

The Mothers



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BRIT BENNETT

Brit Bennett was born in Oceanside, California, where she spent the next seventeen years of her life. Upon graduating from high school, she majored in English at Stanford before pursuing her Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at University of Michigan. She also briefly studied at Oxford, making her the first person in her family to leave the country. In 2014, Bennett wrote an article for *Jezebel* entitled “I Don’t Know What To Do With Good White People.” The piece was published in response to the fact that police officer Darren Wilson—who shot and killed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri—was not indicted for his crime. “I Don’t Know What To Do With Good White People” attracted millions of readers in only several days, spreading Bennett’s name throughout the literary community and beyond. Two years later, when she was just twenty-six, Bennett published her debut novel, *The Mothers*, earning her a place on the National Book Foundation’s “5 Under 35” list of breakout writers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *The Mothers*, Nadia’s character development and emotional life are both intimately tied to her abortion, echoing the United States’ tumultuous past and present. In 1900, abortion was considered a felony throughout the United States, though some states made exceptions in certain cases. Despite the illegality of the procedure, many women still found ways to abort their pregnancies, and several states even made the operation legal again. In 1973, the Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade* that abortion be legalized across the nation, upholding that women have the right to control their pregnancies. However, many religious groups remained vehemently against the procedure. Even today, particularly conservative, religious states still don’t offer wide access to abortion. Although the abortion debate rages on throughout America and remains a polarizing, highly politicized topic, organizations like Planned Parenthood advocate to make reproductive healthcare available to everybody. In turn, the primary complications surrounding Nadia’s abortion in *The Mothers* have to do with her own emotional misgivings and the judgment she fears from her community, not with her access to medical professionals willing and able to perform the procedure.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

With its examination of what it means to be a caretaker, *The Mothers* is similar to works like Celeste Ng’s [Little Fires](#)

[Everywhere](#). Ng’s 2017 novel tells the tale of a single mother and her daughter as they navigate life in a nosy, judgmental community—a story that engages ideas regarding motherhood and gossip that Bennett also mines in *The Mothers*. In addition, *The Mothers* recalls Jeffrey Eugenides’ 1993 novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, which also employs a collective narrative voice (the first-person plural point of view). In *The Virgin Suicides*, a group of boys tells the story of their neighbors, five sisters who enter into a suicide pact. The boys hypothesize about the girls, speculating about the details of their lives in the same way that the church community whispers about Nadia Turner in *The Mothers*. What’s more, it’s also worth noting that suicide factors significantly into the plots of both *The Mothers* and *The Virgin Suicides*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Mothers*
- **When Published:** October 11, 2016
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Contemporary Fiction, Realism
- **Setting:** Oceanside, California
- **Climax:** Robert Turner discovers that Nadia got an abortion when she was seventeen. Learning that Mr. Sheppard financed the procedure, he storms into church the next morning and yells at the pastor, calling him a “son of a bitch” for encouraging his daughter to “kill” her unborn baby. As he shouts, the pastor’s secretary overhears the conversation and subsequently spreads the secret throughout the congregation.
- **Antagonist:** The narrow-minded, sexist, and judgmental attitudes that society projects onto women.
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient with periodic sections of first-person plural narration.

EXTRA CREDIT

The Big Screen. *The Mothers* will soon be made into a feature-length film. Bennett herself will write the script, and Kerry Washington (of *Scandal* fame) will co-produce with Natalie Krinsky (a *Gossip Girl* writer).



PLOT SUMMARY

“We didn’t believe when we first heard because you know how church folk can gossip,” begins the Greek chorus of elderly women known as the Mothers, who belong to Nadia Turner’s church, Upper Room. Alternating between this group’s voice and an omniscient third-person narrator, Bennett introduces

readers to Nadia, a seventeen-year-old black girl living in San Diego in the aftermath of her mother's suicide. The winter after Nadia's mother shoots herself in the head in a parked car, Nadia meets Luke, the pastor's son and a hometown football hero. Shortly after earning a sports scholarship to San Diego State, he injured his leg so badly that he still walks with a limp.

Distraught and unmonitored by her grief-stricken father, Robert Turner, Nadia skips class and wanders through San Diego, even going to a strip club to drink booze, despite being underage. One day, she visits Fat Charlie's seafood restaurant, where Luke—several years her senior—takes her order and flirts with her. From this point on, Nadia makes a habit of seeing Luke at the restaurant, and the two grow closer. Before long, they start hooking up, though they keep their relationship secret because Nadia isn't eighteen yet and Luke's parents are well-respected church officials. When Nadia's father is gone for the weekend, she sneaks Luke into her childhood bedroom and has sex for the first time, embracing the pain because it matches how she feels on the inside. "She wanted Luke to be her outside hurt," Bennett writes.

Soon, Nadia discovers she's pregnant. When she tells Luke, he's terrified but quick to listen to what she wants to do. She tells him that she wants an abortion, and he promises to get her the money. The next day, he presents with an envelope stuffed with \$600 and promises to pick her up when the procedure is over at the abortion clinic—a clinic that their church, Upper Room, has picketed in the past.

Despite his promise, Luke doesn't pick Nadia up after the abortion. As she waits for him in the lobby after the procedure, her stomach cramps painfully and the clinic's only black nurse urges her to eat, but Nadia resists the woman's help. Nadia feels judged by her, as if the dreadlocked nurse thinks Nadia is "just another black girl who'[s] found herself in trouble and [is] finding her way out of it." Eventually, a volunteer at the clinic drives Nadia home, where she crawls into bed and tells her father she isn't feeling well due to menstrual cramps—an excuse that fends him off because it plays upon his uneasiness surrounding feminine matters. Before he leaves her room, though, she asks to borrow his truck, which he's obsessed with and uses to run errands for the church. Hesitantly, he agrees, and Nadia drives the truck to a beach-house party, where she finds an unapologetic Luke. "Some shit came up," he says when she asks where he was earlier. Upset, Nadia gets drunk and drives her father's truck home, running it into a tree and destroying the side of the truck as she turns into the driveway.

As the community members gradually hear that Nadia got drunk and crashed her father's truck, Pastor Sheppard (Luke's father) decides it would be good to give Nadia a job at Upper Room. He tells his wife, Latrice, that Nadia will be her assistant, but Latrice resists the idea because she believes they don't "owe" Nadia anything. Apparently, Luke told his parents about Nadia's pregnancy, and they were the ones who gave him the

\$600 for her abortion, though they're morally opposed to the procedure. Even though Latrice upholds that the family should wash their hands of Nadia Turner, the Pastor feels guilty about the entire ordeal and insists Latrice take on the young woman as an assistant for the summer.

Although Nadia doesn't want to work in Upper Room, her father forces her to accept the Pastor's offer. As such, she spends her summer in the church before going to college in Michigan. At the church, she works under Latrice's stern gaze, feeling all the while that the First Lady disapproves of her, though Nadia doesn't know Luke told his parents about her pregnancy. Nevertheless, she's wounded by Latrice's unaccepting attitude, a feeling compounded by the fact that the First Lady shows warmth and acceptance to Aubrey—a religiously devout girl who also works in the church. Nadia initially thinks that Aubrey is boring and unrelatable. However, the two girls eventually become friends after Aubrey starts eating lunch with Nadia and reveals that she, too, lives without a mother. Although Aubrey's mother is still alive, they don't maintain a relationship because Aubrey's mother didn't intervene when her boyfriend, Paul, frequently raped Aubrey. Aubrey doesn't tell Nadia this detail, but the fact that both girls understand what it's like to navigate the world without a mother endears them to one another. The two girls start spending all their time together, having nightly sleepovers at Aubrey's sister Monique's house, where Aubrey lives.

In the fall, Nadia goes to college in Michigan, leaving behind her life in San Diego. Meanwhile, Luke joins a local football team called the Cobras, which is made up of slightly older men, all of whom have experienced similar disappointments as Luke in their athletic careers. As Luke gets in shape and begins to enjoy playing again, he grows close to a fellow player named Finch. Spending more and more time with this new friend, Luke also gets to know Finch's wife, Cherry. Luke even starts making excuses to go to Finch's house just to see Cherry because he enjoys their long, engaging conversations. One day, though, Cherry kisses the scar on Luke's leg—an intimacy one of her children witnesses. Later, when Luke is on break at Fat Charlie's, a group of Cobras jump him and severely beat him, specifically targetting his bad leg to ensure he'll never play football again.

Luke's recovery is slow, requiring him to live in a rehabilitation facility to regain the ability to walk. After several weeks of boredom and pain, he is delighted when Aubrey visits him on behalf of Upper Room. Though he's never thought about her before, Luke takes refuge in Aubrey's presence and asks her to return with donuts from the donut shop where she works. She obliges, and the two grow closer until. When Luke is finally out of rehab, they start dating, though Aubrey wears a purity ring and makes it clear that she only wants to kiss Luke—a decision he honors, though he's eager to take their physical relationship to the next level.

Nadia isn't thrilled when she hears Luke and Aubrey are dating, but she has a new boyfriend of her own, a kind-hearted and politically active man named Shadi who also goes to school in Michigan. When Aubrey and Luke eventually get married, Nadia and Shadi return to San Diego for the wedding, a period during which Nadia and Luke have several tense moments marked both by resentment and attraction. Nonetheless, neither one of them mention their history to Aubrey, who only knows that Luke once dated a girl who got an abortion. Before long, though, Aubrey also learns that Nadia and Luke hooked up, but they both tell her this happened long ago and is nothing to worry about. Aubrey and Nadia have an awkward conversation about this several days before the wedding. As they lounge on the beach, Aubrey broaches the subject, but Nadia manages to make her feel "silly for being upset." At this point, two Marines approach and ask the girls to play volleyball with them. After some initial hesitations, Nadia and Aubrey join these two flirty men, and Aubrey later finds herself drawn to Russell Miller, the taller of the two—an older man who has experienced active duty. As Nadia and the other Marine swim after sunset, Aubrey and Miller go into the public bathroom and start kissing passionately. Aubrey straddles him until he tells her he doesn't have a condom, at which point she rolls off and leaves him, feeling guilty and exhilarated at the same time. After the wedding, Nadia returns to Michigan and thinks—as she often does—about Baby, the child she and Luke would have had if she hadn't gotten an abortion.

Several years later, when Nadia is in law school, she wakes up in the middle of the night to a phone call informing her that her father has been badly injured while working out in his backyard, crushing his chest while bench-pressing. Back in her hometown, Nadia cares for her father diligently and feels guilty for having left him alone in the first place. One day, Nadia is surprised when Luke appears in the doorway with food sent from the Mothers. It isn't long before he starts coming by frequently, and the two eventually begin an affair.

As Nadia and Luke have regular sex, Aubrey tries desperately to get pregnant, wondering if she's infertile. To make things worse, her sex life with Luke is strained and unpleasant, mostly because she can't bring herself to enjoy the act. Still, she wants to have a baby, and after drinking multiple glasses of wine one night, she pulls him to the couch and they make love, finally conceiving a child. During this time, Aubrey messages back and forth with Miller, who has been stationed in Iraq. She takes comfort in communicating with him, but she doesn't tell anybody, even Nadia, who she asks one day to accompany her to a fertility doctor. Nadia tries to make up an excuse but eventually relents and goes with her friend. In the office, the doctor asks Aubrey if she's ever had an abortion—a comment that unsettles Nadia. With the doctor out of earshot, she tells Aubrey that she "can't believe [abortion] follows [people] around like that." This comment tips Aubrey off, and she

suddenly connects the fact that Nadia and Luke used to date with the fact that Luke once dated somebody who got an abortion.

One day, Miller surprises Aubrey by appearing at Upper Room and asking her to lunch. Several days later, she takes him up on his offer, and they share a dessert at a local restaurant. When this news inevitably gets back to Luke, he confronts her, asking why she's splitting desserts with a strange man. His accusations backfire, though, and she finally reveals that she knows about his affair with Nadia. With this, Aubrey moves out of their shared apartment and refuses to speak with either him or Nadia.

Luke and Nadia's affair draws to a close, as each one tries desperately to communicate with Aubrey. During this period, Nadia's father overhears Nadia saying something about the abortion clinic. When she's out one evening, he goes through all of her drawers and finds a small golden pair of **baby feet** that was originally given to Nadia by a nurse at the pregnancy clinic. These feet, the woman told her, were the exact same "shape and size" of her own eight-week-old baby. As such, Nadia found herself incapable of throwing them away. When Nadia's father finds the feet, he's outraged that his daughter did such an immoral, unchristian thing. Worse, she's forced to tell him that the Pastor and the First Lady gave her the money for her abortion.

The next morning, Nadia's father drags her into the church to confront the Pastor, whom Robert shouts at and calls a "son of a bitch." As his anger unfolds, one of the Mothers overhears the heated conversation from the hallway and later tells her friends the scandalous news about how the Pastor helped Nadia Turner get an abortion. The information spreads quickly and, as a result, Upper Room loses its many congregants. Unable to support itself, the church soon closes its doors.

Nadia leaves town to become a successful lawyer on the east coast. Meanwhile, Aubrey and Luke reconcile, and Aubrey gives birth to their baby girl. Although the church has been shuttered, the Mothers still meet every Sunday to pray for anybody "who comes to mind," interceding on their behalf. On one such day, they see Nadia driving her father's truck. She's in her thirties now, and though the Mothers don't know why she's returned to town, they think they spot a Barbie backpack in the front seat, which they suspect is a gift for Aubrey's daughter. "We will never know why she returned," the Mothers say, "but we still think about her. We see the span of her life unspooling in colorful threads and we chase it, wrapping it around our hands as more tumbles out. She's her mother's age now. Double her age. Our age. You're our mother. We're climbing inside of you."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Nadia Turner – When *The Mothers* begins, Nadia is a seventeen-year-old black girl whose mother, Elise Turner, has just committed suicide. As such, Nadia finds herself motherless in her last year of high school. Although she's a top student with disarming intelligence, she begins skipping school after her mother's death, riding buses all over her hometown of Oceanside, California. Her father, Robert Turner, fails to pay attention to her, instead devoting himself to the Upper Room church community by attending every service and using his pickup **truck** to run errands for the congregation. As such, Nadia has no adult support in her life, which is why she starts misbehaving by partying, hooking up with older boys, and cutting class. While playing hooky one day, she goes to Fat Charlie's seafood restaurant and talks to the twenty-one-year-old waiter, Luke Sheppard, who is also the pastor's son. Since Nadia is used to bottling up her pain and grief, she is fascinated by and attracted to the way Luke wears his pain on the outside, as evidenced by his leg injury from his short-lived football career. Eventually, the two grow closer, and Nadia gets pregnant with Luke's baby. Nadia quickly gets an abortion, which drives her and Luke apart and becomes an enduring source of grief for the both of them. Throughout the rest of the novel, Nadia struggles to keep the secret of her abortion from her father and even from her best friend and primary confidante, Aubrey Evans. Even though Luke eventually marries Aubrey, he and Nadia rekindle their sexual relationship. Although Nadia internalizes her guilt over her past and present relationship with Luke, her secrets about her affair and abortion are gradually exposed and spread through the Upper Room community, eventually laying waste to the majority of her relationships.

The Mothers – A group of elderly women who attend Upper Room, the church that Nadia and her father attend in Oceanside, California. Deeply religious and moralistic, the Mothers practice "intercessory prayer," which means that they pray on behalf of other people in the congregation. In keeping with their belief that they can "become" other people through intercessory prayer, the Mothers narrate portions of the novel using a collective voice to provide insight into how the church community views Nadia and the secret of her abortion. One of the women in this group is Mother Betty, the pastor's secretary who overhears Robert Turner yelling at Mr. Sheppard and learns that the pastor paid for Nadia's abortion. Betty repeats this news to the other Mothers, who spread the gossip throughout Upper Room, ultimately forcing the church to close its doors in response to the scandal. Throughout the novel, the Mothers create and perpetuate gossip, seen even in the final moments of the novel, when the Mothers still speculate about Nadia even though she has long since left California.

Luke Sheppard – The pastor's son. Luke starts dating Nadia after flirting with her at Fat Charlie's, but he urges her to keep their relationship a secret because he's twenty-one, and she's only seventeen. Luke has already been to college, though his academic career came to an abrupt end when he was severely injured in a football accident during his sophomore year, causing him to lose his athletic scholarship. Luke still walks with a limp from his injury, which attracts Nadia to him, since Nadia yearns to externalize her own pain but can't seem to do so. A man who takes pride in his own athletic prowess, Luke is frustrated by his body's various physical failures. Nonetheless, he impregnates Nadia, and though he doesn't object when she tells him she wants an abortion, he later claims that he never wanted to "kill" their baby. This marks him as rather insensitive and selfish, since saying this to Nadia clearly shames her for having sought out the procedure, putting the blame completely on her. While Nadia is at college in Michigan, Luke begins playing football again but soon reinjures his leg. This time, though, his teammates purposely break Luke's leg because of his inappropriate relationship with Cherry, his teammate's wife. In rehab, Luke learns to let go of his identity as a "big man," instead reconciling himself to the idea that he need only be a "good man." During this time, Luke starts dating Aubrey, who visits him in rehab on behalf of Upper Room. Although he soon marries Aubrey, Luke avoids telling her about his past relationship with Nadia. Throughout the novel, Luke thinks more and more about the child he and Nadia would have had together, which causes him significant grief. Luke eventually has an affair with Nadia, which he also conceals from his wife, although she soon figures out the truth on her own.

Aubrey Evans – A pious young woman who appears at Upper Room one Sunday and walks up to the altar with teary eyes to be saved. Nobody knows Aubrey's background, but the church community readily accepts her because of her strong religious devotion. Although Nadia initially sees Aubrey as boring and simple, Nadia soon learns that her new friend has a painful history. Aubrey doesn't live with her mother, but with her sister (Mo) and her sister's girlfriend (Kasey)—a fact that endears Nadia to her, since the two girls bond over not living with their mothers. However, Aubrey's circumstances are different, since she's the one who left her mother, not the other way around. Aubrey's mother has always prioritized her lovers over her children—a tendency that proved harmful when her boyfriend Paul started raping Aubrey on a regular basis. Because her mother failed to ever do anything about this, Aubrey moved to California, where Mo lives with Kasey. Because of her painful history as a rape victim, Aubrey dedicates herself to becoming a "clean" and pious woman who wears a purity ring. When she starts dating Luke, she insists that they wait until marriage to have sex, and even when they finally *do* get married, she has trouble enjoying intercourse, since for her it brings nothing but pain. As her marriage with Luke progresses, Aubrey slowly learns details about her husband's past with Nadia, her best

friend. Unfortunately, though, neither Luke nor Nadia tell Aubrey the truth about their history until she finally discovers that they're having an affair. Distraught, she stops talking to both of them, though she eventually gets back together with Luke and has his baby. As for her relationship with Nadia, she begins talking to her again, though it's clear their friendship will never be the same.

Robert Turner – A former Marine, the late Elise Turner's husband, and Nadia's father. After his wife's suicide, Robert finds himself incapable of supporting his daughter emotionally. Instead of reaching out to her, he directs his own grief into volunteering to run errands for the Upper Room church community with his **truck**. He also starts attending every single church service, effectively avoiding his life at home and ignoring the rift growing between him and his daughter. Robert is a reserved man who has trouble articulating his emotions. This is evidenced by the fact that he avoids using the word "abortion" when he discovers that Nadia underwent the procedure, merely saying, "You did this thing?" This refusal to use the word "abortion" also denotes his strong religious morals regarding the procedure, a disapproving outlook that emerges when he yells at the pastor for helping Nadia afford the abortion. In turn, Robert's loud reprimanding of Mr. Sheppard is what leads to the crumbling of the Upper Room community, since Mother Betty overhears their conversation and spreads the rumor that the pastor paid for Nadia's abortion.

Elise Turner – Nadia's mother, and Robert Turner's wife. By the beginning of *The Mothers*, Elise has already committed suicide. Nadia often thinks about her mother's choice to take her own life, wondering what, exactly, led her to shoot herself in the head. This question is unanswerable, but that doesn't stop Nadia from wondering if perhaps she was a burden to her mother. After all, Elise got pregnant when she was quite young, but she was too religious to seek out an abortion. As such, Nadia considers whether or not her mother would have ultimately been happier if she *had* gotten an abortion, thinking that maybe Elise would still be alive if she hadn't followed through with her pregnancy. In addition to these uncomfortable thoughts, Nadia has to face the congregation's quiet anger over Elise's suicide. While sitting at her mother's funeral, Nadia feels "pity" and "anger" radiating toward her, ultimately sensing Upper Room's harsh judgment of Elise's actions.

The Pastor (John Sheppard) – Luke Sheppard's father, Latrice Sheppard's husband, and the pastor of Upper Room. Unsurprisingly, the pastor is a deeply religious man, though he doesn't stop his wife from paying for Nadia's abortion when his son reveals that she is pregnant with his child. Still, Mr. Sheppard feels a strong sense of remorse for having helped Nadia get an abortion and thinks that the family "owes" the young woman for having put her in a sinful position. In an

attempt to help Nadia, the pastor insists that his wife hire Nadia as a secretary—a proposition the first lady resists. Despite his wife's hesitancy, Mr. Sheppard goes to Robert Turner's house and tells him they'd like to hire Nadia for the summer. During this visit, Nadia momentarily senses that the pastor can sense the fact that she got an abortion. Years later, when Robert finally learns that the Sheppards paid for Nadia's procedure, he storms into Upper Room and yells at John, calling him a "son of a bitch." Mother Betty overhears this conversation and spreads the news throughout the church, effectively disgracing the pastor and forcing the church to close because the congregants start leaving one by one.

The First Lady (Latrice Sheppard) – Luke Sheppard's mother, and John Sheppard's wife. Latrice Sheppard has different colored eyes (one brown and one blue), which Bennett claims enables Latrice to look at a woman and know whether or not she has been physically abused. When Mrs. Sheppard tells Aubrey about this power over a cup of tea in Upper Room one day, the young woman grows nervous that Latrice can intuit her history as a rape victim and worries that her past is "written on her skin." Despite this nervousness, though, Aubrey and Mrs. Sheppard have a close relationship. In fact, Latrice is so kind to Aubrey that Nadia envies their bond, wanting badly for Mrs. Sheppard to treat her with the same kindness. Unfortunately for Nadia, though, Latrice has considered Nadia to be a reckless seductress ever since she caught Nadia kissing a boy behind the church years ago. The tension between Nadia and the first lady is only exacerbated by the fact that Latrice is the one who gives Luke the money to pay for Nadia's abortion. Latrice reveals this to Nadia years later, telling the young woman to leave her son alone. In this way, the bad blood between Latrice and Nadia continues throughout the novel, as the first lady embodies the shame and disapproval Nadia is faced with for her abortion and her relationship with Luke.

Russell Miller – A twenty-eight-year-old Marine whom Aubrey and Nadia meet on the beach several days before Aubrey and Luke's wedding. Aubrey and Russell make a quick connection. At the end of the night, she tells him she's not "afraid" of him and pulls him into a kiss. They then go into the beach's public restroom, where Aubrey straddles Russell on the dirty floor. When Russell tells her he doesn't have a condom, though, she quickly stands up and leaves. Later, she corresponds with him over email, since Nadia slipped Aubrey's address to him before they parted ways. While Russell is stationed in Iraq, he emails Aubrey about his life and asks her about important things that Luke never wants to talk about, like her disappointment regarding the fact that she hasn't gotten pregnant yet. Shortly thereafter, Russell appears at Upper Room and asks Aubrey to go to lunch with him. Aubrey hesitantly accepts, and while they're at lunch she finds herself articulating for the first time that Luke and Nadia are having an affair. In this way, Russell helps Aubrey clarify her emotions and suspicions. Although

their relationship never becomes fully physical, their deep emotional connection allows Bennett to explore the different forms of infidelity. While Luke and Nadia sleep together, Aubrey and Russell share a nonphysical intimacy that Bennett intimates is perhaps not as innocent as it seems.

Cherry – The wife of one of Luke’s teammates on the Cobras football team, Jeremy Fincher. Luke grows close to Cherry while Nadia is at college in Michigan. He even starts making excuses to go to Finch’s house in the hopes of being able to talk with Cherry. One day, while Finch is out of the house, she tells him that a group of Cobras were at the house the previous night watching a video of Luke’s injury. Apparently, they were laughing, whooping, and playing the scene over and over. This upsets Luke, who suddenly thinks his teammates see him as a joke. As he thinks this way, Cherry asks if she can see the scar on his leg. He rolls up his pants and shows her, and after a moment, she stoops to his shin and kisses the scar tissue. Just then, one of her kids appears at the other end of the hall and sees Luke and Cherry engaged in this intimacy. Several days later, Finch and a group of other Cobras find Luke at work and beat him senseless, destroying his bad leg so that he’ll never again play football.

Monique (Mo) – Aubrey’s sister. Mo lives with Kasey, her girlfriend. When Nadia discovers this, she’s surprised, given that being gay in the Upper Room community is a “big deal.” Of course, Mo herself *isn’t* part of the Upper Room community, but Aubrey is so religious that Nadia would never have guessed that she lives with lesbians. Mo hates her mother and is upset when Aubrey wants to invite her to the wedding, but the dispute eventually becomes unimportant when their mother declines the invitation. In general, Mo acts as if *she* is Aubrey’s mother, since she and Kasey took Aubrey into their home when Aubrey finally decided to flee from Paul, her mother’s sexually abusive boyfriend.

Mother Betty – The pastor’s secretary and one of the Mothers. Mother Betty overhears Robert Turner yelling at Mr. Sheppard for having paid for Nadia’s abortion. Shocked by this news, she tells the rest of the Mothers what she’s heard, and the gossip spreads throughout the church community. Mother Betty is the catalyst for the Upper Room’s destruction, as the church is eventually forced to shut down in the wake of the scandal and the pastor’s ruined reputation.

Paul – Aubrey’s mother’s boyfriend and Aubrey’s sexual abuser. When Aubrey is still living at home, Paul makes his way to her room on a nightly basis and rapes her. Despite the horror of her boyfriend’s actions, Aubrey’s mother fails to do anything to protect her daughter. Eventually, Aubrey escapes Paul by moving to California to live with Mo.

The Dreadlocked Nurse – The only black nurse at the abortion clinic Nadia visits. While leading Nadia into the sonogram office, the dreadlocked nurse criticizes her for not wearing

comfortable clothes, and Nadia senses her implicit judgment and resentment. Nadia thinks the dreadlocked nurse must think that Nadia is yet another “black girl” finding her way out of “trouble.” Ultimately, the dreadlocked nurse acts as a caretaker for Nadia. When Nadia first opens her eyes after the procedure, she looks into the dreadlocked nurse’s face and says, “Mommy?” Later, as Nadia waits for Luke in the lobby, the nurse brings her a snack and tells her that she’s waiting in vain, insisting that Luke has clearly decided not to come.

Cody Richardson – A man in his thirties who still hosts parties in his beach house that high school students attend. It is at one of these parties that Nadia finds Luke on the night of her abortion. When she asks him why he didn’t pick her up from the clinic as he’d promised, he tells her that “shit came up.” Coming home from this party, Nadia drives drunk and crashes her father’s **truck** into a tree.

Aubrey’s Mother – A woman whose love life adversely affects her children, Mo and Aubrey. While Mo hates her mother, Aubrey wishes that her mother could still be in her life, although she knows this is impossible because her mother refuses to leave Paul, the man who raped Aubrey on a regular basis before she moved to California.

Dr. Yavari – A fertility specialist Aubrey visits with Nadia. During this appointment, Dr. Yavari asks if Aubrey has ever had an abortion. Later, Nadia marvels at the fact that abortions “follow” people around for their whole lives—a comment that helps Aubrey realize Nadia is the girl who Luke got pregnant and who had an abortion.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Finch (Jeremy Fincher) – Cherry’s husband and one of Luke’s teammates on the Cobras. After Finch’s child sees Cherry kiss Luke’s leg, Finch and several other players find Luke at Fat Charlie’s and assault him, making sure to injure his leg so badly that he’ll never be able to play football again.

Kasey – Mo’s girlfriend. Aubrey gets to know Kasey when she moves in with Mo, eventually coming to see her as a caretaker of sorts. Since Nadia spends so much time with Aubrey, she too grows close to Kasey and Mo, spending several nights a week at the girls’ house.

CJ – Luke’s friend. CJ used to play football with Luke in high school and also works with Luke at Fat Charlie’s. He is supportive of Nadia’s abortion, seeing it as a perfect way for Luke to dodge responsibility for getting her pregnant.

Shadi – Nadia’s political activist boyfriend in Michigan.

Carlos – Luke’s physical therapist in the rehab center.



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.



SECRECY, GOSSIP, AND STORYTELLING

Privacy is a tenuous concept in *The Mothers*, as much of Nadia's personal life is subject to public scrutiny and gossip. Most prominently, her abortion attracts scandalized whispers from the Mothers—a group of elderly women in Nadia's church—who hear the story years after the fact but still can't keep themselves from spreading it through the congregation. However, they soon regret their decision to repeat such sensitive information, since it involves their pastor and eventually forces the church to close. It's clear, then, that the Mothers' tendency to gossip is destructive to their own lives. At the same time, though, Bennett also suggests that the impulse to spread gossip is actually an impulse toward storytelling. In turn, the Mothers' inability to refrain from spreading Nadia's secret shows that storytelling itself is an inevitable and deeply human inclination.

The Mothers' obsession with Nadia's personal life is less than altruistic. Indeed, their gossip about her secrets mainly functions as a form of entertainment. They repeat her story to each other, thrilled by the fact that they possess private information. When Betty, one of the Mothers, overhears Robert Turner yelling at the pastor for financing Nadia's abortion, she quickly tells her group of friends the news. "He called pastor an S.O.B.—can you believe it?" she asks them. "Of course we couldn't," the Mothers note, "which was why Betty looked so delighted to tell us." Betty is "delighted" to have shocked her friends with the salacious news, illustrating that the gossip encircling Upper Room is rooted in sensationalism rather than concern for others. The Mothers are eager for the opportunity to disseminate scandalizing stories.

Although the Mothers are initially excited by the salacious gossip they spread, they come to regret spreading Nadia's story throughout the community. After everybody hears that the pastor and his wife paid for Nadia to get an abortion, congregants start leaving Upper Room one by one until, finally, the church is forced to close its doors. As such, the Mothers—who have dedicated much of their lives to Upper Room—lose the cornerstone of their community. Considering the role they've played in exposing Nadia's secret, the Mothers' tone is remorseful: "All good secrets have a taste before you tell them," they admit, "and if we'd taken a moment to swish this one around our mouths, we might have noticed the sourness of an unripe secret, plucked too soon, stolen and passed around before its season. But we didn't. We shared this sour secret." In this moment, they acknowledge that the "delight" they took in this "sour secret" ultimately led to the demise of their own community. At the same time, when they refer to Nadia's

abortion as a "sour secret," they imply that some secrets are less harmful than others, and that the Mothers' primary failure in this instance was their inability to recognize the danger of spreading this particular story. However, by bluntly stating that they shared the secret anyways, the Mothers suggest that the impulse that drove them to repeat Nadia's "sour secret" was simply too great to resist, implying that some stories are too tempting to not repeat.

Gossip, the Mothers hint, is inevitable. Years after the church has closed, the Mothers sit on a stoop and see Nadia driving her father's **truck** as an adult, and they wonder why she has returned to town. "We will never know why she returned, but we still think about her," they say. "We see the span of her life unspooling in colorful threads and we chase it, wrapping it around our hands as more tumbles out." In this moment, the Mothers acknowledge that sometimes the details of other peoples' lives are elusive and unknowable. However, this mystery naturally invites curiosity. Even though Nadia has long since left California, the Mothers still try to trace the "thread" of Nadia's story as it "unspool[s]."

To emphasize their point that storytelling is an unavoidable human impulse, the Mothers involve the reader in the repetition of Nadia's story. In the novel's concluding lines, they say, "[Nadia] is her mother's age now. Double her age. Our age. You're our mother. We're climbing inside of you." This suggests that the reader, having completed the novel, has become a mother, too. Since the Mothers are the people in Nadia's community who spread her story, the reader is now the person who will continue to tell the tale. Bennett leaves readers with the sense that they have inherited the Mothers' desire to tell somebody's else's story, suggesting that the details of Nadia's life are "climbing inside" him or her, too interesting and irresistible not to pass along to yet another listener.



CARETAKING AND RESPONSIBILITY

Caretaking in *The Mothers* is a duty or responsibility women are expected to uphold. Nadia grapples with this expectation throughout the novel. First, she has to face the congregation's opinion that her mother has shirked her motherly duties by killing herself—nobody, it seems, is willing to consider the fact that Elise has acted according to a sense of free will by ending her own suffering. Instead, the community focuses exclusively on her failure to fulfill her obligations as a mother. Nadia's father, on the other hand, retreats into himself after Elise's suicide, neglecting to provide Nadia with the support she needs, and even depending on her to keep their lives on track. Despite his failure to shoulder the responsibilities of a primary caretaker, nobody in the community condemns Robert for acting selfishly or expects him to address his daughter's needs. This unequal gender dynamic also manifests itself in Nadia's relationship with Luke, since Luke eventually shames her for having an abortion, ultimately

suggesting that Nadia has heartlessly shirked her responsibility to care for their unborn baby. In other words, Luke implies that Nadia had an obligation to become a caretaker just because she was pregnant, and though he was complicit in her decision to get an abortion, he retroactively implies that it was Nadia's duty to go through with her pregnancy and become a mother. As such, Bennett shows that society expects different things of women and men when it comes to caretaking, a notion that puts the burden on women to support their loved ones and shames them when they decide to prioritize their own needs.

Elise Turner's suicide invites widespread disapproval from the church community. Although Nadia is also angry that her mother has committed suicide and abandoned her, the condemnation expressed by the Upper Room community is perhaps stronger than Nadia would have expected. This is because Elise has violated the church's social contract, which upholds that women must take care of their children and husbands at all costs. When Nadia stands in the receiving line after the funeral, one of the Mothers approaches her and says, "I just can't believe she did that to you." This comment emphasizes to Nadia the idea that mothers are held responsible for their children. By killing herself, Elise has blatantly disregarded this idea, to the extent that people like the Mothers see her actions as not only selfish, but pointedly aggressive, too: "[It was as if] her mother had shot Nadia, not herself," Bennett writes, showing Nadia's discomfort about having to listen to her community berate her mother under the guise of sympathizing with Nadia. Framing the situation in this manner, Bennett illustrates how Nadia is forced to feel ashamed because of her mother's actions. As a mere teenager, then, Nadia quickly learns that society expects women to always prioritize their loved ones over themselves.

Unfortunately, men aren't subject to the same expectations surrounding caretaking and responsibility. This is made evident by the fact that nobody criticizes Robert Turner for completely avoiding the everyday duties of a single father. Instead of caring for Nadia after Elise's suicide, Robert spends the majority of his time using his **truck** to run errands for Upper Room. When Nadia gets drunk and crashes his truck, she overhears her father admit to the pastor that he doesn't know how to raise her without Elise's help. Hearing this, Nadia feels bad that her father blames himself for her own mistakes, although she also blames him. Bennett writes, "[Nadia] had been the one who held it together. She'd answered the door when the Mothers visited with food, while her father disappeared into the darkness of his bedroom." When she eventually tires of eating the Mothers' food, Nadia goes to the grocery store and cooks dinner for her father and herself, thereby assuming the role of caretaker in their household. Although it's clear Robert isn't providing his daughter with the support she needs, nobody in the community comments on his failure as a parent, ultimately suggesting that women are expected to prioritize their loved

ones' needs, while men are free to wallow in their own despair and ignore their caretaking duties.

Nadia also encounters expectations surrounding caretaking and responsibility in her romantic relationship with Luke. When she gets pregnant with his child, she feels the weight of responsibility; "She was supposed to be the smart one," Bennett writes. "She was supposed to understand that it only took one mistake and her future could be ripped away from her." The idea that Nadia is supposed to "be the smart one" implies that Luke is granted the latitude to remain unconcerned about the "future" and making "mistakes." In other words, society puts the burden on women—not men—to be responsible when it comes to pregnancy and caretaking.

Nadia feels like she has to be the "smart one" in her relationship with Luke, but Luke also makes her feel irresponsible and heartless for getting an abortion. Indeed, months after she gets the abortion—a procedure Luke provided the money for without protest—Luke tells her, "I didn't want to kill our baby." By using the word "kill," he frames abortion as immoral, and he distances himself from the act by claiming that he never wanted to go through with the procedure in the first place. Removing himself from any responsibility related to Nadia's abortion, Luke shames Nadia into feeling like she has failed to uphold her supposed duty as a woman to become a mother and caretaker.

By highlighting Nadia's experience navigating the expectations society places on women, Bennett illustrates that women who try to act on their own behalf are often perceived as heartless and irresponsible. Men, on the other hand, are generally allowed to behave in the same way without attracting similar judgments. Whereas Nadia is scorned by her community after having an abortion, the general consensus about Luke—who got her pregnant—is that he's "reckless" but, overall, not a "bad kid." The disconnect between the way people judge Nadia and Luke illustrates how nobody expects Luke to take responsibility and become a father, but everybody seems to expect Nadia to give up her dreams of going to college in order to raise a child she doesn't want. Bennett emphasizes that inequality often presents itself as a set of double standards—in this case, a double standard regarding the expectations people have when it comes to caretaking and responsibility.



INTERNALIZATION VS. EXTERNALIZATION

Throughout *The Mothers*, Nadia internalizes her grief and emotional pain rather than externalizing them. She keeps herself from outwardly mourning her mother's death, instead dealing with the trauma as an "inside hurt," even as she admires Luke for his ability to wear his pain externally. Not long after her mother commits suicide, Nadia gets pregnant and has an abortion, an event that perfectly illustrates her struggle to externalize her internal hardships. In this

manner, Bennett illustrates that people often suffer in ways that are invisible to others, but by showcasing the emotional toll this internalization takes on Nadia, Bennett suggests that hidden suffering is no less real than externalized expressions of hardship.

At her mother's funeral, Nadia refrains from crying. She receives praise for her stoicism: "At the repast, a parade of guests had told her how well she'd done and her father placed an arm around her." Even though her community commends her for her supposed strength, Nadia is stricken by a sadness she doesn't know how to address publicly. Removing herself from the public eye, Nadia stops going to school, instead spending her days riding buses and drinking in the dark corner of a strip club to be "alone with [her] grief." Of course, it's somewhat ironic that she, a seventeen-year-old girl with a childish backpack, goes to a bar as a way of hiding her grief, since anybody who sees her drinking at the strip club most likely understands her presence there as a cry for help. Indeed, this irony speaks to the strange way Nadia expresses (or fails to express) her emotional distress. Although she instinctively internalizes her pain, Nadia's attempt to force her grief into an "inside hurt," shows that she actually longs to externalize her pain.

Nadia's desire to outwardly express her grief is made evident by her immediate attraction to Luke. Having been severely injured in a football accident, Luke is an embodiment of external pain: "How strange it must be to hurt in an outside way you couldn't hide," Bennett notes when Nadia encounters Luke one day while skipping school. Luke's limp is a constant, visual reminder of his short-lived football career, which came to an abrupt and painful end. This is exactly what Nadia can't bring herself to do, a fact that makes Luke especially attractive to her. When they eventually have sex, she doesn't shy away from the pain of her first time; "Sex would hurt and she wanted it to," Bennett writes. "She wanted Luke to be her outside hurt." Nadia makes Luke an outlet for her internal pain. However, since they keep their relationship secret, even this gesture toward externality remains secretive and private.

Nadia's pregnancy and subsequent abortion represent the dichotomy between that which is internal and that which is external, in the sense that a secret life grows inside her but is removed before anybody can possibly guess what she is experiencing. Pregnancy is a form-altering experience, but Nadia has an abortion before her body puts her internal world on display. When she comes home after the procedure, then, her father doesn't notice anything different about her. "She was grateful so far that he hadn't [noticed], but it scared her, how you could return home in a different body, how something big could be happening inside you and no one even knew it," Bennett writes, implying that some part of Nadia *wants* her father to see what she has done. Successfully hiding her abortion means that she has to cope with the resulting

emotional turmoil on her own—a solitary burden that follows her throughout her life, as she keeps her abortion a secret from her father, best friend, community, and future boyfriends. Worse, she can't stop thinking about having made such a difficult decision as a mere teenager, and constantly thinks about Baby, the name she uses to refer to the child she would have birthed. Even as an adult, Nadia daydreams about what Baby would have been like, revealing how internalization can keep a person from moving beyond grief and loss. Without an outlet to express her pain, Nadia finds herself saddled with grief for the entirety of her life, ultimately suggesting that internalized hardships are just as life-altering as externalized hardships and may actually come with deeper, more permanent consequences since they hinder a person's ability to process his or her emotional troubles.



RELIGION AND JUDGMENT

Throughout *The Mothers*, religion isolates Nadia Turner. This begins when her mother commits suicide, since Nadia subsequently discovers that Upper Room's congregation—with its unyielding religious and moral values—is incapable of helping her deal with her grief. In fact, the church's reaction to Elise Turner's suicide not only fails to comfort Nadia, but actively turns her away from Upper Room altogether. As such, Nadia is isolated by her community's strict religious ideals, which keep the congregants from fully empathizing with her. Bennett, in turn, points to the fact that faith communities can run the risk of estranging their own members by perpetuating feelings of shame and alienation—even though this goes against Christianity's notion that humans should refrain from judging one another because only God can judge.

After her mother commits suicide, Nadia senses that the polite churchgoers are actually deeply disapproving of her mother's actions. Bennett writes: "At her mother's funeral, in the front pew, she'd felt pity radiating toward her, along with a quiet anger that everyone was too polite to express, though she'd felt its heat tickling the back of her neck." The churchgoers can't seem to stifle their anger toward Nadia's mother for sinning by taking her own life. Although the congregants show Nadia their "pity," they don't treat her with empathy. The word "pity" implies condescension and even a slight sense of disappointment or judgment, as if Nadia's mother is morally inferior for having killed herself. Because the members of the congregation think suicide is a sin, they find it difficult to see past what they believe is Elise Turner's selfish, immoral decision. What they perhaps don't consider, though, is that Nadia herself suffers as a result of this moralistic attitude. In response to the congregation's moral outrage, she distances herself from Upper Room, ultimately cutting herself off from a network that should otherwise support her through this tumultuous period.

As Nadia distances herself from religion, her father devotes

himself to the church. Although this is a way of distracting himself from his grief, his wholehearted commitment to the church also separates him from his daughter. “Her father flung himself into Upper Room. He went to both services on Sunday mornings, to Wednesday night Bible study, to Thursday night choir practice although he did not sing, although practices were closed but nobody had the heart to turn him away,” Bennett writes. By constantly visiting the church, Robert structures his life so that he hardly ever sees Nadia. He even runs errands for Upper Room in his beloved pickup **truck**, jumping at any excuse to leave the house. Robert doesn’t want to address difficult emotions, evidenced by his reaction to when Nadia crashes his truck: “Her father hadn’t even yelled at her,” Bennett notes. “She wished he would rage when he was angry—it’d be easier that way, quicker—but instead, he coiled up tight inside himself, moving silently around her in the kitchen or avoiding her altogether.” While Robert dodges confrontation and emotional discussions by throwing himself into the church, his daughter finds herself without any kind of genuine adult support. Robert’s obsession with the church and religion blinds him to his own daughter’s problems, revealing how religion ultimately isolates Nadia from the people who should otherwise come to her aid.

Nadia’s abortion further distances her from the church (and, thus, the adults in her life), since the Upper Room congregation strongly opposes abortion on moral grounds. In fact, they’ve even picketed the clinic Nadia goes to for the procedure. People like the Mothers see this clinic as an affront to their religious values and a manifestation of the evil they think is slowly making its way into their town. In a passage explaining how the congregation originally reacted to the clinic, the Mothers say, “Well, the [strip club] opened and even though it was a blight to the community, everyone agreed that the new abortion clinic was much worse. A sign of the times, really. An abortion clinic going up downtown just as easy as a donut shop.” The Mothers seem to be frightened by the idea that abortion might become something society approaches so casually that a clinic can arise “downtown just as easy as a donut shop.” Aware of the stigma surrounding abortion at Upper Room, Nadia keeps the news from her father, who has become so involved in the church. As a result, she faces the complex emotional consequences of having to make a mature decision on her own while being a mere teenager. Although the church should serve as a support network for her—especially since the congregation knows her mother isn’t there to help—its moralistic stance on abortion renders it unfit to help Nadia in what is the most fateful decision of her life.

There’s no doubt that Nadia knows the church would scorn her for having an abortion, considering how the congregation reacted to her mother’s suicide. “Who is in a position to condemn? Only God,” said the pastor during Elise’s funeral, but Bennett makes it clear that these words only highlight the

community’s implicit judgment; “the fact that he’d led with that scripture only meant that the congregation had already condemned [Nadia’s] mother, or worse, that [the pastor] felt her mother had done something deserving of condemnation.” Having witnessed this kind of disapproval—in addition to knowing that the church has in the past picketed the abortion clinic—Nadia knows she can’t turn to her religious community for help when she gets pregnant. After all, she has felt the kind of angry condemnation religion inspires in the congregation. It is in this fashion that Bennett demonstrates the fact that religious communities can inadvertently alienate their own members, creating an atmosphere of judgment and isolation instead of acceptance and support.



IDENTITY

The majority of the characters in *The Mothers* hold tightly to their identities. For example, Aubrey, who wears a purity ring, spends her summers working at the church, and never misses Sunday services, remains rooted to her identity as a pious and pure young woman. Meanwhile, Nadia, who breaks the cast of a high-caliber student by skipping school to party and hook up with boys, doesn’t attach herself to a particular persona. Nadia can’t be easily categorized because she exists as many things at once—an intellectual, a drunk-driving party girl, a lover, an adulterer. This is not to say, though, that the people around her don’t try to pigeonhole her into being just one thing. In particular, the Mothers and the rest of the church community are all too eager to impose a narrative onto Nadia’s identity, making her out to be an out-of-control sinner driven to misbehavior by her mother’s suicide. While there are grounds for this interpretation, viewing this as the only aspect of Nadia’s identity is one-dimensional and reductive. In revealing the Mothers’ perception of Nadia, Bennett explores the unfortunate challenges facing people who exist at the intersection of multiple identities, ultimately suggesting that society tries to force people into being just one thing despite the fact that it is human nature to contain complexities and even contradictions.

Some people are content with being defined as just one thing because it gives them a way to guide their sense of self. For instance, The Mothers embrace the name of their group and let it inform how they see themselves. Interestingly enough, they aren’t even all biological mothers. “We were already mothers then,” they note at one point, “some by heart and some by womb. We rocked grandbabies left in our care and taught the neighborhood kids piano and baked pies for the sick and shut-in. We all mothered somebody, and more than that, we all mothered Upper Room Chapel.” The fact that some of the Mothers have never actually had children of their own suggests that if a person wants to identify as something he or she is free to do so—society will gladly box a person into a particular identity. Indeed, the elderly women of Upper Room who don’t

have children of their own only need to *act* in stereotypically matronly ways—like teaching piano lessons and baking pies—in order to be considered mothers. This is a testament to the community’s eagerness to characterize people based on even the simplest criteria.

Aubrey Evans is another perfect example of somebody who allows herself—and even wants—to be affixed to a certain identity. With her purity ring and impressive church attendance, she is the epitome of a devout young woman committed to living the life of a pious congregant. In fact, she’s so invested in this religious identity that Nadia finds it impossible to relate to her at first, thinking this goody-two-shoes must be “the poor holy child of devout atheists who [is] working hard to lead [her parents] into the light.” Although Nadia eventually comes to see there’s more to Aubrey than her faith, Aubrey’s Christian faith remains a core part of her identity. Even when Aubrey is about to marry Luke, she refuses to betray her own principles by having sex before marriage. It’s worth noting, though, that her desire to adhere to this devout identity is fueled by her tumultuous and painful youth. After all, Aubrey doesn’t come from a religious background, but from a nonreligious, dysfunctional family. When she was a young teenager, her mother’s boyfriend, Paul, raped her on a regular basis, and her mother never intervened. This painful memory stays with Aubrey, causing trouble for her even after she throws herself into the new identity of a pious and abstinent congregant. Looking at the pastor’s wife, Aubrey wonders if Mrs. Sheppard can sense her old life; “Was her past written on her skin? Could Mrs. Sheppard see everything that Paul had done to her?” Afraid that her past will follow her and inform how people see her, Aubrey builds a new identity for herself that is marked by purity and chastity in an attempt to counteract the psychological burdens of her horrific history. This, it seems, is why she clings so tightly to her identity in Upper Room: it provides her with a sense of self that helps her move on from her painful past.

Unlike the Mothers and Aubrey, Nadia doesn’t commit herself to a particular identity. Unfortunately, the people around her think otherwise, defining her one-dimensionally and reducing her to several one-note personas that fail to recognize her complexity. Early in the novel, the Mothers and the rest of Upper Room see Nadia as an irresponsible young woman acting out after her mother’s death. “Since [Elise’s suicide, Nadia] had earned a wild reputation—she was young and scared and trying to hide her scared in her prettiness,” the Mothers say. In this moment, it’s almost as if Nadia’s good looks count against her, since the Mothers implicate her “prettiness” in her “wild reputation.” In doing so, they take the most superficial part of her and turn it into a defining element of her identity as a “wild,” “scared,” grieving teenager. This is reductive, considering that Nadia—despite her partying and frequent truancy—soon gets accepted to a well-respected university on

an impressive scholarship. However, since Nadia’s academic gifts don’t align with her “wild reputation,” the Mothers don’t mention her good grades.

Similarly, Mrs. Sheppard, the pastor’s wife, harbors an intense dislike of Nadia because she once caught Nadia kissing a boy behind the church during Sunday school. Since that day, Mrs. Sheppard has seen Nadia as nothing but a promiscuous girl—a reduction of her identity that eventually fuels Mrs. Sheppard’s fury when she finds Nadia and Luke hiding out and talking intimately during Luke and Aubrey’s wedding. Mrs. Sheppard tells her in this moment that “this needs to stop,” and Nadia protests, saying she and Luke were only chatting. Mrs. Sheppard replies, “Girl, who you think you’re fooling? You know how many girls like you I’ve seen? Always hungry for what’s not yours. Well, I’m telling you now this needs to stop. You already caused enough trouble.” In this conversation, Mrs. Sheppard reveals that her disapproval of Nadia is largely based on the fact that (according to her) Nadia aligns with the stereotype of a girl who is “always hungry for what’s not [hers].” This idea demonstrates once again that people are eager to make generalizations that lump others into broad categories. When Mrs. Sheppard adds, “You already caused enough trouble,” she insinuates to Nadia that she knows about the abortion. In this way, Mrs. Sheppard further diminishes Nadia by characterizing her not only as a promiscuous girl, but also as somebody who has done something shameful, since Mrs. Sheppard and the rest of the Upper Room community disapproves of abortion. This view aligns with Nadia’s public persona as a “wild” girl, but it fails to take into account her academic prowess, her genuine capacity to love (since she does, it seems, love Luke), and the complicated remorse she feels regarding her abortion. Instead of considering how these things factor into Nadia’s identity, Mrs. Sheppard writes her off as a troublesome flirt. In turn, Bennett demonstrates to readers how difficult it is for somebody like Nadia—a multifaceted person with conflicting traits—to exist in a world that seeks to flatten people into simple, one-dimensional identities.



SYMBOLS

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



ROBERT’S TRUCK

Robert’s truck symbolizes how coping mechanisms can become toxic. Before his wife’s death, Robert loves the truck, taking pride in using it to run errands for Upper Room. When the church protests the abortion clinic, for example, he offers to transport their picket signs each morning using the bed of his pickup. However, after Elise commits suicide, Robert becomes increasingly obsessed with the truck,

spending the majority of his time washing it or using it to run errands for Upper Room. The truck becomes an outlet for his grief, which he uses to distract himself from and cope with his own sorrow. Unfortunately, this outlet also allows Robert to avoid Nadia, as his constant errands for Upper Room keep him from staying at home and interacting with his daughter or keeping tabs on how she's dealing with the loss of her mother. Robert abandons his responsibility as a parent, instead directing his caretaking energies into polishing his precious vehicle.



THE PRAYER BOOK

Elise's prayer book symbolizes the impossibility of fully understanding someone else's identity and life story. When Luke gives Nadia a prayer book that belonged to her mother, Nadia hopes the book will shed light upon why Elise committed suicide. Because her mother didn't leave a suicide note, Nadia finds herself constantly trying to piece together why Elise wanted to end her life. "Nadia had searched the prayer book," Bennett writes, "hoping to find anything that would help her understand her mother." However, Elise's annotations are inscrutable: "Occasionally, her mother had written notes but those were impossible to understand—under one psalm, she'd jotted down what looked like a grocery list." By showing how enigmatic and even trivial Elise's notes are, Bennett suggests that uncertainty is unavoidable when it comes to piecing together a narrative out of the disparate parts of somebody else's life. This is significant, considering that *The Mothers* examines the ways in which people tell stories about and label one another.



THE GOLDEN BABY FEET

The golden baby feet medallion that Nadia receives from the pregnancy center before getting an abortion symbolizes how an abortion follows a woman around for her entire life. Nadia throws away everything else the center gives her, but she can't bring herself to discard this medallion, instead hiding it in a drawer in her bedroom. Similarly, Nadia can't let go of the complicated grief from her abortion, burying it deep inside of her and carrying it throughout her teenage years and adult life. In addition, Robert learns about Nadia's abortion years later by finding the medallion in her drawer. He angrily confronts his daughter and forces her to grapple with the emotional pain of her abortion once more. As the last remnant of a painful past, the medallion symbolizes how Nadia's abortion "follow[s] her around" throughout her entire life, especially considering that Robert may have never known about his daughter's abortion if he hadn't found the golden medallion. Nadia expresses this sentiment after a fertility specialist asks Aubrey if she's ever had an abortion. Once the doctor leaves the room, Nadia says,

"I can't believe it follows you around like that," astounded that a single procedure can stay with a person so long, affecting her life even years later.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead edition of *The Mothers* published in 2016.

Chapter One Quotes

●● All good secrets have a taste before you tell them, and if we'd taken a moment to swish this one around our mouths, we might have noticed the sourness of an unripe secret, plucked too soon, stolen and passed around before its season. But we didn't. We shared this sour secret, a secret that began the spring Nadia Turner got knocked up by the pastor's son and went to the abortion clinic downtown to take care of it.

Related Characters: The Mothers (speaker), Nadia Turner

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Mothers reveal their interest in secrecy, gossip, and storytelling. When they say that "all good secrets have a taste," these elderly women frame themselves as connoisseurs of private information. It's as if they've told so many secrets they can sense subtle nuances in each hidden fact. However, they also admit that they were perhaps too eager to "share" the secret of Nadia's abortion, saying they "plucked" it "too soon." In addition, the fact that they use the word "stolen" is interesting because it implies that the Mothers have acted immorally by "pass[ing]" Nadia's secret around "before its season," thereby proving that they're self-aware enough to understand they shouldn't have "shared this sour secret." Despite this self-awareness, the Mothers went ahead with their gossip anyway, illustrating that sometimes storytelling is irresistible—especially when the story in question includes sensitive, scandalous information.

●● She was startled by how rarely she had been alone back then. Her days felt like being handed from person to person like a baton, her calculus teacher passing her to her Spanish teacher to her chemistry teacher to her friends and back home to her parents. Then one day, her mother's hand was gone and she'd fallen, clattering to the floor.

Related Characters: Elise Turner, Nadia Turner

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 4



Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Bennett describes the ways in which Nadia's life changes after her mother's death. Although Nadia frequently finds herself spending time in solitude in the weeks following Elise's funeral, Nadia was hardly ever "alone" before her mother committed suicide. Equating Nadia to a "baton" that is "handed from person to person," Bennett suggests that children and teenagers often benefit from not only their own parents' support, but from that of the surrounding community. However, Nadia suddenly falls "clattering to the floor" when her mother dies, implying that the community is unwilling to support her if her own mother doesn't also take part in the process of raising her. As such, Bennett examines the old adage, "It takes a village to raise a child," showing that even tightknit communities fail to adhere to this notion when a primary caretaker avoids her responsibilities.

☹️ Her mother had died a month ago and she was drawn to anyone who wore their pain outwardly, the way she couldn't. She hadn't even cried at the funeral. At the repast, a parade of guests had told her how well she'd done and her father placed an arm around her shoulder. He'd hunched over the pew during the service, his shoulders quietly shaking, manly crying but crying still, and for the first time, she'd wondered if she might be stronger than him.

An inside hurt was supposed to stay inside. How strange it must be to hurt in an outside way you couldn't hide.

Related Characters: Robert Turner, Luke Sheppard, Nadia Turner

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Bennett considers what happens when a teenager is suddenly expected not only to comfort herself, but to care for her own father. Elise's suicide forces Nadia into a strange role, requiring her to support her father even though he ought to be the one supporting her. As Robert "hunch[es] over the pew" and cries with shaking shoulders,

Nadia stands stoically beside him as a figure of resilience. The congregation members praise Nadia for this display of strength by telling her she's done "well," but Nadia ultimately internalizes her pain so much that she envies people who are able to "hurt in an outside way" that can't be "hidden." Indeed, this is why she finds herself so attracted to Luke, whose brutal football injury has left him with a permanent limp. As Luke wears his pain "outwardly," Nadia can't get past her own notion that "an inside hurt [is] supposed to stay inside." This is perhaps why she winds up becoming the caretaker in her relationship with her father: her internalization of grief gives him (and the rest of the church community) the false impression that she's stronger than she actually is.

☹️ But they had used condoms, at least most times, and Nadia felt stupid for how comfortable she had felt with their mostly safe sex. She was supposed to be the smart one. She was supposed to understand that it only took one mistake and her future could be ripped away from her. She had known pregnant girls. She had seen them waddling around school in tight tank tops and sweatshirts that hugged their bellies. She never saw the boys who had gotten them that way—their names were enshrouded in mystery, as wispy as rumor itself—but she could never unsee the girls, big and blooming in front of her.

Related Characters: Luke Sheppard, Nadia Turner

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears when Nadia is at a free pregnancy clinic shortly after discovering that she's pregnant. When a nurse asks Nadia if she has any particular reason to think she's pregnant, Nadia thinks about how she and Luke "used condoms, at least most times." The second half of this phrase is critical, as it reveals that they failed to practice safe sex every single time they engaged in intercourse. This failure is precisely what makes Nadia feel "stupid" in this moment, as she's forced to reconcile herself with the fact that her and Luke's occasional oversight has put her in a difficult position. Worse, the gender dynamics at play in society heighten this feeling of stupidity. After all, Nadia feels like *she's* supposed to be "the smart one" in her relationship with Luke. This is an unfortunate outlook, since it excuses men of their responsibility to make "smart" choices in their relationships, instead putting the burden of accountability completely onto women. When Bennett

writes that Nadia has seen pregnant girls “waddling around school” but has never seen “the boys who” got them pregnant in the first place, Bennett reveals the origins of Nadia’s impression that she is “supposed to be the smart one” in her relationship. Society allows men to hide from the public eye, giving them the freedom to step away from the role they played in an unplanned pregnancy. Women, on the other hand, can’t keep their pregnancies a secret for obvious physical reasons, so they’re the ones who bear the brunt of society’s judgment. In this way, the men who accidentally get women pregnant enjoy the luxury of remaining “enshrouded in mystery” while the women themselves “bloom” in the public eye.

disconcerted by the idea that a person can “return home in a different body” without anyone—even a parent—noticing. As such, Nadia finds herself disappointed in her father’s utter inability to pay attention to her, though she’s also “grateful” that she’ll be able to keep this secret from him.

☝ He stepped toward her and the sudden movement made her drop everything in her hands, her purse and shoes and keys clattering to the driveway. She jutted her arms out before he could come closer. He stopped, his jaw clenched, and she couldn’t tell whether he wanted to slap her or hug her. Both hurt, his anger and his love, as they stood together in the dark driveway, his heart beating against her hands.

Chapter Two Quotes

☝ Her mother had been able to tell when she’d had a bad day at school moments after she climbed into the car. What happened? Her mother used to ask, even before Nadia had said hello. Her father had never been that perceptive, but a pregnancy wasn’t a bad day at school—he would notice that she was panicking, he would have to. She was grateful so far that he hadn’t, but it scared her, how you could return home in a different body, how something big could be happening inside you and no one even knew it.

Related Characters: Elise Turner, Robert Turner, Nadia Turner



Related Themes:   


Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

After Nadia gets an abortion, she goes home and climbs into bed, where she thinks about the difference between her mother and father’s skills of perception. When Elise was alive, she had a sharp eye and keen ability to detect when even the smallest thing had gone wrong in Nadia’s life. Nadia’s father, on the other hand, “has never been that perceptive.” Still, though, Nadia is initially afraid that Robert will be able to sense the fact that she has gotten an abortion—after all, “a pregnancy [isn’t] a bad day at school,” so he’ll surely be able to notice a difference when his daughter is suddenly no longer pregnant. At the root of Nadia’s worry is a fear of externalized expressions of pain and emotion. In this moment, she doubts her ability to hide such a significant emotional experience, worrying that Robert will notice that she’s “panicking.” When he fails to recognize this, she’s relieved, but she also finds herself

Related Characters: Robert Turner, Nadia Turner

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the interaction between Nadia and her father after Nadia drives drunk and crashes Robert’s truck into a tree. After hearing the crunch of the truck against a tree, Robert runs into the driveway to see that his daughter has destroyed his beloved vehicle. Robert is obsessed with his pickup truck—so much so that he pays more attention to buffing it than to parenting Nadia. In this way, he uses the truck as an emotional crutch that helps him avoid confronting his own daughter and the grief they both feel regarding Elise’s suicide. In this moment, though, Robert is forced to face Nadia as they stand in the driveway and assess the damage not only of the truck, but of their own relationship. Their physical movements are worth noting here, since Nadia literally keeps her father at arm’s length. Because she refuses to let her father come closer, Nadia doesn’t know “whether he want[s] to slap her or hug her.” This is a perfect embodiment of their entire relationship—because Nadia and her father both keep each other at arm’s length emotionally, neither person can be certain of how the other feels. What’s more, Robert might not know “whether he want[s] to slap her or hug” his daughter either, highlighting the complexity of his role as a caretaker and his confusion regarding how he should approach this role. On the one hand, “slap[ping]” Nadia would warn her against acting out and driving drunk. On the other hand, “hug[ging]” her would acknowledge the pain she must be going through. In the end, Robert and Nadia simply


stand there, separated by Nadia's arms and unable to connect with one another in any way whatsoever.

Chapter Three Quotes

☝☝ If you don't become them, even for a second, a prayer is nothing but words. [...] That's why it didn't take us long to figure out what had happened to Robert Turner's truck. Ordinarily waxed and gleaming, the truck hobbled into the Upper Room parking lot on Sunday with a dented front bumper and cracked headlight. In the lobby, we heard young folks joking about how drunk Nadia Turner had been at some beach party. Then we became young again, or that is to say, we became her. Dancing all night with a bottle of vodka in hand, staggering out the door. A careless drive home weaving between lanes. The crunch of metal. How, when Robert smelled the liquor, he must have hit her or maybe hugged her. How she was probably deserving of both.

Related Characters: The Mothers (speaker), Robert Turner, Nadia Turner

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, the Mothers describe the act of intercessory prayer. When someone engages in intercessory prayer, her or she prays on behalf of someone else, "becom[ing]" that person entirely. The Mothers practice this kind of prayer, which is why they find it easy to "figure out what had happened to Robert Turner's truck." By praying for Nadia, they "become" her, suddenly "dancing all night with a bottle of vodka in hand" and driving Robert's truck home. The Mothers' interest in this religious practice makes sense, given their commitment to their Christian faith and their over-involvement in other people's lives. Interestingly enough, though, the Mothers conflate intercession and gossip, since they blatantly admit that they overhear "young folks" in the church "lobby" talking about how Nadia crashed Robert's truck. Despite clearly hearing the news this way, the Mothers claim their style of prayer is the reason that they "figure[d] out what" happened to Nadia and Robert's truck. As such, the Mothers frame their tendency toward gossip as a respectable and even pious impulse, thereby absolving themselves of any guilt that might otherwise come along with their prying attitudes

regarding Nadia's private life.

☝☝ At her mother's funeral, in the front pew, she'd felt pity radiating toward her, along with a quiet anger that everyone was too polite to express, though she'd felt its heat tickling the back of her neck. "Who is in a position to condemn? Only God," the pastor had said, opening his eulogy. But the fact that he'd led with that scripture only meant that the congregation had already condemned her mother, or worse, that he felt her mother had done something deserving of condemnation. [...]

How dare anyone at the church judge her mother? No one knew why she'd wanted to die. The worst part was that Upper Room's judgment had made Nadia start to judge her mother too.

Related Characters: Elise Turner, The Pastor (John Sheppard), Nadia Turner

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 54



Explanation and Analysis

When Elise Turner commits suicide, Nadia senses the Upper Room community judging her mother. From the congregation's perspective, not only has Elise sinned by killing herself, but she has also left behind her daughter and husband, shamefully abandoning her duties as a caretaker. Nadia picks up on this scorn while sitting in the "front pew" at the funeral. When the pastor urges his congregants to refrain from "condemn[ing]" Elise, Nadia is certain that he's addressing the unspoken truth, which is that everyone in the church is "already" "angry" that Elise would ignore her duty to provide for her family like a good caretaker. Although Nadia likely harbors similar feelings of anger, she is unnerved by the congregation's harsh judgment of her mother. "How dare anyone at the church judge her mother?" Bennett writes. "No one knew why she'd wanted to die." The idea that there might be a specific reason why Elise "wanted to die" is important, as it implies that Elise's choice to take her own life was motivated by a legitimate desire to stop her suffering, despite the fact that her actions put her loved ones in a painful position. Unfortunately, the Upper Room community doesn't attempt to empathize with Elise, instead judging Elise so intensely that even Nadia finds herself doing the same.

Chapter Four Quotes

☝☝ Not ghost eyes, but she had been gifted with a second sight nonetheless: she could look at a girl and tell if she'd been hit before. Forget bruises and scars—hit women learned to hide or explain those away. No need for stories about running into doorknobs or tripping down stairs—all she needed to do was lock her odd eyes onto theirs and she knew a woman surprised or outraged by pain from a woman who'd learned to expect it. She saw past flawless skin to diamond-shaped iron burns, gashes from golden belt buckles, necks nicked by steak knives, lips split by class rings, faces blooming purple and deep blue. She'd told Aubrey this the third time she'd invited her for tea, and after, Aubrey had stared into the mirror, wondering what else the first lady saw. Was her entire past written on her skin?

Related Characters: Aubrey Evans, The First Lady (Latrice Sheppard)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Prior to this passage, Bennett explains that Latrice Sheppard has one blue eye and one brown eye. Somehow, this mysterious oddity means that the first lady can look at a woman and “tell if she[s] been hit before.” Since this skill enables her to peer into people’s private lives, it makes sense that Aubrey fears Mrs. Sheppard’s gaze. After all, Aubrey has a painful history as a rape victim, which she carefully conceals from everybody in the Upper Room community and even tries to avoid thinking about herself. When she worries that her “entire past” might be “written on her skin,” Aubrey fears that her traumatizing past will follow her through life, marking her as a victim wherever she goes. This idea anticipates Nadia’s later worry that the stigma and guilt of her abortion will “follow” her “around” forever.

In addition, when Bennett asserts that Latrice Sheppard can see “past flawless skin” to “burns,” “gashes,” and other physical injuries, Bennett suggests that some external wounds can actually become internal wounds. Long after violent injuries fade from the body, victims are still scarred internally because they’ve bottled up the pain and violence. As such, Bennett shows that trauma lurks in hidden places, and that people who seem okay on the outside may be in a world of pain on the inside.

☝☝ How could a woman like that kill herself? Aubrey knew it was a stupid question—anyone could kill herself, if she wanted to badly enough. Mo said that it was physiological. Misfired synapses, unbalanced chemicals in the brain, the whole body a machine with a few tripped wires that had caused it to self-destruct. But people weren’t just their bodies, right? The decision to kill yourself had to be more complicated than that.

Related Characters: Monique (Mo), Elise Turner, Aubrey Evans

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Aubrey thinks about Elise Turner, wondering why she killed herself. Aubrey thinks about her sister’s medical explanation for Elise’s suicide, which points to “misfired synapses” and “unbalanced chemicals” that might lead a person to want to “self-destruct.” This answer is unsatisfying for Aubrey, who understands that humans are complex, not mere “machine[s]” made up of neurological “wires” that can be held responsible for every emotional phenomenon. Indeed, Aubrey thinks that people aren’t “just their bodies,” which is an idea that once again calls into question the relationship between the internal and the external, the physical and the emotional. Of course, Aubrey has a tenuous relationship to her own body, as she worries that Latrice Sheppard might be able to that Aubrey has been raped just by looking at her. In this way, Bennett destabilizes the notion that there is a clear separation between the body and the mind, thereby allowing her characters’ to grapple with the various ways in which pain, grief, and trauma manifest themselves both physically and psychologically.

Chapter Seven Quotes

☝☝ He wasn’t a big man anymore. He wouldn’t be famous, like he’d dreamed as a kid, teaching himself to sign his name in all curved letters so he would be prepared to autograph a football. He would live a small life, and instead of depressing him, the thought became comforting. For the first time, he no longer felt trapped. Instead, he felt safe.

Related Characters: Luke Sheppard

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Luke has these thoughts while recuperating in rehab after the Cobras severely break his leg. Having injured the same leg twice, it's clear to him now that he will never play football again. As such, Luke is forced to embrace himself as a non-athlete, which is significant, given that he's oriented his entire identity around the persona of a high-caliber football player. Now, though, Luke isn't "a big man." Instead, he's somebody who will "live a small life," and this surprisingly doesn't "depress" him. Luke has learned to manage his expectations, realizing that his identity as an athlete doesn't have to define him. The fact that he can accept himself on his own terms is important, since characters in *The Mothers* are often judged and treated in accordance with their public personas. In this moment, Bennett shows that it is possible for a person to transition away from the identity he or she has built for him- or herself, though the process requires humility and acceptance.

Chapter Nine Quotes

☝ She had hoped for a release. She would go to this wedding and when she watched the two of them kiss at the altar, the part of her that was still hooked into Luke would finally give. A click, then the latch would open and she would finally be free. Instead, she felt him burrowing deeper into her. She felt the dull burn of an old hunger, all the times she had wanted him, the times she had hoped he might hold her hand in public, the nights she had dreamed about when he might finally tell her he loved her.

Related Characters: Aubrey Evans, Luke Sheppard, Nadia Turner

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes Nadia's feelings about Luke and Aubrey's wedding. Although Nadia is initially upset when she hears that her best friend is marrying Luke, she manages to remain optimistic by seeing the wedding as an opportunity to "release" herself from her connection with Luke. Indeed, Nadia wants to untether herself from the feelings she still harbors for Luke, hoping to finally "be free" of him. Unfortunately, though, seeing him kiss Aubrey at the altar only forces Nadia's love for Luke to "burrow" "deeper into her." She internalizes and suppresses her desire for

Luke, and this only makes it harder to "[un]hook" herself from him. As such, Bennett proves that love can't simply be erased, suggesting that Nadia will never be able to get rid of her feelings for Luke no matter how hard she tries to ignore them.

Chapter Ten Quotes

☝ Her father slept in his easy chair in the living room now—lying down was too painful—so she rubbed his shoulders each morning, working out the kink in his neck. She helped him to the bathroom, only as far as the door. He still had too much pride to allow her to help him bathe, although she was increasingly aware that that day was nearing, if not during this injury, then someday in the future, the way all people grew old and infantile.

Related Characters: Robert Turner, Nadia Turner

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 201



Explanation and Analysis

After Robert injures himself, Nadia moves back to California so that she can help him recover. In doing so, she finds herself in the strange position of having suddenly become her father's caretaker. As she "rub[s] his shoulders" and helps him walk to the bathroom, Nadia assumes the same kind of responsibility as a parent. This role reversal reminds readers of Robert's failure to properly support Nadia in the aftermath of Elise's suicide. Rather than reaching out to his daughter to help her manage her grief, he retreated into himself and avoided his daughter by spending his time at the church and driving his truck all over town. As such, it's almost unfair that Nadia now has to be *his* caretaker, but she takes on the responsibility nonetheless, knowing that the older he gets, the more she'll have to help him. This, Bennett implies, is a natural progression. Since "all people [grow] old and infantile," this transference of responsibility between parents and children is normal. What's unfortunate, of course, is that Nadia has seemingly taken on the responsibility of a caretaker ever since her mother died.

Chapter Eleven Quotes

☝☝ He silently dressed but paused halfway, his pants hanging at his ankles. He looked like he might cry, and she turned away. He didn't love her. He felt guilty. He'd abandoned her once and now he was latching onto her, not out of affection but out of shame. She refused to let him bury his guilt in her. She would not be a burying place for any man again.

Related Characters: Luke Sheppard, Nadia Turner

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis



This passage occurs after Nadia tells Luke that she doesn't love him, insisting that their affair behind Aubrey's back has been nothing but a physical connection. Nadia says this because Luke has just asked her if he can take her out on a date, claiming it doesn't matter that he's married and hinting at the idea of leaving Aubrey. When Nadia tells Luke that she doesn't love him, she makes him want to "cry." Nadia "turn[s] away" when she sees his teary eyes, suggesting that seeing Luke cry will make it harder for her to prevent him from "bury[ing] his guilt in her." Readers might recall that Nadia does the same thing when she's in the sonogram room before her abortion—she turns her head so that she won't see the screen, ultimately making it easier for herself to go through with her decision to get an abortion. In this moment, she applies the same kind of willpower to resisting Luke's guilt. After all, he "abandoned her" when she was pregnant, but now he's trying to "latch onto her," which Nadia suspects he's doing out of "shame." She doesn't want anything to do with his "shame," which he externalizes in a performative manner, so she looks away, finally refusing to "be a burying place for any man" ever again.

Chapter Twelve Quotes

☝☝ "Well, you got your husband to protect you."
"My husband's the one who hurts me," she said. "He thinks I don't know he's in love with someone else."

She had never said it out loud before. There was something freeing in admitting that you had been loved less. She might have gone her whole life not knowing, thinking that she was enjoying a feast when she had actually been picking at another's crumbs.

Related Characters: Nadia Turner, Luke Sheppard, Russell Miller, Aubrey Evans

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

This is a conversation that takes place between Russell and Aubrey over lunch. Having recently returned from Iraq (where he emailed Aubrey on a regular basis) Russell invites Aubrey to have lunch with him. While splitting a piece of pie, Aubrey admits that she often feels unsafe as a black woman, and Russell tries to comfort her by pointing out that her husband will "protect" her. In response, Aubrey surprises even herself by saying, "My husband's the one who hurts me." Having said this, she verbally acknowledges for the first time that she knows Luke is having an affair. The fact that she blurts this out so abruptly suggests that she has been withholding this truth from herself. In turn, Bennett implies that people don't only keep secrets from one another, but also from themselves. Indeed, Bennett upholds that there is "something freeing in admitting" such internalized secrets. In this moment, Aubrey is finally liberated from the burden of having to hide the truth from herself. If Aubrey hadn't spoken these words, "she might have gone her whole life not knowing" that her husband and best friend are having an affair. By articulating her suspicions, she ultimately gives outward expression to a secret that has held her back from recognizing the true state of her marriage.

Chapter Fourteen Quotes

☝☝ "You did this thing?" he said. "You did this thing behind my back?"

He'd refused to name her sin, which shamed her even more. So she'd told him the truth. How she'd secretly dated Luke, and discovered that she was pregnant, and how the Sheppards had given her the money for the abortion. Her father had listened silently, head bowed, wringing his hands, and when she finished, he sat there a moment longer before standing up and walking out of her room. He was in shock, and she didn't understand why. Didn't he know by now that you could never truly know another person? Hadn't her mother taught them both that?

Related Characters: The Pastor (John Sheppard), Luke Sheppard, Nadia Turner, Robert Turner

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 264

Explanation and Analysis

Robert Turner says, “You did this thing?” to Nadia after discovering that she had an abortion. The fact that he “refuse[s] to name her sin” by using the word “thing” instead of “abortion” emphasizes his inability to communicate freely with his daughter about emotionally difficult topics. Just as he ignored Nadia after Elise’s suicide in order to avoid his own grief, he now “refuse[s]” to fully acknowledge that she has had an abortion. His avoidance of the word “abortion” ultimately “shame[s]” Nadia and makes her feel like she’s done something so utterly reprehensible that her father can’t even bring himself to say it out loud. When Robert

abruptly leaves the room, he once again demonstrates his inability to confront hardship. Instead of stopping to recognize how difficult it must have been for Nadia to go through an abortion on her own, Robert selfishly abandons her, once again leaving her to grapple with her emotions without parental support. What’s more, his “shock” confuses her, since she understands that people are complex and are capable of all kinds of things. Meanwhile, Robert is incapable of wrapping his head around the idea that somebody he thinks he knows could do something he’d never imagine them doing.



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 ONE

A Greek chorus of churchgoers known as the Mothers opens by saying, “We didn’t believe when we first heard because you know how church folk can gossip.” They note that secrets quickly get out of control in their community, referencing the time that Betty, the pastor’s secretary, witnessed the church’s head usher having brunch with an unknown young woman. Betty quickly spread the news to everybody in the congregation, attracting suspicions of all kinds until the usher appeared at Upper Room (the church) that Sunday and introduced the woman in question as his great niece. Now, though, a new rumor is afoot, and the Mothers think it feels “different.”

“All good secrets have a taste before you tell them,” the Mothers say, asserting that they wish they took a moment to consider the taste of this new rumor before repeating it. Unfortunately, though, they don’t do this, instead sharing “this sour secret, a secret that [begins] in the spring Nadia Turner [gets] knocked up by the pastor’s son and [goes] to the abortion clinic downtown to take care of it.” They explain that Nadia is seventeen when this happens, and that she’s living with her father, Robert, but not with her mother, Elise, because Elise committed suicide six months ago. Since this tragedy, Nadia has “earned a wild reputation,” and everybody in Upper Room has heard about her “sojourns across the boarder to dance clubs in Tijuana” and her late nights spent flirting with strapping young Marines.

The Mothers admit that all of the stories they’ve heard about Nadia might not be true, but they know one thing for sure: Nadia Turner spends “her senior year of high school rolling around in bed with Luke Sheppard,” and when the springtime rolls around, she’s pregnant with his baby.

By foregrounding The Mothers with a story about the rapid spread of gossip in the Upper Room community, Bennett prepares readers for a tale that hinges upon secrecy and the dispersal of sensitive information. Interestingly enough, the Mothers don’t believe this secret (which Bennett has yet to reveal) when they first hear it, acknowledging that “church folk can gossip.” This is strange, as the Mothers are themselves “church folk” and seem to be active participants in Upper Room’s whisper networks—a fact that suggests that even people who look down upon salacious gossip can’t resist playing a part in the circulation of particularly juicy secrets.



Bennett has already established how secrets can run rampant through the Upper Room community, and now she demonstrates this by using the story of Nadia’s abortion and linking it to the reputation the young woman “earn[s]” in the wake of her mother’s suicide. As the people talk more and more about Nadia, Bennett shows how unforgiving the community is when it comes to Nadia’s behavior—rather than reaching out to help Nadia, the adults around her simply gossip about her and decide that she is “wild,” boxing her into the stereotype of an untethered, irresponsible girl. As such, they turn their back on her rather than providing her with the attention and support she needs.



It’s worth noting that the Mothers are self-aware enough to admit that not everything they’ve heard about Nadia is necessarily true. Despite this, though, they seem to have no hesitation in spreading such stories, illustrating how gossip can be irresistible, even when it’s inaccurate.



Shortly after Elise Turner killed herself, Nadia started skipping school and riding busses through San Diego, getting off wherever they took her. On occasion, she journeyed to the Marine Corps base, where she flirted with recruits, sometimes kissing them until doing so made her want to cry. She rode these buses as a way of escaping her “old life” at school, where she used to have hordes of friends and a support network of teachers. After her mother’s suicide, she’s surprised when she thinks back on “how rarely she [was] alone” in those days leading up the tragedy. “Her days felt like being handed from person to person like a baton, her calculus teacher passing her to her Spanish teacher to her chemistry teacher to her friends and back home to her parents,” Bennett writes. “Then one day, her mother’s hand was gone and she’d fallen, clattering to the floor.”

Now, after her mother’s suicide, Nadia hates being around people at school—her teachers are too forgiving and tentative around her, and her friends no longer tell jokes when she sits with them at lunch, “as if their happiness [is] offensive to her.” When she has to choose a partner one day in AP Government, her friends avoid pairing up with her, forcing her to work with Aubrey Evans, a highly devoted Christian who wears a purity ring. Nadia thinks Aubrey is “probably the poor holy child of devout atheists” and is overcompensating for her parentage by committing herself so vigorously to religion. As they start working together, Aubrey leans close and says, “I just wanted to say I’m sorry. We’ve all been praying for you.” Although this sentiment is “sincere,” Nadia disregards it, since she hasn’t been to church since her mother’s funeral.

One day, Nadia skips school and goes to the Hanky Panky, a local strip club. Even though she looks “like a kid with her backpack,” the bouncer lets her into the dark club, a place where “you could be alone with your grief.” Nadia likes this privacy, which contrasts with how her father has been coping with hardship. Robert has thrown himself into the church, attending both Sunday services each week, going to Bible study on Wednesday nights, and even showing up at the Thursday night choir practices despite the fact that he doesn’t sing. “Her father propped his sadness on a pew,” Bennett notes, “but [Nadia] put her sad in places no one could see.”

In this moment, Bennett asks who should be held responsible for taking care of a seventeen-year-old “wild” girl when her own mother has decided to shirk her own parental duties by killing herself. The fact that Nadia feels like a “baton” that has gone “clattering to the floor” suggests that the various support networks in her life have dropped away in tandem with her mother’s sudden disappearance. Bennett implies that mothers in Nadia’s community are integral to such support networks, so if Nadia’s mother won’t care for her, nobody will.



The people at Nadia’s school used to be a major part of her life, but now Nadia doesn’t want to be around them because it’s clear they can offer her nothing in the way of support. Instead, they treat her too tentatively, forcing her to adhere to the identity of a fragile, sad girl who can’t even stomach her friends’ “happiness.” In this way, she’s alienated from her most familiar community. In addition, when Aubrey Evans extends her religious kindness, Nadia finds herself isolated once again, since religion has never been something she’s turned to in times of need—as such, Aubrey’s sentiment is lost on her, making her feel all the more alone.



This is the first acknowledgement in The Mothers of how Nadia deals with her “sadness.” Bennett makes it clear that Nadia copes with her mother’s death internally, as she grapples with her grief in “places no one [can] see.” While Nadia internalizes her pain, Robert externalizes his by “propp[ing]” it “on a pew,” though it’s worth noting that the effect of this externalization isn’t that he is open about his grief with his daughter. His fervent need to express his pain by constantly helping the church actually cuts him off from having to confront his emotions or talk to his daughter about what he’s feeling. In this way, he both internalizes and externalizes his trauma.



Sitting in a lowly lit corner with a drink she bought with her fake ID, Nadia watches the dancers onstage, whose bodies are “stretched and pitted from age.” Visiting the Hanky Panky becomes a habit, and on her third time at the club, an old man sits down and flirts with her until a middle-aged black stripper shoos him away. The stripper tells Nadia to follow her outside, dumping the young girl’s drink down the sink on her way. Lighting a cigarette, the stripper asks Nadia if she is a runaway, commenting on her pretty eyes and saying she could get a job stripping if she wanted to, since the owner doesn’t mind letting underage girls on the floor. Nadia says she doesn’t want to dance, and the stripper replies, “Well, I don’t know what you’re looking for but you ain’t gonna find it here.”

The stripper gives Nadia several dollars and tells her to go to Fat Charlie’s seafood restaurant, where she encounters Luke Sheppard, the son of Upper Room’s pastor. Luke waits tables at Fat Charlie’s now, though Nadia still remembers him from her days in Sunday school. Several years her senior, Luke has already been through two years of college on a football scholarship, though his athletic career ended (along with his academic career) when he broke his leg in a game during his sophomore year, the bone cracking so severely that it burst through his skin. As a result, he walks with a limp, which makes Nadia “want him” even more. “Her mother had died a month ago and she was drawn to anyone who wore their pain outwardly, the way she couldn’t,” Bennett writes.

In keeping with her attraction to Luke’s outward display of pain, Nadia thinks that “an inside hurt [is] supposed to stay inside.” In fact, she didn’t even cry at her mother’s funeral, literally supporting her father at one point while he broke down in tears. At Fat Charlie’s, Luke flirts with Nadia, telling her which items on the menu are the most disgusting. When she tries to order a drink with her fake ID, he merely laughs at her, saying, “Aren’t you, like, twelve?” “I’m seventeen,” she says defensively, but she knows this makes no difference, considering that Luke is twenty-one and knows all about adult life.

When Nadia goes to the strip club, it’s fair to say that she’s testing herself by seeing how far she’ll go in the direction of becoming the “wild” girl her community already thinks she is. Perhaps because she internalizes her pain, misbehaving and breaking rules is a way of expressing her grief, an acknowledgement that something in her life isn’t right. However, she’s really only flirting with this rebellious persona, so when the stripper asks Nadia if she wants to become a dancer herself, she refuses.



Bennett confirms in this scene that, although she hides her grief “in places no one [can] see,” Nadia yearns to outwardly express her emotions. Unfortunately, this is a seemingly impossible task for her, so she’s drawn to Luke, who literally embodies the way pain can manifest itself physically. Unlike Nadia, Luke wears his “pain outwardly.” Even Robert, who Bennett says “prop[s] his sadness on a pew,” doesn’t express his pain as outwardly as Luke. That Nadia takes such prominent note of Luke’s physical appearance is important to remember, since Bennett has already revealed that Nadia will eventually get an abortion—a procedure that stops her body from growing in ways she wouldn’t be able to hide.



Once again, Bennett shows how attuned Nadia is to the ways in which people display or hide their pain. As somebody who buries her grief inside, Nadia is mortified by the idea of expressing her emotions externally—an important dynamic to keep in mind as she ventures toward pregnancy. In addition, since she doesn’t want her external appearance to reveal anything about her internal world, it makes sense that she tries to trick Luke into thinking she’s older than she is; this is part of the identity she’s trying to build for herself in the world, one that masks with who she actually is (a teenager who is grief-stricken by her mother’s death).



Despite their age difference, Nadia and Luke get along quite well, and Nadia begins paying him frequent visits at Fat Charlie's. As she sits in the booths with textbooks spread over the table, he teases her for being a "nerd"—something even her mother used to make fun of her for, since she has always been disarmingly smart. "See this girl," Luke sometimes says to passing waiters, "first black lady president, just watch." And although "every black girl who [is] even slightly gifted [is] told this," Nadia enjoys hearing Luke brag about her intelligence. "He didn't treat her like everyone at school," Bennett adds, "who either sidestepped her or spoke to her like she was some fragile thing one harsh word away from breaking."

One night that winter, Nadia's father goes out of town, so she invites Luke to her house. She wants to offer him a drink, since this is what "women [do] in movies," but there isn't any liquor in her house. Besides, Luke wastes no time pinning her to the wall and kissing her passionately. After she and Luke make their way to the bedroom, Nadia has sex for the first time, enduring through the pain even as Luke asks her three separate times if she wants to stop. In response, she tells him to keep going, accepting and even embracing the fact that sex hurts, resolving to make Luke "her outside hurt."

Nadia and Luke keep seeing each other privately throughout the rest of the winter and into the spring, at which point Nadia discovers she's pregnant. At first, all Luke can say is, "Fuck." Then he asks her if she's "sure." She assures him that she's absolutely positive, since she went to a free pregnancy center that morning. At this center, which is outside of town, a nurse asked Nadia if she had a particular reason to think she might be pregnant, and Bennett notes that this woman "must've thought Nadia was an idiot—another black girl too dumb to insist on a condom."

When Bennett notes that all intelligent black girls are told they'll be the "first black lady president," she illustrates how eager society is to categorize people into recognizable identities. She suggests that it's easier for people to wrap their heads around black female intelligence if they conceive of this intelligence as remarkable and extraordinary. When Luke calls Nadia a "nerd," he fits her into a framework he can more readily understand, since he otherwise wouldn't know what to make of Nadia, who is simultaneously a high-achieving student and a girl who plays hooky to sneak into strip clubs and drink liquor with a fake ID.



In this moment, Nadia's attraction to Luke's externalized pain comes to a head, as she tries to make him "her outside hurt." What's interesting is how cognizant Nadia is of her own tendency to bottle up her emotions. Whereas many people who repress their grief might not admit to themselves that they're internalizing such problematic thoughts and emotions, Nadia remains self-aware enough to understand that she's partly drawn to Luke because of the outward way he handles hardship. In this way, readers see that Nadia is a character of great complexity, as she embraces the contradictions inherent to her own identity.



Once again, Bennett shows the ways in which people project unfortunate race-related stereotypes onto Nadia. When the nurse at the pregnancy clinic treats her like a "black girl too dumb to insist on a condom," the nurse makes assumptions about Nadia's intelligence and associates her recklessness with her race, as if black girls are categorically "dumb" when it comes to using condoms. In turn, the nurse superimposes a narrative onto Nadia's identity, ultimately flattening her many complexities.



Despite what the nurse at the pregnancy center might think, Nadia and Luke *did* use condoms, “at least most times”—a caveat that Nadia now feels embarrassed about. “She was supposed to be the smart one,” Bennett notes. “She was supposed to understand that it only took one mistake and her future could be ripped away from her.” Sitting across from Luke after revealing that she’s pregnant, Nadia tells him she can’t keep the child. After all, she has just been accepted to the University of Michigan and thus feels like she can’t “let this baby nail her life in place.” After a moment, Luke says, “Okay, okay. Tell me what to do,” asking how much money Nadia needs for an abortion. When he asks if she’d like him to accompany her to the clinic, she tells him to simply pick her up when the procedure is over.

Nadia takes the bus to the abortion clinic on the morning of her appointment and sits in the lobby with several other young women. Looking at a vase made of seashells, she thinks about how her mother loved to collect shells, saying that doing so calmed her. Nadia’s memory is interrupted when a “black nurse with graying dreadlocks” calls her name and tells her she should have worn more comfortable clothes. “I am comfortable,” Nadia says, feeling “thirteen again,” as if she’s “standing in the vice-principal’s office” and arguing about the dress code. But the dreadlocked nurse just shakes her head, seeming “weary, unlike the chipper white nurses.” As they move down the hall, Nadia feels this nurse judging her, thinking she’s “just another black girl who [has] found herself in trouble and [is] finding her way out of it.”

Nadia tells the technician in the sonogram room that she doesn’t want to see the screen. Determined not to “allow herself to love the baby or even know him,” she turns her head away. “Huh,” the technician says, stopping for a moment with the sensor on her stomach. “What? What happened?” Nadia asks, whipping her head around, hoping that maybe—just maybe—she isn’t actually pregnant. When she looks at the screen, though, she sees “a black oval punctuated by a single white splotch,” and the technician simply remarks that her womb is a perfect sphere.

In this scene, Bennett shows how Nadia takes cues from society regarding how she’s “supposed to” behave. Indeed, she feels like it is her duty to be the “smart” one in her relationship with Luke, especially when it comes to pregnancy. This attitude implies that women are the only ones who have to consider the consequences of having unprotected sex, ignoring the fact that men should also be expected to take responsibility for their actions. When Luke asks Nadia to tell him “what to do,” he recognizes that what they do next should be Nadia’s choice, since she is the one who’s pregnant. At the same time, though, he also removes himself from the difficult decision-making process that accompanies unplanned pregnancies, thereby leaving Nadia with the full burden of making a difficult choice.



Feeling judged by the dreadlocked nurse, Nadia experiences the ways in which her own blackness informs the way people treat her. Feeling like “just another black girl,” she senses that the nurse is lumping her into a certain category of people—in other words, the nurse associates her with a negative stereotype regarding young black women and the frequency with which they get abortions. Of course, the nurse herself is black, which may also be why she appears extra cognizant of Nadia’s race—after all, the nurse has most likely experienced bigotry and stereotyping, and thus is especially unforgiving when other black women find themselves in the kind of “trouble” that unfortunately propagates racist stereotypes and narratives.



Nadia worries that seeing the baby on the sonogram machine will destroy her resolve to forge forward as an independent woman, instead convincing her to cancel the abortion and take on the caretaking responsibilities that come with motherhood. When the technician tells Nadia that her womb is a perfect sphere, it’s as if nature itself is tempting Nadia, saying she’s literally made for childbearing. This moment, along with the Upper Room community’s disapproval of abortion, makes it even harder for her to continue on as planned, requiring even more resolve.



After the sonogram, Nadia goes to the operating room, where the dreadlocked nurse tells her that the procedure will only take ten minutes. Afterward, she waits in the lobby for Luke, but he never arrives. An hour later, as Nadia starts to dial Luke for the third time, the dreadlocked nurse brings her crackers and a juice box, urging her to eat to soothe her stomach cramps, which will persist rather uncomfortably for “a while.” Nadia tries to refuse the food, insisting that Luke will arrive soon and take her home. “He’s not coming, baby,” the nurse says, and Nadia is alarmed by her use of the word “baby”—almost as alarmed as the nurse was when, upon waking up from the anesthesia, Nadia looked into the nurse’s eyes and said, “Mommy?”

Bennett explores the expectations and responsibilities that come with caretaking by showing how Luke fails to take care of Nadia in neglecting to pick her up. Considering that he’s the one who got her pregnant in the first place, picking her up would be the least he could do, and yet he doesn’t even manage to fulfill this duty. Bennett also highlights the expectations that come with parental caretaking. When Nadia wakes up and calls the nurse “Mommy,” readers not only understand that Nadia is looking for people to fill Elise’s absence, but are also reminded that Nadia is quite young—a mere teenager yearning for a motherly presence to help her through this difficult time. Nadia subconsciously longs for and expects to have a motherly figure in her life, and momentarily mistakes the nurse for somebody who might take up this role.



CHAPTER TWO

Ten years ago, the Mothers write, Upper Room protested the very same abortion clinic that Nadia has now visited as a patient. Although the church isn’t the kind of religious organization that constantly makes public statements, the congregants simply couldn’t accept “an abortion clinic going up downtown just as easy as a donut shop.” However, the protest only lasted three days, because the group was soon joined by “the type of crazed white people who would end up on the news someday for bombing clinics or stabbing doctors.” Still, while the protest lasted, Robert Turner drove to the clinic every morning in his beloved pickup **truck** to deliver the picket signs. “He and his wife were not the protesting type,” the Mothers note, though the couple was happy to help in this small way, since they, too, were vehemently opposed to abortion.

Bennett takes this opportunity to solidify Upper Room’s disapproval of abortion. Not only is the congregation against such procedures, but it has also blatantly protested the very same clinic that Nadia visits. In this way, Bennett emphasizes to readers the extent to which Nadia goes against her community by getting an abortion. Since Nadia knows that the religion in which she was raised condemns abortion, she is forced to keep the procedure a secret even from her father. Bennett illustrates that Upper Room’s strict morals have essentially pushed Nadia further into secrecy, requiring her to turn her back on the church.



These days, Robert is known as “the man with the **truck**” because of how much he uses it to run errands for the church. He constantly makes himself available to any request from the congregation, eagerly hauling materials to various church functions and driving all over town as a way of contributing to Upper Room. Sometimes he wonders if his community values his truck more than him, though he doesn’t dwell on this, thinking instead that the truck has “turned things around for him” after Elise’s suicide.

Robert’s truck is a distraction from Elise’s death, as well as an outlet for his grief. Thus, the truck represents both an externalization and an internalization of his pain. On the one hand, Robert’s truck provides him with something physical and tangible to obsess over instead of Elise’s suicide. On the other hand, the truck gives him an excuse to avoid talking about his emotions, since he’s always hopping into the truck to run errands for Upper Room. In doing so, he not only avoids his true feelings but also fails to support his daughter, shirking his responsibilities as her caretaker, though nobody—except Nadia—seems to notice this shortcoming.



After Nadia's abortion (and finally getting a ride home from a volunteer at the clinic), Robert comes home to find her in bed. Explaining her stomach cramps, she tells her father that she's just uncomfortable because she's on her period. "Her mother had been able to tell when she'd had a bad day at school moments after she climbed into the car," but her father is completely unable to read her, quickly and uncomfortably accepting her excuse. As he awkwardly leaves her room, she asks if she can borrow his **truck**. He's hesitant, but Nadia convinces him by saying, "Where do you think I'm taking it? The border?" Relenting, he leaves her with the keys.

Nadia drives Robert's **truck** to Fat Charlie's in search of Luke, who's nowhere to be seen. Acting on a hunch, she goes to a beach house owned by Cody Richardson, a man in his thirties who still parties with high school students. Nadia herself has spent many memorable nights at Cody's house, hooking up with boys, smoking weed, and "drunk-crying the weekend after burying her mother." When she finds Luke here, he instantly asks what she's doing at the party—a question she turns on him, asking why he didn't pick her up at the clinic. "Some shit came up, okay?" he says. "I knew you were gonna find a way home." He stares at the ground while saying this, and when he finally looks at her, she's surprised that he looks like he always does; "Shouldn't someone look different once you've caught them in a lie?" she wonders.

"Look," Luke says, "this shit was supposed to be fun, not all this fucking drama. I got you the money. What else do you want from me?" As Luke walks away, Nadia feels stupid for not realizing that Luke saw her as "a problem" to "deal with" when he gave her an envelope filled with \$600 several days before. Wanting to drown this feeling, she grabs a bottle of tequila from a countertop and pours herself a stiff drink despite the dreadlocked nurse's instructions to avoid alcohol for 48 hours. She finds a boy she used to hook up with as a freshman and grinds against him until he presses her hand against his erect penis, at which point she pushes away from him and goes outside.

On the balcony, Cody Richardson points out a nuclear power plant on the horizon, saying to Nadia, "Any minute—boom. Just like that. I mean, all it takes is a storm and we all blow up." Looking at the glowing white domes at the power plant on the horizon, Nadia says, "That's how I wanna go someday." "Really?" Cody asks, to which Nadia simply says, "Boom."

Robert's inability to sense what's really going on with Nadia emphasizes how out of touch he is as a caretaker. In addition, the fact that Nadia can undergo something as significant as an abortion and still easily deflect Robert's concern aligns with her tendency to internalize hardship and emotion. After all, the procedure only affected her internally, giving her the freedom to present herself externally however she wants. She chooses to block her father—a logical choice, considering that he has recently devoted himself so intensely to Upper Room, a church that harshly judges people who support abortion.



When Nadia wonders if a person should "look different once you've caught [him] in a lie," she once again reveals the ways in which she approaches internalization and externalization. Since Nadia usually admires Luke for the way he externally exhibits his pain, she's unnerved by the fact that his face looks the same after he has lied to her. In this moment, she learns that Luke doesn't actually display everything he's feeling and is capable of deception.



Once again, Bennett calls into question the duties and responsibilities people have to one another in their romantic relationships. Having already established the various ways in which Nadia's mother and father have failed to take care of her, Bennett shows that Luke is yet another person who ultimately fails to support her. "What else do you want from me?" he asks, revealing that he thinks he has already satisfied what should be expected of him in this situation. In this way, readers see that Nadia doesn't have anyone to rely on in a substantial or meaningful way.



The imagery of a nuclear power plant exploding is figuratively in line with the way that Nadia keeps her grief, anger, and general unhappiness bottled up inside. When she says that she'd like to die by suddenly exploding, it's not hard for readers to see the connection between the instability of contained nuclear energy and Nadia's internalization of hardship; in both cases, something volatile fights its way out of an enclosed environment to disastrous effects.



Nadia imagines the moments leading up to her mother's suicide, watching in her mind's eye as Elise drives through town with Robert's "service pistol" in her lap. Although Elise wanted to die on the beach, it's dawn and surfers have already started entering the water, so she drives half a mile from Upper Room and parks so that her car is "shielded by branches." Turning off her engine, she picks up the gun.

Coming into the driveway with her father's **truck** after Cody Richardson's party, Nadia turns too sharply and hits a tree. Now, as she and Robert stand together in the driveway, her father asks why she didn't have the headlights on. "They were!" she insists, but he finds her story unlikely. "Are you drunk?" he asks. Stepping closer, he smells the liquor curling off her body. As he advances, she suddenly extends her arms and keeps him from getting any closer. "He stopped," Bennett writes, "[...] and she couldn't tell whether he wanted to slap her or hug her. Both hurt, his anger and his love, as they stood together in the dark driveway, his heart beating against her hands."

Bennett relates the story of Elise's suicide through the lens of Nadia's memory, providing readers with Nadia's mother's backstory and giving insight into just how much this event has influenced Nadia. Bennett suggests that when a significant caretaker commits suicide, the people left behind must piece together why he or she has done so—a painful and seemingly never-ending experience.



This image of Nadia holding Robert at arm's length is visual representation of their strained relationship, especially considering that she can't tell whether or not he wants to "slap her or hug her," and that she feels a mixture of "anger" and "love" emanating from him. It's worth noting that, as she presses her hands against his "beating" heart, this is perhaps the closest she has gotten to her father in quite some time, since they both lead such separate lives. Robert, for his part, has withdrawn from his caretaking responsibilities by distracting himself with the religion and Upper Room. Nadia, on the other hand, has been quietly rebelling against this by partying, going to strip clubs, and generally misbehaving. This moment, then, marks the first time that Robert has actually noticed what's wrong with his daughter. Unfortunately, Nadia has to smash Robert's truck in order to get his fatherly attention—attention he should be giving her regardless of her behavior.



CHAPTER THREE

The Mothers explain that they practice intercessory prayer, taking on the burdens of their community members. "We don't think of ourselves as 'prayer warriors,'" they uphold. Instead, they simply try to "slip inside" someone else's body, inhabiting their pain. In this way, they "become" Nadia Turner after they hear about her drunken escapades. As they pray for her, they also feel sorry for Robert, who they say has been through too much already, since Elise shot her own head "clean off her body" last year, leaving behind her distraught family. Not long after Nadia crashes the truck, the Mothers find a prayer card from Robert in the box outside the prayer room. *Pray for her*, it reads, though they don't know if these words refer to Nadia or to her mother.

Intercessory prayer refers to the act of praying on someone else's behalf. The fact that the Mothers actively take on other people's burdens reflects their tendency to involve themselves in other people's lives. This kind of prayer also aligns with their inability to resist spreading gossip and telling secrets about the members of their congregation. When Robert gives the Mothers a vaguely worded prayer card that could refer to either Elise or Nadia, Bennett illustrates how people peering into the lives of others ultimately have to make to do with partial information and inference rather than hard facts. After all, the Mothers only know so much about Nadia—especially before they find about her abortion—and so their involvement in her life is predicated on speculation.



In the days after crashing Robert's **truck**, Nadia stays home. Upset that she's ruined the "one thing" her father loves, she's further unsettled by the fact that Robert doesn't yell at her about the incident. "She wished he would rage when he was angry—it'd be easier that way, quicker—but instead, he coiled up tight inside himself, moving silently around her in the kitchen or avoiding her altogether."

Although the distance plaguing Nadia and Robert's relationship seemingly comes to a head when she crashes his truck, Robert backs away from his daughter once again. This is because confronting Nadia would mean acknowledging the pain she must be experiencing in the aftermath of her mother's death—a pain he clearly can't imagine discussing. In this moment, his tendency to "coil up tight inside" mirrors Nadia's own tendency to internalize her pain. Of course, the difference is that he, as a parent, has a responsibility to reach out to his daughter but ignores his duty by "moving silently around her in the kitchen" and "avoiding her altogether."



The Sunday after the crash, Pastor Sheppard visits the Turner household. When Nadia opens the door, she's surprised to see him dressed in casual clothes, though she hides this as she leads him to the backyard, where her father is lifting weights. As she leaves the two men alone, she sees the pastor turn to watch her, and she momentarily wonders if he can somehow tell what has happened in her body, as if "his calling [has] imbued him with divine knowledge," and he can see her aborted pregnancy "hanging off her shoulders" like the "heaviness of her secrets."

Bennett frames Nadia's "secret" as something visible that can "hang off her shoulders." Once again, Bennett shows Nadia's fear of externalizing her hardships. The fact that Nadia thinks Mr. Sheppard's "calling" as a pastor enables him to intuit such private things about her also suggests that she worries her secrecy and privacy are threatened by religion—fearful of the harsh judgment to which a religious person might subject her regarding her abortion, she is weary of Mr. Sheppard as he gazes at her body.



Closing the backdoor, Nadia rushes upstairs and crouches by a window that opens onto the yard, where her father and the pastor are talking. She hears the pastor say he heard about what happened with Nadia and **the truck**, and Robert responds by saying, "She wasn't like this before. Or maybe she was. Maybe I just didn't know her before. Elise was always there to...they were so close, I couldn't get between them and didn't hardly want to." At this, Nadia backs away from the window, not wanting to hear her father blame himself for her mistakes, although she often finds herself blaming him for leaving her alone. In fact, she was the one who kept their lives on track after her mother died. As Robert stayed in his dark bedroom, she opened the door when visitors came and even started cooking dinner.

Yet again, Bennett shows that Robert has shirked his responsibilities as a parent and caretaker, leaving Nadia to figure out on her own how to navigate everyday life and her own grief. Even though Robert's failure is glaringly obvious, no one in the community seems to hold him accountable. After all, the pastor says nothing to imply that Robert should pay more attention to his daughter. This is an important dynamic to keep in mind as the novel progresses, as readers will see that the leeway given to Robert regarding his parental obligations is at odds with how people treat women in similar situations.



After Pastor Sheppard leaves, Nadia goes downstairs with a pair of clippers and offers to give her father a haircut—something her mother used to do. As she runs the clippers along his head, he says that the pastor’s wife—the first lady—needs an assistant for the summer. “I can’t work there,” Nadia responds, but when her father asks why, she can’t think of anything to say. “It’s a good job and it’ll be good for you,” Robert says. “Spending some time at Upper Room. It’ll help you. God will—you have to trust Him, see? You trust Him and stay in His presence and He’ll carry you through like He’s carrying me.” As he speaks, Nadia feels as if her father’s trying to convince himself of his own words, as if he thinks “she might absorb holiness into her bones” by spending time in the church.

Nadia doesn’t understand why the first lady would hire her, since she’s certain Mrs. Sheppard hates her after having caught her kissing a boy behind the church years ago. “I’ve never seen such a thing in my life!” she shouted, dragging Nadia and making her write *My body is a temple of God* one hundred times before letting her leave. When Nadia arrives at Upper Room on her first day of work, she stands in Mrs. Sheppard’s office as the impressively tall woman towers over her. “How old are you, honey?” she asks, beginning a series of polite but pointed questions about Nadia’s plans to go to college before saying, “Well, look. I never had an assistant and I never needed one. But my husband seems to think I could use some help. So let’s find you something to do, okay?”

As Nadia fetches Mrs. Sheppard a cup of coffee, she looks out the window and sees a summer camp playing outside. “In the midst of the chaos” stands Aubrey Evans. As Nadia watches her—completely unsurprised to discover that Aubrey spends her summers at church—she thinks that “in another life, maybe, [she] could have been like her.”

Nadia’s immediate refusal to work at Upper Room reinforces the notion that she’s wary of religion and the church. This makes sense, considering that she has gotten an abortion, which her religion condemns. Worse, what her father is suggesting is that she work alongside Luke’s mother, which would make it very difficult to forget about Luke and move on with her life. Nonetheless, it’s clear that Robert is determined to force Nadia into taking this position, perhaps because he thinks this is a way of reassuming some parental responsibility. By insisting that Nadia work at Upper Room, he’s able to act as if he’s involved in her life, though it’s worth noting that the idea itself doesn’t come from him at all, but from Mr. Sheppard. As such, Robert is merely pretending to invest himself in Nadia’s life.



Bennett adds to the reasons why Nadia doesn’t want to work at Upper Room. Having already established that Nadia is hesitant to embrace religion, Bennett now reveals that Nadia has always had a strained relationship with Mrs. Sheppard. Of course, Nadia is even more fearful now, given her recent involvement with Luke, Mrs. Sheppard’s son. Sitting in the office, Nadia no doubt feels judged by Mrs. Sheppard, who seems to embrace this dynamic by bombarding Nadia with questions.



Nadia categorizes Aubrey Evans by seeing her as somebody who must not have a life beyond the church. In this way, she ascribes to Aubrey the identity of an unpopular, overly devout girl, though she doesn’t actually know her at all. Despite this simple-minded conclusion, though, Bennett reveals that Nadia is perhaps capable of seeing beyond such superficial defining characteristics, feeling in some fleeting way that she and Aubrey might actually be alike, that “in another life, maybe, [she] could have been like her.”



As the weeks progress, Nadia works for Mrs. Sheppard, who gives her insignificant tasks and often critiques her work. Because the jobs the first lady assigns her are so small, Nadia wonders why the pastor hired her in the first place. She understands, of course, that he and Mrs. Sheppard must “pity” her, but *everybody* pities her. Indeed, at her mother’s funeral, she could feel “pity radiating toward her, along with a quiet anger that everyone was too polite to express, though she’d felt its heat tickling the back of her neck.” As she felt this, the pastor delivered his eulogy, saying, “Who is in a position to condemn? Only God.” Judging by this choice of scripture, Nadia sensed that “the congregation had already condemned her mother” for committing suicide. After the funeral, one of the Mothers hugged her and said, “I just can’t believe she did that to you.”

One day, Nadia encounters Aubrey in the halls of Upper Room. The two girls have an awkward, stilted conversation. Later, Nadia watches as Aubrey goes into Mrs. Sheppard’s office for tea, and she wonders what it would be like to have the first lady’s approval. Stuffing envelopes, she imagines sitting across the Mrs. Sheppard and looking at the pictures of Luke in her office. With this thought, she tries to refocus on the task at hand, but her mind is “flooded” by the memory of Luke. “Her stomach leapt,” Bennett writes, “like she’d missed a stair. Grief was not a line, carrying you infinitely further from loss. You never knew when you would be sling-shot backward into its grip.”

That night, Nadia opens the drawer of her nightstand and takes out a small golden medallion in the shape of **baby feet**, “a gift, if you could call it that, from the free pregnancy center after she’d learned her test was positive.” As she touches the glinting object, she remembers how the woman at the clinic gave it to her and told her that the feet were “the exact shape and size [...] as those of her own eight-week-old-baby.” At the time, she found herself unable to “throw the pin away,” which helped her realize she was going to have an abortion. “This pin was all that would remain,” Bennett writes. Since then, Nadia has taken to holding the golden feet every night before bed.

The congregation’s fierce disapproval of Elise’s suicide alerts Nadia to the fact that her community harbors certain expectations regarding motherhood. Nobody stops to consider that Elise must have been suffering immensely before taking her own life. Instead, the Mothers and even Pastor Sheppard condemn her actions, framing her as ruthlessly selfish. When Nadia feels “anger” mixed with the “pity radiating toward her” at Elise’s funeral, she’s forced to grapple with society’s unrelenting expectation that mothers always put their children’s needs before their own.



It’s clear Nadia is somewhat jealous of Aubrey’s relationship with Mrs. Sheppard, since Aubrey has the first lady’s approval, and Nadia doesn’t. The fact that this bothers Nadia implies that she yearns for a motherly figure in her life and wants somebody like Mrs. Sheppard to show the same kind of concern and empathy normally expected of a caretaker. On another note, when Bennett says that “grief [is] not a line,” she demonstrates how emotion can swell unexpectedly when a person internalizes pain. Because Nadia never allows herself to express her emotional trauma, she finds that she never knows when she will “be sling-shot backward into [grief’s] grip.”



The golden baby feet medallion is the only physical evidence of what Nadia has gone through with her pregnancy and subsequent abortion. Everything else has been hidden away, rendering the entire pregnancy undetectable. Indeed, only Luke knows about her abortion, and she hasn’t seen him since Cody Richardson’s party. As such, her only tangible connection to the experience comes when she holds this medallion each night—yet another testament to how Nadia keeps her hardships carefully tucked away.



Bennett briefly shifts her attention to focus on Latrice Sheppard, who—just as Nadia suspects—never wanted to hire an assistant, let alone the girl her son got pregnant. Indeed, Mrs. Sheppard knows that Nadia carried Luke’s child; Luke himself told his parents as much in a moment of panic and fear. Although the Sheppards scolded him, they also wanted to protect him from getting in trouble with the law, so Latrice went to the ATM and withdrew the \$600 that Luke gave to Nadia in order to pay for the abortion. Because of this, the first lady feels she doesn’t owe Nadia anything. She tells her husband this, stating that she doesn’t need “some fast-tailed, know-nothing girl” hanging out in the church all summer, but Mr. Sheppard refutes her point, simply stating, “We owe her.”

The fact that Mr. and Mrs. Sheppard know about and even financed Nadia’s abortion is significant because their religion strictly forbids such procedures. This means that the abortion isn’t only Nadia’s secret, but theirs, too, since such information would surely disgrace anybody in Upper Room’s community, let alone the pastor himself. Although Mrs. Sheppard wants to wash her hands of Nadia—writing her off as nothing but a “fast-tailed” girl who almost ruined her son’s life—the pastor feels a moral obligation to support Nadia. Strangely enough, this feeling of responsibility is one of the only kinds of support Nadia receives from her elders throughout the novel. Mr. Sheppard’s sympathy and regret also explain the look he gave Nadia when he came to visit her father—at the time, Nadia thought he could sense what she’d done because of his religious “calling,” but Bennett now reveals he only knew about her abortion because he played a role in financing the procedure.



CHAPTER FOUR

The Mothers recount the last time they saw Elise Turner (they were apparently the last ones to see her alive). Entering the church one morning, they found her kneeling in front of the altar, “slumped forward” as if sleeping. Accustomed to shooing away drunks and homeless people, they told her to leave, that they wouldn’t call the police if she got up and went on her way. When she didn’t move, though, they advanced closer and realized she wasn’t homeless. “Elise!” exclaimed one of the Mothers. “What you doin’ in here?” In response, Elise stammered something about having come to the church the previous night, but she doesn’t finish her sentence, instead stumbling down the hallway and out the door. And though the Mothers didn’t know it at the time, she was on her way toward death.

The fact that the Mothers are the last ones to see Elise Turner alive is in keeping with the novel’s interest in gossip and storytelling—having seen Elise in her final moments, the Mothers have a certain authority over her story, since they possess details to which nobody else has access. As such, they find themselves in a somewhat authorial position, a notion that perhaps explains why their collective voice figures so prominently into this narrative.



Nadia spends the summer thinking about her mother’s final days—wondering what she must have been experiencing—and feeling lonely herself. One day, though, Aubrey sits and has lunch with her at Upper Room. At first, Nadia wants to be left alone, but soon they get to talking, and Aubrey tells her that she lives with her sister and her sister’s girlfriend. “At Upper Room,” Bennett writes, “a gay sister was a big deal.” As such, Nadia wonders about Aubrey’s life, suddenly fascinated and drawn to her. “Why did Aubrey live with her sister, not her parents?” Bennett muses. “[Nadia] felt a sudden kinship with a girl who didn’t live with her mother either. A girl who was also a keeper of secrets.”

The kinship Nadia feels in this moment with Aubrey is predicated on the fact that both girls have “secret” pasts kept hidden from the public eye. What’s more, that Aubrey lives with her sisters suggests that she too lives a motherless life, something that naturally sparks Nadia’s interest, since she is grappling with the reality that she no longer has a dependable caretaker. In this way, Nadia finds herself drawn to Aubrey, a girl she used to think of as boring and unremarkable. In turn, Bennett shows that once somebody puts in the effort to learn about another person, it’s easy to move past preconceived notions regarding that person’s identity. Although at first, Nadia carelessly categorized Aubrey as an uninteresting and unrelatable Christian girl, now Nadia sees that Aubrey is just as complex as she is herself.



Nadia and Aubrey start having lunch together every day. In this way, Nadia slowly learns more about her new friend, who discovered Upper Room when she was sixteen and new to California—she attended a Sunday service one morning and, after listening to the sermon, cried as she walked up to the altar to be saved. Aubrey has moved many times throughout her life, due to the fact that her mother leads an unstable love life and follows men all over the country. One of these boyfriends, Paul, used to sneak into Aubrey’s room and rape her, though she doesn’t tell Nadia this in their conversation about her past.

In this moment, Bennett reveals to readers something still hidden from Nadia: that Aubrey has been raped by Paul, her mother’s boyfriend. In doing so, Bennett confirms Nadia’s previous suspicion that, like her, Aubrey is “a keeper of secrets.” The difference between them, though, is that Aubrey has turned to religion in an attempt to forget her tumultuous past, walking teary-eyed to the altar as a way of erasing her traumatic personal history. Nadia, on the other hand, has never found anything about religion particularly welcoming or comforting—not only has the congregation made her feel guilty on her mother’s behalf, but the pastor’s wife is constantly cold to her. As such, Nadia can’t distract herself from her secret traumas in the way that Aubrey can.



When Nadia asks if Aubrey’s mother is dead, Aubrey says, “No, no, nothing like that. I just—we don’t get along, that’s all.” This shocks Nadia, who wonders if this is something somebody can actually do—simply leave a mother behind. Later, when the girls have started spending every evening together, Aubrey and Nadia swing in the hammock in Nadia’s backyard. As they do so, Aubrey reveals that she hasn’t spoken to her mother in almost a year, and Nadia wonders what it must feel like “to be the one who left.”

At first, Nadia finds herself drawn to Aubrey because she senses that their lives are perhaps similar. As their friendship progresses, though, she realizes that their situations are notably distinct from one another. Although it’s a relief to find somebody who also has secrets and leads a motherless life, Aubrey’s decision to abandon her mother stands in stark contrast to Nadia’s own circumstances, since Nadia’s mother was the one to leave her behind.



Nadia starts spending all of her time at Aubrey’s house, where Aubrey lives with her sister, Monique, and Monique’s girlfriend, Kasey. When Aubrey first moved in, she tells Nadia, she had trouble sleeping, so she and Monique decorated her room together, making it into her ideal bedroom. “Mo thought we needed to do something together,” Aubrey says to Nadia, explaining that they hadn’t seen each other in several years because Monique never visited home because she didn’t like Paul, her mother’s abusive boyfriend. In this moment, Aubrey reveals to Nadia that Paul used to hit both her and her mother sometimes, though she still doesn’t reveal that he also used to rape her.

Once more, Aubrey only partially reveals her past to Nadia, keeping her secret about Paul hidden. Likewise, Nadia has yet to tell Aubrey about her abortion. It’s worth noting, then, that despite their closeness, both girls hide important things from one another, secrets that are constantly on their minds but that they can’t bring themselves to vocalize. In this way, secret-keeping becomes yet another form of internalization.



Bennett notes that Latrice Sheppard—with her unique eyes, one of which is blue and one of which is brown—has a certain ability to “look at a girl and tell if she [has] been hit before.” She told Aubrey this the third time they had tea together, and since then Aubrey has wondered what the first lady knows about her own life, asking herself whether “her entire past [is] written on her skin.” Over tea one afternoon, Aubrey asks her what happened to Elise Turner. She asks this because the pastor never mentioned a cause of death, a fact that caused “lurid speculation” from the congregation. Although Aubrey now knows that Elise shot herself, she wants to know *why* she did so. “The devil attacks all of us,” Mrs. Sheppard says. “Some folks just aren’t strong enough to fend him off.”

Mrs. Sheppard is highly perceptive, but she still doesn’t know that Paul used to get drunk and hit Aubrey and her mother. “He’d moved in a year before [Aubrey had] left,” Bennett explains, “and for a year, he had made nightly trips to her room, pushing her door open, then her legs, and for a year, she had told almost no one. Almost, because she’d told her mother after the first time it happened and her mother had shook her head tightly and said ‘No,’ as if she could will it to be untrue.” As Aubrey sits on Mrs. Sheppard’s couch asking about Elise Turner, the first lady asks why the girl wants to know so much about the incident. “Nadia never talks about it,” Aubrey says, but Mrs. Sheppard only warns Aubrey about getting too close to Nadia, who will be leaving soon for college.

CHAPTER FIVE

Since Nadia’s abortion, Luke has been distracted at work, frequently breaking plates, bowls, and glasses. Though he used to be respected at Fat Charlie’s for always catching falling dishware with his fast football hands, now he’s sluggish and distracted. On break at work one night, he steps outside to smoke a joint with his friend and coworker, CJ, who used to play football with him in high school. Unable to keep his secret any longer, he tells CJ that he got Nadia pregnant, and CJ immediately advises him to demand that she furnish him with a DNA test to prove the baby belongs to him before he pays her any money. When Luke tells him that Nadia has already gotten an abortion, though, CJ pats him on the back and says, “Well, shit. That’s even easier. You got lucky, homie.”

Latrice Sheppard’s ability to “look at a girl and tell if she [has] been hit before” suggests that she thinks certain traumas are impossible to fully internalize. Indeed, Aubrey worries that her past is “written on her skin”—if this were the case, it would be a blatant externalization of her painful history. This is similar to how Nadia fears that her father will be able to sense the change in her body after her abortion. Of course, Robert remains unaware of what Nadia is dealing with, and Latrice Sheppard never seems to mention anything about Aubrey’s past. In this way, Bennett implies that the fear of externalization is rarely more than just a fear. With their intense traumas lurking inside, Nadia and Aubrey feel exposed to a world that, in reality, hardly notices them. On another note, Aubrey’s curiosity about Elise’s suicide is evidence of just how strong the impulse toward gossip and storytelling can be.



Once again, Bennett shows that Aubrey’s fear of revealing her painful history is first and foremost a fear, since Mrs. Sheppard remains unaware of the terrible things Paul has done to Aubrey. In keeping with this kind of sheltered secrecy, Aubrey comes to see that the story of Nadia’s mother is shrouded in mystery, and that she may never understand why Elise killed herself because “Nadia never talks about it.” Of course, Nadia never talks about it partially because she doesn’t even know why her mother committed suicide—an uncertainty that further drives the curiosity surrounding the story of Elise’s death.



Upon hearing about Nadia’s pregnancy, CJ immediately encourages Luke to go to great lengths to avoid having to assume the responsibility of a caretaker. He tells Luke to get a DNA test before he gives Nadia money for the child, ultimately demonstrating how men in this community are quick to refute the idea that they might have to take on the duties of providing for somebody else. This, it seems, is somewhat of a double standard, considering—for example—that the community so vehemently disapproved of Elise Turner’s suicide on the grounds that she abandoned her obligation to care for her daughter. In this way, Bennett illustrates that men often operate under different expectations regarding their roles as caretakers.



As CJ talks about how “lucky” Luke is because Nadia got an abortion, Luke can’t bring himself to feel glad about the situation. Since the incident, he’s been unable to take his mind off the fact that he “helped create a whole new person, a person who never existed before in the entire world.” Apparently, he never intended to leave Nadia at the clinic, but when the day came, he suddenly decided that “he had done his part” by paying her, determining that she shouldn’t expect anything else of him. Since then, though, he frequently thinks about a sign he saw as a child, when Upper Room picketed the abortion clinic: *There’s no such thing as an unpregnant woman, just a mother of a dead baby*, it said. Since then, the word *unpregnant* has haunted him.

Nadia spends every night at Aubrey’s house that summer, leaving her Robert alone and causing him to wonder if Nadia is wearing out her welcome, though she assures him that Kasey and Monique don’t mind having her. Plus, she enjoys Aubrey’s strange little family. As they grill in Aubrey’s backyard, Monique tells stories about her nights working in the E.R. One night, she talks about a girl who took illegal abortion pills and wouldn’t admit to having done so until she was bleeding “out on the E.R. floor.” Later, Nadia asks what happened to this girl, though she can’t bring herself to say the word “abortion.” “Horrible infection,” Mo, says. “But she pulled through. These girls are so afraid to tell someone they’re pregnant. [...] Don’t you girls ever do something like that. You call me, okay? Or Kasey. We’ll take you to a doctor.”

Nadia remembers that she considered illegal abortion pills herself. She would’ve used them, she thinks, if Luke hadn’t given her money for the actual procedure. Lying in the darkness later on, after Mo has told them about the girl in the E.R. who almost died from taking such pills, Nadia asks Aubrey, “Do you think it’s bad? What that girl did?” “Why?” Aubrey asks, to which Nadia says, “I don’t know. Just asking.” After a moment, Nadia says, “Sometimes I wonder—if my mom had gotten rid of me, would she still be alive? Maybe she would’ve been happier. She could’ve had a life.” Nadia knows that any of her other friends would “gasp” and look at her with “wide eyes” in response to this statement, but Aubrey simply squeezes her hand, “because she too under[stands] loss, how it [drives] you to imagine very possible scenario that might have prevented it.”

Luke’s impulsive decision to leave Nadia at the abortion clinic yet again proves that men—at least in this community—seem to conduct themselves according to a different set of expectations, which doesn’t require them to care for their loved ones in any significant way. What’s more, the guilt Luke feels in retrospect has less to do with Nadia—whom he unfairly abandoned—and more to do with the general morality of abortion. Rather than feeling bad about the way he treated Nadia, he feels bad about having transgressed against Upper Room’s values. Despite this new moral stance, though, it’s worth noting that he never voiced such opinions to Nadia when she was making the decision to get an abortion. Assuming he didn’t have to share the burden of decision-making with her, Luke made Nadia bear the full brunt of the choice to not have their baby.



The story Monique tells about a girl almost dying after neglecting to tell the E.R. doctors that she took illegal abortion pills serves as a real-life example of the kind of negative consequences that can come from withholding important secrets. Unlike Nadia, this girl was forced to admit to getting an abortion, since she was literally bleeding out on the floor. Nadia, in contrast, was able to get an abortion before her body showed any signs of pregnancy, thereby successfully internalizing the entire matter. Because this other girl almost died, though, Nadia is forced to acknowledge that certain secrets can be toxic and dangerous to a person’s well-being. Of course, the secret of her own abortion manifests itself emotionally, not physically, but there’s no doubt that hearing this story serves as a disconcerting warning about harboring such secrets.



This is an interesting moment because Nadia considers both the negative and positive consequences that can come from having an abortion. On the one hand, she acknowledges to herself that the difference between her and the girl who almost died in the E.R. is slight (since she herself considered using illegal abortion pills), and she then wonders if this is “bad,” clearly feeling a certain amount of guilt for having gotten an abortion. On the other hand, when she wonders if her mother might still be alive if she’d gotten an abortion, Nadia recognizes that abortions can have positive outcomes. Indeed, by not having Luke’s child, Nadia has perhaps saved herself from leading the same life as her mother, which ultimately ended in sorrow. As such, Nadia questions the notion that abortion is an immoral and inherently evil thing, recognizing that—contrary to what the people of Upper Room might think—it can actually be life-giving.



As the summer draws to a close, Nadia decides she wants to take Aubrey to a party at Cody Richardson's house—one last visit before Nadia leaves California. She helps Aubrey get dressed, encouraging her to wear a short dress and telling her that “every guy's gonna want to hook up with” her, though Aubrey merely says, “So? That doesn't mean I want to hook up with them.” When Nadia asks her friend how much physical intimacy she's had in her life, Aubrey shyly says, “I don't know. Kissing, I guess.” At this, Nadia starts talking about her own first time having sex but stops short, since she's never told her friend about her relationship Luke.

At the party, Nadia gets Aubrey drunk. With alcohol working through her system, Aubrey starts dancing with a boy so sexually that Nadia pulls her away and forces her to drink water. As she does so, Aubrey tells Nadia that she loves her multiple times, which Nadia simply laughs off. “Jesus, Aubrey,” she says as she leads her into Monique and Kasey's house later that night, putting her to bed, getting in next to her, and going to sleep next to her best friend.

One morning, Mrs. Sheppard knocks on Luke's bedroom door and tells him she knows he's been spending his time thinking about Nadia, and that he needs to forget about her and move on with his life. She tells him he needs to come to church, and that it will do him good. As a result, Luke finds himself at Upper Room on the Sunday before Nadia leaves for college in Michigan and discovers that the congregation has taken up a donation to help her cover the extra expenses not included by her academic scholarship. After the service, he catches up with her and makes small talk until, annoyed by his “fake concern,” she says, “I don't have the money. The offering. My dad has it. But I'll pay you back.” Luke tries to protest the idea that he's asking her to reimburse him, but she ignores him.

“Six hundred, right?” Nadia says, pressing Luke. “I'd hate for you to feel like you ever did me any favors.” In response, Luke makes sure nobody is in earshot and says, “I'm sorry. I couldn't go to that clinic. If someone had seen me—” Nadia quickly cuts him off, saying, “So you didn't give a shit if someone saw me?” In response, Luke insists that it's different because he's the pastor's son. “I needed you,” Nadia says. “And you left me.” At a loss, Luke replies, “I didn't want to,” and when Nadia points out that this doesn't matter, that he *did* leave her, he says, “No. I didn't want to kill our baby.”

When Aubrey says she's only ever kissed a boy, she's not being entirely truthful, considering what Paul has done to her. At the same time, though, she's also not necessarily lying to Nadia about the amount of physical intimacy in which she has engaged, since rape doesn't count as intimacy. Still, Aubrey once again finds herself in a position in which she has to keep her past hidden from Nadia. Interestingly enough, as their conversation progresses, Nadia also finds herself hiding the details of her own past. As such, Bennett illustrates that Aubrey and Nadia's friendship is made up of an elaborate dance between truth-telling and secrecy; the girls want to be close to one another and share private details about their lives but can't bring themselves to be fully honest, either.



As Nadia guides Aubrey home and gets her safely into bed, she assumes the role of a responsible caretaker. This is perhaps why Aubrey becomes so affectionate, since her own mother seemingly never cared enough about her to look out for her wellbeing. In this moment, then, Nadia does what Aubrey's mother could never do, a fact that makes Aubrey abundantly grateful for her friend's compassion.



It's clear that Nadia doesn't want to pretend like everything between Luke and her is okay. Making small talk as if nothing has happened between them ultimately diminishes the difficult experience she has been through with the abortion. As such, she stands up for herself by forcing him to acknowledge their past, thereby involving him in the abortion. This ultimately corners Luke into accepting that he failed to take care of Nadia when she needed him most.



By saying that he “didn't want to kill” his and Nadia's baby, Luke backhandedly shames Nadia for getting an abortion, framing the matter as if she forced him into paying for a procedure to which he strongly objected. Of course, readers will remember that Luke didn't object to the idea of an abortion when Nadia first told him her plans, but now he's eager to make her feel guilty. He tries to disgrace her, implying that she has heartlessly “killed” their baby, a word that depicts abortion as a violent, immoral act.



After her conversation with Luke, Nadia imagines what it would be like if she hadn't gotten an abortion. She envisions their child—whom she calls Baby—as a boy taking his first steps, throwing his bottle, learning to jump. She wonders what Baby's actual name would have been, but once she hears Luke say the words "our baby," she can't stop thinking of the child as just Baby. That night—after Luke tells her that he "didn't want to kill [their] baby"—Nadia fantasizes about telling Aubrey everything about the abortion and her relationship with Luke, wanting badly for her friend to show her compassion and understanding. As they play pool together at a local bar, though, she can't bring herself to reveal her secret, too worried it will ruin her friendship with Aubrey.

Nadia's conversation with Luke causes her to question the choice she made to get an abortion. His use of the pronoun "our" recalls the bond they used to share with one another—a connection she clearly misses, though she's also still angry at Luke for having abandoned her at the clinic. Still, hearing Luke talk about their baby causes her to wonder if she has perhaps made a mistake. She seems to think in this moment that she could have raised the child with Luke, thereby assuming the role of a caretaker—a role her own mother failed to successfully carry out. With these thoughts swirling through her head, she yearns for an outlet, wishing she could tell Aubrey about her abortion. Unfortunately, though, she knows that Aubrey is deeply religious, and this keeps her from divulging her secret. After all, the religious community of Upper Room disapproves of abortion, so Nadia fears Aubrey will judge her. In this way, Bennett shows that religion ultimately keeps Nadia from fully reaching out to her various support networks, instead causing her to keep her secrets to herself.



CHAPTER SIX

In Michigan, Nadia meets her new boyfriend Shadi at a Black Student Union meeting. Surrounded by white people, she experiences "a sly type of racism" that runs throughout the university's culture. She notices this all over campus, as white people make her walk "on the slushy part of the sidewalk" but then "champion the diversity of their school, how progressive and accepting it [is]." "In a way," Bennett writes, "subtle racism was worse because it made you feel crazy. You were always left wondering, was that actually racist? Had you just imagined it?"

Throughout the novel, Bennett makes observations about race and the ways in which people treat Nadia according to the color of her skin. This is first apparent when she goes to the free pregnancy center and the nurse looks at her as if she's "another black girl too dumb to insist on a condom." Later, the dreadlocked nurse projects a similar sentiment onto her. Now, though, Nadia encounters "subtle racism" on an everyday basis, finding herself in a context in which people are constantly—and problematically—aware of her blackness. In a predominantly white environment, she experiences what it feels like to have her identity reduced to a single defining factor: the color of her skin.



Shadi is a skilled debater capable of besting seemingly anybody in discussions about equality. During Nadia's sophomore year, he establishes a school paper "dedicated to reporting news about political movements in Palestine and Sudan and North Korea." His interest in international affairs and human rights encourages Nadia to step outside her own boundaries by studying abroad in Oxford. When she goes to the passport office to have her picture taken in preparation for the trip, she realizes that her mother never left the country. "This would be her life," Bennett notes, "accomplishing the things her mother had never done." Unlike her friends, who are proud to be the first in their families to do something, she feels guilty; "How could she be proud of lapping her mother, when she had been the one to slow her down in the first place?"

The guilt Nadia feels about "lapping her mother" suggests that she is unfordable with the idea of venturing into uncharted territories. After all, mothers are usually the ones who show their daughters new things—they are the forerunners of their daughters' lives. This, it seems, is part of what it means to be a caretaker. Because Elise committed suicide, though, she was never able to fulfill this role. Instead, she left Nadia behind, forcing the young woman to forge into the world on her own. In turn, Nadia experiences uncertainty when it comes to trying new things, compounded by the fact that she feels guilty because she secretly thinks she held her mother back, wondering all the while if Elise would have been happier if she'd gotten an abortion.



Immersing herself in college life, internships, and travel, Nadia finds excuses to avoid returning home. When she Skypes with Aubrey, she always says she'll visit "soon," though she never makes good on this promise. "At home, loss was everywhere," Bennett writes. And though Nadia doesn't like thinking about her father spending holidays alone, she can't quite bring herself to return to California.

In the years following Nadia's departure, Luke yearns to play football again. When he's not working at Fat Charlie's, he goes to the park and watches a semi-pro football team called The Cobras practice while he does pushups and pull-ups nearby. Eventually, the coach recognizes him from his days playing college football. Giving Luke his card, he tells him to reach out whenever his leg feels strong enough to play. Excited by this new prospect, Luke tells his parents the good news over their weekly Sunday meal, which they've started having ever since he moved out of the house and into his own small apartment. "Get a job, Luke," Mr. Sheppard says upon hearing about the Cobras. "Listen," his mother adds, shaking her head, "I know you love football but you got to be realistic now."

After working out together one day, CJ tells Luke that he's heard Nadia is "living in Russia and fucking with some African nigga." Luke isn't thrilled to hear this—apparently, he obsesses over the idea of other men touching Nadia, and now he finally has a name to search: Shadi Waleed. On the work computer at Fat Charlie's, he searches Shadi's name and reads an article he wrote about soccer, then scrolls through his Facebook page until he sees a picture of Nadia lounging on his lap. "Her life had gone on like nothing had happened," writes Bennett, "but Luke was stuck, wedged in the past."

Luke joins the Cobras and discovers that he actually enjoys getting hit because it's an outlet for his anger. Though he's slightly younger than the other players, he finds his teammates have all experienced some kind of disappointment regarding their football careers. It isn't long before he becomes friends with these men, most of whom have wives and families. At a party hosted by a player named Finch and his wife Cherry, Luke talks about how Nadia got an abortion and how she's dating somebody else now. "I'm sorry, brother," Finch says. "That's some bullshit and we both know it. I love my wife more than anything, but I'd kill her if she got rid of my baby."

In her hometown, everybody knows Nadia as the wild party girl whose mother committed suicide. This identity doesn't allow her to simply be herself, instead reducing her to one or two notable traits. This is perhaps why she avoids going home—"loss" is "everywhere" in California, but in Michigan she can leave behind all of these preconceived notions regarding her identity, allowing her to build a new persona that might more accurately represent who she is.



Luke's determination to get back into shape shows that he views himself as a premiere athlete. Unfortunately, his injury has thrown him off-track, keeping him from fully assuming his identity as a star football player. When the coach of the Cobras approaches him, Luke sees an opportunity to regain his self-image. Meanwhile, his parents question whether or not it's worth it for Luke to throw himself back into football, since it's clear the Cobras will only provide him with an ego boost but not a stable income. Whether he likes it or not, Luke's body will someday keep him from continuing to play football, and he'll have to give up his identity as an athlete—this is what Mrs. Sheppard tries to get him to acknowledge when she tells him to be "realistic."



The fact that CJ tells Luke that Nadia's in Russia when she's actually in England shows that gossip is unreliable. This is important to remember, since The Mothers explores the ways in which people talk about each other and the impact this has on the stories they tell. Stuck in his hometown, Luke yearns to know more about Nadia's new life. From this distance, he wrongly assumes Nadia has completely moved on from him and her abortion. Of course, readers know that this couldn't be further from the truth, since Nadia constantly thinks about her abortion. As such, Bennett illustrates that looking at another person's life from a distance often leads people to jump to false conclusions.



Again, Bennett frames Luke as somebody who embraces and embodies the idea of externalized pain. This is evident by the way he takes pleasure in getting tackled. Getting hit gives him an outlet to express his inner frustrations, including his mistaken belief that Nadia has moved on with her life. His anger about Nadia also surfaces during his conversation with Finch, who suggests that Nadia wronged Luke by getting an abortion, and that Luke should have been the one to decide the fate of Nadia's unborn baby.



Luke slowly gets to know Cherry and makes excuses to drop by Finch's house to see her, since he enjoys the conversations he has with her. Cherry is a bit overweight, and at first their friendship is purely platonic. One day, though, Luke comes to see her while Finch is gone, and she tells him that several Cobras were at the house the previous night watching a video of Luke's injury, playing it over and over and yelling when the bone came out of his leg. This upsets Luke, making him feel like he's "just a gruesome joke" to the other players. As he thinks this, Cherry asks to see his scar. Reticent at first, he rolls up his pants and exposes his shin. After a moment, Cherry bends down and kisses the scar. As she does so, her daughter runs into the hall and witnesses their intimacy.

The following evening, Luke is taking out the trash in the back alley of Fat Charlie's and thinking about asking Cherry on a coffee date when he sees a group of Cobras approaching. "Yo assholes, I can't get all of you free beer, so don't even ask," he says, but his words go unanswered as the men advance upon him. Before Luke can even react, Finch punches him in the face, and Luke blacks out as the rest of the Cobras start "stomping on his leg."

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the months following his beating, Luke lives in a rehabilitation center and slowly learns to walk again. His physical therapist is a short, kind man named Carlos who tells him, "You used to be a big man. You ain't anymore. Gotta accept that it's okay to not be a big man. It's enough to be a good one." In keeping with this, Luke learns that it doesn't matter who he was "out in the world," because in rehab he is "just like everyone else, struggling to gain control of [his] body." While he recovers, he gets to know an elderly patient named Bill, who fought in the Korean war but "ended up at the rehab center after tripping on the sidewalk and breaking his hip."

Aubrey surprises Luke by visiting him at the rehab center on behalf of the Mothers, who have asked her to deliver a blanket they knit for him. He doesn't know much about Aubrey, other than that both his mother and Nadia like her. Sitting down, Aubrey tells him that she's going to a local college and working at a donut shop. He asks if she keeps in touch with Nadia, and when Aubrey tells him that she does, he asks, "Is she still in Russia?" Aubrey laughs, telling him Nadia has never visited Russia, though she has been to England and France. Before she leaves, Aubrey asks if he needs anything. "You could bring me a donut," Luke says.

Luke's defensiveness after learning that his teammates watched his injury video suggests he's overly sensitive about anything that might challenge his identity as a tough athlete. Imagining Finch and the rest of the Cobras laughing at his injury belittles him, making him feel like "a gruesome joke," when what he really wants is to be accepted by his teammates as a well-respected player. Cherry senses Luke's insecurity, which is perhaps why she kisses his shin—she wants to show him that he doesn't have to be a macho football player around her. By kissing his scar, she ultimately brings tenderness to the externalized pain Luke exhibits, thereby softening his hard exterior.



Considering that Luke wants to ask Cherry on a date, it seems that her kiss has broken past his tough exterior. Right when he allows himself to be vulnerable, the Cobras beat him senseless, targeting his bad leg as if to remind him that his injury—his externalized pain—will always follow him through life. This also reinforces Luke's feeling that he needs to preserve his identity as a tough football player motivated by pain.



Carlos's advice that Luke forget about being a "big man" liberates Luke from his struggle to be somebody he isn't. Luke learns that being a "good man" is just as good as being a "big man," and that the failure of the body indicates nothing about a person's character. This is made evident by the fact that Bill, a triumphant veteran, succumbs to a simple sidewalk.



When Aubrey arrives at the rehab center to deliver a blanket to Luke, Bennett casts her as a natural caretaker. Aubrey doesn't simply hand Luke the blanket, but actually sits down and talks to him, keeping him company even though she hardly knows him. Although she's been sent by Upper Room, her kindness seems to reach beyond simple Christian charity—after all, the Mothers themselves don't even visit Luke, and they're perhaps the most pious characters in the entire novel. As such, Aubrey is depicted as caring and friendly as she gets to know Luke, though readers can no doubt sense the complications that might arise between her and Nadia if she ends up getting too close to him.



Aubrey's visits to the rehab center become quite frequent, and she brings Luke donuts, books, and a tank-top for him to wear during physical therapy. One day, he points at her purity ring and says he used to wear one when he was thirteen, but his hand outgrew it, and his father had to cut it off, nicking his finger with a saw and leaving behind a small scar. "It's okay," he says. "I ended up fucking a girl later that year. I would've done it anyway, the ring just would've made me feel bad." In response, Aubrey tells him that wearing a purity ring isn't about "feeling bad." When Luke asks her what it is for, she says, "It just reminds me." "Of what?" he asks, and she replies, "That I can be clean."

After helping motivate Bill to do his exercises one day, Luke realizes he's interested in becoming a physical therapist. To help him save money for a degree in this field, Mr. Sheppard gives Luke a job at Upper Room once he's left rehab. Meanwhile, Luke continues to spend time with Aubrey, who sits next to him in the back pew during Sunday services. When Luke's father lays his hands on sick people in the congregation each week, Aubrey asks Luke if he wants to go up. "I'll go with you," she says one day, and with that, they make their way to the front of the church together.

Later that night, Luke lies in bed with Aubrey, whom—Bennett reveals—he has started dating. Their relationship has progressed naturally, but they haven't had sex because Aubrey wants to wait until marriage. Although Luke respects this, he's eager for her to change her mind. "Tell me a secret," she says that night. After a pause, he says, "I got a girl pregnant once. She didn't keep it." A moment passes before Aubrey asks who the girl was. "A girl I used to know," he says. "I loved her, but she didn't want the baby."

In this scene, Bennett shows that Luke is a man with a history of physical pain marked by scars. Once again, readers see that his injuries are visible on his body. It is clear that Luke represents the externalization of trauma, while people like Nadia and Aubrey represent the internalization of trauma. However, Aubrey's way of addressing her difficult past is perhaps more complicated than Nadia's straightforward internalization. Aubrey does hide the fact that she's been raped and seems to avoid thinking about it, but she also wears a purity ring to remind herself that she can "be clean," which is a constant reminder of the sexual trauma lurking in her past.



By this point, it's obvious that Aubrey and Luke have formed a meaningful connection. As Luke works on giving up his persona as a "big man," he embraces religion in a new way, allowing Aubrey to escort him up the aisle so that his father can heal him. Of course, this is out of step with how he behaved while he was dating Nadia. Indeed, it's hard to imagine this is the same person who abandoned Nadia at an abortion clinic and then callously told her that "shit" had "come up." Giving up his identity as a tough football player has enabled Luke to accept his own vulnerabilities, a process that consequently makes him kinder and gentler.



From the very beginning of his relationship with Aubrey, Luke keeps his history with Nadia a secret. Even in revealing the fact that he has gotten a girl pregnant, he avoids telling Aubrey the entire story. There's little doubt that he knows how significant this omission actually is, considering that he's aware of the fact that Nadia and Aubrey are close friends. Luke only tells Aubrey half of the truth, essentially starting his relationship with her on tenuous grounds when it comes to secrecy.



Changing the subject, Luke asks Aubrey to tell *him* a secret, and she says that when she was younger, she thought she had superpowers. “Like I could smell if a man was good or bad,” she says. “Or I could jump out of my skin when he touched me. And I could hear really good. I could hear him moving throughout the apartment, like a rat clicking through the pipes. I could hear him before he got to my room. And I always wondered why my mom never heard but I told myself she couldn’t. Because she didn’t have super senses.” With this, Aubrey starts crying, and Luke puts his hands around her face and kisses her before nuzzling into her neck, “wanting to keep her in her skin.”

The way Aubrey reveals that Paul used to rape her is worth examining, since she seems to work her way to the truth gradually, as if letting go of her secret all at once would be too overwhelming. At first, her “secret” seems silly, a mere childhood reverie about having superpowers. However, the nature of her story grows more and more specific, until she’s suddenly speaking not just about any man, but about the one who used to move “throughout the apartment,” “clicking” through the halls on his way to rape her. Unlike Luke, who only tells Aubrey that he’s gotten somebody pregnant before but not that this person was Nadia, Aubrey works up the nerve to reveal a painful secret in its entirety. In doing so, she begins her relationship with Luke in total honesty. Unfortunately for her, though, he fails to do the same.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Three years after she first left California, Nadia still hasn’t returned. Finally, though, she’s summoned back by a phone call from Aubrey, who reveals she’s getting married to Luke. When Nadia hangs up, Shadi doesn’t understand why she’s so upset and asks why she isn’t happy about the news. “Because her fiancé’s a dick,” she says. Bennett notes that “a different man, a more perceptive one, might have asked how Nadia knew. But Shadi just pushed off the couch and went to boil noodles for dinner.” After all, Nadia hasn’t even told Shadi about her abortion, worried that he might not understand, despite his progressive views. “Maybe abortion seemed different when it was just an interesting topic to write a paper about or debate over drinks,” Bennett writes, “when you never imagined it might affect you.”

Nadia’s fear of how Shadi would react to her abortion aligns with Bennett’s notion that people are often quick to judge one another based on a single trait or action. Abortion is a particularly sensitive subject that invites all kinds of judgment, so Nadia is especially careful about telling anybody her secret. In fact, nobody knows she was ever even pregnant, except for Luke and the nurses who served her. This, it seems, is how Nadia would like to keep things, for she’s afraid that even somebody like Shadi—a liberal, open-minded man—will view her differently after hearing about her past.



As the wedding approaches, Nadia prepares to return home for the first time since she left for college. Meanwhile, Aubrey plans the bridal shower with Mrs. Sheppard, who has high expectations and wants to make the party perfect. Aubrey, however, is preoccupied with something else: whether or not to invite her mother. When Aubrey tells Monique that she’s considering this, her sister says, “Are you fucking kidding me?” Later, though, Nadia tells Aubrey on the phone that she should do whatever she wants—it’s Aubrey’s wedding, and she has the right to invite her mother if that’s what she wants. “Life is short and if you want to see your mom again, you should,” she says. After a silent moment, Aubrey says, “I’m sorry,” suddenly realizing “how insensitive it [is] to ask Nadia whether she should invite her mother.”

Unlike Nadia, Aubrey has the ability to rekindle her relationship with her mother. Aubrey is open to the idea of including her mother in her life again, accepting that doing so might unearth painful memories and emotions. When she suddenly apologizes to Nadia for being “insensitive,” Aubrey acts like Nadia’s old friends in high school who used to stop laughing as soon as she sat with them because they worried their happiness would be “offensive” to her. In this way, Aubrey inadvertently puts Nadia into the category of a sad and delicate girl—a label Nadia has resented since the very first days after her mother’s death.



The week before Aubrey's wedding, Nadia comes home to discover that her father has taken down all the pictures of her mother. That night, she calls Shadi, who's planning to fly to California just before the wedding to be her date. Although she has never cried in front of him, she breaks down on the phone, asking him, "How could he do that? She's my mother." When Shadi suggests that perhaps it hurts Robert to look at pictures of his dead wife, Nadia says, "It's like she was never here. Like he never loved her." In response, Shadi says, "I think he still loves her. That's why it hurts so much."

Aubrey is overjoyed to see Nadia at the bridal shower, which takes place in the Sheppards' backyard. Looping her arm around her friend, Aubrey walks through the party with Nadia as guests say, "Well, look who finally decided to come back home" with a certain degree of scorn in their voices. "In their eyes," Bennett writes, "[Nadia] was a prodigal daughter, worse than that even, because she hadn't returned home penniless and humbled. A prodigal daughter, you could pity. But she'd abandoned her home and returned better off, with stories of her fascinating college courses, her impressive internships, her cosmopolitan boyfriend, and her world travels."

Overwhelmed by the party, Nadia escapes to the bathroom to text Shadi. On her way back, she wanders down the hall into what used to be Luke's room, venturing in and remembering what it was like to sneak into his bed when they dated. "I don't live here anymore," Luke says, surprising her from behind. "Got a place by the river," he adds. "I don't care," she states. "I have a boyfriend." Luke tells her he already knows, saying, "The African guy," and Nadia informs him that Shadi is actually American and that his parents are from Sudan. In response, Luke just shrugs. "She hated how casual he seemed," Bennett writes, "how freely he commented on her life when they hadn't spoken in years. Anything he knew, he'd learned from Aubrey, and she felt betrayed, imagining the two of them in bed together, chatting about her."

Although Nadia probably doesn't want to hear this kind of reasoning, Shadi tries to get her to see that her father has internalized his own grief, and that she isn't the only one still struggling with Elise's death. In suggesting that Robert took down his wife's pictures because he loved her so much that it "hurt" to look at them, Shadi urges Nadia to consider that her father acted out of grief and love rather than callousness. Shadi's interpretation suggests that Robert hides the photographs of his wife because they dredge up too much pain, which he would rather bury deep inside himself.



Bennett has already established that the Upper Room community expects women to fulfill their supposed duties as mothers and caretakers. In this scene, though, Bennett suggests that the congregation also expects women to take care of men in general, a sentiment expressed by their disapproval of the fact that Nadia has left her father behind in order to pursue her own life as an independent college student. Their belief that she has "abandoned her home" implies that they think she should be putting her own life on hold to focus on caring for her father.



When Luke "freely comment[s]" on Nadia's life, he reveals that he has been keeping tabs on her. Although this might alert Nadia to the fact that he still cares about her, she can only focus on the notion that Aubrey has told him about her life, which leaves Nadia feeling "betrayed" by her best friend. To make things worse, Luke is "casual" about their interaction, acting as if it's no big deal that he knows intimate details about her current romantic situation.



"I used to steal shit from the church," Luke announces. "When I was little." Nadia doesn't believe him, so to prove it, he reaches under the bed and extracts a small **prayer book**, which he stole from inside Mother Betty's piano bench when he was in sixth grade. "That's my mother's," Nadia says, dumbstruck. "She thought she lost it." Luke says he knows and apologizes for not giving it to her sooner, but he had forgotten about it until he moved out of his parents' house and found it again. He hands the book to Nadia, who sits next to him on the edge of the bed. Nadia thumbs through the prayer book and smells the faint aroma of her mother's perfume drifting up from the pages. As her eyes begin to well with tears, she feels Luke's hand on her back.

Aubrey's mother responds to her invitation the weekend before the wedding. *We can't make it, she writes. But congratulations!* The next day, Nadia and Aubrey go to the beach and lie in the sun. In her black swimsuit, Nadia attracts the gazes of men passing on the beach, and Aubrey feels like "the ugly friend." She wonders if she has always felt this way, or if the thought is only cropping up now because she witnessed Nadia and Luke sitting in her fiancée's old bedroom at the bridal shower, leaning close and speaking intimately. Aubrey hates how casual Nadia and Luke looked together, considering Aubrey has felt "terrified every time" she gets "closer to Luke." "But Nadia looked comfortable" with Luke, and Aubrey could tell that "this closeness wasn't new to them. They shared some sort of past together, and the fact that neither had mentioned it hurt the most."

"What happened with you and Luke?" Aubrey asks Nadia. "I know you guys were involved." Shifting on her towel, Nadia tells her friend that they merely "hooked up a few times" when she was in high school. She assures her that it was nothing, saying, "Do you know how many guys I hooked up with in high school?" She laughs as she says this, and Aubrey feels silly for being so upset. At the same time, though, Aubrey can't help but compare herself to Nadia, imagining her friend wearing sexy lingerie for Luke—the kind of outfit Aubrey can't bring herself to put on.

By offering Elise's prayer book to Nadia, Luke suggests he wants to make amends. Indeed, their conversation has thus far been tense, and Nadia has been relatively combative. Suddenly, though, Luke disarms her by giving her the prayer book, an object fraught with her mother's memory. It's worth noting that Nadia's eyes fill with tears as she sits on Luke's bed, since she didn't even cry at her mother's funeral. This suggests that Nadia feels close enough to Luke to show him her grief. Since Nadia avoids letting others know how she's feeling internally, this is a rare, candid moment.



When Aubrey feels like Nadia's "ugly friend," Bennett begins crafting a tension between the two girls predicated on comparison and competition. This dynamic manifests itself in the way each girl secretly feels jealous of the other regarding their respective relationships with Luke. While Nadia can't stand to think about Aubrey and Luke talking about her in bed, Aubrey hates how comfortable her fiancée and Nadia seem together. Compounding this tension, Aubrey feels as if she's been boxed into an archetype as an attractive girl's lesser half. Bennett expresses this sentiment by using the article "the" in the phrase "the ugly friend," as if Aubrey belongs to a preexisting category of "ugly" girls who hang out with pretty people like Nadia.



Just as Luke only tells Aubrey half of his secret, Nadia only reveals part of the truth about her and Luke, refraining from telling her best friend that she was pregnant with Luke's child. Ignorant of Nadia and Luke's secret, Aubrey focuses on comparing herself to Nadia. This makes Aubrey feel inadequate, since she doesn't see herself as the type of person who wears sexy lingerie for her husband. After all, she wears a purity ring to remind herself that she "can be clean"—this is an identity she has already committed herself to, so she finds it difficult to compete with Nadia when it comes to sexuality.



Two Marines approach Nadia and Aubrey on the beach and ask them to play volleyball, claiming they need two more players. Aubrey notices that one of them—the tall black one—is looking directly at her “the way most men look at Nadia.” The girls initially decline the Marines’ offer, but eventually Nadia relents, and they join the game. Afterwards, the two girls have dinner with the Marines, and Aubrey flirts with Miller, the tall one who’s clearly interested in her. He’s older—twenty-eight—and has been deployed to Iraq twice. Telling herself she’s not doing any harm, Aubrey allows her thigh to rest against his on the seat beneath the restaurant table.

When they’re finished with dinner, the group returns to the beach, where they start a small fire before jumping off the pier into the freezing water. Aubrey thinks about how dangerous it is to make this jump—worrying about hitting something and becoming paralyzed—but she does so anyway. Wading back out of the water, though, she notices that Miller has stayed onshore. She asks if he’s scared, and he says “Of dying? Yes.” In response, she says, “I’m not scared.” “Of what?” he asks. “Of you,” she says. Her words hanging in the air, Miller kisses Aubrey, who pulls him into the dark public bathroom and pushes him onto the dirty floor. When she straddles him, he lets out a moan and tells her he doesn’t have a condom, at which point she pulls away, lifts herself off his body, and exits through the bathroom door.

When the sun starts to rise the next day, Aubrey and Nadia are still awake. Sitting in Robert’s **truck**, Nadia says she thinks Miller liked Aubrey, and Aubrey considers telling her friend what happened in the bathroom. She wants to tell Nadia “how she had taken charge, how she hadn’t felt afraid,” but she doesn’t, “for the same reason she’d refused Miller’s number at the end of the night”—she knows she’ll never see him again. Instead of saying any of these things, Aubrey asks why Nadia never told her about her relationship with Luke. “Why would I?” Nadia asks. “We hooked up in high school. It’s not a big deal!” In response, Aubrey yells, “It is to me!” Shocked, Nadia whispers that she’s sorry, that she won’t keep anymore secrets from her friend. Pulling Aubrey close, she kisses her forehead, and Aubrey melts into her, exhausted after the long night.

Aubrey’s realization that Miller looks at her “the way most men look at Nadia” comes to her as a welcome surprise, considering that she has been feeling inadequate in comparison to Nadia. The man’s gaze encourages her to forget about her identity as a pure, “clean,” pious girl. In this way, she allows herself to cut loose from the persona she’s built for herself, suddenly embracing the exciting wildness of flirting with a stranger, just days before her wedding.



When Aubrey says she’s not afraid of Miller, what she’s truly saying is that she’s not afraid of stepping beyond the boundaries of the identity she has ascribed to herself—at least in this instance. By saying, “I’m not scared [...] of you,” it’s almost as if she’s not talking to Miller, but to herself, proving to herself that she can overcome her fear of physical intimacy and her persona as somebody who is always “clean.” Although she maintains this attitude long enough to kiss and straddle Miller, this outlook only takes her so far before she reverts back to her normal ways, peeling her body from Miller’s and leaving him behind when it becomes clear that in order to go through with this radically uncharacteristic moment, she’d have to have unprotected sex.



During their conversation in the car, Aubrey gives Nadia another opportunity to tell the truth about her relationship with Luke, but Nadia decides to stick to her lie that they only “hooked up in high school.” In doing so, Nadia commits herself to keeping her abortion a secret. Nadia clings tightly to this piece of information, showing that she’d rather lie to her best friend than reveal this traumatic detail that would complicate their already strained friendship.



CHAPTER NINE

Shadi finally arrives in California, and Robert takes him and Nadia out to dinner at a fancy restaurant. During the meal, Nadia—who has spent the day thumbing through her mother’s **prayer book** and looking at the words Elise underlined—suddenly says, “You had no right to do that, you know,” referring to her father’s decision to take down the photographs of her mother. Robert tries to defend himself by pointing out that it’s been four years since Elise’s death, but Nadia rejects this, saying, “How do you think that makes me feel? To walk in and she’s just gone?” In response, her father says, “She is gone. And you’ve been gone too but now you want to tell me how to live in my own house?” With this, he stands up and leaves the table.

That night, Shadi sneaks into Nadia’s bedroom and slips into bed next to her. “I’m such a bitch,” she says, but he assures her that it’s “okay to be angry.” This only makes her angrier, feeling “annoyed by his patience.” She suddenly finds herself wishing he would get upset at her for once; “Just once, she wished he would see her for who she truly was,” Bennett writes. Feeling this way, she blurts out, “I fucked the groom.” After some silence, Shadi asks when this happened, and when Nadia says it was four years ago, he tells her he isn’t mad. “Well,” he says, “then that was four years ago.” He then cuddles up to her, but when he falls asleep, she wiggles out of his grasp and sits by the window with her mother’s **prayer book** in her lap.

Nadia cries three times at Aubrey and Luke’s wedding: when Aubrey walks down the aisle, when Luke delivers his vows, and during the couple’s first dance. She finds herself longing to be the woman in Luke’s arms, or the one who stops his hands from trembling as he reads his vows. Restless and wishing there was alcohol at the reception, she goes to the bathroom and lingers in the hall. As she does so, Luke appears and asks if she wants a drink, uncapping a flask and handing it to her. As they sip his liquor, they talk about Shadi and Aubrey, and Nadia realizes that although she hoped the wedding would give her closure regarding Luke, he has actually now “burrow[ed] deeper into her,” and she feels the “dull burn of an old hunger.”

Because Nadia and her father never talk about their shared grief, it is impossible for them to have a levelheaded conversation about why Robert took down all the photographs of Elise. Nadia doesn’t initiate this discussion very well, beginning by combatively telling him that he has “no right to” get rid of Elise’s pictures. However, when she asks, “How do you think that makes me feel?” she puts herself in a better position to share her complicated emotions with her father. By this point, though, she has already enraged her father, who removes himself from the conversation, thereby avoiding having to talk with his daughter about the feelings they both hide from one another.



When Nadia blurts out, “I fucked the groom,” she turns her secret into an interpersonal weapon, trying to provoke Shadi into seeing her for “who she truly [is].” She thinks shocking Shadi with this information will force him to acknowledge that she’s a bad person, suggesting that she sees herself as cruel and heartless. However, Shadi understands that Nadia’s relationship with Luke doesn’t make her a bad person. He knows that a person’s identity isn’t dictated by just one action and accepts Nadia’s complexities and contradictions even when she isn’t capable of doing so herself.



The language Bennett uses to describe Nadia and Luke’s interaction aligns with the novel’s interest in internalization. This is evident when Bennett says that Luke has “burrow[ed] deeper” into Nadia. For the most part, Nadia’s various internalizations have to do with grief and trauma, but here Bennett suggests that Nadia bottles up feelings love and desire, too. This makes sense, considering that her relationship with Luke actually does have to do with grief and trauma, since so much of her emotional turmoil can be traced back to the fact that she was once pregnant with his child.



Luke and Nadia finish the liquor, and Luke puts the flask in his pocket. Making their way back to the reception, they encounter Mrs. Sheppard, who grabs Luke's arm and whisks him away. As Nadia follows, Mrs. Sheppard blocks her path and says, "This needs to stop." When Nadia says that she hasn't done anything wrong, the first lady says, "Girl, who you think you're fooling? You know how many girls like you I've seen? Always hungry for what's not yours. Well, I'm telling you now this needs to stop. You already caused enough trouble." Confused, Nadia asks what she means, to which she responds: "You know what I mean. Who you think gave you that money? You think Luke just had six hundred dollars laying around? I helped you do that vile thing and now you need to leave my son alone."

Mrs. Sheppard leaves Nadia standing in the lobby outside the wedding reception. Alone, Nadia processes the fact that Luke told his parents about her abortion. Later that night, Luke goes to unzip Aubrey's dress, but she reaches behind and stops him. "I know about you and Nadia," she says. "I know you slept with her." At this, he freezes, but Aubrey adds, "It's okay. I just wanted you to know that I know." He wonders how she knows, asking himself if Nadia told Aubrey or if Aubrey simply "sensed it on her own." Regardless, Luke resolves to be "better" from now on, promising to himself that he'll "be good to" Aubrey.

CHAPTER TEN

While sleeping with Zach, a white boy that Nadia has started casually hooking up with in law school, Nadia receives a phone call from the hospital in her hometown, informing her that her father has been severely injured. Apparently, he dropped his weights on his chest while working out in the backyard, crushing his diaphragm, breaking his ribs, and puncturing his lung. Nadia hasn't been to her hometown since Aubrey and Luke's wedding several years ago, but she jumps out of Zach's bed and asks him to drive her home so she can pack her bags and catch the next available flight to California. In the time she's been away, she has reviewed "everything about that summer before college: the pastor's tentative visit, [...] Mrs. Sheppard's coldness at work, how surprisingly kind she'd seemed right before Nadia left."

Mrs. Sheppard reprimands Nadia for spending time with Luke, finally confirming Nadia's suspicion that Mrs. Sheppard doesn't like her. "You know how many girls like you I've seen?" the first lady asks, making it clear that she views Nadia as the stereotype of a promiscuous, untrustworthy woman who tempts men away from their spouses. This is made obvious by her word choice, as she says, "girls like you," expressing her conviction that people can be categorized. By calling the procedure "vile," Mrs. Sheppard shames Nadia for getting an abortion—even though Mrs. Sheppard actually enabled Nadia to do so by giving her money.



In this portion of The Mothers, some of the secrets that have been kept hidden throughout the novel are finally unearthed, and the characters are left to deal with the consequences. For Nadia, this means grappling with the fact that Luke's parents know about and even paid for her abortion. For Luke, this means coming to terms with the idea that his new wife knows about his relationship with Nadia. In this case, though, the entire truth hasn't yet revealed itself, since Aubrey still doesn't know about Nadia's abortion. However, Bennett shows readers that even partial truths are disorienting.



Since discovering that Mr. and Mrs. Sheppard paid for her abortion, Nadia has thrown herself back into the past, looking for indicators of truth. Bennett implies that when someone discovers a long-hidden secret, it's natural to suddenly question everything. As Nadia combs through and reinterprets her past, Bennett shows that the truth can often destabilize a person's own narrative, abruptly reframing his or her history.



When Nadia arrives at the hospital after flying to California, her father cries, either “because of the pain or because he [is] glad to see her, or maybe even because he [is] ashamed for her to see him like this.” He apologizes for making her fly all the way home, but she tells him not to worry about that. Sitting beside his bed in a chair, she falls asleep while holding his hand. When she wakes up, she finds Aubrey sleeping on a cot one of the nurses brought in. Nadia hasn’t seen Aubrey since the wedding. Although Nadia has tried many times to convince her friend to visit her in Michigan (in an attempt to avoid having to come back to California and see Aubrey’s new life with Luke), Aubrey keeps making excuses, as if she’s become “that type of wife” who can’t “go anywhere apart from their husband.”

Robert comes home the following week, and it’s Nadia’s job to tend to him. One evening, right when Nadia finally settles down to get some rest, the doorbell rings. Hauling herself up and opening the door, she finds Luke on the front steps with a container of food in one hand and a cane in the other. He tells her he’s representing Upper Room’s sick and shut-in ministry and asks if he can come inside. “Marriage hung on Luke’s body,” Bennett writes. “He looked older and fuller now, not fat, just satisfied.”

“I don’t need your food,” Nadia tells Luke. When he looks confused, she reveals that she knows he told his parents about her abortion. “I needed the money,” he explains, insisting that his parents wouldn’t have lent him the cash if he hadn’t told the truth. As he tries to justify his actions, she tells him to get out, assuming that he won’t care that he’s hurt her, since he has “a good life now.” She thinks that all she’s done is “drag him back into the past.”

During this time, Aubrey starts corresponding via email with Miller, the Marine she met on the beach before her wedding. Apparently, Nadia gave Miller Aubrey’s address before they parted ways on the beach, and though Aubrey was initially upset about this, she can’t deny to herself that she enjoys keeping in touch with this older man. She learns that his first name is Russell, and that he has once again been stationed in Iraq. As they grow closer through their conversations, Aubrey tells Russell about her troubles getting pregnant. For whatever reason, she and Luke haven’t been able to conceive a child. “I made an appointment with the doctor,” she tells him one day, and he replies, “Baby?” At first, she thinks he’s calling her “baby,” which would violate her rule that their conversations remain friendly, but she soon realizes that he’s asking if she’s pregnant.

When Aubrey appears by Nadia’s side in the hospital, Bennett shows that parents aren’t the only people who devote themselves to caring for loved ones. Friends can also act as caretakers, which is something Aubrey proves by spending the night in the hospital despite the fact that she and Nadia have grown apart in the years since the wedding. As Aubrey cares for Nadia, and Nadia cares for her father, Bennett demonstrates that people who support others need support themselves.



Luke’s body exhibits what’s going on in his personal life, as marriage “hangs” on him like it’s something physical. Luke once again embodies the idea of an “outside hurt,” which is likely still appealing to Nadia—especially as she assumes the role of her father’s caretaker, forced to stay at home and spend all her time with a man she can’t talk to about her feelings.



Nadia goes out of her way to reject Luke’s efforts to help her, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of feeling like a beneficent caretaker. She feels betrayed by the fact that he told his parents her secret, implying that her abortion was private and thus should have remained a secret. By telling his parents her story, Luke violated her trust. Coupled with Luke’s failure to pick her up at the clinic after the procedure, Nadia thinks Luke is doubly unfit to be a caretaker of any sorts, so she resents the weak effort he makes to help her care for Robert.



Amidst all the secrets at play in The Mothers, Aubrey’s close contact with Russell is fairly innocent. Compared to the fact that Luke got Nadia pregnant, for instance, Aubrey’s long-distance interest in this Marine is relatively harmless. Even compared to her own secret—getting raped by Paul in her childhood—Aubrey’s correspondence with Russell seems harmless. However, since she’s normally so pure, her willingness to indulge in even the slightest emotional infidelity is worth noting. Russell, it seems, gives her the emotional support she must not be getting from Luke, since she resorts to telling this relative stranger intimate details about her life and marriage.



In the past, Aubrey has somewhat blurred the line between friendship and flirtation with Russell. She even sends him a picture of herself driving up the coast with her sister—a picture in which her tank top strap has slipped down her arm in a suggestive manner. Still, she tries not to think about what this picture might imply, instead focusing on the fact that Russell is lonely. She can sympathize with this loneliness because she feels it too—Luke has recently been promoted at his rehab job and has also started spending his time helping his father at Upper Room, so Aubrey often finds herself alone. When she asks Luke to accompany her to a doctor’s appointment, he says he can’t because he’s working, adding that he wishes everyone would stop “obsessing about babies.” “We’re young,” he says. “We got time.”

One night, Robert tells Nadia a story about his own parents. He explains that when he was growing up, his parents hated each other. It was his mother’s job to look after all six children while his father worked during the day and spent his nights gambling away his earnings and visiting brothels. When Robert’s father would finally come home, Robert’s mother would wash her husband’s filthy shirts in a claw-foot bathtub in the yard. One day, she was washing clothes in the tub when Robert’s father appeared in the yard in fresh clothing, ready to go waste the family’s money at the pool hall. Overcome by rage, Robert’s mother grabbed an icepick lying on the ground, drove it into the man’s back, and let him bleed out in the tub.

After telling Nadia the story about his parents, Robert falls asleep. In the afternoon, Nadia has been awake for twenty-four hours when she hears the doorbell ring and sees Luke standing in the doorway. Luke sees how weak Nadia looks, so he takes her to the kitchen table and insists that she eat. “I should’ve visited,” Nadia says. “I should’ve come home more.” Luke points out that this wouldn’t have changed anything, but she still feels guilty, saying, “I left him like she did.” With these words hanging in the air, Luke touches Nadia’s cheek. “I feel like I have to be her for the both of us,” she says as tears form. As she cries, Luke puts her head to his shoulder, takes her to the bathroom, and runs a tub. “Why are you doing this?” she asks. “Because,” he says, “I want to take care of you.”

During this period, Luke and Aubrey slowly drift apart, as evidenced by the fact that Aubrey understands Russell’s loneliness on a personal level. What’s more, Luke seems somewhat aloof, flippantly shrugging off Aubrey’s concern about not being able to conceive. It’s worth noting that this isn’t the first time in the novel that Upper Room provides a man with an excuse to withdraw from a loved one. This is exactly what Robert does in the aftermath of Elise’s suicide by vigorously committing himself to religion, consequently leaving Nadia to her own devices. As a result, readers see that religion sometimes gives its adherents an excuse to escape and avoid their own lives, potentially making their loved ones feel neglected and alone.



Robert’s story speaks to the novel’s interest in questioning who is responsible for keeping a family running smoothly. The fact that Robert’s mother has to clean his father’s clothes each evening just so that he can go get them dirty again and waste the family’s money suggests that he, along with the society he lives in, expects women to shoulder the burden of caring for the family. Robert’s mother simultaneously rails against this notion and reinforces her role as a responsible caretaker by stabbing her husband—by killing him, she exhibits her resentment that he expects her to keep the family afloat while he misbehaves, but she also takes matters into her own hands, ridding the family of this terrible man and his destructive ways. Using Robert’s mother as an example, Bennett illustrates how women often find themselves having to play into a sexist paradigm even as they reject its implications.



Despite the anger and resentment she feels toward Luke, Nadia still harbors a tenderness toward him. Perhaps because she’s exhausted, she finally accepts his help and sympathy, crying in front of him for the second time in the novel. Again, it’s important to remember that Nadia only cries when she’s with Luke, showing how Luke is able to bring out Nadia’s internalized, bottled up emotions. Given that Robert has just told Nadia a story about his mother killing his misogynistic and uncaring father in a bathtub, it’s especially significant that Luke runs a bath for Nadia in this moment, telling her, “I want to take care of you.” In doing so, he communicates his desire to humble himself by taking on the responsibility of supporting Nadia. However, since Robert’s father was left bleeding in the tub, the bath that Luke runs for Nadia may also suggest danger and destruction.



The next day, Luke and Nadia kiss in the bathroom when he comes over to deliver Robert's medicine. Luke and Nadia go to her bedroom, where they ease onto her bed. This time, their lovemaking is different—it is soft, quiet, and gentle, unlike the quick and agitated sex they had as teenagers. "Now they were slow and deliberate," Bennett writes, "the way hurt people loved, stretching carefully just to see how far their damaged muscles could go."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nadia and Luke start spending almost everyday together in her father's house. They usually have sex, but sometimes they just talk, enjoying each other's company. In their minds, they aren't having an affair, since affairs are "shadow and secretive, not lunches shared in a sunbathed kitchen while [Nadia's] father nap[s] in the living room." At the same time, though, the days they don't have sex feel even more "treacherous" and "intimate." One day, Luke traces his finger along Nadia's stomach and says, "I love you," and she wonders if he's talking to her or to their unborn baby.

As Nadia and Luke's secret romance unfolds, Aubrey goes to the appointment she made with her doctor to talk about her inability to get pregnant. As she lies on her back while the doctor examines her, she thinks about her strained sex life with Luke, realizing that she can't relax when they make love. Indeed, she "tense[s] up when anything [is] inside her, even Luke's finger." When they had sex for the first time—on their wedding night—she experienced nothing but pain and wondered how Luke was able to ignore the fact that "he was hurting her." Now, as her appointment comes to an end, the doctor says there's nothing wrong with her, assuring her that she's young and healthy. "Just relax," he says. "Have some wine."

Nadia and Luke continue having sex behind Aubrey's back. They both pretend to not feel guilty, but it's obvious that each of them harbors deep misgivings about what they're doing, though their attraction to one another and their history keep them from stopping. Luke keeps thinking about the baby they would have had together, but when he tries to talk to Nadia about it, she tells him she doesn't want to talk, distracting him by kissing his neck.

Once more, Bennett adds a secret to the plot of *The Mothers*: Nadia and Luke are having an affair. What's significant about this secret, though, is that it's ultimately founded upon an entire history of things Nadia and Luke have kept from Aubrey, rendering it even more emotionally complex and dangerous.



Bennet suggests that the most powerful secret of all is hidden emotional intimacy, illustrated by the way that Nadia and Luke feel most guilty about spending time together when they don't have sex and instead simply pass the afternoon talking. This notion may also apply to Aubrey's online back-and-forth with Russell, since this relationship is comprised solely of emotional intimacy. On another note, when Luke says "I love you" to Nadia's stomach, he acknowledges the connection he has not only to Nadia, but to their unborn baby—a connection he's forced to hide in his everyday life but can finally express in the privacy of Nadia's bed.



Aubrey is uncomfortable with physical expressions of love, likely because sex has never been emotionally intimate for her—when Paul used to rape her, love and intimacy were certainly not what she experienced. For Aubrey, love is an internalized emotion that doesn't translate into physical embodiment. Since Aubrey has still concealed her secret about being raped in her childhood, Luke is seemingly unaware of Aubrey's struggles and fails to show her the kind of attentive intimacy that would make her more comfortable. Given these factors, it's unlikely Aubrey will be able to abide her doctor's casual advice to "relax" while having sex.



The way Nadia and Luke have sex stands in stark contrast to the way Aubrey approaches physical intimacy. Nadia and Luke's relationship blossoms physically, and the internalized elements of their relationship (attraction, guilt, and sorrow) manifest themselves in the act of lovemaking. However, some things, like the memory of Nadia's abortion, can hardly find expression through physical acts.



Shortly after visiting her regular doctor, Aubrey makes an appointment with a fertility specialist named Dr. Yavari, who is hailed in online pregnancy forums as the “baby-maker.” When Aubrey asks Nadia to come to this appointment with her, Nadia immediately says, “I can’t.” However, she can’t think of a good way of back up this statement, so she eventually relents and accompanies Aubrey. Sitting in the waiting room, Aubrey tells Nadia that she’s nervous because she knows something is “wrong with her.” After saying this, she tenses up, waiting for Nadia to ask how she knows such a thing, but Nadia simply says, “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

During the appointment, Dr. Yavari asks Aubrey a set of questions. “Have you ever had an abortion?” she asks at one point, catching Aubrey off-guard but quickly explaining that she has to ask this. Later, when they’re alone in the office and Aubrey is getting dressed again, Nadia says, “I can’t believe she asked you that.” “Asked me what?” Aubrey says. “You know,” replies Nadia. “The abortion thing. Why does it even matter?” Aubrey says she doesn’t know, speculating that it must matter in some capacity, otherwise Dr. Yavari wouldn’t have brought it up. “Still,” Nadia says. “I can’t believe it follows you around like that.”

After Nadia says she can’t believe abortion “follows” a person around, Aubrey is certain that her friend is the woman Luke told her about, the one he got pregnant and who got an abortion. “Later,” Bennett writes, “Aubrey would wonder what had exactly tipped her off. The statement itself, or the unusual softness in Nadia’s voice, or even the way her face had looked under the fluorescent light, slightly stricken with grief.” Regardless, Aubrey is positive now that her friend is “The Girl.” After dropping Nadia off, Aubrey goes to the liquor store and buys a bottle of wine. At home, she changes into sexy lingerie (which she otherwise never wears) and gets drunk. When Luke comes home, she pulls him to the couch, and when he enters her, she “clench[es] her eyes and [finds] sweetness in the pain.”

Nadia’s hesitancy to go with Aubrey to the fertility specialist make sense, since doing so may exacerbate her guilt regarding her abortion and furtive relationship with Luke. Nonetheless, she’s forced to accept Aubrey’s invitation because failing to do so would look suspicious. In turn, Bennett shows readers that keeping secrets often means having to put oneself in uncomfortable situations. In addition, by asserting that she knows something must be “wrong with her,” Aubrey indirectly discloses that she knows Luke is fertile and that he has gotten someone pregnant before (not yet knowing this person was Nadia). Bennett suggests that even the deepest secrets are difficult to keep, implying that humans are naturally inclined to share their hidden stories.



When Nadia says she can’t “believe” abortion “follows” people around, she frames it as a stigma that is impossible to escape. She herself has been carrying around the emotional impact of her abortion since she was a teenager, but now she sees that this secret has the potential to affect her in more tangible ways. If she wanted to get pregnant again, for instance, she might also find herself sitting in Dr. Yavari’s office and answering this question, thus having to outwardly acknowledge a secret she otherwise protects at all costs. The idea of an abortion “follow[ing]” somebody throughout her entire life suggests that the procedure can come to define a woman’s identity.



In this scene, Bennett showcases the ways in which even Nadia—a person who always internalizes her emotions—can’t help but externalize her feelings in some situations. Talking about the stigma surrounding abortion, Nadia’s face looks different, “slightly stricken with grief.” It is perhaps because Nadia is ordinarily so capable of hiding these feelings that Aubrey suddenly realizes that Nadia is the woman Luke impregnated. Paralleling Nadia’s uncharacteristic externalization, Aubrey suddenly embraces sexuality in a way she never has before, pulling Luke to her and finding “sweetness in the pain” of sexual contact.



Luke asks Nadia if he can take her on a date. “You can’t,” she says, annoyed by how easily he thinks he can transition away from being a husband. She reminds him that he’s married, and he says, “What if I wasn’t?” This gives Nadia pause, but then she points out that Aubrey loves Luke and that they can’t do that to her. “We’re just fucking around,” she says, “but she loves you.” This offends Luke, who insists that they’re clearly not “just fucking,” but Nadia interrupts him to say that to her, they really are “just fucking.” Luke starts dressing and looks like he’s going to cry, but Nadia refuses “to let him bury his guilt in her.”

Luke’s casual implication that he could divorce Aubrey for Nadia symbolizes how nonchalant he is when it comes to commitment and responsibility, as he’d rather follow his impulses than uphold his devotion to Aubrey. This doesn’t sit well with Nadia because she has witnessed how society shames women (like her mother) who walk out on their commitments, while men have the latitude to casually follow their impulses and ignore the consequences. On another note, when Bennett writes that Nadia refuses to let Luke keep “bury[ing] his guilt in her,” readers might recall her previous assertion that Luke has “burrowed” deep inside of her. This wording implies that Nadia will no longer internalize her love for Luke or let him influence her internal world. After all, he was always supposed to be her “outside hurt,” but now he seems to have turned into the exact opposite.



Luke leaves Nadia’s house, accidentally forgetting his watch on her nightstand. The next morning, she brings it to Upper Room. While doing so, she sees Mother Betty getting off the bus. Betty tells her that the DMV took her license away, so Nadia offers her a ride, providing the old woman with her phone number so she can call whenever she needs to get somewhere. Betty is grateful for this, and Nadia leaves Luke’s watch on Betty’s desk in the church.

Having ended things with Luke, Nadia’s life is on hold as she lives in his father’s house in California while he recuperates. This stagnancy is most likely why she offers to become Betty’s chauffeur. In doing so, though, she involves herself with the community, ultimately taking care of the church’s elderly population—a group of people who have done little for her other than gossip about her mother’s death.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Nobody makes anything of the fact that Nadia had Luke’s watch, but the Mothers now understand that the object was a telltale sign of their affair. The Mothers reveal that Aubrey finally becomes pregnant with a baby girl, and they speculate that this girl will “someday” hear the story about Nadia and Luke. And although they admit this story shouldn’t necessarily affect this child, they assert that “the weight of what has been lost is always heavier than what remains.”

The Mothers’ retroactive realization regarding the significance of the watch emphasizes the ways in which even the most furtive secrets seem obvious after they’ve been discovered. Secrets, Bennett intimates, have a way of affecting the past, rearranging details and reframing memories to align with a new reality or truth. Similarly, secrets also influence the future, a fact the Mothers understand when they wonder what Aubrey’s child will make of the mysterious story surrounding her parents and Nadia.



Throughout the fall, Nadia drives the Mothers all over town. Meanwhile, Robert recuperates to the point where he can take walks around the neighborhood on his own. As his caretaker, Nadia tries to hide how worried she is about him. “She mothered as a penance,” Bennett writes. Still, she also talks to her father as a daughter, working up the courage one afternoon to ask if her mother ever considered having an abortion. “No,” Robert says immediately. “Never. She never would’ve done something like that. Did you think...No, honey. We loved you. We always loved you.” And though this news soothes Nadia—who fears that her birth ruined her mother’s life—she’s also aware that if her mother had considered getting an abortion, at least Nadia would be able to “look at her mother’s face in the mirror and know that they were alike.”

Nadia’s bond with her father is especially complex because they each vacillate between assuming the role of the caretaker and the dependent. When Nadia helps Robert recover from his accident, she’s provides support in their relationship. When she asks him to talk about her mother, however, she suddenly reverts to the child, perhaps reminding Robert that he’s the one who should be taking care of her. What’s more, when Nadia asks if her mother ever considered getting an abortion, Nadia seems to be flirting with the idea of telling her father what happened between her and Luke the year before she left for college. Unfortunately, her father’s reaction makes it clear that he strongly disapproves of abortion. When he says, “We loved you,” he implies that only loveless people seek out abortions, discouraging Nadia from revealing her secret.



Nadia has been spending so much time at Upper Room that the pastor asks her to chaperone the children’s Halloween party, where she runs into Luke in a dark corner. Leaning close, he tells her that he’s been talking to somebody named Dave, a counselor at a Family Life Center. “He doesn’t think it’s good that we never talk about him. Our baby,” Luke says. “We don’t have to be sad anymore. Dave says he’s in heaven right now. And your mom’s holding him.” In response, Nadia squeezes Luke’s hand—if this is what he needs, she thinks, then “she want[s] him to believe it. She want[s] him to believe it all.”

Luke looks to religion as something that will help him cope with his regret over Nadia’s abortion. Thinking about their would-be baby living in heaven soothes him and gives him something to hold onto. In contrast, Nadia doesn’t find comfort in religion, since the idea of her unborn baby and her mother existing in heaven doesn’t necessarily change the fact that she isn’t actually with them. Plus, Nadia didn’t want to have a baby, so the grief she feels regarding her abortion is different than the regret and retroactive sense of loss Luke experiences.



The following Sunday, Aubrey sees Russell in the receiving line at church. Catching up with him outside, Aubrey asks Russell what he’s doing at Upper Room. He says that he came because she didn’t answer his email about his return to the country and his invitation to get lunch together. Reiterating this invitation, he assures her he doesn’t have anything inappropriate in mind and just wants to thank her for keeping his “spirits up” while he was in Iraq. “Your husband can even come if he wants,” he adds, and Aubrey says she’ll mention the idea to Luke. Despite this, though, she remains quiet in the car on the ride home, even evading Luke’s question when he asks what she’s thinking about.

Aubrey’s reaction to seeing Russell at Upper Room aligns with the notion that their relationship is perhaps not as harmless as she’d like to think it is. By failing to mention to Luke the possibility of getting lunch with Russell, Aubrey proves that she wants to keep her contact with him a secret. Bennett suggests that Aubrey isn’t as innocent as she thinks, since her fidelity to Luke seems to waver when it comes to fostering emotional relationships. Since Aubrey doesn’t express love through physical intimacy and instead views love as an internalized emotion, a secret lunch date with a man with whom she’s been privately communicating for months is perhaps just as shameful as sleeping with somebody else.



Aubrey meets Russell at a diner on the pier two days later. Reminding herself they’re not on a date, she slowly relaxes throughout the meal, realizing she feels natural around Russell, who asks how her fertility appointment went. “Fine,” she says, thinking about how Luke doesn’t seem to care that she’s pregnant (which, it’s worth noting, nobody knows yet except the couple). All Luke can think about is the baby he lost “years ago,” the baby he “made with Nadia.” As they talk, Aubrey and Russell split a piece of lemon meringue pie.

Russell’s interest in Aubrey’s personal life and pregnancy contrasts with Luke’s aloof attitude. Once again, Bennett emphasizes that Russell and Aubrey share a close, personal bond that surpasses Aubrey’s connection with her own husband. Perhaps this is why Aubrey didn’t want to invite Luke to join them for lunch—doing so would have revealed her and Russell’s secret closeness.



Russell asks if Luke wants a boy or a girl, and Aubrey says she doesn't know. "People always think men want boys," Russell says, and when Aubrey asks, "You wouldn't want a son?" he says, "Too dangerous. Black boys are target practice. At least black girls got a chance." Aubrey says she doesn't think this is true, saying that she herself feels "scared all the time." "Well, you got your husband to protect you," Russell offers. "My husband's the one who hurts me," Aubrey replies. "He thinks I don't know he's in love with someone else." Having spoken these words for the first time, she realizes she must confront Luke about his affair with Nadia. Seeing the look on her face, Russell reaches across the table and lays his hand on hers.

Aubrey and Russell's lunch date doesn't go unnoticed in the community, and people from Upper Room start gossiping, telling one another that Luke Sheppard's wife was spotted sharing lemon meringue pie with another man. It's not long before the news reaches Luke, who finds himself most upset by the fact that Aubrey shared a dessert with this man, since splitting dessert is "intimate." After hearing the news, Luke asks Aubrey, "How was your date?" Aubrey claims that it wasn't a date, saying she doesn't have to tell Luke about every single lunch she goes to. "If you're out with some strange nigga, then yes, you fucking do!" he yells. After staring at him for a moment, Aubrey says, "I never ask where you go. I never ask when you're sneaking off to see Nadia."

Aubrey accuses Luke of loving Nadia. "Please," he says, but she tells him he can stop lying, saying she knows he's always loved her. Again, he pleads with her to stop, but she states, "She's the one you want." Luke finds himself disconcerted by Aubrey's calm demeanor, having expected her to cry and yell. Indeed, her matter-of-fact "calmness" is what indicates to him that she's going to leave him.

Russell's comment that black boys are "target practice" picks up the novel's touch-and-go examination of the ways in which race influences the way people treat each other. Bennett's considerations of how race influences identity are rarely at the foreground of a scene's focus, instead existing as a background reality that she acknowledges from time to time. On another note, throughout the novel, Aubrey has slowly pieced together the details of Luke and Nadia's relationship, first learning that they used to hook up, then learning that Luke once got a girl pregnant, and finally discovering that this girl was Nadia. In this moment, Aubrey finally articulates what she has long expected: that Nadia and Luke are still romantically involved.



Finally, Aubrey and Luke put their secrets into the open. Because Luke has actually acted on his feelings for Nadia, though, Aubrey is able to take the attention away from her own infidelity. Of course, readers know that since Aubrey isn't a physical person to begin with, her emotional relationship with Russell is still disloyal to her husband, but Luke is at a severe disadvantage in this moment because his affair with Nadia is built on a backlog of secrets surrounding their romantic history.



Aubrey's "calmness" makes sense, considering that she has slowly pieced together different parts of this secret throughout the course of the novel. She has held on to the indicators that Luke and Nadia's relationship was more than she knew, internalizing the details, grappling with them privately, and coming to terms with them one at a time. It's as if she learned about Nadia and Luke's affair in manageable increments so that now, when she finally knows the entire story, she can levelheadedly state the truth: her husband loves her best friend.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Aubrey moves out and refuses to talk to Luke or Nadia. During this time, Nadia stays in California, continuing to take care of her father and driving the Mothers to Upper Room. She thinks about leaving, but can't bring herself to abandon her father again, at least "not yet." In church one day, Mrs. Sheppard pulls her aside and asks if she's heard from Aubrey, since Aubrey won't tell her mother-in-law what happened. "She's pregnant, you know," she says, and Nadia's breath snags in her chest. Going back to the service, Nadia sits next to her father as the choir sings, and he asks if she wants him to pray with her. "He lived in prayers and sermons," Bennett says, "in scriptures she didn't understand, and even though it had always made her feel so far from him, she nodded. She closed her eyes and bowed her head."

Aubrey has been living at her sister's house and refusing visitors. However, she's spoken to Luke on the phone, giving him updates on her pregnancy. One day, Aubrey goes back to their house to pick up her mail and wanders into the room they'd planned to use as a nursery. Luke opens the door, and when he sees Aubrey, he stops and says, "Wow," letting his eyes move over her pregnant body for the first time. She then tells him that her sister's house is too small to raise a baby in, insinuating that she wants to move back, though she adds that she needs to think about the decision. He accepts this, and as she leaves, she grabs a stack of letters from Nadia. At the top of the pile, the words *Please forgive me* are written in "smudged blue ink."

Luke visits Nadia's house one day while her father is out walking. Luke tells her that Aubrey has taken her letters, and "For the first time in months," Nadia's "chest [feels] lighter." Her mood lifting, she congratulates Luke, saying she heard he'll soon be a father. "It don't feel real yet," he says. Changing the subject, he says: "Can you talk to Aubrey?" He suggests that Aubrey might listen to Nadia now, after having taken her letters. "You can tell her what happened," he says, "how you were sad about your dad and how shit got complicated because of everything that happened before—" At this point, Nadia interrupts, saying, "You want me to take the blame." Luke denies this interpretation, but Nadia is adamant that this is exactly what he's asking her to do. "I want to see my daughter," he responds. "I want to know her."

Nadia has a visceral reaction to the news that Aubrey is pregnant. After Nadia has spent so much time hiding the fact that Luke got her pregnant, it is now Aubrey, her best friend, carrying his child, and Aubrey's pregnancy will certainly become public knowledge. Reeling from this, Nadia turns to her father, but her father is characteristically immersed in religion. When Bennett says that religion normally makes Nadia "feel" "far from" her father, Bennett acknowledges that spirituality essentially isolates Nadia from people who might otherwise care for her. This time, however, Nadia simply decides to go along with Robert's piety, suggesting that she so badly needs support that she's willing to seek refuge in the very thing that has estranged her from her father and community.



On the verge of motherhood, Aubrey is careful about the decisions she makes. This is why she doesn't immediately let Luke back into her life: she needs time to think about moving back in with him and decide if she can trust him. This careful thinking seems to be the mark of a good caretaker. It's not that Aubrey necessarily wants to punish her husband, but that she wants to make sure she's making the right choice by coming back to him.



When Luke asks Nadia to talk to Aubrey, he implores her to take the full brunt of his own shame. He reveals his expectation that Nadia take the fall for their mutual misbehavior by casting herself as a promiscuous woman who needed to steal her best friend's husband because she was "sad." The fact that he tries to place his own feelings of remorse and shame onto Nadia recalls Bennett's previous notion that Luke "bur[ies] his guilt" in Nadia—something she's recently decided to put an end to.



After Luke says he wants to “know” his daughter, Nadia realizes that “she could do this for him, take the fall.” She could tell Aubrey that she seduced Luke, that she “ensnared a good man who was only trying to help her care for her sick father.” However, she doubts Aubrey would actually believe this lie, asking herself whether “any woman” would believe such a thing. “I hope she forgives you,” she says to Luke. “I hope you’re there for her. You were never there for me. You left me in that clinic. I had to handle everything on my own.” Luke tries to interrupt, but Nadia pushes on, saying, “I’m sorry. But I’m not lying for you. I’m not lying to her anymore.”

Once Nadia tells Luke that she won’t lie for him, he quickly leaves. On his way out, he passes Nadia’s father, who has returned from his walk and heard the tail-end of this conversation. Having heard them arguing about a clinic, he goes into Nadia’s room later that night and searches through her drawers, looking for any kind of sign that this “clinic” isn’t the abortion clinic downtown. By the time Nadia finds her father sitting in her room, he’s already holding the golden pair of **baby feet** in his hands.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The morning after Robert finds **the golden baby feet**, he bursts into Upper Room with Nadia and goes straight for the pastor’s office. The night before, Nadia found him sitting on her bed with the medallion in his hands, and he said, “You did this thing? You did this thing behind my back?” At a loss, Nadia told him everything, which is why he wants to confront the pastor, who he now knows paid for the abortion. When they enter Mr. Sheppard’s office, the pastor asks them to sit down, but Robert says, “No. You don’t give me orders. She was just a girl, you son of a bitch, and you knew what your boy had done to her.” In turn, the pastor says, “It was handled, Robert,” but Nadia’s father presses on, accusing the pastor of forcing his daughter to have an abortion.

Summoning her courage, Nadia speaks up, saying that nobody made her do anything and that she had the abortion because she simply didn’t want a baby. “So you kill it?” her father says, looking at her with disgust in his eyes. “No one made me do anything,” she repeats, knowing that if her mother was still alive, she could be proud of her daughter for not blaming anybody else for her choices. “She was that strong, at least,” Bennett writes.

In the process of telling Luke that she won’t lie for him, Nadia emphasizes the ways in which he has failed to care for her when she’s needed him most, referencing how he abandoned her after she got an abortion. “I had to handle everything on my own,” she says, destroying any delusions that he has helped her in any way whatsoever. She also makes it clear that she won’t allow him to “bury his guilt” in her anymore, refusing to internalize the turmoil he brings to their relationship and tries to impose upon her.



At this point in The Mothers, almost all of the secrets Bennett’s characters have been amassing are exposed in full. Indeed, the novel’s momentum picks up as Robert discovers the golden baby feet medallion, and as the novel builds toward a conclusion, there remains only one secret: why Elise Turner killed herself.



Robert’s reaction to finding out about Nadia’s abortion fails to take into account how withdrawn he was as a caretaker in the year after Elise’s death. “You did this thing behind my back?” he asks—an unfair question, since everything could be considered “behind [his] back,” given how significantly he retreated from his responsibilities as a father. Of course, it’s easier for him to put the blame on Mr. Sheppard, making the pastor out to be a bad person whose son corrupted Nadia. Blaming the pastor helps Robert avoid admitting to himself that he’s the one who failed as a caretaker.



In this moment, Nadia decides to tell the complete truth about her abortion, declaring that nobody forced her to “do anything.” In doing so, she bravely invites her father’s scorn and his judgment that she “kill[ed]” her baby. This viewpoint is in line with Upper Room’s religious values, so it’s unsurprising to hear Robert express such disapproval of Nadia’s abortion. Nonetheless, there’s no doubt that it must deeply hurt Nadia to see her father’s contempt, though this doesn’t stop her from being “strong” and accepting responsibility for her decision to move forward with her own life rather than living an unhappy existence with an unwanted child.



Nadia finally decides to leave California again. As she packs, her father tries halfheartedly to stop her, as if he's expected to tell her to stay. Nadia even wonders if he's eager to live a "simple" life again without her, though he'll have to find a new church after the situation with Mr. Sheppard, and "what other church would have a need for a lonely man and his **truck**?"

On her way to the airport, Nadia stops at Monique and Kasey's house and talks to Aubrey, who is now far along in her pregnancy. Upon seeing her, Nadia remembers how she felt when she was pregnant, and how she feared others would be able to notice her body changing. Aubrey, though, doesn't look scared. "She wanted this baby," Bennett notes, "and that was the difference." Inside the house, the girls talk about Aubrey's pregnancy. "What happens if I don't love this baby?" she asks, but Nadia assures her that she will. In response, Aubrey points out that both she and Nadia were born to mothers who didn't love them enough, and Nadia finds herself wishing that this were true. Hugging her friend goodbye, she goes out the door, gets back into the cab, and leaves California.

The Mothers recount how the news of Nadia's abortion spreads through the church. First, Mother Betty overhears Robert yelling at the pastor for financing the abortion. Betty then whispers to the other Mothers during bingo that Robert called the pastor an "S.O.B." "Can you believe it?" she asks. "Of course we couldn't," the Mothers write, "which was why Betty looked so delighted to tell us." From there, the Mothers spread the gossip throughout the church until, one day, one of them leaves in the middle of the pastor's sermon. Slowly, the rumors twist until somebody claims the Sheppards gave Nadia \$5,000, which is how she afforded to go to school in Michigan. A reporter even arrives from a local paper asking about the preacher's nefarious dealings, and though the Mothers shoo him away, he gets the information from another source and puts it in the paper.

Upper Room closes amidst the chaos of swirling rumors, since so many congregants find new churches to attend after hearing about the pastor's financing of an abortion. Years later, long after Nadia has left California, the Mothers still talk about her, wondering what kind of life she leads. One of them insists that Nadia now lives in New York or Boston and works as a respected lawyer. Betty maintains that Nadia has never settled down, claiming she goes "flitting around the world, from Paris to Rome to Cape Town, never resting anywhere." Another Mother says she heard on CNN about a woman who attempted suicide in a Chicago park; "she hadn't caught the name," Bennett writes, "but the photo looked just like the Turner girl."

It's clear that Nadia empathizes with her father and his loneliness, even feeling guilty that he now will have to find a new community. At the same time, she also can't bear to stay with him any longer, perhaps because he has harshly judged her for getting an abortion, further straining their relationship.



When Aubrey suggests that she and Nadia were both born to mothers who didn't love them, Nadia wishes this were true because it would ultimately be easier to understand this sentiment. It would be simpler to comprehend that her own mother never wanted her—after all, Nadia herself knows what it feels like to get pregnant with an unwanted child. What's harder to understand, though, is why a loving mother would want to leave. This uncertainty will follow Nadia for the rest of her life, as she'll never know why Elise committed suicide. In this way, Bennett preserves one last secret, hinting that some things in life are unknowable no matter how badly a person wants to discover the truth.



With this whirlwind of gossip, Bennett demonstrates how stories contort and intensify as they're passed from one person to the next. This has disastrous effects for the Upper Room community, since the church will certainly earn a bad name in the broader religious community if news gets out that the pastor paid for a girl's abortion because his son got her pregnant. As this salacious news works its way toward destroying the church, it's worth noting that the community itself plays a huge part in spreading Nadia's story. As the Mothers gossip and people whisper about the abortion, they put the reputation of Upper Room in jeopardy. Nonetheless, they keep talking. Through the church community's behavior, Bennett illustrates that storytelling is a natural human impulse, and that it is irresistible even when it threatens to harm the very people who are telling the tale.



As she skips ahead in time, Bennett shows that stories often have long-lasting effects. Sometimes people can't stop talking about certain tales, as is the case with the Mothers and their fascination with Nadia's new life. In a way, the uncertainty surrounding her current whereabouts and existence becomes a secret itself—one the Mothers can continue to guess for the rest of their days, superimposing narratives onto Nadia's life and continuing to pigeonhole her as a wild, sad, doomed girl.



Since Nadia's last departure from California, the Mothers have seen her one final time. These days, the Mothers gather on a porch on Sundays and pray for people in their community, though nobody leaves prayer cards anymore. Still, they pray for people like Aubrey Evans and Luke Sheppard, whom they've seen together with their newborn child, "together, but not quite so, the way you can fix a hole in a worn pair of pants but they never look new." One such day, they see Nadia driving by in Robert's **truck**. She's in her thirties now, though she looks the same. The Mothers wonder why she has come back to town, speculating that perhaps Robert is sick, though they notice the truck has boxes in the back, suggesting that perhaps Nadia's helping her father move. Or maybe, they think, she's bringing Robert to live with her.

One of the Mothers claims she sees a pink Barbie bag sitting in the front seat of Robert's **truck** as Nadia drives past, and the group speculates that she's bringing a gift for Aubrey's daughter. Just as quickly as they can formulate this hypothesis, though, Nadia drives around the corner and out of their lives again. "We will never know why she returned," the Mothers say, "but we still think about her. We see the span of her life unspooling in colorful threads and we chase it, wrapping it around our hands as more tumbles out. She's her mother's age now. Double her age. Our age. You're our mother. We're climbing inside of you."

The Mothers' tendency to involve themselves in other people's lives persists as they pray for the community, even focusing on Aubrey and Luke and speculating that, though the young parents have clearly made amends, their relationship still suffers from their past dishonesty. Bennett gives readers one last glimpse of Nadia, but Bennett doesn't reveal anything about her life, allowing readers to feel the same kind of insatiable curiosity the Mothers feel toward Nadia.



In these concluding sentences, Bennett jumps forward in time, saying that Nadia is suddenly "her mother's age," then "double her [mother's] age," then the same age as the Mothers themselves. As such, readers feel Nadia's life rapidly "unspooling" from their grasp, forcing them into further uncertainty regarding what has become of her. Amidst this uncertainty, the Mothers say, "You're our mother," implying that the readers have assumed the position of the storytellers. Readers have inherited the Mothers' desire to know and tell Nadia's life story, and as this impulse toward narration "climb[s]" through them, the novel itself ends. In turn, readers are left holding a mess of "colorful threads"—the strands of an unfinished story.





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