government benefits. Judith explains to Shaila that some surviving relatives are still "hysterical" and shares with Shaila the steps of grief that she has learned from **textbooks** on "grief management": rejection, depression, acceptance, and reconstruction. Six months after the tragedy, only a few relatives are "reconstructing," Judith says. Many, according to Judith, are stuck in a state of depressed acceptance. Shaila finds herself unable to tell Judith that her family surrounds her, that they change shapes to appear to her, and that her days and nights have become thrilling as a result.

Judith's understanding of grief seems to come mainly, if not exclusively, from textbooks. She also seems stubborn in her wrong-headedness, unable to consider that there might be other ways to approach grief than the roadmap offered by those textbooks. For example, Shaila feels that her family is always with her. Shaila is unable to tell Judith about that, though, because it wouldn't fit into the narrow understanding of grief that Judith is rigidly attached to.

In the apartment building, Shaila notices the "distinctive and immediate Indianness of frying *ghee*." She tells Judith that the elderly couple will not open up to a Hindu woman like Shaila because they will view her as an outsider, and Shaila involuntarily stiffens at the sight of their beards and turbans. She notes to herself that the couple fear that signing the papers would mean selling their sons for two airline tickets to Ireland, where they would be asked to identify their sons' bodies. In the house of the Sikh couple, the rooms are dark and stuffy, with the lights off and only an oil lamp lit on the coffee table.

Judith's inability to understand the nuances of cultures different than hers is on full display. She fails to understand that to the Sikh couple, Shaila, who is a Hindu, will also come off as an outsider. Shaila tries to explain, but Judith doesn't listen. Yet Shaila is guilty of her own forms of prejudice and casts some people who are different than her, people who are Sikh, as the "other."

The elderly couple has recently come to Canada from India. Since their sons were lost in the tragedy, they haven't been paying utility bills out of "fear and the inability to write a check." The telephone has been shut off, and electricity, gas, and water will come next. Shaila talks with the couple in Hindi. She believes that if they think she is here as a translator, they might be offended, knowing there are thousands of Punjabi speakers and Sikhs in Toronto who would do a better job.

Shaila reiterates the differences between herself and the Sikh couple while also trying to connect with them. The interaction also highlights Judith's cultural incompetence and further bureaucratic fumbling of the situation, by showing that Judith is seemingly oblivious to possible differences in culture, even differences such as preferred language, between Shaila and the couple.

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When the elderly couple remains reluctant to sign the papers to get government assistance, Shaila tells them that she too lost her sons, as well as her husband, in the crash. The couple responds by saying that God provides and God takes away, so God will provide, not the government, and that their sons will return to help them.

The couple insists that God took their sons away and that God will provide for them, not the government. Even though the couple is in increasingly dire financial and material circumstances, they insist on prioritizing the spiritual world, and their spiritual belief in God's ability to provide, over the government's promises of material recompense.

When they leave the apartment, unsuccessful in getting the elderly couple to sign the papers, Judith says to Shaila, "You see what I'm up against? … Their stubbornness and ignorance is driving me crazy." When Judith begins to complain about the next person they will visit, Shaila tells Judith to let her out at the subway. She could try to explain to Judith the error of her ways. She could tell Judith that "in our culture, a parent's duty is to hope." Instead, she leaves without an explanation and slams the door as she exits the car.

Judith is flummoxed by the couple's unwillingness to sign the paper and their insistence that their sons will return. To Judith, the couple's unwillingness to sign is rooted in superstition and ignorance. Judith shows again that she is unable or unwilling to understand perspectives that do not correspond to her own narrow worldview. Shaila considers trying to communicate the importance of that spiritual, internal world, to explain what hope means to her and to the Sikh couple, the way that it tethers those who have survived to their loved ones just as meaningfully as physical presence might. Sensing that her words would be met by more intransigence, though, Shaila leaves without any kind of explanation.

During the Toronto winter, Shaila writes letters to editors of newspapers and members of parliament. She says that now they at least acknowledge that a bomb exploded on the plane. She sets up a trust with money that her husband had saved for her sons' education and sells her house to move to a small apartment downtown.

Shaila has taken steps to move toward a new chapter in her life, like selling her house and moving to a small apartment downtown. And, unlike the debilitating "calmness" she experienced earlier, Shaila now takes proactive steps (writing to newspaper editors and members of parliament) to try and seek justice for the people who were killed on the plane and for their relatives. In some ways, Shaila is tackling the bureaucratic establishment head-on.

Kusum writes to Shaila from Hardwar and describes a vision of her daughter fanning the coals of a kitchen fire in a hut in a small Himalayan town. Kusum asks Shaila what she thinks of that and Shaila says that she envies Kusum for having been able to see her daughter again. Kusum's other daughter, Pam, never made it to California. Instead, Pam writes Shaila letters from Vancouver, where she works in a department store. Dr. Ranganathan accepted an academic job and moved to Texas, where "no one knows his story and he has vowed not to tell it." He still calls Shaila once a week.

Throughout the story, Shaila, Kusum, and Dr. Ranganathan navigate the tumults of grief. Kusum does so through her spirituality and continues to see visions of her family members, which Shaila envies. After turning his house into a shrine to his lost family and turning himself into a devotee, Dr. Ranganathan moves to Texas, where no one will know about what happened to him. Shaila continues to keep in contact with both of them, as well as with Pam, showing that part of her process through her grief entails maintaining meaningful connections with those around her, as she forges a new kind of family in the most harrowing circumstances. Notably, none of these steps taken—by Shaila, Kusum, or Dr. Ranganathan—would be likely to appear in Judith Templeton's textbook on grief management.

While walking through the park on a rare sunny, winter day, Shaila pauses on the path. She looks up into the trees and hears the voices of her family for the last time. "'*Your time has come,*' they [say]. '*Go, be brave.*'" She does not know where the voyage will lead and doesn't know which direction she will take, but she drops her **package** and begins walking.

Shaila's complicated, excruciating, and at times—as she says—"thrilling" path through grief reaches an inflection point at the end of the story. Shaila has waded through the hardest parts of her grief, come face to face with despair, and found a path that took her to the other side. In a vision, her family then tells her to move ahead, to go and be brave. Their guidance doesn't signal the end of Shaila's grief so much as the possibility of a fully-lived life, a life as brimming with vitality and adventure as the one she shared with her family. Shaila doesn't know where that voyage will lead, or which direction to take, but she accepts her family's request and begins that journey with courage.

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