

Transcendent Kingdom



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF YAA GYASI

Yaa Gyasi was born in 1989 in Mampong, Ghana. When she was two years old, her family moved to the United States, where her father earned his Ph.D. She spent her early years in Ohio and Tennessee, but by the time Gyasi was 10, her father was teaching at the University of Alabama. She spent most of her childhood in Huntsville, Alabama. Gyasi loved reading and writing from an early age and has said that her desire to become a writer was crystallized after she first read Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Gyasi was educated at Stanford and the Iowa Writers Workshop, and she released her first novel, *Homegoing*, to great acclaim in 2016.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gifty's brother Nana dies of an accidental heroin overdose, after becoming addicted to opioids prescribed to him for a sports injury. He is thus an early victim of the opioid epidemic. Prior to the introduction of OxyContin in the 1990s by the Sackler Family's Purdue Pharma company, opioids—powerful and powerfully addictive drugs—had been primarily used for acute cancer pain and end-of-life care. The introduction and marketing of OxyContin, a supposedly “safe” opioid, generated an epidemic of addiction in the United States, as doctors prescribed opioids for relatively minor injuries and post-surgical care and their patients became addicted. In many ways, then, Nana's story is typical of the opioid epidemic: prescribed drugs for an injury and unable to continue getting them through his doctor, he eventually turns to heroin as a less-expensive substitute. But, because the family is Black, Gifty ends up being exposed to her church's racism, which points to another historical epidemic related to addiction: the so-called “War on Drugs.” Drug use was increasingly criminalized in the 1980s in the United States. Sentencing disparities for different drugs or drug forms, notably much harsher sentences for crack cocaine than powdered cocaine, led to much higher incarceration rates among Black Americans and contributed to stereotypes that Black people are more prone to addiction. Gyasi's works have also been published against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement, the ongoing deaths of Black people at the hands of the police, and the “America-First” movement that characterized the presidency of Donald Trump and sought to drastically reduce immigration, especially from African countries.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Transcendent Kingdom begins with two epigraphs, one of which

is from contemporary poet Sharon Olds' poem, “The Borders.” It describes, from a mother's point of view, the complicated and intertwined relationship between herself and her daughter. The second epigraph comes from Victorian poet Gerard Manly Hopkins's poem “The Grandeur of God.” Because Gifty's individuation from her mother is tied up in her struggle between faith and science, *Transcendent Kingdom* also recalls *Father and Son*, a memoir written by poet and literary critic Edmund Gosse in 1907. On the scientific side, Gifty frequently uses scientific studies to help her understand the world and her experience. Of these, perhaps the most important is Margaret Mahler's *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant: Symbiosis and Individuation*. On the religious side, the most important related works are the Gospels from the Christian Bible. These four books (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) tell the story of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection from four different perspectives. The Gospel of John, which begins with a meditation on the idea of logos, which can be translated as “word,” “discourse,” or “reason,” and is the only gospel to contain the story of Lazarus, which is particularly compelling to Gifty. Finally, as a story about an immigrant family from Ghana and as the story of a Black family in the American south, *Transcendent Kingdom* ties into the traditions of immigrant stories and contemporary literature by BIPOC authors. Gifty's mother defies the “typical” immigrant pressure to achieve upward mobility as portrayed in works such as Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. And, in reckoning with the experience of institutionalized racism in America, *Transcendent Kingdom* is a fictional counterpoint to memoirs such as Brittany Cooper's *Eloquent Rage* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Transcendent Kingdom*
- **When Written:** 2018–2020
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 2021
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** Stanford, California in the present; Huntsville, Alabama 15–25 years ago
- **Climax:** Gifty's mother escapes the apartment, and Gifty asks for help finding her.
- **Antagonist:** Addiction and depression
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Butterfly in the Sky. As a child, Gyasi sent a story into *Reading Rainbow's* Young Authors and Illustrators Contest, winning a certificate signed by star LeVar Burton.

Show Me the Money. Gyasi reportedly received an advance of more than \$1 million for her first book, *Homegoing*, in 2015. She had cold emailed the draft to a literary agent she admired, who took her on immediately as a client.



PLOT SUMMARY

As Gifty plugs away at the experiments necessary for her doctoral thesis about the neurological pathways of addiction and depression, she receives word from Pastor John that her mother is experiencing another major depressive episode. Gifty asks Pastor John to put her mother on a plane to California so she can take care of her mother. As Gifty splits her time between taking care of her mother and working on her experiments, she reminisces about her childhood and considers the way religion and science have shaped her life.

Gifty's mother wanted to give her first-born son, Nana, a better life, so she immigrated to America from Ghana when he was a baby. Soon after, Gifty's father, the Chin Chin Man, followed them. Gifty herself was a surprise baby, born when her mother was 40. In America, Gifty's mother worked as a home health aide. By the time Gifty was born, her father was working as a school janitor and was the primary parent for the children while their mother worked the night shift. But when Gifty was still a preschooler, the Chin Chin Man went back to Ghana for a visit and never returned.

Soon after coming to Alabama, Gifty's mother joined the Pentecostal First Assemblies of God Church, a primarily white church, since she didn't yet know enough about America to realize that churches there have *either* Black or white congregations. Gifty was raised in this church; as a child she accepted its teachings without question. She had her come-to-Jesus moment there in middle school.

After their father left, Nana became Gifty's primary caretaker. Gifty adored and looked up to her big brother, who made sure that she was well fed, taken care of, and loved. Gifty was a serious, religiously minded, and rules-oriented child; she aspired to be a preacher's wife or a movie star when she grew up. Nana was a gifted athlete who played soccer from a young age. But soccer was the Chin Chin Man's favorite game, and Nana stopped playing after he left. Eventually, he joined the high school basketball team, where he instantly became a star player. But, after being prescribed OxyContin for some torn ligaments, he became addicted to opioids. Gifty became Nana's caretaker during the years he was addicted, and he died of an accidental overdose while still in high school. At his funeral, Gifty lost her faith in God.

After Nana's death, Gifty's mother fell into a deep depression. Eleven-year-old Gifty initially attempted to nurse her mother through it on her own. But when her mother attempted suicide and was involuntarily committed, Gifty was sent to Ghana to stay with her Aunt Joyce while her mother recovered. It was her mother's and brother's experiences with addiction and depression that inspired Gifty to study science in college at Harvard and pursue her doctoral degree in neuroscience at Stanford. She studies reward-seeking behaviors in **mice**, hoping to find a way to interfere with addiction through optogenetics (using light to influence a neural pathway).

Back in the present, while Gifty obsesses over her research experiments, she cares for her mother and tries to avoid intimacy with her colleague Katherine and her lab-mate Han. Her early experiences in her family and church, as well as with a college friend Anne and a serious boyfriend named Raymond, have made her suspicious of friendship and intimacy. She is unwilling to share her personal history, talk much about her mother's current illness, or ask for help. Nevertheless, Han invites Gifty to parties, and after she accidentally blurts out some of the truth to Katherine, Katherine makes a point of being kind and caring towards Gifty. Katherine often brings her baked goods and offers her support.

Just as Gifty's experimental research is reaching its conclusion and she thinks that her life is back on track, she returns to her apartment to find her mother missing. Fearing her mother might attempt suicide again, Gifty calls Katherine in a panic, admits that she isn't okay, and asks for help. The two women soon find Gifty's mother sitting by the side of the road. After she brings her mother home, Gifty bathes her mother gently. Her mother looks into Gifty eyes and tells her that there's nowhere she could go where God isn't with her; Gifty shouldn't worry about her. After her mother falls asleep, Gifty leaves the apartment and drives around the city, feeling for the first time since she was five that she no longer needs to take care of her family members after a lifetime of caring for Nana and her mother.

In an epilogue that takes place sometime later, Gifty has finished her graduate work and has a career as a research neuroscientist with a lab at Princeton University. She and Han are a couple. And she has resolved, at least to her satisfaction, her desire for the "transcendent," which she finds in the world—and people—around her. Yet, she still clings to the memory of her religious upbringing. Gifty often sits in the sanctuary of the local Episcopal Church, where she looks at the image of Christ on the cross, thinks about her past, and tries to make sense of her life.



CHARACTERS

Gifty – Gifty is a sixth-year PhD candidate studying the

neuroscience of addiction and depression. Her mother and father (the Chin Chin Man) immigrated to America from Ghana after the birth of Gifty's older brother, Nana. Gifty's childhood is marked by trauma and loss: first her father returns to Ghana alone, Nana becomes addicted to heroin and dies of an overdose, and her mother falls into several deep depressions. As a young child, Gifty is driven, serious, pious, and literalistic. She worries about her ability to follow the Bible's commands and she approaches Christianity as a checklist to complete, with tasks like praying successfully, reading the whole Bible one summer, memorizing scriptures, and performing charity work with the church. As a teenager and college student, Gifty clings to her sense of legalism and orderliness to protect herself from more trauma. To avoid repeating her mother and brother's perceived mistakes, she avoids alcohol, drugs and sex. She denies herself intimacy with everyone, including her best friend Anne. As an adult, Gifty pursues science because it is orderly and rule-bound. She knows that if she performs her experiments the right way and repeats them enough times, she'll get the answers she's seeking. In many ways, Gifty doesn't see herself very well. She claims that she went into neuroscience because it was hard, when it's clear that she also wants to find answers to the pain and suffering experienced by her family (but is unwilling to admit this). She says she doesn't believe in God, but she can't stop listening for him. And she doesn't think that she needs other people, even as she slowly learns to accept the friendship and help of her colleague Katherine and lab-mate Han. Initially, Gifty feels that she has a million contradictory selves, but this is an artifact of her own denial and unwillingness to see herself in the way that others, like Nana, Anne, Katherine, and Han, see her.

Mother – Gifty's mother was born in Ghana and raised there in a Pentecostal Church, which taught her the importance of religious faith. She married later in her life, by Ghanaian standards, because God told her to wait until she met the Chin Chin Man. When they initially struggle to have a baby, she meets the challenge with prayer, and emerges victorious when their son, Nana, is born. Wanting a better life for Nana, she brings the family to the United States, where she works as a home health aide. She is surprised to find herself pregnant with Gifty at the age of 40. After the Chin Chin Man leaves his family and returns to Ghana, Gifty's mother holds herself and the family together by faith. However, she falls into a major depression after Nana's accidental death and she attempts suicide. In addition to her deep and abiding faith, Gifty's mother is stubborn, persistent, and driven. She loves her children dearly, although she doesn't know how to express it—or can't, since she expends so much of her time and energy on survival and taking care of her clients. Unlike other immigrant parents, she doesn't press her children into fulfilling certain stereotypes or expectations, although she certainly understands that they are both gifted, and she does expect them to live up to their potential. Gifty thinks of her mother as unsentimental and

stingy—for example, she only participates in the diasporic Ghanaian community if the meetings are close to home. Gifty frequently describes her mother as callous. Yet, she also understands that calluses are the hard parts of a person that develop to protect the body from trauma, and in retrospect, she's able to see how her mother's difficult circumstances shaped her.

Nana – Nana is Gifty's older brother; he dies of a heroin overdose when he's a teenager. He was born in Ghana as and was his mother's miracle child; after years of infertility she fasted and prayed for days, then found herself pregnant. It's for Nana's sake that she brought her family to the United States. Nana is a bright, happy, and athletic child. From a young age, Gifty looks up to and idolizes him. Because he's six years older than her, Nana becomes her primary caregiver during her childhood, first as their parents' marriage falls apart (when he protects her from overhearing their fights) and later, after the Chin Chin Man has returned to Ghana, while their mother works. Nana is perceptive. He works out on his own that their father isn't coming back, and he is quicker to see the close-mindedness and racism in the way that Christianity is practiced in the family's church. But he's also prone to perfectionism (like Gifty) and there are signs of unaddressed hurt in his life long before he becomes addicted to opioids. For instance, he tries to tell himself that he doesn't care about what his absent father thinks, even though it's clear that he does. And when he begins to play basketball, he spends hours and hours each day playing pickup games and shooting hundreds of practice shots in a row in the family's driveway. When Nana is injured during a basketball game, he is given a prescription for OxyContin and becomes addicted. Initially, he approaches sobriety the same way he approached everything else in his life, with the belief that by his own efforts he can overcome the challenge. But he repeatedly fails to remain sober on his own, and he relapses within a day after leaving an inpatient rehab program. Nana's death by accidental overdose causes Gifty's loss of faith, their mother's depression, and inspires Gifty to study science.

Father/The Chin Chin Man – Gifty's father, the Chin Chin Man, received his nickname because he would buy *achomo*, or "chin chin," from Gifty's grandmother. He was raised Catholic but after his marriage to Gifty's mother, he joined her Pentecostal Church. His easygoing nature and devotion to their son, Nana, led to the family's immigration, at his wife's request, to America. However, he isn't happy in the states, where he is treated with racist suspicion. When Gifty is still small, the Chin Chin Man leaves his family and returns to Ghana, where he eventually remarries. The Chin Chin Man represents a frequently ignored immigrant story: the non-triumphant, unsuccessful immigrant. He comes to America and loses his dignity, his community, and his happy marriage. But he can't simply return to his old life, either: when he returns to Ghana, he loses his connection with his beloved children, who stay in the U.S. with their mother.

When Gifty visits the Chin Chin Man in Ghana, it's clear that he doesn't have any idea of how to connect to the life or the children he left behind in America any longer.

Anne – Anne is one of Gifty's closest friends from her undergrad degree program. They meet in an Integrated Science course at Harvard, where they are assigned to the same lab group. Although Gifty had taken a great deal of notice of Anne, she herself didn't come to Anne's attention until she defends religious belief one day in class. Anne, intrigued, befriends Gifty. The two share an intense, intimate, and almost sexual friendship despite the differences in their upbringings. Anne is an atheist, multiracial, and outspoken in her opinions. But she is also the first person to truly see and appreciate Gifty for who she is. Despite their different attitudes towards faith, she tells Gifty that she loves Gifty best when she's defending religion, because that's when she's the most authentic. Nevertheless, Gifty decides to reject this intimacy, allowing their friendship to die when Anne graduates and goes off to medical school.

Raymond – Raymond is a man with whom Gifty shared a romantic relationship early in grad school. The son of an African Methodist Episcopal preacher, Raymond studies Modern Thought and Literature and likes to throw elaborate dinner parties where he and his friends discuss and theorize about the world. Gifty finds him intensely attractive, but she struggles to open up to him and tell him about her family and her past. He and his friends also stand for a certain intellectualism that endlessly discusses problems in the abstract rather than coming up with solutions for them in reality. In this way, Raymond represents an intellectual approach to life that, like the religious approach characterized by P.T. and Pastor John, fails (at least in Gifty's estimation) to address the concrete problems of the world, unlike the science she herself pursues.

Katherine – Katherine is one of Gifty's colleagues in the neuroscience program. She has taken time away from her psychiatric practice to get her Ph.D. because she is passionate about helping people for whom conventional and established therapies have failed. She is also vocal about being a woman in STEM and she openly confesses her ongoing conversation with her husband about when or whether to have a baby. Thus, unlike Gifty, Katherine can articulate the connection between her life and her current studies, is comfortable in her femininity, and doesn't feel that an academic career path necessarily precludes familial intimacy. She takes Gifty under her wing as a friend, gently making herself available and baking Gifty a lot of tasty **food** once she learns about Gifty's mother's depression. It's Katherine to whom Gifty finally confesses that she's not okay when she learns to ask for help.

Han – Han is Gifty's lab partner at Stanford, where his research involves imaging the neural circuits involved in reward expectation. He is shy and reticent with Gifty at first, and his ears turn red when she talks to him. Over time, however, he becomes more open with her and invites her to parties at his

home, where he is much more relaxed and personable. It's clear that he like Gifty, and that his blushing is, in part, a response to her, although she doesn't notice this and is surprised when he asks her out on a date. Eventually, Han's good sense of humor and quiet friendship allows Gifty to open up about her mother's illness and Nana's death. By the end of the book, Han and Gifty are a well-established couple.

Pastor John – Pastor John is the head pastor of the Pentecostal First Assemblies of God Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Pastor John and his wife briefly take Gifty in while her mother is in the psychiatric hospital. He is the link that keeps Gifty connected to and informed about her mother, first when she is sent to Ghana as a child and later when her mother falls into her second depression while Gifty is in grad school in California. Like many of the other representatives of religion in the book, Pastor John's espouses a literalistic interpretation of the Bible and shuns science as an attack on his faith. Yet, his beliefs aren't unshakable and they do change in response to circumstances, such as when he becomes more forgiving and less harsh about extramarital sex after his own teenage daughter becomes pregnant. Because he remains faithful to Gifty and her mother and offers them more support than anyone else after Nana's death, Gifty retains a certain affection for him.

P.T. – P.T. is the youth pastor at First Assemblies of God Church when Nana and Gifty are children there. His real name is "Pastor Tom," but he goes by P.T. in an attempt to seem approachable to the youth. He tries to act like he thinks teenagers act, which includes going by "P.T." instead of his real name, and addressing Nana by made-up slang that he thinks sounds "black." He tries to make God seem "cool" and thus makes himself into "God's bouncer." But in his unwillingness to grapple with challenging questions, such as those that Nana pose in Youth services, he demonstrates a certain shallowness in the way that the Pentecostals of Gifty's youth practice and understand their religion. This contributes to her loss of faith.

Ryan Green – Ryan Green is a schoolmate of Nana's and attends the same church as Gifty and her family. He has wormed his way into the position of P.T.'s protégé, despite being the biggest drug dealer in the high school. Even though Gifty doesn't realize that at the time, she notices and is bothered by the contrast between his overtly enthusiastic religious performance when others are watching and his meanspirited behavior towards her in private. Ryan is a foil for Nana, who was only accepted in his community as long as he demonstrated his athletic brilliance. In contrast, Ryan is wholly accepted by the church despite his flaws.

Aunt Joyce – Aunt Joyce is Gifty's mother's sister; she lives in Ghana. Gifty stays with Aunt Joyce when her mother is recuperating from her first depression after Nana's death. Gifty is surprised to find out about her aunt, since her mother rarely talks about her family or her life in Ghana. Joyce is a large, no-nonsense, and loving woman who reflects the person Gifty's

mother could have been had she experienced less pain and trauma in her life.

TERMS

Optogenetics – Optogenetics is a method for controlling the activity of targeted neurons with light. As an approach to neuroscience, optogenetics started to become viable in the early 2000s. In the novel, optogenetics both provides an avenue for **Gifty** to find scientific answers to her questions about pain and loss, and it demonstrates her superior intellectual capacity, since her research is cutting-edge and difficult.

Pentecostalism – Pentecostalism is a form of evangelical protestant Christianity that emphasizes a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and a belief in the power and intervention of the Holy Spirit. Being raised in a Pentecostal church meant that **Gifty** was taught as a child that the Bible was the inerrant word of God, that the Bible should be read and understood literally, that a personal come-to-Jesus moment was necessary for salvation, that miraculous healing was possible through prayer and faith, and that members of the church were engaged in life-and-death spiritual warfare with demonic forces in the spiritual realm and in the secular world.



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.



SCIENCE AND RELIGION

The narrator and protagonist of *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gifty, grew up in a Pentecostal church.

Following her brother Nana's untimely death of a heroin overdose, she becomes a scientist who studies the neurological basis of addiction and depression. The religious and scientific communities around Gifty think of themselves as polar opposites but having had one foot in each world allows her to see their true similarities. Both attempt to answer big, difficult questions, like the meaning of existence and how people make (good) decisions. Both require the faith and loyalty of their followers, and, ultimately, both fail to answer all the questions they raise.

Gifty's research question—essentially, “can we control our thoughts?”—can be read as a religious question about whether it's possible to live without sin or as a neuroscientific question about the subconscious. Gifty's church shunned science, believing that it would destroy the faith of believers; in college,

her classmates expressed an equally uncritical atheism and rejected religion. However, the novel shows that both religion and science require faith to keep going. And Gifty recognizes that for her mother and many others, religious faith can be a lifeline in times of trial and sadness. In many ways, Gifty realizes, religion and science just provide different ways of naming the same yearnings.

In Gifty herself, a scientific and a religious approach to life frequently overlap. As a child she created an experiment to see if she could literally pray without ceasing. And she looked for the confirmation of her prayers in real life. As an adult she still has a sense of the divine and the transcendent, but the lab becomes her holy place. Although science offers her a new way to understand her place in the world, Gifty ultimately realizes that it is just as limited as religion in its ability to answer humanity's burning questions. She may be able to change her **mouse** subject's behavior, but that doesn't mean that she will understand why it behaved a certain way in the first place. *Transcendent Kingdom* suggests that both science and religion raise more questions than they can answer, so Gifty's experiences of transcendence, ultimately, lie within herself rather than in the overarching framework of either religion or science.



SELF-DISCOVERY, IDENTITY, AND INDIVIDUALITY

Years after her brother Nana's accidental death of a heroin overdose, 28-year-old Gifty thinks that she's abandoned her religious upbringing and youthful belief in God for a life of science. But as she cares for her deeply depressed mother, it gradually becomes apparent that she is still stuck in childish patterns. Thus, *Transcendent Kingdom* traces Gifty's final steps towards self-acceptance and maturity. The novel suggests that to complete the process of accepting herself and becoming an adult, Gifty needs to finish the process of developing her identity separate from her mother.

When Gifty left Alabama for college, she wrote in her journal that she was going to invent a new Gifty to take with her. Yet, the novel shows that despite this vow, she's still stuck in her childhood roles and patterns. Importantly, even as an adult, she overidentifies with her mother and what she believes her mother wants or needs. This keeps Gifty from feeling like she can or should ask other trustworthy adults in her life for help, as when 11-year-old Gifty chose not to tell anyone, even the kind and sympathetic school librarian, about her mother's depression or how much Gifty herself needed love and support. Gifty repeats the same pattern later in life, initially concealing her mother's visit and illness from Katherine, Han, and her other graduate colleagues.

But though Gifty thinks she alone knows what her mother needs and how to care for her, there are signs that perhaps

Gifty doesn't know her mother that well after all. The most notable sign is that Gifty's mother calmly accepts Gifty's career in science, despite the fact that by choosing science, Gifty essentially rejects her mother's deeply held faith. While caring for her mother as an adult, Gifty ultimately comes to understand her overidentification with her mother through a psychoanalytic theory of child development, in which the final phase of an infant's development occurs when the infant realizes—and accepts—that she and her mother are separate people. Gifty's mother seems to have already done this work; she long ago accepted Gifty's turn from religion to science. But for Gifty to make this leap herself requires an act of long-delayed teenage rebellion, in which she sneaks of the apartment while her mother sleeps to confront her own fears and insecurities. Gifty can only complete the coming-of-age process and discover who she is as an adult when she also accepts the many ways in which she differs from her mother (such as in her inability to find the answers she needs in religion) as well as their similarities.



ADDICTION, DEPRESSION, AND CONTROL

When she was in middle school, Gifty's teenaged brother, Nana, died of an accidental heroin overdose. Following his death, Gifty's mother fell into a deep depression. Many years later, Gifty is studying neuroscience, hoping to unravel the science behind addiction and depression. She understands that these are two sides of the same coin: addiction means that the brain doesn't have enough restraint against reward seeking, and in depression, it has too much. As a child, Gifty intuits that restraint is at the heart of avoiding addiction. But the novel shows that her initial attempts at self-control are nearly as devastating as her brother's addiction and her mother's depression. In the end, Gifty's research into addiction and depression is important precisely because her story demonstrates how little control people have over themselves and their behavior.

As the novel slowly reveals, there were hints that Nana was prone to addiction before his injury; there was something inherent in his brain chemistry or character that made him vulnerable. For example, when he started playing basketball, he would spend hours every day practicing his free throws. Like Gifty's limping **mouse**, which isn't actually hurt but learns to limp in anticipation that it will experience an electric shock when it tries to seek out a reward, there was something in Nana that self-control couldn't touch. Yet in response to her brother's addiction, Gifty became an extremely rigid rule-follower, practicing the restraint she subconsciously wishes he had. She imagines alcohol as a dangerous stranger, trying to tempt into dark alleys. She doesn't drink, do drugs, have sex, or skip class. She believes (incorrectly) that her rules will save her, her brother, and her mother from harm. But they don't: Nana

still dies and her mother attempts suicide. And in the process, the novel suggests that Gifty becomes addicted to restraint itself. When her friend Anne tries to repair a harm to their relationship, Gifty ignores her, feeling proud of her restraint rather than sad over losing an important relationship. Ultimately, this is why Gifty's later success in changing the addicted mouse's behavior (it finally stops seeking its reward) is so important and powerful: Gifty can finally accept that it sometimes takes an outside force, rather than a person's self-restraint, to moderate or change one's behavior.



TRAUMA, CARETAKING, AND INTIMACY

As a child, Gifty assumed a caretaking role for her drug-addicted older brother, Nana, and then for her deeply depressed mother. As an adult, she can't relinquish her caretaker role or accept intimacy until she realizes that accepting care from others doesn't make her weak, which only happens after her experiments on the neuroscience of addiction are successful. In this way, the book shows both the importance of caretaking in intimate relationships and outlines why Gifty struggles to accept intimacy herself: forced into taking care of others whom she saw as weak, Gifty must first confront her own limitations and learn that needing help doesn't make a person weak.

Life circumstances required Gifty to fill adult caretaking roles early in life. She, not their mother, rode with Nana to the hospital after his injury. And it was Gifty who made Nana coffee in a misguided attempt to rouse him from his stupor and nursed him while he came down from his highs. When their mother became depressed after Nana's death, 11-year-old Gifty took on the cooking and cleaning in addition to school. A rules-oriented child, Gifty thought she needed to cultivate personal strength as a defense against depression and addiction. But strength, the novel shows, is isolating. Because she wants to believe that she doesn't need help, she rejects an important friendship with Anne and a romantic partnership with Raymond, leaving her alone and without anyone to support her.

But Gifty's experiments prove that strength of character alone won't protect against "mental weakness." This knowledge—in addition to the loneliness and isolation of caring for her mother as she suffers yet another depression—begin to break down Gifty's barriers. To escape the apartment she now shares with her mother, Gifty attends a party thrown by her lab mate, Han. This act of camaraderie allows them to talk more at work, until Han overcomes his shyness and asks Gifty on a date. At the party, Gifty is so desperate to fix her mother's depression that she tries to tell a colleague, Katherine, about it. It takes a few more failed attempts, but eventually Gifty asks Katherine for help. Through her neuroscientific experiments, Gifty comes to realize that mental strength isn't the answer to life's pain, and that being depressed or addicted doesn't make a person weak. And by developing friendships with Katherine and Han (and

later, a long-term romantic relationship with Han), she begins to realize that accepting help and support from others is essential to her mental health. Indeed, it helps her heal from the trauma she experienced as a child, when she was forced to take on a caretaking role long before she was ready to do so.



SYMBOLS

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



BABY BIRD

The baby bird that Gifty and Nana tried to rescue after it fell from its nest symbolizes Gifty's childhood helplessness and dependence. Holding the bird in her hands, five-year-old Gifty is struck by its vulnerability. Weakness and vulnerability are the things that she tries hardest to escape after Nana's death and her mother's depression, and the unease she experiences when she feels the baby bird trembling in her hands foreshadows her attempts to reject weakness and vulnerability in herself as an older child and later, as an adult.

The bird's connection with weakness and vulnerability underwrites its connection to the lab **mice** Gifty uses in her experiment. These creatures are completely subject to her whims and her experimental manipulation, but she doesn't hate them for their vulnerability (as she hates and fears vulnerability and weakness in herself). Instead, she cares deeply about them, trying to treat them as gently and respectfully as possible. Later, Gifty remembers the baby bird again when she watches her mother holding a lab mouse in her hands, and this helps her to realize the truth of her mother's claim that every living creature is vulnerable to suffering and pain—even Gifty—and that it isn't necessarily a personal failure to be vulnerable.



FOOD

In *Transcendent Kingdom*, food represents the desire and potential for connection and intimacy between people. Gifty instinctively connects food with intimacy, while rejecting food is something that gives a person power. To prepare for her depressed mother's arrival, Gifty orders a Ghanaian cookbook and deep fryer and practices cooking Ghanaian recipes. Initially, she makes elaborate dishes trying to tempt her mother out of her emotional isolation. But Gifty's mother repeatedly rejects Gifty's offers and thereby refuses to connect with her daughter. This happens several times throughout the novel, first when Gifty's mother becomes depressed the first time and doesn't eat the peanut butter sandwiches young Gifty made. During her second depression, she ignores the *koko* Gifty lovingly prepares. Similarly, Gifty's

rejection of the breakfasts her boyfriend Raymond prepared demonstrates her fundamental inability to accept intimacy. The only person who she allowed to provide her with food was her brother, Nana, who used to help her find the goodies their mother hid in the house to keep the family's food budget low.

The association between food and intimacy is an important part of Gifty's developing friendships with Han and Katherine late in her grad school career. She buys Han a cupcake to celebrate his academic success, thereby reaching out to him and trying to make a connection. Later, wishing to keep Katherine out of her apartment, Gifty instead joins her for lunches around campus. Between these lunches, Katherine demonstrates her affection and care for Gifty with food, the dozens of cookies, breads, cakes, and pies she delivers to Gifty's office. This ultimately forms the basis for Gifty and Katherine's budding friendship.



MOUSE

Because Gifty's mice help her to understand addiction, they symbolize her brother, Nana, who died of an accidental heroin overdose. The mice allow Gifty to answer questions she had—and still has—for Nana. Not all of them are answerable: she will never really be able to understand what being high felt like for Nana, and she will never be able to untangle how chance and Nana's interrelated risk factors culminated in his addiction and untimely death. But *Transcendent Kingdom* makes it clear that Gifty identifies the mice—particularly one so hopelessly addicted to Ensure that he develops a psychosomatic limp, expecting to be painfully shocked while he tries to get his hit—with Nana. In her desire to understand addiction and the mice, at one point, Gifty buys a can of Ensure and drinks it herself, trying to find a point of connection with the limping mouse and with her deceased brother, with limited success. But the mice do give answers to some of the questions, namely, how can a person get a brother to put down the needle? The answer, Gifty discovers, is by modifying the neural pathways that expect reward. And although her research can't rewrite the past or bring Nana back from the dead, when optogenetics stops the limping mouse from seeking his reward, she experiences the moment as a sort of rebirth that she always wanted for Nana.



SACRED WORDS

Sacred words, such as those from the Bible, represent Gifty's quest to make meaning out of her life, especially as she embraces science rather than religion. Gifty was raised in the Pentecostal church, and the words of scripture are deeply and resonantly embedded in her thought processes long after she leaves the church behind. In quotes and allusions throughout *Transcendent Kingdom*, these sacred words demonstrate the power people have to create meaning out of their lives. For Gifty, much of this meaning lies in the

intersection between the religion of her childhood and the scientific vocation of her adult years. While religion and science tend to see themselves as polar opposites, for Gifty, they are woven together in complex ways. When she thinks about optogenetics (using light to influence brain activity), she remembers a verse from the Bible about how sweet it is to see the light of the sun. When she tries to imagine how to raise her mother from her depression-induced stupor, she considers the Biblical story in which Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. And she notes that her favorite Gospel is the one written by John, which begins, “In the beginning was the *logos*,” or word. As Gifty comes to understand, “*logos*” means not just “word” but also “question” or “premise,” and thus, for her, the words of scripture become the questions, premises, and context that help her to build meaning out of the jumble of her life.





QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Knopf Doubleday edition of *Transcendent Kingdom* published in 2021.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ I was determined not to let that happen again. I’d bought a Ghanaian cookbook online to make up for the years I’d spent avoiding my mother’s kitchen, and I’d practiced a few of the dishes in the days leading up to my mother’s arrival, hoping to perfect them before I saw her. I’d bought a deep fryer, even though my grad student stipend left little room for extravagances like bofrot or plantains. Fried food was my mother’s favorite. Her mother had made fried food from a cart on the side of the road in Kumasi. My grandmother was a Fante woman from Abandze, a sea town, and she was notorious for despising Asantes, so much so that she refused to speak Twi, even after twenty years of living in the Asante capital. If you bought her food, you had to listen to her language.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

When Gifty was still a schoolchild, her brother died of an accidental heroin overdose, and after that, her mother fell into a major depression. At the time, Gifty tried to nurse her mother through her illness. Now, Gifty is an adult in graduate school, and her mother has fallen into a second

depression. In this passage, Gifty reflects on how thin her mother became during her experience of depression, since lack of appetite is one of the symptoms. She’s determined not to let this happen again, and part of her plan involves cooking the Ghanaian foods her immigrant mother loves. The importance of cooking for her mother introduces food as a symbol. In *Transcendent Kingdom*, the sharing of food is an important act that can forge intimate ties or show proof of intimacy between people. In her desire to cook Ghanaian foods for her mother, Gifty is attempting to show her mother how much her daughter loves and cares for her.

This passage also points towards the theme of self-discovery and individuality. It shows how food has been an important theme through the lives of Gifty’s mother and her mother’s mother. Thus, her newfound desire to cook for her mother represents a point of continuity between the three generations of women. Moreover, her grandmother’s refusal to communicate with her customers in Twi rather than Asante (both are mutually intelligible dialects spoken by different tribes who were at war in the mid-1800s) demonstrates the stubbornness that is a family trait. Gifty’s mother showed it by immigrating to the United States and forging a life there despite many trials and traumas. Nana showed it in his single-minded focus on the sport of basketball. And Gifty shows it in many ways throughout the novel, not all of which are healthy or helpful. She shows it in her determination to care for her mother and her brother as if she is an adult although she is still a child; her dedication to the difficult study of neuroscience; and her longstanding unwillingness to give up control and allow herself to experience intimate friendships.



Chapter 6 Quotes


☛ “Gifty,” she said as I set the bowl of koko down. “Do you still pray?”

It would have been kinder to lie, but I wasn’t kind anymore. Maybe I never had been. I vaguely remembered a childhood kindness, but maybe I was conflating innocence and kindness. I felt so little continuity between who I was as a young child and who I was now that it seemed pointless to even consider showing my mother something like mercy. Would I have been merciful when I was a child?

“No,” I answered.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

While her mother lies in her apartment suffering through her second major depressive episode, Gifty tries to nurse her with food and companionship. Her mother isn't eating much of what she cooks or answering many of Gifty's attempts to start a conversation. Although lack of appetite and isolation are both symptoms of depression, Gifty struggles not to take them personally. She feels rejected when her mother refuses a dish she's cooked or won't talk to her. Thus, her "unmerciful" answer to her mother here feels like it's the truth and a way to hurt her mother back at the same time. Especially because it feels like Gifty's mother is only interested in talking with her daughter to determine whether she still feels any connection to the faith she lost many years ago. Gifty's mother is deeply religious, and Gifty was raised as a Christian in the Pentecostal church. But she lost her faith during the aftermath of her brother's addiction and suicide.


Because she was dedicated to her Christianity as a child, Gifty's subsequent loss of faith feels to her like a decisive break in her character, destroying most of the continuity between her childhood self and her adult self. Yet, over the course of the novel, it becomes obvious that there is much more continuity of character in Gifty's life. In fact, she's so stuck in her childish role with her mother that it takes a major, scary event for her to step out from the shadow of her mother and fully claim her adult identity. In this passage, Gifty describes her sense that she's no longer even remotely the person she was as a child. Child Gifty, wanting to please her mother and earn her love, would have been merciful. But adult Gifty isn't. Yet, the novel slowly reveals that this is not true: Gifty gives many examples of her lack of regard for others' feelings, even when she was a child. And, in this way, she's demonstrating a strong similarity to her mother, whom she says never lied to her children to protect their feelings.

Finally, it's worth noting that, although the "No" which concludes the quote is Gifty's answer to her mother's question—does she still pray—it also functions to answer Gifty's own question to herself: "Would I have been merciful as a child?" She doesn't yet realize that the correct answer to this question is "No," just as she doesn't yet realize that the correct answer to her mother's question is "Yes." For it turns out that Gifty does pray quite a bit, even if she doesn't experience her faith in the way she did as a child.

Though I had done this millions of times, it still awed me to see a brain. To know that if I could only understand this little organ inside this one tiny mouse, that understanding still wouldn't speak to the full intricacy of the comparable organ inside my own head. And yet I had to try to understand, to extrapolate from that limited understanding in order to apply it to those of us who made up the species *Homo sapiens*, the most complex animal, the only animal who believed he had transcended his Kingdom, as one of my high school biology teachers used to say. That belief, that transcendence, was held within this organ itself. Infinite, unknowable, soulful, perhaps even magical. I had traded the Pentecostalism of my childhood for this new religion, this new quest, knowing that I would never fully know.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

After feeding her mother and having a stilted conversation with her in which she admits that she no longer prays, Gifty goes back to her lab to continue her neuroscientific experiments. She is working with mice, trying to see, essentially, if she can fix the brain chemistry of addiction. Because her brother died as a result of his own addiction, this question is of scientific and personal interest to Gifty, and she thus invests the mice on which she experiments with great importance.


In this passage, Gifty shows that, although she may not believe in the Christian God any longer, she hasn't lost her sense of the divine or of the transcendent. "Transcendent" means exceeding the normal limits of a thing, or exceeding comprehension. In a religious sense, "transcendence" represents the inability of humans to fully comprehend the divine. In the context of Gifty's science teachers, "transcendence" indicates humans' belief that they are somehow different or better than the rest of the animal kingdom, due to the complexity of our brains and our social and cultural creations. Throughout the book, transcendence operates in this doubled way, pointing both towards the religious and towards the science by which humans are attempting to understand how their own brains work. Although Gifty is engaged in this scientific work, on one level she knows that she will never be able to fully comprehend the brain or how it works. A few moments ago, when her mother asked if she still prayed, Gifty answered "no," as if to show that she'd transcended the religious


superstitions of her childhood for the pursuit of science. But alone in her lab, she admits to herself that the transcendent is still all around her and that there will always be mysteries in the universe beyond her comprehension.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛ Like when I was five and Nana was eleven, and we found a baby bird that had fallen out of its nest. Nana scooped it into his big palms, and the two of us ran home. The house was empty. The house was always empty, but we knew we needed to act fast, because if our mother came home to find the bird, she'd kill it outright or take it away and drop it in some small stretch of wilderness, leaving it to die. She'd tell us exactly what she'd done, too. She was never the kind of parent who lied to make her children feel better ... Nana left the bird with me while he poured a bowl of milk for it. When I held it in my hands, I felt its fear, the unending shiver of its little round body, and I started crying.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Mother , Nana

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 30-31

Explanation and Analysis

As she thinks about her past, Gifty remembers that when she was a young child, she wanted to be a worship leader when she grew up. But she changed her mind when she heard the worship leader's warbling voice at her church one Sunday. It reminded her of the time that she and Nana found a baby bird that had fallen from its nest. The children tried to rescue the bird, although this was a hopeless endeavor. The way the bird trembled in Gifty's hand reminds her of the worship leader's wavery voice, and the association of the two forever ends her desire to sing in church. In its complete weakness, helplessness, and dependence, the baby bird symbolizes the need to be taken care of that Gifty rejects in herself and pities in others. The bird's loss of its family, particularly the loss of maternal care it suffers by falling from its nest, foreshadows Gifty's terrible aloneness after Nana's death and her mother's depression. Throughout the book, Gifty compares anyone who she believes to be weak and wants to look down on to the baby bird, including her one-time boyfriend Raymond. Although she wanted desperately to save the baby bird when she was a child, as she grows older, her ability to have

compassion for the weaknesses of others decreases, making her more like her mother and less like Nana.

Importantly, Gifty finds the bird with Nana when he is still her caretaker and protector. In rescuing the helpless animal, they align themselves against their unsentimental and unmaternal mother, whom they believe would leave the bird to die. Caring for the bird that is doomed to die helps prepare Gifty for her later role in caring for Nana during the addiction that leads to his death. But their childish sense of their mother's heartlessness is not totally correct: later in the novel it's revealed that during this episode, she took the opportunity to teach her children an important lesson that all living creatures experience pain and trauma. And her later handling of the mice in Gifty's lab shows a gentleness and sentimentality that child Gifty couldn't have imagined.

☛ I think ... people ... assumed that I had gone into neuroscience out of a sense of duty to him, but the truth is I'd started this work not because I wanted to help people but because it seemed like the hardest thing you could do, and I wanted to do the hardest thing. I wanted to flay any mental weakness off my body ... I never touched a drop of alcohol because I lived in fear that addiction was like a man in a dark trench coat, stalking me, waiting for me to get off the well-lit sidewalk and step into an alley. I had seen the alley. I had watched Nana walk into the alley and I had watched my mother go in after him, and I was so angry at them for not being strong enough to stay in the light. And so I did the hard thing.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Mother , Nana

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis


As she thinks about experiences in her childhood that have led her to her current situation—completing a PhD on the neuroscience underlying addiction and caring for her depressed mother—Gifty tries to explain the reasons she chose to study neuroscience. The obvious explanation is that, since her brother became addicted to opiates and eventually died of an accidental heroin overdose, she wanted to learn about what causes addiction and how it can be prevented or reversed. But she denies that this was her reason at all, claiming instead that she went into neuroscience because it was hard, and she wanted to demonstrate that she herself had no weaknesses in order to avoid the addiction that claimed her brother and the depression that consumed her mother.


Although Gifty claims to feel like her childhood self is an entirely different person than her adult self, as she digs into her childhood and adolescent memories throughout the course of the book, it gradually becomes apparent that there is, in fact, a great deal of continuity in her character. As an adult, Gifty still values control over herself, and the novel offers several examples of her extreme forms of self-control, such as when she allows her friendship with Anne to die just to show that she can avoid the “weakness” of needing the companionship and love of another person. In the course of her maturation, although Gifty avoids becoming addicted to drugs, she instead becomes addicted to her own sense of control. Her pride in being able to keep herself on the “brightly-lit sidewalk,” and her implied judgment of her mother and brother for falling prey to the man in the dark alley, points towards this addiction. As a neuroscientist, Gifty knows that it’s not so clear-cut: the reasons why some people (or mice) become addicted while others don’t aren’t yet obvious. But she still relies on a sense of her own goodness to give order to the world, because it makes her feel safe to believe that if a person—if *she*—makes the right choices, they will be protected from pain and suffering. It’s only gradually that she starts to realize that the “right” choices she’s made in her life have, in themselves, isolated her from other people and created pain and suffering of their own.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☛ I’m not pretending there is an impending disaster; I truly believe that there is one. At one point, I make a low, guttural, animal sound, a sound so clearly biological in its design to elicit attention and sympathy from my fellow animals, and yet my fellow animals—my father, my brother,—do nothing but talk over me ... we are all safe, in a small, rented house in Alabama, not stranded in a dark and dangerous rain forest, not on a raft in the middle of the sea. So the sound is a nonsense sound, a misplaced sound, a lion’s roar in the tundra. When I listen to the tape now, it seems to me that this itself was the disaster I foresaw, a common enough disaster for most infants these days: that I was a baby, born cute, loud, needy, but wild, but the conditions of the wilderness had changed.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Nana , Father/The Chin Chin Man

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 49-50

Explanation and Analysis



Gifty has very few memories of the time before her father, the Chin Chin Man, left the family in America and returned to Ghana, because she was only three years old at the time. However, there are some family audio recordings and pictures that help give her a glimpse of what that time was like. In this passage, she describes listening to an audio recording of her family. While Nana tries to tell their father a story, baby Gifty babbles for attention. When that fails, she screeches. On one level, the interaction between Gifty and Nana in the recording dramatizes the organization of the family. Gifty’s parents very much wanted and prayed for Nana, who came to them as a gift from God. She, on the other hand, was a surprise, born late in her mother’s life and close to the end of her parents’ marriage. The family revolved around Nana for as long as Gifty can remember. And in this passage, he demands that Gifty allow him center stage when he slaps her. But the Chin Chin Man intervenes and reminds Nana that he must love and care for his sister.

But in reflecting on the recording as an adult, Gifty brings a much deeper level of analysis to her infantile cries. She hears the panic and terror in her baby voice over the prospect of being neglected and left to fend for herself. It seems that for her, this memory foreshadows what will happen when she’s abandoned by first her father (who returns to Ghana) and then her brother (who becomes addicted to opioids and then dies of an accidental heroin overdose). After the loss of these family members, Gifty did feel herself to be largely abandoned and uncared for, since her mother was unsentimental and didn’t generally make displays of maternal affection. In one later memory, Gifty remembers laughing when her mother said, “I love you,” because those words sounded so strange coming from her mother’s mouth.

Finally, this passage helps to make the connection between the baby bird, which symbolizes a need for affection and protection, with Gifty. Gifty connects her wordless cries with the noises made by baby animals to gain their parents’ attention. As a scientist, she understands people to be a member of the animal kingdom, although her religious upbringing stressed humanity’s dominion over the animals. But, when listening to her infant cries of desperate need, Gifty feels kinship with all the other animals in the world, especially the defenseless ones like the mice she uses in her experiment, or the baby bird that she and Nana will later attempt to rescue after it falls from its nest.

●● Back then, I approached my piety the same way I approached my studies: fastidiously. I spent the summer after my eighth birthday reading my Bible cover to cover, a feat that even my mother admitted she had never done. I wanted, above all else, to be good. And I wanted the path to that goodness to be clear. I suspect that this is why I excelled at math and science, where the rules are laid out step by step, where if you did something exactly the way it was supposed to be done, the result would be exactly what it was expected to be.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 54-55

Explanation and Analysis



When Gifty's mother breaks her depression-induced silence to ask if her daughter still prays, it reminds Gifty of one of her earliest religious experiments. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (in the New Testament of the Christian Bible) tells believers to rejoice always and pray without ceasing. As a child, Gifty tried to keep up a constant stream of prayer in her mind, but quickly realized that it was impossible. Her mother suggested that a life well lived might be a form of prayer, and that Gifty could write her prayers to God in a journal. As she remembers these events, Gifty reflects on her motives at the time.

As an adult, Gifty doesn't initially feel much continuity between her childhood self and her adult self. The fracture seems to primarily arise from her loss of faith, which followed her brother's accidental death when she was still a child. However, when Gifty reflects on her experiences, it's clear that there is a great deal of continuity between her childhood and adult selves. As a child, she approached her religion in a scientific way; as an adult, her science is tinged with a sense of the divine. In both cases, what Gifty most wants is the one thing that life cannot give: certainty. And a large part of Gifty's maturation process in the novel involves her growing realization that certainty isn't possible in the world. Religion left too many questions unresolved for her. But science also fails to answer some of the biggest and most important questions humanity asks, and Gifty must learn to accept that these questions will remain unanswered, at least for her in her own lifetime.

Chapter 14 Quotes

●● If I've thought of my mother as callous, and many times I have, then it is important to remind myself what a callus is: the hardened tissue that forms over a wound. And what a wound my father leaving was. On those phone calls with the Chin Chin Man, my mother was always so tender, drawing from a wellspring of patience that I never would have had if I were in her shoes. To think of the situation now still makes me furious. That this man, my father, went back to Ghana in such a cowardly way, leaving his two children and wife alone to navigate a difficult country, a punishing state. That he let us, let her, believe that he might return.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Mother, Father/The Chin Chin Man

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 72-73

Explanation and Analysis

Gifty's parents immigrated to the United States from Ghana when her older brother, Nana, was a baby. But her father, the Chin Chin Man, struggled to find a place in America and eventually he abandoned the family and returned to his native country. In the aftermath of his departure, Gifty's mother must raise her two children on her own. And this is the first in a string of calamities that strike the family, which include Nana's addiction, his accidental death of a heroin overdose, and Gifty's mother's deep depression. In this passage, Gifty considers her mother, whom she is nursing through her second depression.


When she was a child, Gifty's experience of her mother was not characterized by sentimentality; her mother wasn't an overly maternal figure. This has wounded Gifty, who has always felt that her mother loved or wanted her less than her brother Nana. But, even as she feels hurt, she recognizes the circumstances that conspired to make her mother hard. And Gifty has a callousness to her personality that mirrors her mother's. She's unsentimental and isolated, and describes multiple instances where she refused to offer others compassion for their struggles and trials. Rather than feeling empathy, more often than not, Gifty felt a smug sense that people deserved their suffering. But while she speaks about her mother's struggles in this passage, Gifty also illuminates some of the painful experiences that made her callous, too. Although she doesn't really remember the Chin Chin Man from her childhood, she was also affected by his ongoing absence. And when she reconnects with him later in life, the wound is deepened by his ongoing lack of concern for her struggles, Nana's, and her mother's. The

callousness of Gifty and her mother contrasts sharply with the Chin Chin Man's, since their "calluses" cover a true love and concern for others.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ We walked to the Greyhound station, our mother holding our hands the entire time. We took that bus home, and I don't think Nana made a single noise. I don't think I did either. I could feel that something had changed among the three of us and I was trying to learn what my role in this new configuration of my family might be. That day was the end of my naughtiness, the beginning of my good years. If our mother was angry or upset at us, me for being a terror, Nana for changing his mind, she didn't let on. She wrapped us in her arms during that long ride home, her face inscrutable. When we got home, she put all of Nana's soccer gear into a box, sealed the box, and dumped it into the nether regions of our garage, never to be seen again.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Nana, Father/The Chin Chin Man, Mother

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gifty remembers an episode from her childhood. After her father, the Chin Chin Man, abandoned the family in America and returned to Ghana, Gifty's mother had to take over rearing the children alone. This was challenging for many reasons, including the fact that Nana was playing on a travel soccer team at the time. Soccer was one of his connections to his absent father, who had loved the sport. But on this day, on the bus ride to an away game, Nana suddenly realizes that his father isn't coming home and he instantly quits the sport. Gifty's family returns home not on the soccer team's charter bus, but on a regular Greyhound bus.

The departure of her father, although Gifty barely remembers him, was the first of a string of traumas to befall her family. Quitting soccer (and possibly the trauma of his father's absence) will lead Nana to basketball, where an injury will lead to his addiction. But most of what Gifty remembers from the day is fairly mundane. This passage is also notable for its exploration of the caregiving roles in the family. Gifty's mother is not an overly sentimental or maternal figure; as Gifty explains elsewhere, she's not the type to lie to make her children feel better or to support silly stories like the tooth fairy. When the Chin Chin Man was still with the family, he was Nana and Gifty's primary

caretaker. When the marriage began to fall apart, Nana took on some of the responsibilities of caring for his younger sister. Yet, in this moment, when the three members of the family truly confront the truth that the Chin Chin Man has gone and must adjust to the new shape of the family, Gifty's mother makes an uncharacteristic display of maternal affection, holding the children's hands and embracing them on the bus ride home.

Nevertheless, this is also the start of Gifty's path towards caretaking and control. Prior to this day, she was a carefree, rather careless child. But, as she understands that her family dynamic has shifted, she begins to be concerned about the wellbeing of others, particularly her mother. Her resolution to stop causing her mother trouble is a form of familial love and caretaking. It's also a form of control, as this marks the beginning of Gifty's legalistic rule-following. Although following the rules kept her safe from addiction and depression, it also made Gifty harsh and judgmental of others, and caused her to hold herself back from forming intimate and supportive relationships. In combining all of these threads, this memory provides insight into the formation of Gifty's character and the nature of her familial trauma, while also showing how events that are small and mundane at the time can be revealed as foundational and life-changing in retrospect.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ The collaboration that the mice and I have going in this lab is, if not holy, then at least sacrosanct. I have never, will never, tell anyone that I sometimes think this way, because I'm aware that the Christians in my life would find it blasphemous and the scientists would find it embarrassing, but the more I do this work the more I believe in a kind of holiness in our connection to everything on Earth. Holy is the mouse. Holy is the grain the mouse eats. Holy is the seed. Holy are we.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 95-96

Explanation and Analysis

At the very beginning of *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gifty discovers that two of the mice she uses in her experimental research have been fighting, and one has been grievously wounded. She is distressed by this turn of events and does her best to nurse the wounded animal back to health. When it dies, she holds it in her hands and grieves over it, and thinks about the story of the Last Supper in the Christian

Bible. Just before his death, Jesus shared a meal with his closest disciples, during which he washed their feet. Whenever Gifty handles her mice, she remembers Jesus washing his disciples' feet, placing himself humbly beneath his friends. Although the mice are lowly, she needs them more than they need her, for her research wouldn't be possible without them. And she's aware that her research sometimes causes them harm: she gets them addicted to Ensure, even though mice in the wild don't have addictive tendencies, and then shocks them to demonstrate that they are truly addicted.



In this passage, she goes beyond thinking of the Last Supper into an outright declaration that her partnership with the mice is holy in some way. In this admission, she both shows how her personal understanding of the world stands in opposition to the two belief systems that have shaped her, Christianity on the one hand and science on the other. But she also shows the limitations imposed on both when they are unwilling to consider their similarities. The mice serve Gifty, but she tries to serve them as well, demonstrating a Christ-like love and care for them—recalling obliquely the words of Matthew 10:29, which assure believers that not a sparrow falls from the sky without God knowing about it.

This statement of her belief in the holy nature of her work and her partnership with the mice also foreshadows two key moments later in the book: first, it underwrites the sense of transcendence Gifty feels when her experiments succeed and she proves that she can interrupt a mouse's addictive actions with neural stimulation. Second, it sets the stage for her final words in the book, when she says that she doesn't need either religion or science to give her answers any longer, because she has learned to see and appreciate the holy and transcendent in the world around her. In this moment, she expresses that idea when she declares the mouse, its food, and humans equally holy.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝ I felt a strange sense of kinship with Hopkins every time I read about his personal life, his difficulty reconciling his religion with his desires and thoughts, his repressed sexuality. I enjoyed reading his letters and, inspired to some romantic ideal of the nineteenth century, tried writing letters of my own to my mother. Letters in which I hoped to tell her about my complicated feelings about God...all of which could have been a different petal on the flower of my belief: "I believe in God, I do not believe in God." Neither of these sentiments felt true to what I actually felt.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Gifty remembers how, in college, she took a class on the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins to fulfil a humanities requirement. Most of the other students took a creative writing course, but, terrified of the self-disclosure this would involve, Gifty took this course instead. And it proved to be a key place for her to explore and work on creating her own identity, as well as providing her ways to think about her religious experiences and how her childhood faith connects with her adult persona.

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born in England in the Victorian era into a family that was accomplished in the literary arts. But when he underwent a religious conversion, becoming Roman Catholic and taking the vows of the priesthood, he burned much of his poetry and tried to turn his back on what he saw as his artistic vanity. This conversion also created a rift between himself and his family that echoes the way Gifty feels her loss of faith separates her from her mother in some unbridgeable way. But Hopkins's conversion, though heartfelt, wasn't easy. And in him, Gifty intuitively seems to recognize a kindred spirit for whom the relationship between faith and one's calling (for him, poetry; for her, science) can be tortured and complex.



Emulating Hopkins's letters also gives Gifty an opportunity to explore her own self and continue the project of self-definition she began when she left to go to college. Later in the book, she will remember re-reading her old journal entries and deciding to create an entirely new Gifty to bring to college; here readers see her in the midst of this program of self-creation. However, it's not as easy to let go of childish mindsets and feelings as Gifty might like to believe, and her efforts at self-creation are limited, at least at this point, by her need to define herself solely in relation to her mother and her faith. Thus, she tries on two different attitudes: one of faithfulness and one of atheism. When neither quite fits how she feels, she abandons the project rather than explore what it might mean to live with ambivalence.


Chapter 23 Quotes

☛☛ What's the point? became a refrain for me as I went through the motions. One of my mice ... was hopelessly addicted to Ensure, pressing the lever so often that he'd developed a psychosomatic limp in anticipation of the random shocks...Soon he would be one of the mice I used in optogenetics, but not before I watched him repeat his doomed actions with that beautifully pure, deluded hope of an addict, the hope that says, *This time will be different. This time I'll make it out okay.*

"What's the point of all this?" is a question that separates humans from other animals. Our curiosity around this issue has sparked everything from science to literature to philosophy to religion. When the answer to this questions is, "Because God deemed it so," we might feel comforted. But what if the answer to this question is "I don't know," or worse still, "Nothing?"

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Nana

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

As her mother's depression deepens, Gifty avoids her pain by spending more time at the lab. She's there so much that it begins to affect her body and her spirit: she's allergic to the mice, and seeing how intractably addicted the limping mouse is makes her question whether her research will ever have a meaningful result. Of course, the "point" of her research is to determine whether it's possible to use light stimulation to interrupt the neural pathways contributing to addictive behavior in her mice.

But in a larger sense, Gifty's scientific experiments can't answer the bigger, more important questions, like why Nana got addicted in the first place, or why he wasn't able to recover. She realizes that both science and religion ask similar questions about the meaning of life and free will. Her depressing conviction that the answer to these questions is "Nothing" suggests her loss of faith. But her ongoing quest for answers argues that she doesn't really believe that "nothing" can possibly be the answer. And her experiences have shown her that, because both religion and science are limited in their ability to answer this question, it's important for people to seek the answers for themselves rather than waiting for them to be handed down by a higher authority.

In addition, this quote touches on the connection between Gifty's research and her brother's addiction. The limping mouse represents Nana, who was also hopelessly addicted

to the point that he couldn't even stay sober for a full day outside of rehab. But Gifty shows herself to be somewhat addicted to her research throughout the novel, unwilling to give up the question "What's the point," no matter how painful it is. And at a certain point, she even realizes that she's continuing to repeat her experiments after they have been conclusive. The difference between Gifty and her brother, it seems, is that he was addicted to opioids, while she is addicted to her ability to control circumstances (like her manipulation of the mice's environment and behaviors) and the search for answers.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☛☛ In class that day, I stared at the diagram in wonder, the secret world, an inner world, revealed. I looked around at my classmates and could see in their business-as-usual faces that they already knew all of this. Their bodies had not been kept from them. It was neither the first nor the last time at Harvard that I would feel as though I was starting from behind, trying to make up for an early education that had been full of holes. I went back to my dorm room and tentatively, furtively pulled out a hand mirror and examined myself, wondering all the while how, if I hadn't left my town, if I hadn't continued my education, this particular hole, the question of anatomy, of sex, would have been filled. I was tired of learning things the hard way.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 140-141

Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Gifty remembers learning about female anatomy in a biology class in college, rather than through the so-called "sex education" she received through her church as a child and through her mother when she began menstruating. As a child and young adult, Gifty felt that there was an unbreachable barrier between science and religion. Partly, this came from her college classmates, who tended to mock religion or consider it as outright dangerous. But it has more to do with the isolation engendered by her fundamentalist religious upbringing. Gifty's church was suspicious of intellectualism, considering it a trap meant to ruin people's faith. In Gifty's experience, her religious upbringing tended to avoid and close down questions rather than to embrace them as opportunities for growth. Perhaps the most vivid example of this was the church's reaction to a rash of teenage pregnancies in town, which was to round up all the girls for a "sexual education"

retreat which didn't end up teaching them anything about their bodies or how they worked. Later, when Gifty got her period, her mother displayed a similar reticence. As a result, Gifty arrived in college not only sexually inexperienced, but completely unaware of what her anatomy looked like or how its pieces went together. To her, this represents the narrowness and limitation of her upbringing. But the image of her sitting in college, feeling so far behind her peers in terms of learning, also suggests the way the traumas of her childhood trapped her in an extended adolescence and delayed the process of her developing her own identity.

Chapter 29 Quotes

☞ I didn't move at all. Something came over me. Something came over me, filled me and took hold. I had heard that altar call hundreds of times and felt absolutely nothing. I had prayed my prayers, written my journal entries, and heard only the faintest whisper of Christ. And that whisper was one I distrusted, because maybe it was the whisper of my mother or of my own desperate need to be good, to please. I hadn't expected to hear the loud knocking on my heart's door, but that night I heard it. I heard it. These days, because I have been trained to ask questions, I find myself questioning that moment. I ask myself, "What came over you?" I say, "Be specific."

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Gifty was raised in the Pentecostal church, which emphasizes the importance of believers having a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus in their hearts. A key component of this is being "saved," which is a kind of conversion experience in which the church-goer hears Jesus inviting them to this special relationship and accepts. Often, as in Gifty's case, this happens publicly. Pastor John makes an altar call, asking anyone who's heard Jesus calling them to come to the altar to receive prayers and, by their action, make a public profession of their faith. Gifty spent many years of her childhood waiting to hear the call, but she often found herself uncertain and doubtful. As a rules-oriented, serious, and pious child, she needed to be absolutely sure she heard Jesus "knocking at the door of her heart" before she could publicly claim her faith fully.

Importantly, Gifty hears God's call when she is alone, without her family there. Her brother is at home, convalescing from his basketball injury, and her mother is at

work. This makes Gifty's conversion wholly her own; it's one of the few things she experiences outside of the context of her family. Perhaps, this fact suggests, it wasn't possible for her to hear the call unless she was alone, since she would have struggled to separate her mother's expectations from her own inner sense of the divine call. But although her family isn't there, in this moment, she feels surrounded, loved, and supported by a church that hasn't yet shown her the extent of its hypocrisy. And her isolation foreshadows the end of the book where she sits in a church by herself, listening with confidence to the wisdom of her own life experiences rather than passively listening for the voice of God.

Chapter 31 Quotes

☞ I couldn't make myself look away. I felt like I was watching some major natural event—newly hatched sea turtles heading toward the lip of the ocean, bears coming out of hibernation. I was waiting for Nana to emerge, new, reborn.

In the church I grew up in, people cared about rebirth. For months on end, all across the South, all over the world, revival tents are erected. Preachers stand at pulpits promising people that they can rise from the ashes of their lives. "Revival fire fall," I used to sing along with the choir, jubilantly asking that God raze everything to the ground. I stole glances at Nana at the end of our pew, and I thought, *Surely the fire has fallen?*

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Nana

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

Following an accident while playing basketball, Gifty's brother Nana was prescribed opioids for pain relief. Unfortunately, he became addicted to them. When Gifty's mother found his stash of pills, hidden in his light fixture, she threw them away and confronted him. Forced to quit cold-turkey, Nana suffered through severe symptoms of withdrawal. Once the worst of it is over, Nana accompanies Gifty and their mother to church, where Gifty can't stop herself from staring at him. In this passage, she describes why she couldn't look away. She still believed, then, in the possibility of redemption and rebirth, because this was before she realized how quickly Nana's sobriety will give way to active drug use. Even sending him to an inpatient drug treatment program won't be able to break the hold of his addiction, and he will relapse within a day of coming home. But this early in his addiction, Gifty still believes that

God can “burn away” the bad parts of Nana and leave only the good ones.



As the novel progresses, Gifty will come to see the fault in her thinking. Later, at Nana’s funeral, she will hate the people who want to deny the painful parts of her brother’s life and only focus on the good ones. She comes to believe that a person should be accepted and loved in their entirety—for their successes as well as for their faults. No one should have to change or be reborn to be loved. This childhood belief also lies beneath Gifty’s longstanding desire to create a new, better version of herself. From her childhood attempts to baptize herself through her decision to create a new persona when she goes to college, to her unwillingness to open up to the intimacy offered to her by her colleagues, Gifty lives out her own conviction that the “bad” parts of her—her doubt, her guilt over Nana’s death, the pain and suffering she still feels from her childhood traumas—need to be burned away for her to become a good or loveable person. It’s only as she becomes able to accept herself and her mother for their individual personalities that she realizes that rebirth isn’t the clean slate that she once believed it to be.

Chapter 36 Quotes

☝ I thought that Nana was proving everyone right about us, and I wanted him to get better, to be better, because I thought that being good was what it would take to prove everyone wrong. I walked around those places, pious child that I was, thinking that my goodness was proof negative. “Look at me!” I wanted to shout. I wanted to be a living theorem, a Logos. Science and math had already taught me that if there were too many exceptions to a rule, then the rule was not a rule. Look at me.

This was all so wrongheaded, so backward, but I didn’t know how to think any differently. The rule was never a rule, but I had mistaken it for one. It took me years of questioning and seeking to see more than my little piece, and even now I don’t always see it.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Nana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

As Nana’s addiction slowly became common knowledge in the family’s church, the congregants started to gossip about

it. In this passage, Gifty reflects on a time when she overheard two church members saying that his addiction is sad, but unsurprising because he’s Black and “their kind” seem drawn to drugs. As a child, Gifty feels ashamed of her brother and of herself, although she doesn’t yet fully understand why. Now she has an understanding of systemic racism, and she can see the ways in which the predominantly white church that she belonged to treated her in ways that made her feel her sinfulness and difference very strongly. Angry that Nana’s addiction was allowing people to judge the family, Gifty asks God to “show them” by healing Nana. And, to help matters along, she tries to show that “their kind” can be just as moral, upright, and faithful as anyone. She thus reveals that her addiction to rules and being good wasn’t just tied to her need to feel in control. It was also a desperate attempt to singlehandedly turn back the subtle and overt racism she and her family experienced when she was a child.

Moreover, this passage puts the hypocrisy of the allegedly faithful Christians in Gifty’s church on display. Despite being members of a faith that tells its adherents to love their neighbors as themselves and to forgive each other’s sins, the church had very little grace, forgiveness, or understanding available to support Gifty and her family through their series of calamities (her father’s departure, her brother’s addiction, her mother’s depression). This suggests that her loss of faith isn’t just about her belief in science, but also about the pain and harm inflicted on her by her fellow believers.

☝ I didn’t want everybody staring at us, making their judgments. I didn’t want further proof of God’s failure to heal my brother, a failure that I saw as unbelievably cruel, despite a lifetime of hearing that God works in mysterious ways. I wasn’t interested in mystery. I wanted reason, and it was becoming increasingly clear to me that I would get none of it in that place where I had spent so much of my life. If I could have stopped going to the First Assemblies altogether, I would have.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Nana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

As the church began to turn its back on Nana, Gifty experienced a rising desire to escape, which this passage explores. Although she was a rules-oriented and pious child, Gifty comes to understand that all her goodness won’t

counteract the racist assumptions and beliefs that people in the church have. No matter how good she herself is, she realizes they will see her as the exception and Nana, who has stopped coming to church and become addicted to drugs, as the rule.

This also marks an important juncture on Gifty's path from her childhood, when she believed in religion, to her adulthood, where science has become her guiding principle. Even as a child, she wants to know that her efforts will be rewarded, to feel like there are universal rules that apply to everyone. Gifty wants to know that if she follows the rules, she will be rewarded. But the reactions towards Nana in the church demonstrate beyond a doubt that the same rules don't apply to everyone. She and her family are judged more harshly. Additionally, although elements of his character or details of his life history (having a single mother, being Black in the American South) may have predisposed Nana towards his addiction, it was precipitated by a freak accident. Gifty is slowly learning that chaos and randomness can't be avoided. But at this stage in her personal development, she still thinks that if she can't find the rules that will keep her and her loved ones safe in religion, she can locate them in science.

Chapter 40 Quotes

☝☝ [A]t a certain point, science fails. Questions become guesses become philosophical ideas about how something should probably, maybe be. I grew up around people who were distrustful of science, who thought of it as a cunning trick to rob them of their faith, and I have been educated around scientists ... who talk about religion as though it were a comfort blanket for the dumb and the weak, a way to extol the virtues of a God more improbable than our own human existence. But this tension, this idea that one must necessarily choose between science and religion, is false. I used to see the world through a God lens, and when that lens clouded, I turned to science. Both became, for me, valuable ways of seeing, but ultimately both have failed to fully satisfy in their aim: to make clear, to make meaning.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 212-213

Explanation and Analysis

As Gifty's mother spirals ever deeper into her second depression, Gifty continues her experimental research with her mice. One day, after reading to her mother the Bible

story in which Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, Gifty goes to the lab. There, she finds herself thinking about the similarities—and similar limits—between science and religion, neither of which can fully answer the questions she has about life. She remembers a TA in college offering her a book about neuroscience in response to her questions about the distinction between a person's brain and their essence (or their soul). But since this didn't help her, she realized that there are some questions that science can't yet answer any better than religion does. Science and religion each fear the other, yet they both have limitations. Gifty sees that it's a false choice between the two. In many ways, although they have different approaches, they share the same failures. Religion calls the self a "soul" but can't explain how it's related to the body, the mind, or the heart; science places the power of the brain at the center of the human but can't fully articulate the relationship between a person's conscious awareness of themselves and the workings of their brain.

Chapter 46 Quotes

☝☝ I started writing my own fairy tale, wherein my mother, the beauty of Abandze, who grew sleepier and sleepier each year that she was away until she finally became unrousable, is carried on her golden bed by four gorgeous, strong men. She is carried all the way from my apartment in California to the coast of Ghana, where she is laid on the sand. And as the tide comes in, licking first the soles of her feet, then her ankles, to calf, then knee, she slowly starts to wake. By the time the water swallows the golden bed, stealing her out to sea, she has come alive again. The sea creatures take bits of her bed, and with it, they fashion a mermaid's tail. They slip it onto her. They teach her how to swim with it. They live with her there forever.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Mother

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 241-242

Explanation and Analysis

Above almost anything else, Gifty longs for a sense of connection with her mother, a way to tether her mother in the present of real life instead of watching her continually drift in and out of contact at the whims of her depression. During this time, she finds herself writing a fairy tale about her mother instead of working on her paper. This story is an important step on her journey toward accepting that she and her mother are different people with different paths in life. Until she manages to do this, she feels stuck in her



family's story, playing a supporting role first for Nana and then for her mother.

The story reflects and modifies several important themes in the book. First of all, it reveals that Gifty feels some real tenderness for her mother. Previously, the other persona Gifty assigned her mother was “the Black Mamba” after a dangerous and swift snake that’s always ready to pounce. As a child, Gifty often felt that her mother was always ready to pounce on her for small infractions like getting her hair wet in the bathtub or sneaking food with Nana. In this story, however, Gifty’s mother is a beautiful mermaid. The sleepiness of the mythical princess in the story obviously parallels Gifty’s mother’s depression. And in Gifty’s story, her mother is saved from her depression when she is reborn as a mermaid. Although Gifty had previously noted the importance of rebirth in the Christian faith, it’s important to note that in this story, her mother doesn’t have to do anything to receive it: not go to church, attend a revival, go to see a therapist, or listen for Jesus knocking on her heart’s door. Thus, the way in which Gifty’s mermaid mother is reborn reflects the gradual metamorphosis that Gifty herself goes through over the course of the novel.

Chapter 48 Quotes

☝☝ She would tell me stories about her sister and then look at me expectantly as though I were meant to trade. A sister story for a brother story, but I wouldn’t do it. Anne’s stories about her sister, about the parties they’d gone to, the people they’d slept with, they didn’t feel like an even trade for the stories I had about Nana. My Nana stories didn’t have happy endings. His years of partying, of sleeping around, they didn’t end with him holding down a job in finance in New York, as Anne’s sister did. And it wasn’t fair. That was the thing that was at the heart of my reluctance and my resentment. Some people make it out of their stories unscathed, thriving. Some people don’t.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Anne

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

When Gifty was still a child, her father abandoned her family and her brother became addicted to opioids following a freak accident while playing sports. Added to this, her mother was distant and un-maternal; the only real support Gifty had for many years was her sense of a relationship with God. And after Nana’s death, she lost her faith as well. Some of her early friendships were ruined by

her brother’s addiction, which taught her the need to keep family secrets and familial pain within the circle of the family. It’s only after she confesses the terrible truth to her best friend that word of Nana’s drug habit starts to circulate around their church.

Thus, as she grows up, Gifty struggles to create meaningful relationships with other people, because she is terrified of intimacy and unwilling to share the painful stories from her past. The closest she comes to a real relationship in college is with Anne, whom she met in her Integrated Science class. Although Anne fundamentally disagrees with Gifty about the personal importance and social value of religion, she still wholeheartedly accepts and loves Gifty for who she is. Nevertheless, she senses Gifty’s distance and tries to find ways to penetrate it, including sharing stories of her wild adventures with her sister.

But Gifty hasn’t yet resolved her childhood traumas, specifically her tortured relationship with her mother and her guilt over Nana’s death. And, she hasn’t yet realized that she can, in fact, bear the trials that she’s endured. So she feels that Anne’s stories are deeply, personally unfair, because they remind her that not everyone makes it out of their wild stories alive—Nana didn’t. Moreover, by refusing to share family stories with Anne, and by even avoiding the topic of Nana’s death, Gifty ensures her means of remaining in control of the relationship. Following her brother’s illness and her mother’s depression, Gifty developed a need to prove that she could control herself, and this sometimes, as here, spills over into controlling her relationship with others.

Chapter 50 Quotes

☝☝ It took me many years to realize that it’s hard to live in this world. I don’t mean the mechanics of living, because for most of us, our hearts will beat, our lungs will take in oxygen, without us doing anything at all to tell them to. For most of us, mechanically, physically, it’s harder to die than it is to live. But still we try to die. We drive too fast down winding roads, we have sex with strangers without wearing protection, we drink, we use drugs. We try to squeeze a little more out of our lives. It’s natural to want to do that. But to be alive in the world, every day, as we are given more and more and more, as the nature of “what we can handle” changes and our methods for how we handle it change, too, that’s something of a miracle.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Han, Katherine, Raymond, Anne, Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

Gifty's rumination on the mystery of people's attraction to risk and the miracle of a person's ability to adapt to change comes in the context of a day where her mother has refused connection with Gifty yet again and Han has asked her out on a date. Gifty remembers her breakup with Raymond, which happened in part because she was unwilling to tell him about her family history. To put him off about meeting her family, she offered to plan a trip for the two of them and her mother to Ghana. In fact, her mother never went back to Ghana after she came to the United States, because, as she told Gifty, her life is here now.

This passage begins with Gifty's thoughts about risk and reward. She's already outlined the many ways that human beings are risk-takers and noted the importance of this trait. Without the desire and the ability to take risks, her mother would never have come to America. Yet, the consequences of a person's decisions are potentially devastating, and it's hard for Gifty to look past her knowledge of her mother's suffering. Her research is about the balance between risks and rewards: her mother's depression represents insufficient reward-seeking behavior while her brother's addiction represented excessive reward-seeking behavior. The need to balance risks and rewards makes life hard for most people. It's certainly been hard for Gifty and her mother.


Once upon a time, Gifty resented the religious platitude that God wouldn't give her more than she could handle. She felt that the loss of Nana was more than she could handle, and her anger at God for making her suffer through it is part of the reason she lost her faith. Yet, many years later, she is making scientific and human progress built on that painful experience. And as she slowly realizes that she's building real relationships with Han and Katherine, despite her earlier failures with Raymond and Anne, Gifty comes to see that she has been able to handle what life has thrown at her. And for everyone who survives pain and suffering, it's a testament to the miraculous ability of human beings to adapt and grow that they can continue to live despite the bad things that have happened to them.

Chapter 52 Quotes

☝☝ My papers ... captured the facts of my experiments, but said nothing of what it had felt like to hold a mouse in my hands and feel its entire body thump against my palms as it breathed, as its heart beat. I wanted to say that too ... I wanted to tell someone about the huge wave of relief I felt every time I watched an addicted mouse refuse the lever. That gesture, that refusal, that was the point of the work, the triumph of it, but there was no way to say any of that. Instead, I wrote out the step-by-step process, the order. The reliability, the stability of the work, the impulse to keep plugging ... that was the skin of it for me, but the heart of it was that wave of relief, that limping mouse's tiny, alive body, living still, and still.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Nana

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

After years of preparation and months working on her experiments, Gifty prepares the hopelessly addicted, limping mouse for treatments and discovers that she is able to prevent him from seeking the Ensure to which he's addicted. Once she's proved her concept, all that's left is for her to write up her findings for publication. In this passage, however, she ruminates on the limits of her scientific paper to express the wonder and transcendence of her work. What Gifty has accomplished is no small feat, and her discovery holds the promise of help and healing for thousands, if not millions of people who suffer from addictions. Moreover, she has finally answered one of the unanswerable questions from her youth, which is whether there was anything at all that could have prevented Nana's death. It turns out that it might have been possible to save him, even if Gifty's breakthrough comes years too late for him.


But this passage also captures another one of the crossover points between science and religion for Gifty. As a child, she followed her religious beliefs almost scientifically, experimenting with self-baptism and continual prayer. Later, when her family life descended into chaos, she operated under the mistaken hope that if she just followed the rules well enough, she could keep herself and her family safe from harm, or at least disprove the racist beliefs people held about her. From these earlier experiences, she learned that even science, with its rational approach to the world, has its limitations. One of the limitations she wasn't able to express

at first, though, was the way in which science often doesn't capture the transcendent experiences of being human. And it's this feeling of transcendence that seems to most affect Gifty in her success and that she wishes she could capture in her writing. The rules she's clung to are capable of many things, but they aren't capable of expressing the wonder and mystery of life, the feeling of holding her mouse-subject's life in her hand and ultimately healing him from the addiction she'd given him.

Chapter 53 Quotes

☝☝ I started reading my way through every entry I'd ever written, reading my way through what was essentially my entire conscious lifetime. I was so embarrassed by the early entries that I read them all, cringing and squinting my eyes in an attempt to hide from my former self. By the time I got to the years of Nana's addiction, I was undone. I couldn't proceed. I decided then and there that I would build a new Gifty from scratch. She would be the person I took along with me to Cambridge—confident, poised, smart. She would be strong and unafraid. I opened up a blank page and wrote a new entry that began with these words: *I will figure out a way to be myself, whatever that means, and I won't talk about Nana or my mom all the time. It's too depressing.*

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Nana, Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 275-276

Explanation and Analysis

When Gifty was young, her mother encouraged her to write her prayers to God in a journal and Gifty kept up this practice throughout her childhood, because it gave her a sense of power and holiness. After her brother Nana died of an accidental heroin overdose, she hid the journals away under her bed, only uncovering them when she is preparing to leave home for college at Harvard University. In this passage, she remembers how it felt to look at those old journals, and the resolution she made to create a better self to take to college.

At the beginning of the novel, Gifty repeatedly talks about how little continuity she feels between her childhood self and her adult self. However, her narration is interspersed with journal entries and memories that suggest there is more similarity between her juvenile and adult selves than she can see or admit. This passage reveals that her sense of discontinuity is more of a wish than reality. Made terribly unhappy by the pain and guilt that rereading her entries


makes her feel, she decides to create a new person from scratch. Yet, this is easier said than done. Gifty has lost her childhood faith in Christianity, but in college, she defends the belief of people like her mother. And her insistence on following the rules, maintaining self-control, and her single-minded loyalty to her family above all other connections are all threads that tie her present to her past. And while her initial decision to avoid talking about her mother and Nana is couched in terms of generosity—she worries that other people will think her boring or depressing if she only talks about sad stuff, and many of her experiences have been deeply sad—she ends up using her silence as a shield that protects and prevents her from forming intimate relationships with others.

Throughout her mother's second illness, Gifty refers to her journals, and, as she admits to Katherine, she still keeps a journal. Her acts of writing, reading, and revisiting help to demonstrate the cohesion between the many selves she thinks she has, and are thus an important part of the process by which she both allows herself to open up to people who want to befriend her and the process by which she differentiates herself from her mother and comes to accept herself for who she truly is.

Chapter 54 Quotes

☝☝ When I was a child, I had this sense of confidence, this assuredness that the things I felt were real and important, that the world made sense according to divine logic. I loved God, my brother, and my mother, in that order. When I lost my brother, poof went the other two. God was gone in an instant, but my mother became a mirage, an image formed by refracted light. I moved toward her, but she never moved toward me. She was never there. The day I came home from school and couldn't find her felt like the thirty-ninth day in the desert, the thirty-ninth day without water. I didn't think I'd be able to survive another. "Never again," my mother said, but I didn't believe her. Without meaning to or planning to, I'd spent seventeen years waiting for the fortieth day. Here it was.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Mother

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

After years of work, Gifty's research experiments into the underlying brain chemistry of addiction have been successful. It seems like her life is on track, at least

professionally; at home, she is still nursing her mother through her second bout of depression. Wanting to get her mother out of the house for the afternoon, Gifty returns home early, only to find that her mother is missing. In this passage, she describes her feelings in that moment, which align perfectly on top of her feelings on a day many years before when she tried to care for her mother during her first depression. On the day she came home from school to find her mother out of bed, she initially thought that her prayers and ministrations had been successful, that she'd called her mother back to life the way Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. But her hopes were soon dashed when she realized that her mother had gotten out of bed to attempt suicide.


That event, more than any of the other traumas she suffered as a young girl, seems to have marked Gifty and made her suspicious of the world and the people around her. Although she thought she had a deep faith in God when she was young, in this moment she realizes how much of that belief was contingent on the feeling of safety and security she had in her family. And in her family, her sense of security was dependent on her brother, Nana, rather than her busy, overworked, and unsentimental mother. When he died, she lost her sense of security and now she realizes that, in many ways, since that day she's never been able to relax her vigilance. She is always waiting for the next disaster. In this way, although she's utterly distressed to find her mother missing, she's also not surprised. She's been waiting for the next disaster since the last one, which happened more than 15 years ago. Realizing that she never trusted her mother's promise to not attempt suicide again, to not succumb to depression again, helps Gifty to see how stuck she has been in her childhood feelings.

Epilogue Quotes

☛ I wish I were trying to figure out how to clone an alien, but my work pursuits are much more modest: neurons and proteins and mammals. I'm no longer interested in other worlds or spiritual planes. I've seen enough in a mouse to understand transcendence, holiness, redemption. In people, I've seen even more.

From the back pew, Christ's face is the portrait of ecstasy. I stare at it, and it changes, goes from angry to pained to joyful. Some days, I sit there for hours, some days mere minutes, but I never bow my head. I never pray, never wait to hear God's voice, I just look. I sit in blessed silence, and I remember. I try to make order, make sense, make meaning of the jumble of it all. Always, I light two candles before I go.

Related Characters: Gifty (speaker), Mother, Han

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

Some years into the future, long after finishing her graduate research on the underlying neural pathways of addiction and nursing her mother through her second depression, Gifty is settled. She and Han are a couple and her mother, after living a long life, has died peacefully. Some days, after work, Gifty stops at the Episcopal church between her lab at Princeton University and her home to sit in the sanctuary. The only person she ever encounters there is the caretaker. Like Han, he has a taste for science fiction, and Gifty always suspects that *he* suspects that she is working on some nefarious, secret project like cloning aliens.

When Gifty was a child, she expected her religion to answer all her important questions. When she lost her faith in God, she transferred that expectation and hope to science, only to realize as an adult that it, too, is limited in its ability to transcend human awareness and answer the unanswerable questions of life. And now, she is at peace with those limitations. She understands that it isn't necessary to search for transcendence, the ability of a thing to stretch beyond its limits, in any system of belief. Human beings, in their ability to grow and evolve, to encompass ever more difficult tasks and painful traumas, are more than capable of transcending their nature on their own. Gifty's research allowed her to transcend her painful past, to individuate herself from her mother and to let go of the guilt she'd carried around with her after her brother's untimely death.

Now, as Gifty looks at the image of Christ on the cross that watches over the sanctuary, she no longer listens for a voice outside of herself. She has come to trust in the wisdom of her own experience, and to accept that it will be limited by her understanding. Instead of finding a fixed truth in the image of Jesus's face, Gifty realizes that it changes based on her own feelings. Nevertheless, although she hasn't returned to the faith of her childhood, she still hasn't lost her sense of the divine in the world around her. When she lights candles for her mother and her brother, she reaffirms her connection with and love for them, and takes the opportunity to connect, once again, with the transcendent divine that she feels all around her.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

When Gifty thinks of her mother, she pictures her mother lying in her bed during her two illnesses. During the first Gifty was a child and she was sent to Ghana. Walking through the market one day, her aunt pointed out a “crazy person” who stumbled around, mumbling and gesturing nonsensically.

Gifty doesn't know why her aunt pointed out the man. Maybe she thought there were no crazy people in America. Or she was contrasting Gifty's mother, sick in a way that Gifty didn't yet understand, with a truly crazy person. Her aunt's words reminded Gifty of her mother, with Pastor John's hand on her head while prayers buzzed quietly in the room.

Even now, when Gifty hears “crazy,” she imagines both the man in the market and her mother. The man seemed peaceful, despite his wild gestures. But her mother, lying perfectly still in bed, was “wild inside.”

The book opens with the image of Gifty's mother in bed, because her mother's depression—and the family tragedy that caused it—are the center around which Gifty's research work and personal life orbit. Gifty also saw a lot of her mother when she was in bed, since she was responsible for nursing her through at least part of both her illnesses, once when Gifty was a child, and later when she was an adult. The image of her motionless mother calls up another early vision of mental illness, this one characterized by excessive motion and sound. The comparison and contrast of these images of mental illness suggest that health and illness aren't easy to identify or understand from the outside.



Gifty's suspicion that her aunt was contrasting the crazy man with her mother suggests that, at least as a child, she didn't truly accept or understand that her mother was sick. As an adult and a neuroscientist, she understands that depression is an illness, not a character flaw. Her memory of the family's pastor praying for her mother's healing introduces the theme of science and religion. Since the prayers were evidently ineffective—her mother is still sick, so Gifty is in Ghana with relatives—Gifty's memories suggest her preoccupation with the ways both science and religion fail to answer important questions or solve painful problems.



Gifty finishes thinking through the comparison and contrast between her mother and the crazy man at the Ghanaian market. She suggests that both of them were wild, just in different ways. While the man expressed wildness, he seemed to be relatively content; in contrast, by silently containing her wildness inside of her, Gifty's mother was ill and suffering in a different, perhaps worse, way.



CHAPTER 2

At the beginning of her mother's second illness, Gifty discovers that her experimental **mice** have been fighting. She separates them as she speaks on the phone to Pastor John, who is worried because her mother isn't coming to church or answering the phone. He thinks that "it" is happening again, so Gifty asks him to send her mother to stay with her.

When her mother falls into her second depression, Gifty becomes her primary caretaker. Until that moment, her inclination towards taking care of others was directed towards the mice she uses in her neuroscientific experiments. The juxtaposition of the mouse's suffering with that of Gifty's mother introduces one of the book's important symbols: the mice stand in for Gifty's brother (and to a lesser extent her mother), helping her to understand the roots of her childhood trauma. On the phone, neither Gifty nor Pastor John can name her mother's depression. And his roundabout discussion of "it" clearly suggests that faith alone isn't the answer to what ails Gifty's mother.



When Gifty gets her mother from the airport, her mother seems empty. She doesn't even mock the "bleeding heart" that Gifty's hybrid-electric car signifies. When her mother calls her "my bleeding heart," Gifty assumes she means that Gifty left Alabama because her bleeding heart made her too weak to live among the Bible Belt's strong Christian folk. The **words** of her mother's clichés are always corrupted, like saying "crime shame" instead of "a crying shame."

When Gifty picks her mother up from the airport, she immediately falls into the old caretaking role she had as a child. Gifty also makes assumptions about what her mother believes (like that it's frivolous in some way to drive a hybrid vehicle) and presents them as fact. Readers should be careful about taking Gifty as a reliable narrator of her mother's inner life, even though Gifty herself thinks she knows her mother well enough to guess. The corrupted language of Gifty's mother's clichés arises, at least in part, from the fact that she's an immigrant and English is her second language. But it also points to the fragility of received ideas, including the religious dogma Gifty was taught as a child.



Gifty's mother stares out of the car windows while Gifty remembers how beautiful she found California initially. She wanted to find herself by getting lost, following advice she underlined when she read [Walden](#) in college. On a bridge, Gifty stares at another driver, making him uncomfortable. She thinks that everyone must look at the water and wonder if there's another way out.

As Gifty and her mother drive home, Gifty reflects on her reasons for coming to California, which included a desire for self-discovery. The fact that she's still thinking about her desire suggests that she hasn't discovered herself. The drive also offers important hints about Gifty's character: there's no reason for her to make the other drivers feel uncomfortable, except perhaps for her own discomfort over being forced into a caretaking role for her mother again. Moreover, her belief that everyone must be subtly suicidal suggests her worry over her mother (who once attempted suicide) but also her own fascination with death. Again, she's assuming that other people must feel what she herself feels.



During her first illness, Gifty's mother lost 70 pounds, so this time, Gifty buys a Ghanaian cookbook and a deep fryer to make her familiar **foods**. Her grandmother sold food from a cart in Kumasi, a city in Ghana. Because she was Fante, she refused to speak the Asante majority's language (Twi).

The brief aside about Gifty's grandmother, who refused on principle to learn the language of a tribe with whom her people were at war generations earlier, shows how stubbornness is a family trait that both Gifty and her mother will demonstrate. Gifty's worry over making sure her mother eats points to the way that food symbolizes both caretaking and intimacy in the book.



At her apartment, Gifty apologizes to her mother for the mess. Her mother could always find hidden dirt and would admonish Gifty, saying, "Cleanliness is godliness." Gifty would correct the **words** of the cliché, reminding her that "cleanliness is *next* to godliness," but her mother didn't see a difference.

Although Gifty is performing the role of the caretaker for her mother, her worry that she will get in trouble for not keeping her home clean enough suggests that in important ways she hasn't stopped seeing herself as a child in relation to her mother. The quibble of the two women over the words of the cliché shows how mother and daughter are both similar (both stubbornly hold to their version) and different in their worldviews.



CHAPTER 3

On the day that Gifty found her **mice** injured, her lab mate, Han, found her weeping in a corner. He tried to comfort her, but she imagined him fretting that he went into the hard sciences to *avoid* dealing with emotional women. In the bathroom, she tried to get ahold of herself, but instead felt like she had too many selves to hold on to at once.

Gifty reacts strongly to her injured mice, in part because they symbolize her family's troubles to her. When Han finds her, she assumes that she knows what he is thinking and presents it as fact, although readers have no evidence with which to judge Han's feelings. Readers should be careful about believing Gifty's unfounded assumptions about other people's thoughts. When she looks at herself in the bathroom mirror, Gifty confronts the quandary of her life: she hasn't yet developed a sense of individual identity, and thus doesn't understand how her experiences and past selves are connected and cohesive.



On the day of her mother's arrival, Han is in the lab before Gifty. They don't talk much; if she says more than "hello," his ears burn with embarrassment. After checking on her **mice**, she goes home, where her mother is sleeping in the bed. Gifty has forgotten what it's like to live with and care for her mother. Although they spent most of her life together, this arrangement is "unnatural," the result of their family shrinking from four to two.

Gifty assumes that Han is horrified or embarrassed by her, but it's also possible to read his shyness as attraction. Because readers don't see what Han really feels, they're stuck with Gifty's assumptions, at least for the time being. The juxtaposition of the mice and Gifty's mother underlines their connection: Gifty explicitly equates taking care of her experimental mice with taking care of her mother. In considering her caretaking role, Gifty understands it to be an unnatural reversal of the mother-daughter roles. And it emphasizes the losses in their family: Gifty takes care of her mother because there is no one else left besides the two of them.



CHAPTER 4

Excerpts from Gifty's childhood journal take the form of letters addressed to God. She wonders where God is, exactly: is he in space? In a second excerpt, Gifty complains that her mother (in the journal code-named "the Black Mamba") sneaks up on her. Nana (codenamed "Buzz") can do a good impression of her, sneaking around until he finds something on the floor and asks, "What is this?" He doesn't do the Chin Chin Man anymore. In a third excerpt, Gifty wonders what she looks like to God from space, and what God himself looks like.

Gifty's journals reveal the nature of her early faith, which was childlike and literal. They also point to her shrinking family: she speaks of her mother (the Black Mamba) and brother (Buzz), but her father (the Chin Chin Man) is noted only by his absence. These entries also illuminate Gifty's fear that her mother will find hidden dirt in her apparently clean apartment: she grew up feeling like both her mother and God are always watching her actions.



CHAPTER 5

Gifty recalls her family's story. Her father, the Chin Chin Man, met her mother buying **food** from her grandmother's cart. Her mother was 31 when they married, because God told her to wait for the right man. But she had trouble getting pregnant, and she wondered if, like Sarai in the Bible **verse**, she was too "worn out" to have a baby. But after her mother fasted and prayed for three days, Gifty's father "lay" with her and nine months later, Nana was born.

Gifty tells her family's history with borrowed biblical language (such as the euphemism of "laying together" for sex) and stories. This points to the Pentecostal faith in which she was raised, in which the events of one's life were meant to be interpreted almost exclusively through a biblical lens. Importantly, however, the biblical language pertains to her parents' lives together before Gifty's birth, suggesting the separation between their deeply held faith and her own lapsed Christian beliefs. Gifty reads her parents' story through the story of Abram and Sarai in the Hebrew Bible (and Christian Old Testament) to whom God promised many descendants through a son born in their old age.



Everyone adored Nana. The Chin Chin Man was happy in Kumasi, but her mother wanted to go to America. After some arguing, he relented, and she applied for a green card. She took Nana with her to Alabama to stay with a cousin who was getting a PhD until she had enough money to buy a plane ticket for him.

In the Bible story, God also gave Abram and Sarai a promised land. For Gifty's mother, the promised land is America, although from her adult perspective, Gifty knows that the family will only find dissolution and trauma there.



CHAPTER 6

Gifty's mother does nothing but sleep. She refuses to eat the *komo*, a favorite Ghanaian **food**, that Gifty makes after going to three stores for ingredients. Her mother's back is always turned to her. After five days, her mother asks Gifty if she still prays.

One of the ways Gifty tries to show care for her mother is with food. She puts a great deal of effort into making Ghanaian dishes, which her mother rejects. The fact that the first words her mother says to her concern the practice of Christianity suggest that her faith is more important to Gifty's mother than almost anything else, including her daughter.



Gifty thinks she was a merciful child, but she doesn't see any continuity between that child and herself. So, she tells her mother the harsh truth: she doesn't. Gifty remembers how, as a child, she prayed, read her Bible, and wrote letters to God in a journal, with code names for her family because she often wanted God to punish them for her. In excerpts, she complains to God that her mother (the Black Mamba) is being mean to her. She also brags about her adored brother Nana (Buzz), who got her treats and stuck up for her in games. But over time, he changed; one excerpt describes a night where he came home, yelled at their mother, and smashed up the living room. Gifty was 10. She remembers hiding in her bedroom with her mother while Nana raged and her mother prayed.

In the present, her mother tells Gifty that she should pray. Then she takes two bites of the **food**. When Gifty asks if it's okay, her mother shrugs and turns her back.

Gifty goes back to the lab and performs surgery on some of her **mice**. No matter how many times she sees a brain, she's still awed by its complexity. It's this complexity that makes Homo sapiens what they are: the only animal to have transcended its kingdom. For Gifty, the "unknowable" and "magical" brain has displaced the Pentecostalism of her childhood as her religion.

As a sixth-year PhD candidate in neuroscience at Stanford, Gifty is researching "the neural circuits of reward-seeking behavior," although she has learned to simplify how she describes her work to most people. Now she tells her dates that she gets **mice** hooked on cocaine and then takes it away. It thrills her to have something illicit and interesting to say, just like having sex makes her feel powerful. She didn't date in high school and spent college trying to move beyond the strict abstinence encouraged by her Christian faith.

In an earlier moment, Gifty looked at herself in the mirror and felt completely disconnected from her childhood self. Here, she thinks that she would have been kinder to her mother as a child than she is as an adult. But then her memory suggests otherwise: she was a dogmatic and unmerciful child, complaining to God when people did things she didn't like or approve of. These ruminations lead to a memory of her brother, Nana, when he was struggling with addiction and behaving in ways that scared and hurt Gifty and her mother.



When Gifty's mother eats a few bites of the food, it seems like a moment of redemption, or at least reconnection. But just as quickly, Gifty's mother turns her back on her daughter again. Gifty seems to feel that the silence is punishment for her lost faith rather than a symptom of her mother's depression.



Gifty's mother just asked if she still prayed and Gifty said no because she no longer identifies with the Pentecostal faith of her childhood. But that doesn't mean that she's lost her sense of wonder or a belief in the transcendent. It's just that now, science has become her religion. The brain, while available to scientific study, is so complex that it still seems mysterious and magical to Gifty. While her Pentecostal faith sought to transcend the merely human by appealing to God, as an adult, Gifty finds a sense of transcendence in the mysterious workings of human beings in and of themselves.



The experiments that Gifty performs on the mice, especially the way she describes them to bored dates, emphasizes their symbolic alignment with Nana, who became addicted to opiates and died of an accidental heroin overdose. Gifty's romantic history reveals how isolated she has become in response to her traumatic childhood: she sees relationships in terms of power dynamics rather than as intimate, mutually beneficial partnerships.



Gifty remembers a time when she asked her mother if she was beautiful. Her mother told Gifty to look at what God (and she) made, while forcing Gifty to look at herself in the mirror. When her work alarm went off, Gifty's mother put on her lipstick, kissed her own reflection, and left. Gifty kissed her own reflection, too.

As Gifty thinks about how sex makes her feel powerful, she remembers a moment when she felt small and unpowerful. Gifty remembers looking at her own reflection in the mirror with her mother, while her mother made her acknowledge her own beauty. If Gifty looks and acts like her mother as a child, then it follows that she would still look and act something like her as an adult. Since Gifty needs to separate herself from her mother in order to discover her own identity, this memory is a reminder of how stuck Gifty is at the beginning of the story.



Gifty tries not to humanize her mice, but she does wonder if they notice the weight of the lenses she puts in their brains. She goes to her office to try to work on finishing an article for publication. But despite a sign that says "TWENTY MINUTES OF WRITING A DAY OR ELSE," she has been "twiddling her thumbs" because the idea of graduating seems impossible. She doodles, then re-reads the journal entry that she keeps in her desk for inspiration.

Gifty prides herself on self-control and has done since she was a child. However, at this point in her research, she is struggling to hold on to that piece of her identity, and her inability to convince herself to work on the writing necessary to finish her degree suggests that she may have less control over herself than she imagined. The fact that she keeps a journal entry in her desk at the lab also suggests that there is more continuity between her past selves and her current self than she has been willing to admit.



In the entry, Gifty describes how handsome Nana looks as he dresses for prom in his special-ordered suit. When he gets into the limo with his date, he looks "normal." And although she begged God to let things stay like this, her brother died of a heroin overdose just a few months later.

Although it's been clear that something bad happened to Nana since the beginning of the story, it's only after Gifty begins to describe her research that the book reveals the cause of Nana's death. In fact, he died as the result of addiction, and addictive behavior is what Gifty studies in her mice. This reinforces the symbolic connection between Nana and the mice while also explaining part of the reason why Gifty lost her faith in a God who apparently didn't listen to her prayer to heal her brother.



CHAPTER 7

As a child, Gifty found the story of her parents' immigration insufficient, so she invented better stories. In kindergarten, she thought her teacher was punishing her by making her sit with a runny-nosed kid. To torment him, she claimed she was an African princess.

There have already been several moments when Gifty has interpreted someone else's thoughts or feelings and then presented her guesses as facts. Her willingness to embellish and retell her parents' story to make it suit her makes her an unreliable narrator of her family history and suggests the limitations of her insight as an adult. But this also points towards one of the quieter sources of trauma in Gifty's childhood: growing up both Black and as an immigrant in the American South.



Gifty wanted her family's story to either be a fairy tale or to reflect the war-torn and famine-stricken Africa she saw on TV. But her mother's stories were matter of fact and ordinary instead of exotic and desperate. A few months after her mother and Nana came to America, the Chin Chin Man joined them. Her mother was a home health aide, caring for the racist, cranky Mr. Thomas. Despite overwhelming evidence, Gifty's mother would never admit that they experienced racism in Alabama. Yet, her father couldn't find a job and became reclusive.

The Chin Chin Man's arrival reminded Gifty's mother of how much she owed God. And to help him out of his rut, she knew she needed to climb out of her own, so she started going back to church at the First Assemblies of God on Bridge Avenue. On her first visit, she knelt down, prayed for a long time, and started to feel like she might get used to America.

The story of how and why Gifty's family immigrated isn't exotic or exciting. Her parents wanted a better life and struggled to make one in the United States, where they were surrounded by racism. Gifty's story offers a stark reminder of how difficult life can be for immigrants and also that not all immigrants succeed in making a better or happier life in a new country. Her father seems to struggle from the moment he arrives.



The Chin Chin Man's arrival in America begins the family's relationship with their church. It's the first Pentecostal church Gifty's mother found. And at least as far as Gifty understands, it's the continuity of her faith that helped her mother to flourish in her newly chosen home.



CHAPTER 8

As a child, Gifty thought she would grow up to be a dancer, a worship leader, a preacher's wife, or an actress. She suspects her mother would have preferred worship leader, but she changed her mind on that career when she was old enough to go to the adult service and the singer's warbling soprano voice made her uncomfortable.

It reminded her of the **baby bird** she and Nana found when she was five. It had fallen from its nest. They brought it home, even though their mother would have unsentimentally left it to die. Gifty held the trembling bird while Nana got milk to feed it. The singer's voice reminded Gifty of the bird's trembling.

Next, Gifty planned to be a preacher's wife, and prepared by offering to pray for her friends' pets. One was a dog named Buddy, who was being threatened by a neighbor after he tipped over a garbage can and accidentally revealed the man's secrets. In her living room, Gifty laid hands on Buddy and asked God to give him a spirit of peace. His continuing survival showed her the efficacy of her prayers.

When Gifty mentions her childhood aspirations, it becomes a bit easier to see how she feels her adult self is totally different from her childhood self: nothing like a scientist is on her early list of dream careers. It's an early marker of difference between them that Gifty thinks her mother would have liked her to be a worship leader, when this was the potential career she crossed off her list first.



The worship leader's voice reminds Gifty of the baby bird, which in turn symbolizes her unacknowledged need to be cared for and loved. This subtly suggests an early intuition that the First Assemblies of God Church would be incapable of fulfilling Gifty's needs or answering her search for meaning. The siblings found the bird when Nana was still alive and was still a caretaker for his younger sister. Its unavoidable death after falling from the nest foreshadows how brief Gifty's experience of being cared for and protected will be.



Gifty's memory of her brief career as a future preacher's wife helps to paint a fuller picture of her character. Even as a young child, she relied on a sense of structure and order, a belief that if she did the right things (laying hands on Buddy the way church members lay hands on each other in prayer), then she would get the expected result.



When Nana was 15, their mother was cleaning his room and discovered hidden pills. Years later, at his funeral, she told Gifty that she blamed herself for not doing more. Gifty refused to comfort her, although she should have, because she felt angry and guilty, too. In the space of one tremble on that day, she stopped believing in God. When she was 15 herself, her biology teacher kindled her love of science. At the time, she felt that the teacher's platitudes about the compatibility of faith and science were ridiculous, but now they are comforting. Especially the idea that people don't know what they didn't know; science helps humanity experiment and explore until it illuminates one more tiny light in the dark.

This reminds Gifty of the Naked Egg experiment she did in middle school to learn about osmosis. Because her mother complained about having to buy corn syrup, Gifty asked the teacher for some. But this mortified her mother, who worried that the teacher would think they couldn't afford it. Watching the egg absorb colored water, all Gifty could think about was her mother's tantrum over the corn syrup bottle. Gifty thinks that her life with her mother was (and still is) an experiment testing whether they will be okay.

In the present, Gifty and her mother aren't talking. One night, when she goes to a party at Han's house, she approaches her colleague, Katherine. She's wary around Katherine, whom she feels overshadows. Katherine reminisces about her psychiatry practice, which she misses because she loved seeing people get better. Gifty knows that her mother didn't get better through therapy; she distrusted it and rejected mental illness as a Western invention.

Still, Gifty remembers that not long after the Naked Egg experiment, her mother climbed into bed and refused to get up. Only 11 years old, Gifty made her **food** and learned to clean the house. When she found her mother in an overflowing bathtub, she felt betrayed, since she thought she was doing a good job.

Gifty's refusal to comfort her mother at Nana's funeral is a second piece of evidence disproving her earlier belief that she was a merciful child. It seems that, for a long time, she has refused to show her mother compassion. The funeral is also the point at which she stopped believing in God, although she doesn't yet reveal the specific reasons for her loss of faith. When she stopped believing in Christianity, she found her teacher's attempts to square faith and science childish, but as an adult, she's become more willing to acknowledge the limitations of her own knowledge (and human knowledge generally). This is one of the ways in which religion and science are similar: they are both responses to the limitations of human knowledge.



The memory of the Naked Egg experiment touches on many of Gifty's important formative experiences. Her mother's horror at learning that Gifty asked the teacher for supplies points to her mother's independence and pride in supporting her family all by herself in America. The tantrum her mother threw is an early indication of the reversal of roles between the two, foreshadowing how Gifty will have to become the parent when her mother becomes depressed. And the bird's egg recalls the baby bird that Nana and Gifty found, pointing towards Gifty's need for intimacy and love at a time in her life when she felt that she no longer had either.



Gifty recalls the Naked Egg experiment in the context of her mother's silence, almost suggesting that her old tantrum might have been preferable. Desperate for connection, Gifty goes to a party at Han's house. But when she's there, it becomes clear that she has no idea how to get her need for intimacy met, since she's completely unwilling to share anything about either her past or her current situation.



The memory of the Naked Egg experiment is also connected to the memory of her mother's suicide attempt, since both represent times that child Gifty thought she misunderstood what her mother wanted or needed from her. She tried to perform her mother's caretaking tasks (cooking and cleaning), believing that if she did them "right," then she'd get the result she wanted—her mother's return to normal.



In the present, Gifty thinks about how she went into neuroscience because it is such a hard subject. After Nana's addiction and her mother's depression, she wanted to prove that she had no mental weakness. She was "a self-righteous child," who used to pray for classmates she considered sinful and who lacked empathy for "small things" like friends' breakups.

Eventually, her mother's depression had "healed through prayer," but her mother was like a broken bone that hadn't been properly set, no longer strong or straight. In the present, Gifty goes home after the party to discover that her mother has been out of bed. Gifty thinks that they're doing okay.

Gifty claims that she went into neuroscience to prove her own strength, which ties into her ongoing need to demonstrate masterful self-control. Thus, although she's experimenting on mice to discover if it's possible to adjust the way the brain reacts to reward, her choices in life have betrayed her belief that she can moderate her behavior on her own. Additionally, based on being raised by a distant mother and losing her beloved brother prematurely, for Gifty "self-control" primarily seems to mean holding herself apart from other people.



After Nana's death and her mother's depression, Gifty grew up needing to prove that she could control herself (unlike them). Yet, it's not through self-control but through time and faith that her mother healed, suggesting a truth Gifty hasn't yet realized: that sometimes an outside force is necessary to moderate or change a person's behavior. And there are indications that time will heal her again: like when Gifty comes home from her failed attempt to connect with others to find that her mother has gotten out of bed, at least briefly.



CHAPTER 9

The Chin Chin Man finally found work as a janitor at a daycare center, where the children loved his accent, his height, and his stories about being one of two living tree-men that grew in a forest in Africa. When Nana was in kindergarten, the Chin Chin Man would take care of him while Gifty's mother worked. She became jealous of how close father and son were, although she herself never kept the things he made her or listened to his stories. Gifty listened to the stories, including the tree-man one. Once she asked if their mother was the second tree-person, and Nana said no, their father was a tree, but their mother was a rock.

In the present, Gifty looks at her **mice** in the lab and they remind her of the **baby bird**. After she and Nana couldn't get it to drink, they tried to encourage it to fly. When their mother came home, she told them it would never fly now; since they'd touched it, its mother would reject it and it would die. Nana, a lover of animals, cried. While Gifty thinks about this, she stimulates a mouse's neural pathways.

Gifty isn't just a carbon copy of her mother; this memory illustrates how she shares her tendency to tell stories—such as claiming that she's an African princess in kindergarten—with her father. The domestic arrangements of Gifty's family also point towards the struggles they experienced as immigrants: the Chin Chin Man struggled to find work and then became the children's primary caregiver because Gifty's mother remained the primary breadwinner. As children, she and Nana thus found their mother humorless and uninteresting, like a rock. It's only as she ages herself that Gifty can start to understand some of the traumas that made her mother into the person she knows.



The baby bird represents Gifty's need to be loved and nurtured. After Nana's death, she tried to bury those needs. Although Gifty's mother is right that by trying to save the bird, they doomed it, the message is painful for Gifty. She wants to know that if she follows the rules and does the right things, that her life will work out well. While she remembers the baby bird Gifty continues to work with her mice. Like her memories, the mice connect her to Nana, since she's trying to figure out a way to prevent tragedies like his addiction from occurring.



Once, she explained this to a boyfriend called Raymond in an overly simplistic way, and he chastised her for downplaying her intelligence and work. This memory reminds Gifty of telling her mother she wanted to be a scientist. On a visit home from college, she made a promise to go to church, which she immediately regretted. So, she followed it by announcing her career plan, expecting her mother to object. She reflects that she'd already become her mother's daughter, a callous person. Once, when her mother said, "I love you" (a phrase she used to call "white people foolishness") at the end of a phone call, Gifty laughed in surprise. Still, when Gifty went to church that visit, she felt like her mother asked Pastor John to make her a focus of his prayer.

As Gifty returns the **mouse** to its cage, saying a small prayer that her experiments will work, she thinks about her research on identifying the neural mechanisms at play when the brain's reward system is insufficient (depression) or overactive (addiction). She wonders if someday, her research could lead to a brother putting down a needle, or a mother getting out of bed.

Gifty's train of thought connects the memory of her failure to nurture the baby bird with another of her ex-boyfriend, Raymond. He was interested in her intellect and her work, unlike her mother, who didn't seem to care much one way or the other what Gifty chose to do with her life. Thus, he represented an opportunity to find the intimacy that Gifty craves. In contrast, her mother has always been distant and callous, and Gifty thinks that this has made her, in turn, callous. She remembers trying to goad her mother into being upset with her career choice and her frustration that her mother, if she was bothered, expressed it indirectly by asking Pastor John for his prayers.



Gifty's thoughts circle and revisit an earlier claim that she had gone into neuroscience to prove her mental toughness, not because of her family history. But this time, it's her brother and her mother that are front and center in her thoughts, and it seems that trying to address the sources of her family's suffering are an important part of why Gifty studies what she does. This moment shows other connections that Gifty has previously denied, too. She still prays, even if she doesn't fully accept her Christian faith anymore, showing continuity between her childhood and adult selves. And her prayers are connected with her hopes for her research, demonstrating the similarity between religion and science as belief systems in Gifty's mind.



CHAPTER 10

Gifty's mother used to tell Gifty that she wasn't a very good baby. Nana had been a miracle and Gifty's birth when her mother was 40 was in its shadow. Her mother made her understand that in a "matter-of-fact" but not "cruel" way. Yet, when Nana died, these "facts" started to feel cruel.

For Gifty, even the story of her own birth demonstrates how she has something to prove. Her mother had wanted Nana but Gifty was a surprise. And, unlike her older brother, she was a trial to her mother when she was an infant. Although (or perhaps because) she clearly longs for a deeper connection with her mother, Gifty continually excuses her less-than-intimate maternal behavior, trying to convince herself (and readers) that things that actually felt cruel were just facts.



But, when Gifty's family had four members, their life was sweet. The Chin Chin Man, of whom she has pleasant (if distant) memories, had steady work as a janitor. As an adult, Gifty is quiet and shy, but she was a chatty baby. When she sees or hears herself on recordings from that time, she feels like she's seeing another person. In one, Nana tries to tell their father a story while she babbles urgently in the background. Adult Gifty hears genuine fear and warning in baby Gifty's voice. Eventually, Nana becomes angry enough to slap her and get in trouble.

In the present, Gifty's mother is eating again, but not in front of Gifty, and only Amy's Chunky Tomato Bisque. Gifty has lots of convenience foods because she is a busy grad student, although she feels ashamed of her purchases at the grocery store. As Gifty sits in her mother's room to eat, her mother still refuses to face her. After her mother's first depression, Gifty made herself an expert on her face and its moods. But now it is hidden from her.

This makes Gifty think of Edward Tronick's "Still Face Experiment," which asks mothers to first interact with their babies then to turn to stony-faced silence. In response, the babies panic and suffer. When she watched the video of this experiment in college, Gifty was reminded of the childhood tape of her babbling. But watching the video of the experiment was harder because the students had to see the babies' distress. One student ran out of the room crying. In the present, she thinks of her relationship with her mother as the "Turned Back" experiment. She feels that the harm she'll suffer will be minimal, because she's a fully formed adult and a scientist who understands her mother's mental illness as a disease. Nevertheless, desperate to get her mother to speak with her, she lies a little and says that she still prays sometimes.

For the first time, Gifty shows a true contrast between her childhood (or babyhood) self and her adult self that seems to support the feelings of discontinuity she has about her life. She was a chatty baby, but she is a quiet adult. The question of what changed has already been partially answered: we know that her father will leave the family picture at some point and then Nana will die. But perhaps another clue lies in the family recordings: Nana slaps Gifty for demanding attention when he himself wants it. Although the Chin Chin Man disciplines Nana, the lesson is clear, even to baby Gifty: Nana is the family's center.



Although Gifty has tried to forge an intimate connection with her mother by cooking elaborate Ghanaian food, her mother rejects her attempts and will only eat canned soup. Her turned back is another sign of rejection: she refuses to talk to her daughter and she denies Gifty the opportunity to glean any information about her feelings from looking at her face. The fact that Gifty became an expert in her mother's moods by sight as a child shows how long her functioning in her family has relied on correctly guessing her mother's feelings.



The connection between the audio recording of baby Gifty and the adult Gifty is rejection. Gifty, as yet unable to acknowledge this truth to herself, expresses it mostly by resorting to the comfort of a scientific explanation. In this way, she uses scientific papers almost like a Christian uses the Bible: as a holy text that allows her to understand how the world around her works. In this case, she references a famous study about maternal rejection which also explains how a chatty baby Gifty might have become a withdrawn, suspicious adult Gifty: the babies who are treated to the stony-faced mother panic and quickly become withdrawn and wary. And Gifty's attempt to connect with her mother by reassuring her that she does still sometimes pray contradicts her assertion that she's unharmed by her mother's turned back. The rejection clearly affects Gifty and still makes her suffer, even if she's somewhat used to it by now.



As a child, Gifty worried about a Bible verse, the **words** of which tell believers to pray without ceasing. This felt impossible to her. Her mother asked her what she thought prayer was, and Gifty was stumped. She approached faith like homework, expecting that following the rules would yield predictable results. Her mother replied that living a godly life is a kind of prayer. She also suggested that if it was hard to pray, Gifty could write her prayers to God. Gifty began her journal that night, hooked on the feeling it gave her of being connected to God. In the present, she wonders if slurping soup with her mother is prayer.

The degree of Gifty's lie about still praying depends on how one defines prayer. When she was a child, she interpreted the words of the Bible very literally, so verses saying things like "pray continually" confused and alarmed her. Her first attempt to follow this commandment was literal and she found that it failed. But her mother (as readers have already seen at the beginning of the book) interprets received wisdom like clichés and Bible verses more flexibly. She suggests to Gifty that a life well-lived could be a kind of prayer. And if that's the case, then adult Gifty's claim that she still prays might not be so much of a lie.



CHAPTER 11

In an excerpt from Gifty's childhood journal, she tells God that she and Nana raced to the car after church, and she almost won. She is sure she will beat him next time. In a second excerpt, she asks God to bless Nana and her mother and to let Nana get a dog.

These excerpts from Gifty's journal show the simplicity of her childhood faith, how centered her world is around her mother and her brother, and how loving and complete her world felt when Nana was still in it. They help to contextualize the magnitude of the loss Gifty and her mother suffered when Nana died.



CHAPTER 12

Gifty remembers watching a surgery that stimulates neurons in the brains of people with Parkinson's disease to improve motor functions. The patient is kept awake during the procedure. Stimulating the right area of the brain slowed the tremors in his hands. But when the doctor moved the electrode slightly, the patient began to weep. Gifty reflects on the short distance—just one-tenth of a centimeter—between “pretty good and unimaginable sorrow.” Optogenetics, the technology of her work, targets individual neurons better than DBS (deep brain stimulation).

Gifty's memory of the deep brain stimulation surgery illustrates how challenging her research is: there's a fine line between “fixing” someone's brain and potentially causing harm. This further points to how fragile the brain is in general: the line between a normal brain and an addicted or depressed brain, this passage seems to imply, is equally thin.



Parkinson's reminds Gifty of Mr. Thomas's funeral, although she's not sure if her memories of the day (she was three) are accurate. She thinks she remembers her parents fighting about whether they should go, and one of Mr. Thomas's children apologizing to her mother for how awful Mr. Thomas was. On the way home, Gifty's mother, horrified by the sin of speaking ill of the dead, made the Chin Chin Man pull over so the family could pray on the side of the road for Mr. Thomas's soul and for the family's protection.

As elsewhere in the book, one of Gifty's memories links to other memories of her childhood. In this case, the link is the brain disease, Parkinson's, that united the deep brain stimulation patient and her mother's first long-term home-health client, Mr. Thomas. Gifty acknowledges the unreliability of her memories here (since she was three at the time), and this offers readers a pointed reminder that Gifty's memories of childhood are shaped by the rest of her life experience and shouldn't simply be accepted at face value. Her parents' fear that speaking ill of the dead would put them at spiritual risk highlights the distinctly Ghanaian way her parents understood their Christianity, which was in contrast to the way most of the American members of their church practiced their faith.



That prayer, like all the others of Gifty's childhood, ended with the **words**, "In Jesus's name, amen." Some of those prayers were offered at Nana's soccer games. The Chin Chin Man loved soccer for its dancing elegance and precision. Gifty remembers one game, where a father on the other team loudly admonished his son, "Don't you let them niggers win." Nana played the second half with pure, consuming fury, winning the game. Gifty remembers the joy of his win, despite the white man's hate. But she also learned that she has something to prove and must do so with "blazing brilliance."

The words "in Jesus's name, amen" link all of the prayers of Gifty's childhood together, because sacred words like these help people make meaning out of their lives. Unfortunately, the harsh words of parents at Nana's soccer games also illustrate the values of many in the community in which Gifty and Nana grew up. Thus, Gifty learned early on in life that she needed to disprove others' racist beliefs about her abilities.



CHAPTER 13

When Nana started playing soccer, Gifty's mother and father started fighting about **food**. Gifty wasn't allowed to waste food or be a picky eater, although she tried. Nana consumed everything in sight. Their parents closely tracked their grocery bills, tried to stretch things, and started hiding food around the house. Once Nana and Gifty, home alone, went on a search for hidden foods and drinks including chocolate. Their mother found the wrappers in the trash and was irate. Their father defended their hunger, but this started a fight. Nana took Gifty to his room, gave her a coloring book and crayons, and praised her work while their parents fought beyond the closed bedroom door.

The familial fights about food indicate the growing tension and unhappiness between Gifty's parents. And they show how food isn't just a symbol of intimacy and caretaking, but it can also be a site of worry and control. When Nana helps Gifty find food to assuage her hunger and when he shields her from their parents' fight, he shows that he's already become her primary caretaker. Gifty's mother withholds food, her brother offers it. This is part of why his addiction and death are so traumatic, because they cost Gifty the only relationship in which she feels uncomplicatedly loved and protected.



CHAPTER 14

Gifty started dating Raymond—who was sexy, intoxicating, and a preacher's son—during the first year of grad school. Their relationship recaptures what she felt reading the **words** of the Song of Songs in secret as a child, relishing their sensual, forbidden pleasure. Raymond liked to host parties where he talked about ideas with his friends while they ate sumptuous **foods** he'd prepared. He encouraged Gifty to talk about her research. By that time, she'd trained her **mice** to seek the caloric reward of Ensure by pressing a button with their feet, then changed the conditions so that they sometimes get the reward, and sometimes get a painful shock. Some quickly stopped trying, others stopped slowly, and some (the addicts) couldn't.

The memory of Gifty's closeness with Nana leads to memories of Raymond, her first serious boyfriend. Like Nana, he thought Gifty was smart and talented and encouraged her. Her feelings for Raymond are tied up with her old religious feelings—he makes her feel the emotions behind some of the most sensual passages in the Bible. And her memories of their relationship are tied to food that is as abundant and delicious as the food of her childhood was scarce and unsatisfying. It's symbolically important that her relationship with Raymond occurs around the same time she's started to test her addicted mice. What Gifty craves is a 1:1 correspondence between her actions and results. She deprives her mice of this correspondence by making their rewards and punishments random. And, in any relationship, it's impossible to have such a 1:1 correspondence. In a way, she will perform the same experiment on Raymond, sometimes disclosing her thoughts to him while hiding the facts of her life from him at others.



Gifty's parents began to fight daily, about money, chores, and the **words** of Scripture. The Chin Chin Man left his parents and his country for his marriage. He missed Ghana and wanted to go back home. But America was the only home Nana and Gifty had known. Eventually, their father went home to visit family and never came back. Gifty was four. At first, Nana and Gifty's mother would talk on the phone with her father regularly.

Adult Gifty thinks about how callous her mother is, reminding herself that calluses form over wounds to protect them. She feels angry when she thinks about how the Chin Chin Man abandoned his family to fend for themselves and lied to them about coming back. But her mother never said anything bad about him and didn't want Nana to hate him either.

The addicted **mice** are the most interesting to Gifty. During her mother's second depression, she was trying to find ways to "turn on" the neurons that should have stopped the mice from their addictive behavior. She remembers another dinner with Raymond and his friends, where she described her work. They thought she was interested how people restrain themselves, not understanding that addiction changes brain chemistry so much that the mice are no longer "themselves." Raymond's friends connect this idea to **words** from *King Lear*. Gifty didn't stay to wash dishes. She was upset that the others only seemed to talk and identify issues, rather than doing something to solve them.

The Chin Chin Man's challenging experience as an immigrant to the United States eventually breaks up Gifty's parents' marriage. His tale shows that not all immigrants to the promised land (in this case, America) are ultimately successful. Some decide that their home is the promised land instead and return. Because sacred words are a way that Gifty—and her family—understand themselves, it's fitting that her parents' fights include disagreements over scripture. The verse to which her father alludes when he talks about leaving his parents and country is Genesis 2:24. But the Chin Chin Man's inability to stay, or even to leave his family openly and honestly, show that these words have a limited capacity, in and of themselves, to direct people's actions.



Remembering the way that her father abandoned the family gives Gifty a greater sense of compassion for her mother. And her mother's refusal to speak ill of the Chin Chin Man, or to allow her children to do so, reveals part of how Gifty developed her extreme reluctance to talk to others about her pain and suffering. She was taught, early on, that it wasn't acceptable to complain.



Again, Gifty's assertions that she went into neuroscience because it was hard, not because of her family history, are contradicted by her affection for the addicted mice, which are clearly representative of her brother's addiction. Looping back to the beginning of the chapter, Gifty remembers a less than pleasant experience at one of Raymond's dinner parties. Raymond, who appreciates her talents, encourages her to talk about her work. But when she does so, his friends don't seem to understand why the work is important to Gifty, because (as she believes) they would rather talk about issues than look for solutions. Their inability to see things the way she does causes a rift between her and Raymond, and makes her distrust sharing herself with him in a truly intimate way.



CHAPTER 15

In Sunday School, Gifty was taught that sin was anything a person says, thinks, or does that goes against God. Because she was good and pious, she didn't worry about saying and doing, but she worried about whether people had control over their thoughts. She knew she could control one layer, but not the rest, which she now understands is the subconscious.

Gifty thinks of Jesus's **words** in Matthew telling his followers to love God with their hearts (the part that feels), minds (the part that thinks), and souls (the part that is). Neuroscientists don't talk about the soul, equating it with the brain. But as a child, Gifty believed in the soul. She remembers praying for the soul of Buddy the dog before he died. She wonders what child Gifty would make of adult Gifty, although she realizes she's mostly looking for new names for old feelings, and that she gives the brain the same qualities she used to give to the soul.

Gifty has few memories of the Chin Chin Man, and most come from family stories. After he left, they tried to keep their lives the same for his eventual return. Nana started playing more soccer, earning a spot on the travel team. But once, when it was Gifty's mother's turn to chaperone, she had to take Gifty along, too. Gifty made a nuisance of herself on the two-hour bus ride to the game. When they arrived, Nana refused to get off the bus and said he didn't want to play anymore.

In comparing her childhood intuition that she only had control over some of herself—her words and actions, but not her thoughts—with her adult understanding of the subconscious, Gifty draws another line of comparison between religion and science. Both understand that there is a difference between what one does consciously (words and actions) and what one thinks. But, for Gifty, who wanted to be able to follow the rules and do the right things, the idea that she could sin in an area she couldn't fully control was horrifying. Science, by releasing the conscious mind from responsibility for the subconscious mind, releases her of the unnecessarily harsh responsibility for her thoughts she felt from her religious upbringing.



On some levels, Gifty understands that her adult approach to science is not so different from her childhood reliance on religion. Both offer to explain some of what makes a person a person. But neither can fully explain what that is. Religion calls it the "soul" but doesn't fully explain how this is different from or dependent on the heart and the mind. Neuroscience accepts the brain as the controlling force behind the person that is, but can't fully explain how the brain works.



The memory of the bus ride on which Nana decided to quit soccer is pivotal in several ways. First, it marks the moment when Gifty, Nana, and their mother all tacitly accept that the Chin Chan Man won't be coming back for them, ever. Second, it explains how Gifty fell into her familial role of caretaker. And third, it shows how Nana's dedication and drive, when deprived of their purpose (soccer was an important way he connected with his father), can turn inward in dangerous ways.



Instead of pointing out how much she'd sacrificed for the trip and how precarious the family's situation was, Gifty's mother sighed deeply. She told Nana that he didn't have to play anymore. She walked with her children to the Greyhound bus station and rode back to Huntsville with them wrapped in her arms. That day was the end of Gifty's naughtiness. At home, her mother sealed Nana's soccer gear into a box and hid it in the garage.

Gifty's transition from troublemaker to caretaker happens on this one day, at least in her memory. Now that the family understands that they have shrunk by one member, the roles are reassigned. Nana becomes Gifty's primary caretaker. And in her own way, Gifty tries to become a caretaker in her own right by ending her naughtiness and trying to ease her mother's challenging life by being a good girl. Importantly, this is also one of the few memories Gifty has where her mother acts in a comforting, maternal way rather than her usual, more strict and direct form of address. The embrace the three share on the bus ride home shows their dependence on each other, but also highlights how isolated they are in the community in which they live. They have each other and no one else to rely on.



CHAPTER 16

Gifty asks Katherine to lunch. Gifty arrives early and takes her **food** to sit outside in the sunshine. It reminds her (by contrast) of her undergrad years at Harvard, where she hated the cold weather and had to get a UV lamp (to combat Seasonal Affective Disorder) from mental health services. While she waits, she watches two undergraduates fighting. One storms off and the other notices Gifty staring, but Gifty refuses to look away or give her privacy for her embarrassment. She wants to say her life is worse than whatever drama just unfolded between them.

Food continues to symbolize the intimacy of relationships, so as she tentatively forges a friendship with Katherine, Gifty asks her to share a meal. But, when Katherine is running a little late, Gifty eats her meal alone, which shows how unready she still is to form truly intimate connections with other people. Sitting in the sunshine reminds Gifty of her own brush with depression, which she refuses to admit amounted to more than seasonal affective disorder after moving from the South to cold and cloudy Massachusetts. And, as she watches the undergraduates argue, she again demonstrates the mercilessness she's learned to show in adulthood. It's clear that she sees others' drama as a sign of their own weak wills and lack of self-control. She believes that her problems are much worse, but she isn't making a scene about them.



Katherine is 30 minutes late. There aren't very many women in their department, and Gifty hasn't felt the need to connect with them. She doesn't understand Katherine's commitment to being a woman in STEM. Gifty doesn't want to be thought of as a Black or female scientist, but just as a scientist. She feels that womanhood is a millstone around her neck. She doesn't want to talk with Katherine about their work, anyway; she wants to talk about her mother's depression, which isn't improving.

Gifty learned in childhood that she couldn't show any weaknesses, so she doesn't want to lean into her female or Black identities, preferring to be simply a genderless, raceless "scientist." Anything else feels like a needless burden. The proverbial idea of the millstone around the neck—the faster to drown a person—comes from the Bible, Matthew 18:6. Katherine, on the other hand, is comfortable enough with her own identity that she wears cheeky tee-shirts about being a "STEMINIST" or STEM-feminist hybrid.



Gifty doesn't know what to do. In desperation, she had Pastor John pray for her mother over the phone. She can't commit her. But Gifty can't bring herself to open up to Katherine. Instead, she says that she's stressed about finishing her article, and Katherine reminds her to take good care of herself. Gifty doesn't even know what that would look like. She's doing the best she can for her **mice**, her mother, and herself. It reminds her of being offered counseling at Harvard. She felt sad but assured herself that it was just the weather. She had wanted challenge and rigor and she hadn't wanted help.

Gifty's concern about her mother's ongoing depression has reached such a level that she's caved to religion and asked Pastor John to pray for her mother and that she wants to talk to Katherine about it. But she's not yet ready to make that second leap, so she deflects the conversation on to her own struggles. This follows a pattern that she learned in childhood, to keep family troubles within the family. When the larger community found out about Nana's addiction, they abandoned and judged the family rather than trying to help, damaging Gifty's ability to trust others. Katherine's hope that Gifty is taking care of herself reminds Gifty that she doesn't know what self-care looks like, because she has spent so much of her life worrying about and caring for others. She has, instead, prided herself on not needing help, even when she was sad and lonely at Harvard.



CHAPTER 17

Gifty's sophomore year at Harvard was very hard. She struggled to collaborate in her Integrated Science course and her participation grade struggled. Although she practiced things to say in class, she couldn't bring herself to talk. Her lab partners, Yao, Molly, Zach, Anne, and Ernest, tended to exclude her. Zach was a goofball, and one day he joked about students on campus handing out small Bibles, claiming he'd taken one and then climbed onto a statue to shout, "GOD DOESN'T EXIST!"

Gifty struggled when asked to work with others, because she had trained herself not to need the help of other people. But she learned to overcome this in Integrated Sciences, in part because her lack of participation was interpreted as a lack of knowledge or intelligence by others, especially her male classmate Yao. What jolted her out of her silence was a challenge to the religious beliefs she had mostly—but not completely—given up by the time she got to college.



Gifty interrupted the group's laughter to ask how they knew that God didn't exist. Anne, whom Gifty likes for being the smartest one in the group, jumped on her. She said it wasn't just ridiculous but dangerous to believe in God, pointing to religious wars and anti-LGBT laws. Gifty replied that "Belief can be powerful and intimate and transformative," too, not just evil. But Anne retorted that religion is the "opiate of the masses." After a tense moment, Yao brought their attention back to the project. Gifty wasn't yet sure how she felt about her own faith, but she was protective of her mother's. And after this outburst, she spoke up more in class.

Gifty's college classmates represent a point of view that science and religion are completely opposed to each other. But because they're just students, so much younger and less experienced than the adult Gifty who narrates the book, the story suggests that their belief in this division is likewise immature and incomplete. In class that day, Gifty tried to articulate this, but as an immature and somewhat inexperienced person herself, she's not quite able to yet. Nevertheless, her defense of religious belief introduces her to Anne, the first truly intimate relationship she has after the death of her brother. Additionally, her defense of religion places her both in line with and opposed to her mother and is thus an important part of her growing sense of individuality. She no longer subscribes to Christianity as wholeheartedly as she did when she was a child, but she's not willing to completely deny the importance and comfort of religion to her mother.



CHAPTER 18

Gifty has been saved and baptized in the spirit, but not in water. Nana was baptized as a baby in Ghana, where the attitude towards belief was “more is more,” up to and including indigenous practices like the witch doctor. But in Alabama, the Pentecostals didn’t believe in infant baptism, thinking it needed to be a person’s own choice. Gifty spent her childhood waiting for a near-death experience to be “saved,” since she took the church’s words literally. She tried to invite Jesus into her heart, but she worried when she couldn’t tell if he’d accepted her invitation or not. Gifty longed to be baptized since it was a clear sign of salvation, and she tried to surreptitiously baptize herself in the bathtub a few times.

In the present, when Gifty’s wounded **mouse** dies, she blesses it. She realizes that she needs the mice more than they need her, because they are the key to her understanding. She believes that if her collaboration with them isn’t holy, it’s sacrosanct, although she knows that both the scientists and Christians in her life would be scandalized by her views.

At home, Gifty tries to draw her mother out of her depression with music and by cleaning, believing that the harsh but familiar smell of bleach will make her feel more comfortable. One day, as Gifty dusts the windowsill, her mother asks her for some water. This makes Gifty almost impossibly happy. When her mother is done drinking, she lays back down and refuses more water. But she does chide Gifty for her dreadlocks, which she doesn’t like. Gifty stifles laughter at this sign of her mother’s life beneath her depression.

Gifty’s religious tradition emphasizes personal choice and responsibility, so she wasn’t baptized as a child. This created anxiety for her, since she didn’t have a definitive sign that she’d been saved. As a child, Gifty longed for certainty in her religion. As an adult, although she still hopes to find answers with her scientific research, she knows that certainty isn’t guaranteed. And usually the certainties of scientific advance happen in very small and incremental steps. It’s also in line with Gifty’s self-sufficient character that she attempted to take matters into her own hands and self-baptize several times, just to have the sense that she’d followed the correct steps.



The mouse’s death forces Gifty to reflect on the incremental nature of scientific revelation, and to accept that her success in her experiments isn’t guaranteed. Since she wants science—and her life—to reward her proper steps with a sure answer, this is a challenge for Gifty to accept. This is another one of the ways that Gifty understands science and religion to be more similar than different: both require their followers to have faith in the larger process, even when roadblocks like a failed experiment, a dead experimental subject, or personal traumas arise.



Gifty’s attempts to connect with her mother are rewarded randomly; in this way, Gifty herself is like her mice, who never know if they’ll receive a dose of Ensure or a painful shock. This is the key to her excessive reaction to her mother’s simple request. It’s also notable that Gifty is trying to draw her mother out by being good, and by doing tasks in the way she believes her mother wants or will approve of. Readers will come to learn that cleaning and cooking weren’t sufficient to heal her mother in the first depression, yet Gifty hasn’t yet figured out a new approach. Like her mice, she’s stuck in a reactive rut. Moreover, her mother doesn’t respond to the cleaning so much as expressing her disapproval over Gifty’s choice of hairstyle; the intimacy Gifty stubbornly wants to feel with her mother continues to elude her.



CHAPTER 19

In college, Gifty took a class on Gerard Manley Hopkins for her humanities requirement. Most science students took creative writing as an easy course, but she feared the self-disclosure writing might have involved. The professor was obsessed with Hopkins's use of language. Gifty couldn't understand the professor's obsession, but she was moved by Hopkins's life and struggles to reconcile himself with his faith. His letters inspired Gifty to write to her mother, although she never sent the letters. The letters alternated between being declarations of her belief in God, and of her belief in science.

Nana, in contrast to the younger, believing Gifty, was conflicted about God. Gifty recalls how he hated their church's youth pastor, P.T. P.T.'s attempts to ingratiate himself with the youth were heavy-handed. Gifty remembers this because when Nana graduated to youth group, she acted out in Sunday School until she was permitted to join her brother. She relished the superiority; she knew this privilege basically acknowledged her goodness.

P.T.'s desire to make God "hip" was aggressive. Gifty imagines him thinking Jesus was a club and that he was one of its bouncers. One day, Nana challenged this "exclusionary God." He asked about a hypothetical remote village in Africa that no missionaries had discovered, and he asked if the villagers would go to Hell even though they hadn't had the opportunity to be saved. With an insufficient caveat that God would have made a way for them to hear the good news, P.T. rapidly answers that if they hadn't, of course they would be damned. This was a sign that he saw God as a prize only certain people deserved.

Gifty was aware of the racism around her: the exploitation of hunger and suffering to get missionaries for Africa, even though poverty wasn't purely a racial issue. P.T.'s lack of consideration for the hypothetical Africans was based on the belief that some people were subhuman, no better than dogs. After this, Nana stopped going to youth group.

Gerard Manley Hopkins was a late Victorian whose conversion to Catholicism and subsequent choice to become a celibate Jesuit priest were in conflict with his romantic spirit and his poetic vocation. As a deeply religious man, yet one who struggled to integrate the various aspects of his life, Hopkins becomes a kind of example that Gifty can think with and use while she discovers and articulates her own troubled relationship to both faith and science. As part of this process, she remembers experimenting with trying on various personalities in letters home to her mother, alternately faithful and faithless to the religion of her childhood.



Gifty's conflicted feelings about religion as a teen and young adult mirrored Nana's conflicted feelings when he was a teenager. But, for both Nana and Gifty, issues of faith were inseparable from the community of their church. Neither Nana nor Gifty liked P.T. and the form of "hip" religious culture he tried to promote.



The episode in which Nana challenged P.T. over God's nature is another key moment in Gifty's childhood, tied to several themes that resonate with her still as an adult. First, P.T.'s response, his casual willingness to write off certain types of people—notably non-white, non-industrialized people whose experiences were so different from his own—illustrates the casual, systemic racism that surrounded Gifty and Nana as they grew up. But his impatience and quick answers also demonstrate a certain arrogant unwillingness to ask questions about his faith, and one of the things Gifty most appreciates about science is the way it doesn't assume knowledge but asks questions and then tries to answer them.



Nana reacts to P.T.'s not-so-subtle racism by leaving youth group and stepping back from his faith. As a child, Gifty was still too invested in Christianity to follow him, even if P.T.'s exclusionary God made her feel uncomfortable. Instead, she redoubled her efforts to deserve her spot in the kingdom of God.



CHAPTER 20

In two excerpts from her childhood journal, Gifty tells God that Nana told her Christianity was a cult that started before people knew what cults were. And she asks God if he would show her if he's real.

Nana's break with his faith brought up Gifty's earliest questions about her own beliefs, as evidenced by this journal entry. Child Gifty is evidently torn between following her brother's beliefs and seeking answers from the God she still believes in. Again, she repeatedly claims to feel no continuity between her adult, scientific, non-believing self and her childhood, faithful, dogmatic self. Yet, her journal entries show that she started asking questions about her faith long before she felt she lost it.



CHAPTER 21

Gifty walks into her apartment, which smells like oil, pepper, rice, and plantains: her mother is making **food**. Her mother wants to know how Gifty eats without eggs, milk, or flour in the house, and Gifty confesses that she doesn't cook much. If she'd spent more time in the kitchen as a child, her mother says, she would have learned. Gifty watches her drop plantains into the hot oil, unbothered by it splashing. She asks if her mother remembers putting hot oil on Nana's foot. Her mother turns to face Gifty, holding the strainer like a weapon. She says, "I never, never did that," and Gifty realizes that mentioning it was a mistake. But she knows it happened.

Gifty has been trying to draw her mother out since her arrival, and now it appears that something has shifted. Importantly, her mother rises from bed to make food, which Gifty has been trying to use to forge a connection between the two of them since her mother came to stay with her. Even so, this activity highlights the difference between the two women: Gifty doesn't generally cook for herself and doesn't stock her kitchen the way her mother would. Watching her mother make fried plantains reminds Gifty of a childhood moment when her mother treated one of Nana's small childhood injuries with a Ghanaian folk remedy of hot oil. Her mother's angry denial strains the fragile connection between the two.



Shortly after the Chin Chin Man left, her mother hosted a party for the Ghana Association of Alabama. Although Gifty and Nana were afraid that they'd be pitied by the others, they found themselves enjoying the party and began to have a **food** fight. When Gifty hid behind the couch for an ambush, she knocked a piece of the couch loose. Nana soon stepped on it, puncturing his foot with a long nail.

In Gifty's memory of the Ghana Association party, food again symbolizes intimacy. She and Nana had worried that the party would merely serve to highlight the difficulties of their life, including their father's abandonment and their mother's challenging personality. Yet the food—in the form of a childhood food fight—allows Nana and Gifty to connect with the other children and feel some joy, at least until Nana is accidentally injured.



The adults gathered around to discuss the injury, worrying about tetanus, and trying to outdo each other as they discuss Ghanaian folk remedies. Gifty's mother took Nana to the kitchen, dipped a spoon in hot oil, and used it to clean and close the wound, while Nana screamed in pain. Gifty can't imagine that her mother doesn't remember, but she drops the subject while her mother serves their dinner. Gifty has seconds, because the **food** is delicious and because she's so relieved by signs of life from her mother. But when she leaves for the lab the next morning, her mother is still in bed.

In the wake of this accident, everyone has advice to offer Gifty's mother. But, perhaps to demonstrate her independence, she forestalls the advice by treating Nana's foot with hot oil then and there. This remedy, while apparently successful (Nana didn't get any infections or come down with tetanus), was also cruel and painful. It is thus emblematic of the way Gifty views her mother's parenting: effective, but unsentimental to the point of pain for her children. Gifty drops the delicate subject during dinner, but her mother refuses to get out of bed in the morning. There are two possible interpretations to this. In one, her mother is upset that Gifty brought up the hot oil incident and is punishing her with silence. In the other, she is suffering through the symptoms of a major depression and her sleepiness isn't a comment on Gifty or her actions. But Gifty can't tell which is the truth, and as a consequence, readers are also left guessing her mother's motives—or lack thereof.



CHAPTER 22

With fiber-optic cables attached to their heads for her experiments, Gifty's mice look like they belong in a science fiction movie. When she mentions this to Han, he confirms that they are, indeed, creating cyborgs, which sends him into a lengthy monologue about the "Future of Science Fiction." Gifty doesn't really care, but she's drawn in by his animation. When she says that her brother wanted bionic legs to help him on the basketball court, Han is surprised to learn about him. She awkwardly blurts out that he died a long time ago. Han holds Gifty's gaze and tells her how sorry he is to hear that.

The conversation between Gifty and Han about science fiction shows the ways in which human imagination pushes beyond scientific horizons. This is another way to think about the similarities between religion and science: both imagine a situation where things are made whole that are currently broken and painful (heaven, in Christianity; the future, in science). It's also a moment that demonstrates the slowly growing intimacy and friendship between the two. Gifty, who could be callous towards other people's needs and interests in previous relationships, finds herself drawn in by Han's enthusiasm, even though she herself doesn't really care about science fiction. This intimacy underwrites her first attempt at sharing some of her life story when she reveals that her brother died prematurely.



Gifty remembers how Nana started playing basketball a year after he quit soccer. The physical education teacher suggested that he try out, surprising them since they were a soccer family and the Chin Chin Man once said that he'd rather watch giraffes in the wild than basketball on TV. But Nana was in perpetual motion, and he had clearly missed sports. He immediately fell in love with basketball and spent hours a day practicing with the hoop Gifty's mother bought and put up in the driveway. It was like a totem that he worshipped.

Nana's death is indirectly connected all the way back to the day when he decided to stop playing soccer. That's because he needed the outlet of some athletic activity, and he ended up in basketball and was eventually injured during a basketball game. Switching from soccer to basketball also finalizes the separation between Nana and his father. Perhaps it's Gifty's adult knowledge of the connection between the sport and Nana's addiction, but when she remembers him practicing in the family driveway, she particularly remembers his compulsion towards the game, the way he would "worship" the hoop and practice for hours.



Although they didn't understand the game, Gifty and her mother were proud of Nana when they went to his games. But Gifty's mother was annoyed when people started to suggest that Nana had a future in sports, like they hadn't expected much for him before.

Sometimes Gifty and Nana would play HORSE. One day, Gifty asks if Nana thought the Chin Chin Man would have liked basketball if he'd grown up with the sport. Nana answered, "I don't give a fuck what he thinks," and punished Gifty by setting up an impossible shot for her. He hadn't answered the question. And Gifty knows that he was lying every time he tried to tell himself he didn't care about their father. Long after dark that night, Nana continued to practice free throws in the driveway.

Adult Gifty thinks about a study that applied cognitive-behavioral therapy to basketball players to improve their success at free throws. It helped them to replace negative thought patterns with positive ones. She wishes she could know what was running through Nana's head when they were kids, even though she can't. But she imagines that his mind was as restless as his body. She imagines that he "cared deeply and thought deeply," and that his driving thought as he played basketball—"I don't give a fuck what he thinks"—harmed him, if not his game.

Gifty would walk to the high school to watch Nana's games, then they would walk home together. One night, as she said, "Good job, Nana," the school janitor butted into their conversation. He says that they sound more like business partners than siblings and asked why they didn't just hug. Nana and Gifty left, but on the way home she repeated the question, asking why they didn't hug. In a dark spot left by a broken streetlight, Nana paused to ask Gifty if she wanted a hug, and she said no.

Gifty and her mother support Nana as best as they can when he starts playing basketball, and their presence at his games indicates their love for him. Because Nana is athletically gifted, once he starts playing—and helping to win games for the local high school team—people in the community become interested in him and assume he has a future in sports. This is another subtle reminder of the pervasive racism that Gifty and her family experienced while she was growing up and which colors many of her early memories, even though she doesn't often address racism directly.



As Nana and Gifty grow up, they remain close even if their roles in the relationship change. Now, Nana does less caretaking of Gifty, but he still tolerates her presence, and they shoot hoops together in the driveway. It's during one of these moments of sibling connection that the depth of Nana's anger and hurt over the Chin Chin Man's abandonment bubbles to the surface. And this pain connects with an obsessive energy he brings to basketball that foreshadows his addiction to opiates.



As she's replaced religion with science as a guiding force in her life, scientific studies have come to have a force like scripture for Gifty: she uses them to interpret and understand the world around her and how it works. But just as religion's ability to answer big questions is limited, so too is science's. Just because Gifty understands the power of repeating thought patterns to shape behavior and outcomes doesn't mean she can fully apply this knowledge to Nana, since she doesn't really know what his thought patterns were. The best she can do is guess, based on her knowledge of her brother, what he was thinking.



This chapter started with a moment of growing intimacy between Gifty and Han, and it closes with a reflection on how differently her family expressed love and intimacy than other people. The janitor—a notable figure because he reminds them of their father, who was also a school janitor—critiques their relationship as overly formal, even though the siblings both experience it as a nurturing and intimate experience. Gifty's refusal of the offered hug can be read either as a part of her pattern of refusing the help and support of others or as an acknowledgement that the relationship fulfills her needs, even if it looks different than what people expect.



CHAPTER 23

Because she dreads going home to find nothing changed with her mother, Gifty starts spending more time in the lab. She prefers the familiar boredom of her work to boredom at home, which is painful since she's always hoping it will change. Han also spends a lot of time in the lab, driven by his work.

Gifty is allergic to the **mice**. She remembers a time in the first year of her experiments when she had itchy rashes from them. One day, she scratched one while Raymond cooked **food** for breakfast. She had asked him to stop her, but when he did, she resented being told what to do with her own body. He suggested seeing a doctor, even though he thought she was “funny about...medicine” after she refused painkillers for strep throat. If prescribed, Raymond said he would take “the good stuff.” Gifty didn't answer but drove to her lab weeping.

Gifty is more careful about handling the mice and washing her hands, and she rarely gets the rashes anymore. But staying in the lab for too long affects her thoughts, and she begins to wonder “What's the point?” One **mouse** is so addicted to the Ensure that he can't learn to stop pressing the lever and he has developed a psychosomatic limp in anticipation of the shocks. Gifty is attached to this mouse. But she's bothered by the fact that the human question of purpose—which both science and religion attempt to address—is so hard to answer.

CHAPTER 24

Gifty considers a recent study showing that schizophrenics in India and Ghana hear friendlier voices than in America. She remembers her aunt pointing out the “crazy person” in the market and how no one seemed to fear him. And she remembers her mother's experiences with the ghost that haunted her cousins' apartment when she first came to America.

The lack of connection with her mother at home leads Gifty to spend more time at the lab, where her relationship with Han can grow. Because they're both driven by their research work, this is an especially important relationship for Gifty, since it shows that science and friendship aren't mutually exclusive.



As Gifty spends more time at the lab (and with Han), her allergy to the mice reasserts itself. This leads to a memory of Raymond, who reminded her to stop scratching her mouse-induced rash one day at breakfast. Both in the reminder (which Gifty asked for) and his offer to make her breakfast, Raymond offers her intimacy, but she refuses it. She's peeved at the reminder, and she refuses to eat the food he wants to make her. At another moment, she's hurt by Raymond's casual approach to potentially addictive drugs. But, since she hasn't been willing to tell him anything about her family, she's holding him responsible for things he couldn't possibly know.



Now Gifty's response to overexposure at the lab is philosophical rather than physical. The hopelessly addicted mouse reminds her of her hopelessly addicted brother, and because she couldn't help or save him when she was a child, she doubts her ability to make a difference or change the mouse's behavior now. The fears and doubts she experiences as a scientist recall the fears and doubts that characterized her religious beliefs, offering yet another reminder of the similarity between the two systems in Gifty's mind.



Even neuroscientific questions are subject to culture, as these experiments demonstrating the different expressions of mental illness in different cultures demonstrate. While mental illness may be universal, Gifty understands that the experience of its symptoms is often painfully contingent on one's circumstances. Her connection of the crazy person with her mother's depression and her mother's ghost story initially suggests that Gifty sees the ghost as an indication of mental illness.



The ghost only came out when Gifty's mother was alone. Her cousin had complained about the high phone bills, so she had stopped calling the Chin Chin Man so much. She was fond of the ghost, who would brush the back of her hand and make her feel less lonely.

Remembering the ghost story gives Gifty an idea, and she starts to rub her mother's back or squeeze her hand when she goes into her room. One day, her mother comments that this affection shows that she's becoming "soft like an American," but since mockery is her way of showing affection, Gifty is excited rather than insulted. Her mother turns towards her and tells Gifty that she works too much. Gifty replies that she learned from her mother and asks if she would like to come to the lab. Her mother says "maybe," then lies back down. Gifty knows it might be days or weeks before she will reach her mother again.

Yet the ghost doesn't really seem to indicate any inherent instability in Gifty's mother, just her loneliness. Her experience as a young and recent immigrant was incredibly isolating, and the ghost helped her to get through that time.



In remembering the ghost, Gifty also realizes that she can do more to connect with her mother. This includes touching her, which Gifty hasn't yet tried (she's been so focused on food, cleaning, and trying to talk). When she adjusts her approach to meet her mother's needs rather than her own expectations, Gifty has better luck, and these caresses do evoke a response and create an opening for Gifty to connect with her mother.



CHAPTER 25

Before her mother arrived, Gifty went to the campus bookstore and bought a Bible to keep on her mother's nightstand. After a while, she starts flipping through it when she's in her mother's room, quizzing herself on all the verses she memorized as a child. In college, she wished she could clear her memory banks of them so that she could memorize more useful information, like proteins and nucleic acids. And there are other things she wishes she could forget, or that she never knew. Reading the Bible, adult Gifty finds herself drawn to the **words** in a way child Gifty, intent on memorization, hadn't been.

If science and religion are irrevocably opposed to each other, Gifty is on Team Science now, so she feels that buying the Bible should be shameful. Yet, no one pays much attention to her purchase. And then, at home, she begins to revisit the sacred text of her childhood. Now, as an adult and as a person who has walked away from the Christianity of her upbringing, Gifty finds a fresh appreciation for the words of the Bible. This suggests that the enmity between faith and science isn't, perhaps, as great as it first seemed. And it points to Gifty's deeply spiritualized sense of the world, despite her exit from organized Christianity.



Once, she wrote a journal entry about the first verse of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word." She took these **words** seriously and felt like an apostle writing a new book of the Bible. Later, when P.T. explained that the "Word" or "Logos" in the gospel meant something more like "plea" or "question," Gifty felt stupid and betrayed. But she liked the ambiguity, too.

It's fitting that Gifty is drawn to the first verse of the gospel of John, since words—both sacred and scientific—are so important to her sense of herself and the world around her. As a child, she initially interpreted this verse narrowly, which allowed herself to imagine her own words of prayer to God as sacred. When she learned that logos had more interpretations, she was initially flummoxed, especially since she was a literalistic and rules-oriented child. Yet, like her mother's suggestion that a life well lived could be a form of prayer, Gifty eventually embraced the ambiguity in the word. The idea of the logos as a plea or question is much more in line with Gifty's adult personality, which can see the ambiguity and ambivalence in the world around her.



In her junior year of college, Gifty heard a sermon about literalistic interpretation of the Bible by a female reverend. As a child, Gifty took the Bible to be “the infallible **word** of God” and she read it literally. In contrast, the reverend’s interpretation is non-literal but “humane” and “thoughtful.” Gifty felt her life would have been different if she’d grown up in this woman’s church rather than her own, which shunned intellectualism as a trap and sidestepped hard questions. That’s why P.T. had shut down Nana’s question about the villagers.

Pastor John’s sermons against the “ways of the world” were about drugs and sex but also about the kind of learning that makes a person question their beliefs. And his literalism shifted when his own daughter got pregnant at 17: God became less punitive and more forgiving, and the church was encouraged to be less judgmental, more open. Gifty understands that the Bible doesn’t change, but how people read it does.

After P.T.’s sermon, Gifty became more fascinated with the idea of the Logos and with **words** generally. She realized how her mother’s personality changed based on the language she used. In Fante with her friends, she was a girlish gossip; in Twi with her children, she was a mother, sometimes stern and sometimes warm; in English, she was “meek.” Gifty thinks that she couldn’t “translate who she really was into this new language” of English in America.

Recalling P.T.’s sermon leads Gifty to another memory of a time when she heard a sermon that expressed a different approach to Christianity than the one she’d been raised with. As a child, the only way that she understood the Bible to be true was to take it as literal. But this led to inhumane interpretations, such as P.T.’s assurance that anyone who hadn’t been “saved,” even if they hadn’t had an opportunity to learn about Christianity, would be sent to hell. However, Gifty’s appropriation of Biblical language and stories to tell her family’s history, as well as her mother’s mangled clichés, all point to the ways in which words can be used and interpreted in multiple ways.



The changes in Pastor John’s approach to teenage sexual sin after his own daughter became pregnant illustrated to Gifty, even as a child, that “literal” readings of the Bible are somewhat subject to interpretation and circumstance. Context is important. As Gifty ruminates on her religious upbringing, especially in contrast to the sermon she heard in college, it becomes clearer that she didn’t just grow up as a Christian, but as a certain type of Christian. And this suggests that if there are Christians who can balance faith with intellectual pursuits, then there are scientists who can have faith. Gifty’s experiences in Integrated Science already showed that some scientists could be just as bigoted and closed-minded about religion as Gifty’s church was close-minded and bigoted about science. The important difference is the context of belief in which people operate.



P.T.’s sermon became an important juncture in Gifty’s life, since it sensitized her to the importance of words and language. Paying attention to the personality her mother expresses in different languages, Gifty is forced to reckon with the multiplicity of life: her mother isn’t just one person, but she has many sides to her that can only be expressed in certain circumstances. It seems, then, that Gifty’s hope for a singular, unified self is naive.



CHAPTER 26

Everyone gossiped about the pastor's pregnant daughter, wondering where she'd conceived her baby. But it wasn't just her: many other teens got pregnant that year, including five from Gifty's church. At the time, her "sex ed" was religious in tone: she had been told her body was a temple that she should keep holy, and she was asked to write an essay about the virtue of patience. Finally, the church rounded up the girls for an intervention.

The girls were taken to a former abortion clinic that's been turned into a place for abstinence courses. Gifty and the other girls saw horrific images of STDs and were reminded that "covenant" agreements (like marriage, described as a covenant in the Bible) require bloodshed. A girl losing her virginity before marriage was making promises she couldn't keep. This was about all of Gifty's sex ed. When she got her period, she didn't even know where to insert a tampon. She didn't learn anything about vaginas until her freshman biology class in college. And, she realized, most of the other students' early educations didn't have the same massive holes (about things like sex and science) that hers did.

Gifty's memories switch back to the day she defended religion in Integrated Science. After class, Anne caught up with her and apologized for being a "bitch." She followed Gifty back to her dorm, and soon they were inseparable. Anne was a senior, a mixed-race, atheist, incisive woman. She wanted to know if Gifty's religion really required her to "flagellate" herself for her perceived sins. Gifty protested that she didn't and that she no longer believed in God. But Anne knew she was rigid and "goody": Gifty didn't skip class, do drugs, or drink. Anne suspected she was still a virgin. Sitting together on the bed, Anne asked if Gifty had ever been kissed.

The teenage pregnancy crisis in Gifty's town vividly illustrates the fact that not everyone in the church practiced what they preached (or what was preached to them). Even when she was still a believer, there were signs all around Gifty that maybe her faith wasn't so consistent as she believed—or wanted—it to be. This memory also serves to illustrate the profound anti-intellectual strain of Christianity Gifty experienced as a child, which rejected out of hand anatomically aware sex education. This helps to explain why she feels such a profound divorce between her religious, child self and her adult, scientific self, even if her actual approach to life blends elements of both selves.



The memory of her "sex ed" also illuminates some of Gifty's profound difficulty forming intimate relationships as an adult. It isn't just the profound loss and trauma that happened in her family when she was a child, but that her religious faith made things like sex sound frightening and dangerous. As a result, Gifty felt herself to be profoundly behind her peers when she arrived at college and began to realize how different her upbringing and education were from the typical Harvard student.



Reflecting on the gaps in her education because of her religious upbringing, Gifty's memories circle back to her Integrated Science class, where her impassioned defense of religion may have marked her as a zealot to most of her peers. But it impressed Anne, who respects Gifty's willingness to say what she believes, even when it's not necessarily the easy or the popular opinion. It's also clear that she has some of her own biases and stereotypes about Christianity, for instance that all Christians punish themselves excessively for straying from their understanding of good behavior. The fact that Gifty has to protest that she's no longer Christian even though she avoids the kinds of teenaged behavior stereotypically classed as sins (drinking, drugs, and sex) further suggests that Gifty's adult, non-believing self is less divorced from her faithful child self than she thinks at the beginning of the book.



CHAPTER 27

For Nana, basketball was a seasonless obsession. He went to basketball camp in the summer, played on the high school team in the fall and winter, and practiced in the driveway year-round. When his friends came over, they'd yell and get animated watching games on TV. But when Nana was alone, he would watch (and take notes) in intense, silent concentration. As a sophomore, he'd already broken state records and attracted the attention of college recruiters. And he stopped going to church, so Gifty started going to "big church" instead of youth group to show her mother that one of her kids still cared about God.

Gifty doesn't remember much about "big church" except the altar call. At the end of every service, Pastor John would invite anyone who was ready to come to the altar to be saved. After a few months, Gifty became aware that her mother was expecting her to go, but she wasn't ready for the attention or to relinquish her childhood and her sins.

Gifty remembers a later time when Nana was trying to decide on a college. They had recently learned that the Chin Chin Man was remarrying. When he called, Gifty would talk to him for a few minutes until he asked for Nana. But Nana usually got Gifty to say he was out and their mother never chastised either of them for the lie.

As Gifty remembers Nana's approach to basketball, more and more hints surface that, perhaps, the seeds of his addiction had been planted in his brain long before his first dose of OxyContin. He throws himself into the sport with a silent, monomaniacal obsession that suggests an inability to control the reward seeking behavior in his brain. At first, this doesn't seem to be a bad thing for him, since it's opening doors for an education that his family otherwise might not have been able to afford. But his absence from church also suggests his increasing distance from his family and isolation within his own obsession. In response, Gifty steps into a caretaking role, trying to show her mother that she is still important by making a show of going to church with her.



Gifty's unwillingness to relinquish her sins or her childhood happen in the context of what she calls her "good years"—that time after the day when Nana quit playing soccer, during which she came to believe that obeying the rules and making her mother happy would protect the remnant of her family. This raises the question of what sins she's unwilling to give up, and emphasizes the trauma that she endured by being thrust into adult roles and responsibilities at a young age.



Not only does the Chin Chin Man abandon his family in America, but he goes on to remarry in Ghana, which only serves to reinforce the message that his children and Gifty's mother aren't important or meaningful enough for him to keep. This also further traumatizes Nana, who refuses to talk with his father any longer. The pain of being abandoned seems to lie beneath their mother's willingness to look the other way, even though she knows that the children are lying to their father about Nana's unavailability to come to the phone.



The day of the Ridgewood game, their mother was at work, so Gifty sat alone in the bleachers working on her homework. As she tried to draw a perfect picture of the anatomical heart, she heard a loud shout: Nana was lying on the ground, injured. She rode with him to the ER, not holding his hand (because they weren't that kind of family) but praying over him. Nana had torn ligaments in his ankle, for which he was prescribed OxyContin, rest, and ice. Gifty can't remember going to the pharmacy to pick up the pills. Or how Nana spent the rest of the day. It was an ordinary bad day, and she can't remember it well enough now to "pinpoint the exact moment we shifted away from ordinary."

The Ridgewood game is the pivotal moment in Gifty's young life, because it is the beginning of Nana's path through addiction to his untimely death. At first, it's such a mundane experience that Gifty isn't really paying attention to the game, nor can she remember what happened after the family left the ER. It's only in retrospect that the day gains its significance. Her ambulance ride with Nana also gains significance only in hindsight, as the moment at which she and her brother began to shift roles, as he transitions to becoming the needy sibling and she starts to become his caretaker.



CHAPTER 28

Gifty is getting too attached to the limping **mouse**. She feels sorry for it. One day, she asks Han if he's ever tried Ensure. It's been a year since they've shared the lab and his shyness has abated. Gifty drives to the grocery store and buys two cans of Ensure. When she returns, Han teases her, reminding her that they can't get addicted to the stuff like the mice. This reaction isn't what Gifty was looking for, but she wanted to find a way to relate to the limping mouse. The Ensure isn't bad, but it isn't good. And as Gifty finishes her can, she tells Han that her brother died of an opioid overdose.

Gifty's attachment to the mouse further cements its identification with her brother. She tries the Ensure as a way to get a sense of the mice's experiences in her lab, even though she knows she can't inhabit their consciousness any more than she could have understood Nana's addiction from the inside. But, sharing the Ensure is another important step towards the increasing intimacy and friendship between Han and Gifty, and his willingness to indulge her rather silly impulse opens the door for her to disclose more about her tragic family history to him.



Gifty remembers how confused she was the first time she saw Nana high. He looked like he was half asleep, dreaming sweetly. But after days and weeks, she figured out what was happening. Eventually, she got up the courage to ask what it felt like, but he said he couldn't describe it, other than saying it feels good for everything to empty out of his head.

As a child, Gifty didn't initially understand what was going on with Nana, although she was able to see that something was off. As she watched him, she learned to read his expressions to tell whether he was high or not, in much the same way that she later learns to read her mother's expressions for signs of depression or anger. Being high looks enticing: Nana looks like he's happy. But he can't explain the feeling to Gifty, at least not enough for her to understand why he has become addicted.



CHAPTER 29

The Sunday night after Nana's accident, before they realized that his addiction was taking hold, Gifty's mother was working, and Gifty went alone to church. The sermon was short and dull, but this time when Pastor John made the altar call, she heard an undeniably "loud knocking on [her] heart's door." She was in fourth grade, and she raised her hand, walked to the altar, and felt God's presence in Pastor John's hand on her head and the hands of the congregation stretching out to her.

Gifty's narration finally loops back around to something that she had mentioned in an earlier chapter, that she'd been saved and born again in the spirit. This refers to her experience on the night she finally felt drawn to the altar calls made weekly by Pastor John. In the Pentecostal tradition, a personal sense of conviction over one's sins and a deeply-felt desire to make a personal commitment to following Jesus are the hallmarks of salvation. Gifty waited through years of her childhood, following the rules and accepting every belief that she was taught, for this night. This is a transcendent, transformative moment for her, and it divides her young life into a before and after. It foreshadows the transcendent feeling she will have when her scientific experiments succeed.



CHAPTER 30

The knowledge of her salvation made Gifty feel special, and she was perturbed when she told a classmate about it and learned that this classmate—who had showed her budding breasts to another kid—had been saved two years earlier. But she tried to hold onto the feeling of specialness.

Unfortunately for Gifty, the special feeling of her transformative spiritual moment is difficult to hold onto. She compares herself with a classmate who she judges to be less holy than herself—since Gifty would never have unchastely showed her developing body to a classmate—who has already been saved. The comparison suggests that Gifty might feel that others claim salvation too easily, while she herself waited and waited until she was sure that she heard Jesus calling her. But in a time of familial upheaval, her salvation gives her something to hold onto for herself.



Gifty tried to put her salvation to use volunteering at the church. She was usually the only person who went with P.T. to the soup kitchen, but lots of the teens liked going to the fireworks stall that the church, for some reason, owned. Neither the teens nor P.T. really wanted her there, so she kept quiet, reading books and judging P.T. for shooting off merchandise without paying.

Gifty continues to compare herself and her salvation to the other members of her church, who she thinks behave less charitably than she herself does. For example, everyone likes volunteering at the firework stand, because it's fun. Conversely, very few people show up to do the harder and more thankless work of the soup kitchen. Even as she's trying to show off her new-found salvation, however, Gifty can't resist judging others like P.T. who follow the rules less scrupulously than she herself does.



P.T.'s protégé was a kid named Ryan Green, whom Gifty didn't like even though she didn't yet know that he was the high school's biggest drug dealer. He would ask her about Nana's recovery, since the basketball team was suffering without him. In front of P.T., Ryan was "prayerful" and respectful. On his own, Ryan was mean and belittling. Ryan made Gifty wonder how there could be a place for her in the Kingdom of Heaven if God also allowed duplicitous people like Ryan in.

Ryan Green's behavior, from his mean and subtly racist attitude towards Gifty and Nana to his drug selling, isn't particularly in line with the values of Christianity. Nevertheless, he doesn't have a hard time acting out a faith that he doesn't seem to practice. Gifty's hard-earned and honestly-felt faith doesn't seem to count for as much in her church as Ryan's physically effusive but shallow beliefs. This suggests that it's not just her religion's opposition to science that alienated Gifty, but also a certain amount of hypocrisy among her fellow churchgoers. The pastor's response to his pregnant daughter earlier in the book suggested this hypocrisy, and Ryan begins to show that it might run deeper than Gifty had originally realized.



CHAPTER 31

If most lives proceed in a straight line from birth to death, Nana's drug-addled final years zig-zag. Gifty's mother realized that he was hooked after two months, when he asked for a second refill and she found pills hidden in his room. Gifty didn't understand how her dynamic brother had become so still, and she tried to buy and make him instant coffee to perk him up. She asked her teacher if someone could die from sleeping, and the teacher said no. Gifty still doesn't understand why she believed the teacher.

As Nana sinks into addiction and his life ceases to run in a straight path, Gifty and her mother must also shift and change to accommodate this new traumatic upheaval in their family. Gifty fully switches into the role of caretaker for Nana, trying to rouse him from his intoxicated stupor even though it's clear that she doesn't understand fully what is happening. It's important to keep in mind the fact that she is only in 4th grade as she's learning to contend with her brother's illness.



Gifty remembers Nana going through withdrawal, sweating so much that he drenched all his shirts, threw up constantly, and "shit himself more than once." Their mother, unfazed by bodily fluids after years as a health aide, would put him in the bathtub and clean him. Gifty intuited the shame Nana felt and would tactfully avoid the subject. But her mother never seemed ashamed.

Nana's painful and traumatic attempt to quit drugs on his own shows the power that addiction can hold over the brain. It's clear that willpower and self-control alone couldn't touch Nana's addiction, no matter how stringently Gifty believes that safety lies in following the rules. Her memories also demonstrate the infantilizing horror of withdrawal, which not only makes Nana sick but reduces him to a state of infant-like dependence on his mother, just at the point in life when he was preparing to go off to college and become an independent adult. Caretaking in this family, it seems, happens only at the most extreme moments, which might explain Gifty's resistance to allowing others to take care of her. In her experience, people only accept caretaking when they have become physically incapable of caring for themselves, like Nana in his addiction or her mother in her depression.



Gifty's mother was comfortable around death. She'd been there when one of her clients died, reading scriptures to her. The client had been given morphine to ease her pain, and this was the purpose of drugs, their mother told Nana and Gifty. Gifty remembers her mother imitating a death rattle and telling her that she shouldn't fear death. But Gifty did fear it, despite the comfort she found in the **words** of scripture that promised the dying that they were not alone. Gifty feared death because she understood, on some level, that she was really listening for Nana's death.

While Nana was detoxing, their mother convinced him to go to church with her and Gifty. Gifty couldn't stop staring at her brother; he looked better, and she was waiting for him to be reborn. The idea of rebirth was important in her church, and as a child, Gifty believed in its power. Ryan Green said hello to Nana as he entered the church, asking him when he would be back to playing. But Gifty's mother shouted for him to leave Nana alone.

CHAPTER 32

One of Gifty's childhood journal entries explains that she learned at church that her friend's mom won't allow her to play at Gifty's house. She told Nana, but he didn't care.

Gifty recalls intuiting that addiction was contagious and shameful, so she and her mother should not talk about Nana with anyone. She didn't talk until college when she confessed after a classmate wondered how she knew so much about heroin. The classmate was impressed that Gifty was taking her pain and turning it into helpful research.

Part of the trauma of Nana's addiction for Gifty seems to be her sense that, while she felt fearful and out of control, her mother appeared to have command of herself and the situation. She wasn't bothered by Nana's vomit and excrement, and she spoke about death matter-of-factly. In contrast, rules-oriented Gifty feels that her life is spiraling out of control, and she intuitively understands that her family will never resume its old shape.



In the early phases of Nana's addiction, it's still possible for Gifty to imagine a religious, transcendent cure for his illness. She clings to the idea of rebirth for Nana, which is especially clear to her given her own recent spiritual experience. But, by his very presence, Ryan Green calls into question rebirth—he himself has been allegedly reborn but it doesn't mean that he has necessarily become a good person.



As Nana's addiction gradually becomes common knowledge, Gifty and her mother find their family isolated rather than supported by the community in which Nana and Gifty have lived their whole lives. Nana's addiction insulates him from its consequences, and as a child Gifty struggles to make him understand her suffering.



In her childhood, Gifty learned that it was dangerous to tell people about the bad things that happened to her (specifically Nana's addiction) because doing so isolated her and her family or, worse, made them into some sort of object lesson for others. She learned this lesson perhaps too well, leading to her adult struggle to share her thoughts and experiences with others. This revelation adds further depth to her willingness to tell Han about her brother and his death.



But Gifty doesn't feel so noble. She remembers wishing Nana had cancer because that would have felt less shameful for her. She started researching addiction to work through her misunderstandings and shame. Because she can still look at the scans of addiction-ruined brains and still wonder why Nana couldn't stop for her or for their mother.

Gifty finally acknowledges that her neuroscientific research isn't just about proving her capability but is also about working through her complicated feelings about her brother's death. It's a sign of her enduring and unaddressed trauma that she feels guilt over her childhood reactions towards Nana. On one hand, she understands that he didn't have control over his actions, but on the other, her own addiction to self-control means that she has a hard time accepting this truth.



After a short sobriety, Nana disappeared. Gifty imagined how tired he must have been of the pain of withdrawal, of everything. They found him in a park, spread out “like an offering.” They lifted him into the car, while Gifty tried not to cry and people looked on without helping. At home, as Nana started to wake up, their mother hit him, screaming, “This has to stop.” But she couldn't stop hitting him and he just took it.

The memory of finding Nana in the park ties together several themes of Gifty's memories and the book. First, in linking being high to other experiences of transcendence, such as her religious experience a few chapters earlier, this moment suggests that there isn't one path towards transcendence. Neither religion, nor scientific discovery, nor even drugs have a monopoly on making people feel good. But, in this moment, no one feels good. Readers are stuck with Gifty's guesses about how Nana must feel, but given the circumstances, it's not hard to join her in imagining his desperation to escape the pain in his life. Moreover, the growing isolation the family is experiencing in the church is highlighted in this moment, where there are many observers (and judges) of the family's pain, but no one steps up to help. Since Gifty experienced mostly judgement and very little compassion from her community, it makes sense that she will struggle to reveal herself to others as an adult.



CHAPTER 33

In her scientific research, Gifty usually starts with an answer—a hypothesis—and then tinkers and experiments until she confirms or disproves it. Answers are easy, but finding the questions is hard. And it's hard to know if she's approaching an answer or a dead end.

Gifty's approach to science illuminates her earlier approach to faith. Above all things, it seems, she craves certainty. She waited until she was certain she heard Jesus knocking on her heart to answer the altar call. She wanted to be certain that she was properly following God's rules, like praying continually. Yet, one of the tragedies of life that she must contend with as an adult is that life is far from certain. And the farther she gets in her research, the more she must admit that the same uncertainty is also a feature of science.



Gifty remembers her mother hitting Nana over and over, until Gifty stepped between them and took one of the blows. This shocked her mother enough to stop and leave the room. Gifty settled Nana to the couch and sat with him through the night, watching as he came down. In the morning, their mother packed him off to a Christian rehab program. Nana protested and promised to stop. But she packed him some **food** and escorted him to the car.

In placing herself between her mother and brother, Gifty takes yet another step into the role of familial caretaker. This night marks a moment of continuity between mother and daughter as Nana's caretakers. But it also marks a profound shift, as Gifty's mother removes herself from the caretaking process, first by letting Gifty watch Nana overnight and then by sending him to rehab in the morning. Nana's departure also highlights a shift in the siblings' relationship. Previously Nana and Gifty were a pair, with their mother on her own. Now, Gifty and her mother are together, and Nana is the isolated one.



It took Gifty a while to settle on her thesis project. She wasted time trying to avoid her true question: can an animal stop itself from seeking rewards, especially to avoid risks?

As Gifty thinks about Nana's stint at rehab, she can no longer deny the connection between the events of her childhood and her current research. As a child, she wanted to know why Nana could not stop himself from doing drugs, or why God didn't stop him. As an adult, she locates the source of answers in brain chemistry, but the question remains: why did what happened to Nana happen?



The rehab program lasted for 30 days. After detoxing, Nana could call home on Fridays. These talks were as stilted as ones with the Chin Chin Man, because he felt angry and betrayed. When Gifty and her mother picked him up at the end of the program, they stopped at a Chick-fil-A for lunch. It's seared into Gifty's memory, and she still loves Chick-fil-A's **food** out of nostalgia. Nana described morning prayers, learning meditation, and group therapy, where the residents had to talk about their hopes for the future. Nana wanted to "get right...play basketball, spend time with y'all." Gifty knows that she's trying to understand if it's possible to change an addict's behavior. Because Nana relapsed 14 hours later.

The growing distance between Gifty and Nana manifests in this shift in their conversations while Nana is in rehab. On the phone, Gifty feels less like she's talking to her brother and more like she's talking to their absentee father. But the intimacy seems to be restored when the family eats at Chick-fil-A after Nana's graduation from the program. But Nana's hopes for the future don't seem to be particularly well-formed or deeply-felt, which perhaps explains why his relapse happened so soon after he got home.



CHAPTER 34

Scientifically, Gifty understands that opioids work by flooding the brain with dopamine, which the brain craves. Eventually, the drugs stop providing euphoria and only offer relief from withdrawal. She attended a lecture Han gave on imaging of what it looks like in the brain when a person expects a reward. Afterwards, she asked what the brain looks like when someone does something very bad.

Just because Gifty understands from a physiological and scientific point of view how addiction works doesn't mean that she truly understands addiction. Her research is an effort both to see if she can change the physiology of the addicted brain through optogenetics and to try to answer the unanswerable questions raised by the traumas of her childhood. From her question to Han, it's clear that she feels more responsible for what happened to Nana than she's previously let on—she's been keeping the readers at arm's length in much the same way she's avoided intimacy with other people throughout the book.



CHAPTER 35

In a childhood journal entry, Gifty tells God that she wishes Nana would die so that the whole ordeal would just be over.

This journal entry helps to clarify some of Gifty's guilt and sense of responsibility. It's not just that her love and caretaking couldn't save Nana, that she couldn't convince him to get better for her sake. It's also that she wished he would die, and then he did die. As a child, she believed in the power of prayer, and because her journal was one of her primary means of praying, she felt responsible in some way for causing Nana's death. But her loss of faith in God didn't release her from the guilty feeling that her prayers helped cause his death.



CHAPTER 36

From self-help books, Gifty knows that it's necessary to talk about pain to move through it. But the only person she could talk to about Nana was her mother, who couldn't handle it. She wrote to God about it instead, and her journal entries grew frantic. When she wished that Nana would die, she meant it. But in the morning, she destroyed the entry hoping that God would forget her wish. When Nana relapsed, she felt responsible.

Gifty intellectually understands what she needs to do to address her childhood and its traumas, but she continually finds herself unable to do it. Forced into an adult, caretaking role in her family at a young age, she can't talk with her mother. And, after her friends' parents began to consider Nana a bad influence, she learned that talking to anyone outside the family was also unallowable. The only outlet she had left was God.



After Nana's relapse, Gifty's mother got increasingly unrestrained at church. This fed gossip as people slowly realized that Nana's injury had turned into something more sinister. Gifty once overheard two ladies gossiping about it and one said, "their kind does seem to have a taste for drugs." Adult Gifty would have schooled them about how race isn't a factor in addiction. But 10-year-old Gifty was ashamed.

The lack of real support offered by the church becomes increasingly obvious as Nana's addiction deepens. So does the reason for this lack of support, the racism expressed by the two ladies Gifty overhears. Racism also seems to tinge the congregation's reaction to her mother's increasingly frantic practice of her faith. As a child, unfortunately, she didn't have the knowledge to counteract these narratives; her mother even refused to acknowledge Mr. Thomas's racism.



Now, Gifty understands much more about the institutionalized and individual racism she experienced. But as a child, she didn't have the language to identify or explore her self-loathing. As a recent immigrant, her mother didn't realize that white and Black churches in America were fundamentally different. It took Gifty a long time to identify the wounds caused by going to an all-white church where people disparaged "[her] kind."

From her adult perspective, Gifty is able to see how the subtle and not-so-subtle messages she got from her church harmed her. But as a child, she didn't know how to protect herself and thus was further traumatized. Because the adults around her in her church were the primary sources of authority in her life, she naturally internalized their racism.



Overhearing the women's words, Gifty wondered where God was in a church that couldn't see her humanity or her brother's and didn't believe that he could be healed. That night, her journal entry asked God to make Nana better to show everyone, even as she knew that God didn't work that way. She just wanted to disprove the unspoken rule that said her Black family was less worthy than everyone else. She didn't yet realize it wasn't a real rule.

Overhearing the comments about her brother being susceptible to addiction because of his race solidifies the discomfort Gifty first felt in youth services when P. T. blithely assured Nana and Gifty that God would condemn to hell people who weren't Christians even if they hadn't had an opportunity to convert. In some way, then, even as a child she understands that there's nothing she can do to disprove the racist beliefs of her community, even though she can't help but try to prove them wrong. The seeds of her loss of faith in God are planted in her knowledge that even God can't protect her and her family from the unfair treatment of his believers.



After his relapse, nothing could protect Nana from people's hate. When he was helping the team win, Pastor John and the church were quick to give the glory to God, but when he became an addict, they were just as quick to blame him for the team's losses. Gifty remembers them booing in the stands.

The way that the congregation and the larger community turn on Nana underlines the racist atmosphere Gifty and Nana grew up in. Nana only seems to have been appreciated when he was doing something valuable to others, such as winning soccer or basketball games. But even then, he wasn't given full credit: the glory for his athletic abilities went solely to God, while the blame for his addiction fell squarely on his own shoulders. Nor do any of the church members show the grace and forgiveness appropriate to their faith when Nana strays. In contrast, although they gossip, everyone seems to quickly forgive the pastor's pregnant teenage daughter. Although she can't yet see the racism behind these differences, as a child, Gifty can still see the hypocrisy.



Gifty clung to the Biblical **words** telling people to love God and to love their neighbors as they love themselves. She copied the verse dozens of times in her journal. But she didn't love herself. And she had begun to feel that God was cruel. She only went to church so her mother wouldn't be alone.

While the church abandoned the family and turned on Nana, Gifty tried to live out the Christian values she'd been taught, especially loving her neighbors. But her faith is slipping away, thanks to the hypocrisy she sees around her, and her sense that God has failed to protect her brother. But, because church is still her main point of connection with her mother, she can't yet give it up.



CHAPTER 37

Now, Gifty wishes she could understand Nana's addiction as if it were her own. Her journal is filled with an anthropological account, but the information is useless because it doesn't let her see into his mind, his experience. He began to steal things from the family and disappear regularly. Gifty's parents fought on the phone, her mother blaming the Chin Chin Man for his absence. When he was sober, Nana broke things: the walls, the television, picture frames.

The terrible truth about relationships is that one person will always have limited insight into another person's mind. Gifty struggles against this knowledge as she performs her experiments. She may never know why Nana became addicted, what made his addiction so impossible to break, or why he became so violent and destructive. But if her experiment is successful, she will at least know that changing the outcome for people like Nana is possible.



It was easier when Nana was high, subdued, and distant. Once Gifty watched him shoot up, and now she can't look at a needle without seeing him. She can't see the vein in the crook of an elbow without remembering him nodding off on the couch.

The night before Nana died, Gifty's journal entry said: "Buzz looked tired but good!" Afterwards, it seemed like a mockery. That day, her mother came home late from work. Gifty made **dinner**. They noticed his absence, but he was gone two days before they looked for him, and four before they called the police. They were blindsided when the police came to the door at nine o'clock to tell them that Nana had died of an overdose.

Gifty's acknowledgement that it was easier to deal with her brother when he was high parallels her confession that she wished him dead in her journal. She feels guilt, now, over her perceived failure to support or save her brother. But, given the traumatic nature of his addiction and the violence of his sober outbursts, her feelings are completely understandable.



Just like the day he got injured, the day Nana died was normal and didn't offer any hints that life was about to be irrevocably changed. It's not possible to pinpoint the moment when things change, any more than it would have been to change the trajectory of events. Importantly, Gifty makes dinner that night, indicating how much of a caretaking role she's taken on in her family. The child/caretaker roles between her and her mother are already beginning to shift, even before her mother's depression begins.



CHAPTER 38

About a week after their **lunch** at the Thai place, Gifty runs into Katherine in the sandwich shop. For a long time, Gifty has gone out of her way to avoid recognition and companionship like this. Katherine muses about living on the west coast and the trouble of balancing her career with her husband's desire for kids. She asks if Gifty wants any, and Gifty says "no."

Gifty finds herself confessing her inadvertent year-long celibacy to Katherine. She is surprised she said anything, since she's still timid on the subject thanks to her early religious training. She remembers when she lost her virginity just after college. She was so tense that the sex barely worked. But she'd enjoyed it enough to continue her relationship with her boyfriend, at least until she left for grad school.

Although she wasn't able to open up to Katherine at their previous lunch, fate seems to hand Gifty another opportunity when she randomly encounters Katherine in the café. Katherine continues to offer intimacy and connection to Gifty, and her openness begins to break down some of Gifty's barriers.



Despite her tendency to avoid talking about herself and especially her problems, Gifty finds herself opening up to Katherine. She doesn't start with her real worry (her mother), though, opting for the safer ground of sex. But by confessing her involuntary celibacy, she's also acknowledging how isolated she has become in the last year of her research.



Katherine changes the topic, asking Gifty how she got into neuroscience. Thrown off guard, Gifty blurts out that her mother is staying with her and that she's depressed and resistant to help after a bad experience in psychiatric care. Katherine expresses sympathy, but when she asks how she can help, Gifty thinks, "Only God can help me."

Katherine seems to sense intuitively that Gifty isn't talking about what's truly important, and when she changes the subject Gifty is surprised enough to be truthful. Although Gifty's mother has been staying with her for weeks, she hasn't yet told anyone that she knows about it. In this moment, Gifty is still profoundly locked in her isolation. Although Katherine not only offers help but is qualified to give it (she's a psychiatrist and thus presumably knows enough about depression to offer meaningful assistance to Gifty), Gifty's reflexive response is denial. Her feeling that only God can help her shows the extent of this isolation while also again calling into question the sharp line she sees dividing her religious childhood from her non-religious adulthood.



After Nana's death, Gifty's mother threw herself into planning a Ghanaian-style funeral, complete with mourning clothes for her and Gifty. She cried so much that she passed out from dehydration once, and she scratched herself until she bled. She and Gifty were completely alone. No one showed up to support them: not their church, not the Ghanaian community, not the Chin Chin Man. After three weeks, Pastor John visited. Gifty was so hungry for touch that she loved him when he laid a hand on her head to pray. And he stayed in her and her mother's life since that day.

Gifty's mother responded to the trauma of Nana's death through her faith, focusing as she did on the religious and cultural ceremony of his funeral. But even in this, she inadvertently highlights the distance at which she has existed from her children. The Ghanaian-style funeral is meant to fulfil her needs, not necessarily honor Nana's wishes. And her mother's grief is so overwhelming and so large that it leaves no room for Gifty to express or experience her own grief. Her mother's dramatic reactions, including self-harm and passing out, ensure that she gets the available attention. Gifty's involuntary appreciation of Pastor John's prayer shows how starved for love and attention she is after Nana's death.



Gifty never told her mother that she hated her mourning clothes from Ghana. At the funeral, her mother and the other Ghanaians paced, wept, and sang, questioning God while the Americans watched on, perplexed. Pastor John's prayers assured everyone that Nana's death was God's plan. Gifty was keenly aware of how much Nana would have hated his funeral, especially the way that everyone avoided considering or empathizing with the part of his life that happened after his addiction.

Consciously and subconsciously, as a child Gifty learned to subordinate her feelings and desires to her mother's. This is why she keeps silent on the subject of her funeral clothes. The distance between the experience of most of the church members and Gifty's family—if not their actual racist beliefs—are on display at the funeral, when they react with surprise and confusion over the way the Ghanaian immigrants indulge in emotional display. And their hypocrisy and racism are on display in their careful avoidance of the subject of Nana's addiction and accidental death. This helps to contextualize Gifty's loss of faith; in an earlier chapter, she dated that loss to Nana's funeral. But only after reviewing her memories of how the church and community behaved during Nana's illness and addiction does that loss come into full focus.



CHAPTER 39

The Chin Chin Man sent pictures of the Ghanaian funeral, which was filled with strangers to Gifty and Nana. When she learned that her father had only told people that Nana was “sick,” she hung up on him. Afterwards, her mother stood in her bedroom door, chastising her for this disrespect. Gifty couldn’t relate to her mother in those weeks after Nana’s death, so she was silent until her mother left to take an Ambien.

The Ambien made Gifty’s mother “loopy and mean.” She told Gifty, “You know I didn’t want another child after Nana,” and “I only wanted Nana and now I only have you.” Adult Gifty knows this sounds hurtful and cruel. But she also wanted Nana instead.

When her mother would wake up from her Ambien-induced sleep, she was confused. One day, she asked where she was, and Gifty told her she was at home in Alabama. Her mother went back to bed, declaring “No” over and over.

CHAPTER 40

Gifty considers her mother in bed at 68 and remembers her mother in bed at 52. There are differences in the images, although they are subtle. And she feels just as out of her depth now, at 28, as she did then, at 11.

The differences between the Ghanaian and American funerals emphasize the distance—geographic, emotional, and cultural—between the Chin Chin Man and his thoroughly Americanized children. Gifty is, however, horrified to learn that in both countries, her brother’s addiction is a shameful secret to be hushed up or spoken of obliquely. And the way that Gifty’s anger contributes to the rift between herself and her mother in the weeks after Nana’s death helps to explain why she feels so guilty and responsible for her mother’s depressive episodes.



As always, Gifty excuses her mother’s hurtful words, trying to convince readers (and possibly herself) that her mother’s words can’t be painful because they are true. On one level, however, she does recognize that both she and her mother were feeling inexpressible pain over the loss of Nana. Her mother’s Ambien-addled abuse also explains Gifty’s fear and avoidance of prescription medications, which surfaced in an early memory of Raymond: Nana’s addiction made him unpredictable and violent, and the Ambien that Gifty’s mother takes also reduces her ability to control her hurtful words. And above all, Gifty fears a loss of control over herself.



The deepening confusion and sleepiness Gifty’s mother displays are warning signs of her growing depression, although as a child Gifty has no idea how to interpret these symptoms or awareness of what’s coming.



For Gifty, her mother’s second depression is more similar than different to her first. Even though she’s now truly an adult—not just a child taking on adult roles and responsibilities—she still feels completely out of her depth. This new depression is forcing Gifty to relive her childhood trauma. There isn’t much that Gifty can do to care for her mother during her depression other than keep her fed, warm, and safe, and keep an eye open for suicidal ideation. Although she’s doing all of those things, her mother’s emotional vacancy means that Gifty still feels incapable, even though she’s doing the right things.



Ambien is in a class of drugs called hypnotics, and when her mother fell into her depression, at first Gifty thought that her mother had been hypnotized. One morning, she couldn't rouse her mother. She considered skipping school but went anyway since it gave her time to figure out what to do. When the librarian asked her if she was okay, Gifty lied, although the librarian was the person most likely to have cared or tried to help. The moment she said, "I'm fine," Gifty knew that she was going to take care of her mother alone.

Katherine starts dropping off homemade **foods**—cookies, pies, bread—at Gifty's office. Gifty realizes that she's not ready to need or accept help, really, but she enjoys the foods, and sometimes her mother will eat a little, too. Because the baked goods are beautifully made and presented, Gifty imagines Katherine running a one-woman bakery called "Kathy's Cakes."

The first week that her mother was in bed, Gifty rushed home after school each day. She would find the sandwiches she'd made uneaten, and she would wash the dishes. She deep cleaned the house, imagining her life clearing up in the process. Being emotionally alone with grief and guilt was awful. She left the TV on, hoping her mother would yell at her for wasting electricity.

One day, Han stops by Gifty's office after Katherine dropped off a strawberry cake. He offers to get her something from the coffee shop, but Gifty tells him she's going home soon to share the cake with her mother. She imagines a normal afternoon, sitting on the balcony sharing **food**. At home, Gifty brings her mother a slice of cake and begins to read to her the **words** of the Lazarus story from the Gospel of John.

For Gifty as a child, her mother's depression is deeply alarming in part because of the way it mimics Nana's addiction, at least superficially. Both Nana and Gifty's mother are rendered sleepy and unrousable by drugs. But when Gifty force-fed Nana coffee, she abandons her mother to her sleep and goes to school, trying to buy more time to figure out what to do. In both cases however, Gifty allows her caretaking responsibilities to force her into an adult role. She learned to keep family secrets secret when Nana's addiction cost her friendships, so she doesn't ask any adults for help now.



In contrast to her childhood experience, where no one offered Gifty help and she couldn't bring herself to ask for it, Katherine seems to have intuited Gifty's need of support. She demonstrates both kindness and friendship through her baked goods, since food powerfully symbolizes intimacy and relationships in this book. Although Gifty isn't yet ready to ask for help, she shows that she's becoming more open to it by accepting and consuming "Kathy's Cakes."



Gifty's experience taking care of her mother during her second depression, readers now learn, is very much like her experience the first time, right down to the uneaten food. In both cases, Gifty tries to coax her mother back into life through performing domestic tasks, even though now, as an adult and as a scientist who understands the brain chemistry of depression, Gifty knows on some level that these actions will not work. When caretaking fails, she tries to goad her mother into resuming her adult role by breaking the unspoken household rules, hoping for punishment.



Gifty's friendships with both Katherine and Han are deepening, almost despite her efforts to keep them both at arm's length. And both relationships are expressed, at least at this stage, through food. In contrast, Gifty can only imagine sharing the cake with her mother in an intimate, friendly way. She knows that sitting on the balcony and sharing cake is a fantasy at this point. Nevertheless, she does try to connect with her mother through the words of scripture. Importantly, in the story of Lazarus, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead after he'd been buried for four days. On one level, Lazarus's resurrection represents a wish that Nana might have been saved from his addiction. And on another, he still represents Gifty's hope that her mother will rise from her depression, which is like a living death.



As a child, Gifty thought this story was too miraculous. She believed that Jesus could do it, but she didn't understand why. What made Lazarus so special? She was fascinated by him and wanted to know more: how he lived afterwards, what it felt like to have received this gift from God. She realizes how easy this is to psychologize, in the context of her life.

In college, Gifty read a philosophical examination of neuroscience that claimed that neuroscience can't replace psychological explanations for behavior; the brain "make[s] it possible for us—not for it—to perceive and think." Her TA gave her the book to read because she wanted to know what accounts for reason and emotion if the brain can't. Is it the soul? Her Christian upbringing had primed her to believe in the mystery of human existence, but she was frustrated that the mystery seemed to get farther away the more she tried to uncover it.

As an adult, Gifty understands that sometimes science fails, that its questions turn into philosophical hypotheses. She thinks that the dichotomy between science and religion is false because both fail to provide ultimate answers.

Gifty remembers Anne asking if she believed in evolution. Their friendship was full of arguments and wouldn't last, but Gifty felt that Anne truly knew her and truly saw her in a way that no one, not even her mother, could. Anne argued that creationism and evolution were "diametrically opposed," and Gifty answered with the words of her high school teacher that people are made of stardust, but God made the stars.

It's another sign of continuity between Gifty's adult, scientifically-minded self and her childhood persona that even when she believed in the miracle of Lazarus's resurrection, she still wanted to know more about how and why it had happened. It also points to the larger questions that neither science nor faith can answer: why do some people become addicts but others don't? Why do some people have safe, easy lives while others suffer? Why do some people get to be reborn or to recreate themselves, while others can't?



In conjunction with the Biblical text of the Gospel of John, Gifty thinks of a scientific text that has helped her to understand her life, which tries to draw a distinction between the brain and the self. Earlier, she thought about how neuroscientists aren't really comfortable with the idea of a soul and realized that she herself now thought of the brain as she used to think about the soul: as that thing which made a person an individual. But neither science nor religion has yet helped her to fully unlock this fundamental mystery of what makes someone themselves, and she's frustrated that the limits of her new belief system (science) are the same as her old one (Christianity).



This brings Gifty to an important admission, but one which she wouldn't feel comfortable saying out loud in the scientific community. She realizes that science doesn't have all the answers for life and its mysteries. Sometimes, science leads right back to philosophy and religion. Philosophy and religion have always attempted to answer the questions that science can't.



More than anyone else in the book, Anne represents the idea that science and faith are irresistibly opposed to each other, something that Gifty herself disagrees with on a fundamental level. However, despite this irreconcilable difference in their belief systems, Anne nevertheless seems to truly love and value Gifty as a person, offering her the first real taste of intimacy she's ever experienced. Through Anne, Gifty starts to learn that it's possible to have intimate relationships with people who are challenging (like her mother) or who have different beliefs and values than she does (like Katherine).



Why Jesus would resurrect Lazarus is a mystery, but so is why some mice stop pressing the lever and others don't. Gifty stopped believing in extravagant miracles after Nana's death, but she still hoped for smaller ones, like her mother getting up. She created and clung to a routine with her mother, so she felt as if her efforts had been rewarded the day she came home to find the bed empty. Like Jesus she'd willed her mother, in the **words** of the Biblical text, to "come forth." Gifty called Pastor John, who called an ambulance. As Gifty's mother was lifted onto a stretcher, she apologized for not letting the Chin Chin Man take Nana with him to Ghana.

Gifty stopped believing in extravagant miracles after Nana's death because God hadn't healed Nana as she had asked. But she still clings to hope that she can salvage the remnant of her family. This is the smaller miracle of her mother getting up. But when her mother does appear to have risen from the grave of her bed, it's a false hope. In fact, she's tried to commit suicide. In a way, however, this act saves Gifty's mother, since it's what gets her the psychological help that allows her to get back on her feet after Nana's death. Now, in her scientific research, Gifty looks for the smallest of small miracles: the tiny, finite part of the brain that she can stimulate to stop an addicted mouse from risking his health seeking the high of a shot of Ensure.



CHAPTER 41

With her mother in the hospital, Gifty went to live in Pastor John's bright yellow house, three blocks from the church. Their sons were in college, and they sent their daughter to stay with an aunt, so Gifty was alone with Pastor John and his wife, who cooked American **foods** like spaghetti and meatballs and encouraged her to come to church and pray for her mother's healing. Gifty avoided them as much as possible. Although her mother looks the same when she picks Gifty up, she also says, "I'm sorry." The unusual occurrence of her mother's apology makes her feel like a stranger to Gifty.

When Gifty's mother is in recovery from her depression, Gifty experiences caretaking within the context of two other families. The first is Pastor John's, where her physical needs are taken care of. But instead of addressing Gifty's unspoken emotional needs (for love, for support), Pastor John and his wife focus on spiritual activities, like praying. Their inability to truly love Gifty is symbolized by the food they make for her, which fulfills her nutritional needs but doesn't make her feel welcomed. Moreover, sending their daughter away suggests an ongoing belief that Nana's addiction, Gifty's mother's depression, or even just Gifty's race are somehow contaminating. This reminds readers of the ongoing traumas Gifty experienced growing up in a community that had racist views of her family. And it continues to display the hypocritical contradictions between the commandments to love their neighbors as themselves and the way that people in Gifty's church behaved. To make matters worse, when her mother comes home, she feels like a stranger to Gifty.



At home, Gifty watched her mother warily, refusing to find herself "falling for" her recovery. But she was still upset when her mother told her she had bought a ticket to send Gifty to Ghana for the summer while she recovered at home. Gifty promised to be good, to go to church. But her mother, saying she needed a spiritual warrior, told her that she could go to church in Ghana.

Although Gifty's wariness suggests the growing distance between her and her mother, she's still upset when she is sent away, as if she's being punished for her inability to prevent her mother's suicide attempt. Her mother's request for a spiritual warrior, rather than an earthly caretaker, seems to emphasize Gifty's failure.



In Ghana, Gifty met her Aunt Joyce. Before she arrived, she didn't even know she had an aunt. Joyce was buxom and chatty, and suspicious of Gifty's thinness. She immediately bought **koko** from a vendor to feed her. As they sat outside the airport, Joyce told Gifty stories about her mother, but all Gifty could see was the sloping curve of her mother's back in bed.

In an earlier chapter, Gifty mentioned that koko is one of her favorite foods. Because it's connected with the first time she met her kind and maternal aunt, in this context the food is once again suggestive of intimacy. The contrast between the mother Aunt Joyce knew and the mother Gifty knows suggests how important external factors are in causing (or resolving) depression. It's not just, as childhood Gifty often believed, a question of having adequate self-control.



CHAPTER 42

The large Pentecostal church in which her mother grew up was overwhelming to Gifty, from the pastor shouting about spiritual warfare to the congregants dancing and “[falling] out in the Spirit.” It wasn't like Gifty's American church. Her mother sent her to perform spiritual warfare, but Gifty worried about her ability to do it since her faith was so small. She missed Nana, wishing he was there to experience Ghana with her.

Gifty's experiences in the Ghanaian church are alienating and strange. This emphasizes the awkward position Gifty occupies: as the child of immigrants, her childhood was different from her American peers' in many ways. Yet, she doesn't fit in with the Ghanaian culture of her parents, either. Where church and her faith were once a place of safety and security for Gifty, the differences in the way that faith is practiced, even in the same kind of church (Pentecostal), also point towards a much broader and less literalistic idea of faith that Gifty eventually embraces. If not everyone practices Christianity the same way, then there is room for differences of belief within faith.



One day, Gifty asked Aunt Joyce to take her to the Chin Chin Man. Gifty refused to embrace him and demanded to know if he knew she was in Ghana, and if he knew her mother attempted suicide. He talked about everything and anything else than her questions, and Gifty understood that he would never apologize. On the ride home, Joyce explained that he felt “Ofare,” unsure of how to say the **word** in English. Gifty's mother later translated, telling Gifty her father was ashamed. She didn't care how he felt, and only wanted to go home.

Gifty's uncomfortable meeting with the Chin Chin Man just emphasizes her isolation and helps to show why she is so afraid of intimacy in the present. She lost her father long before her brother and her mother, and in her mind, it's impossible to extricate her father's sudden abandonment from Nana's eventual addiction (given how traumatic the loss of his father was for him) and her mother's depression and suicide attempt. She is unable to forgive her father for the same reason she judges her brother for his addiction and her mother for her depression: as a child, Gifty still places an inordinate amount of faith in her own self-control, and she condemns those whom she sees as weak, including her family members.



The word for the inability to find pleasure in customary activities—the primary symptom of major depression—is “anhedonia.” Gifty wants to understand the causes of this symptom, but she is aware that she only studies one part of the story. On paper, Nana’s anhedonia has so many possible causes: being Black, an immigrant, lower-middle-class, or coming from a single-parent home. It would be hard to prove his anhedonia came from the drug use, or to isolate what caused his drug use.

Anhedonia, or inability to feel pleasure, connects Nana and Gifty’s mother. Gifty understands that Nana’s anhedonia contributed to his addiction, perhaps by setting up the circumstances under which the drugs became such a sweet relief. And it’s the primary symptom of her mother’s depression. Now, as an adult, Gifty understands that many complex and interrelated events may have contributed to Nana’s addiction and death, from the abandonment of his father to the trauma of facing racism as he grew up. But even knowing all of this, she still can’t answer the question that she most wants to: why Nana? Yet again, science, faith, and knowledge fail to answer the most important questions.



The question of why people become addicted to drugs is important to most people, who want to believe that if they’re good enough, the bad things Gifty studies won’t happen to them. Even she feels that way sometimes. But no case study can capture the magnificent entirety of Nana, of any person. And when she felt that her brother was a waste, she was seeing just his addiction, rather than the sum of his whole being.

Gifty’s desire to find an answer to the question of “why” parallels the feelings of most people. There is an unspoken belief that if one understands why someone else becomes addicted, they might escape the same fate themselves. As a child, Gifty thought this way, imagining addiction and depression as a shady man trying to tempt people to turn from their paths into the shadows. But now, she understands that it’s impossible to separate the good from the bad in a person. And focusing on the origins of addiction or other types of mental illness takes away from the dignity and wholeness of their victims.



CHAPTER 43

In an entry from her childhood journal, Gifty tells God that Nana made her dinner while their mother was at work. When she told him that a classmate had mocked her cheap clothes, Nana told her that there was a place in hell for the girl, and this made Gifty feel better.

Gifty’s childhood journal entries contextualize the magnificent wholeness of Nana that people missed when they focused solely on his addiction. First, she remembers him as her caretaker, making her dinner and making her feel better when another child mocked her. But this also emphasizes the difficult circumstances that Gifty said, in the previous chapter, might have led to his addiction: he’s making dinner because their single-parent mother is at work, trying to make enough money to support her children. And the other child’s mockery suggests the racist and classist abuse that Nana, Gifty, and their mother experienced in Alabama.



In another entry, Gifty wishes God a Merry Christmas and describes her small part in the nativity play. She only had one line, but Nana gave her a standing ovation.

In the second entry, Gifty describes Nana’s unstinting support of her, even when her part in the play wasn’t very impressive. This suggests the kind of support that she wishes others could have given him, appreciating his goodness even when it was partly obscured by his addiction.



CHAPTER 44

While Gifty was in Ghana, her mother healed in Alabama. Her anhedonia persisted, but her time in the psych ward seemed to have helped her other symptoms and she started going back to church. Gifty begs Pastor John for updates over the phone, but he only has superficial information, like what her mother wore to church.

Gifty understood that her mother needed healing, but not what she needed healing *from*. She had only heard people use “depression” as another word for “sadness.” Learning about major depressive disorder in college helped her to understand her mother better, and she used her classes as an excuse to ask her mother about her experience in the psych ward.

While she was committed, Gifty’s mother was supposed to take medicine and talk to the doctor. She took the meds there but stopped after she was released because she didn’t feel like they were helping. She didn’t want to tell the doctors they weren’t working because she was afraid they would shock her. Electroconvulsive therapy has a bad reputation from the “wild west” days of neurology, when experimental protocols were common and ethics were loose. Often, shocks were used to control patients who neither asked for nor needed treatment but were considered abnormal by society. But electroconvulsive therapy *can* work and is still used as a last resort for intractable depression.

When she returns to practice, Katherine’s patients will be looking for last resorts. Her research involves experimental vagus nerve stimulation, which is helpful but, like DBS, is poorly understood and imperfect as a therapy.

As Gifty’s mother recovers, she returns to her primary community, which is the church. Yet, the support she receives there is superficial. Pastor John doesn’t seem to have any sense of how she’s actually doing. Gifty’s mother, at home, is as isolated as Gifty herself is, far away in Ghana. She already established in an earlier chapter how far-flung the Ghanaian community in America was. After Nana’s funeral, they largely disappeared from her and her mother’s lives again. But the funeral also emphasized how different Gifty and her mother were from the rest of the church community, showing their decreased ability to provide Gifty’s mother with any real support in Gifty’s absence.



As a child, Gifty didn’t have context to understand her mother’s depression. In part, this has to do with her mother’s resistance to Western medical ideas, and in part it has to do with her church’s evident inability to understand or have compassion for it. In this way, Gifty discovers another hole in her education when she gets to college. But this also affords her an opportunity to talk to her mother about her experiences.



In her first depression, Gifty’s mother locked herself into her own suffering and depression to a greater extent than necessary by her refusal to talk to others or accept their support. In a similar way, Gifty is locking herself into greater suffering by taking care of her mother alone and refusing to talk about her past or current struggles with any of the people around her. The specter of electroshock therapy suggests that the fear of mother and daughter is misplaced. Certainly, intimate relationships can be painful, especially when they’re lost (represented by the Chin Chin Man’s abandonment and Nana’s death). But, in the right amounts, they can also be therapeutic. In her fearful attempts to avoid pain, Gifty’s mother missed an opportunity for healing, and Gifty’s fear threatens to damage her in the present.



Gifty’s research isn’t just important to her because of her family history; it’s also important because she understands how limited treatment options still are for the worst cases of addiction and depression. With ever greater specificity (like that which her research might provide, with its ability to stimulate specific neurons), therapies become less and less potentially dangerous.



Eventually, Gifty's mother surfaced from her depression. The last time Gifty went to church in Ghana, she felt like the pastor's sermon was directed at her personally, out of frustration over her refusal to come accept healing at the altar. He said her mother's healing was a miracle, although "those in the West" might see it as coincidence. He shouted that when God says to rise, the people RISE. Gifty sat still and stared at him, unwilling to believe that her mother had really risen, like Jesus and Lazarus.

At the airport in Ghana, Aunt Joyce wrapped Gifty into an enormous hug. Gifty realized that her aunt reflected what her mother could have been—happy, assured, proud—under other circumstances. Joyce told Gifty she was proud of her, then put her on the plane back to America. After this "feast of love," Gifty was starving for whatever her mother had to give, including the smile she offered when she got Gifty from the airport.

CHAPTER 45

Gifty was in fifth grade when Mrs. Palmer, one of her mother's clients, died. She remembers looking at the wrinkled body in the casket, and how Mrs. Palmer's family hugged her mother like she was a member of their family. Her mother had spent more time with her clients and had touched them more than she'd ever touched Gifty, and Gifty started to realize her mother didn't belong to her.

One morning, Gifty finds her mother getting dressed, ready to go see the lab. Gifty, unprepared for her mother's sudden interest, doesn't have anything cool to show off. Her mother asks to see the mice, and Gifty places one into her hands. Her mother laughs with pleasure when the **mouse** rouses slightly and looks at her. She wants to know if the mice get hurt, and Gifty says that although they try to be humane and responsible, sometimes they do. Gifty remembers the day she and Nana found the **baby bird**, remembers her mother telling them "There is no living thing ... that doesn't come to know pain."

Gifty's refusal to accept an altar call in Ghana is in line with her previous experiences. In America, she refused until she was absolutely certain she heard Jesus calling her. But it also underlines the distance between herself and her Ghanaian heritage. Gifty accepted her faith in its American form, but she rejects it in its Ghanaian form. It also shows how profoundly wounded Gifty has been by the things that have happened to her. She no longer believes in God because he failed to heal her brother. Thus, she's suspicious of claims that God healed her mother.



In connection with the Lazarus story and its promise of literal rebirth and resurrection, Gifty's Aunt Joyce represents what her mother might have been if she was fully alive. But, in committing herself to immigrating to America when Nana was a baby, Gifty's mother seems to have died in an important and unfixable way. Realizing that her mother's capacity for love has been limited by her circumstances, Gifty returns home ready to accept a more circumscribed form of intimacy.



Although Gifty was starving for any attention her mother had to give her when she came home from Ghana, she quickly realizes that the scraps aren't enough. Her mother belongs more to other people than to her daughter, just as Gifty belonged more to Nana (and was more frequently under his protection and care) than her mother.



But sometimes, Gifty's mother surprises her. Gifty had all but forgotten the offer to visit the lab, so her mother's sudden interest catches her unprepared. The similarities between mother and daughter are on display in Gifty's mother's approach to the mice, which is every bit as careful and concerned as her daughter's. And it's another surprise reversal: although Gifty has learned to accept the damage and pain she causes the mice, her mother seems to be bothered by it. In contrast, when she and Nana found the baby bird, from her mother's reaction, Gifty didn't think that she seemed to care very much about its suffering.



Watching her mother walk around the lab, Gifty thinks about Mahler's "separation-individuation theory of child development," which is the stage where babies become aware of themselves and start to understand their mothers as individual beings. Intellectually and experientially, she knows that she and her mother are separate beings, but they are both sometimes angered over reminders of their difference. After Nana's death, when her mother couldn't get out of bed, Gifty wanted her mother to be "hers" again, someone she could understand. Her mother's illness was a reminder that Gifty would never know her mother "wholly and completely."

Being in the lab with her mother reminds Gifty of the last scientific text she introduces in the book, and perhaps the most important. If, earlier in the story, she understood her tortured relationship with her mother through the damage her mother's lack of attention and intimacy caused, now she starts to understand that she needs to forge her own path apart from her mother. Nana's death, and the necessity of becoming her mother's caretaker at such a young age, have stranded Gifty in an immature stage of her emotional development where she overidentifies with her mother and her mother's needs.



CHAPTER 46

When Gifty looks at her mother and sees the spark of life beneath her illness, she thinks, "Please don't go." She tries to work from home, although she spends more time thinking about what she should be doing than actually writing her paper. She writes a fairytale in which her sleepy mother is carried on her bed back to Ghana, where she is laid at the edge of the ocean and brought back to the life by the waves. Then sea creatures make her a tail and she becomes a mermaid.

Gifty is terrified of losing her connection with her mother or her brother, and that seems to be part of the reason why she's delaying writing up her results. Although her research has given her the answer she's been seeking—the beginning steps on a path towards being able to "turn off" addiction in the brains of patients—it also represents the end of a project that allowed her to feel connected to her dearly loved and deeply missed brother. The fairytale that Gifty writes is an important step towards her individuation. Imagining her mother as a mythical, magical creature helps her to see her mother as a separate individual from herself. And, imagining a happy ending to her mother's suffering releases her from some of the responsibility she feels to make things better for her.



Gifty remembers her English professor lecturing on Gerard Manley Hopkins, specifically his concept of "inscape" or "the sanctity of a thing." A student asked if it was possible to talk about Hopkins without considering the repressive force of religion in his life. Admitting that church can be a place to learn right and wrong, the student nevertheless described the crushing religious guilt that he felt since no one told him that it was impossible to be perfect.

Yet again, Gifty's college classmates argue for a strict division between the religious and secular worlds, holding religion accountable for causing more misery than salvation. One student acknowledges that there are valuable moral lessons to be learned in church, but he can't separate those from the crushing sense of guilt he felt there. Gerard Manley Hopkins struggled with the guilt caused by what he felt to be the contradictions between his art and sexuality and his faith. But in response, instead of running away, he found a new and different way to express his understanding of the sacred in the world around him. His idea of "inscape" clearly resonates with the way that Gifty sees sacredness all around her, even though she's lost her faith. The mice, the lab, and her experiments all have a sense of "inscape" and spiritual importance even though they are so distant from the religious practice of her childhood.



Gifty ruminates on right and wrong, which is sometimes taught to children by their parents and is sometimes learned through painful experimentation. But addicts don't learn to avoid harmful things through their experiences. The only foolproof way to avoid addiction is to avoid all risks, but humans are hardwired to experiment and take risks. Stanford itself is proof, since the statehood of California depended on the risk-taking of explorers and pioneers.

Gifty's work tries to anticipate this human recklessness and find a way to avert it. And she uses mice, which are subject to her whims. She manipulates them into seeking danger, and she understands that the things that put humanity apart from the animal kingdom—like recklessness and creativity—have also led to the destruction of nature.

But Gifty also understands that religion has its limits. For instance, while it can teach about morality, about right and wrong, sometimes those messages just don't translate into a person's brain. The painful shocks should teach the mice that their pursuit of the Ensure is potentially bad. And it does for most of them. But for some, it's not enough and it fails. And this isn't a failure in humans, but seems to be part of their design, because without taking risks, they wouldn't have accomplished the things that they did, like crossing North America on foot.



The mice are good experimental subjects for Gifty because of their differences from humans. They don't naturally seek out danger, so when they do, it's easy to tell that she's found mice who are addicted to the Ensure. Gifty understands that humans are animals. But she also sees how the differences between humanity and the rest of creation—primarily in their heightened willingness to accept risk—can be a liability as much as a benefit.



CHAPTER 47

In a childhood journal entry, Gifty describes a contest with her friend Ashley to see who could hold their breath longer in the pool. She was so determined to win that she passed out and had to be pulled from the water by Ashley's mother, who yelled, "You could have killed yourself!" Gifty asks God if he would have let her die.

Gifty herself has always been risk-averse, feeling that if she controls herself carefully, she will be able to avoid the pitfalls she watched her family members succumb to. The memory in this journal entry marks a rare exception, albeit one that is connected to other themes in Gifty's life. Her mother's suicide attempt involves submerging herself in water, and both this actual attempt to die and Gifty's accidental courting of death recall Gifty's sly attempts to baptize herself in the tub. Both represent a desire to die to the old life and be born anew. Although this journal entry is undated, its address to God suggests it's before Nana's death, Gifty's loss of faith, and her mother's suicide attempt. Nevertheless, it shows how her belief in God made her feel less vulnerable than she actually was, suggesting that both her mother and brother might not have properly understood their own vulnerabilities, either.



CHAPTER 48

Gifty remembers being slow to experiment with recklessness and slow to make friends. Nana always had lots of friends, in part from being on sports teams. After he became a basketball star and a hometown hero, everyone in town wanted to talk to him and associate with him. Gifty was too young to go to parties with him and when he hosted them at their house, he bribed her to stay in her room, where she piously prayed for the partygoers' souls. And she wouldn't tell on Nana, even though their mother always found some tiny sign that he'd missed during cleanup: a bottle cap, or a beer stain on a washcloth.

Sometimes, Gifty wishes she had told on Nana, especially after a party not long after his injury that included unfamiliar faces. She snuck downstairs and watched him standing on the coffee table, putting too much weight on his hurt ankle while his friends cheered him on for doing something Gifty couldn't see. She remembers how badly she wanted to have whatever made people cheer and gather around Nana.

Gifty had her first alcoholic drink at a party in college, and she surprised everyone with the willingness it gave her to talk, laugh, and dance. After Anne arrived, she pulled Gifty up onto a table to dance. While partygoers catcalled them, Gifty asked Anne if she liked her better when she had been drinking. And Anne said she liked her best when she was talking about Jesus and "feeling holy."

A few weeks later, Anne and Gifty drove to the woods to do mushrooms together. They spread a blanket in a clearing of trees that impressed Gifty with their age and height. She doesn't know how long it took for the psychedelics to take effect, but she remembers the sensations of relaxing, unspooling, and of time slowing down. She murmured about "living-man trees," and when she and Anne came down, Anne wanted to know the story. Gifty refused to tell it, unable to imagine being free enough to truly connect with others.

While Nana's recklessness may have contributed to his addiction, it also benefitted him socially. Conversely, although Gifty was spared dangerous experimentation because of her extreme risk aversion and self-control, she also made herself lonely by these character traits. The image of her sitting in her room, praying for her brother and his friends as they sinned by partying, reinforces this distinction between the siblings.



In light of her piety, judgmental attitude towards others' perceived sins, and aversion to risk, it's interesting that Gifty didn't tell on Nana for his parties. Now, of course, she regrets that she didn't, thinking that perhaps if his addiction had been discovered and addressed sooner, he might have lived. But it also makes sense that she would have instinctively protected Nana: he instinctively protected her from their parents' fights and from the racism and loneliness of her childhood. At first, she can only see the brother she loves, admires, and wishes to emulate.



When Gifty does finally experiment with alcohol, much later than many of her peers, she discovers that it's not as scary as she had thought. It loosens her up and makes her more fun. At first, she worries that her friend Anne will like the inebriated Gifty more than the regular Gifty. But Anne's love isn't circumstantial. She befriends Gifty because Gifty defended religion to her classmates. Anne, unlike everyone else Gifty has known outside of her family, sees and accepts her for who she is.



Gifty has spent most of her life scrupulously avoiding temptation, so it's a testament to the trust and affection she has for Anne that she would risk trying psychedelics with her friend. And, as for Nana, the emptying-out feeling of the drugs is a welcome relief to Gifty, who hasn't felt this relaxed and unguarded in a long time, if ever. But her unwillingness to share the story of the tree men with Anne, because it relates to her father, shows that Gifty still desires control and self-control. This foreshadows the end of her relationship with Anne, which also involves unconfessed stories and Gifty's addiction to a feeling of self-control.



Gifty's relationship with Anne was intimate and romantic, if not fully sexual. But Gifty remained guarded and unwilling to talk about Nana, because those stories all ended in his death. She told Anne one about painting Nana's nails while he slept; he punched her when he couldn't wash it off. She wanted to know if this was the kind of story Anne wanted, and only became angrier and more defensive when Anne suggested she see a therapist. Gifty laughed a mean laugh and cried "He died" over and over.

Despite the importance of her relationship with Anne, Gifty isn't able to accept Anne's offer of intimacy, and so she refuses to tell Anne about her brother or her mother. Gifty's refusal to tell unhappy memories suggests a fear that her struggles and traumas make her unlovable. Ironically, however, she makes herself unlovable more by her refusal to share, although it will take at least two painful breakups for her to realize this.



CHAPTER 49

In high school, Gifty had a week of terrible nightmares that she couldn't remember. She didn't want to worry her mother, so she didn't say anything. She just tried to keep herself awake watching TV. When that failed, she prayed. And when that failed, she talked to Nana. She told him all kinds of things, and the only rule was that she couldn't use his name directly, or she would ruin the magic of the conversations. One night, her mother found her, and when Gifty confessed that she was talking to Nana, her mother told her, "I talk to Nana too" and she thought she could hear him answer.

Gifty struggles to let go of her most important, most intimate relationship in the weeks and years after her brother's death. Her overidentification of the mice with Nana suggests that, even in the story's present, she hasn't quite resolved this issue yet. Although she seems somewhat ashamed of her need to talk to him—resorting to it only after distraction and prayer have failed—this is an important moment of bonding between her and her mother. They both are still suffering from his loss and at least some of their reactions to that pain are the same.



Gifty finally told Anne about Nana's overdose the night before Anne was taking the MCAT. They slept together in Gifty's bed that night, Anne crying herself to sleep and Gifty's heart growing hard toward her as she wondered what Anne could know about suffering. She never spoke to Anne again, ignoring weeks of increasingly frantic texts. The texts stopped when Anne graduated and Gifty went home for the summer.

When Gifty finally admits the truth to Anne, Anne is upset. But, as elsewhere in the book, readers can only interpret this event through Gifty's experience, so they can't know why Anne cries. Gifty decides that Anne's response co-opts her own pain and decides to abandon the friendship. Her refusal to allow Anne to apologize seems like a way to punish her friend for her reaction to the story. But it also serves to punish Gifty for allowing Anne to become so intimate with her.



CHAPTER 50

Gifty's mother is sitting up in bed. Gifty offers her **breakfast**, but all she wants is a granola bar and some water. Although it's the day she's going to prep the limping **mouse** for optogenetics, Gifty offers to stay home, but her mother lies back down in bed. Gifty goes to the lab, both relieved and sad.

Gifty is overjoyed at the signs of life in her mother and she responds by offering her food, which serves to reaffirm their sense of intimacy and togetherness. Importantly, Gifty is willing to choose her mother over her day's research. And when her mother refuses this offer, Gifty feels ambivalent about it, because she wants both to be successful in her science and to feel close to her mother.



At the lab, Han is celebrating getting a publication in [Nature](#). Gifty brings him a **cupcake** and sings him a celebratory song. She realizes that she's steeling herself for his departure. She also realizes that she's reached the point where her desire to confirm her findings has become procrastination about her next steps. She wants to be famous, wealthy, and respected, and so she tests and tests again.

Anne used to call Gifty a control freak, in a loving way. The last text she sent said, "I love you. You know that, right?" and although Gifty wanted desperately to respond, she restrained herself, exercising the control that makes her good at her work. Moreover, she still finds the process of research, flooding the mice's brains with blue light to modify their behavior, completely compelling: to her, it's holy, even divine.

Han breaks Gifty's reverie by asking her on a dinner date. She tries to brush him off, but he persists. He tells her it's not healthy to spend more time around mice than people. This reminds her of a fight with Raymond, who wanted to meet her family. Early on, she had implied that she was an only child and then she didn't know how to say the truth later. She tried to keep him away from her family while also trying to assuage her guilt by lying to him, saying that they would plan a trip to Ghana with her mother.

Gifty's mother had never returned to Ghana, and when Gifty had suggested it, her mother flatly stated: "My life is here." Their life in America was the only connection she still had to Nana. And coming to America was, for Gifty's mother, not all that different from the wild, important recklessness of the pioneers. Like them, her mother suffered and persevered. Even lying in Gifty's bed, her mother is a testament to perseverance, since she's still alive, even after crushing trials.

Gifty leaves her mother at home, after her mother refuses Gifty's attempt to connect with her. But in the lab, she discovers that Han has reason to celebrate and so she reinforces her growing connection with him through her goofy song and celebratory offering of food. Han's success—and a reminder that the lab is only meant to be a temporary stop in her career trajectory—inspire Gifty to finish up her own project.



Gifty revisits the end of her friendship with Anne, confessing how badly she wanted to respond to Anne. Her refusal to acknowledge Anne's apology seems to be less connected to any hurt Anne caused her and more a way for Gifty to prove to herself that she doesn't need people like Anne, who will occasionally cause her to feel pain or discomfort. She reflects that, as with the thin line between therapy and harm in electroshock therapy, or between stilling Parkinson's tremors and making a person incurably sad, there is a thin line between the ways her desire to control things are helpful and harmful to her.



Just as Gifty thinks about how she ended her relationship with Anne by refusing the other woman's offer of love and intimacy, despite all of Gifty's flaws and traumas, Han asks her on a date. This in turn reminds her of Raymond. Her relationship with him failed and ended for the same reason her relationship with Anne did: Gifty was too afraid to be honest with either one about the pain and trauma she'd endured or how badly this had hurt her.



When Gifty was in Ghana as a child, she struggled to connect with her family and culture. She is thus not very surprised when her mother admits that she doesn't want to go back home because her life is in America. Gifty's life is there, too. This is one of the things that connects Gifty and her mother and separates the two of them (and Nana) from the Chin Chin Man, who never made a successful life in America. Her mother's immigration and tenacity represent the same kind of human risk-taking behavior that can lead equally to addiction or to scientific or cultural breakthroughs.



Gifty used to believe that God wouldn't give her more than she could handle, but that was before Nana's death. That was too much. It took her a long time to understand that it's hard to live in the world, that as people are given more and more, the nature of "what we can handle" changes, sometimes in miraculous ways.

Gifty recalls a platitude offered to people in her church, based on 1 Corinthians 10:13, which says that God will not allow anyone to be tempted beyond the ability he gives them to resist. She suggests, then, that she lost her faith in God because Nana's death was too much for her to handle. Yet, she survived it relatively intact, and eventually realized that her capacity to handle things has changed over time, becoming greater as the need has arisen.



CHAPTER 51

After many requests, Gifty allows Katherine to visit her home. She knows that she'll have to ask for and accept help eventually, but still clings to a pattern of trying to fix her mother independently. She successfully keeps herself from tears when Katherine asks how she is doing. She learned this skill from her mother, and it makes her think of all their other similarities. She finds it hard not to imagine herself in her mother's place in bed someday.

The dam of Gifty's solitude is slowly being worn away by Han's overtures and by Katherine's consistent kindness and attention. Gifty realizes this but continues to resist it, because she hasn't yet been faced with something that is beyond her ability to handle on her own. Her perverse pride in being able to keep herself from honestly sharing her feelings with Katherine is another similarity between her and her mother, and points to the ways in which she still overidentifies with her parent.



To change the subject, Gifty mentions her journal and shamefacedly confesses that she grew up evangelical. Although Katherine says it's important and beautiful to believe in something, Gifty disagrees. She thinks that faith requires a person to submit to and believe in something specific. If she can't believe in her childhood God, she can't replace him with a vague "something." But she doesn't know how to say this aloud. She hasn't been able to give a straight answer to anyone about her belief in God since Nana's death.

In contrast to Gifty's college classmates and the church members of her youth, both of whom wanted solid walls between science and faith, Katherine has a more mature and comprehensive perspective. She thinks that belief not only isn't opposed to science, but that it's important for people to have something to believe in. Her willingness to keep an open mind and think flexibly is initially challenging for Gifty, who hasn't been so openly accepted since her relationship with Anne. Nevertheless, Gifty demonstrates another point of continuity between her childhood and adult selves when she resists the idea that a person can believe in a fuzzy "something." For her, it's a black and white choice between believing in God and having no faith. This is yet another marker of her inability to fully separate herself from her mother and her mother's beliefs—which include her faith. Gifty doesn't believe in God the same way her mother does anymore, but she can't yet imagine belief outside of the way her mother believes.



The day that her teacher said she believed that people are stardust from divinely created stars, Gifty laughed aloud. She told the teacher that this compromise belief system seemed too convenient. The teacher didn't respond, denying Gifty the fight she wanted. Gifty knew she wouldn't find answers for hard questions in her hometown. And now she realizes that she will likely never find answers that satisfy her.

As Katherine leaves, she encourages Gifty to keep writing in her journal.

CHAPTER 52

As Katherine leaves, Gifty checks on her mother, still unmoving in the bed. She goes to the lab, where she cleans up her workspace. She has finished her research: she is as certain as she can be that she can make the mice refrain from seeking rewards by stimulating the right neural pathway. She delivered the light, and even the limping mouse stopped pushing the lever. She begins to write up her findings, which are dry and direct. They can't capture her very human feelings of relief, or the sensation of holding a mouse's life in her hands.

The laying on of hands was important in Gifty's childhood church: when someone received prayer, it was administered through the hands of those nearest them. Everyone else reached out their hands across the distance. Gifty remembers the feeling of touch when she was saved and watching the limping mouse refuse the lever reminds her of the meaning of rebirth and redemption, of needing the outstretched hands of others and the grace of God.

Coming to her own definition of faith has always been a struggle for Gifty. Her attempt to bait her science teacher into a debate about it recalls her attempts to bait her mother into a debate or argument about the merits of her scientific career versus her faith. But where Gifty sees opposition, others don't, and slowly she comes to realize that the answers are not and never will be as clear-cut as she wants them to be. Any system of belief, whether it's science or religion, requires a certain amount of faith from its followers.



The journal has provided Gifty with insights into her past and has demonstrated the continuity between her childhood and adult selves. When Katherine encourages her to keep up the practice, she is also encouraging her to continue the self-exploration that is necessary for the next step of her maturity—understanding and accepting her identity on its own, without reference to her mother or her mother's beliefs.



There is still reason for Gifty to believe that things—and people—can't change. Her mother's second depression seems to be following the first almost exactly. This consistency throws Gifty's scientific breakthrough into sharp relief and offers a reminder that the whole point of her work is to change situations of depression and addiction that, up till now, had been considered hopelessly unchangeable. But even as she does this work she realizes that the science alone won't ever capture her transcendent feeling of success.



There is some important form of connection between living creatures that Gifty can't explain through science. She felt it when she was saved one night in her church, and every time that her congregation laid hands on one another for healing. She felt it when Pastor John laid his hands on her head to pray for her in the weeks after Nana's death, and when she watched him praying for her mother. Although these prayers weren't effectual in and of themselves, they are a key component of being human. And Gifty feels this connection when she respectfully and gratefully touches her mouse. And, seeing the mouse's refusal of the lever, for the first time in her life she truly believes in the possibility of redemption.



CHAPTER 53

Gifty is writing her paper in earnest now and making good progress. While she works, she listens to a mixtape Raymond made for their six-month anniversary, shortly before they broke up. She avoided Katherine for as long as she could, but finally caved in and accepted a **lunch** invitation. While they eat sushi, Katherine asks after Gifty's mother. When Gifty avoids the question, Katherine asks about her journaling.

Gifty remembers re-reading all her old journal entries before she went to college. They embarrassed her, and she resolved to create a new Gifty for her adult life, one that didn't talk about depressing things, like her mother and Nana.

Her relationship with Raymond ended over her journal, too. After she realized he was secretly reading through it, she confessed in the journal that she was lying to him about planning their trip to Ghana. When he reached that entry, two weeks later, he confronted her. In the face of his hurt and disbelief, Gifty laughed. But it was a "mean and terrible" sound that scared them both; Raymond shivered like the **baby bird**. But Gifty couldn't stop laughing; she couldn't believe that she could shake her ghosts or stop ruining things. She let Raymond leave without a fight.

Gifty tells Katherine that she and her mother are fine. Katherine replies that she's not trying to psychoanalyze Gifty or pump her for information. She's just trying to be present, as a friend. Under the table, Gifty pinches her skin to keep from crying, unsure what it would feel like to believe in Katherine's friendship.

As Gifty works on concluding her experiments and this phase of her career, she listens to music that reminds her of her failed relationships. Although she tried to cut Katherine out like she did Anne and Raymond, Gifty hasn't succeeded. In asking about Gifty's mother, Katherine shows concern for Gifty and her life which Gifty initially refuses.



But when Katherine brings up the journal, Gifty is forced to reckon with the ways that the choices she's made have directed her life—and the ways in which they haven't. In going to college, she tried to insulate herself from intimate relationships because the loss of her brother and the loss of connection with her brother were so painful to her. But she carried these traumas unavoidably with her, and her refusal to acknowledge them may have damaged her relationships far more than admitting them would have.



Gifty also remembers the end of her relationship with Raymond, which happened after he discovered that she was lying about their trip to Ghana. She never told him that she had a brother and doesn't know how to break the news after months of evading the truth. Rather than face herself and her own painful past, she allows a second important and intimate relationship to come to an end over her inability to allow others to know her as she truly is—the good and the bad.



Katherine seems to intuitively understand that Gifty is evading self-disclosure when she swears that things are going well, despite evidence to the contrary. She offers her friendship to Gifty outright, but Gifty can't imagine accepting the overtures, since she is so terrified of opening herself up to a relationship with a person who might hurt or abandon her.



CHAPTER 54

After lunch, Gifty decides to give herself the afternoon off to take her mother to the beach. She's not surprised when she enters a silent apartment, but when she peeps into the bedroom, her mother is gone. Gifty remembers her childhood confidence that things happened according to divine order, a confidence that vanished after Nana's death and her mother's depression. She realizes that her mother's suicide attempt felt like the thirty-ninth day in the desert without water, and she's spent the last seventeen years waiting for the fortieth day. And now it's here.

Gifty calls, "Ma!" as she searches the small apartment, specifically the bathroom. She runs outside but stops short when she realizes she has no idea where to look for her mother. She pulls out her phone and calls Katherine, who answers by asking if she's okay. "No, I'm not okay," she replies. And she wonders if or when she's ever made that confession before.

Katherine drives over and she and Gifty begin to drive around the complex and the neighborhood while Gifty catalogues the bridges and bodies of water her mother could have used to attempt suicide again. Just as she resolves to call the police, Gifty sees her mother on the side of the road, sitting beneath a tree. She shouts, "Where were you?" but her mother is stiff and unresponsive as they put her in the car.

Gifty understands the experience of her mother's suicide attempt by way of a Biblical metaphor. Three of the four gospels tell this story. After his baptism, Jesus retired to spend 40 days in the desert, fasting and praying. During this time, Satan appeared and tempted him several times, but each time, Jesus resisted Satan's offers. The themes of this story that seem to resonate with Gifty are the tremendous isolation, loneliness, and suffering of Jesus in the desert. But whereas Jesus relies on God for strength and resists Satan, Gifty lost her faith in God through the trials that surrounded her brother's death. When she connects her mother's two depressions into one sojourn in the desert, she suggests a powerful continuity between the two. But this also shows at least one of the ways in which Gifty has gotten stuck. Forced too young into a caretaker role for her mother, she doesn't feel like she's ever been relieved of that post. She spent the years between her mother's two depressions just waiting for her mother to attempt suicide again.



Gifty's mother is not lying, suicidal, in the bathtub as she did on that other day many years before. But she isn't in the apartment anymore. In a way, finding her in the tub might have been easier for Gifty, because then at least she would have known what to do: call for help (as she called Pastor John when she was a child) and turn her mother over to the care of medical professionals. But because her mother is gone, she doesn't know what to do. And because she doesn't know what to do, she does what has been unthinkable for her since she was a small girl: ask someone else to come and help her.



With Katherine alongside her, Gifty can at least take some action to find her mother. But Gifty, who has always seemed so assured that she understands her mother perfectly, is wrong. This wasn't a suicide attempt, or at least it doesn't appear to be. Katherine and Gifty instead find Gifty's mother sitting beneath a tree, looking out of place and confused.



Katherine drives them home, where Gifty refuses her offer to stay. As Gifty's fear dissipates, pity for her small, disheveled mother replaces anger. Gifty runs a bath, then gently undresses her, and begins to bathe her. When she pours water over her mother's head, she sees shock and pleasure in her eyes. She says, "Mama I beg you" but doesn't know how to finish the sentence: to live? to stop? to wake up? While Gifty gently washes, her mother grabs her hand, holds it to her heart, and says, "Ebeyeyie," *it will be all right* in Twi. It's what she said to Nana when she bathed him during his withdrawal. Gifty doesn't trust it: it was true then only until it wasn't. But her mother grabs Gifty's face, looks into her eyes and insists, "Don't be afraid ... God is with me wherever I go."

Once Gifty's mother is asleep, Gifty sneaks out of the house, despite feeling like she needs to stay and hold vigil. She drives north to San Francisco, relishing the feeling of the wind from the open windows on her face. She's trying to escape mice and humans and herself, especially herself. She wants to hear God's voice telling her the way.

When they were children, Nana and Gifty used to sneak into the community's gated pool—which their parents had refused to let them join—while their mother worked the night shift. Neither were good swimmers, so they just waded in the shallow end. Gifty fretted that God would be mad at them for sinning and doing something against the rules. But Nana replied that it's a nice sin.

Part of the trauma experienced during her mother's first depression was being forced as a young child into the role of an adult caretaker. When Gifty and Katherine get her mother home, Gifty runs a bath and bathes her mother as if she were a small child and Gifty herself was the mother. But this act of role reversal doesn't seem traumatic. Rather, it seems to release Gifty of the need to take care of her mother on her own and at the expense of her own personal mental and emotional health. The bath is where Gifty, as a child, tried to baptize herself. So bathing her mother acts as a sort of baptism marking her own rebirth, rather than her mother's. Gifty is reborn as her mother's caretaker, but also as her own individual person, no longer completely dependent on her mother's or her family identity for a sense of meaning. In addition, while Gifty bathes her mother, her mother speaks tenderly to her, reminding her that God takes care of her, releasing her daughter from her feeling that she is solely responsible for taking care of her.



With her mother bathed and her newfound sense of release, Gifty engages in a much-delayed act of rebellion. Like a teenager, she waits until her mother is asleep and then sneaks out of the house to be on her own for a while. As she drives around, she wishes to escape her responsibilities, fears, and traumas. She wants to be told where to go and what to do. And she realizes that she's still listening for God's voice, even though she stopped believing in the faith of her childhood many years ago.



As Gifty drives, she remembers sneaking into the community pool late at night with Nana. Her memory suggests that God isn't watching her as closely or as critically as she always thought: she has always had the leeway to make her own choices and her own mistakes. Like her mother, who didn't much care if her children went into sports or medicine or science as long as they worked hard, God doesn't seem to care about every tiny little action and thought Gifty has. In this memory, she realizes that sometimes it's nice to let go and let down her guard. But it's also clear that she hasn't been able to do this since Nana died and left her on her own to take care of their mother.



Gifty drives around the city until it gets dark, then parks her car. She tells God, someone, anyone: her mother will get better, and she will finish her paper. Her work will have meaning, and her mother will be alive to see it. She fantasizes about driving home and finding her mother awake, making dinner. She begs “Please, please” into the darkness, waiting for a response or “some bit of wonder,” before beginning the drive home.

As she thinks about what she will do going forward, Gifty’s thoughts are poised between prayer and talking to ghosts. Earlier, she talked to Nana to ease the pain of missing him; she talks to her mice while she does experiments; and she spent much of her childhood talking to God. In all of these cases, the relief followed the talking, suggesting that it’s less that God is listening that brings her comfort than that she’s allowing herself to express her true feelings. But as she waits for an answer, she realizes that she is the only one who has always been listening. And what she has heard in these moments of inspiration and silence have made her into the person she is.



EPILOGUE

Han and Gifty are a couple. He was with her when her mother eventually died of old age, at home in her bed. They can hear the bells of the Episcopal church from their home in Princeton, NJ. Occasionally, Gifty stops there on her way home from the lab to sit with the image of Christ on the cross. Despite his intimate understanding of Gifty, her work, her family, and her past, Han can’t understand her trips to the church or her nostalgic listening for the sound of Christ’s knock on her heart.

Many years later, Gifty and Han are a couple, and readers learn that Gifty didn’t have to go through her mother’s final illness alone: Han was at her side. The fact that Han can never fully understand Gifty’s continuing fascination with religion shows that it’s possible to have an intimate relationship with someone who has different feelings and beliefs than oneself, and shows that Gifty has finally opened herself up enough to another person to have this kind of relationship. And while Gifty hasn’t recaptured her childhood faith, she still feels comfortable and at home in a religious setting.



Usually Gifty is alone with Bob, the maintenance man who asks about her research in a winking way that makes Gifty suspect he thinks she’s doing science fiction experiments like cloning aliens. But she’s interested in earthly things: mammals, proteins, and neurons. She has found enough “transcendence, holiness, redemption” in mice and people to satisfy her at last. As she watches Christ’s face, its expression changes from “angry to pained to joyful.” She doesn’t bow her head or pray or listen: she sits in silence, remembering, and working on making meaning of the jumble of her life.

Just like when she drove to San Francisco, praying and listening for God only to realize that she only heard the sound of her own voice, Gifty still seeks the transcendent but realizes that her sense of it is internal. In this way, her religious sensibility at this point in her life is closest to Gerard Manley Hopkins’s idea of “inscape,” which she learned about many years before in college. Gifty seems to have a sense of the divine and the transcendent in the world around her, and that is where she finds comfort and meaning, rather than in the specific rules and interpretations of Pentecostal (or even Episcopal) Christianity. Church is a place for her to listen for the wisdom and direction in herself, under the watchful if not omniscient eye of Christ depicted on the crucifix that decorates the sanctuary.





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