CORAL RUSSELL

A GUIDE TO READING MISS MACINTOSH, MY DARLING BY MARGUERITE YOUNG

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A Guide to Reading Miss MacIntosh, My Darling

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The Marguerite Young Society
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Introduction

There is a novel that most American readers have never heard of. It was published in 1965, took eighteen years to write, and runs to 1,198 pages. Anaïs Nin called it the American *Ulysses*. The *New York Times* compared it to Joyce and Melville. It has been out of print more often than in it, praised extravagantly and then quietly set aside, the culture moving on the way cultures do when something is too large and too strange to metabolize quickly.

The novel is *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* by Marguerite Young.

If you have never heard of it, that is not a failure of your attention. It is a fact about what American literary culture decided to remember and what it decided to let go quiet. This guide is, among other things, an argument that the letting-go was a mistake.

Here is what I want you to know before you begin: this novel is not difficult the way difficult books are difficult. It does not punish you for arriving without a degree or a reading list. What it asks for is a different kind of attention than most novels ask for, one that is slower and more patient, willing to let a sentence return and find it changed, willing to stay with an image longer than feels strictly necessary, willing to trust that the not-resolving is the point rather than a problem.

This guide is here to help you do exactly that.

Each chapter entry covers the characters, what happens, the themes and symbols worth tracking, the passages worth pausing on, and a section called "For the Curious" that opens outward into context and connection. You can read it alongside the novel, chapter by chapter, or come to it after a section when you need someone to say: yes, that happened, here is what I think it means.

You do not need to have read anything else first. You do not need to have any prior knowledge of Young or her world. You need only the willingness to give a very large and very alive book the kind of attention it was made for.

Young spent eighteen years writing this novel because the novel took that long. It is worth the time it takes. I have read it five times and it keeps changing on me, which is the mark of the thing that knows more than you do and is patient enough to wait for you to catch up.

Come in. The door is open.

Chapter 1: The Endless Grayness

Research notes: Chapter 1

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Homer Capehorn · Madge Capehorn · Miss MacIntosh · Moses Hunnecker · Vera Cartwheel

Symbols: The Bus and the Journey

Philosophy: Freud and Jung · Kant and Hegel · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Don Quixote · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · The History of Opium

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If you've just opened *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* and put it down in bewilderment after the first twenty pages, this is for you.

You are not failing the book. The book is doing something unusual to you on purpose, and once you understand what that is, the bewilderment transforms into something closer to awe.

Here is the first thing to know: Marguerite Young is not hiding the story from you. She is giving it to you in the way memory actually works by circling, doubling back, lush with digression, lit from odd angles. The story is there. Let's find it together.

What actually happens in Chapter 1

A young woman named Vera Cartwheel is on a bus somewhere in the American Midwest. It is grey out. The bus driver, Moses Hunnecker, is large-headed, bushy-haired, drinking whiskey openly, and calling on God and angels while driving erratically through heavy mist. A young married couple, Madge and Homer Capehorn, are asleep in their seats. Madge is pregnant and visibly unhappy about it. Homer is placidly, blissfully asleep.

The bus is crossing southern Indiana, "a state as yet unknown to me," Vera says. It happens to be Young's own home state. She was born in Indianapolis and lived for years in New Harmony, in its far southwestern corner. Vera enters it as a stranger.

That is all that happens, in terms of external events. The bus moves through a grey landscape. Vera watches.

Everything else in the chapter and it is considerable resides in Vera's mind.

What Vera is thinking about

Vera is on this bus because she is looking for someone: Miss Georgia MacIntosh, her childhood nursemaid, who disappeared years ago and may be dead. The search is both literal (she is actually going to Miss MacIntosh's hometown of What Cheer, Iowa) and something more: a search for truth, for stability, for a self that isn't consumed by illusion.

It was Miss MacIntosh who told her she "must lead a useful life and see America first." That was a real slogan, from a 1906 campaign urging Americans to travel their own West

instead of Europe. Vera is following her nursemaid's advice even now, into "the broad interior, the spacious Middle West."

Vera grew up in a household ruled by illusion. Her mother, Catherine, is an opium addict who has taken to her bed and never left it, living entirely inside her own hallucinations. Miss MacIntosh was the opposite: plain, practical, red-haired, broken-nosed, a woman who believed in facts and schedules and the cold, honest surface of things. She was the one solid thing in Vera's life. And then she was gone.

So when Vera watches Moses Hunnecker drinking and praying at the wheel, and when she watches Madge sleeping her resistant, unhappy sleep while Homer sleeps his innocent one, she isn't just watching passengers on a bus. She is watching the question her life has been organized around: what is real, what is illusion, and what do we do when the only person who taught us the difference has disappeared?

Why Young writes this way

Young herself described the structure of *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* in an interview: "I always thought of Miss MacIntosh as the center of the wheel, the hub, then the spokes as the subsidiary, secondary characters, and the wheel as endlessly expanding like a universe." Everything radiates outward from that absent center. And the prose radiates the same way: each sentence proliferates into the next, association breeding association, the way a mind actually moves when it is obsessively circling something it cannot resolve.

This is not accidental difficulty. It is the form enacting the content. Vera cannot think in straight lines because the thing she is thinking about (loss, truth, the gap between reality and dream) does not resolve into straight lines.

Why a bus and not a train? Young answered that herself in a 1965 radio interview with Studs Terkel: "I chose a bus because it does not go on a rail, and it therefore could be a more erratic journey than a train journey." A train runs on fixed rails from station to station. Vera's bus wanders through the mist, on a road that seems "to go back the way it had gone before." That is the shape of the whole book.

Once you accept this, the prose stops feeling like an obstacle and starts feeling like weather you're moving through. Let it wash over you. The meaning accumulates.

The people on the bus, and what they mean

Young chose her characters' names with great care. Moses Hunnecker, the bus driver calling on God while driving recklessly, is named for the prophet who led people through the wilderness but never reached the promised land himself. His enormous hair (he never cuts it), his whiskey, his invocations: he is a figure of chaotic faith, which is to say, faith under pressure. Vera imagines he has a wife and children at home. She may be inventing this entirely. The novel will keep doing this to you: offering you something that might be real, might be projection, might be both.

Moses came from life. "And I met such a bus driver on my way perhaps to New Harmony," Young said. So did Madge. Young saw her "on a bus once in Iowa with the bird on her

hat," and that hat, with its "one stuffed yellow canary with a moth-eaten wing," cost her some work. She rewrote the description "40 times." Elizabeth Bowen told her, "I knew on page two that it was a great book because of that sentence." If a long sentence in this chapter tries your patience, remember that one.

Madge is an old nickname for Margaret, from the Greek word for "pearl," and Margaret in French is Marguerite, the author's own name. Notice the "ten cent store pearls" dripping from Madge's ears. She is pregnant with a child that may not be her husband's, trapped in a marriage she didn't choose, returning to a town she doesn't want to return to. Homer, whose name means "hostage" or "pledge", sleeps on, peacefully, pledged to a life whose complications he does not register. The contrast between them is one of the book's first quiet jokes: the woman who knows too much, awake and suffering; the man who knows too little, peacefully asleep.

Vera's own name is a clue. Vera means "true" in Latin and "faith" in Russian, and she is searching, she says, "for truth that does not fail." Her family name, Cartwheel, carries the wheel Young built the whole novel around.

What to hold onto

Roadside, the bus passes a double-headed man standing in the mist, staring at nothing. Young uses this figure, strange and briefly glimpsed, to open one of the chapter's great philosophical passages about the illusion of individual selfhood: the idea that every face, every soul, every heart is somehow interconnected, that the borders of the self are not where we think they are.

It sounds abstract, but hold this image. The double-headed man will make sense later in ways you cannot yet anticipate. This is a book that rewards trust.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Miss MacIntosh's whaler's hat and rubber mackintosh coat and her name itself comes from Charles MacIntosh, who invented waterproofed cloth. She is, literally and symbolically, a woman who keeps the rain out. Keep noticing what she wears, what she refuses to wear, and when.

The mist. Young will use fog and grayness throughout the novel as the atmosphere of uncertainty, the dissolution of clear borders between real and imagined. The "endless grayness" of this first chapter is not just a weather condition.

Vera has a tendency to imagine backstories for the people around her. She does not know that Moses has a family, she supposes it. This habit of supposing is central to who Vera is, and to what the novel is doing.

What to hold onto

If you feel lost, come back to this: a young woman on a bus in the grey American Midwest is looking for the only person who ever told her the truth, and she isn't sure if that person is alive or dead. Everything else, every digression, every philosophic spiral, every strange figure in the mist is Vera's mind trying to prepare itself for what she might find.

That search is the spine of the entire novel. You now have it in your hands.

For the Curious

On the names

On the names.

Young chose every name in this novel with intention. Vera means "truth" in Latin and her life is a search for it. Cartwheel suggests both industry and spinning, a wheel that turns but may not arrive anywhere. Georgia means "tiller of the soil," and MacIntosh means "chief" or "front man", so Miss Georgia MacIntosh is, etymologically, a woman who works the earth and leads. Her rubber mackintosh coat is no accident either: Charles MacIntosh was the Scottish inventor who first waterproofed cloth. She keeps things out. Homer means "hostage" or "pledge." Madge is a diminutive of Madeleine, "woman from the high tower" and Madge's maiden name, Edwards, connects to John Edwards, who translated *Pilgrim's Progress*. Even the minor characters are on a pilgrimage of some kind.

On the bus

On the bus.

The grey bus moving through formless midwestern mist echoes what was sometimes called the "Grey Goose". It is slang for buses used to transport prisoners between facilities, always migrating, never arriving. The journey Vera is on has that quality: movement without freedom, destination uncertain.

On Don Quixote

On Don Quixote.

Young is in conversation with Cervantes throughout this novel. Harold Bloom called *Don Quixote* the first modern novel, and said its protagonist is "at war with Freud's reality principle" or the part of us that accepts the necessity of dying and the limits of the real. Vera is fighting the same war. Like Quixote, she tilts at windmills; like Quixote, she is not entirely wrong to do so.

On the structure

On the structure.

Young described *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* in an interview as "spokes of a wheel, with Miss MacIntosh in the middle." Hegel described his philosophical system as "a circle of circles." Young knew her Hegel. In her novel things have worlds and worlds inside, and

the idea is architectural: every digression contains its own center, and every center radiates outward again. You are not lost. You are inside the wheel.

Chapter 2: The Beautiful Corpse

Research notes: Chapter 2

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Jock Cartwheel · Mr. Chandelier · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Love

Symbols: Birds

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Ancient Egypt · Gambling and Playing Cards · The History of Opium

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If Chapter 1 dropped you into a grey bus moving through uncertain mist, Chapter 2 drops you into a bed.

Specifically, into the bed of Catherine Helena Cartwheel, Vera's mother, where she has been lying, largely motionless, for years. She is not asleep. She is not awake. She is somewhere in between, sustained by opium, visited by hallucinations, and more alive in her dreams than most people are in their waking lives.

New readers sometimes find Catherine's chapter the most disorienting in the entire novel. It helps to know, going in, that this disorientation is the point. You are inside a mind where the dream is more real than reality. Young is not asking you to follow a **plot here. She is asking you to inhabit a consciousness.**

What actually happens in Chapter 2

Mr. Spitzer, the family lawyer, a semi-retired, absent-minded man broken by grief visits Catherine every evening, as he has for years. Catherine lies in her enormous bed, surrounded by jewels and phantoms and the light of her chandelier, and receives him. An Egyptian sailor arrives at the house, lost and looking for Mr. Spitzer's twin brother, Peron, who is dead. Catherine insists the sailor is real and gives him elaborate directions through the labyrinthine house. Mr. Spitzer tries to explain to the sailor that his brother is gone. The sailor dances with joy at seeing Mr. Spitzer, convinced he has found who he is looking for. Nobody fully agrees on what is happening.

Even the sailor began in real life. Young told Studs Terkel that "there was a boat which reached New York Harbor, and the captain of the crew thought that he should be in Boston Harbor. He had misread some of the signs, and I simply used that incident to bring in my own imagination about a drowned Egyptian sailor."

Meanwhile, Catherine's little yellow canary sings in its gilded cage. When the canary dies which it has, many times Mr. Spitzer secretly replaces it, so that Catherine will never know. She believes it is the same bird. It isn't. It never is.

Who Catherine is, and how she got here

Catherine's full name is Catherine Helena Cartwheel, née Snowden. Catherine means "innocent." Helena means "the bright one." Snowden means "snow hill." She is, in Young's naming logic, an innocent brightness buried under snow which is exactly what she is.

She grew up under a domineering father of fierce orthodox faith, whose rituals governed every hour of the household. She married Jock Cartwheel, a reckless sportsman who disappeared in the Alps, and was abandoned. She was socially humiliated. She carries an invisible birthmark on her left cheek that no one else can see, but which she is convinced marks her as flawed, set apart, not quite belonging to the world.

Notice, too, what her father refused her. She would complain endlessly to Mr. Spitzer that her father had never allowed "to any woman in his house a higher education." All she was given was "walking, dancing, surf-riding, horsemanship, harp-playing, tennis."

So she left it. The bed is her kingdom now. And in her kingdom, dead kings visit. Angels appear. Movie stars from silent films drift through. An Egyptian sailor arrives bearing a papyrus that turns out to be a horse-racing tip sheet.

The world inside Catherine's head is not chaos. It is extraordinarily populated, extraordinarily detailed, and governed by its own logic. Young gives us access to it not to show us a mad woman, but to show us a mind that has decided, quite rationally, that the dream world is more honest than the real one.

Catherine came from life. As a Depression-era student at the University of Chicago, Young was sent to read Shakespeare aloud to Minna K. Weissenbach, "the opium lady of Hyde Park," and she read to her for two years, "often during her opium dreams." The invisible birthmark was hers: "she always said that she turned her cheek toward the shadow." So was the elephant in the hallway, and the balloon fish floating over her bed. "I was literally with her when she had a long conversation with the head of John the Baptist," Young said. Young was offered opium every evening and always refused, and Weissenbach called her "the prosaic sprite… because I didn't need drugs to dream." Weissenbach was addicted "not through choice, but through medication," and she was not unusual. By the late 1800s women made up about sixty percent of American opiate addicts, many of them first given the drug by doctors treating "female complaints."

The love triangle at the center of everything

Much of Chapter 2 establishes a triangular relationship that will echo through the entire novel. Catherine loved Peron Spitzer, the vivid, unreachable twin, who did not love her back. Joachim Spitzer, the devoted, steady, lawyerly twin, loved Catherine and was not loved in return. Peron died young, by his own hand. Joachim stayed.

Their very names encode this: Joachim means "raised by God." Peron means "rock." The man raised by God stayed earthbound, faithful, forgotten. The rock fell into the sea. This is why the Egyptian sailor's arrival matters so much. He comes looking for Peron, the dead one, the beloved one, and sees him in Joachim's face. Catherine understands this instantly. Mr. Spitzer does not want to.

The canary

The little yellow canary in its gilded cage is one of the novel's most quietly devastating images. Catherine believes her life is tied to the bird's: that if it dies, she dies. So Mr. Spitzer, faithfully and without ever telling her, replaces each dead canary with a living one. The illusion of continuity is maintained. The same bird has died a hundred times and is always singing.

Catherine calls the bird "all that had ever stood between her and tides of death." Coal miners once carried canaries underground because the birds sickened from poison gas before the men did. Catherine's canary is a miner's canary in reverse: as long as it sings, death stays away.

Notice that this is also what Young is doing with time in this chapter and in the novel as a whole. The same moments return, slightly altered. The same losses repeat. The same questions are asked again and the answers are never quite the same, and yet the singing continues.

Mr. Chandelier

Among Catherine's phantoms is one she calls Mr. Chandelier, the actual chandelier of her room, personified, a companion "not always faithful," holding seven lighted candles in seven crystal hands. He is not decoration. He is what happens when a mind so thoroughly animated by imagination turns even its furniture into characters. The seven candles evoke ritual, illumination, the sacred number that recurs throughout the novel's mythology. But the light they cast is chandelier light: prismatic, beautiful, not quite revealing anything clearly.

What to hold onto

Catherine is not a cautionary tale about addiction. She is a philosopher who has chosen her medium. Her argument, spoken in this chapter with full lucidity, is that the real world is inevitably a disappointment, a series of promises that fail to materialize, while the dream world is expansive and protective, alive with what life actually should have been.

You do not have to agree with her. But you have to take her seriously. Young does.

She has old company. "My mother pretended that the real was the dream, that the dream was the real," Vera says. Long ago the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi dreamed he was a butterfly, and when he woke he could not tell whether he was a man who had dreamed of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming that it was a man.

When you feel lost in this chapter, return to the canary. A woman who believes the same bird has been singing to her for years, and a man who makes sure it always is. That is Chapter 2, held in a single image.

For the Curious

On the names

On the names.

Catherine means “innocent” which is a bitter irony for a woman the world treated as guilty of existing. Helena, “the bright one,” echoes Helen of Troy, another woman whose beauty and circumstance made her the center of a catastrophe she did not choose. Snowden, her maiden name, means “snow hill” or burial under cold whiteness. Joachim means “raised by God.” Peron means “rock.” The twin who stayed was the one God raised; the twin who fell was the one who was supposed to be solid.

On the Egyptian sailor

On the Egyptian sailor.

Young is drawing on one of the oldest stories in human literature: the ancient Egyptian “Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor,” in which a traveler lost at sea encounters a divine island and returns home wiser, bearing gifts. The sailor in Catherine’s drawing room has been lost too: lost to grief, to the wrong address, to the confusion between a dead man and his living twin. He carries a papyrus that is actually a horse-racing dope sheet. Even the sacred documents are about gambling.

On opium

On opium.

By the late 1800s, women made up sixty percent of opium addicts in America. It was widely prescribed for everything from menstrual pain to “nervous complaints.” Catherine is not an anomaly, she is a portrait of what happened to women for whom the world offered no other exit. Young knew this history and writes Catherine without judgment, only with attention.

On the number seven

On the number seven.

Mr. Chandelier’s seven crystal hands appear at the intersection of almost every major symbolic system Young draws on: seven days of creation, seven Olympians attending each major deity, seven notes in the musical scale, seven items in short-term human memory. The chandelier is not just furniture. It is a cosmology.

On the Woman in White

On the Woman in White.

Catherine’s white bed, white gowns, and perpetual horizontal stillness evoke Wilkie Collins’s 1860 novel *The Woman in White* which is a story about a woman imprisoned for the financial and social convenience of the men around her. Before the Married Women’s

Property Act of 1882, a wife’s assets passed automatically to her husband. Catherine’s retreat to bed can be read as the one space no one could fully take from her.

Chapter 3: The Truest Thing in the House

Research notes: Chapter 3

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Madge Capehorn · Miss MacIntosh · Moses Hunnecker · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Illusion and Reality · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Twins and Doubles

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Heraclitus and Flux · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Angels and Archangels · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · The History of Opium

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By now you have spent two chapters in the fog traveling on that grey bus, inside Vera's circling mind, watching Moses Hunnecker drink and pray, watching Madge sleep her resistant, unhappy sleep. You have had glimpses of Miss MacIntosh, heard her name, understood that she is the reason for this journey. But you haven't met her yet. Not really.

Chapter 3 is where you meet her.

And she is worth the wait.

What actually happens in Chapter 3

Catherine Cartwheel, Vera's mother and the opium addict who never leaves her bed, has been confined to her room and her hallucinations for some time now. Someone needs to look after Vera. The family lawyer, Mr. Joachim Spitzer, hires a nursemaid: Miss Georgia MacIntosh, from What Cheer, Iowa.

What Cheer is a real town, about six hundred people in Keokuk County, Iowa, though Young said she had no idea it existed and thought she had made the name up. The name is an old English greeting. The Narragansett people are said to have greeted Roger Williams in 1636 with "What cheer, netop?" ("What cheer, friend?"). To Vera it is "What Cheer, Iowa, a small town like any other."

That is the external event. The chapter is Vera's portrait of her.

Vera describes Miss MacIntosh's appearance: her marcelled red hair, her greyish-green eyes, her sensible shoes (size eight, like a man's), her black umbrella, her serge dress, her corset laced tight. She describes her habits: the wading into the surf whatever the weather, the insistence on schedules and physical exercise, the mending of clothes, the building of fires. She describes her philosophy: hard work, self-forgetfulness, the acceptance of necessary deprivations, and a bone-deep suspicion of illusion in any form. She describes an encounter with an Australian bushman who has wandered into Catherine's household and become obsessed with Miss MacIntosh's head (he wants to sculpt it) and whom Miss MacIntosh dispatches with contempt.

Miss MacIntosh came from life, several lives in fact. She “is made up of three or four spinsters in Indianapolis,” Young said, and “Ethel Barrymore sort of influenced my idea of the way Miss McIntosh walked.”

And then, at the end of the chapter, Vera tells us what she already told us in Chapter 1: Miss MacIntosh is gone. Her clothes were found on the beach. Her purse contained two pennies. Her body was never recovered. Vera blames herself.

The chapter is both introduction and elegy. Young gives us Miss MacIntosh whole, luminous, and entirely herself and then reminds us she is already lost.

What Vera is thinking about

Everything in this chapter is filtered through Vera’s love for this woman and her grief at losing her.

Think about what Vera’s life looked like before Miss MacIntosh arrived. Her mother lived inside hallucinations, receiving imaginary visitors, lost in opium visions of poets and grandeur. The household was full of dreamers, illusionists, and people who had decided that reality was optional. Vera had no one to tell her what was real.

And then: Miss Georgia MacIntosh. A woman who waded into cold water. Who mended things when they tore. Who said that life was made up of necessary deprivations and that you should not waste your time chasing golden apples that weren’t there. Who did not believe in six-winged seraphim or furnished heavens or any of the other elaborate fantasies that the people around Vera used to avoid the fact of being alive.

For Vera, this was not austerity. It was rescue.

Even Miss MacIntosh’s God works for a living. He is no harlequin. “God was rather an old harness-maker or an old harpooner or a simple carpenter,” and He has hung her harness “with tinkling bells so that it might always be known where she was.” Vera hears them all through her childhood, “her bells ringing so that I might know, through fog and mist and darkness, where she was.”

So when she describes Miss MacIntosh’s red hair catching the light like sparks, or her umbrella raised against the wind like a challenge, or the way she used a jar of fireflies as a lamp in the dark, these are not just memories. They are acts of preservation. If she can make Miss MacIntosh vivid enough in language, she hasn’t entirely lost her.

This is, quietly, what the novel is doing. Young wrote Miss MacIntosh, My Darling over eighteen years. It is 1,198 pages long. A large part of what drives it is exactly this: the refusal to let someone disappear.

The two women at the center of the book

Chapter 3 is the first place where Young lays out the novel’s central opposition in full, and everything that follows depends on it.

Catherine Cartwheel lives entirely inside illusion. Her opium visions are not mere escapism, they are her whole world. She receives guests who are not there. She inhabits

a reality she has constructed and furnished to her own specifications. She is, in a certain light, the novel's portrait of what happens when the imagination is given everything and the real world nothing.

Miss MacIntosh is her perfect opposite. She believes in what can be touched, worn out, scheduled, and endured. She does not dream, or if she does, she does not trust her dreams. She is the novel's embodiment of the real, of the position that life requires us to see it clearly, accept its hardships, and do the work.

Her practicality has a politics, too. Her lessons for Vera are facts, and the facts are about work and injustice: "We dealt with the unjust circumstances under which Negroes were employed. We dealt with the injustices done to the Africans working in diamond mines blazing like fields of light. We pitied the lighthouse keepers who had no union and no organization." She teaches about "the united brotherhoods of the sleeping car porters." Her realism is not cold. It looks straight at who does the world's work and who is paid for it.

Young holds these two women in the same story for a reason. She is not asking you to choose between them. She is asking you to hold both: to feel the pull of Miss MacIntosh's hard, clear-eyed practicality and the pull of Catherine's bottomless inner world and to sit with the question of what it costs to live at either extreme.

Vera grew up between them. She loves them both. The novel is her attempt to make sense of what that did to her.

The Australian bushman, and what he's doing here

He seems to come from nowhere this figure who has wandered into Catherine's household, who has some connection to the wider world of the book's strange cast, and who fixates on Miss MacIntosh with an intensity she finds contemptible.

He wants to sculpt her head. He corners her. He speaks to her with what Young calls a "calculated, incalculable eloquence" a beautiful phrase and she is completely unimpressed.

Miss MacIntosh sees through pretense immediately. She does not care about his eloquence or his obsession. She dispatches him.

Young knew why he wanted a head. "I was thinking of the Easter Islands and those distant places where they worshipped the great stone heads," she said.

But notice what Young is doing here: the bushman is interested in Miss MacIntosh's head specifically. Not her practicality, not her values, not the whole woman, just the head. He wants to possess a piece of her, reduced to an aesthetic object. And she refuses. This refusal is entirely in character, and it is also, given what the novel will eventually reveal about Miss MacIntosh's body and her secrets, quietly significant. Young plants these seeds without calling attention to them. Trust that they will matter.

There is also a feminist dimension worth naming: the bushman feels entitled to her attention regardless of her feelings. He interrupts, corners, and pursues. Miss MacIntosh

is having none of it. In 1965, when this novel was published, that was a more radical stance than it might appear now.

The disappearance

Young does not save this for later. We already know, from the novel's opening pages, that Miss MacIntosh is gone. Chapter 3 confirms it: the clothes on the beach, the two pennies, the unrecovered body. Mr. Spitzer thinks she may have simply returned to the working poor she came from. Vera knows she did not.

What actually happened to Miss MacIntosh? The novel will give you more information as you go, information that will change the shape of what you already know. But it will not give you a clean answer. This is Young's way: she is more interested in the weight of an unanswered question than in the relief of resolution.

For now, hold what you have: a woman who was the truest thing in the house, and an absence shaped exactly like her.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Miss MacIntosh's corset. She laces herself into it every morning as a philosophical act, the body held to its proper shape by an act of will. Young will return to this garment in ways you don't yet expect. Notice it each time it appears.

The two pennies. In ancient Greek burial practice, a coin was placed in the mouth of the dead as payment for Charon, the ferryman who carried souls across the river Styx to the underworld. Two pennies in a purse on a beach. Young knew exactly what she was doing. Miss MacIntosh says so herself: they are the "two pennies with which, she used to say, her eyes would be closed when she was dead."

The sea. Miss MacIntosh waded into it in all weathers, though "She could not swim a stroke." And then it took her or she walked into it. The sea in this novel is the border between what we know and what we cannot know. Watch where it appears.

Watch, too, for the rocks in her pockets, "sagging because she had carried so many rocks, perhaps as ballast." Young said, "I had been inspired as to the means of Miss MacIntosh's suicide by Virginia Woolf's suicide." Woolf walked into the River Ouse in 1941 with her pockets full of stones, and Young learned only later that Woolf had "carried her walking stick with her clear to the tide's edge," just as Miss MacIntosh leaves her umbrella.

Vera's habit of description. Notice how much of her grief comes out as physical detail: the red hair, the greyish-green eyes, the size-eight shoes. When we lose someone, we often try to hold them through the inventory of their particulars. Young understands this. So does Vera.

What to hold onto

If Chapter 3 overwhelms you with its length and its layering, come back to this: a child grew up in a house full of illusions, and the one person who taught her that reality was real has disappeared. Everything Vera says about Miss MacIntosh, every detail, every memory, every piece of her philosophy is Vera trying to keep her alive in language.

That is what this chapter is. That is what this novel is, in one of its many dimensions.

You are not lost. You are watching someone grieve in the only way she knows how.

For the Curious

What Cheer

What Cheer, Iowa is a real place. A small town in Keokuk County, Iowa, population around 600. Young maintained in interviews that she had no idea it existed when she invented it as Miss MacIntosh's hometown. Whether this is entirely true or a charming piece of authorial mythology, the name is perfect: it carries the promise of comfort alongside a slight edge of irony, which is exactly Miss MacIntosh's register. She offers what cheer she can. It was never going to be enough.

Marcelled hair

Marcelled hair was created in 1872 by French hairdresser Marcel Grateau, who used heated irons to produce soft, continuous waves close to the head. It was enormously fashionable from the 1920s through the early 1940s, the era in which Miss MacIntosh would have come of age. It is practical, controlled, and requires real skill. That Vera notices and remembers it so vividly tells you something about how carefully she watched this woman.

Charles MacIntosh

Charles MacIntosh was the Scottish chemist who in 1823 invented the process for waterproofing cloth by bonding layers of fabric with rubber. The rubberized mackintosh coat is named for him. Young named her most grounded, reality-insisting character after the man who invented the coat that keeps the rain out. She is, quite literally, a woman who keeps things from getting through.

The Protestant Work Ethic

The Protestant Work Ethic was named by the sociologist Max Weber in his 1904 work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber argued that Calvinist theology with its emphasis on hard work, self-denial, and the rejection of luxury shaped the specific culture of the American Midwest. Miss MacIntosh is this thesis in a corset and sensible shoes. She believes in labor, discipline, and the acceptance of necessary hardship not because anyone told her to, but because for her, they are simply the truth about what life requires.

Virginia Woolf walked into the River

Virginia Woolf walked into the River Ouse in March 1941, weighting her pockets with stones. She left her coat on the bank. Young began writing this novel not long after. Miss MacIntosh's disappearance (her clothes on the beach, her body never found) carries this shadow whether Young intended it or not. Two women. Two coats left behind. Two bodies the water kept.

John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress (1678)

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) is one of the most widely read books in the English language, a Christian allegory about a man named Christian who travels from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Along the way he falls into the Slough of Despond or a deep bog of guilt and despair. Young references this bog in Chapter 3, suggesting that Miss MacIntosh has made her own version of this journey before Vera's story begins. She came through it. The question the novel leaves open is whether she came through it whole.

"No man ever steps in the same river twice"

"No man ever steps in the same river twice" is attributed to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who taught that everything is in constant flux or *panta rhei*, everything flows. Young is in deep conversation with Heraclitus throughout this novel. For Miss MacIntosh, impermanence is not a philosophy to be contemplated but a practical reality to be accepted: you cannot live twice in memory, you cannot walk the same path again, so you had better be present in the one you are on. She was. Until she wasn't.

Chapter 4: The Long Sleep of Empty Years

Research notes: Chapter 4

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Suicide in History and Literature · The Bible · The History of Opium

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You have just spent Chapter 3 falling a little in love with Miss MacIntosh. Young made sure of that. She gave you the red hair and the black umbrella and the fireflies in a jar, the corset and the sensible shoes and the wading into cold surf. She gave you a woman who was the truest thing in the house.

And then she reminded you, as she did in Chapter 1, and now again here, that Miss MacIntosh is gone.

Chapter 4 is about what that loss does to Vera. And it is, in its quiet way, one of the most honest portraits of grief in the novel.

What actually happens in Chapter 4

Miss MacIntosh has disappeared. Her clothes were on the beach. “The two pennies were in her purse.” Vera sits by the shore for what feels like years: crying, barely functioning, her body described as “slothful and immense,” her mind “employed by nothing but the dream.” She tries to write a book. She lights fires on the beach. She talks to fishermen and sailors, asking questions no one can answer.

Her mother, Catherine, watches this and makes her own diagnosis: Vera is losing her sanity. Catherine’s solution is the one she has always had: the opium, the withdrawal, the beautiful obliteration. She offers Vera a vision of eternal youth and dreamless sleep, jewels and supernatural servants, an “opium paradise” where nothing can hurt her anymore. She is, in her way, trying to be a good mother. This is simply the only medicine she knows.

Vera refuses. She leaves by way of Grand Central Station, heading toward What Cheer, Iowa, and whatever she might find there.

On the way, she encounters “a fat, soft-faced lady on” a train who offers her a warning: the place she is going is desolate. Out of this world. “No social life, no communication, no human” warmth. Just cold and silence and decay. The golden bowl, the lady says, is broken there.

Young also gives us, in the middle of all this, a brief and haunting story about a young woman who set out to be married, turned back at the last minute, and jumped from the Brooklyn Bridge, her wedding veil packed in the suitcase in her hand. She disappears into the dark water. The novel doesn’t linger on it. It doesn’t need to.

What Vera is thinking about

Grief is the engine of this chapter, but Young is not interested in simple grief. She is interested in what grief does to a person over time, how it can become its own kind of opium, its own withdrawal from the world.

Vera has been lost before. She grew up lost, in a house where reality was optional. Miss MacIntosh was the thing that tethered her. And now the tether is gone, and Vera is discovering something terrifying: that without it, she is capable of floating away just as her mother did. That the boundary between herself and Catherine is thinner than she thought.

This is why Catherine's offer of opium is so dangerous in this chapter, not because it is obviously wrong, but because it is almost tempting. Vera can see the appeal. She can see how a person ends up in that bed, in those dreams, in that beautiful nowhere. She is close enough to the edge to feel the pull.

What saves her, if anything saves her, is the stubbornness of Miss MacIntosh's memory. The ivory knitting needles she finds in the sand. The fire she lights on the beach. The specific, physical, irreducible realness of the woman she is looking for. You cannot grieve a dream the way Vera grieves Miss MacIntosh. This grief is proof that something was real.

So she gets on a train. She goes toward Iowa. She carries her grief with her like a suitcase.

The woman on the Brooklyn Bridge

Young drops this story into the chapter without explanation or fanfare, and it is easy to read past it. Don't.

A young woman of the working class, about to be married, changes her mind at the last minute and, carrying the suitcase with her crushed veil packed inside, jumps from the Brooklyn Bridge into the East River. She is never named. We are told very little about her. And then Young moves on.

You have met her before, in a single line of Chapter 1, where "a dead girl's love letters scattered on the floor of her empty bedroom" was among Vera's reasons for her journey. Here her story comes out. The letters were ones "she had written but had not mailed, each accepting the proposal of a man she had never seen," farmers "in deep countries" who knew her only from her descriptions of herself. Her mother "had been an Irish wash woman." She had "no father who would give her away," for she had lost him at the age of three, and she was going "a thousand miles to meet a stranger" who "wore a waxed mustache, an old-fashioned handlebar," like the father in "her portrait at the age of three in the arms of her father who had worn an old-fashioned handlebar."

But the image stays. A wedding veil, the symbol of a life about to begin, clutched in a suitcase all the way down to the dark water. Young is placing this alongside Vera's own crisis point: the moment when the pull of oblivion is strongest. She is not saying Vera will make the same choice. She is saying this is the landscape they all inhabit, these women in this novel: a landscape where the alternative to the life you have been handed is sometimes the river.

The reality of women's lives in the era Young is writing about is part of what this image carries. Marriage was not simply an option, it was, for most women, the entire structure of a viable life. There was no other architecture. The woman on the bridge was on her way to that architecture. And she chose the water instead. Young does not judge her. She just shows you the bridge.

Catherine, again and why she matters here

It would be easy to read Catherine as simply a cautionary tale: this is what happens when you surrender to illusion. But Chapter 4 asks you to look at her more carefully.

Catherine genuinely loves Vera. The opium paradise she offers her daughter is not cruelty, it is the best gift she has. She has found a way to stop hurting, and she wants to give it to the person she loves most. The jewels, the supernatural servants, the eternal youth: these are not a trap she is setting. They are her idea of heaven.

What Young is doing here is complicated: she is asking you to feel the appeal of what Catherine is offering, even as you understand why Vera must refuse it. Illusion is not always ugly. Sometimes it is gorgeous. Sometimes it is the only mercy a person has found. The novel does not let you dismiss Catherine. It makes you understand her.

Vera understands her. That is part of what makes leaving so hard.

The fat, soft-faced lady on the train

She arrives as a voice of experience, warning Vera about where she is headed. What Cheer or wherever Vera is going is not what she imagines. It is cold and silent and the community has collapsed in on itself. The golden bowl is broken.

Her words come from Scripture. "The voice of the turtle-dove was not heard in all that land, for the golden bowl was broken and the wheel broken at the cistern," she says. She turns the Song of Solomon's springtime, "the voice of the turtle is heard in our land" (2:12), inside out, and she quotes the Preacher's picture of old age and death in Ecclesiastes 12:6: "or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern." She knows something about endings herself. She would go to Boise or Reno, "where she had gone to get her divorces."

Some of what she describes came from Young's own Midwest. The townspeople she warns of go "carrying old-fashioned ear trumpets which they did not turn on." Young had written about a whole community of the stone deaf in her 1945 essay "The Midwest of Everywhere," and near the end of her life, asked whether such things could be true, she answered, "Yes, and they were all true."

She is not wrong, exactly. But notice what she represents: the voice that says *don't go*. The voice of reasonable caution, of hard-won disillusionment, of the person who has already made the journey and come back diminished. Vera listens to her. And then goes anyway.

This is who Vera is. This is, arguably, who she has to be.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The ivory knitting needles. Vera finds them in the sand, Miss MacIntosh's, left behind like everything else. She keeps them. They become a kind of relic, a physical proof of a life that was real. Watch what happens to objects in this novel. Young uses them the way a poet uses images: precisely, with accumulated weight.

Vera's fires on the beach. She lights them to signal to Miss MacIntosh, to call her back, to mark the place of loss. Fire in this novel is almost always about wanting to be seen across a great distance. Notice when it appears and who is trying to reach whom.

Iowa's cold. When Vera remembers Miss MacIntosh's descriptions of What Cheer (the frozen ears, the frozen horses, the frozen smoke) she is not just receiving travel information. She is receiving a portrait of a life stripped of illusion all the way down to the bone. Iowa, in this novel, is reality at its most unadorned. That is why she has to go there.

Lazarus. Young references the Biblical story of a man raised from the dead after four days in the tomb. Vera is not thinking about miracles here, she is thinking about the desire for one. About the hope that what has disappeared might come back. About the difference between resurrection and delusion. The novel will keep returning to this question.

What to hold onto

Chapter 4 can feel like a long dark passage: Vera at her lowest, pulled toward oblivion, surrounded by people and images that say *give up*. If you feel the weight of it, that is intentional. Young wants you in the fog with Vera.

But here is what to hold onto: Vera gets on the train. After all of it, the years of grief, the mother's beautiful offer of oblivion, the warning from the fat soft-faced lady, she gets on the train and goes toward What Cheer, Iowa. She carries her loss with her and she keeps moving.

That is not nothing. In this novel, that is almost everything.

For the Curious

The Brooklyn Bridge

The Brooklyn Bridge opened in 1883 and immediately became one of the most famous structures in the world and one of the most frequented sites for suicide in New York City. In the era Young is writing about, jumping from the bridge carried a particular meaning for women: it was a public, visible act of refusal. The woman in the wedding veil is refusing something specific. Young does not tell us what. She leaves that to us.

Grand Central Station

Grand Central Station opened in its current form in 1913 and by the mid-twentieth century had become one of the great crossroads of American life, a place where people departed for everywhere and arrived from everywhere. Vera passing through it on her way to Iowa is Young placing her inside the largest symbol of American mobility and longing she could find. Everyone in Grand Central is going somewhere. Not everyone knows why.

Swan boats

Swan boats in the Boston Public Garden have been in service since 1877, operated by the same family for generations. They are one of the most gentle and domestic images in American public life: pedal-powered, slow, circling a small pond. Young uses them here as part of Vera's vision of the "charmed life" she wants: ordinary, unhurried, real. The swan boat is the anti-opium. It goes nowhere fast and that is entirely the point.

Quinine

Quinine is extracted from the bark of the cinchona tree and was for centuries the primary treatment for malaria. Its extreme bitterness became the basis for tonic water and people mixed it with sugar and soda to make it bearable. Young uses it here as a small, precise image: something medicinal that also causes suffering, something that heals and hurts at once. This is, quietly, the condition of most things in this novel.

Lazarus of Bethany

Lazarus of Bethany is raised from the dead by Jesus in the Gospel of John after four days in the tomb and the most dramatic resurrection miracle in the New Testament. Young's reference here is not about religious faith. It is about the human refusal to accept that someone is simply gone. Vera has been waiting at the door of the tomb for years. She is still waiting. The question the novel is slowly building toward is: what do you do when no one comes out?

Bells

Bells appear throughout this chapter as background presence, the bells of the house, the tolling that runs under the narrative like a low note. In many traditions, bells mark the passage between the living and the dead: funeral bells, church bells, the bell that calls souls home. In a chapter about grief and the refusal to let go, they are always sounding just below what you can quite hear.

Chapter 5: A Crazy Bus-Driver Losing His Way That He Knew Too Well

Research notes: Chapter 5

Characters: Justice O’Leary · Miss MacIntosh · Moses Hunnecker · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Society, Class, and Race

Symbols: Hair, Wig, and Baldness

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Greek Mythology · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Music and Composers · The Bible

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Welcome back to the bus.

If you felt, in Chapters 3 and 4, that you had moved away from the bus and deep into Vera’s past, you were right. That is how this novel works. The bus is always there, waiting, while Vera’s memory does its long and spiraling work. And now, in Chapter 5, we return to it. Night has fallen. The roads are washed out. And Moses Hunnecker, bus driver, is holding forth.

Prepare yourself. Moses has a lot to say.

What actually happens in Chapter 5

It is nighttime on the bus. Moses Hunnecker is driving through flooded, broken roads in the dark: no stars, no signposts, the landscape dissolved into rain and mist. He is drinking. He is talking: to himself, to the old doctor, to whoever will listen.

He refuses to cut his hair. This is the chapter’s great fixed point: Moses’s hair, which has never been cut, which has grown to enormous proportions, which he treats as his last and most personal possession. He will not let anyone touch it. Not the barber. Not the Democrats. Not anyone.

He rails against the Democrats and the New Deal, against FDR, against what he sees as the government’s steady encroachment on his freedom. He is a lifelong Republican. He has never voted, he never has time, but his politics are ferocious.

He talks about the old doctor, Justice O’Leary, a country doctor back home in a state of advanced dementia, imagining he is still making house calls, still delivering babies, his rusted forceps and broken stethoscope still tools of a living practice. Moses alternates between mockery and a kind of rough tenderness toward him.

And then, quietly, the chapter asks a question it does not answer: is Moses actually driving this bus? Or is he dreaming it? Is any of this happening?

What Vera is thinking about

Vera watches all of this with her characteristic mixture of empathy and detachment. She is the observer, the recorder, the consciousness through which we receive everything, but she does not intervene. She listens to Moses and understands, on some level, that he is caught in the same kind of loop she is: a man driving a road he knows too well, going somewhere he may never arrive, in a landscape that has stopped making sense.

There is a line Young gives us early in the chapter: “a crazy bus-driver losing his way that he knew too well.” Sit with that. You can know a road so well that you lose it, know it so well that it stops being a road and becomes something else entirely, a groove worn into habit, a dream of motion without destination.

This is Vera’s condition too. She has been circling Miss MacIntosh’s absence for so long that the circling has become its own kind of journey. Moses is her mirror in this chapter, whether he knows it or not.

Moses and his hair

The hair needs its own explanation, because Young gives it so much weight and it might otherwise seem merely eccentric.

Moses has never cut his hair. It has grown to extraordinary length and, in his telling, has taken on a life of its own, full of “burning eyes like the eyes of Argus,” twisting and growing like something alive. He talks about it the way other men talk about their souls. It is his “only virtue.” His “angel.” The one thing about himself that no one has managed to take from him.

This sounds strange until you understand the context. Moses is a man who feels that everything else has been stripped away: his country is declining, the government is encroaching, the roads are washed out, the old certainties are gone. His hair is the last thing that is purely, irreducibly his. No barber. No government. No tax on it.

There is a long tradition, across many cultures, of hair carrying the self: its strength, its identity, its spiritual power. The Biblical Samson is the most famous example: his hair was the source of his power, and when it was cut, he was undone. Moses (and Young chose this name deliberately) is a version of that story: a prophet-figure driving through the wilderness, his identity intact in his uncut hair, raging against the forces that would diminish him.

The vow has a date on it. “I bet all the old pool players who have not a hair on their heads I would not cut my hair until Roosevelt got out of the White House,” Moses says. Young did not invent the gesture. The novel, she told Studs Terkel, “takes place at that time when Republicans were threatening to let their hair grow until Roosevelt got out of the White House.” Roosevelt was elected four times. It was a long vow.

The novel also makes a quietly darkly comic point: hair and nails do not actually continue to grow after death. It only looks that way, the skin dehydrates and pulls back. If Moses is, as the chapter hints, possibly dead or dreaming rather than truly driving, his hair’s

continued growth is itself a kind of illusion. The last thing he believes is real might not be real either.

The old doctor, and the ghosts he carries

Justice O'Leary is not on the bus. He rides along only in Moses's talk and Moses's half-dreams, "always reflected in the rear view mirror above the bus-driver's shaggy head." Through Moses, we come to understand him. He was once a country doctor who made house calls, who delivered babies, who was a figure of authority and care in his community. Now he is old and lost, his mind running on rails that no longer connect to the present world. He thinks he is still practicing. He sees patients who are not there. His instruments are rusted, his stethoscope broken.

Moses is not entirely wrong to mock him. But watch how Young holds both things at once: the doctor is deluded, yes, but his delusion is that he is still helping people, still bringing life into the world. Of all the delusions available to a person, this one has a certain dignity. He has not retreated into pleasure or comfort or oblivion. He has retreated into service, even if the service is imaginary.

He came from life, too. "I knew Dr. O'Leary and his violin. He never used to hear the telephone ring," Young said. "I was living in the house with him.… He was delivering imaginary babies." She told Studs Terkel that "the idea of the senile doctor still carrying on his practice was one of the things which started me on the book."

The pregnant women he tends, his "patients", are ghosts. Their cries and their suffering are echoes of births that may never happen, futures that may never arrive. Young is showing us a world in which the business of bringing new life into being has become spectral, uncertain, haunted.

Is any of this real?

Chapter 5 does something the earlier chapters have gestured toward but not said outright: it openly questions whether Moses is actually driving the bus or dreaming the whole thing from his four-poster bed.

Young never resolves this. She is not going to. The bus is real and the bus is a dream and the bus is a passage between worlds and all of these are true simultaneously. Moses himself wonders if he has died and is continuing out of habit, driving the same road because he doesn't know how to stop.

This is not a puzzle you need to solve. It is a condition you need to inhabit. The novel is asking you to hold uncertainty the way its characters hold it, not as a problem to be fixed, but as the weather you're moving through.

What matters is that Vera is on the bus. Whatever the bus is (real, dream, passage) she is in it, moving forward, searching for something that may or may not be findable.

The political weather

Moses's tirades against the Democrats and the New Deal might seem like local color, but they are doing something more precise. Young is placing us in a specific American moment: the 1930s and '40s, the era of FDR, when the question of what the government owed its citizens was being fought over furiously. Moses represents one side of that argument: the man who sees government help as government control, who feels the state reaching into his last freedoms and taxing even his hair.

You do not have to agree with Moses to understand him. Young doesn't ask you to agree. She asks you to feel the genuine fear underneath the bluster: the fear of a man who has watched his country change in ways he didn't choose, who has no power over any of it, and who has found the one thing, his hair, his body, his self, that he can still refuse to surrender.

That fear is real. It has not gone away. Look around.

Listen, too, for how ugly the bluster can turn. Moses tells old Doc to "remember that you are a good Republican and that we shall never have free medicine," in the years when the American Medical Association was fighting national health insurance as "socialized medicine." And of the women Doc tends he asks, "why don't you just close their wombs, tie the knots?" That was no joke in his America. Indiana passed the first law for forced sterilization in 1907, the Supreme Court upheld such laws in Buck v. Bell in 1927, and tens of thousands of Americans were sterilized under them.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The four passengers named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Young names four passengers on the bus after the four Evangelists, the authors of the four Gospels. They appear quietly here, but they give the bus journey a spiritual dimension that will deepen as the novel continues. Moses is not just a bus driver on a midwestern road. He is a prophet-figure navigating a passage. Notice who is bearing witness to the journey.

The folk songs. Moses sings "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" (the old gray goose is dead) and "The Old Gray Mare." Both are songs about something vital that has died or declined. Young is not being subtle here. The dead country Moses is driving through is America or a version of it, an America that has stopped being what it was supposed to be.

Wormwood, boxwood, cedar. Three woods mentioned in the chapter, each carrying Biblical weight: cedar for sacred endurance, boxwood for divine provision, wormwood for bitterness and judgment. When Young reaches for this kind of language, she is building a register of meaning that accumulates slowly. Don't worry about tracking every reference. Just notice that the landscape has this kind of depth.

The question of whether Moses is dead. Hold it. Don't try to answer it. Let the novel show you what it wants to show you.

What to hold onto

Chapter 5 is wild and funny and dark and a little operatic with Moses raging about his hair and his politics in the rainy dark while an old doctor tends to invisible patients. It can feel like a departure from the intimacy of Vera's grief in earlier chapters.

But here is the thread: Vera is watching a man who, like her, has refused to let go of something. Moses will not cut his hair. Vera will not give up on Miss MacIntosh. Both of them are holding onto the one thing that still feels like themselves, in a landscape that has done its best to wash everything away.

They are more alike than either of them knows. This bus is exactly the right place for both of them.

For the Curious

Moses Hunnecker's name carries Biblical freight

Moses Hunnecker's name carries Biblical freight that Young packed deliberately. Moses was the prophet who led the Israelites through forty years of wilderness wandering: a journey that was also, always, a journey without arrival. He never reached the promised land himself. He got close enough to see it. Young's Moses is driving through his own wilderness, on a road that loops and wanders, toward a destination that keeps receding.

The New Deal

The New Deal was Franklin D. Roosevelt's response to the Great Depression: a series of programs and reforms launched in the 1930s aimed at providing relief, recovery, and reform. Moses's fury at the New Deal, at FDR, at what he sees as government overreach, was a real and widespread political position. Many Americans, particularly rural Midwesterners, felt that the New Deal represented a dangerous expansion of federal power and a threat to individual liberty. Young is not endorsing this view. She is placing it in the mouth of a drunk, possibly dead, bus driver singing folk songs in the dark. But she takes it seriously as a feeling, as a response to a real loss of autonomy.

Argus Panoptes

Argus Panoptes was a many-eyed giant in Greek mythology. A watchman set to guard things that needed guarding, whose hundred eyes meant he could never fully sleep. When Moses describes his hair as having "burning eyes like the eyes of Argus," he is imagining it as a kind of perpetual vigilance, a sentinel against the forces that want to diminish him. It is grandiose and sad and entirely human.

"Go Tell Aunt Rhody"

"Go Tell Aunt Rhody" has a melody that originated as a minuet in an eighteenth-century French opera and arrived in America through hymnals. The lyrics tell a simple, bleak story: the old gray goose that was being saved to make a feather bed has died in the

millpond. Young uses it here as part of the chapter's sustained meditation on what has died in America and what, if anything, can be made from the feathers.

Burma-Shave signs

Burma-Shave signs were a series of roadside advertising signs that appeared on American highways from 1926 to 1963, usually five or six small signs in a row, each carrying one line of a rhyming jingle, spaced so you read them as you drove past. They were beloved fixtures of midcentury American road travel, folksy and ubiquitous. Their presence here is a small precise detail: Young is placing us in a specific moment of American highway culture, on a road where even the advertisements have the quality of folk poetry. On a road, in other words, that is both real and mythological.

The Dark Night

The Dark Night of the Soul is a concept from the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, a period of spiritual aridity and inner darkness through which the soul must pass on its way toward union with God. It has entered broader usage as a term for any profound crisis of meaning and identity. Chapter 5 is Moses's dark night. It is also, quietly, America's.

Chapter 6: The Wedding That Was a Funeral

Research notes: Chapter 6

Characters: Homer Capehorn · Jacqueline White · Madge Capehorn · Miss MacIntosh · Moses Hunnecker · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Death and Mortality · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Twins and Doubles · Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Fairy Tales and Folklore · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Music and Composers · Pregnancy, Abortion, and Midwifery · The History of Opium

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We have been watching Madge Capehorn since Chapter 1, asleep in her seat, pregnant, visibly unhappy, the stuffed bird on her hat bobbing in the dim light. She has been a figure in the background, part of the landscape of the bus. In Chapter 6, Young brings her forward. We step inside her.

What we find there is not comfortable. But it is one of the most honest portraits of a woman trapped by the circumstances of her time that you will encounter in this novel. Settle in. Madge has things to say.

What actually happens in Chapter 6

The bus moves through a desolate night landscape: broken gates, fallen pillars, a derelict windmill spinning in the wind, withered leaves. Moses is half-asleep at the wheel. And Madge Capehorn is crying in her sleep.

When she surfaces into a kind of wakefulness, we learn her story. She is five months pregnant. She left her hometown years ago, went to work in a pottery town, grew older than the girls around her, and ended up marrying Homer Capehorn, not because she loves him, but because she needed a father for her child. Homer is not the father. Madge has married “the one man for whom fatherhood would be impossible,” and whoever the father was, “it was not he in all this world.”

Homer is not a bad man, exactly. He is young, placid, oblivious, physically strong, and emotionally absent. He is asleep for most of the chapter or half-asleep, dreaming of a girl named Jacqueline White, his high school sweetheart, who is dying of tuberculosis. Madge knows he loves Jacqueline. She has always known. She accuses him of it. He denies it, barely awake, insisting he hasn’t thought of Jacqueline in years. They both know this is not true.

Even his sleepiness may have a cause. Homer met Madge at the pottery (“I hardly remembered you until I saw you at the pottery”), and he says, “It’s only the lead in my system makes me want to sleep.” Pottery glazes were made with lead, and the workers who dipped the ware suffered lead poisoning: exhaustion, pallor, drowsiness.

In the middle of all this, Young gives us the tragedies stacked beneath the present one: Madge's mother died in childbirth. When Madge was twenty-three, the age her mother was when she died, her father, a drunken fisherman, came to her bed one winter night calling her his dead wife. She drove him out into the snowstorm, and he died in the frozen river. Homer's father, on hearing that Homer's mother was pregnant, went out with his hunting dogs and killed himself. Death and birth are not separate events in this chapter. They arrive together, the way they have always arrived in this family.

Madge believes she will die in childbirth, the way her mother did. She believes Homer will die young, the way his father did. She can see the shape of it all. She is driving toward her own end with her eyes open, and there is nothing she can do about it.

What Vera is thinking about

Vera observes all of this while listening to Madge's half-dreaming monologue, watching the exchange between Madge and Homer, understanding things about both of them that they may not fully understand about themselves.

Remember that Vera is on this bus because she is searching for Miss MacIntosh, the woman who embodied reality, practicality, the plain truth of things. And here, in Madge, she is encountering reality of a very different kind: a woman for whom reality is a trap with no exits, a marriage that feels more like a funeral, a body being remade against her will.

Vera does not intervene. She never does. But she witnesses. And in a novel where so much is illusion and dream, witnessing, truly seeing another person's suffering, is its own act of moral seriousness.

Madge and what her story is really about

To understand Madge, you need to understand what the world looked like for women in the era Young is writing about. This is not ancient history, it is the America of the 1930s and '40s, the America Young herself grew up in and observed.

Marriage was not one option among many for a woman then. It was the only option. It was the entire architecture of a viable life. Without it, a woman had no economic security, no social standing, almost no respectable path forward. Madge left her town, went to work in a pottery factory, which was already an act of independence, grew older, and found herself pregnant and unmarried. In that world, in that moment, her choices had already been made for her.

She married Homer not for love but for survival. She is not a fool. She knows exactly what she has done and why. And she knows that the life she has bought herself is not a life she would have chosen.

Young is not writing a tragedy about a weak woman who made bad choices. She is writing about what happens to a person when all of the choices available to them lead to the same place. Madge's intelligence, her self-awareness, her fierce and furious understanding of her own situation, none of it is enough to change what is happening to her. That is the point.

Jacqueline White, and the ghost in the marriage

Homer loves Jacqueline White. She is dying of tuberculosis or “consumption,” they called it, the disease that turned people pale and thin and beautiful as it killed them. She is becoming an ideal precisely because she is disappearing: untouched by time, preserved in Homer’s memory as the girl she was, the love he didn’t pursue.

Madge cannot compete with this. No living woman can compete with a dying one in a man’s imagination. Jacqueline will always be young, always be the one he didn’t get to keep. She is becoming the kind of love that only works because it was never tested.

This is one of the more quietly devastating observations in the chapter: that the dead and the dying have an advantage over the living, because they never have to become ordinary. Miss MacIntosh understood something like this. So does Vera. And now Madge is living it from the inside.

The two faces

Madge believes she must maintain at least two faces: the one she was born with, and the painted one she puts on for the world. This is not vanity. It is a survival strategy.

Young knew, and stated in interviews, that everyone wears masks: an inner self and an outer self presented to the public. But for Madge, this doubling is not philosophical, it is compulsory. She cannot afford to show the world what she actually feels. She cannot afford to be the woman who is terrified and grieving and furious and exhausted. So she paints a face over that one, pins the stuffed bird to her hat, and gets on the bus.

The stuffed bird is a perfect image. It is decoration that was once alive. It was killed to become ornamental. It sits on Madge’s hat going nowhere.

The deaths on both sides of this marriage

Young piles up the deaths in this chapter with a kind of brutal patience. Madge’s mother: died in childbirth. Madge’s father: dead in the frozen river after he mistook his daughter for his dead wife and she drove him out into the storm. Homer’s father: killed himself when he learned his wife was pregnant.

Notice what Young is doing here. The news of a new life coming into the world (pregnancy, the thing that is supposed to represent hope and continuation) is the event that triggers the deaths on Homer’s side of the family. His father could not face it. Madge’s family was destroyed by it from a different angle.

This is a chapter in which birth and death are not opposites. They are the same gesture, made in different directions. Madge carrying a child is also Madge moving toward the grave her mother already reached. She knows this. She feels it in her body.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The pottery town. Madge worked in a pottery factory before all of this, one of the Midwestern towns, possibly in Ohio, where the clay soil produced the ceramics industry. Young makes something of this: Madge came from a world of clay and making, of things shaped by hand into useful forms. And now she is the clay, being shaped by forces she didn't choose.

Tuberculosis. Jacqueline White is dying of it, and in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was a leading cause of death in the United States. It was called consumption because it seemed to consume a person from within and also the "Great White Plague" for the pallor it gave its victims. It had a terrible romantic reputation, for exactly the reason Young is using it here: it made beautiful young people die beautifully. Madge is right to resent it.

Masking. The idea that people show a different face to the world than the one they actually have runs through this entire novel. Madge states it plainly here that she keeps at least two faces. Watch for this idea as the book continues. Almost every character in this novel is wearing something over their real face.

The animals. Chapter 6 is full of them: moths, stags, dragonflies, blackbirds, rabbits, pheasants. Young uses each one as a layer of meaning: transformation, death, fragility, change. You don't need to decode all of them. Just notice that the natural world in this chapter is saturated with significance, that nothing is merely decorative.

What to hold onto

Chapter 6 can feel overwhelming, so many nested tragedies, so much grief packed into one woman's half-dreaming monologue on a midnight bus. If you feel the weight of it pressing down, that is exactly right. That is Madge's weight. You are supposed to feel it.

But here is what to hold onto: Madge is awake when everyone else is asleep. She is the one who sees clearly, who knows exactly what her life is and what it cost her. In a novel full of people fleeing into dreams and illusions, that clarity, however painful, is its own kind of power.

She cannot change her circumstances. But she knows what they are. And in Young's world, that is not nothing.

For the Curious

Pottery towns

Pottery towns of the Midwest. East Liverpool, Ohio was one of the great ceramic centers of America, the "Pottery Capital of the World" at its peak in the early twentieth century, producing everything from washbowls to fine china. The clay soils of eastern Ohio and

western Pennsylvania made this industry possible. Madge working in a pottery town is a small, precise detail that places her in a specific working-class Midwestern world, a world of making things with your hands, of practical necessity, far from the opium dreams of the Cartwheel household.

Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis, also called consumption, was the leading cause of death in the United States throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. It is caused by bacteria and spread through the air, and before the development of antibiotics in the 1940s it was largely untreatable. It gave its victims a wasting pallor that popular culture romanticized as the “beautiful dying” of countless nineteenth-century heroines in literature and opera. Young uses Jacqueline White’s consumption deliberately: she is becoming the kind of perfect, unreachable ideal that only dying women get to be.

Maternal mortality

Maternal mortality in the era Young is writing about was a genuine and pervasive fear and a reality. Before modern obstetric care, childbirth killed women at rates that are almost unimaginable today. Madge’s terror of dying in childbirth, the way her mother did, is not irrational or melodramatic. It is statistically grounded. Young knew this. Vera knows this. And Madge, who has watched what pregnancy did to her family, knows it better than anyone.

Depersonalization-derealization

Depersonalization-derealization is the psychological term for what Young seems to be describing through Madge in this chapter, a dissociative state in which a person feels detached from their own body and mind, as if watching themselves from outside, or as if the world around them is unreal. It can be triggered by trauma, including sexual violence. Young, writing in the 1940s, did not have this vocabulary. But she renders the experience with remarkable precision.

The Ship of Theseus

The Ship of Theseus is an ancient philosophical paradox: if you replace every plank of a ship, one by one, is it still the same ship? Young brings it into Chapter 6 through Madge’s crisis of identity as the question of whether the person she is now, the married pregnant woman on a bus, is the same person she was before. Whether anything has survived the replacement of all her circumstances. It is one of the oldest questions in philosophy. For Madge, it is not abstract.

“The Red Shoes”

“The Red Shoes” is a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen in which a vain girl is condemned to dance forever in enchanted shoes, unable to stop even after her death. Young uses this image in reference to Madge: a woman compelled to keep moving

through a life she did not choose, unable to stop, the motion itself become a kind of punishment. The red shoes are not freedom. They never were.

Chapter 7: The Doctor Between Worlds

Research notes: Chapter 7

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Gertrude Hathaway Tidings · Homer Capehorn · Justice O’Leary · Madge Capehorn · Miss MacIntosh · Moses Hunnecker · Musidora Tidings · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Faith, God, and the Supernatural · The Search for Meaning

Symbols: Keys, Doors, and Locks · The House · Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Fairy Tales and Folklore · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Shakespeare · The Bible

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By now you have your bearings on this bus. You know Moses: his hair, his politics, his whiskey, his raging at the dark. You know Madge: her grief, her fury, her two faces, her clear-eyed understanding of the trap she is in. You know the landscape outside: flooded roads, fallen pillars, a midwestern darkness that goes on and on.

Chapter 7 deepens all of it. We stay on the bus, but the bus now feels less like a vehicle and more like a vessel, like something crossing between states. And Justice O’Leary, the old doctor who has lived so far only in Moses’s talk, finally takes his place at the center.

What actually happens in Chapter 7

Moses is driving through rain and flood when he spots something on the side of the road: the skeletal chassis of Old Doc’s Model T (no wheels, no engine parts, barely a car at all) faintly illuminated in the dark. Old Doc is out there, tending to his patients. Except his patients, as Moses describes them, are shades. Ghosts. People who may never have been born, or who have been dead for years.

Moses watches, rationalizes, mocks, and underneath all of it is moved. He debates whether to help the old man or leave him to his fate. He does not stop.

Then the chapter shifts to the bus interior, where Madge and Homer are talking or rather, Madge is talking and Homer is resisting. She tells stories about the people back home: the Hathaway and Tidings families, a tangle of death, suspected murder, and generational suffering that reads like a dark fairy tale from the rural Midwest. Josh Hathaway is dead. His brother Rudolph died before him. Their wife or widow, or both, in sequence, Gertrude, is accused by Madge of having killed them both. The evidence is circumstantial, the story murky, the locked door and the fire never quite explained.

And then there is Musidora, Gertrude’s sister, mentally impaired, living in poverty, sold by her mother to an old man who became her husband and the father of too many children. Musidora’s pale, moth-like children follow her up the graveyard hill and play among the tombs while she eats there, “for she’s so simple that she does not know she should be sad.”

Homer wants to believe the best. Madge knows better. And Vera witnesses all of it from her place on the bus, adding it to the archive of human suffering she has been quietly assembling since the novel began.

Old Doc and the question of what he is doing

Justice O'Leary is one of the stranger figures in a novel full of strange figures.

He was once a real doctor, a country physician who made house calls, who delivered babies, who was a figure of practical care in his community. Now he is old and his mind has gone. His Model T has no wheels. His instruments are rusted. But he keeps going out. He keeps answering calls. He keeps doing what a doctor does, even when there are no patients left who are truly alive.

Moses thinks this is madness. And in a literal sense, he is right. But Young is doing something more complicated. The old doctor's delusion, that he is still needed, still helping, still bringing life into the world is in its way a kind of faithfulness. He cannot stop being what he was. He cannot accept that the world he served has gone.

There is a question this chapter asks without answering: Is it worse to be deluded and faithful, or clear-eyed and resigned? Moses has given up on almost everything. The old doctor has given up on nothing. Who is actually more alive?

Madge's stories, and what they are really about

The Hathaway and Tidings families might seem like a detour, local gossip, small-town tragedy, a locked-room mystery Young drops into the middle of a chapter and never fully resolves. But look more carefully at what Madge is describing.

Gertrude married one brother, then the other. The first died mysteriously. The second died under suspicious circumstances. She is accused of murder but never charged. She drinks and her house falls apart around her.

Musidora was sold, that is the word, sold, by her own mother to an old man who became her husband. She is described as "peculiar," which in this context is Young's careful way of suggesting cognitive or developmental disability. She has too many children and not enough of anything else. Her pale children play hopscotch among the tombs.

The novel even names the price. "The old man bought her from her mother for sixteen dollars and a new roof he promised."

These are not unusual stories for the time and place Young is writing about. They are the stories that didn't get told: the lives of poor rural women in the American Midwest, ground up by poverty, limited options, and a legal and social system that offered them almost no protection. Marital rape was not considered a crime in the United States until 1978, and not in all states until 1993. Women were frequently passed between men, from fathers to husbands, from one brother to another because their independence was not a category the law recognized.

Madge tells these stories with the flat, unflinching tone of someone who knows they are true because she has been watching from nearby her entire life. Homer resists them because he prefers not to know. This dynamic of the woman who sees clearly, the man who would rather not, runs through the entire chapter.

The graveyard as gathering place

One of the most haunting images in Chapter 7 is Musidora's pale children playing in the graveyard. Young doesn't linger on it. She just puts it there, matter-of-factly, and moves on.

But think about what it means. The graveyard is a public space, one of the few that remains. It costs nothing to enter. No one tells you to leave. The children of a poor, marginalized woman are welcome there in a way they are not welcome elsewhere.

Young is not being sentimental about this. She is being precise. The dead are more hospitable to these children than the living have been. The graveyard is where life happens, for people who have been pushed to the margins of everything else.

The locked-room mystery

Young had a minor in criminology and loved murder mysteries, and she planted one here: Josh Hathaway dead behind a locked door, a fire, circumstances that suggest murder but prove nothing. Gertrude is accused. Nothing is resolved.

She once said she had wanted to be a detective or a journalist, but the opportunities for women were limited at the time.

This is deliberately unsatisfying, and it is meant to be. The locked-room mystery, a staple of detective fiction in which a murder seems to have been committed in circumstances that make it impossible, traditionally promises resolution. The detective figures it out. The truth comes out. Young denies you that comfort.

Life in this novel is full of locked rooms. Miss MacIntosh's disappearance is a locked-room mystery. Catherine's inner world is a locked room. The truth about almost every character is locked away behind a door that may never open. The Hathaway murder is Young's way of telling you, directly: don't expect clean answers. The evidence is always incomplete. The door stays locked.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Old Doc's violin. He plays it in Chapter 7, a broken or barely functional instrument, a smoky lantern at his side. Music in this novel is never just music. It is a form of reaching toward something that cannot be said directly. Watch what instruments appear and who is playing them, and under what circumstances.

The names Young gives to Madge's small-town cast. They are thick with Biblical allusion: Solomon, Bathsheba, Reuben, Gad, Manasseh. Young is layering the ordinary horror of these Midwestern lives with the weight of ancient stories: the stories of women desired and disposed of, of brothers in conflict, of families destroyed by the decisions of powerful men. The names tell you that these stories are not new. They have always been happening, everywhere, to women who were never given the chance to tell them themselves.

The jeremiad. Moses's long, raging monologue in this chapter falls into a specific American literary tradition, the jeremiad, a lament over the moral decay of society, the nation fallen from its promise. Young knew this tradition well. Moses is not just a drunk bus driver railing at Democrats. He is speaking in a voice that goes back to the Puritan preachers, to the founding of the country, to the original American anxiety that things are not as good as they were supposed to be.

Homer's hope. Notice how consistently Homer chooses not to know. He believes in an afterlife. He resists Madge's grim accounts. He prefers the version of events that ends better. This is not stupidity, it is a choice, and Young is watching it the way she watches everything: carefully, without judgment, and without quite letting it off the hook.

What to hold onto

Chapter 7 is a chapter about people who keep going when they should, by all reasonable measures, have stopped. The old doctor tends to patients who aren't there. Moses drives roads that aren't really roads. Madge tells truths that no one wants to hear. Musidora's children play among the headstones because it is the only space left to them.

None of these people have what they need. All of them are still moving. That is, quietly, what this chapter is about.

The bus is still going. So are you.

For the Curious

The Model T Ford or "Tin Lizzie"

The Model T Ford or "Tin Lizzie", was manufactured from 1908 to 1927 and was the first automobile mass-produced on an assembly line, making it affordable to ordinary Americans for the first time. By the time Young is writing, it was already an antique, a relic of a previous era of American optimism about what technology and industry could deliver. Old Doc's Model T without wheels or engine is a precise image: the promise of the machine age, broken down, going nowhere, still out in the rain pretending to work. The jeremiad is a long literary tradition in American writing, a form of sustained lamentation over the state of society, always containing a prophecy of imminent downfall. The term comes from the Biblical prophet Jeremiah, who spent his ministry warning an unwilling Israel of the consequences of its moral failures. American Puritan preachers adopted the form, and it has never gone away: from colonial sermons to political speeches to Moses

Hunnecker raging in the dark about Democrats. When Moses despairs over his country, he is speaking in a tradition four centuries old.

Marital rape

Marital rape was not criminalized in the United States until 1978, when Oregon became the first state to make it illegal. By 1993, all fifty states had laws against it, though many states still treated it more leniently than other forms of rape, and some continue to do so. Young was writing in a world where this violence was entirely legal, entirely invisible, and largely undiscussed. Musidora's story of being sold to an old man and bearing too many children is a story about this world, told quietly and without editorial comment because none was needed.

King Lear

King Lear is Shakespeare's tragedy of an aging king who gives up his power to his daughters and is destroyed by the storm that follows: both the literal storm on the heath and the metaphorical storm of betrayal and madness. Moses compares himself to Lear in the storm in this chapter: the old man who gave everything away and is left with nothing, raging at the sky. Young knows her Shakespeare deeply, and Lear is one of the presiding spirits of this novel as a meditation on what happens when the old order collapses and the world offers no shelter.

Gertrude

Gertrude, the name Young gives to the woman accused of murdering her two husbands is also the name of Hamlet's mother in Shakespeare, a woman caught between two men (her first husband and the brother who murdered him), whose moral position remains one of literature's great ambiguities. Young is stacking the reference deliberately: her Gertrude is another woman whose guilt or innocence the novel refuses to settle, another woman whose life has been shaped entirely by men's decisions, another figure standing at the intersection of marriage and murder.

Eugenics

Eugenics appears in the chapter as a shadow, the pseudo-scientific theory, popular in the early twentieth century, that "undesirable" human traits could be bred out of the population. Musidora's children, pale and gathering in the graveyard, are exactly the kind of people the eugenics movement targeted: poor, possibly cognitively different, born to a mother who had no power over her own reproduction. Young knew what was being done, in her time and before, to people like Musidora's family. She does not say it directly. She shows you the children in the graveyard and lets you draw your own conclusions.

Chapter 8: The Village at the End of the Road

Research notes: Chapter 8

Characters: Beatrice Fitzgerald · Homer Capehorn · Jacqueline White · Justice O'Leary · Madge Capehorn · Miss MacIntosh · Moses Hunnecker · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Death and Mortality

Symbols: The Bus and the Journey · Twins and Doubles

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Descartes and Dualism · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Plato and Platonism

Allusions: Dante · Edgar Allan Poe · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest

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The bus is almost there.

After seven chapters of driving through an American Midwest that has grown increasingly strange with flooded roads, spectral doctors, the stories of Madge and the Tidings family and all the small-town dead we are nearly at the destination. Chapter 8 is the chapter of arrival, or almost-arrival. And Young, being Young, makes the approach as layered and strange as everything that came before it.

The storm intensifies. The road becomes a river. And the bus stops, briefly, at a crossroads that turns out to be one of the novel's great symbolic intersections.

What actually happens in Chapter 8

The bus drives through a violent cloudburst: thunder, a broken windshield wiper, rain coming down like a deluge, the road nearly indistinguishable from the flooded fields around it. Vera reflects that it feels like the beginning of creation, or perhaps a farewell to the earth as she has known it.

The bus stops at a fork in the road near a graveyard hill. Old tombstones line the slope, their names worn faint. One branch of the fork leads down toward a small village. It is the village Vera has dreamed of, "that land of promise through eternity, there where the trees would blossom and where no flower would fade, there where the children would dance, where the young would not grow old, where the old would never die, for time should cease."

Across the road stands Beatrice Fitzgerald's house, a decrepit tin structure in a flooded yard full of mud, refuse, and wreckage. Moses stops here to change horses. And Madge and Homer argue about who Beatrice is and what she deserves.

Madge calls her the ugliest old woman for miles. A "common prostitute." Someone who puts out her lights so no one will see her. Homer offers a different picture: a woman who works harder than anyone, who pulls a little red sled over snow with her face turning blue, who lost an eye when "A little boy shot at her with his bow and arrow," whose son, fathered, it's rumored, by Old Doc, who never claimed him, joined the Navy and travels

the world. Homer calls her “royal,” because names beginning with “Fitz” are said to trace back to royal bastard lines in England.

Moses delivers a long, dark, funny monologue about death and medical science, about how Old Doc couldn’t help Jacqueline White, about how no doctor can, about how there is no hell, no heaven, no cure, just the tide going out when it goes. And then the bus rolls into the village at night.

What Vera sees is spectral: upright houses like coffins, a pale moon like a skull, great spaces yawning between the buildings. She wonders if it is real. If any of it is. Whether she is inside a dream, or a dream within a dream.

The fork in the road

Young does not make you work hard to find the symbolism here, she places it plainly, and trusts you to feel its weight.

On one side: the graveyard, the tombstones with their fading names, the dead who have already arrived at their destination. On the other side: the village described as a land of eternal promise, where no one ages, no one dies, the children dance forever.

And right there at the junction, neither one nor the other: Beatrice Fitzgerald’s ruined house.

Beatrice is not dead, but she is not exactly thriving. She exists at the threshold between the graveyard and the village, between what the community has decided she is and what she actually is, between the two versions of her that Madge and Homer offer. She is the novel’s crossroads figure, and she is treated accordingly: as an embarrassment, a mystery, a rumor, and a person who nonetheless pulls a red sled through the snow to do other people’s laundry.

Beatrice Fitzgerald, and what the two versions of her mean

Madge’s version: an ugly old woman, socially disgraced, a prostitute, someone who hides from the world by putting out her lights.

Homer’s version: a woman of possible royal lineage, a tireless worker, someone who bore a son nobody would claim, who lost an eye to a little boy’s arrow and never made a fuss about it, who has endured quietly in a flooded tin house while the rest of the town talked about her.

Both versions are being offered by people who know her only through gossip. Neither Madge nor Homer is her. Young never gives Beatrice a voice in this chapter and she exists entirely through what other people say about her, which is its own kind of statement.

The name Beatrice comes from the Latin for “she who makes happy” and is most famous from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, where Beatrice Portinari is Dante’s guide through Paradise, a figure of divine grace, a woman so pure she was thought worthy to speak for God. Young’s Beatrice is the opposite in every external way: old, poor, scorned, living in a

flooded yard. And yet Homer calls her royal. And yet she works harder than anyone. And yet her son is out on the seas of the world, wearing a uniform instead of rags.

Young is doing what she does throughout this novel: placing the grandest possible resonance inside the smallest, most overlooked life. Beatrice Fitzgerald in her tin house is Dante's Beatrice, reduced and enduring. The guide through paradise, standing at the crossroads, putting out her lights so nobody will see her.

Moses on death, and why it matters

Moses's monologue in Chapter 8 is one of his longest and most philosophically direct. He is, essentially, delivering a sermon on mortality as one that strips away every comfort. No heaven. No hell. No doctor who can stop the tide when it turns. Jacqueline White is dying and the best doctor in the world couldn't help her.

This is bleak, and Young means it to be. But notice what Moses is doing underneath the bleakness: he is grieving. His rant about Old Doc and the futility of medicine is not the speech of a man who doesn't care. It is the speech of a man who cares enormously and has found no way to act on it. He cannot fix Jacqueline. He cannot fix Old Doc. He cannot fix Beatrice's flooded yard. The rage is helplessness wearing a different face.

This is Moses's consistent register throughout the novel: a man who sees everything clearly, grieves everything quietly, and expresses it all as fury.

Arriving at the village

The chapter ends with Vera's description of the village at night, and it is one of the most carefully composed passages in these early chapters. The houses stand like coffins. The moon is pale and dented like a skull. Great spaces yawn between the buildings.

This is not welcoming. This is not the land of promise Vera dreamed of. Or perhaps it is and this is what eternal life looks like when you arrive: spectral, silent, emptied of everything ordinary.

Vera asks whether it is real or a dream. Whether the journey has been a dream within a dream, a phrase Young borrows from Edgar Allan Poe, who borrowed it from the long philosophical tradition going back to Plato and Descartes, asking whether what we perceive is ever the world itself or only our representation of it.

You have been on this bus for eight chapters. You may have started asking yourself the same question.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Beatrice's son. He joined the Navy and travels the world: Singapore, Borneo, "the China Sea, the Rock of Gibraltar." He is out there somewhere, seeing everything, the child of a woman nobody respects and a man who never claimed him. Young will not forget him.

Watch for the places he travels through, they become a kind of atlas of the world beyond this narrow midwestern road.

The name Longtree appears among the tombstones on the graveyard hill. Hold onto it. It is the last name of a character who will appear much later in the novel. Young plants names in passing throughout these early chapters, not to confuse you, but because she is building a world that is already fully inhabited before the novel begins. The graveyard names are not decorative. They are a record.

“A dream within a dream.” This phrase, lifted from Poe, will echo through the rest of the novel. Young is building a question here that has no clean answer: at what point does the story we tell ourselves about reality become the only reality we have? When does the dream replace the thing it dreamed of? Vera has been asking this question about Miss MacIntosh since Chapter 1. The village ahead is going to press it further.

Light and darkness. Beatrice puts out her lights so people won’t see her. The village arrives at night, described as spectral and empty. Moses drives through a cloudburst with a broken windshield wiper. Light in this chapter is failing, intermittent, unreliable and characters’ relationships to it tell you something about their relationship to being seen.

What to hold onto

Chapter 8 can feel like a chapter of arrivals and thresholds, the fork in the road, the graveyard on one side, the dreamland village on the other, Beatrice at the crossroads, the bus rolling finally into a place that looks like death dressed up as a town.

If you feel the strangeness of it pressing in, that is exactly right. This is the edge of something. The bus has arrived, or almost arrived. But arrival in this novel does not mean resolution. It means the next question.

What Vera is searching for, Miss MacIntosh, or the truth about Miss MacIntosh, or the truth about herself, is still ahead. The village is spectral and silent. But she is still on the bus. She has not stopped looking.

Neither should you.

For the Curious

Beatrice Portinari

Beatrice Portinari was a real Florentine woman, born around 1265, whom Dante Alighieri loved from a distance and barely spoke to. She died at twenty-four. Dante spent much of the rest of his life writing about her, first in *La Vita Nuova*, then as the guide who leads him through Paradise in the *Divine Comedy*. She becomes, in Dante’s hands, a figure of divine grace, the human face of theology. Young names her wretched, scorned, hard-working character after this woman deliberately. The distance between Beatrice Portinari and Beatrice Fitzgerald is the distance between the ideal and the actual and Young thinks they are the same person.

“A dream within a dream”

“A dream within a dream” is a phrase from Edgar Allan Poe’s 1849 poem of the same name and one of his last, written near the end of his life. The poem ends by asking whether everything we see or seem is a dream within a dream. But the question goes back further: to Descartes asking whether he might be dreaming everything he perceives, to Plato’s allegory of the cave, in which humans mistake shadows for reality. Young places this question at the center of her novel. It is not a rhetorical question. She means it.

The “Fitz” prefix in English surnames like Fitzgerald

The “Fitz” prefix in English surnames like Fitzgerald, Fitzroy, and Fitzwilliam does trace back to the Norman-French word *fils* (son of), and several famous “Fitz” surnames were associated with royal illegitimate lines , most notably the Fitzroys, descendants of King Charles II and his mistresses. Homer’s claim that Beatrice has “blue blood” through her name is a piece of village mythology, the kind of genealogical rumor that attaches itself to people on the margins and grants them a dignity their circumstances deny them. Young takes it seriously as a form of the human need to believe that the overlooked are secretly remarkable. She thinks they are. She just doesn’t think it should need to be a secret.

The Spanish Flu of 1918

The Spanish Flu of 1918 is referenced in Moses’s mention of an “influenza epidemic” which killed an estimated 50 to 100 million people worldwide, more than the First World War. It arrived in waves, and in communities across the rural Midwest it killed people with terrifying speed. Moses’s bitterness about the limits of medicine is partly rooted in a real historical memory: a disease that swept through towns and proved that doctors, for all their instruments and authority, could not stop it.

Life review or the phenomenon in

Life review or the phenomenon in which a drowning person relives their entire life in seconds before losing consciousness, was first described by British naval officer Francis Beaufort after nearly drowning in 1790. He described a “panoramic review” of every incident of his existence, compressed into less than two minutes. Vera references this phenomenon in Chapter 8. She has been, in a sense, experiencing a kind of extended life review for the entire novel: reliving, reexamining, trying to understand what has already happened. The difference is that she didn’t need to nearly drown to begin it. She lost Miss MacIntosh, and that was enough.

Chapter 9: I Am Dancing with Death

Research notes: Chapter 9

Characters: Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Solomon the Turtle · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Guilt, Innocence, and Justice · Motherhood, Pregnancy, and Birth · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Pregnancy, Birth, and Children · Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Hinduism · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Pythagoras and the Music of the Spheres

Allusions: Astronomy · Fairy Tales and Folklore · Greek Mythology · Music and Composers · The Bible · The History of Opium

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We step back from the bus now. Chapter 9 is one of the novel's memory chapters, the kind Young writes when she wants to take you deep into the life that preceded the journey, into the texture of the years Vera spent under Miss MacIntosh's care before everything broke apart.

If the early bus chapters showed you Miss MacIntosh through Vera's grief and longing, Chapter 9 shows you what their daily life together actually looked like. And it is rich, strange, funny, tender, and shot through with an approaching darkness that Vera can feel but not yet name.

What actually happens in Chapter 9

Vera opens the chapter with a question she has been carrying since Miss MacIntosh disappeared: was she responsible? Did she cause it, in some way she cannot fully articulate? She does not answer this question. She turns it over and over like a stone.

Then she takes us back. She shows us the schoolroom: Miss MacIntosh at the blackboard, drilling Vera on geography, history, facts about the Chicago fire and the glaciers and the grasshoppers. She shows us the embroidery hoop, the straight basting stitches, the hemming of handkerchiefs, Miss MacIntosh's program for turning Vera into a competent, marriageable woman, delivered with the focused intensity of someone who believes that discipline is protection.

She shows us Solomon the turtle, ancient and slow, hauling a clay flower pot with a geranium across the schoolroom floor while Miss MacIntosh eyes him with undisguised contempt. She shows us the silver dollar watch Miss MacIntosh wore, always producing it to remind Vera that time was passing, that they had work to do, that there was no room for sloth.

And she shows us Vera's fourteenth birthday. Mr. Spitzer sends a party dress: filmy, sleeveless, embroidered with seed pearls. No guests come. Vera dances alone in the empty room, imagining a partner, and declares to Miss MacIntosh: *I am dancing with Death*.

Miss MacIntosh's response is immediate and serious. Death is not a dance partner for a fourteen-year-old. Death is real, universal, coming for everyone, and not to be romanticized. Vera listens. And in the darkness afterward, she begins to think about marriage, about the man she might someday know, and whether she would ever truly know him at all.

Miss MacIntosh as teacher

The schoolroom scenes in this chapter are among the most vivid in the novel, and they deserve your full attention.

Miss MacIntosh's education program for Vera is not gentle. It is relentless. Geography, history, domestic skills, moral instruction and all of it delivered by a woman who came from nothing, who believes that preparation is the only armor a girl has, and who is determined to give Vera the tools that her mother's opium dreams never provided.

But notice what is underneath the curriculum. When Vera, in her twelfth year, asks, "Miss MacIntosh, where are your ovaries?" Miss MacIntosh, absent behind her newspaper, answers, "In the bottom drawer, dear, you will find them … next to the spare corset, I have no doubt." When Vera asks where her eyebrows are, she gets a lecture on the great Chicago fire. Personal questions are deflected. Bodily questions are redirected. The space between them is full of things Miss MacIntosh will not say.

Young is not suggesting that Miss MacIntosh is a hypocrite. She is showing you a woman with her own private architecture, her own rooms that stay locked, teaching the best she can from the rooms that are open. Miss MacIntosh believes in honesty and reality. But there are aspects of her reality she is not prepared to share with a child. Not yet. Perhaps not ever.

Solomon the turtle, and what he represents

The turtle named Solomon was Catherine's gift to Vera on her twelfth birthday, and he had been "given to her by one of her dead guests." Vera wonders if he might be the World Turtle or the mythological figure found in cultures across the globe, the great creature whose back holds the world on its shell. He carries a clay flower pot with a geranium that smells of tobacco, moving with the patience of something that has been alive longer than anyone can remember.

Miss MacIntosh despises him. She associates his slowness with sloth, with the absence of discipline, with everything she is trying to train Vera away from. He is the anti-Miss MacIntosh: ancient, unhurried, indifferent to schedules.

But Young gives Solomon a name and not just any name. Solomon was the wisest king in the Bible, famous for his wealth and his discernment. Miss MacIntosh objects to the name itself: Solomon "had had too many wives and too much of mortal glory." By naming this slow, contemptible-to-Miss-MacIntosh creature after wisdom itself, Young is gently undermining the idea that speed and discipline are the only forms of intelligence. Solomon

the turtle does not hurry. Solomon the turtle does not care about Miss MacIntosh's watch. Solomon the turtle has been here longer than any of them and will likely outlast them all.

The birthday party that wasn't

Vera's fourteenth birthday is one of those passages that Young renders with particular precision, every detail chosen to make you feel both the beauty and the sadness at once.

Mr. Spitzer sends the party dress. It is lovely: filmy, sleeveless, embroidered with seed pearls. He gives it to her himself, with a shy kiss on the forehead and an old Roman coin, but he cannot stay for the celebration; he must go to Buzzards Bay "to trace a lost heir." No guests come. Miss MacIntosh is present but not celebratory. And Vera, in her beautiful dress, alone in the room, dances with an imaginary partner.

This is Vera at fourteen in miniature: imaginative, yearning, already accustomed to the absence of what she was promised. She creates what isn't there. She dances with the invisible.

And then she says, to herself or to Miss MacIntosh: *I am dancing with Death.*

It might be adolescent drama. It might be genuine metaphysical awareness. Miss MacIntosh takes it as the latter because she takes everything seriously, because she is not a woman who dismisses what children say. First she scolds her ("I thought I had cured you of lying, for Death is not yet") and sends her to bed. Then, standing at the foot of the bed, she asks, "What did your companion look like? Can you describe him?" Vera thinks "that my companion looked like Miss MacIntosh, whose face glistened in the watery distance." And Miss MacIntosh tells her about death plainly: it is real, it comes for everyone, it is not romantic, it is not a partner you choose. You do not invite it in as a companion. You acknowledge it and you keep living.

This is the truest and most direct thing Miss MacIntosh says in the chapter. It is also, in retrospect, haunted. Because she will walk into the sea. Because the dance Vera was imagining is not far away.

What Miss MacIntosh says about marriage

In the darkness after the birthday, Vera asks or thinks about asking what marriage is really like. Miss MacIntosh's answer is not comforting.

You do not truly know a person until after you have married them. And then it is too late.

This is not cynicism from Miss MacIntosh, it is realism. She is not saying marriage is bad. She is saying that the self people present before marriage is not the entire self, and the discovery of the self comes after the contract is already signed. She is preparing Vera for the truth that the person you marry is, in some essential way, a stranger. And that learning to live with a stranger, with their full, complicated, sometimes disappointing reality, is what marriage actually is.

Vera, at fourteen, wants something else. She wants adventure, passion, a union with someone worth knowing. She wants the story. Miss MacIntosh is trying to give her the

facts.

Neither of them is wrong. That tension between the story Vera wants and the facts Miss MacIntosh insists on is the tension that runs through everything.

The guilt Vera carries

The chapter opens and returns to a question Vera cannot resolve: did she cause Miss MacIntosh's death? Was there something she did, something she said, something she failed to do that set the ending in motion?

Young does not answer this. She will not answer it for many chapters yet. What she does instead is show you the weight of the question, the way it sits in Vera, the way she turns it over, the way she can reconstruct every detail of their life together and still not arrive at a clean cause and effect.

This is what guilt without resolution feels like. Not a verdict. Not even a clear accusation. Just the loop of memory, the same moments replayed, the same question asked again at the end that was asked at the beginning.

Notice that Vera's guilt does not stop her from loving Miss MacIntosh. The two things exist together: grief and guilt, love and the possibility of responsibility. This is one of Young's most honest emotional observations.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The party dress. Mr. Spitzer sends it, but does not attend. He is always doing this, providing for Vera at a distance, present in her life through gestures and objects but absent from the actual moments. The party dress is a generous and useless gift: beautiful, and belonging to a party that doesn't exist. Watch how Spitzer operates throughout the novel. His presence is always slightly off.

Miss MacIntosh's watch. She produces it constantly, checking the time, reminding Vera of the time, insisting that time is moving and there is work to do. It is her instrument of discipline. In a novel where time bends, loops, and dissolves, Miss MacIntosh's silver dollar watch is the attempt to keep it straight. Notice what happens to time in the chapters where she is absent.

The question about ovaries. Vera asks. Miss MacIntosh, not listening, sends her to the bottom drawer. This evasion matters more than it seems. Miss MacIntosh is a woman who believes in truth about everything except certain things about herself and her body. Those things are hidden. The novel will eventually show you why.

"I am dancing with Death." Hold this phrase. It is not the last time the image of dancing appears in the novel, and it is not the last time death is present in a moment that should be celebratory.

What to hold onto

Chapter 9 is a chapter of preparation for what is coming in the novel, and for what has already come. Vera is learning, under Miss MacIntosh's strict and loving supervision, to face facts. To hem a handkerchief straight. To know her geography. To understand that marriage is not a fairy tale and that death is not a dance partner.

She does not fully learn any of this. She is fourteen and dreaming of adventure and she dances alone in her beautiful dress with an invisible partner and says she is dancing with Death, and some part of her believes it is romantic.

But Miss MacIntosh is watching. And trying. And the watching and the trying are, in their way, as close to love as this household gets.

For the Curious

The World Turtle

The World Turtle is a cosmological myth found in Hindu, Chinese, Indigenous North American, and other traditions, the idea of a great turtle whose back supports the world. Young gives this myth to Solomon the schoolroom turtle, who is old enough that Vera can't imagine a time before him. The joke is gentle and precise: the creature Miss MacIntosh dismisses as slothful and useless is, in Vera's imagination, the foundation of everything.

Pythagoras believed in metempsychosis or the

Pythagoras believed in metempsychosis or the transmigration of souls, the idea that after death, the soul enters another body, continuing its journey through multiple lives. He also taught *musica universalis*, "the music of the spheres, the" belief that the planets move according to mathematical equations, creating an inaudible symphony that underlies all of existence. Young mentions him in Chapter 9 in the context of Miss MacIntosh's factual curriculum, but these are not facts Miss MacIntosh endorses. They are facts about the strange theories people have had about reality. Young, who believed in the reality of the imagination, was more sympathetic to Pythagoras than Miss MacIntosh would have been.

Proteus

Proteus was the shape-shifting sea god of Greek mythology as the "Old Man of the Sea," capable of changing form to avoid being caught, who would tell the truth only to those who could hold him long enough. The name became the root of "protean," meaning endlessly changeable in form. Young references him in the context of identity and transformation, the question of whether there is a fixed self beneath all the changing. It is the same question the novel asks about almost every character.

Pandora

Pandora was, in Greek mythology, the first woman, created by the gods and given a jar (mistranslated as a "box" since the Renaissance) containing all the evils of the world.

When she opened it, they escaped. Hope remained inside. Young references Pandora in Chapter 9 in the context of Vera's questions about femininity and her body or the idea that womanhood itself is a container of forces that, once released, cannot be gathered back.

"There but for the grace of God go I"

"There but for the grace of God go I" is attributed to the English reformer John Bradford, who said it while watching prisoners being led to execution. He himself was later burned at the stake under Queen Mary I. The phrase became shorthand for a particular kind of moral humility: the acknowledgment that circumstances, not virtue, often determine outcomes. Miss MacIntosh uses it or something like it in a way that reveals her awareness of how close her own life has been to the margins she is trying to keep Vera away from.

Marguerite Young's own sexuality

Marguerite Young's own sexuality is worth noting here. Young, who never married, had relationships with both men and women, she described a relationship in which she told a man he could visit her every Tuesday for the rest of his life but she would not marry him. When the word "gay" appears in Chapter 9, it may carry this awareness. Young was writing in an era when the word was shifting from its older meaning of carefree happiness toward its newer one, and she was writing from inside a life that would not have been entirely legible to the world she was depicting. The novel is, among its many other things, a book written by a woman who understood what it meant to live outside the expected scripts.

Chapter 10: The Wedding That Became a Funeral

Research notes: Chapter 10

Characters: Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Solomon the Turtle · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Dreams and Imagination · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Astronomy · Genesis · Milton · The Bible · The Book of Job

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In Chapter 9, Vera danced alone at her birthday party and declared she was dancing with Death. In Chapter 10, she falls asleep thinking about marriage and has one of the strangest, funniest, and most quietly heartbreaking dreams in the novel. Young does not always announce when the narrative shifts from waking to dreaming. You may not realize at first that the wedding ceremony Vera is witnessing is a dream. That is entirely intentional. The dream and the waking world use the same prose, the same density of attention, the same quality of presence. Learning to move between them without a handrail is part of reading this book.

What actually happens in Chapter 10

Vera, still awake after the birthday, is thinking about what Miss MacIntosh said: that you don't truly know the person you marry until after the ceremony, when it is too late. She is thinking about marriage in general, what it is, what it requires, who she might someday know.

And then she is in a dream.

The dream is a wedding. Mr. Spitzer is there, and Miss MacIntosh is there, and a preacher is presiding. At first Mr. Spitzer is the bridegroom and Miss MacIntosh the bride, "carrying her black umbrella." Then the stars light up, and Vera sees the dream's error: "Mr. Spitzer was the bride, wearing a white veil. Miss MacIntosh was the bridegroom, wearing a waxed mustache like Mr. Spitzer's and a high silk hat and her silver dollar watch." The preacher's words begin as wedding vows from the old Sarum rite an ancient medieval English ceremony and then slide, almost without notice, into a funeral oration. The wedding is becoming a funeral. The vows are becoming last rites. The guests are few and vague and the preacher seems to be dissolving as he speaks.

Biblical figures appear in the preacher's litany: Gorgons and Hydras and Chimeras, Lucifer who was brightest and fell farthest, Beelzebub, the Day of Judgment. The cosmic and the domestic are sitting in the same room, which is what Young's dreams always do.

Vera wakes or surfaces from the dream feeling not amused but troubled. She has been thinking unkindly of Miss MacIntosh in the dream, seeing her as colorless, as someone "none would have." And now, awake, she feels the pity of it: this woman who has given her whole life to practicality and discipline and has never been loved the way she

deserved, who has aged into a kind of invisibility that the world imposes on women who do not marry and do not perform the expected ceremonies.

Vera is hungry. She wants to go to Miss MacIntosh. She has been warned not to wander at night. She does not go.

She stays in her room, hungry in more ways than one, and the chapter ends.

The dream wedding, and why it matters

This dream is doing several things at once, and they are all worth naming.

First, it is doing something with gender. Mr. Spitzer as bride, Miss MacIntosh as bridegroom, the expected roles reversed. Young is not simply playing with visual incongruity. She is asking what it means for a ceremony to require a bride and a groom at all, for those roles to be fixed and assigned rather than chosen or earned. The inversion makes visible something that the normal ceremony hides: that the roles are arbitrary, that they could be otherwise, that we have agreed to pretend they are natural when they are not.

Second, it is doing something with ceremony itself. The wedding vows that slide into funeral liturgy are not an accident of Vera's dreaming mind: they are a truth the dream is telling. In the era Young is writing about, marriage for women was frequently described as a kind of death: the woman's legal identity was absorbed into her husband's, her name changed, her previous self declared over. The Sarum rite, which is the source of many of the phrases in the preacher's speech, was the medieval English marriage ceremony: old, authoritative, carrying the weight of centuries. Young puts it in a dream and lets it dissolve. She is not respectful of the ceremony's authority. She is watching it come apart.

Third, and most quietly, the dream is about loneliness. Mr. Spitzer, who has spent his whole life mourning his dead twin brother, is here as a bride with no real groom. Miss MacIntosh, who has spent her whole life resisting the softness the world tried to take from her, is here as a bridegroom with no real bride. Two lonely people, dressed in each other's costumes, presided over by a preacher who is dissolving. This is not comedy. This is sorrow wearing a costume.

Miss MacIntosh, seen from the outside

One of the most important things Chapter 10 does is show us Miss MacIntosh through Vera's eyes at a moment when Vera is being uncharitable and then show us Vera catching herself.

In the dream and in the waking thoughts that follow it, Vera notices Miss MacIntosh's ordinariness. Her colorlessness. The fact that she is aging, that "none would have her," that she has resigned herself to a life without the love and partnership that the world holds up as the measure of a woman's worth.

And then Vera stops herself. Because Miss MacIntosh did not fail to marry. She chose or was shaped by her life into choosing a different kind of existence. She gave Vera

discipline and geography and the facts of the world. She waded into cold surf. She kept time with a silver dollar watch. She was the truest thing in the house. The world's judgment of her, that she is a spinster, colorless, someone who never achieved the central ceremony, is not the same as the truth of her. Vera knows this. The guilt of having thought unkindly, even in a dream, is real.

This moment is a small lesson in how the novel works. Young will keep showing you characters who appear, from a certain angle, to have failed and then she will rotate the angle. She is always rotating the angle.

The preacher's words

The preacher's speech in this chapter is one of Young's great set pieces of Biblical ventriloquism, she draws from Job, from Corinthians, from the Book of Common Prayer, from the Sarum rite, weaving them together into a ceremony that is simultaneously a wedding, a funeral, and a cosmic reckoning.

Some of the phrases worth holding:

"This life is very short and full of mortal sorrow" is from Job, the book of undeserved suffering, the book of questions that God does not answer.

"He cometh up, and he is cut down" is also from Job, about the brevity of human life, the flower that blooms and withers.

"Oh, death, where is thy sting? Oh, grave, where is thy victory?" is from Corinthians, the famous challenge to death, which in this context sounds less like triumph and more like a question asked into the dark.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" is the burial rite, the reminder of what we are made of and what we will return to.

Young is not quoting these to comfort you. She is using them to show you how thoroughly the language of endings has been woven into the language of beginnings. The wedding ceremony and the funeral oration are made of the same words. They always have been. We just don't usually notice.

Vera's hunger

The chapter ends with Vera hungry. Literally, she has not eaten, it is late, she wants to go to Miss MacIntosh's room. But the hunger is also something else: the want of connection, the wish to undo the unkind thoughts of the dream, the desire to say something true to this woman who has been trying to teach her truth all along. She does not go. She has been warned not to wander at night. She obeys, and she stays hungry.

Even the door tells her no. "At night, her bedroom door, as I knew, was always locked from the inside, always double bolted."

This is a small, precisely calibrated moment of regret. The not-going. The obedience that costs something. In a novel where missed connections and delayed understandings

accumulate like unpaid debts, this one of Vera lying in her room, wanting to knock on Miss MacIntosh's door, choosing not to is worth noticing.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Mr. Spitzer as bride. The image of Spitzer in a veil is strange and funny and also heartbreaking when you understand him as a man who has spent his whole life in grief for his dead twin, who has never fully inhabited his own identity because so much of it died with his brother. Young dresses him as a bride in Vera's dream, and the costume fits in its own terrible way. He is always waiting for a ceremony that already happened without him.

The Sarum rite. This was the medieval English marriage service used before the Reformation, the source of many of the phrases we still recognize in wedding ceremonies today as including "to have and to hold," "till death do us part," and the question of whether anyone knows of an impediment. Young reaches back to the oldest layer of the ceremony because she is interested in what marriage has always been, beneath the layers of custom and sentiment.

"Familiarity breeds contempt." This proverb, attributed to Chaucer and Augustine and others, appears in this chapter in the context of Miss MacIntosh's observation that you don't know your spouse until it's too late. Young is building a sustained meditation on intimacy and knowledge, the paradox that the closer you get to someone, the more clearly you see what you didn't know, and the less romantic the seeing becomes.

Solomon the turtle, still there. He is present in the dream too, slow and ancient, witnessing everything. He does not judge. He does not hurry. He will be there when the ceremony is over.

What to hold onto

Chapter 10 is a dream chapter which means it operates by association rather than by logic, and it is asking you to feel your way through it rather than parse it.

Here is what to hold: Vera is fourteen, she has just danced alone at her own birthday party, she is lying awake thinking about marriage and what it means and whether she will ever truly know the person she marries. She dreams a wedding that turns into a funeral. She wakes feeling she has been unkind to someone she loves. She is hungry and does not go to ask for food or comfort.

And outside, in the darkness, Miss MacIntosh is alone in her room, not knowing she was dreamed.

For the Curious

The Sarum rite

The Sarum rite was the liturgical practice of the Diocese of Salisbury in medieval England, and it became the dominant form of worship in England before the Reformation. It is the source of many phrases in the modern Anglican and Protestant wedding ceremony including “to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.” When Young’s preacher speaks these words, she is reaching back to the oldest layer of the ceremony in English, the one closest to the original Latin, the one written before the Reformation changed everything. She is marrying her characters in a rite that no one has used for five hundred years.

The Book of Job

The Book of Job is one of the oldest and strangest books in the Bible as a philosophical dialogue about undeserved suffering, in which a righteous man loses everything and demands an explanation from God, and God’s answer is essentially: the universe is larger than your understanding, and your suffering does not require a reason you can comprehend. Young was drawn to Job throughout her life. Its questions: Why do the good suffer? What does God owe his creation? What is the relationship between justice and fate? These are the questions her novel keeps asking. The preacher’s speech in Chapter 10 draws heavily from Job, which means it is asking these questions inside a wedding ceremony. Which is, if you think about it, exactly the right place to ask them.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust”

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” does not actually appear verbatim in the Bible, it is a phrase from the Anglican burial service, first appearing in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, combining Genesis 3:19 (“for dust you are and to dust you shall return”) with the general idea of human mortality. It has become so familiar that we no longer hear it. Young puts it in a wedding, where it has no business being, and suddenly you hear it again.

Lucifer

Lucifer, “who was brightest and fell farthest” the name means “light-bearer” in Latin, and was originally associated with the planet Venus as the morning star. It became associated with Satan through a passage in Isaiah about a fallen Babylonian king, and later through Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, where Lucifer is the brightest and most beautiful of the angels before his fall. Young’s preacher invokes him in the wedding litany not as a figure of evil but as a figure of extreme contrast from highest to lowest, brightest to darkest. It is the structure of tragedy. It is also, quietly, the structure of Miss MacIntosh’s story.

“One who could know us and yet love us”

“One who could know us and yet love us” Vera reflects in this chapter on what she believes would be the truest love: not blind love, not idealized love, but the love of

someone who sees you completely and loves you anyway. This is connected to Psalm 139, which describes a God who knows every thought and every step and loves regardless. Young is not making a theological argument. She is making a human one: that to be fully known and fully loved at the same time is the rarest and most real thing. And that most of us spend our lives being known only partly, or loved only partly, and calling that enough.

Chapter 11: The Alphabet of Everything

Research notes: Chapter 11

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Ancient Egypt · Astronomy · Exploration and the Poles · Greek Mythology · Music and Composers · Sir Walter Raleigh · The History of Opium

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Chapter 11 is one of the shortest in the novel. You could read it in five minutes. But don't let that fool you into thinking it's minor, because it contains one of the most quietly devastating sentences Vera will speak in the entire book, and it sets up the long comedy of Mr. Spitzer's structural absence that will run through dozens of chapters to come.

Take a breath. We're in good shape here.

What actually happens in Chapter 11

Almost nothing, in terms of external event. Vera pauses in her narration to reflect on her own situation. Her mother, Catherine, is somewhere deep in her opium voyage, working through the P's, Q's, and R's of her alphabetical guest list. Phantom visitors from history, geography, mythology, and art are assembling in her velvet bedroom. Mr. Spitzer, as always, has missed the whole thing.

That's it. But what Young puts inside that frame is extraordinary.

What Vera is thinking about

The chapter opens with Vera asking herself a question she has no answer to: "how should I endure this isolation"?

She cannot be like her mother. She knows that. Catherine has retreated entirely into hallucination, and the opium world she inhabits is complete and self-sustaining. But Vera can't go there. Miss MacIntosh trained her too well. She will always be able to tell exactly where the dream ends and the reality begins, and that clarity, which sounds like a gift, turns out to be its own kind of sentence. If you can't dissolve into illusion, and the real world is as bleak as the one Vera is living in, what exactly do you do with yourself?

Young doesn't answer the question. She pivots, as she so often does, into the gorgeous absurdist theater of Catherine's guest list. But hold onto that opening. It's the emotional engine underneath everything that follows.

Catherine's guests, and why the alphabet matters

Catherine has been working through her visitors alphabetically, and by Chapter 11 she is somewhere in the Q's and R's. This detail is funny, but it's also doing real work.

The alphabet is humanity's most basic tool for organizing everything. We sort libraries with it. We file documents. We impose order on the chaos of the world by putting it in A-B-C sequence. What Young is showing you is what happens when you apply that system to the entire universe: geography, history, mythology, the living, the dead, the imagined. The system keeps trying to hold, and the universe keeps overflowing it. The Q's alone are "a naval battle, an island, and a continent." The R's sprawl into pharaohs, composers, portrait painters, constellations, and a headless Elizabethan aristocrat running an atheist society.

The alphabet cannot contain what Catherine contains. Nothing can. That's the joke, and also the tragedy.

The guests worth knowing

Queen Charlotte Islands arrives quietly, exchanging a word or two with Catherine about the climate and a missing courtier. She is a real place, an archipelago off the coast of British Columbia, made into a person, a cold and polite acquaintance from another summer. The islands are the home of the Haida, and they are now called by their Haida name, Haida Gwaii. Young loves this move: collapsing the geographical into the personal, turning landscape into someone you might have known.

Queen Maud Mountains is a different order of visitor entirely. This is an Antarctic mountain range, "a coastline of frozen, phantasmal peaks," arriving in Catherine's bedroom as the most imperious houseguest imaginable. She wears glacial white. She exchanges no words. Her skirt is "five hundred miles long and made of pure Brussels lace." She carries a white parasol that happens to belong to Catherine.

That last detail is the one to hold. The guest has absorbed the hostess's own possessions. The boundary between Catherine and her visitors is completely porous. What is hers and what has been dreamed into the room can no longer be distinguished.

Rameses I, II, and III arrive as a single bemused pharaoh who is in fact three pharaohs layered inside each other, each unwrapping to find an older king inside. He has been "partitioned into many selves without his knowing it, without his consent." As Rameses III, he has been dreaming "the dreams of Rameses I who" is already dead. This is one of Young's most precise images of what fragmented identity actually feels like from the inside: not dramatic, not chosen, just the quiet discovery that you are multiple, and that some of those selves preceded you.

Sir Walter Raleigh arrives last and most spectacularly. He wears white satin embroidered with seed pearls. He removes his hat, and removes his head along with it. He asks to be called "by his intimate name, Ocean or Water." That is history, too. Queen Elizabeth called him "Water," and Spenser named him "the Shepherd of the Ocean." His detached head then explains that he presides over a secret society devoted to atheistic propositions, including the one that God is dog spelled backward.

Raleigh was actually beheaded in 1618, so his appearing with a removable head is grounded in historical fact, delivered with perfect Young deadpan. He really was known for facing his execution with unusual composure. Young takes that historical detail and runs it

to its logical absurdist conclusion: if you can face the removal of your head with equanimity, you might as well carry it around with you.

His society of night is history as well. “The school of night” comes from Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, and the phrase became a name for Raleigh’s circle with Thomas Harriot and Christopher Marlowe, men accused of doubting Genesis and God. In 1594 an inquiry at Cerne Abbas examined charges of atheism against them. Even “man had existed before Adam” was one of the charges: the Baines note of 1593 accused Marlowe of saying that ancient authors “have assuredly written of above 16 thousand years agone whereas Adam is proved to have lived within 6 thousand years.”

Mr. Spitzer, who is always missing the party

Mr. Spitzer does not appear in this chapter. He is defined entirely by his absence from it.

Catherine catalogs, with tactless relish, everything he missed: Rimski-Korsakov, Sir Joshua Reynolds, the Great Ram constellation, “Raphael’s tomb, the songs of Ronsard,” and of course Sir Walter Raleigh with his detachable head. She reminds Mr. Spitzer of his absences the way you might remind someone that they missed the best party of the year, with the particular cruelty of someone who knows they will keep missing it.

And Rhadamanthus, one of the mythological judges of the dead, has already tried Mr. Spitzer in absentia and found him guilty of many forgotten crimes.

Poor Mr. Spitzer. He is always out performing dusty legal errands for people who don’t particularly want them performed. He is always arriving just after the extraordinary thing has happened. Young will spend hundreds of pages building this portrait of a man who is structurally, constitutionally, cosmically late to everything that matters. It is one of the novel’s great sustained jokes, and underneath the joke is something genuinely sorrowful.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The question Vera asks at the opening of this chapter (how do I endure isolation when I can’t dissolve into illusion?) is the question the entire novel is organized around. Every character in Miss MacIntosh, My Darling is working out some version of it. Some dissolve. Some can’t. Some spend the entire book trying to decide.

The alphabetical guest list will keep going. As Catherine moves through the letters, the guests will keep arriving and multiplying, and Mr. Spitzer will keep missing them. Let the comedy build. It is doing something serious underneath.

Notice how often Catherine’s guests bring their own geography with them. Queen Charlotte Islands brings her climate. Queen Maud Mountains brings five hundred miles of skirt. Raleigh brings the Atlantic Ocean in his name. The outer world keeps collapsing into the bedroom, which is another way of saying: Catherine’s inner world is large enough to contain everything.

For the Curious

Queen Maud Mountains

Queen Maud Mountains is a real Antarctic mountain range named for Queen Maud of Norway. It really is approximately five hundred miles long. Young's geography is frequently exact underneath the surrealism; she did her research, and then she set it loose.

Rhadamanthus

Rhadamanthus is a figure from Greek mythology, one of the three judges of the dead in the underworld (the others being Minos and Aeacus). He was known for being scrupulously just. His presence in Catherine's R's is not accidental: the underworld's most reliable judge has already assessed Mr. Spitzer and found him wanting. For what crimes, exactly, remains unclear. That is part of the joke.

The phrase "God is dog spelled backward"

The phrase "God is dog spelled backward" has a long history in both theological satire and folk wordplay. Its appearance here, delivered by a detached aristocratic head presiding over a midnight atheist club, is Young at her most playful. She is absolutely aware of how absurd this is. She is inviting you to laugh.

Rimski-Korsakov

Rimski-Korsakov, who only comes when Mr. Spitzer is away, composed Scheherazade: the orchestral suite based on One Thousand and One Nights. The woman who tells stories to stay alive. Young knew exactly which composer to put in Mr. Spitzer's absent chair.

Chapter 12: The Garden of the Blind

Research notes: Chapter 12

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Symbols: Clocks and Watches · Eyes and Blindness · Keys, Doors, and Locks

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Hinduism · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Astronomy · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · The Bible

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Chapter 12 is the longest and most important chapter we've had in a while, and it ends on a sentence that will change how you read everything that comes after it.

Stay with this one. It earns its length.

What actually happens in Chapter 12

It is past ten o'clock at night. Vera is in her bedroom, kept company by Miss MacIntosh's alarm clock: the one reliable clock in a house where all the others have been stopped. Restless and lonely, she gets up, picks up Miss MacIntosh's Coca-Cola fan, and eventually slips out of the house into the night.

She wanders into the garden and finds herself, without having planned it, in a very particular place: a garden her mother's father planted long ago for his blind wife. A garden designed not to be seen but to be touched and smelled. Vera closes her eyes and moves through it with her fingers, feeling the petals and stamens and whorls of flowers she cannot name in the dark.

In this heightened, strange state (joyful, almost ecstatic, certain of the reality and beauty of the world) her mind opens into a long meditation on Miss MacIntosh. What Miss MacIntosh taught her. What she was like. What it meant to have her. And then, at the very end of the chapter, a sentence arrives that tells you something enormous is about to happen.

Young is preparing you. Chapter 13 will deliver what Chapter 12 has been building toward.

The clocks, and what they mean

Before Vera goes into the garden, Young gives us two kinds of clocks, and the contrast between them is one of the most precise things in the novel.

Miss MacIntosh's clock is Old Reliable: plain, practical, no carved figures, no weeping ladies, no sporting cupids. It keeps accurate time. It does "not repeat the hours, a day being gone when a day was gone." It was made for servants, Vera tells us, for people who must actually wake up and do things at a specific hour.

“All the other clocks in the house” have been stopped, each one frozen at a different hour from the long period when Catherine gradually retreated from the world. Sometimes, deep in the night, one of them shudders awake and strikes (three bells here, four bells there, from distant corners) but the darkness does not lift.

This is Young telling you, with great economy, exactly what the house is: a place where time has been refused. Where a woman decided, slowly and not without hesitation, to stop. Miss MacIntosh’s one wound clock is the only thing in the entire house insisting that time is real and moving and will require something of you in the morning.

The garden of the blind

The garden Vera wanders into is one of the most beautiful and strange settings in the novel. Catherine’s father built it for his wife, who was blind. Not a garden to look at, but a garden to move through by touch and smell: odorous blooms, textured petals, flowers chosen for their whorls and stamens and the way they move under a moving finger.

His wife, we are told, was the most immediate of persons. Practical. Unimaginative. She used to walk a circular path in the garden, and it was for her simply a household habit, nothing poetic about it. She argued with her coachman about whether it looked like rain. She chose clothes in muted, inconspicuous colors. She had no interest in art, until she was blind, and then she traced the stone faces in the garden with her fingers, and the lips and nostrils seemed to move.

Vera steps into this garden at the height of her happiness, certain that the world is real and beautiful and made for human senses to inhabit. She closes her own eyes and touches the flowers. And Young quietly notes: this “first vision of the wonders and glories of this planet” would also be the last.

Something is coming.

What Vera remembers about Miss MacIntosh

The center of the chapter is a long, spiraling memory of what Miss MacIntosh was and what she did for Vera.

At seven years old, Vera tells us, she “had been a nervous wreck, baying like a dog at the moon,” pretending to be a dog. Digging for bones in the garden. She believed she was the reincarnation of Chopin. She had a wireless attached to her head through which she heard the voices of the dead. She held conversations with a gentleman in a snuff-colored velvet coat who carried a music box full of buzzing bees.

Miss MacIntosh solved most of these problems by ignoring them. Where she could not ignore them, she applied firm, practical remedies: box a sandbag dummy, run a mile on the beach, restore your circulation and your waning common sense. She tapped Vera’s forehead with her great silver thimble (the one engraved with the word Juliet, 1899, though who Juliet was or why 1899 we are never told).

She taught Vera “to admit, quite simply, that nothing had happened, that not a leaf had fallen,” not a blow had struck, not a wave had broken. That “omniscience had not been given to us, fortunately,” because if we could see everything “we should all most certainly lose our minds.”

And it worked. Miss MacIntosh held Vera’s “attention by yelling louder than the dead.” That is the sentence Young gives us, and it is both funny and heartbreaking: the only thing that could compete with Vera’s hallucinations was a very loud, very matter-of-fact woman from What Cheer, Iowa.

Miss MacIntosh’s philosophy, in her own words

This chapter gives us the most extended portrait of Miss MacIntosh’s worldview we’ve had yet.

She believed that God, having created this world somewhat erroneously and filled with remorse ever since, does “not ask us to understand His traffic.” We should attend to our own knitting. We are plain. “We were intended for no high” office, “no imaginary diadem, no fine feathers.” The wisest man is a fool in God’s eyes. We are here to endure ourselves, not to test God.

On love, she can only guess. Love is “not an inquiry beyond what meets the natural eye.” It is greatest when it sees another’s face in daylight and hears another’s voice. She is, she admits without self-pity, “a plain, old-fashioned, unvarnished spinster, her” shirtwaist bristling with needles and pins “to forbid inquiry and to suggest that hers was not a good shoulder to weep on.”

And on the question of time and its passing: “she would not give a pin for” the suggestion that time passes through us rather than us through it. When something is gone, it is gone. She kept her feet planted on earth, which she acknowledged was not solid, and she let her head drift nowhere.

She had only one face. Not two: one for the world, one for heaven. Only one.

Hold that. It matters enormously in Chapter 13.

The sentence at the end

The chapter closes with Vera’s mind circling back to Mr. Spitzer, and her mother’s old suspicion that he sometimes imagines “himself to be his dead brother.” And then the chapter simply ends, mid-thought, carrying you directly into Chapter 13.

Chapter 13 begins: “Farewell to the last certitude, even that tender night of my fourteenth birthday when I trembled on the margin of sentient life—farewell to Miss MacIntosh.”

Something happened in that garden. Something Vera saw. And Young has spent all of Chapter 12 making sure you understand what Miss MacIntosh meant to Vera before she shows you what Vera found.

Don’t stop here. Chapter 13 is why this chapter exists.

For the Curious

The garden planted for a blind woman

The garden planted for a blind woman is a real horticultural tradition. Blind gardens, also called sensory gardens, were designed specifically around texture, scent, and sound rather than visual beauty. Young would have known this. Catherine's father's garden is not a fantasy; it's a real thing, which makes Vera's stumbling into it, on the night before her first real shattering, all the more precise.

The thimble engraved with "Juliet, 1899"

The thimble engraved with "Juliet, 1899" is one of the novel's small mysteries. Young never explains it. Juliet is the name of a woman who died for love. 1899 is the year before a new century. The thimble is used to tap children back to their senses. Draw your own conclusions, but don't expect resolution.

Absalom

Absalom, mentioned briefly in Vera's meditation on hair, was King David's son who rebelled against his father and was caught by his hair in the branches of an oak tree and killed. Young works him in during a passage about hair as a warning system, which is exactly the kind of move she makes constantly: a perfectly ordinary anatomical observation, and then suddenly a man hanging by his hair from a tree for defying his father. The Old Testament is never far.

Miss MacIntosh's line

Miss MacIntosh's line that God has "been filled with the greatest remorse ever since the day of the beginning" is not conventional Christianity. It's closer to Gnosticism, the ancient theological tradition that viewed the world as an error, the creation of an imperfect or malicious deity. Young knew her Gnostic texts. The idea that we live inside a mistake, and are not responsible for setting it right, runs through Miss MacIntosh's entire philosophy and, quietly, through the whole novel.

Chapter 13: Farewell to the Last Certitude

Research notes: Chapter 13

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Music, Sound, and Silence

Symbols: Horses and Carriages · Silence and Deafness

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Angels and Archangels · Deafness and Sign Language · Fairy Tales and Folklore · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Romantic Poets

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We have been building toward this chapter for twelve chapters. Young has been placing the pieces with great care: the plain alarm clock, the stopped clocks, the garden of the blind, the portrait of Miss MacIntosh's philosophy, the sentence at the end of Chapter 12 that told you something enormous was coming.

Chapter 13 is where it arrives.

Something happens to Vera on the night of her fourteenth birthday that changes how she sees Miss MacIntosh, and therefore how she sees everything. Young tells us this has happened before she shows us what happened. That choice is deliberate and important, and we'll come back to it.

What actually happens in Chapter 13

Vera wanders through the estate's gardens on the night of her fourteenth birthday. She moves through what she now calls the garden of the deaf: a different garden from the blind one in Chapter 12, or perhaps the same garden understood differently, a place where sound has died. She sees chessmen moving on a chessboard of light and shadow, life-sized, played by invisible hands. She sees marble statues, mist-flowers that fly away like moths when she reaches for them, gargoyles spouting water, cherubim made of barnacles.

And somewhere in this night, she sees something about Miss MacIntosh that she will never unsee.

Young does not show us the moment directly. Not yet. What she gives us instead is its aftermath: the knowledge that Vera now carries, the understanding that Miss MacIntosh (the one solid, ordinary, unambiguous person in the entire novel) was not what she appeared to be.

The chapter then moves into a long, extraordinary conversation between Catherine and Mr. Spitzer about the garden of the deaf: a garden where, Catherine insists, the ear is dead, where no sound reaches, where Mr. Spitzer's music can only be silence because no voice carries and no one can hear another speaking farewell.

The rider over Lake Constance

Before anything else, pause at the passage near the chapter's opening. It is one of the most important in the entire novel, and Young places it here for a reason.

A traveler on horseback crosses Lake Constance in winter, in a blizzard, at night. He cannot see anything, not the landscape, not his reflection, not where land ends and lake begins. He rides the forty-six miles in blinding snow, thinking he is crossing solid ground. When he reaches the other shore and looks back and sees what he has actually crossed (a lake that was never completely frozen, that no one had ever ridden across and survived) he drops dead from "the shock of the after-knowledge."

He was safe as long as he didn't know. The knowing killed him.

The rider comes from German legend, best known from Gustav Schwab's ballad "Der Reiter und der Bodensee" ("The Rider and Lake Constance"), and German still speaks of "a ride over Lake Constance," a *Ritt über den Bodensee*, for a danger survived only because it was never understood.

This is what Vera says her ignorance about Miss MacIntosh was: the thing that kept her alive and sane. And this is what she is about to lose. She has reached the other shore. She is looking back. She is about to see where she has been.

What Vera now knows, without telling us yet

Young builds the chapter around an absence at its center. We know that Vera saw something. We know it changed everything. We know that after this night she will never again see Miss MacIntosh as she knew her. But Young withholds the specific revelation for just a little longer.

This is not coyness. It is the structure enacting the experience. Vera's knowledge arrived the same way: she saw something she wasn't prepared for, and then she had to live inside the new reality while the old one dissolved around her. Young makes the reader inhabit that same disorientation. You know something happened. You are not yet sure what. You are on the shore, looking back at the frozen lake, not yet able to name what you crossed.

What we are given instead of the revelation itself is the cascade of farewells that opens the chapter. Farewell to Miss MacIntosh. Farewell to the last certitude. Farewell to the old moralities and the proverbial wisdom and the rote questions and answers. Farewell to What Cheer and its cherry blossoms and peach orchards. Farewell to the "fabric of self-deception we two persons had lived by, and farewell to the past and its illusion, and farewell to the reason, the purpose, the goal, the future."

All of it. Everything that Miss MacIntosh represented is dismantled in a single page, before Young has told us why.

The garden of the deaf

The chapter's second half is a sustained, heartbreaking conversation between Catherine and Mr. Spitzer about a garden where, according to Catherine, the ear is dead.

She is not speaking metaphorically, or rather she is, but she means it literally too. In this garden (part of the vast estate, companion to the garden of the blind from Chapter 12) sound has ceased. One can see the bird but not hear the song. One can see a lover's face but not hear his voice speaking farewell. The ear that is dead, when Mr. Spitzer asks whose ear she means, is his own. She "naturally did not mean his dead brother's ear," though she asks whether he does not stop "to drop perhaps a flower upon that silent grave."

Mr. Spitzer pushes back, carefully. He points out that his brother was not buried on this estate. He also admits, in his precise, lawyerly way, that in his right ear there is "always a subdued roaring, a noise" his brother's physician told him does not come from this world, and that he is learning "not to turn his head every time he" hears a traffic horn that isn't there.

Catherine is not persuaded. She keeps talking, louder and louder, even perhaps after Mr. Spitzer has quietly left, still arguing with the sense of him that remains in the room. The sound is fled from the universe. His music can only be silence. "One should see the bird." "One should not hear the song."

For Mr. Spitzer, whose life's work is music he never plays and never finishes, this is a more devastating verdict than Catherine probably realizes she is delivering.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Chapter 17 will give you what Chapter 13 withheld. Young has prepared you as carefully as she can. The revelation about Miss MacIntosh is coming, and when it arrives it will be both shocking and, in retrospect, inevitable: all the signs were there.

Notice, going forward, how the novel's language around Miss MacIntosh shifts. The plain, practical, unambiguous woman remains present in Vera's memory, but she is now always seen from the other shore. Everything she said and did carries a different weight. The thimble engraved Juliet, 1899. The needles and pins bristling from her shirtwaist. The one face, not two. All of it will mean something different now.

The garden of the deaf joins the garden of the blind as one of the novel's organizing spaces. Young is building a landscape of absent senses: a world that can be touched but not seen, heard but not touched, seen but not heard. Pay attention to which sense is missing in each passage. It tells you something about what kind of knowledge is available in that moment.

For the Curious

The Lake Constance story

The Lake Constance story is a real legend, or at least a real literary legend. The tale of the rider who crossed the frozen lake without knowing it and died of the knowledge appears in several forms in German literature and folklore. Young would almost certainly have known the version in a poem by Gustav Schwab, published in 1826. Schwab's rider is sometimes read as a figure for the artist or the visionary: the person who accomplishes the impossible precisely because they do not know it is impossible. Young takes that reading and makes it tragic: the knowledge that kills Vera is not that she crossed safely, but that the ground was never what she thought it was.

The garden

The garden of the deaf is Young's companion invention to the historical garden of the blind from Chapter 12. Sensory gardens designed for the blind were a real tradition; gardens designed around silence or the absence of sound are rarer and more philosophically strange. Young may be drawing on the tradition of deaf schools and institutions that developed sensory environments in the nineteenth century, but the garden of the deaf is also simply her own invention, and it is one of her most haunting.

Catherine's insistence

Catherine's insistence that one should see the bird but not hear its song echoes a long tradition in aesthetics about the relationship between sight and sound, presence and absence. John Keats wrote about the unheard melodies being sweeter in his Ode on a Grecian Urn. Young is in that conversation, but she arrives at a darker conclusion: for Mr. Spitzer, the silence is not sweeter. It is simply the condition of his life, and Catherine names it with the loving cruelty of someone who has known him for years.

The chessmen moving on a chessboard

The chessmen moving on a chessboard of light and shadow, played by invisible hands, will recur throughout the novel. Chess is one of Young's recurring images for the question of whether any of us are moving ourselves or being moved by forces we cannot perceive. The game has rules. Whether anyone is playing by them, and who, is another matter entirely.

Chapter 14: The Black Coachman

Research notes: Chapter 14

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Symbols: Horses and Carriages

Philosophy: Astrology, Alchemy, and Esoterica

Allusions: Gambling and Playing Cards · Suicide in History and Literature · The History of Opium

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Chapter 14 is the longest chapter we've encountered so far, and the most demanding. It asks you to sit inside two minds at once (Catherine's hallucinatory one and Mr. Spitzer's bewildered, sorrowful one) for a very long time, as they talk past each other, toward each other, and sometimes through each other in the dark.

If you find yourself losing the thread, that's fine. You're supposed to. Catherine loses the thread too. So does Mr. Spitzer. The chapter is partly about what happens to conversation when one person is tethered to reality by the thinnest cord and the other is barely tethered at all.

Stay with it. By the end you'll know things about Mr. Spitzer that will change how you read him for the rest of the novel.

What actually happens in Chapter 14

Vera is still wandering the estate grounds, and the chapter begins at "the grave of the black coachman": the old family servant who drove Catherine's father's carriage. From there, the chapter pivots into a long reconstruction of Catherine's obsession with locating the black coachman, her endless interrogations of Mr. Spitzer about where he was buried, what happened to the four white horses, whether her instructions for his funeral were properly carried out.

Around and beneath this obsession, the chapter slowly delivers what we've been circling since the novel began: Mr. Spitzer's brother fell from a tall building. It was not an accident. His brother had a suicidal streak. Mr. Spitzer has been living in the aftermath of that death ever since: wearing his brother's cufflinks, finding his brother's cigarette still warm in his coat pocket, being mistaken for his brother on city streets, sometimes not correcting the mistake.

The chapter ends with Catherine still talking after Mr. Spitzer has quietly left the room, addressing his empty chair, unable to register his absence. She will talk until the stars fade and sleep takes her. The night, she says, is the only light.

The black coachman, and why Catherine cannot let him go

The black coachman is not a person Catherine knew intimately. He was a servant: the man who drove the carriage, who knew the roads and the horses and the directions of the

winds. He survived everyone in the family, just by a shade. Catherine had arranged, years ago, that he should be buried by the sea with “the carriage and the four white horses,” in his livery and high silk hat, so that he could go on driving under the earth.

Why does this matter so much to her? Young gives us the answer in a single sentence: “If she could find him, she could perhaps find herself, the bewildered passenger.”

The black coachman is Catherine’s figure for orientation. He is the one who knew which way to go, which road to take, how to bring the carriage safely around the long avenue. In a life that has dissolved entirely into hallucination (where even Mr. Spitzer’s reality is uncertain, where time has stopped on the bedside clocks, where the guests are all dead or imaginary) the black coachman is the last possible landmark. Find him, and the carriage stops spinning. Find him, and you know which city you’re in.

She cannot find him. Mr. Spitzer maintains his silence. So she keeps asking, evening after evening, year after year, circling the question the way a carriage circles an avenue with no end.

What we learn about Mr. Spitzer’s brother

Chapter 14 is where Young finally lays out, in full, the story of the twin brothers.

Peron, the brother, was the quick one, the brilliant one, the gambler. He moved in racing circles and shady company. He kept a double life that Mr. Spitzer is still discovering, years later, when strangers on city streets call out to him with debts to settle or old love affairs to resume. He was capable, Young tells us, “of far greater variations on one theme than” Mr. Spitzer, who is cautious and slow and literal-minded and has, in his own assessment, led “the most retired, the most unassuming life imaginable.”

Peron fell from a tall building. There is almost no doubt in Mr. Spitzer’s mind that it was deliberate. He had a suicidal streak. The day of his death was, according to the dream books Mr. Spitzer has been secretly consulting, a lucky day: a great day for new adventures, “an excellent day for beginning a new relationship or ending an old love.” It was, for Mr. Spitzer, the unluckiest day of his life.

And here is the thing Young gives us quietly, almost in passing: Mr. Spitzer had dreamed, long before his brother’s death, that he himself had fallen. He had climbed a rope toward heaven, heard silver trumpets and the fading voices of violins, and then lost his footing and fallen. He woke. He was fine. He was still sitting at Catherine’s bedside, in plain view. And yet; something of Mr. Spitzer died when his beloved brother was buried, he will say later. The clods of earth fell on that other face, and they fell on something in Mr. Spitzer too.

He has been wearing his brother’s cufflinks, double horses’ heads carved in mother-of-pearl, to his brother’s funeral and every day since. He carries his brother’s ivory-headed cane. The cigarette still warm in his coat pocket. The playing card dropping from the sleeve of his brother’s purple dressing gown. These are not supernatural occurrences. They are the texture of grief that has nowhere to go.

The case of Spitzer versus Spitzer

Catherine, in one of her sharpest moments in the chapter, names what has consumed Mr. Spitzer's entire adult life: "the case of Spitzer versus Spitzer."

He is both the defense and the accusation. He is the lawyer who has outlived the man he should have been, or who has lived the life the other was supposed to live, and he cannot settle the case. He does not know which brother survived and which one died. He does not know if the thoughts he thinks are his own or his brother's. He finds things in his pockets that are not his. He is recognized on streets he has never walked. He sometimes does not correct people who call him by his brother's name, and in not correcting them, he lets his brother live a little longer.

Which is shadow and which is man? Catherine asks this, and it is not a hallucination. It is the most accurate question anyone has ever posed to Mr. Spitzer, and he has no answer.

Even Catherine cannot settle it. The chapter ends with her question: "Where was the grave, she would ask, of the other Mr. Spitzer, the slow one, the sick musician she had always loved?" The slow one, the musician, is the man sitting at her bedside.

Catherine as the unexpected authority

One of the most interesting things Young does in this chapter is establish Catherine (the opium addict, the hallucinatory invalid, the woman who has not left her bed in decades) as the person who most clearly sees Mr. Spitzer.

It is Mr. Spitzer who walks about in the world, but it is "my mother who knew, through her absence from the world, the world."

She knows he has been reading dream books in poor neighborhoods. She asks how it could be "that he wore the coachman's hat and coachman's silver buttons and coachman's black, flowing cape, for he was not the coachman?" She knows that his music stopped before his brother died, not after, even though Mr. Spitzer has been telling himself and everyone else that the death was the cause. She knows "he placed a bet on a dead horse" at a parimutuel window without knowing what he was doing. And she treats him as what he is: the one stubbornly, confusingly real person in a life where everyone else is imaginary.

The person most disconnected from ordinary reality is the one who sees the real man most clearly. This is one of Young's great recurring propositions, and Chapter 14 is its fullest demonstration.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The black coachman will not be found. That's not what the search is for. The search is Catherine's way of insisting that something in her life was once oriented, was once

moving purposefully through the world in a known direction. The carriage keeps circling because there is no destination, but there was a coachman, and he knew the roads.

Mr. Spitzer's relationship to his brother will deepen and complicate across the entire novel. What Young has established here is the basic grammar of it: one quick, one slow; one dead, one surviving; one who took the last chance, one who is still waiting. Every time you see Mr. Spitzer hesitate, fumble, arrive too late, maintain his silence, remember this chapter.

Notice that Catherine sets a place at the table for the dead. She says this plainly, as a domestic fact: the table is "always laid for twelve or thirteen or fourteen guests," and there is "a place set for the dead." This is one of the most quietly extraordinary sentences in a novel full of them. She is not being morbid. She is being hospitable. In Catherine's world, the dead are expected.

For the Curious

The four white horses

The four white horses named King, Queen, Prince, and Spade are a minor glory. Catherine keeps repeating their names through her delirium, and they accumulate meaning: royalty, aristocracy, and the spade that digs the grave. The horses that carried the living family are the same horses Catherine imagines carrying her to her burial. Young chose the names carefully.

The fountain pen with a crystal point

The fountain pen with a crystal point that writes under water appears in Catherine's will as the instrument she used to leave the black coachman everything. A pen that writes underwater is a pen that functions in Catherine's medium: the submerged world, the place below consciousness where her real life takes place. Of course that's the pen she uses for her most important document.

Mr. Spitzer's dream books

Mr. Spitzer's "dream books sold by fortunetellers in poor neighborhoods," are a real category of popular literature that flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They claimed to interpret dreams and predict lucky days based on loosely astrological calculations. Mr. Spitzer has been consulting them in secret, which is both funny and heartbreaking: the literal-minded lawyer, the man who does not believe in hallucinations, reading cheap dream pamphlets in bad neighborhoods to understand what is happening to him.

The Czar Kolokol

The Czar Kolokol, the King of Bells, is real. The Tsar Kolokol is the largest bell ever cast, currently sitting on a pedestal in the Moscow Kremlin. It has never been rung. It cracked during a fire in 1737 before it could be hung, and a chunk broke off. Catherine passes it in

her imaginary carriage and nods to it. Young understood that a bell which has never tolled is the perfect image for a voice that has never been heard.

Chapter 15: The Night of My Fourteenth Birthday

Research notes: Chapter 15

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Dreams and Imagination · Motherhood, Pregnancy, and Birth · Nature, the Sea, and the Cosmos

Symbols: Pregnancy, Birth, and Children · The Sea and Water

Allusions: Deafness and Sign Language · Ecclesiastes · Gambling and Playing Cards · Revelation and the Apocalypse · The Bible

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After the long, enclosed darkness of Chapter 14 (that claustrophobic bedroom, Catherine and Mr. Spitzer circling each other in the lamplight) Chapter 15 throws open a door and sends you outside.

We are back with Vera. It is still the night of her fourteenth birthday. She is standing at the sea.

This chapter is one of the last breaths before the revelation. Something extraordinary happens at its close, and Young earns it by spending the chapter inside the particular texture of being fourteen and alive and standing at the edge of the Atlantic in the dark, feeling like the universe has just become available to you.

What actually happens in Chapter 15

Vera has wandered from the garden to the shore. The night is wild: fog, a skull-white moon, black roaring water, phosphorescent surf. She runs into the waves. She is soaked, her hair streaked with salt. She doesn’t care. She laughs aloud.

In this state of exhilaration, her mind turns to Miss MacIntosh, but differently than before. For the first time in the novel, Vera turns a critical eye on her. She thinks about what Miss MacIntosh doesn’t know: the undertow, the waywardness of water, the deeper things of life. She thinks about Miss MacIntosh’s strange habits: the umbrella carried indoors, the windows flung open in winter, the bare cold bedroom with its broken-down brass bed. She replays the long lecture Miss MacIntosh delivered all day on her birthday: proverbs about death, about marriage, about disorder and men and the proper life of an industrious ant.

And then the sea performs something extraordinary. Young gives us a passage of apocalyptic beauty: the water turning to glass, the clouds pregnant with impossible colors, the harpers harping on the sea at the end of time. It lasts only a moment. Then the waters go black again.

The chapter ends with a blind sheep dog barking at the waves.

Vera’s revolt

This is the first time we’ve heard Vera think critically about Miss MacIntosh rather than yearningly. It is important, and it feels true to being fourteen.

What Vera notices, standing in the surf on her birthday night, is that Miss MacIntosh's practical wisdom has limits. She couldn't swim a stroke. She avoided the greatest waves. "She would have been dragged down at the first blow by her rainproof" and her sea boots and all her needles and pins. All that famous common sense, and she couldn't breast the roaring tide.

There is something fond in this critique, even as it sharpens into something harder: "Miss MacIntosh knew less than I did, hers being" "a deadness, a dullness, a coldness of heart." That is a fourteen-year-old's verdict, delivered with a fourteen-year-old's certainty, standing wet in the ocean at midnight feeling immortal. Young knows exactly what she's doing. This is not the novel's judgment. It is Vera's judgment on this particular night, in this particular mood, before she knows what she is about to find out.

The revolt is the preparation for the grief.

Miss MacIntosh's birthday lecture

The chapter gives us, in Vera's memory, the full length of Miss MacIntosh's speech on the day of her fourteenth birthday. It is extraordinary. It goes on all day, through breakfast and dinner and in between, and it is almost entirely about death and marriage in that order, as if they were the same subject.

"Death, like our mother and our father," "is an old harpoonist who will capture the swimmer in narrow streams." "Our cradle stands in the grave." Death "loves a young maid and an old man. Death loves a shining mark."

On marriage: all women should certainly marry, but no man. "Perhaps no man should marry woman." Before marriage, keep your eyes open; after marriage, "keep them half shut for fear of what" you might see. True marriages are "few and far between due to the sins of our first parents and the high cost of living."

And woven through: wheat markets, bowling scores, black hens laying white eggs, the sinking of the Titanic, Ecclesiastes, the Farmer's Almanac, Benjamin Franklin, John Bunyan. Miss MacIntosh does not separate the sacred and the practical. They are the same shelf.

Some of her sayings are much older than she is. "Death loves a shining mark" comes from Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742 to 1745). "Our cradle stands in the grave" is from Bishop Joseph Hall, the seventeenth-century English devotional writer: "Death borders upon our birth, and our cradle stands in the grave." Miss MacIntosh hands them down the way she hands down the wheat prices.

What makes this extraordinary is that Young has given us, in this extended monologue, Miss MacIntosh in full voice, not filtered through Vera's admiration or grief, but rendered directly, on a grey rainy birthday morning, in all her sour and loving and slightly unhinged glory. She is funny. She is bleak. She is preparing Vera, in her own completely idiosyncratic way, for a world she knows is hard. And underneath every word, if you listen, is the sound of a woman who has made her peace with having been loved by no one.

The vision at the sea

Young saves the chapter's most extraordinary writing for the end, and it arrives like weather: suddenly, fully, and then it passes.

The sea turns to oily green and gold. The sky lights up with colors outside the mortal spectrum. The waves slow, almost stop. Vera hears what she describes as "harpers harping on those seas of glass which man shall behold at the end of time when the heavens are parted, when the sky rolls back like a scroll."

Then it's over. The waters go black again. The clouds fade. A dead seagull lies cold on a rock. The marble statue of Saul, we learn in passing, was once swept out to sea by a musical tide and never returned. A strange marble head came in and took his place.

This is Young at her most formally ambitious: a moment of genuine apocalyptic vision, framed on either side by the mundane, the barking sheep dog, the dead seagull, the empty coffin and the playing cards the sea leaves behind. The heavens part and the harpers play, and then the sheep dog barks at the waves. Young will not let the transcendent stand alone. She always puts it back in the world.

The secret dream

Briefly, almost in passing, Vera mentions a secret dream she has been carrying: a false wedding, one that begets no other wedding, where Mr. Spitzer is married to the bridegroom. The only guests are "the northern light beams, the stars, and droves of seals on a solitary shore."

This is the daydream from Chapter 10, where "Miss MacIntosh was the bridegroom, wearing a waxed mustache like Mr. Spitzer's and a high silk hat and her silver dollar watch." Back then there were "no wedding guests but myself." Now, remembered at the sea, the guests are lights and stars and seals. Young does not tell us what the bridegroom represents. It feels significant, and it is, but the novel will take its time with it. For now, file it away. Vera carries a dream about a wedding that cannot produce another wedding, and it makes her laugh in the dark.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The sea has now been established as the novel's site of revelation and dissolution. It sweeps statues away. It brings unknown heads in their place. It briefly parts to show you something outside the mortal spectrum and then closes again. Every time you encounter the sea in the chapters ahead, remember what it did on the night of Vera's fourteenth birthday.

Miss MacIntosh's bedroom (bare, cold, the windows open in winter, the three-mirror dressing table she never looks into) has been described here for the first time with some strangeness. Why does she carry her umbrella indoors? Why does she refuse to look in

mirrors? Why does she sleep in the cold? These are the details that will matter when Chapter 17 finally delivers what has been withheld since Chapter 13.

The blind sheep dog barking at the waves is the last image of the chapter, and it echoes Chapter 13's garden of the deaf. An animal whose sight is gone, barking at something it cannot see, that cannot hear it. Young places this image carefully at the close of the chapter. It is not decorative.

Remember, too, that this same dog kept Miss MacIntosh awake the night before. That morning she asked Vera whether she had heard it, and warned her that it "had not barked for nothing." There might be, she said, "someone who would take a young girl by the hair and drag her into the shadows where her cries should not be heard."

For the Curious

The passage about the harpers harping

The passage about the harpers harping on the sea of glass draws directly from the Book of Revelation: specifically chapter 15, verse 2, where those who have overcome the beast stand on a sea of glass mixed with fire, holding harps given to them by God. Young chose to echo Revelation in the chapter numbered 15. That is not a coincidence.

Miss MacIntosh's proverbs

Miss MacIntosh's proverbs are a mix of genuinely ancient wisdom and folk sayings, a few of which Young has altered or invented. Death loves a shining mark is a real proverb, used by Jonathan Swift among others. "Our cradle stands in the grave" is Young's own compression of a much older idea about mortality. The phrase men are fallen, delivered at the dinner table between observations about the wheat market, is doing more philosophical work than Miss MacIntosh intends.

The marble statue of Saul swept

The marble statue of Saul swept out to sea by a musical tide is one of the novel's strangest small details. Saul, in the Old Testament, was the first king of Israel: chosen by God, later abandoned by God, ultimately destroyed by his own failures. He was succeeded by David, the musician. A musical tide taking Saul and replacing him with a stranger's head is Young thinking in myth, and doing it with a light hand.

Men and melons

Men and melons are hardest to know is a real proverb, recorded in various forms across European folk traditions. It is exactly the kind of saying Miss MacIntosh would deliver while peering over her eyeglasses at the slate-colored water, as if the sea itself were a melon she was assessing for ripeness.

Chapter 16: Falada

Research notes: Chapter 16

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Falada · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Symbols: Horses and Carriages · The House

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Angels and Archangels · Deafness and Sign Language · Fairy Tales and Folklore · Gambling and Playing Cards

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We have been building toward this chapter since Chapter 13 told us that something happened on the night of Vera's fourteenth birthday that changed everything. Chapter 14 gave us Mr. Spitzer's grief. Chapter 15 gave us Vera at the sea, giddy and briefly rebellious. Chapter 16 takes us inside the house and down the long corridor to Miss MacIntosh's door.

Young does not give us the revelation in this chapter either. But she brings us to the threshold and stops there, the door swinging open, the moonbeams cutting through the dark, Miss MacIntosh standing by the window, unbelievably not herself.

The revelation is in Chapter 17. But Chapter 16 is the approach, and it is one of the most beautiful sustained passages in the novel. Don't rush it.

What actually happens in Chapter 16

Vera is riding her black pony, Falada, through the grounds of the estate on the night of her fourteenth birthday. She rides through the dark allees and orchards and abandoned sports courts, past the gargoyles and marble statues and the garden of the blind. She is exhilarated, wild, laughing, whispering her secrets into the pony's drooping ear.

Listen to what those secrets are: "how I had no mother and was an orphan, how I had never known my father, how Miss MacIntosh was an old witch who kept me enchained in a dark tower, how I had escaped her domination." She is still the princess of her own fairy tale, with Miss MacIntosh cast as the witch. Keep that in mind as she rides toward the witch's door.

She decides not to visit her mother: Catherine is either deep in her dreams or rising to the surface, and bringing a real horse into that bedroom could kill her with shock. So Vera and Falada climb the stairs of the great house instead, moving through its extraordinary interior: the mosaic emperors, the funeral gondola in the fountain, the phoenix above the fireplace, the tomb of the unnamed musician, the tapestries of angels restoring "sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf."

They are heading to Miss MacIntosh. She is the one who will know they are real.

The door to Miss MacIntosh's bedroom, which is usually "locked and barred from the inside," swings open of itself. Falada snorts. In the moonlight, Miss MacIntosh is standing

by the window. And the chapter ends on the moment before Vera can fully take in what she sees.

Falada

The pony's name carries an enormous amount of freight, and Young makes sure you know it.

Mr. Spitzer traces the name to an old Arabic fairy tale with parallels across many countries and ages. Falada is the horse whose head is "cut off and nailed above the city gates and whose" severed head then speaks "oracles and parables to the people passing through." A head that speaks after death. A horse that carries truth even when it has been silenced.

The fairy tale Young is drawing on is most familiar in its German version, collected by the Brothers Grimm, called The Goose Girl. In that story, a princess is betrayed by her handmaid, who steals her identity and her prince. The princess's magical horse Falada is killed to prevent it from revealing the truth. Its head is nailed above a gate. Every morning, as the true princess passes under it, Falada's severed head speaks to her: "Alas, young Queen, how ill you fare! / If this your tender mother knew, / Her heart would surely break in two."

Young chose this name with exquisite care. Falada is the horse that speaks truth from beyond death. (In Portuguese, *falada* even means "spoken.") Vera rides him directly toward Miss MacIntosh's door. He seems to know the way, she says. He is "my head, my intelligence. I was the headless rider."

The headless rider going where the speaking head leads her. Toward the truth she has not yet been able to see.

The interior of the house

The chapter's long central passage, as Vera and Falada move through the house's interior on their way to Miss MacIntosh, is one of Young's great architectural inventions. Read it slowly.

The house contains multitudes. A funeral gondola in an interior fountain. A phoenix above a fireplace of cold ashes. The empty tomb of a musician who has "gone to join the world of music": its lid a gold grand piano held up by cherubim with folded wings. A "marble boy lying on his tomb with a marble book opened in his hand and marble rose petals upon its pages and his marble dog sleeping at his feet," with no one knowing if the tomb was ever occupied. "Mosaic emperors like the faces of old playing cards." Sleeping marble lions from a Venetian doge's palace.

This is Catherine's house, and it reflects her: it is a world where art and death are indistinguishable, where music leads to a tomb, where tombs may be empty, where angels on tapestries restore the senses the novel has been mourning, sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf. The house is the inner landscape of a woman who has refused the outer world for decades, accumulated into architecture.

And through all of it, Falada's hooves clatter. He and Vera make no sound. They move like a pair of moths.

Why Vera goes to Miss MacIntosh

The logic of this moment is quiet but precise. Vera cannot go to her mother because Catherine lives in a world where the boundary between real and phantom is completely dissolved. If Catherine saw a girl on a horse, she might think they were phantoms (which would be fine, she is not afraid of phantoms) or she might recognize them as real, which could kill her with shock. Either way, Vera cannot be known there.

So she goes to Miss MacIntosh. Because Miss MacIntosh, "though she might condemn us, would know that we were real."

This is everything. After four chapters of approaching and circling and withholding, Young gives us the clearest statement of what Miss MacIntosh means to Vera: she is the person who confirms reality. Not who loves Vera most. Not who knows Vera best. The person whose recognition makes Vera real. In a house full of hallucination, with a mother who lives entirely inside her own mind, Miss MacIntosh is the one solid witness. Her knowing you are there means you are there.

And the door, which is usually "locked and barred from the inside," swings open of itself.

The sentence at the end

Young ends the chapter on one of her most carefully constructed sentences.

"She had greatly changed since last I had seen her, and she was unbelievably not herself, and yet—how was it that I recognized her instantly as if she were something I had always dimly known, and the shock of this knowledge was but the affirmation of some older shock which had been forgotten and laid over by the autumn leaves, the snow falling, the first buds of spring?"

Two things are happening at once here. Vera sees something that shocks her. And in the same moment she recognizes it as something she has always, at some level, already known. The shock is not of discovery but of confirmation. The older shock (the one that was forgotten, buried under the seasons) surfaces.

Young is telling you, without yet telling you, that the revelation about Miss MacIntosh is not a betrayal. It is a recognition. The truth was always there, waiting under the ordinary surface of things, and Vera is about to stop not knowing it.

Chapter 17 delivers it. Go there now.

For the Curious

The Goose Girl

The Goose Girl is one of the most widely distributed fairy tales in the world, appearing in variants across Arabic, European, and Asian traditions. In the Grimm version, the key line

Falada speaks from above the gate (Alas, alas, if thy mother could see thee now, her heart would break) is spoken to a princess who has lost her true identity and is living as a servant. Young chose this story for a novel about a girl whose true self has been obscured by her mother's hallucinations and Miss MacIntosh's careful management of reality. The parallel is exact.

The cabriole leg

The cabriole leg, the curved furniture leg that Young traces back to Falada's lineage, really does take its name from the word for a goat's leap, the same movement a horse makes when it lifts all four feet at once. The idea that an old racing pony's bloodline runs through the legs of Boston drawing-room furniture is purely Young: absurd, precise, and somehow completely convincing.

The tomb

The tomb of the unnamed musician with its grand piano lid upheld by cherubim is one of Young's most concentrated images of what music means in this novel. The musician has "gone to join the world of music." His tomb is an instrument. The pallbearers are angels. No one plays it. This is Mr. Spitzer's world rendered in marble: the silent music, the unwritten score, the instrument that exists only to mark an absence.

The spider's web painted

The spider's web painted on the white china doorknob of Miss MacIntosh's bedroom is easy to pass over and shouldn't be. A spider's web on the door to the room of the one person in the novel who denies the existence of phantoms, who insists on the plain surface of things. Young does not put anything on a doorknob by accident.

Chapter 17: She Was Bald

Research notes: Chapter 17

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Falada · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: The Search for Meaning

Symbols: Hair, Wig, and Baldness

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Genesis · The Bible · The History of Opium

Here it is. The moment the novel has been building toward since Chapter 13.

Take your time with this chapter. It is not long, but it is dense with feeling, and Young is doing several things at once. She is delivering the revelation. She is showing you Vera's wild, fourteen-year-old response to it. She is asking one of the novel's deepest questions. And she is being very careful, in a way that first-time readers sometimes miss, not to tell you what the revelation means. That is your work. She is only showing you what Vera saw.

What actually happens in Chapter 17

Miss MacIntosh is standing by the window in the moonlight. The curtain that had concealed her head blows aside. And Vera sees that Miss MacIntosh is bald. Completely, coldly, stonily bald, her skull gleaming like an ivory ball, not one hair on her head.

Vera recognizes her instantly (by the broken nose, by something definite in her manner) and in the same moment refuses to accept what she sees. She cycles through shock, resistance, a wild kind of triumph, and then screams: "Miss MacIntosh, you are a man!"

Miss MacIntosh moves toward her. What follows is a fight, or what feels like a fight, or what Vera experiences as a fight, or what may be partly hallucination and partly real. Blows are exchanged. Vera is knocked down, lifted up, laid on the bed. She passes in and out of consciousness. She wonders if her assailant might be a sandbag dummy come to life, or a Roman gladiator, or the angel with whom Jacob wrestled at Peniel. The chapter ends the morning after. Vera's braids are neatly plaited down her back. There are no scratches on her cheeks except perhaps those made by leafless branches.

The baldness

Young has seeded this moment across many chapters. The mirrors Miss MacIntosh avoids. The umbrella carried indoors. The windows thrown open in winter. The bundling up in hot weather. The bedroom bare of almost everything except a broken-down brass bed and a dressing table with three mirrors she never looks into. The one face she claimed in Chapter 12, when she "had not two faces, one to turn toward the world, one to turn toward heaven." Only one.

All of it resolves here. Miss MacIntosh wore a wig. The practical, plain, red-haired woman who denied the existence of everything unreal was herself, at the most literal level, constructed. Her most visible feature (the red hair that gleams throughout the novel, that Vera describes as tawny as an August sunset) was not hers. The anchor of reality was wearing a disguise.

Young does not editorialize. She gives you the bald skull in the moonlight and lets you sit with it.

What Vera screams, and what it means

“Miss MacIntosh, you are a man!”

This is a fourteen-year-old's conclusion, delivered in shock and triumph and cruelty, and Young is careful to frame it that way. Vera herself immediately notes that had she stopped to think, she might have been silent. The laugh that follows is the laugh of someone who has been proved right about something she didn’t know she suspected.

What has Vera actually seen? A bald woman. In Vera’s shocked words, someone “who had only one breast and no hair.” A woman who is physically powerful (the amazing biceps, the muscular expansion, the skillful boxing) in ways that Vera associates with men. A woman who never looked in mirrors, never discussed her own body, kept herself covered even in summer, whose bedroom was bare of all the feminine furnishings of the house. A woman who Vera had privately imagined with a red, curled mustache, whom she had assigned the role of the bridegroom in her secret dream.

Young is writing in 1965, and she is writing about something the culture of 1965 had almost no language for. She does not give it language here either. She gives you Vera’s scream, and Vera’s scream is wrong in the way that a fourteen-year-old’s first understanding of something vast is always wrong: partially true, coarsely framed, certain in the way only the newly shocked can be certain.

What Young seems to be showing us is a person who built an entire identity (the practical nursemaid, the anchor of reality, the one who denied the existence of dreams) over something hidden so deep and so carefully that even the wig was part of the architecture. Miss MacIntosh’s insistence on the real, on the ordinary, on the surface of things: perhaps it was the most necessary insistence of her life. Perhaps the denial of illusion was her only way of surviving in a world that had no place for what she was.

The fight

The physical struggle between Vera and Miss MacIntosh is one of the strangest and most extraordinary passages in the novel, and Young is very careful about what she does and doesn’t tell us.

Did it really happen? Young gives you both possibilities simultaneously. Vera’s consciousness divides: “one who fought, one who lay still and watched it all.” The blows are described in the precise vocabulary of boxing (the left jab, the straight right, the rabbit punch, the Sunday punch) which is also Miss MacIntosh’s own vocabulary, the language

of the sandbag dummy she had Vera box as a cure for daydreaming. Vera wonders if her assailant might actually be that sandbag dummy come to life. The next morning there are no scratches except possibly from branches.

Young is not being evasive. She is being accurate. This is what it feels like to have the foundation of your reality knocked out from under you: you experience it as a physical assault, as something that hits you, lifts you, lays you out. The body registers what the mind cannot yet process. Whether Vera's knuckles actually connected with Miss MacIntosh's face or whether the encounter happened partly in the space between shock and unconsciousness is a question Young leaves open on purpose.

What is not in question: Vera is changed. The sandbag dummy: the one Miss MacIntosh told her to box when she was being foolish, when she was daydreaming, when she needed to restore her circulation and her waning common sense: has fought back.

The question at the chapter's center

In the middle of the fight, falling, Vera asks the question that is the novel's central question, delivered here in its most compressed form:

"What shall we do when, fleeing from illusion, we are confronted by illusion? When falling from illusion, we fall into illusion?"

This is the question the whole novel turns on, and here it arrives not as a philosophical abstraction but as something Vera is screaming into the dark while a bald woman in a moonlit bedroom deals her the rabbit punch.

Vera fled Catherine's world of opium and hallucination by holding onto Miss MacIntosh. Miss MacIntosh was the real. And Miss MacIntosh, it turns out, was also a construction. The escape from illusion led into illusion. The anchor was wearing a wig. Where, then, is the real world?

Young does not answer. She gives you Vera's braids neatly plaited down her back the next morning, and leafless branches that might account for the marks on her cheeks, and she moves on.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Miss MacIntosh does not disappear from the novel after this. She will be present throughout, in memory, in the search that drives Vera's journey, in every question the novel asks about what is real and who gets to decide. But she will never again be what she was before this night. Vera will spend the rest of the novel understanding what she saw.

The morning after detail matters enormously. Vera's braids are exactly as they should be. There are no marks. Life continues on its surface exactly as before. This is Young's

version of the morning after the impossible crossing of Lake Constance: you survived, you are here, everything looks the same. And nothing will ever be the same.

The sandbag dummy has been in the novel since Chapter 12. Notice, from here forward, every time Miss MacIntosh's boxing lessons appear in Vera's memory. The dummy was always a stand-in for something. Now you know what.

For the Curious

The angel with

The angel with whom Jacob wrestled at Peniel is one of the most mysterious figures in the Old Testament. In Genesis 32, Jacob wrestles all night with a being that the text calls both a man and God. Jacob refuses to let go until he receives a blessing. He is renamed Israel, the one who struggles with God, and he walks away with a permanent injury to his hip. Young places this story inside Vera's tumbling, half-conscious mind during the fight, and it is exactly right: a nightlong struggle with a figure whose nature cannot be determined, from which you emerge changed and injured and renamed.

The Sunday punch

The Sunday punch is a real boxing term for the knockout blow delivered under ideal conditions: the decisive strike that ends the fight. Its appearance here, in Miss MacIntosh's bedroom, deployed against a fourteen-year-old girl on her birthday night, is Young at her most formally precise. Miss MacIntosh taught Vera to box. Miss MacIntosh knows where to hit.

The jumbo corset whale-boned and girded

The "jumbo corset whale-boned and girded like a tired battleship" is one of the great comic images in the chapter and one Young allows herself to enjoy even in the middle of violence. The corset stays that protrude like porcupine quills in the opening paragraph, which Vera isn't sure are stays or moonlight, reappear here in full absurdist glory. Miss MacIntosh's armor, her practical girding for the world, is the last thing Vera sees before losing consciousness.

The detail

Falada does not move throughout the encounter. The horse who knows the way, whose head speaks truth, stands still and watches. He is not frightened. He simply waits. Young doesn't explain this. She doesn't need to.

Chapter 18: The Long Night

Content note: *This chapter strongly suggests that the young Vera has been sexually assaulted, and it shows an adult frightening a child into silence.*

Research notes: Chapter 18

Characters: Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Duality and Doubles · Memory and the Past

Symbols: Twins and Doubles

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Chapter 18 is one of the most important chapters in the entire novel, and also one of the most difficult to hold in your hands. It is the night after the revelation, stretched out to its full impossible length, Miss MacIntosh talking and talking in the dark, holding Vera in her arms, talking until dawn.

You may find it overwhelming. That is the point. Vera is overwhelmed. Young is giving you the experience of being inside that room, inside that night, without the mercy of distance or summary.

Read it slowly. Let the proverbs accumulate. Let the voice shift. There are things said in this chapter that the rest of the novel will spend hundreds of pages unfolding.

What actually happens in Chapter 18

The night continues. Miss MacIntosh holds Vera in the crook of her arm, her bald head brushing against Vera's cheek, and she talks. She talks in two registers, sometimes simultaneously: the familiar Miss MacIntosh of proverbs and schedules and common sense, and another voice underneath, raw and grieving and ancient, crying out about ephemeral life, the missing breast, the hair that was never hers, the kiss that was never given.

She tries to persuade Vera that nothing happened. She promises that in the morning everything will be "all right, shipshape," "all things restored to their usual place."

By dawn, Miss MacIntosh is asking Vera geography questions again. What is "the chief industry of northern Michigan?" Where is Egg Harbor? Where is the Battle of Shiloh? The night is being packed away. Near the end, she threatens her: "if ever I told what I had seen, she would kill me, for it was nothing another should see." She scolds Vera for entering without knocking.

The chapter ends with Miss MacIntosh rocking Vera toward sleep, whispering that she lost her hair in Vera's service, that when she came she had her own hair, a thick pale gold mane. "Tempus fugit. Will you believe me when I say that I am not so old as you think?"

The two voices

Young built Miss MacIntosh's voice in Chapter 18 on two frequencies running at once, and you need to hear both of them to understand what the chapter is doing.

The first voice is the one we know: proverbs, schedules, common sense, almanac facts, moral instruction. It surfaces throughout the night, trying to reassert normalcy. "One dupe would be as impossible" as one twin. "The old ways are best because they have been tried." We will run a mile and knock down tenpins and say our lessons. This voice is performing recovery, insisting with increasing desperation that what happened can be folded back into the ordinary life of the household.

The second voice breaks through in the long crying passages. "Oh, how ephemeral are we! Oh, how transient were we, my child! The earth has known us not. Our mothers and our fathers never knew us." "God pity my right arm! God pity my left! The left breast is already gone." "Child, we are sinned against more than we are sinning. I can go no farther." "Oh, where's my hair?" This is not the Miss MacIntosh of the schoolroom. This is someone much older and more sorrowful, someone who has been carrying something alone for a very long time, and who is, in this one night, in this dark room, with this one child, briefly allowed to put it down.

The two voices are not in conflict. They are the same person. Young has spent seventeen chapters showing you the first voice. Chapter 18 shows you the second. Both are true. Neither is the whole truth.

The secret man and the secret woman

Early in the chapter, Vera arrives at a thought that is one of the most careful things in the novel. She decides that what loomed above her in the darkness was not a "man but only such a man as is hidden in the woman, just as there must also be, in every man, a woman secret and recessive, the forever fading image of the other self."

Young is reaching here toward something the language of 1965 could barely name, and she does it not by naming it but by making it universal. Every person contains their opposite. The secret self that society will not accommodate doesn't belong only to Miss MacIntosh; it belongs to everyone, hidden at different depths, pressing differently against the surface. Miss MacIntosh's secret is simply more visible now, because her wig is on the chair post.

This is why Young cannot be reduced to a simple reading of this chapter. She is not saying Miss MacIntosh is a man. She is not saying Miss MacIntosh is a woman disguised. She is saying that Miss MacIntosh is a person whose inner life exceeded the categories available to contain it, and who spent decades building a persona of radical ordinariness as the only shelter available. The plainness was armor. The proverbs were a wall. And underneath, all her life, that second voice.

The threat and the tenderness

Two things happen near the end of the chapter that seem to contradict each other, and Young puts them almost side by side.

First, the threat: she would kill me if I told. “It was nothing another should see. She had never seen it herself except in a mirror.” This is Miss MacIntosh afraid: afraid with the specific fear of someone whose survival has depended on concealment for so long that the concealment has become the self. The threat is real. It is also the most naked moment of vulnerability in the chapter, because it reveals exactly how much is at stake for her in Vera’s silence.

Then, almost immediately: “she rocked me back and forth in her arms.” She kissed Vera’s eyelids and eyes, her hair, her palms, the soles of her feet. She said she had lost her hair in Vera’s service. That “I am no older than the day I was born.” “Age is the most difficult thing to achieve.”

Threat and tenderness. Concealment and confession. The attempt to erase the night and the refusal, at the same time, to fully let go of it. Young holds these things together without resolving them, because they cannot be resolved. This is what it is to be a person whose secret has been discovered by someone they love.

Memory as the chapter’s frame

The chapter opens with Vera reminding us that she is not sure what Miss MacIntosh actually said, and halfway through the night she says it again. “I am not sure now that Miss MacIntosh did say all I remember her as saying.” “Memory is surrounded by the unknown.” “Memory sometimes provides the one flower more than ever blossomed. Memory sometimes omits the only flower there really was.”

This framing matters. Everything in Chapter 18 is Vera’s memory of a night that happened when she was fourteen, filtered through years of reflection, shaped “by the illumination larger than that of any instant.” The proverbs, the confessions, the geography questions, the rocking and the kissing and the threat: Vera is certain these happened. She is not certain of the exact words.

Young is being scrupulous about the nature of memory while also trusting the emotional truth of it. We may not have the transcript. We have the experience. And the experience left “the heavy, claw-shaped mark of” Miss MacIntosh’s hand on Vera’s forehead, which is the one thing Vera knows was real: “there, that will teach you to remember me.” There, that will teach you charity.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Miss MacIntosh will leave. The novel has been telling us this since Chapter 12, when she warned Vera that she might some day retire. Now you understand what departure means

for Miss MacIntosh, and what it will mean for Vera. It will not be the retirement of an old nursemaid. It will be the disappearance of the only person who could confirm Vera's reality.

The wig on the carved chair post. Young places it there and does not take it away. When Miss MacIntosh asks "whose red wig was that upon the carven chair post," while she herself is right here, she is describing the situation exactly. The disguise is visible. The person is visible. They are both present. They are not the same.

"A woman, a wig-maker, and a wild horse are the three things never to be trusted." This proverb appears in Miss MacIntosh's mouth in the long night, and it may be the only moment in the novel where she makes a joke about herself. Or it may not be a joke at all. Either way, Young put it there deliberately.

For the Curious

The left breast

"The left breast is already gone" appears twice in the chapter, delivered as lamentation. A mastectomy in the early twentieth century was a radical and disfiguring surgery, performed without the reconstructive options available today, leaving a significant scar and physical absence. Young does not elaborate. She does not need to. The line is placed among the other losses Miss MacIntosh catalogs in her crying voice (the hair, the heart, the kiss never given) and it belongs there. It is one more thing her body has been stripped of, one more thing she has carried alone.

The heavy

"The heavy, claw-shaped mark of her hand upon my forehead" is the chapter's last concrete physical image, and it echoes the silver thimble engraved Juliet, 1899 that Miss MacIntosh used to tap against Vera's forehead to restore her to her senses. The thimble was the instrument of practical correction. The claw-shaped mark is something different: a branding, a claim, a last act of possession before the night ends. Remember me. Be charitable. Both.

O tempora!

O tempora! O mores! is a phrase from Cicero, used in one of his speeches against Catiline to lament the corruption of the age. It means Oh, the times! Oh, the customs! Miss MacIntosh delivers it at dawn, in Latin, after a night of proverbs and confessions and geography questions, and then immediately asks what day it will be tomorrow. Young gives her Cicero and then takes him away in the same breath. That is exactly right.

Tempus fugit

Tempus fugit, time flies, is the last thing Miss MacIntosh says in the chapter, rocking Vera toward sleep, having just claimed that she is not so old as Vera thinks, that she is no older "than the day she was born." "Age is the most difficult thing to achieve." The woman who

wound Miss MacIntosh’s alarm clock every day, the woman who denied that time repeats itself, “a day being gone when a day was gone”: ends the chapter with the oldest, most worn acknowledgment that time passes. She has been fighting it all her life. She is still fighting it. She is losing.

Chapter 19: The Morning After

Research notes: Chapter 19

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: The Search for Meaning

Symbols: Eyes and Blindness · The House

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Angels and Archangels · Gambling and Playing Cards · The Bible

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After the long, overwhelming night of Chapter 18, Chapter 19 is very short. It is one of the most carefully constructed chapters in the novel precisely because of that brevity. Young has spent two chapters giving you the shock and the darkness and the voice. Now she gives you daylight.

Read it slowly. Every object in this room has been chosen. Nothing here is accidental.

What actually happens in Chapter 19

Vera wakes in Miss MacIntosh's bed at dawn, uncertain whether the night was real or a dream. The light comes in. She keeps her eyes closed at first, already beginning to reconsider, in the safety of not-quite-looking, certain small things about Miss MacIntosh she had never examined before. The baseball cap. The ribbons worn in the evening. The acres of veiling over the whaler's hat. The umbrella carried indoors in fair weather. Why had none of it seemed important before?

She opens her eyes.

Miss MacIntosh's bald head is on the pillow next to hers, cold as marble. The red wig is on the hat rack within easy reach. The room's contents are laid out in full inventory: the corset, the false teeth in the jeweled glass, the grey fedora on the floor, the ivory-boned knitting needles, the Moody's hotel Bible chained to the table, the deuce of clubs face up on the marble slab, the playing cards with Dutch windmills on their backs. The chapter ends on a single sentence, delivered with the same plainness Miss MacIntosh herself would have used: "I observed what I must surely have always known, the fact that one breast had been amputated. What was left was no bigger than a baby's."

The inventory of the room

Young spends most of this short chapter on a meticulous inventory of Miss MacIntosh's possessions, and it rewards the same attention Miss MacIntosh brought to geography lessons and bowling scores. Every object is a small biography.

The wig on the hat rack "within easy reach of her gnarled hand." "Death should never catch her napping," she had always said, and the wig is positioned exactly for that: grab it in a moment, be ready. The salmon-colored corset draped over the rocking chair, its

metallic supporters still staring like lost eyes. The grey fedora kicked to the floor. The convict's striped undershirt. The shirtwaist still bristling with its rusted needles and pins.

The false teeth in a jeweled water glass. The contrast is exquisite and purely Young: the teeth themselves functional, replaceable, slightly absurd; the glass ornamented and fine, perhaps the last luxury object in an otherwise stripped-down room. She saved what she saved.

The Moody's hotel Bible chained to the table. She had always said "she was a Christian woman with an honest mind." She chained the Bible down.

The broken ship's compass "she was intending, I remembered, to repair." She had always meant to fix the instrument that finds the directions of the winds.

The deuce of clubs face up on the marble slab. In Chapter 14, Catherine told us the deuce of clubs portends death and is the trifoliate club that may be transformed into the cross, the cross into the rose, the rose into the snail. Here it is, the card that was always present, now visible in morning light.

The questions Vera asks before opening her eyes

The early paragraphs of the chapter give us something quietly remarkable: Vera lying with her eyes closed, already beginning to reread the past in light of what she now knows.

Why no eyebrows, and the evasive answer when asked? Why the face so sensitive to light, blushing for no reason, the colors of her skin changing so fast? Why always the baseball cap in the morning, the ribbon around her hair in the evenings, acres of veiling over the whaler's hat in the wind? Why the umbrella carried like a shield even indoors where there was no rain?

All of it was always visible. None of it was ever assembled into a picture. Vera, like the rider over Lake Constance, was crossing ice she never knew was there, carried safely by not knowing. Now she is on the other shore. The same details that meant nothing before (the cap, the veiling, the umbrella, the blush) resolve into a portrait she can finally see.

Young is showing you something important about how knowledge works: it doesn't create the evidence, it illuminates what was always present. The clues were never hidden. They were simply not yet read.

The last sentence

Young ends the chapter with one of the most controlled sentences in the novel: "I observed what I must surely have always known, the fact that one breast had been amputated. What was left was no bigger than a baby's."

Two things to hold here. First, the phrase "I must surely have always known." Vera is extending the logic of the night (the older shock beneath the newer one, the recognition that feels like memory rather than discovery) to the body itself. She must have known. At some level, in some chamber of the mind she never entered, she knew.

Second, the measurement: no bigger than a baby's. Young does not write this for pathos. She writes it with Miss MacIntosh's own precision: plain, factual, "the shortest distance between two points." It is the most tender sentence in the chapter and the most devastating, and it achieves both effects through exactness rather than elaboration. Miss MacIntosh would have approved of the sentence. She would have recognized herself in it.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Miss MacIntosh will reassemble herself. The wig will go back on, the corset will be laced, the umbrella will go up. The question the novel now carries is whether Vera can unknow what she knows, whether the plain, practical nursemaid of the daylight hours can coexist with the bald head on the pillow. Young's answer, delivered slowly across many chapters, is that they must coexist. There is no version of Miss MacIntosh that erases the other.

The room's objects will scatter. The broken compass will not be repaired. The Bible will remain chained. These are the possessions of someone who is almost done with this life, and Young has laid them out for you here like evidence at an inquest, or like the belongings of someone you will soon be asked to grieve.

Notice the bust of Martin Luther. It is the only decoration Miss MacIntosh permitted in her room, the one ornament she would not put outdoors. Luther, the reformer who nailed his theses to a church door and refused to recant. The only image she kept was a man who said: here I stand, I can do no other.

For the Curious

The deuce of clubs

The deuce of clubs is the lowest card in most card games, and also, in certain folk traditions of cartomancy, a card associated with obstacles, bad news, and the proximity of death. Young had already given it cosmic significance in Chapter 14, through Catherine's elaborate reading of the four aces that keep appearing in Mr. Spitzer's sleeve. Its appearance here, face up on Miss MacIntosh's bedside slab, is the novel's quietest callback: the card that portends death, dealt and waiting, in the room of the woman who said "death should never catch her napping."

The Atlantic City paperweight sitting on

The Atlantic City paperweight sitting on Miss MacIntosh's table is one of those details Young drops without comment that rewards a moment's attention. Atlantic City was, in the early twentieth century, a famous resort destination: the Boardwalk, the hotels, the pleasures of the sea. A woman who kept herself as stripped of ornament and luxury as Miss MacIntosh, who covered the cherubim with cheesecloth and chained the Bible to the table: kept a paperweight from Atlantic City. She was somewhere else once. She was someone else once.

The swan pitcher and basin

The swan pitcher and basin were a standard feature of Victorian and Edwardian bedroom furniture, the washstand set that preceded indoor plumbing becoming widespread. Young places it in Miss MacIntosh's room as part of the overall picture of a woman who is behind the times, or outside of time, or simply indifferent to its passage. The swan is also one of Young's recurring images throughout the novel: the wild swan that cannot be taught to lay a tame egg, the twelve white swans of Vera's childhood dream. It is possible that the pitcher is purely functional. It is also possible that nothing in this room is purely functional.

The cherubim whose wings

The cherubim whose wings have already fallen, covered with cheesecloth by Miss MacIntosh when she first moved in because they would never "remind her of herself or anyone": lose a ear during the night, or perhaps an alabaster rose falls, Vera isn't sure. Something came loose in this room. Something always comes loose in the rooms where the extraordinary happens.

Chapter 20: I Should Protect Her from the Knowledge of Herself

Research notes: Chapter 20

Characters: Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Faith, God, and the Supernatural

Symbols: Hair, Wig, and Baldness · The House · Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Ancient Egypt · The Bible · The History of Opium

Chapter 20 is the last chapter of the Miss MacIntosh sequence: the four chapters that delivered the revelation and its aftermath across one night and the dawn after it. Chapter 21 picks up Vera's thoughts that same morning, and the novel stays with Miss MacIntosh a little longer before it moves on to other stories, other characters, other rooms.

But first, Young gives us one more morning with Vera lying in the bed, eyes open now, watching Miss MacIntosh sleep. And she gives us the decision Vera makes.

It is the most important decision in the novel.

What actually happens in Chapter 20

It is full dawn. Vera lies beside the sleeping Miss MacIntosh and looks at her in the light. She sees, for the first time in daylight and without the excuse of shock or darkness, everything: the bald head, the missing breast, the deprivations that the night had revealed and that the morning confirms. She thinks about what she has seen. She thinks about God. She thinks about hair.

And then she makes her resolution: she will go on as if she never saw. She will pretend. She will iron Miss MacIntosh's shirts with new eagerness, recite the genealogies, learn the ancient weights and measures, keep the secret locked in her own capacious heart. She will protect Miss MacIntosh from the knowledge of herself.

Near the end, Vera makes the explicit promise that closes the sequence: "I should hold to every moment as if I lived with a dying man, and I should protect her from the knowledge of herself."

The decision

Vera's resolution to pretend is not cowardice. Young is careful about this. Vera is fourteen and has just had the floor taken out from under her for the second time in her life: the first being whatever happened to her father, about whom we learn only that he fell "while walking a frozen cable stretched between two snow-capped mountain peaks." She knows what she is doing and why.

She is choosing to protect. To hold the secret in her own capacious heart and not let it surface through a flicker of an eyelid or a wandering gesture. She is choosing to give Miss MacIntosh the dignity of her own concealment. And she is choosing, at fourteen, to live with a dying person and know it and say nothing.

This is an enormous thing to choose. Young renders it plainly, without sentimentality, as the kind of moral decision that only becomes visible in retrospect as what it was: a child deciding, quietly and without fanfare, to be charitable. Which is what Miss MacIntosh asked of her, in the dark, pressing her claw-shaped hand to Vera's forehead. There, that will teach you charity.

The teaching worked. The lesson cost everything.

Seeing her plain

Chapter 20 contains some of the most sustained and beautiful writing in the novel about what it actually means to see another person.

Young gives us Vera watching Miss MacIntosh in sleep with a clarity she has never had before: her face "sublimely peaceful even in its broken, anguished beauties such as I had hardly noticed or appreciated before." The face that was always present, the face Vera saw every day for years, is only now being seen. The bald head, the "thin-lidded eyes closed in thin sleep," the narrow and intolerable vacancy where the breast is missing, and in the middle of it, something that Young names as "affirmation, strong and positive, that which God Himself should tremble to see."

Young refuses to resolve Miss MacIntosh into tragedy. She was stripped bare. She was also, in her stripping bare, something Young calls a sad masterpiece. Not a victim of her circumstances but a person who made herself, under impossible conditions, into the one authority Vera had truly known. That is the affirmation the chapter insists on finding in the wreckage.

The question Vera asks ("Whose work, I vaguely wondered, was this? Whose accomplishment, this sad masterpiece?") does not receive an answer. It was Miss MacIntosh's own work, built out of the materials available: proverbs, common sense, a wig, a salmon-colored corset, the courage to keep to her schedules every day.

Was she deserted at the altar by her bridegroom or her bride?

Young gives Vera a list of questions about the hair: was it hair by hair "through many hesitant years, or all at one blow"? Was it her broken heart? "Was she in mourning for someone dead"? "Had some old crow plucked each hair away?" And then: "was she deserted at the altar by her bridegroom or her bride? Was she her only lover?"

Young does not answer any of these questions. She lists them as possibilities, in Vera's wondering voice, and moves on. But the two final questions carry the weight of the sequence: the bridegroom or the bride. Both options held open simultaneously. And the last one, the strangest: was she her only lover?

A person whose inner life had no acceptable outward form, who could not find or keep a love that matched what she was, who had, perhaps, turned the capacity inward. Was she her only lover? Young asks it and does not answer it, which is the most respectful thing she could do.

Was God bald too

Near the chapter's end, Vera's mind drifts into a long meditation on God. Was God bald, "or bearded so that birds might hide" behind His dreaming hair? "What was God, defined in so many terms": a fuller's soap, a refining fire, "the light of the morning when the sun arises," a stone of grace, "a friend that sticketh closer than a brother," "the shadow of a great rock in a weary land?"

This passage is Young at her most formally ambitious and also her most playful, piling Biblical epithets for God one on top of another until they accumulate into something that feels less like theology and more like Vera's mind refusing to land anywhere, floating through the possibilities the way Catherine floats through her opium dreams.

But underneath the floating there is a serious question: if Miss MacIntosh's baldness is a kind of nakedness before God, what does that say about God? If she is the sad masterpiece, is God the artist who made her so? Is God also somehow stripped, also somehow exposed, also bald in the sense of having nothing to hide behind? Young leaves this open. She almost always leaves this open. But she asks it, here, at dawn, over the sleeping head of the most practical woman in the novel.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Vera's promise to protect Miss MacIntosh from the knowledge of herself is the emotional foundation of everything that follows in the novel. Every time Vera thinks about Miss MacIntosh (in memory, in the long search, in the chapters still to come) she is keeping that promise, or failing to keep it, or renegotiating what keeping it means. The novel is now about to expand enormously. Other characters, other histories, other geographies. You will sometimes go many chapters without returning to Vera directly. But you are now carrying what Vera carries: the knowledge of the bald head on the striped pillow, and the decision made at fourteen to go on as if she never saw.

The words of the title have been in the novel since Chapter 1, where Vera remembers "Miss MacIntosh, my darling, only a step beyond." In Chapter 20 they come back stripped bare: "my plain darling." My darling. Not Miss MacIntosh, that plain nursemaid. My darling. The relationship has been named, at last, for what it always was.

For the Curious

The list of Biblical names for God

The list of Biblical names for God that Young gives Vera near the chapter's end draws from multiple books of the Old and New Testament simultaneously: Isaiah, Psalms, Proverbs, the Gospels. A fuller's soap appears in Malachi; a "shadow of a great rock in a weary land" appears in Isaiah 32; "a friend that sticketh closer than a brother" is from Proverbs 18. Young has assembled them freely, not in scriptural order, the way someone's mind actually moves through half-remembered language at dawn. She is not quoting the Bible. She is thinking with it.

Ovid's line

Ovid's line ("ugly is a field without grass, a plant without leaves, a head without hair") appears in the Amores, Ovid's early collection of love elegies. Young cites it almost as a footnote to Vera's wondering, then immediately follows it with the Greek proverb: "hair adds beauty to a good face and terror to an ugly one." She is placing Miss MacIntosh's baldness in the longest possible context of what hair has meant to human beings as a sign of beauty, status, and identity, and then showing you a woman who, stripped of all of it, is still a sad masterpiece.

The itinerary

"The itinerary of the children of Israel from Egypt to Canaan" ("Rameses, Succoth, Etham, Pi-Hahiroth, Marah, Elim," the desert of El-Tih) is exactly the kind of thing Miss MacIntosh would have had Vera memorize, in the same spirit as the names of rivers and the dates of lost battles. Vera resolves to learn it now, as an act of devotion, a way of giving back the attention she withheld when it was only a lesson. The stations of the Exodus become, in this context, a private liturgy: the places you pass through on the way from bondage to the promised land, knowing that some will die before they get there.

The frozen cable her father walked

The frozen cable her father walked "between two snow-capped mountain peaks" is mentioned only once, dropped into the chapter almost in passing. We are never told more. It is the novel's second great absence, alongside Miss MacIntosh's vanishing: the father who fell. Young gives Vera this history without explaining it, trusting the reader to feel the weight of a child who lost the man who walked the impossible wire, and then nearly lost the woman who kept her sane, in the same night.

Chapter 21: Let Bygones Be Bygones

Research notes: Chapter 21

Characters: Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Symbols: Clothing, Hats, and Skirts

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

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Chapter 21 is the last chapter of the birthday night sequence, and it does something no reader quite expects after chapters 17 through 20: it ends with comedy.

Not the dark comedy of the novel's great surreal passages, but something lighter and more precise: the comedy of two people who have been through something enormous together, silently agreeing to say nothing about it, and returning to ordinary life with the particular relief of survivors.

Young earns this ending. Don't be fooled into thinking it undoes what came before.

What actually happens in Chapter 21

Vera is still lying in Miss MacIntosh's bed, still watching the bald head on the pillow, still composing her resolution to pretend. Young gives us one final extended description of Miss MacIntosh as she is in this moment: the gnarled hands and feet, the missing breast and its scar, the absent eyelashes and eyebrows, the woman's clothes strewn in bundles on the floor, the "green hair ribbon looped over the bust of Martin Luther." The Irish green ribbon on Luther. Young cannot help herself, and neither can we.

Then Vera falls back to sleep.

When she wakes, Miss MacIntosh is standing at the foot of the bed, fully dressed and wigged, her red hair shining, her silver-dollar watch blotted out by sunlight, in a remarkably good humor. The bedroom is neat. Nothing has changed. The pact is already in effect without a word being spoken.

Miss MacIntosh says Vera has "been very sick and unusually stubborn, but" has recovered. She scolds her mildly for dancing when there was no partner at the birthday party. She holds up the party dress Mr. Spitzer had taken out of its long white box (that filmy, floating creation) and says it cannot be mended and must be thrown away. "Into the ash bin it goes."

The second inventory

Before Vera falls asleep, Young gives us one last full look at the body as it is in morning light, and it is the most complete description in the sequence. The stalk of a breast "cut away so early, the scar, the tissues like a baby's fist." "No eyebrows, no eyelashes, no single hair or feather, the hairless body shining in the" sound of surf. The "gnarled hands with veins knotted by old labors." The "brassiere with a wad of cloth" concealing what is missing.

And in the middle of this: the pity, pity, pity. Young uses the word three times in close succession, and it is doing the work that nothing else in the sequence could do. Not grief, not outrage, not the rage of a child who has been deceived. Pity. The feeling that arrives when you understand something about another person's life that they never chose to show you, that they have carried alone for years, that is simply larger than any response you have.

This is what Vera carries forward from this night. Not the shock, not the fight, not even the decision. The pity that is not the end but the beginning, only the beginning, of understanding another person.

Miss MacIntosh returns

The scene of Miss MacIntosh standing at the foot of the bed, restored, is one of the most carefully handled moments in the novel. Young gives us her return in full detail: the green hair ribbon, the pin-striped shirtwaist, the turtleneck "sweater with holes at the elbows," the "faded woolen scarf pinned with a large black safety pin." Every piece of the assembly back in its place.

And Vera's response: she "looked at her without the slightest astonishment, completely forgetful that she had ever been different than now she seemed." Not pretending to forget. Actually, momentarily, forgetting. The vision of the night slipping under the surface of the ordinary morning like something covered by a wave.

This is what Young has been building toward across five chapters. Not a confrontation, not a confession, not a reckoning. Two people standing in a bedroom in the morning, one of them asking what Mr. Spitzer was thinking when he sent that party dress, and neither of them saying anything about the bald head on the pillow an hour ago. The pact holds. The ordinary day begins.

The party dress

The chapter ends on the party dress, and Young gives it real weight. Mr. Spitzer took it out of its long white box. "It was a filmy, floating creation," cloudlike. Now Vera thinks she "should have worn white roses in" her hair.

It cannot be mended. We should only tear it further. Into the ash bin.

The dress is the fourteenth birthday itself: the party that had no guests, the night that went so far from what it was supposed to be. Miss MacIntosh holds it up to the light, and Vera can see no hole in it, no seed pearl out of place, all the little ribbons intact, every rosette of yellowed lace exactly as it was when it came out of the box. The dress survived the night intact. The night did not.

Miss MacIntosh's verdict is cheerful and final: it cannot be mended. Throw it away. There will be no new one. This is Miss MacIntosh at her most characteristic: pragmatic, slightly bleak, refusing to pretend that the unrepairable can be repaired. She has been making this assessment all her life, about things rather more significant than party dresses.

It is also, read against the night, the novel's most compressed statement about what has happened: the dress is fine, but it cannot be worn again. The occasion is over. "Let bygones be bygones. We shall turn over a new leaf."

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The birthday night, chapters 13 through 21, is complete. Chapter 22 begins at breakfast the same morning, and Miss MacIntosh stays at the center a little longer. After that, the novel will return to her constantly, in memory, in Vera's search, in the questions the novel keeps circling. You now have the full picture. Everything else is aftermath and extension.

Notice, from here forward, how often other characters in the novel are described in terms that echo Miss MacIntosh's situation: the disguised, the concealed, the person whose outer life is a performance built over a private reality. Young is going to show you this pattern in many different lives. You are now prepared to see it.

The "green hair ribbon looped over the bust of Martin Luther" will stay with you. It should. It is one of those small, exact, irreducible images that Young places in a scene and lets stand without comment. The ornament of the woman's secret self (the Irish green, the softness of a ribbon) resting on the shoulders of the man who said here I stand, I can do no other. Young does not explain this. She never explains these. You carry them.

For the Curious

The old blind sheep dog on three legs

The old blind sheep dog on three legs appears again at the chapter's opening, running ahead through the surf, barking at sticks and shells and the carapace of dead animals, guarding a pasture that no longer exists against a thief who will not come. Young has placed this dog at several key moments in the sequence: barking at the waves at the end of Chapter 15, present again now at the return to ordinary life. A blind dog doing its job faithfully in the absence of any threat, in the presence of nothing to guard. It is one of Young's most affectionate images of the faithful and the futile continuing side by side.

The Devil in Miss MacIntosh's monologue

The Devil in Miss MacIntosh's monologue (wearing a red coat and green breeches, a fine dancer, able to quote scripture, God's ape wearing God's crown) is drawn from a rich tradition of folk theology that imagined the Devil as charming, educated, and almost indistinguishable from the righteous. The detail that some still confuse the brothers, the one who fell and the one who is not fallen, is Miss MacIntosh's own private gloss on the Lucifer story, and it lands differently after five chapters about a woman who was herself two things at once, two selves inside one body, two brothers perhaps in one heart.

The party dress in its long white box

The party dress in its long white box, sent by Mr. Spitzer: a gift from the man who is always late, always missing the significant event, always arriving with something that turns out not to fit the occasion. The dress is correct. The night was not the night it was supposed to be. Mr. Spitzer could not have known. He never knows. Young allows him this particular consistency throughout the entire novel.

The phrase this great baldness as

The phrase “this great baldness as of the moon sunken beyond a watery horizon of iron waves” (and later, “this everlasting baldness so like my love”) are the chapter’s most compressed statements of what the sequence has accomplished. The bald head has become, in Vera’s mind, a permanent feature of love itself. Not its obstacle, not its tragedy. Its face. “My darling who slept now without her wig.” The endearment and the plainness held together, exactly as Young intended from the beginning when she named the novel.

Chapter 22: All in All, There Is No News Today That Was Not Yesterday

Research notes: Chapter 22

Characters: Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Exploration and the Poles · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest

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Chapter 22 is the first full ordinary day after the revelation, and Young gives it to us in full. It is long and dense and wanders and doubles back on itself, and it does this deliberately: this is what it feels like to sit at a breakfast table with someone and try to act as if nothing has changed.

If you find yourself lulled by the rhythm of Miss MacIntosh's newspaper recitations, her geography questions, her complaints about dust and housekeeping, that's fine. That lulling is the point. And then the chapter breaks the lull, twice, with sentences so precise they stop you cold. Stay alert for those. The chapter earns them.

What actually happens in Chapter 22

It is the morning after. Vera sits at an unexpectedly festive breakfast table (the good Haviland china, a silver service, white roses in a hammered silver bowl) while Miss MacIntosh reads the morning newspaper aloud. Her wig is in place. The pact is holding.

Miss MacIntosh reads about Brazilian rebellions, Wall Street, Norwegian storms, horse races, cock fights, needle-workers' strikes, the price of eggs, divorces, the deposition of Balkan kings. She asks Vera geography questions, creation questions, sports questions. She complains about the housekeeping, the dust, the unmatched socks, the angels in the hallways who need dusting. She reads that celluloid collars are going two for a nickel in a flooded Boston basement.

Vera, watching the brick-red top of Miss MacIntosh's wig above the newspaper, seething with a nameless irritation, asks whether Miss MacIntosh threw away her party dress "for a punishment." Miss MacIntosh ignores the question and asks more questions of her own.

Near the end, almost in passing, Miss MacIntosh says: "baldness is no cure for sorrow, my dear." And later: sometimes "the inner man was all that counted—not the outer man, this poor visage and mockery of himself."

Between the two, Vera wonders: was she all others? The chapter itself ends with Miss MacIntosh imagining she would give the Emperor Constantine "a whack with her black umbrella."

The festive table

Young opens the chapter with something small and strange: the breakfast table is decorated as if for a special occasion. The Haviland china, the silver service, the hammered silver bowl of white cabbage roses. They never use these things. They are usually down to the broken crockery bought cheap at a fire sale.

Miss MacIntosh apparently does not notice. She sees only the old oilcloth of What Cheer, Iowa. She has “no eye for artificial beauty or anything” man has made, and she says so, as she always has.

But someone set that table. Someone brought out the good china and the silver bowl and the roses. Young does not say who. The chapter simply begins with Vera sitting before this festive spread, and Miss MacIntosh behind her newspaper, and the morning light on the red wig, and the pact quietly in effect. The table is the only acknowledgment either of them will make of what the night was.

Miss MacIntosh in full voice

Chapter 22 gives us the longest and most expansive portrait of Miss MacIntosh’s newspaper monologue in the novel. It goes on for most of the chapter, weaving between world affairs and geography lessons and housekeeping complaints and sports scores and creation theology, and it is worth reading as a performance, because it is one.

Miss MacIntosh is talking to keep the silence away. The questions come faster than usual, the complaints more insistent, the newspaper’s contents more varied. She reads about cock fights and dog races and steeplechases and shipwrecks and divorces and the price of tallow. She moves from God’s creation of the firmament on Monday to the greatest pearl ever grown to whether Siberian wheat can grow in the Dakotas to the rules of bowling, all without pausing.

Vera notices that their schedule seems “somewhat off course, perhaps by a point or two.” She notices that Miss MacIntosh has already eaten her breakfast, “a meal both hearty and spare, as she described it.” She notices the rasping of Miss MacIntosh’s breathing, the difficulty of it, like a drowning man who sees a wall of water approaching.

Underneath the performance, Vera is listening for something else. And then, late in the chapter, Miss MacIntosh gives it to her: “baldness is no cure for sorrow, my dear.” “Spinach is the best bone-builder. We all require a little salt in our blood—but not much. Death has a salty taste—the same as tears. We came from the sea.”

It is the only direct acknowledgment either of them makes. It is delivered in the voice of a proverb, almost sleepily, “like the continuation of a dream.” And then the newspaper goes back up.

The inner man

Near the chapter’s end, Miss MacIntosh says something she has perhaps been building toward all morning: sometimes “the inner man was all that counted—not the outer man,

this poor visage and mockery of himself, so every image should fade." "The inner man might be an altogether different being from the poor outer man. Only the poorest fool would judge by the appearances, by the outer visage and these poor clothes a man must wear, these mortal garments so ill-fitting and not his choice at all."

She applies this to herself immediately: "sometimes she thought the inner man was battered, too, impaired by much hard usage. Her soul itself must have, she laughed, this broken crown, these weak and watering eyes," "this poor, broken nose, these false teeth, these knotted veins, the large hands, the large, long feet."

This is Miss MacIntosh doing what she does in the night chapters, but in daylight, in her normal voice, filtered through the grammar of proverb and common sense. She is telling Vera, and telling herself, that the mortal garments are not the person. That the outer visage is not the choice. That the inner man and the outer man may be different beings.

It is as close as she will come, in daylight, to speaking directly about what Vera saw.

Was she all others?

The question near the chapter's end (was she all others?) is one of the novel's most compressed. Vera asks it without elaboration and Young does not answer it.

What does it mean? Vera has been watching Miss MacIntosh perform normalcy all morning, and she has been watching the performance crack at the edges: the festive table no one acknowledges, the schedule off course, the breathing like a drowning man, the line about baldness and sorrow. And she wonders: is Miss MacIntosh's ordinariness not just a performance but a kind of universality? Is she, in her stripping bare, not one particular strange person but somehow everyone, every person carrying a secret the outer self works all day to conceal?

Young has been building to this question since Chapter 18, when Vera thought about the secret man hidden in the woman, and the secret woman hidden in the man. Now, at the breakfast table, in the ordinary morning light, the question arrives in its simplest form: was she all others? It opens outward into the rest of the novel, which will keep asking it, of character after character, in different rooms and different weathers.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The novel is about to expand. Young is going to begin widening the frame: bringing in other characters, other histories, other geographies. The Miss MacIntosh sequence has been the novel's anchor. Everything that comes next will be understood against it.

Miss MacIntosh's mention of her dead love, the silver-dollar watch "given to her by her dead love," arrives so quietly in this chapter that you might miss it. Young does not elaborate here. Much later, Vera will hear "the history of her love." For now, this is just one

more detail of the inventory, placed without emphasis, in a sentence about how Miss MacIntosh is protected by her lack of pretence.

The shipwrecks off the coast accumulate in this chapter into a significant catalogue: “the captain’s table set for two” or three, the stringless harp washed up, the cardinal’s hat, the twelve rosaries strewn from here to the lighthouse. These are the things the sea keeps returning. Young is building the novel’s coastal mythology: a world where what has been lost keeps coming back, changed, barnacled, still recognizable.

For the Curious

Bay Marguerite

Bay Marguerite appears in Miss MacIntosh’s geography questions near the chapter’s end, listed among “the Gilbert Islands, the Falkland Islands,” Coronation Island, Henrietta Island. It is a real place: a bay in Antarctica. Young put her own first name in the geography lesson, tucked between the Shetland Islands and Port Royal, and said nothing about it. She did this knowingly. It is her novel’s most private signature.

The Kirtland’s warbler

The Kirtland’s warbler, whose sole nesting ground Miss MacIntosh identifies as the Upper Michigan Peninsula, is one of the rarest songbirds in North America: a species that nests only in young jack pine forests in a small area of Michigan, first identified in the mid-nineteenth century and by the time Young was writing this novel, genuinely threatened with extinction. Miss MacIntosh describes its preferred habitat: “the low scrub, the sand where it could not be easily seen.” A bird that nests where it cannot be seen, in a place almost no one goes, “a species almost extinct, seldom seen in this world.” Young chose it carefully.

The baseball autographed by a dead

The “baseball autographed by a dead St.” Louis Cardinal who was a friend of Peron’s and Mr. Spitzer’s favorite (passed along to Miss MacIntosh, sitting in the bottom drawer next to the grey yarn and the spare corset) is one of the novel’s most affectionate small details. Three people connected by a signed ball: the dead brother who ran in racing and sporting circles, the living brother who knows “nothing of sports except by indirection,” and the nursemaid who was “the best baseball player in little old What Cheer.” The ball sits in the drawer. No one throws it.

The migratory orioles

The migratory orioles that mistake the lighthouse for the light and dash themselves against the glass (mistaking the reality for the illusion, Young says, the reality for the illusion) is one of the novel’s most concentrated inversions. Usually we speak of mistaking illusion for reality. Young turns it: the birds die because they take the real light for the guiding star. Sometimes the real thing is what kills you. Sometimes the illusion is what kept you safe.

Chapter 23: We Be Creatures of the Darkness

Research notes: Chapter 23

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Light and Darkness

Symbols: Lamps, Candles, and Light · Snow, Ice, and Winter

Philosophy: Aristotle · Augustine and Christian Theology · Descartes and Dualism · Empiricism (Locke, Berkeley, Hume)

Allusions: Gambling and Playing Cards · Judaism · The Bible · The Book of Job

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Chapter 23 is the electric lights chapter, and if you read it only as a comic tirade against modern convenience you will miss what it is doing.

Miss MacIntosh spends most of this chapter behind her newspaper, blaming Benjamin Franklin for the ruin of private life. She objects to floodlights, headlights, footlights, tail lights, traffic lights, searchlights, fluorescent lamps, and the two-way lighting systems she sees advertised as available in Boston. It is funny. Young means it to be funny.

It is also a woman who was seen last night, looked at without her wig by a child in the moonlight, arguing at enormous length that no one should have to be looked at.

Hold both of those at once and the chapter opens.

What actually happens in Chapter 23

Nothing, in the sense that nothing happened in Chapter 22. It is the same breakfast table, the same August morning, the same newspaper held up between two people who have agreed without discussion to say nothing.

Miss MacIntosh begins on vain man: the Emperor Constantine, the Slough of Despond, the heart that was locked from the inside. She moves to Caesar crossing the Rubicon and asks who alive ever saw him. History lies, she says, and geography is uncertain. She declares her faith in common sense, “the middle brow, the middle way, the average life.”

Then she arrives at Benjamin Franklin and stays there for most of the chapter. Franklin flew a kite, harnessed lightning he was never asked to harness, paved the way for electric lights, and now there is “nowhere a man can hide his” face. She works through the consequences: no dark corner on Skid Row, no privacy in a man's own bedroom, midnight baseball, the poor paying the light bills. She argues that darkness once protected marriage, that Helen of Troy would not have been Helen of Troy if someone had switched on a lamp, that Ulysses would never have come home if “he had seen Penelope under electric” light. She would give Thomas Edison a piece of her mind if it were ever her doubtful pleasure to meet him.

She asks where Baffin Bay is. She gives Vera advice about igloos.

Vera, meanwhile, does something she has never done before. She works out what the talk is for.

The chapter ends with Miss MacIntosh quoting the Book of Job and crying out that “the stars have lighted the heavens from pole to pole.”

Vain man

Vain man giving himself “immortal airs, imagining what is not.” And then, immediately: “when the door of the heart slams shut, it will not be opened by man again. The heart, my dear, was locked from the inside, and that is that.”

She says this at breakfast, to a fourteen year old, apropos of Constantine.

Notice also the shape of the skepticism. “History lies, and geography is uncertain,” says the woman who quizzes Vera on geography every single morning and has done so for years. She is a teacher calling her own curriculum unreliable, and she does it without any apparent sense of contradiction. “Ignorance of the law is no excuse,” she adds, and Young tells us she says it “without conviction.”

This is the chapter's first quiet signal. Miss MacIntosh's certainties have started saying things she does not entirely believe.

Why the electric lights matter

The tirade runs for pages and Young lets it run. Taken as argument it is crank material, the grumbling of a woman who has decided that a century went wrong. Taken as autobiography it is one of the most exposed passages in the novel.

Every complaint is the same complaint. There is no dark corner left. There is “nowhere a man can hide his ugly face.” God's starlight “left us the privacy in which a poor man may die.” Before all this tampering there was always a lightless alley, a street without lamps, a “bedroom where a man could hide” his face from everyone but God.

Last night a child came into her moonlit bedroom and saw what she had spent a lifetime covering. Miss MacIntosh has not mentioned it and she will not mention it. She is talking about Benjamin Franklin instead. But everything she says about light is about being seen, and everything she says about darkness is about the mercy of not being seen, and she says it for most of a chapter without once saying I.

Young does not underline this. She simply puts the tirade at breakfast the morning after and trusts you.

The ugly woman safe in her husband's arms

The marriage passage is where the defense stops being general.

In the old days, she says, when darkness fell and it certainly did fall, “an ugly woman was safe in her husband’s arms,” since he could not see what he could not touch. He might even think her handsome. Couples undressed in the dark, each being modest. “Many a wife never saw her husband except when he was clothed. Many a husband never saw his wife.” Then the electric lights come on, and a blushing bride is shown up for what she is,

sometimes on the wedding night, sometimes the night before, and look at the divorce rate.

Read this as a joke and it is a good one. Read it as a woman with a mastectomy scar and a bald head explaining why she never married and it is something else entirely. “The wisest men are never married,” she says a few lines later, and moves on.

“Beauty is as beauty does, my dear.” She offers it as folk wisdom. It is the only comfort she has ever been able to give herself, and she is handing it across the breakfast table to a girl who has just learned what it cost.

The igloos

Then, with no transition at all, she tells Vera how to keep house at the top of the world.

Always have two igloos. Keep the permanent one “closed against wind and drifting snow.” Keep “a good supply of frozen seals and” kitchen matches. A new broom sweeps clean. Never build the second igloo on an old ice floe, because it may “move away in a long night’s darkness.” Wait until the ice has stopped moving. “Listen for the crackle of distant ice,” she said, “like the screaming of wild geese.”

And then the sentence the chapter has been circling: “the ice might seem quite firm where we are,” and be in motion “miles behind us or miles ahead.” These appearances are often deceptive. Old “floes have a way of splitting into two. We might lose ourselves. We might lose our sleds and our dogs.”

That is not housekeeping advice. That is a woman describing her own life in the only vocabulary she permits herself, and it is as close to a confession as she comes. Always keep a second shelter. Never trust ground that is not moving yet.

Notice too the small physical detail Young drops in the middle of it. “She coughed into her napkin, and then she seemed to scream.” It is one clause, easily missed, and it belongs with the rasping breath Vera heard in Chapter 22. The performance holds. The body does not.

Covering her hand

Vera's recognition arrives in the sunlight, at the table, in the middle of the geography.

These cosmic subjects, she thinks, the phantasmagoric glaciers and submerged continents and the latitude and longitude of the Austral Islands, are dreams, impersonal and vast, and they cover her hand, “as is said in gambling circles.” They conceal her limitations, the thing missing from the essential human, the thing she does not want Vera to see.

Then comes the harder line. “Of herself, of herself alone, what had she ever said that was personal and sad and revelatory?”

Fourteen years. The woman who raised her, who tested her every morning on rivers and capitals and the first day of creation, has never once told her anything about her own life. Vera notices this for the first time at this breakfast, and it is the notice that makes Chapter

23 a turning point rather than a second helping of Chapter 22. In Chapter 22 Vera watched a performance and wondered whether Miss MacIntosh was all others. Here she works out what the performance is for.

She is always evading something, Vera thinks, something too subtle to evade.

Winter in August

The chapter's last movement belongs to Vera, and it is one of the loveliest things in the novel.

Miss MacIntosh announces that they “must get ready for winter’s blast,” mend the old woolen drawers, keep a nip of brandy for warmth. It is “the cold hand of death for those who are not ready.”

And Vera asks the obvious question. Why are we talking about winter in “August sunlight, heavy with the perfume of rain-washed flowers, and was there to be no season of transition, no gradual change, no autumn, no Indian summer like the Indian summer of the human soul, no time” for farewell before the world goes colorless?

Then she answers herself with a list. Winter wears “its coat of many colors, too,” dimmed though they are: “the bronze of beach grass, the whiteness of snow upon the heads of the blackened spruce and hemlock, the pale iridescence of the seagull’s eye, the purple and mauve and grey and gold of the winged seed heads. There would be the luminous colors of the winter sea like a great opal seen through” fog.

That is the lesson of the birthday night arriving in Vera's own voice, without anyone teaching it to her. A stripped world is not a world without color. It is a world whose colors have gone quiet. She has just watched a woman be stripped down to the bare fact of herself, and this is what she has made of it.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The blind man in the final lines looks like a throwaway joke. “A blind man saw me, certainly, and without electric lights.” It is not a joke. Back in Chapter 3, Vera told us Miss MacIntosh had been “connected with various institutions, a lighthouse for the blind,” and the garden of the blind has been part of the house ever since. It is also the chapter's actual argument, delivered in one sentence after several thousand words of complaint about light bulbs: being truly seen has nothing whatever to do with illumination. The one person who ever saw her could not see.

Watch the doubling. Two igloos. Two lighting systems in the Boston advertisement. Dwarves who dream they are giants and giants who dream they are dwarves. The novel is full of twins, doubles, and second selves, and Miss MacIntosh keeps producing them in pairs without ever noticing she does it.

Watch who she talks to. She would say this to Benjamin Franklin if she met him in the darkness. She would give Thomas Edison a piece of her mind. She would have a word with Caesar, were it her doubtful pleasure. Every argument she wins is with someone who cannot answer. Then turn the page to Chapter 24 and watch Catherine place telephone calls to Augustine and King Canute and Cousin Hannah. Two women in one house, both talking at length to the unreachable, one of them certain she is the sensible one. Young put those chapters side by side deliberately.

For the Curious

Benjamin Franklin

Benjamin Franklin did not invent daylight saving time. In 1784, serving as an envoy in Paris, he published a satirical piece in the Journal de Paris suggesting that Parisians could save a fortune in candles and lamp oil by getting out of bed earlier. He proposed changing habits, not clocks. The clock-changing idea came later, usually credited to the New Zealand entomologist George Hudson in 1895, and was adopted in the United States in 1918 as a wartime fuel measure. So Miss MacIntosh is prosecuting Franklin for a crime he did not commit, while quoting his own early-to-bed maxim back at him as evidence. Young knew exactly what she was doing. The chapter is about testimony that cannot be verified being treated as settled fact.

Thomas Edison and the war

Thomas Edison and the war of the currents. Miss MacIntosh would like a word with Edison, and there was a genuine war over the lighting of the night. Through the late 1880s Edison's direct current system fought George Westinghouse's alternating current for the American market. Edison's side publicized fatal accidents from high-voltage AC lines, funded a campaign to prove AC was lethal, and arranged for the first electric chair to be powered by a Westinghouse generator. By 1892 Edison Electric had merged with its rival Thomson-Houston to form General Electric and the war was over. The last direct current utility in New York City was not shut down until 2007. The bright lights Miss MacIntosh objects to were installed over corpses, which is very nearly her point.

The Slough of Despond

The Slough of Despond is from John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, the bog where Christian sinks under the weight of his own sins on his way to the wicket gate. Young tells us elsewhere that Miss MacIntosh reads Bunyan more than she reads her Bible. It is the right book for her: a plain, practical, doggedly literal allegory in which a man walks toward salvation over difficult ground, checking his footing.

Crossing the Rubicon

Crossing the Rubicon refers to Julius Caesar bringing his army south across a small river in January of 49 BC, an act of irreversible commitment that began a civil war. The phrase has meant the point of no return ever since. Miss MacIntosh reaches for the standard

idiom for irreversibility and then disputes whether it happened at all, or whether there was ever a Caesar. She is denying the existence of a point of no return while sitting three days past her own.

Bayberry candles

Bayberry candles were a colonial American economy, made from the waxy berries of the bayberry shrub, slow to gather and therefore saved for occasions. The custom she is invoking is the one that says a bayberry candle burned down to the socket on Christmas Eve brings food to the larder and gold to the pocket. That is the light she is defending: a candle you burn all the way to the end, once a year, for luck. Not something you switch on.

Common sense

Common sense is a real philosophical school, not just Miss MacIntosh's private religion. Aristotle named the faculty, Thomas Reid built a system on it against Hume and Descartes, Thomas Paine borrowed the phrase for the most influential political pamphlet of the eighteenth century, and G. E. Moore revived it by holding up his hand. Reid's central claim is that what everyone perceives, everyone may reasonably believe, and that the philosophers of his day had wildly overstated the gap between the world and our picture of it. Miss MacIntosh is standing squarely in that tradition when she asks who alive ever saw Caesar. What she does not seem to notice is that she is using Reid's test to dismantle her own lessons.

The closing question

The closing question is Job. Why should light “be given to a man who is in misery,” whose way is hid, whom God hath hedged in: that is Job in the third chapter, asking why the suffering are kept alive at all. Miss MacIntosh has spent an entire chapter complaining about light bulbs and ends by quoting the bleakest question in the Hebrew Bible, then immediately drowns it out with the stars. It is the chapter in miniature. She gets within one sentence of saying what is wrong, and then she reaches for the cosmos and covers her hand.

Chapter 24: After All, How Else Should They Keep Their Jobs?

Research notes: Chapter 24

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Nature, the Sea, and the Cosmos

Symbols: The Sea and Water

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Ancient Egypt · Genesis · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Napoleon and Wellington · Shakespeare · Women's Suffrage

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Chapter 24 marks a shift. After eleven chapters in the intense, close world of the birthday night and its aftermath, Young pulls back the camera. We are still at the breakfast table, still in the morning after, but now Vera's mind moves away from Miss MacIntosh and out into the house, into the servants' quarters, into Catherine's bedroom, into the vast social machinery of imaginary guests and disconnected telephone lines.

Think of this chapter as a wide establishing shot after a long series of close-ups. It shows you the full scale of the world Vera has been living in. And it ends with Vera asking, quietly and without an answer, who on earth she is supposed to turn to.

What actually happens in Chapter 24

Vera's mind, sitting at the breakfast table with Miss MacIntosh, moves through the household. She thinks about the servants, who have absorbed Catherine's dream world so completely that they argue about whether it is Roman in the morning and Greek in the afternoon, polish shoes left out by imaginary guests, wait on Wellington, believe they live in forests of cuckoo clocks, drive Hannibal's elephants over the Alps.

She thinks about Catherine: the horizontal lady who will "die in the midst of her dreams," who discusses her own obsequies endlessly with absent social secretaries, who calls Athens on a telephone connected only to the servants' quarters and gets Rome, who has been trying for years to reach Cousin Hannah on a number that was disconnected long ago.

She thinks about Mr. Spitzer, who is coming again in the evening, "filled with his usual euphemistic certainties" about a Heaven that will unite us all, and utterly uncertain about this earth.

The chapter ends with Vera's question: to whom should she turn, asking the personal questions that burn in her "mind, questions as to the secret purpose of life," love, marriage, reproduction, death? Her imagination wanders "like a dark and formless cloud, seeking" a certitude it might never have.

The servants’ sea change

Young has mentioned the servants throughout the novel, but Chapter 24 gives us our fullest portrait of what Catherine’s household does to ordinary people over time. “After an hour or a year or many years in this employment,” even the most sensible servants undergo what Young calls a sea change. They reach for door knobs that are not door knobs. They open doors that are not doors. They “stagger to and fro chasing illusions like butterflies.”

And yet (and Young gives this its own line, which stops you) after all, “how else should they keep their jobs?”

The servants have adapted. They have entered into Catherine’s spirit because that is the only way to function in this household. The one who polishes imaginary guests’ shoes, the valet who waits on Wellington, the housemaid who speaks only to herself and is several fine ladies simultaneously; these are not mad people. They are people who have found the only workable response to an impossible situation: go along, elaborate, make yourself useful to the dream.

Young is generous about this. She does not mock the servants. She presents their adaptation as logical, even wise. The alternative (refusing the dream, insisting on the real) is Miss MacIntosh’s approach, and we know what that cost her. The servants chose differently. Neither choice is free.

Catherine’s telephone

The image of Catherine as an entire telephone exchange, calling dead numbers and reaching wrong parties, is one of the novel’s great comic inventions and also one of its most moving.

She calls Athens and gets Rome. She calls the Bishop of Hippo and he has just stepped out. She calls the Emperor Hadrian and he has gone into his garden. King Canute is on a long voyage. The Lowells and the Saltonstalls never seem to be home. Cousin Hannah’s number was disconnected long ago. Uncle Ronald is dead. Uncle Bernard died in Moscow carrying a message to the czar.

Her telephone, it turns out, is connected only to the servants’ quarters. She never guesses this. She thinks she is placing transatlantic calls, “calls ship to shore, star to star, these calls from the living to the dead.” She is leaving messages with the second butler who believes he is the Great Emir.

The gap between what Catherine believes she is doing and what she is actually doing is the gap the novel is organized around. She is in her room. She is talking to the servants. She believes she is in communication with the dead, the famous, the cosmic. Young does not decide which of these is more true. The Bishop of Hippo always just stepped out. He may be just around the corner.

Cousin Hannah

This is the first time Cousin Hannah's name appears in the novel, and Young drops it so quietly that you might miss it. Catherine has been trying to reach her on a telephone number that was disconnected long ago. Why had Cousin Hannah never called?

Cousin Hannah is one of the novel's major figures: the Boston feminist, the balloonist, the mountain climber, the militant suffragette known through the seraglios of the East as Al Hamad. She will have her own chapters later, and she is one of Young's most extraordinary characters. But she arrives here first as an absence: a disconnected number, a name Catherine reaches for and cannot find.

Notice it. She will arrive in full later. For now she is a name in a list of unreachable people, and that is where Young wants her to begin: among the dead and the missing and the ones who have sailed away.

To whom should I have turned?

The chapter's final question is the one that closes the long morning after the birthday night. Vera has spent eleven chapters living through the revelation and its aftermath, learning something enormous about the one person she trusted to be solid and ordinary and real. And now, at the breakfast table in the morning sunlight, she asks: who is left?

Not Catherine, who places "her faith only in the unreal." Not the servants, who have adapted to the dream. Not Mr. Spitzer, who is so unsure of himself that he cannot remember his own memories as well as strangers', whose evasions exceed even his own understanding. And not, anymore, Miss MacIntosh in the way Vera once understood her, though she is right there, "coarse-grained and ruddy, her red hair gleaming like another light."

Vera's imagination wanders "like a dark and formless cloud, seeking" a certitude it might never have. Young leaves her there, wandering. The breakfast is over. The novel is about to move on. Vera will keep wandering (across cities, across years, across eight hundred more pages) looking for Miss MacIntosh in harbor cities and "shelters for lost souls," and finding, instead, the whole of America.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The novel is about to open dramatically. Chapter 25 and beyond will introduce new characters and new storylines, and you will sometimes feel as if you have lost the thread entirely. You have not. Young is building a wheel. In her own words, "I always thought of Miss MacIntosh as the center of the wheel, the hub," with the other characters as "the spokes" (in a 1989 conversation with Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs). Every digression, every new character, every detour leads back to that center, and to the question Vera cannot stop asking: what is real, what is illusion, and what do we do when

the only person who taught us the difference turns out to have been something other than we thought?

Catherine's phrase for Mr. Spitzer, "a roundhouse of the trains which run no more," is one of the novel's great compressed portraits of a character. Mr. Spitzer as a building designed to house trains that no longer run, a structure whose purpose has been overtaken by time, whose tracks are crossed in eternal darkness, whose signal lights show red where they should show green. It is tender and precise and entirely in Catherine's voice.

The gardener who believes he is the spouse to Potiphar is a detail worth holding. In the book of Genesis, Potiphar is the Egyptian captain whose wife falsely accuses Joseph of assault: a story about betrayal, false witness, and the person who tells the wrong story about another. Young places one of the servants inside that story without comment. In this household, everyone is inside a story. The question is always which one.

For the Curious

The Bishop of Hippo

The Bishop of Hippo is Augustine of Hippo: Saint Augustine, one of the most influential theologians in Western Christianity, author of the Confessions and The City of God. Catherine has left messages for him. He has always just stepped out. This is Young at her most quietly blasphemous: the greatest theologian of the Western church, the man who wrote about the restless heart that cannot rest until it rests in God, is simply not available to take Catherine's call. He is expected back in an hour.

King Canute

King Canute, whom Catherine calls and who has gone on a long voyage, is best known for the legend in which he commanded the tide to stop, usually understood as a demonstration of the limits of royal power, a king showing his courtiers that not even a king can command the sea. Catherine, living inside a house that is constantly threatened by the sea, constantly hearing the waves and the bells of sunken ships, calling a king who tried to stop the tide and finding him permanently unavailable, is doing what she always does: reaching for the figure who tried to impose order on chaos, and finding him gone.

Cousin Wilbur

Cousin Wilbur, who disappeared in his sailing boat and never returned, is mentioned here alongside Uncle Ronald who is dead and Uncle Bernard who died in Moscow. Young scatters these brief family obituaries through the novel the way the sea scatters wreckage along the shore: casually, specifically, without ceremony. Each one is a life. Each one is gone. Catherine keeps trying to call them.

The sea change Young invokes to

The sea change Young invokes to describe what happens to the servants is drawn from Shakespeare's The Tempest, in which Ariel sings that a drowned man has undergone a sea change into something rich and strange. Young uses it here for the servants' transformation from ordinary people into participants in Catherine's dream world. The change is rich and strange, and it is irreversible. Once you have lived long enough in this house, you reach for door knobs that are not there.

Chapter 25: Mr. Spitzer Had Been Told That Mr. Spitzer Was Dead

Research notes: Chapter 25

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Mr. Chandelier · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Death and Mortality

Symbols: Mirrors and Reflections

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Judaism · Suicide in History and Literature

Chapter 25 is the most sustained portrait of Mr. Spitzer we have had yet, and it arrives with a gift: at last, in full detail, we learn exactly how Peron died. We also learn what Mr. Spitzer did the day he walked through a glass wall and was told, afterward, that he was dead.

This chapter is one of the funniest in the novel, and also one of the saddest. Young achieves both simultaneously, which is her particular genius, and nowhere more clearly than here.

What actually happens in Chapter 25

Still at the breakfast table, still in the morning light, Vera's mind moves through everything she knows about Mr. Spitzer. Young gives us the full account: his relationship with Catherine, his dead brother Peron, his habits and hesitations, his theory of his own existence.

We learn that Peron fell "through a glass window on the fourteenth floor of an office building." Mr. Spitzer cannot decide whether it was suicide or accident. Perhaps Peron, rushing impetuously ahead, simply mistook "a window for a door. If the floor level had continued on the other side," Peron would have lived. It didn't. He fell through "the first gleamings of the first stars" to the pavement below, screaming as he recognized, too late, the void.

We learn that Mr. Spitzer once walked through a glass wall in another lawyer's office. He felt nothing, heard nothing, noticed nothing. His valet found glass particles behind his ears that evening, like the prisms of a chandelier. Days later, he received a bill for the wall. He ignored it. More bills came, and threatening letters. Finally, seething with an uncharacteristic fury, he tried to collect for his own discomfort. He was told by a "desk clerk, that Mr. Spitzer was dead, having departed this mortal life several years ago." His arguments fell upon the empty air.

The hesitant suicide

Young gives Mr. Spitzer one of her most precise self-descriptions in this chapter: he is not “the sudden, untimely suicide as his brother had been but rather the hesitant suicide who takes his luxurious time and considers, weighs and measures all the lost possibilities and disappointments until life ends upon its own account without anyone’s permission or objection or desire.”

This is one of the most exact things Young says about anyone in the novel. Peron was the decisive one: “quick to live, quick to die,” taking the last chance when the odds were all against him. Mr. Spitzer is the other kind: the man who rehearses his ultimate passage so many times, dying so many fugitive deaths, that when the final one comes he hopes it will be imperceptible, that no one will notice when quietly he slips away.

He has been dying slowly since his brother died. Perhaps, he suspects, since before. He cannot remember exactly when he started. He has gained weight as his sorrow has “increased. A fat man, well protected by his dreaming flesh,” treading softly where angels fear to rush ahead, never knowing whether the next step will bring stairway or dissolving stairway or chasm.

And he is proud, ridiculously and tenderly proud, of his little accidents. He has walked through a glass wall and survived. Peron walked through a window and did not. Mr. Spitzer considers this the essential difference between them.

How Peron died

The account of Peron’s death is the most specific thing Mr. Spitzer allows himself to know about it, and even here he cannot hold it steady. It shifts between suicide and accident in the same paragraph, Young giving us Mr. Spitzer’s mind working the question from every angle and arriving at no conclusion.

What is certain: Peron rushed impetuously ahead. The window was on the fourteenth floor. The building “looked out only upon the pavements of the evening clouds, the first gleamings of the first stars.” He screamed as he fell, recognizing too late “the void, the pavement of the city, and his nullification so final, so complete that he had perhaps hardly been able to judge” it.

What is uncertain: whether he knew. Perhaps, Mr. Spitzer reasons carefully, Peron simply mistook the window for a door, as Mr. Spitzer himself once mistook a door for a window. Perhaps he was not suicidal at all but only, in one bright disoriented moment, wrong about where the floor was. “If the floor level had continued,” he would have lived and carried on with his usual pleasures.

Mr. Spitzer cannot settle this. To decide it was an accident would relieve him of something. To decide it was suicide would give Peron’s death a meaning, a choice, a finality that Mr. Spitzer cannot quite claim for his own life. Either way, it was Joachim who has had to think so much about death, beautiful death, all these years since. Peron, Mr. Spitzer thinks, “would never know that he was dead until the question was asked, and he would reply, smiling in his grave!”

The glass wall

Mr. Spitzer walks through a glass wall and leaves a hole in it that he cannot remember making. He feels nothing. He hears nothing. He goes on about his errands. His valet finds the glass behind his ears like chandelier prisms at the end of the day.

Young plays this for comedy and she earns every laugh. The bills arrive. Mr. Spitzer ignores them. More bills. Threatening letters from the other lawyer. Finally, and this is where Young lets us see a flash of Peron in Joachim, he loses his patience. There is still, it seems, a spark of life in Mr. Spitzer. He decides to collect for his discomfort. He presents himself as the aggrieved party.

He is told he is dead.

The desk clerk is not wrong, exactly. Mr. Spitzer has been dying by degrees since his brother died. He has been mistaken for his brother on streets, at race tracks, at parimutuel windows. He has been allowing people to believe he is Peron. He has been living in his brother's clothes, with his brother's cufflinks, drinking his brother's coffee, living in his brother's house of wreckage. Of course the desk clerk thinks he is dead. The living Mr. Spitzer has made every possible effort to become a ghost. And his arguments fell upon the empty air. Young ends the episode there. The bill is never paid. The glass wall stays broken. Mr. Spitzer, told he is dead, has no further recourse. He was the one who should have died.

What Mr. Spitzer finds in Catherine

Young gives us something unexpected near the chapter's center: Mr. Spitzer's account of why he keeps coming to Catherine's bedside, year after year, evening after evening. It is not entirely about love, or not only.

He has found in Catherine "the bulwark of his own greater delicacy." She accuses him of falsehood, theft, unsound perceptions, faulty memories. She tells him he is dead, that he has been buried, that he is married to the worm. And through all of this, paradoxically, he gains a "sense of his own precarious being." Without "her constant, fickle reminder that he" exists (even if only as a ghost, even if only to be accused of things) "he might have forgotten both brothers, the living and the" dead.

She needs him to be real enough to argue with. He needs her to insist that he exists, even wrongly. They sustain each other's reality through mutual incomprehension. It is one of the novel's strangest and most honest portraits of what keeps two people together.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The glass wall is not the last time Mr. Spitzer will walk through something that should stop him and feel nothing. Watch for the pattern: he moves through barriers that break around

him, leaving damage he does not register, continuing on about his errands. It is his way of being in the world. He is always the one who survived the window.

The twin golden cradles beside the twin iron beds in Mr. Spitzer's bedroom (his and Peron's, from infancy) are one of the novel's most precise images of what grief looks like lived in daily. He would sooner have parted from his life than from those cradles. They remind him of infancy and death. Everything in his house is simultaneously the beginning and the end.

Mr. Spitzer's description of the only music worth hearing as the music he has "never heard, perhaps his own which he had never written, and the only friend" as the friend he has "never met, and the only loves" as the loves he has never loved; these are the novel's statement of his condition in its most compressed form. He is a man defined entirely by absence. The unwritten score. The unlived life. The brother who should have lived.

For the Curious

The fourteenth floor from

The fourteenth floor from which Peron fell mirrors the fourteenth birthday on which Vera's world changed. Young uses the number fourteen as a hinge in both lives: the moment at which something falls through, the floor that does not continue. This is the kind of structural rhyme Young plants without comment and trusts the attentive reader to find.

Mr. Spitzer's full name

Mr. Spitzer's full name, Joachim, appears in this chapter more clearly than it has before. Joachim is a Hebrew name meaning God will establish or God raises up. His brother Peron's name is less common but appears in several Romance language traditions. Young chose these names with her usual deliberateness. Joachim, the one God will establish, is the one still living, barely, by inches. The one who raises himself up each morning and puts on his brother's cufflinks and goes out to perform his dusty legal errands.

The lost heir whose case Mr. Spitzer

The lost heir whose case Mr. Spitzer was presenting when he walked through the glass wall (a man whose famous actress mother "denied that he was her son," with no estate involved) is one of the novel's many figures of disputed parentage and unacknowledged existence. Mr. Spitzer has been writing painstaking letters on his behalf, presenting his pretentious claims. No estate is involved. There is nothing to inherit. Mr. Spitzer champions him anyway. This is what Mr. Spitzer does: he locates the lost heirs of nothing and argues their case.

The glass particles behind Mr. Spitzer's ears

The glass particles behind Mr. Spitzer's ears, found by the old clam-digger at the end of the day like the prisms of a chandelier, are one of the novel's most quietly perfect images.

Mr. Chandelier presides over Catherine’s bedroom with his seven bent flames. And here is Mr. Spitzer coming home from a day of errands with chandelier glass behind his ears, carrying fragments of the barrier he walked through without knowing it. He is always bringing pieces of the broken world back with him, and never noticing.

Chapter 26: The Department of the Dead

Research notes: Chapter 26

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Symbols: Moon and Stars · Twins and Doubles

Philosophy: Hinduism · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Music and Composers

Chapter 26 continues where Chapter 25 left off (still inside Mr. Spitzer's world, still at the breakfast table in Vera's mind) but it shifts the angle. Where Chapter 25 gave us the key events of Mr. Spitzer's life, Chapter 26 gives us his philosophy. His professional world. His theory of heaven. His understanding of what separated him from his brother, and what that separation cost.

It is a long, ruminative chapter, and it rewards slow reading. Young is building Mr. Spitzer into one of literature's great portraits of a certain kind of man: the faithful one, the patient one, the one who stayed.

What actually happens in Chapter 26

Vera continues her meditation on Mr. Spitzer. Young takes us into his professional life first: he is a lawyer of the dead, his department "the hidden past, the wills and deeds" and dusty archives, the secret drawers of old houses haunted by those who are gone. He has spent his career locating lost heirs, heirs who turned out to be heiresses, heiresses who turned out to be heirs, wandering derelicts shipwrecked on other coasts, people who could not be found or would not be.

We get the story of the two Boston spinsters, each the reincarnation of Cleopatra, each with a Sphinx in her garden, both clients of Mr. Spitzer, one dying and leaving everything to her "Siamese cats, with the provision that the ancient caretaker should live in her house and enjoy an annual income as long as the cats lived." The cats, having nine lives each, appear to be flourishing indefinitely.

Then the chapter turns to the question at its center: if Peron had lived and Joachim had died, what would Peron have done? Would he have come faithfully to Catherine's bedside, year after year, bringing winter violets plucked from secret places? Would he have finished Mr. Spitzer's unwritten music, even adding a hesitant note? Young's answer, delivered through Mr. Spitzer's own understanding, is no. Peron would have swept Catherine into the living sunlight, that "magnificent moment of defeat, even though the living sunlight might be" her death.

The chapter ends with Mr. Spitzer contemplating the lower world, the one that lies just under the surface of life, acknowledging "that in order to reach the upper world, one must first travel through the lower world, visiting all streets, lanes, alleys, and the journey might be endless."

The department of the dead

Mr. Spitzer's professional world is a perfect mirror of his personal one. He works in the hidden past: the wills departments, the dusty archives, the pigeon-holes and secret drawers of dead people's houses. He is always entering old houses, "searching through old secretaries in dim, ghost-haunted rooms where he had felt that at any minute the living might appear."

He has come to doubt that there should be any real heirs whatsoever, any real property handed down in golden perpetuity. There have been so many lost heirs, secret sons and daughters, heirs who turned out to be heiresses. He has come to feel that even "our features, our hair, our eyes, our" hands; these properties too have been confused in metamorphic storms, and are "very, very makeshift, very uncertain, the properties" of a dream.

This is Mr. Spitzer's professional conclusion applied to the question of identity itself. We do not even inherit our own faces reliably. The self we believe we own is as disputed as any estate, as likely to have a secret claimant, as likely to turn out to belong to someone else.

The two Cleopatras

The story of the two Boston spinsters (rival beauties in youth, rival reincarnations of Cleopatra in old age, rival Sphinxes in adjacent gardens, both clients of Mr. Spitzer) is one of the novel's great small comic passages, and Young gives it more space than you might expect.

The one who dies leaves everything "to her innumerable Siamese cats, with the provision that the ancient caretaker should live in her house and enjoy an annual income as long as the cats lived." The cats, he notes with a sighing remark, each having nine lives, appear to have suffered no deaths whatsoever. He last visited several years ago. The old caretaker had since died and been replaced. The cats were flourishing. A cat walked up and down the piano keys playing a tune from "one of the more obscure eighteenth-century musical composers." This is Young doing what she does so well: a miniature of the novel's larger concerns (contested identity, immortal pretensions, the faithful guardian of someone else's estate, the music that continues without human hand) compressed into a cat story told to amuse a dying woman. Mr. Spitzer is not sure he is not teasing Catherine. He is probably not sure he is not teasing himself.

What Peron would not have done

The chapter's most important passage is Mr. Spitzer's extended meditation on what Peron would have done if their positions had been reversed: if Joachim had died and Peron had lived.

He "would not have sat up all night with any corpse." He would not have brought winter violets from secret places in the whirling snow. He would not have endured Catherine's pleasure in ignoring him. He would not have finished Mr. Spitzer's music or attempted to

add a hesitant note. He would have swept Catherine out into the living sunlight: one magnificent moment, even if it killed her beauty, even if it killed her.

Peron cared only, it seemed, for old hags, Mr. Spitzer says with painful candor. Catherine holds it against Mr. Spitzer that he did not rescue her. She yearns “for her escape from this illness.” She would rather have been swept away and died in the sunlight than preserved indefinitely in the dark.

And Mr. Spitzer knows this. He has always known it. He is the wrong brother. His faithfulness, his patience, his undying love; these are exactly what she does not want. She wanted Peron’s impetuous, careless, finite love. She got Joachim’s infinite, cautious, immortal devotion instead.

This is the novel’s most heartbreaking statement of the Spitzer situation: the faithful one is faithful precisely because he cannot give her what she wants, and the one who could give it to her is dead.

Mr. Spitzer’s heaven

Near the chapter’s center, Mr. Spitzer offers his vision of what heaven should be, and it is completely in character: perfect oblivion. All souls equal when all are dead. “No rivalry between person and person, none between the divisions of self. There should be no immortal derangement as of this present world with all its stains and cracks and flaws.” Complete forgetting, not Catherine’s complete memory, but the opposite: the silence that “requires neither instruments nor voices, the heavenly harmonies forever fixed above the floods of” dark time.

Mr. Spitzer wants, above all things, to stop being himself. Or rather, to stop being both of them. He believes in “no hell more than this present individual life already” affords. He is not sure that heaven is a place so much as the state when we “have completely forgotten who we were, when we” have been united “as equal brothers, one and the same.”

One and the same. The twin who was always divided wanting, at the last, to be undivided. Not Joachim, not Peron, not the one who survived and not the one who fell. Just the silence where neither needs to be remembered.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Mr. Spitzer’s meditation on the lower world at the chapter’s end (the one that lies under this world, “close to the surface of life,” full of thieves and painted street women and dark lanes) points forward to chapters that will take us into exactly those places. The novel is about to widen its geography considerably. Remember that Mr. Spitzer believes you must travel the lower world to reach the upper one, and that the journey might be endless.

Catherine’s desire to be swept into the living sunlight, even at the cost of her life, is one of the novel’s great withheld actions. Mr. Spitzer cannot do it. He knows only the darkness

and the night. This is what he means when he says his love is immortal: it is precisely because it cannot be enacted in mortal life. The love that can be acted on belongs to Peron. The love that survives Peron belongs to Joachim. Neither is what Catherine wants.

The lost heirs Mr. Spitzer spends his professional life locating (heirs who turned out to be heiresses, heiresses who turned out to be heirs, people who inherited features that were not quite theirs) are a professional echo of the Miss MacIntosh sequence. Everyone in this novel is the uncertain heir of a self they did not fully choose. Mr. Spitzer, whose profession is to locate such people and establish their claims, cannot quite locate himself.

For the Curious

The two rival Cleopatras with their

The two rival Cleopatras with their rival Sphinxes in adjacent Boston gardens is one of Young's most compressed satirical portraits of New England aristocratic eccentricity. The detail that Mr. Spitzer was the lawyer for both of them simultaneously (both rival queens, both rival Sphinxes) is the heart of the joke. He has spent his entire career serving people whose claims on reality are disputed, including their claims on their own identities. He is perfectly suited to this work.

The cat playing a tune from one

The cat playing a tune from "one of the more obscure eighteenth-century musical composers" on the dead woman's piano keys is not incidental. The obscure eighteenth-century composer echoes Mr. Spitzer's own situation: the musician who wrote for no mortal ear, whose compositions were played to empty halls. Now a cat, with no musical training and no awareness of what it is doing, plays the notes. The music continues. The composer is forgotten. Young does not identify the tune.

The phrase heirs

The phrase "heirs who had been heiresses, heiresses who had been heirs" appears in Mr. Spitzer's meditation on the properties of the dead, delivered with Mr. Spitzer's particular careful vagueness. Young places it among confused features and makeshift identities and properties of a dream. The legal language of inheritance and the language of embodied identity are treated as the same kind of uncertainty. Who inherits what is always, in this novel, a question that cannot be cleanly resolved. Mr. Spitzer's belief that "perfect life should be perfect death," and that "one should not die while one should live. One should not live while one should die," is the chapter's most concentrated statement of his condition. He has been dying since his brother died. He has been living in his brother's life. He cannot tell anymore which one is which. Perfect life would be the moment when the confusion ends, not because one of them wins, but because both of them finally stop.

Chapter 27: The Two Watches

Research notes: Chapter 27

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: The Search for Meaning

Symbols: Clocks and Watches · Twins and Doubles

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Astronomy · Deafness and Sign Language · Suicide in History and Literature

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Chapter 27 completes the three-chapter portrait of Mr. Spitzer that began in Chapter 25. We are still at the breakfast table, still inside Vera's meditation, and Young is still deepening our understanding of Mr. Spitzer before the novel moves outward to other characters and other lives.

This chapter is quieter than the previous two. It circles around a single image: the two watches, one ticking and one broken. And it gives us the most precise account yet of what Mr. Spitzer is actually like as a presence in the world: ponderously dignified, perpetually late, always caught in revolving doors and between traffic streams, walking through glass walls and barely noticing, asked by a stranger on a crowded street if he wants to die.

What actually happens in Chapter 27

Vera continues her meditation on Mr. Spitzer. Young builds him outward from the inside: his preference for isolation and neutrality, his knowledge of his own deficiencies, his habit of carrying calling cards and an out-dated passport and scrolls of silent music so that, if found among the drowned women and fallen men of a city morgue, he might be identified as himself and distinguished from his brother.

The chapter's center is the two watches. Mr. Spitzer wears his dead brother's wristwatch, which is accurate and fine, used by Peron for timing horses at the races. His own identical watch is broken: its crystal shattered, its wheels rusted, its mechanism clogged with dust, stopped long ago, perhaps "several days after his brother's death," perhaps several days before. He has recently found it again behind bottles and scrolls on his dressing table and begun wearing it on his left wrist, under his cuff, as a reminder that his brother's life was brief.

The chapter ends with Mr. Spitzer being escorted through traffic by a stranger who asks if he wants to die. He replies in the negative while "shaking his head in the affirmative." The stranger leads him safely across.

The two watches

The image of the two watches is one of the novel's most precise and most economical symbols, and Young gives it the space it deserves.

Peron's watch, now on Mr. Spitzer's wrist, is intact, accurate, excellent for timing horses. Peron removed it thoughtfully before jumping; this detail, Young notes carefully, destroys "in some people's minds, the hypothesis of an impulsive, thoughtless suicide." A man who removes his watch before jumping has planned something. Or at least has cared about the watch. Mr. Spitzer, who has been equivocating about whether Peron's death was an accident or choice, finds himself forced to acknowledge: the watch was removed. Deliberately. It ticks on now on Joachim's trembling wrist, marking "the course of the inaccurate planets, the recurring years, the unknown flow of time."

Mr. Spitzer's own watch, now on his left wrist under his cuff, is broken. Crystal shattered. Wheels rusted. Mechanism clogged with dust. It stopped around the time of Peron's death; he cannot remember if it was before or after, having been in a state of shock that negated personal memory. He may have fainted while walking under a light snowfall "at about the time of his brother's death, perhaps through sympathy, for they had always suffered" "the same accidents, one not falling unless the other fell."

So: the living brother wears the dead one's running watch and his own broken watch simultaneously. The time that moves is Peron's. The time that stopped is Joachim's. He tells time by his brother's clock and carries the evidence of his own stopped life against his skin.

His paraphernalia

Young gives us, in this chapter, the full inventory of what Mr. Spitzer carries on his person at all times. It is a list worth holding:

His flowing cape of darkness. His high silk hat. His black necktie. A rosebud with maidenhair. Numerous calling cards. "An out-dated passport for a journey he" has not taken and has not thought of taking. Scrolls of silent music, "perhaps several abandoned beginnings, mere preludes, perhaps several tentative endings, mere epilogues to the great body of his uncreated work, unfinished epithalamiums and dirges and vast recessionals." Notes for voiceless choirs, tongueless nightingales, deaf listeners.

He carries this paraphernalia so that if he is ever found "in a city morgue among the drowned women and the fallen men," he can be identified. He can be distinguished from his brother. The calling cards, the passport, the scrolls of music; these are his proof of existing as himself and not as Peron. They are the documents of a man who is not sure he will be recognizable without them.

The epithalamiums are wedding songs. The dirges are for the dead. The recessionals are for departures. Mr. Spitzer carries, in his pockets, music for occasions he has never attended and will never attend: the wedding that did not happen, the funeral that is always pending, the departure that is always coming. He writes the music for the life he did not live.

The dignity question

Near the chapter's end, Young gives us one of the most endearing observations about Mr. Spitzer in the novel: there is probably nothing he fears "so much as the loss of his dignity, that he might seem ridiculous in other people's eyes."

And then, immediately: he is always caught in revolving doors. He is always caught between traffic streams, always crossing the street just when the red light turns green. He is afraid of icy pavements and polished floors and the crystalline glare of a half-dark sky. He is always being held over from one chord into the next, always experiencing the blurring of effects that produces a terrible discord where he expected a concord.

Young lets these two things stand side by side without resolution: his profound concern for dignity, and his complete inability to move through the world without incident. He is ponderously proud of having walked through a glass wall and survived. He chuckles softly about the desk clerk who told him he was dead. He considers it a joke he played. And then he crosses the street at the wrong moment and a stranger has to ask him if he wants to die and lead him safely through the traffic.

He replies in the negative while "shaking his head in the affirmative." Young does not comment. She does not need to.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

The novel's great expansion is close. Mr. Spitzer stays at the center through Chapter 29, and then, with Cousin Hannah in Chapter 30, we enter the wider landscape of American life that Young has been preparing us for since Chapter 1. New characters, new geographies, new obsessions. The Miss MacIntosh sequence and the Spitzer portrait are your foundation. Every new character you meet will rhyme, in some way, with what you have learned here.

The "out-dated passport for a journey" not taken is one of the novel's small perfect images of Mr. Spitzer's suspended life. He is prepared for a departure that never comes. He carries the credential for a crossing that he has not thought of making. It has lapsed, and yet he keeps it on his person, as if one day the moment might arrive. Mr. Spitzer is always almost ready to leave.

The detail that "one not falling unless the other fell," the twins sharing their accidents through sympathy, is the chapter's most concentrated statement of what it means to be a twin who survives. Mr. Spitzer may have fainted at the moment of Peron's death. His watch may have stopped then. He fell without dying; Peron fell and did not survive the fall. They shared the accident. One got up and one did not.

For the Curious

The epithalamium

The epithalamium is a classical poetic form: a song or poem written for a bride and groom on their wedding night. Its origins are Greek; Sappho wrote famous epithalamia; the form runs through Western literary tradition up to Spenser and beyond. Mr. Spitzer carries unfinished wedding songs in his pocket. He was the one who offered his passive hand in marriage to Catherine and was refused. He has been writing the wedding music for a ceremony that never took place. It is unfinished because he could never get to the part that comes after the refusal.

The recessional

The recessional, the music played “during the recession of the clergy and choir from the chancel to the robing” room, is the music of departure, of the congregation filing out after the service is over. Mr. Spitzer writes vast recessionals. He is always composing the music for after things end. He has been living in the aftermath of Peron’s death for so long that departure is the only occasion he knows how to score.

Peron’s removal of his watch before jumping

Peron’s removal of his watch before jumping is a detail Young plants with deliberate care. In the legal world Mr. Spitzer inhabits, it matters enormously whether a death was accidental or intentional, for insurance purposes, for estate settlement, for the assignment of guilt. A man who removes his watch before jumping has made a choice. The watch is now on Mr. Spitzer’s wrist, ticking, telling time that belongs to the dead man. He cannot ignore what the watch implies. He does not want to know what it implies. Both are true.

The stranger

The stranger who escorts Mr. Spitzer through traffic (asking first if he wants to die, accepting the ambiguous answer, leading him safely across) is the chapter’s most compressed image of how Mr. Spitzer moves through the world: never quite alone, never quite able to navigate without assistance, always found at the dangerous crossing by someone who asks the right question and receives the wrong answer and helps him anyway.

Chapter 28: Impalpable Butterflies

Research notes: Chapter 28

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Esther Longtree · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Mr. Weed · Peron Spitzer

Symbols: Butterflies and Moths

Philosophy: Aristotle · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Stoicism

Allusions: Deafness and Sign Language · Exploration and the Poles · Greek Mythology · The History of Opium

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Chapter 28 continues the extended Spitzer sequence, which runs through Chapter 29, and it is one of the most beautiful chapters in the novel. It does something Young has been saving: it gives Mr. Spitzer a passion. Not the silent music, not the legal errands, not the faithful evening visits. Something more intimate and more surprising: butterflies.

This is a short chapter, and the butterflies matter.

What actually happens in Chapter 28

The chapter opens with Mr. Spitzer acknowledging that he may be, even in his own awareness, nothing more than one of Catherine's hallucinations: a bearded Russian bishop, an Antarctic mountain range in a lace cape, "the headless horseman fording a brook." His life, except for these enchanted evenings, has "been a dark and empty plain." It is only here, still denied and turned away, that he is renewed.

Young then gives us the thing Mr. Spitzer has given up: his butterfly collection. During Peron's life, he had collected "beautiful butterflies of every coloration and kind." Brimstone-colored ones burning like torpid flames. Bejeweled ones precious to him beyond jewels or mosaic emperors. He had maintained "a large correspondence with other meditative butterfly hunters." He had watched the "birth of a butterfly, the first tremblings of the feeble, dew-lit wings as they unfolded") and its death. He had observed that if one were called away at the crucial moment, one might never know whether one had seen a beginning or an end.

He has not added to his collection in many years. Many things came "to an end on the day of Peron's devastating funeral, including, of course, his own capacious heart, the living heart, his way of life or most of it." But sometimes, "when his memory of his brother" grows dim, he still remembers "the phenomenal world of the butterfly." Seas of twinkling yellow flowers. "Clouds of yellow butterflies like flowers floating in the pale morning air." The butterfly on the flower, identical to the flower, twin to twin, until the flower flew away and the winged petals remained.

Mr. Spitzer and his butterflies

The butterfly collection is not incidental. In European literary and philosophical tradition, the butterfly, the psyche in Greek, has been the symbol of the soul since antiquity. Mr. Spitzer, who collects souls for a living in the legal sense (the lost heirs, the disputed estates, the dead people's properties) collected actual butterflies with the same meditative scrupulousness. It was his version of his silent music: an attempt to pin down something ephemeral, to hold the beautiful and fleeting still long enough to study it.

The key observation is what the butterflies showed him: that if you "watched at only a certain moment, if one were suddenly called away in the midst of these proceedings, one should never know whether it was death or birth, beginning or end." "The manifestations of birth and death were the same in this realm." This is what first caused him to "embark upon his studies of impalpable butterflies."

Mr. Spitzer began collecting butterflies because he could not tell whether they were dying or being born. He has spent his entire life unable to tell whether Peron's fall was an ending or a kind of beginning. Whether his own continued existence is a life or a prolonged dying. Whether the moment he is living is the first trembling of the wings or the last. The butterfly collection was his attempt to learn to distinguish these things. He never quite learned. He gave it up two or three years after Peron died.

The contrast with Peron

Young uses this chapter to draw the sharpest contrast yet between the two brothers, and she does it through their relationship to time.

Peron cared for the actual, the present, the immediate. "The wastrel wheels of chance, the games of loaded dice, the" swift horses, the present hour that sufficed. He had "no patience to wait for the caterpillar to become the butterfly." "He had given no thought to a future life." The present moment was enough, or so it had seemed. Young's qualification is quiet but exact: or so it had seemed. We know now that Peron removed his watch before jumping. Whatever he thought about the future, he thought about it enough to care for the timepiece.

"Mr. Spitzer had thought only of the impossible future." He watched the caterpillar. He timed the butterfly's birth. He composed music for voiceless choirs and deaf listeners. He carried "an out-dated passport for a journey he had not taken." He is the man who waits, who watches, who outlives the moment he was prepared for.

And yet, Young plants this with precision, it is Mr. Spitzer who still occasionally remembers "the phenomenal world of the butterfly." The living heart may have stopped on the day of Peron's funeral. But the memory "of yellow butterflies like flowers floating in the pale morning air" is still there, when he allows himself to find it.

Why Catherine needs him

The chapter opens with a passage about why Mr. Spitzer keeps coming, and Young gives it more weight here than she has before. He finds in Catherine's house "his only sense of his unbroken continuity in life." No chair has changed its place for years. There are "these ethereal gleamings of gold and silver," these intricately woven bellropes, "these candle flames reflected in dark Venetian mirrors." The constancy of her unchanging world is, paradoxically, what makes him feel continuous.

Everything outside her room shifts and disorients him: glass walls, wrong cities, revolving doors, the dead man's watch ticking on his wrist. In here, the same candles, the same mirrors, the same denial and the same welcome. He is renewed by her obtuse faith that he will always return. She denies his reality and she counts on it simultaneously. Both are necessary to him.

And he still remembers her as she was in his youth. He comes each evening to see a woman who has not moved in decades, a woman who is preserved by opium and darkness and the unchanged arrangement of her furniture. For a man whose own life stopped when his brother died, she is the only continuity he has.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Chapter 29 picks up the butterflies where this chapter leaves them. Then, with Cousin Hannah in Chapter 30, the novel begins its great expansion into the wider world. You will meet Esther Longtree, Cousin Hannah, Titus Bonebreaker, the hangman Mr. Weed, the featherweight champion, many others. Young has spent twenty-eight chapters building you a set of lenses: Miss MacIntosh's insistence on the real, Catherine's faith in the unreal, Mr. Spitzer's inability to tell the difference. Every new character will be refracted through these lenses.

The butterfly as a symbol of the soul, the psyche, will keep reappearing throughout the novel. Young uses it the way she uses most of her symbols: repeatedly, lightly, from different angles. When you see a butterfly in the chapters ahead, it carries the weight of what Mr. Spitzer learned watching them: that at a certain moment, you cannot tell birth from death, beginning from ending, the first trembling from the last.

Young uses the phrase *the living heart* to mark exactly what Peron's death took from Mr. Spitzer: not his life, which continues, but the living part of his heart, its capacity for passion and pursuit. The butterfly collection was the living heart's expression. The silent music, the legal errands, the faithful evening visits; these are what the surviving heart can still manage. It is not nothing. But it is not the living heart.

For the Curious

The butterfly as psyche

The butterfly as psyche, the Greek word for both butterfly and soul, is one of the oldest symbols in Western tradition. Aristotle used the butterfly as the final stage of metamorphosis in his biological writings. The Stoics used it as a symbol of the soul's release from the body at death. Young's Mr. Spitzer, collecting these impalpable creatures, pinning them in glass cases, maintaining "correspondence with other meditative butterfly hunters," is doing what philosophers have always done with the idea of the soul: trying to catch it still enough to examine it, knowing it will always escape.

The Hesperides

The Hesperides, which Young names among the butterfly varieties Mr. Spitzer collected, are in Greek mythology the nymphs who guard a garden at the western edge of the world, where the tree of golden apples grows. Their name means daughters of the evening. Mr. Spitzer has been collecting spirit messengers named for the guardians of a garden that exists at the world's end, in the last light before dark. This is not accidental.

The phenomenon Mr. Spitzer describes

The phenomenon Mr. Spitzer describes (where "the butterfly perching upon the flower" becomes identical to the flower, twin to twin, until the flower flies away and the winged petals remain) is a real observational puzzle that has fascinated naturalists. Certain species of butterfly achieve near-perfect mimicry of the flowers they rest on. Young takes this biological fact and makes it Mr. Spitzer's founding mystery: the creature and its world so perfectly matched that you cannot tell them apart, until one of them moves.

The large correspondence with other meditative butterfly hunters

The "large correspondence with other meditative butterfly hunters" is one of the novel's most touching small details. Mr. Spitzer, the most isolated of men, the one who prefers darkness and silence and neutrality, maintained for years a network of fellow collectors. He wrote letters. He received letters. About butterflies. About "the manifestations of birth and death" in this realm. It was the only community he ever sought. He gave it up when Peron died, along with everything else that required him to reach toward the living world.

Chapter 29: Butterflies of Resurrection

Research notes: Chapter 29

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Peron Spitzer

Themes: The Search for Meaning

Symbols: Butterflies and Moths · Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Exploration and the Poles · Gambling and Playing Cards · Homer's Epics

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Chapter 29 is the longest in the Spitzer sequence and one of the most ambitious chapters in the novel. Young gives Mr. Spitzer the floor entirely, and what he does with it is extraordinary: he speaks about butterflies for the length of a short novella, and in doing so, speaks about everything, death, resurrection, the soul, God, his brother, his grief, the question of whether any life is truly one's own.

This is the chapter where Young earns Mr. Spitzer's full stature as a character. He arrives here as the novel's most profound thinker, its secret philosopher, its dark atheist who knows more about the life beyond the grave than anyone, because he has been living in the aftermath of death for so long that the two worlds have merged.

The chapter is long and the prose is dense. Let it wash over you. You will not catch every butterfly name or classical allusion on a first reading. You are not supposed to. Let the accumulation do its work.

What actually happens in Chapter 29

Mr. Spitzer speaks about butterflies. He speaks about the difficulty of distinguishing butterfly from moth, and how this mirrors the difficulty of distinguishing happiness from sorrow, brother from brother. He speaks about the butterfly as psyche, the Greek word for soul, and about butterflies observed far out at sea, wandering far off their course, perhaps blown by hurricanes between stars.

He describes everything he knows: the mourning cloak "hibernating in a hollow tree trunk" through a frozen winter, the chrysalis like a mummy in its shroud, the birth of the butterfly from the caterpillar's silken cocoon. He catalogs hundreds of species by name: pearl crescents, painted ladies, red admirals, purple emperors, old monarchs, Arctic satyrs, Homeric butterflies, "butterflies with Latin messages written on their wings."

He describes Peron's funeral: "the merriest mourners who ever were," "merry andrews and fat aldermen and" ruined gamblers and dice shooters, a crowd his brother had loved and Joachim had never understood. He describes his own grief afterward, betrayed only to an old lamp-lighter on a windy street corner "whose face was also streaked with tears," who said of Peron: "he will never light another lamp."

He meditates on the sock question: a sock so many times darned and patched, are these new socks or old? When the last original thread has gone, what remains? He asks

whether the butterflies “glowing in his cavernous mind” are even his, or belong to nobody. The chapter ends with a last catalog of butterflies and with Mr. Spitzer as “this dark atheist, this believer in nothing, in no one.”

The butterfly as the argument

Chapter 29 is structured as a philosophical argument delivered through natural history, and the argument is this: the butterfly is the proof, or at least the best available evidence, that transformation is real.

Mr. Spitzer watched the caterpillar wrap itself in silk and sleep and emerge. He has “seen the preparations of the caterpillar for a future life,” he says, and watched it achieve “immortality within the logic of mortality.” The chrysalis is like a mummy. The butterfly that emerges is the same being and a completely different one. You cannot tell, at the crucial moment of emergence, whether you are witnessing a birth or a death. Both are true simultaneously.

This is why he began collecting butterflies in the first place. Not as a hobby. As an investigation into the single question his life has been organized around: is transformation possible? Is it possible to come out the other side of a catastrophic change (his brother’s death, his own stopped life) as something new and whole, rather than simply as what remained after everything was taken?

He has no answer. But he has the butterflies, which at least demonstrate that the thing happens (somewhere, in some other kingdom) even if he has never managed it himself.

The oceanic butterflies

One of the chapter’s most beautiful passages is about butterflies observed far out at sea, miles from any shore, travelling through day and night, buffeted by winds. Some believe they were blown off course by hurricanes. Others believe they sail by “their own dreams, being these wandering psyches,” “seeking reunion with immortal love.”

Mr. Spitzer holds both explanations without resolving them. Were they blown, or did they choose to go? Is there a difference? He has seen “the caterpillaring sea,” “wings of butterflies like sails of ships gleaming through distant clouds.” He believes these oceanic migrations may be intentional, not merely an accident or monsoon.

This is Mr. Spitzer’s life in miniature: a being far off its course, in conditions that should not support its survival, moving through the dark either because of forces beyond its control or because it is a wandering soul seeking reunion with something it has lost. He cannot say which. Neither can we.

Peron’s funeral

Young gives us the full account of Peron’s funeral here, and it is one of the most affecting passages in the novel. The crowd was “the merriest mourners who ever were”: merry andrews “and broken-down vaudeville stars, waterfront characters and cue-ball

champions,” dice shooters and ruined gamblers, old fly-by-nights, mad mountebanks. A crowd that spoke in languages Joachim did not understand: “roulette wheel talk, bird cage talk,” “spirit jockeys and glass bead madames.” He has been slowly learning the translation ever since.

Everyone thought his self-containment was supernatural, his serenity almost marvelous. It was grief. Utterly devastating grief. Almost no one sensed it. Only the old lamp-lighter on the windy street corner afterward, “whose face was also streaked with tears,” who said what needed to be said: “he will never light another lamp.”

Young gives us this moment (the great lawyer and musician, his face streaked with tears in the wind, standing on a street corner with a lamp-lighter) and then moves on. She does not dwell. She trusts it to carry its own weight. And it does.

The sock question

Near the chapter’s end, Mr. Spitzer poses what he calls the philosopher’s question: his socks have been so many times darned and patched that he wonders whether the last original thread has now disappeared, making them technically new socks, albeit very fragile ones easily unravelling.

This is the Ship of Theseus, Young’s version: the famous philosophical puzzle about whether an object that has had all its parts replaced is still the same object. Mr. Spitzer applies it to himself. He has been so patched and darned over the years since his brother’s death (by grief, by impersonation, by wearing Peron’s watch, by attending Peron’s funeral as both chief mourner and the body in the coffin) that he genuinely cannot say whether what remains is Joachim or something else, made of so many replacements that the original is gone. The ghostly conformation of the old sock persists. The leg inside is still his leg. But what are these socks?

Young places this right before the final butterfly catalog because that is exactly where it belongs: the sock question is the human version of the butterfly question. The caterpillar becomes the butterfly. The old sock becomes the new sock. At what point in the transformation are you still you?

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

After Chapter 29, Cousin Hannah arrives and the novel begins to open outward. You have now received the heart of Mr. Spitzer’s portrait: five chapters, from his professional life through his grief through his butterflies. He will continue to appear throughout the novel, always arriving just after the extraordinary thing has happened, always missing the party, always treading softly on the thinnest ice. You now know why.

The butterflies will keep returning. Young uses them the way she uses all her recurring images: lightly, from different angles, always adding a new facet. When you see a butterfly in the chapters ahead, carry what you know from Chapter 29: it is the soul in

transit, the being mid-transformation, the creature that cannot be told from the flower it rests on until one of them moves.

The lamp-lighter who said “he will never light another lamp” is one of the novel’s most quietly charged minor figures. He mourns Peron with tears on his face. He knows what Peron was to the city’s darker corners in a way Joachim never did. He offers Joachim the only eulogy that matters, and then he goes on lighting his lamps down the dark street. Young gives us one sentence of his and moves on. That is often her method: the peripheral figure who carries more weight than the central ones.

For the Curious

The mourning cloak butterfly hibernating in

The “mourning cloak butterfly hibernating in a hollow tree trunk” through a frozen winter is one of the few butterfly species that actually overwinters as an adult rather than as an egg or chrysalis. Mr. Spitzer finds it sleeping in the cold, its wings folded, and does not disturb it. In spring he sees a mourning cloak fluttering over daisy-starred fields and almost lifts his hat in greeting. The mourning cloak is named for its dark brown-black wings edged with yellow: the colors of mourning dress. Young chose it for the hibernation chapter of Mr. Spitzer’s life with full awareness of what its name carried.

The Ship of Theseus problem

The Ship of Theseus problem, which underlies the sock question, is one of philosophy’s oldest paradoxes, recorded in Plutarch: if a ship has all its planks replaced one by one, is it still the same ship? Thomas Hobbes extended it: if you take all the original planks and build a second ship from them, which one is the Ship of Theseus? Young applies this to identity, to grief, to the question of whether Joachim Spitzer is still Joachim Spitzer after so many years of being patched with pieces of his dead brother’s life.

The lamp-lighter as a figure belongs

The lamp-lighter as a figure belongs to a vanishing world: gas lamps were being replaced by electric ones throughout the early twentieth century, a transition Miss MacIntosh would have strongly approved of resisting. The old lamp-lighter moving down the dark street “like Jacob with his ladder of dreams reaching to the clouds” is one of Young’s most deliberate anachronisms: a figure from a world without electric light, mourning a man who will never light another lamp, in a novel where Miss MacIntosh has just spent two chapters condemning electric light for destroying the darkness in which certain lives were possible.

Urania Sloanus

“Urania Sloanus, Ornithoptera Paradisea, Saturnia Pyri,” the Latin names Mr. Spitzer knows, are real butterfly and moth species. Urania Sloanus is an extinct Jamaican moth, one of the most spectacular ever recorded, now known only from museum specimens. Mr.

Spitzer knows a butterfly that no longer exists. He knows butterflies that have survived the deaths of stars. Young is not careless with these names.

Chapter 30: Cousin Hannah

Research notes: Chapter 30

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Eustace · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Grief, Loss, and Mourning · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Clothing, Hats, and Skirts

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Angels and Archangels · Astronomy · Gambling and Playing Cards · Napoleon and Wellington · Suicide in History and Literature · The History of Opium · Women's Suffrage

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After twenty-nine chapters of preparation, Cousin Hannah arrives. Not in person, she died years ago and is buried "in a grey New England churchyard where many tombs were marked only with the sign of the codfish," but in full force, through Catherine's memory and longing and Vera's reconstruction of what she knows.

This chapter is the novel's great opening of doors. Young has been building a closed, interior world: the coastal house, the opium bedroom, the Miss MacIntosh sequence, the Spitzer portrait. Cousin Hannah blows all the doors open. She has been to Persia, Babylonia, Arabia Deserta, the Alps, the Himalayas, the deserts of Moab. She has ridden against Spanish cavalcades disguised as an Arab king. She has heard muezzins and archangels and the whispers of dying sea captains to their wives. She is everything the coastal house is not.

Who is Cousin Hannah?

Cousin Hannah Freemount-Snowden is Catherine's cousin, or was, before she died. She was a Boston feminist, suffragette, world traveler, balloonist, mountain climber, swordswoman, archer, markswoman, and spy. She traveled disguised as an Arab king, a Tibetan jockey, "a lazar ringing his bell in" holy cities. She rode her white horse El-Burraq, named for the horse Mohammed tethered at the Wailing Wall before ascending to heaven, through howling desert sands. She attacked Spanish soldiers who were assaulting a Riff caravan, routing them single-handedly, and disappeared back into the sandstorm.

She never stayed anywhere long. She left no forwarding address. When Catherine tried to call her by telephone, it rang through empty rooms in a house that had been torn down to make room for an asphalt highway. Cousin Hannah was always already gone.

She is buried "in a grey New England churchyard" with a "jeweled sword at her side and" "her great star sapphire upon her breast, her sapphire which Mr. Spitzer had pinned upon her old grey army coat." That detail, Mr. Spitzer's hand on the jewel she was buried with, is Young's way of connecting the novel's poles: the most adventurous spirit in the book was put to rest by its most earthbound one.

What Cousin Hannah represents

The novel has given us two responses to an untenable world. Catherine dissolves into hallucination. Miss MacIntosh insists on the practical surface. Cousin Hannah takes a third path: she acts.

She is the novel's figure of pure will. She sees hazards before they occur and chooses the lesser danger, but she always chooses. The iceberg moved to allow her passage. She cut "through great cables of iron as if they were silken threads." Where the road crumbled into a chasm, she went "on, crossing great stone deserts and viewless abysses as if they were city streets." She found the dangers of the Alps less than the danger of crossing traffic-crowded Boston streets.

Young describes her as a being "dedicated to the overthrow of the dream and of the dreamer in all countries." This is what makes her the opposite of Catherine and the uncanny double of Miss MacIntosh. Both Hannah and Miss MacIntosh are anti-dreamers, insisting on the real. But where Miss MacIntosh insists through proverbs and schedules and the plain surface of the domestic day, Hannah insists through action, through bodies in motion, through the actual material world of camels and swords and mountain passes.

She is also, Young makes clear through Catherine's memories, an emancipated extension of Catherine herself: the "Captain Derring-Do who engaged in" the adventures Catherine only dreamed of through the endless years. Catherine's longing for Hannah is a longing for her own unlived life.

The loss of a skirt

Young drops one detail about Cousin Hannah with characteristic lightness and moves on: "because of the loss of a skirt, it was known now, her entire life had been perhaps an act of sorrow and redemption."

This is the novel's most compressed statement of Cousin Hannah's inner life, and Young never elaborates it. What skirt? Lost how? To what sorrow? We are not told. What we are told is the consequence: her entire life, all those years of adventure and disguise and camels and swords and mountain passes and Arabian nights, was a response to one lost garment. A sorrow to be redeemed through a lifetime of action.

Young places this in the same chapter as the Miss MacIntosh sequence's distant echo: the old nursemaid who never looked in mirrors, who carried needles and pins to forbid inquiry, who slept in the cold and kept the windows open. Both women have built elaborate lives around something that cannot be named directly. Both have turned a private wound into a public performance. Hannah's is grander and more spectacular. The wound is the same order of magnitude.

Eustace

Before Cousin Hannah takes over the chapter, Young gives us one more of Catherine's phantoms: Eustace. He is the most volatile of her imaginary visitors, taking many forms: a

mocking bird, an old woman, an old bearded man like a cypress tree, Wellington “at the head of his troops,” a blind astronomer, a Venetian murderous valet, the murdered gentleman who walks abroad at midnight. He is limitless, “not confined to any one form by the laws of nature, which” have been suspended in his case.

Catherine calls to him the way she calls to all her visitors: “Eustace, Eustace! Oh, is it you, Eustace dear, and the golden-antlered stags, the large planets, the small planets? Come in, Eustace, and do close the door, for there’s a great draft.” It is the most ordinary hospitality, extended to the most extraordinary being.

Eustace functions as a hinge between the Spitzer chapters and the Hannah chapter: he is the figure of pure mutability, the visitor who cannot be fixed into a form, the one Catherine summons when Mr. Spitzer’s too-solid flesh becomes oppressive. He is the possibility of radical transformation. Cousin Hannah, in her own way, is Eustace made flesh.

Cousin Hannah’s views on the Spitzers

Young gives us one of the novel’s great comic passages through Cousin Hannah’s opinions of the twins. She “had never cared for the Spitzer boys,” had stanchly predicted “they would come to no good end,” and described them in terms that collapse the distinction between them: “the musical gambler with his piano-playing and horn-blowing friends, the horse-playing musician, the gambling lawyer who would take his last chance, the philanthropic dice-rattler,” “and the suicidal butterfly-chaser chasing himself with his butterfly net. Both brothers were profligates.”

She is partly right and wholly wrong simultaneously, which is Young’s method with characters who are powerful but limited. Hannah sees through things with a ruthless sangfroid. She cannot always see what she is looking through them at. “The suicidal butterfly-chaser chasing himself with his butterfly net” is the most precise and most wrong description of Mr. Spitzer ever offered. He is chasing himself. But not with a butterfly net.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Cousin Hannah will return in her own chapters later in the novel; she is one of the most important characters in the book, and Young will give her considerably more space. What Chapter 30 does is establish her presence, her history, and her relationship to the household. She is the great absence in Catherine’s life: the cousin who never answered the phone, who never left a forwarding address, who is now dead in a codfish churchyard but still more alive in the imagination than most living people.

The question Catherine keeps asking through Hannah (Have you seen my husband?) is the question that unifies the chapter. Catherine’s husband, Vera’s father, was “lost while walking between two frozen mountain peaks.” In Chapter 18 Vera says he fell “while walking a frozen cable stretched between two snow-capped mountain peaks.” Young tells the one loss in two versions, and she does it deliberately. The father who went into the

mountains and did not return is the novel's founding absence, the wound before the wound. Cousin Hannah, who knows the Alpine abysses with intimacy, is the only person in the novel who might have looked.

El-Burraq, Cousin Hannah's white horse, is named for the horse that carried Mohammed on his night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and then to heaven. It is the horse of the miraculous journey, the crossing from one world to another. That Cousin Hannah rode this horse through howling desert sands is Young at her most quietly magnificent.

For the Curious

The codfish churchyard where Cousin Hannah

The codfish churchyard where Cousin Hannah is buried, tombs "marked only with the sign of the codfish," is a real New England tradition. The codfish was the symbol of the Massachusetts fishing industry and the economic foundation of the Puritan settlements. Boston's Sacred Cod hangs in the State House. To be buried with the codfish sign is to be of the original New England aristocracy: the salt-sea Puritan stock. Cousin Hannah, who went everywhere else in the world, lies forever in the most rooted of New England ground.

The Riff people Cousin Hannah defends

The Riff people Cousin Hannah defends against the Spanish soldiers were a Berber people of northern Morocco who fought a famous war of resistance against Spanish colonial forces in the 1920s: the Rif War, in which an indigenous army briefly defeated a colonial European power before being overcome. Young places Cousin Hannah in this conflict, riding against the Spanish cavalry in Arab disguise, as a figure of anti-colonial action. She is, throughout the chapter, on the side of the outnumbered and the invaded.

Cousin Hannah's suffragette history

Cousin Hannah's suffragette history (her grey army coat that had seen so many campaigns for the emancipation of woman, her jeweled sword) places her in the generation of militant suffragettes who chained themselves to railings and went to prison and went on hunger strikes in the early twentieth century. Young names her campaigns in India and China and foreign and domestic wars, suggesting a figure who fought for women's rights globally, not merely in Boston drawing rooms. She is a foremother of the specific kind Young most admires: the woman who acted, who chose the lesser danger and went on anyway.

The old Boston newspaper reporter

The old Boston newspaper reporter who covered Cousin Hannah's adventures without ever leaving "his desk and was not likely to do so until he was carried out feet first into a greater desert" is one of Young's best peripheral figures. He wrote about the world's most active woman from a chair in a Boston office. Young gives him one sentence and leaves him there, dreaming.

Chapter 31: Here Lies the Dead Love of the World

Research notes: Chapter 31

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Peron Spitzer

Themes: Grief, Loss, and Mourning

Symbols: Keys, Doors, and Locks

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Deafness and Sign Language · The History of Opium

Chapter 31 deepens Cousin Hannah's portrait in two directions at once: it gives us the great captain's inner life (her secret grief, her failed mission to rescue Catherine, the love she never spoke of) and it gives us Mr. Spitzer's relationship to her: the faithful caller at her perpetually empty house, the one who buried her, the one still composing her epitaph.

This chapter contains some of the most beautiful writing in the novel. Read slowly.

What actually happens in Chapter 31

The chapter moves through three connected strands. First: the enduring relationship between Catherine and Mr. Spitzer in Cousin Hannah's absence, their mutual admiration of the captain who made "their own adventures seem forever unfulfilled." Second: the full portrait of Hannah's secret, her grief, never named directly, her failed battle to rescue Catherine from her opium dreams, her verdict on both Spitzer brothers. Third: Mr. Spitzer's long faithfulness to Hannah's empty house, his calling cards pushed through the slot, his knocking on the door he was sure would not open, his grief at her death, and his inability to settle on an epitaph.

The chapter's great set piece is Mr. Spitzer's cascade of draft epitaphs for Cousin Hannah, each one more expansive and more grieving than the last, all of them crossed out, ending in a simple headstone with only her name and no dates.

Hannah's secret grief

Chapter 30 told us that Hannah's "entire life had been perhaps an act of sorrow and redemption," caused by the loss of a skirt. Chapter 31 tells us a little more, but only a little. "She had never married, for her life had been shadowed with grief which was mentioned whisperingly with hesitation even now by my mother and Mr. Spitzer, both of whom seemed to wish to bury the great secret of Cousin Hannah's life."

Young will not name the secret directly. She gives us its shape instead: Hannah searched all her life for a "dead love, a body covered by" snow. She had taken what amounts to a vow against the external man, "giving her gentleman's word of honor," as if serving "as a barrier between herself and any other love which wore a human face." "Her furies had not diminished but had increased as she had furiously tried to climb the walls of forbidden cities of brides, those who were held in thralldom by a cruel bridegroom."

What Young is tracing, in the most oblique language available to her in 1965, is the shape of a love that could not be named or lived. Hannah's great adventure, all those decades of disguise and action and desert crossings, was built over a grief she could never speak. She had given her gentleman's word of honor, which is itself the tell: not a lady's vow, but a gentleman's. She lived in the register she was given. The skirt that was lost is the world she could not inhabit.

Hannah's mission to rescue Catherine

Young reveals something in this chapter that reshapes how we understand Cousin Hannah's relationship to the household: she had wanted to carry Catherine "away from this dark tower, to rescue her from" the opium dreams of dead love. It had been her losing battle. "She had won greater battles than this" one. She had lost this one.

Hannah's verdict on Catherine was direct, as everything about her was direct: Catherine "was in love with no man on earth but with a fleeting shadow, the mere shadow of a man." And her verdict on both brothers was equally unsparing: Joachim "was weak as water, deceitful and wavering," blown about like foam; Peron was equally deceitful without even pretending otherwise. Hobson's choice. "A choice between death and death."

Hannah was right about many things. She was wrong about one: "she did not seem to know that death was necessary to my mother's love." Catherine requires the dead man. The shadow is the point. Hannah, who was always in motion, who pitched her tent in far deserts and never stayed, could not understand a love that required stillness and darkness and the opium-maintained preservation of loss. Her directness, which served her in every other battle, failed her here.

Mr. Spitzer at Hannah's door

Young gives us one of the novel's great comic-elegiac passages in Mr. Spitzer's visits to Hannah's perpetually empty house. He came always "when he knew she was absent": absent in the Alps, absent in Arabia, absent at sea in an open boat without captain or compass. He timed his visits as an elegant strategy, "a countermove to her ignoring him."

The signs of her absence catalogued at her door are extraordinary: the closed shutters, the broken lanterns, "the summer furniture left out all winter" under white trees with "long white hair blowing in the wind, the tattered" awnings like Arab tents, the frozen fountains, the old newspapers blowing on the porches. He reads the newspapers for news of her journeys: knowing they are not always accurate, that she had taken many journeys they had not known.

And yet, through the great keyhole large enough for a butterfly to fly through, he sometimes sees a great rounded eye staring back "at him with equal astonishment, its iris streaked like a sunken rainbow." He calls out, hallo, hallo. He bangs on the door. He concludes "it was a star passing in a cloud." He pushes "his calling card through the slot" (embossed with the butterfly, "his sign of resurrection and eternal life") and goes away.

He continued these visits, Young tells us with perfect deadpan, even for a brief period after she was already dead, though “certainly before the house was torn down.” Sometimes he was “windily shaken by the thought that it might be his own absence”: “he was this empty cocoon.”

The epitaphs

The cascade of draft epitaphs Mr. Spitzer composes and crosses out is one of the novel’s greatest passages, and it deserves to be read aloud. Young gives us eight or nine of them, each one reaching for something truer, each one abandoned:

“Here lies the great captain unhorsed.” “Here lies that great Crusader who rode against the Saracens and the Greeks” and “the Romans and the English and the French. She raided the Etruscan towns. She invaded the cities of night.” “Here lies the greatest captain who fought against all nations and rescued many ladies from their dark towers and cruel lords but could not rescue herself. Here lies one who searched all her life for her dead love, a body covered by the snow. Here lies one who was pitiful. Here lies one who shared our common lot of mortal frailty and died of her life.”

Each epitaph is true. None is complete. The one he settles on is the simplest: her name only, and no dates, because he cannot remember the date of her death and she had never told him the date of her birth. So he gives her, in his own inaccuracy, this extension of time.

The final phrase, “here lies the dead love of the world,” is the one Young uses as the chapter’s emotional summit, and it is Mr. Spitzer’s most honest statement about what Cousin Hannah was. Not the dead love of one person. “The dead love of the world”: the capacity for love itself, as it exists in the world, lying “in a grey New England churchyard” with a jeweled sword and a St. Bernard.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Cousin Hannah will return in later chapters with her own narrative space. What this chapter establishes is the emotional register she inhabits in the novel: she is the figure of action whose inner life is entirely secret, the woman who fought every battle except the one closest to her, the captain whose ship, in the end, came home to a domestic war.

“She died at home. She perished in a domestic war.” Young places this quietly, near the end of Mr. Spitzer’s draft epitaphs, without elaboration. After all those Alps and deserts and Moroccan pirates and Spanish cavalcades, Cousin Hannah “died in her own old tent bed set in a windy place with no aide-de-camp.” The greatest captain “was taken by a greater captain” wearing a winding shroud.

Mr. Spitzer’s inability to settle on an epitaph for Hannah mirrors his inability to settle on one for Peron. He has two graves he cannot adequately mark: his brother’s and the great captain’s. Both headstones are incomplete. Both people exceeded his capacity to find the

right words. This is, quietly, the novel's statement about Mr. Spitzer's music: the silence is not failure. It is the only honest response to what exceeds language.

For the Curious

Hobson's choice

Hobson's choice, which Hannah invokes in her verdict on the brothers, comes from Thomas Hobson, a Cambridge horse-dealer of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who rented horses but required customers to take the horse nearest the stable door or none at all, giving no real choice. The phrase has meant a forced choice between one option and nothing since at least the seventeenth century. Hannah uses it to say: Catherine has been choosing between two versions of the same inadequacy, neither of which constitutes a real alternative. She is not wrong.

The St. Bernard dog buried at

The St. Bernard dog buried at Hannah's "feet with its Red Cross bottle between its paws" is one of Young's most characteristic flourishes: the breed famous for rescuing travellers lost in Alpine snow, given to a woman who climbed Alpine peaks and searched for a love buried in snow. Mr. Spitzer made sure the dog was buried with her, and made sure the Red Cross bottle was full so she could take a nip in the long lonely nights. He is meticulous about the dead in ways he cannot be about the living.

The image of Mr. Spitzer's timid music

The image of Mr. Spitzer's timid music that "could be played only when there was a great storm all but blotting it out" is one of the novel's most precise statements about his relationship to sound, to grief, and to expression. He can only speak in the register of the inaudible. His music requires the cover of something overwhelming to be heard at all. This is why he writes for voiceless choirs and deaf listeners. The storm is the only condition under which his sound can exist.

The phrase she died of her life

The phrase she died of her life appears in the draft epitaphs without elaboration. It is one of the most compressed things Young writes about anyone: a death not from illness or accident but from the accumulated weight of living as she lived. Cousin Hannah's life (sixty years of action, disguise, grief, and furious motion) was itself the thing that killed her. Not a battle, not a glacier, not a Moroccan pirate. Her own life. Young offers this as one of Mr. Spitzer's discarded epitaphs, which means he considered it and found it insufficient. He is wrong. It is the truest one.

Chapter 32: Weddings Are Funerals, and Funerals Are Weddings

Research notes: Chapter 32

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh

Themes: Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Exploration and the Poles · Fairy Tales and Folklore · The History of Opium · Women's Suffrage

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Chapter 32 deepens the Cousin Hannah portrait and, simultaneously, gives us a full account of Catherine's marriage, or what passed for one. Young weaves the two together because they are the same story: Hannah's lifelong battle to rescue Catherine, and Catherine's marriage to the absent bridegroom who was always already gone.

This is a long, rich chapter and it asks a lot of you. Take your time. Young is doing something philosophically ambitious at the end, her final statement about death and travel and partial knowledge, that rewards the full weight of everything that came before it.

What actually happens in Chapter 32

The chapter deepens the Cousin Hannah portrait through Catherine's eyes. Hannah was explosive and instantaneous, always hurried, "the greatest courier of every storm." She flourished upon renewed discouragement, almost with a terrible zest. "She had lived through so many dangers" that her face was ravaged, her eyes burning, "a saber wound upon her cheek, a grizzled chin."

We learn that Hannah had tried to break up Catherine's marriage, had beaten at the bridegroom with her white umbrella, screaming like ten thousand demons, attempting to carry Catherine away in the manner of a robber. And we learn, finally, what Catherine's marriage actually was: something spectral, a ceremony with a faceless bridegroom, a wedding "to all the fading images of this world." "She had been married to a sail-boat which suddenly lifted its wings and sailed away. She had been married to a porpoise and a star," an iceberg, a church bell.

The chapter closes with Catherine's final statement: she "had always wanted to die while travelling—as then she would never completely die." "Death is that which is caused by our partial knowledge."

Hannah's philosophy of woman

Chapter 32 gives us Hannah's feminist argument in its most developed form. She had been "the high-souled lover of woman," she said, come to rescue her "from slavery to

man worse than enchantment by an Eastern drug.” She “had urged woman to use her parasol as her sword,” to fly her skirts as banners on tallest mountain peaks, “to show her little bird feet” and arise and make war.

But Hannah had also been opposed to what she saw as women’s frivolities: the great garden hats with billowing plumes, the silks, the secretive veils, the narcotic flowers, the parasols used as flirtation weapons. This is where her feminism develops its own tension. She loved woman and was opposed to femininity as she found it. She wanted to rescue women from men and also from the performance of womanhood that men had imposed.

Young presents this honestly and without resolution. Hannah is right about the oppression. She is also something of a tyrant in her prescriptions. She had urged Catherine to arise and take horse and make war, but Catherine’s nature required the opium bed, the dark tower, the dreamed bridegroom. You cannot save someone by demanding they become you.

Catherine’s marriage

The account of Catherine’s marriage is the most important revelation in the chapter, and Young delivers it sideways, through Catherine’s own uncertain and shifting memory.

“She had been married on the tennis court,” in flying veils, passing a “great ball which was the winged moon.” “She had been married on the clouded archery range,” shooting “a golden arrow through a cloud. She had been married to a sail-boat,” a porpoise, a star, an iceberg, a church bell. She had never seen her bridegroom’s face. In the midst of the wedding ceremony, she had felt herself “hypnotized, drawn by a magnetic force which came from no known place or star,” not knowing “what she was doing or who the bridegroom was.”

This is not madness. It is the most honest account available of a marriage to someone who was constitutionally, essentially absent. Catherine’s husband left her, she is vague about when and how and who he was, and went into the mountains and never returned. Young has given us glimpses of him across the novel: the man who walked a frozen cable between snow-capped peaks and fell. What Catherine married was the “great traveller who never would return.” She married, in other words, the void that all the others in her life have been orbiting: the man who was already gone at the moment of the wedding.

Hannah had tried to interrupt this wedding, beating at the phantom bridegroom with her umbrella. She could not break it up. Catherine had married the absent one. That is the only marriage available to a woman whose capacity for love requires absence as its condition.

Weddings are funerals, and funerals are weddings

Near the chapter’s end Young gives Catherine one of the novel’s most compressed philosophical statements: weddings are funerals, and funerals are weddings. “When one marries, a part of one must die. When one dies, one is forever married, married through

separation unto eternity. The great lover is always the absent one. He is one whom no one has ever known or loved."

This is Catherine's philosophy of love in its final form, and it is not evasion. It is observation. The love that persists is always the love that was never consummated, never fixed in the ordinary daylight of a shared life. Miss MacIntosh loved someone she could not name. Cousin Hannah loved someone she could not reach. Catherine loves someone who was never there. Mr. Spitzer loves Catherine who will never choose him. The novel's great lovers are all loving across an absence that cannot be closed.

The wedding to the absent bridegroom is not, in Catherine's understanding, a tragedy. It is the condition of love itself. "The great lover is always the absent one." The moment you catch him, he becomes something smaller. The marriage to the iceberg, the church bell, the sail-boat that "lifted its wings and sailed away"; these are not failures of love. They are its most accurate forms.

Hannah's end

The chapter gives us something heartbreaking near its close: Hannah's deathbed confession. She had told Catherine, in some final visit, "that these great battles had been as nothing to her, had been as mere incidents in a busy life." She realized now "that the greatest heroes were not those who perished in the loud clash of arms." "The greatest battles were fought in the domestic wars by those who had never left home. They were fought by man and woman. It was always an unequal battle, for woman reigned supreme. The man who had left home was a coward who should never be forgiven."

This is Hannah's final reversal. The woman who had been to Persia and Arabia and the Alps and Hudson Bay and fought against Spanish cavalcades and Turkish lords, who had believed her entire life that action was the answer, at the end acknowledged that she had been fighting the wrong battles in the wrong places. The domestic war was the real one. She had gone far away to avoid it.

Young delivers this through the uncertainty of how the confession could have occurred: Catherine had not seen Hannah, and both were bedridden, and it may have been a dream. But Mr. Spitzer acknowledges it was possible. He had been the go-between. He had seen Hannah in her last days, wrapped "in his dark cape, the snow like ermine" on his collar, and she had known when she saw him that her time was close.

The final sentence

The chapter ends: "my mother had always wanted to die while travelling—as then she would never completely die—for every traveller dies merely by passing through a city, and none will know that landscape which he passes through in the long night. Death is that which is caused by our partial knowledge."

This is the novel's most direct statement of its central philosophical proposition. We die because we know only part of the world we pass through. If we could know it completely, if we could see the full landscape of the long night, we might not die, or at least we would

not die completely. Partial knowledge is the condition of mortal life. The traveller who passes through a city and does not stay, who does not learn its streets and faces, never fully dies there because he never fully lived.

Catherine wants to die while travelling because she has spent her whole life in one bed, and the one death she fears is the complete one: the death of the person who stayed. The traveller's death is a partial death. A partial death is a kind of life.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Cousin Hannah is far from finished. She stays near the center of the novel for many chapters to come, through her deathbed in Chapter 42 and the story of her lost skirt that follows it, and Catherine's marriage returns in Chapters 33 and 34. Here, Young has given us the shape of her end: the great captain who died in her bed, of her life, having lost the domestic war she fought on every other front.

Catherine's final sentence, "death is that which is caused by our partial knowledge," is the novel's thesis statement in its most compressed form, and everything that follows will be an elaboration of it. Every character in Miss MacIntosh, My Darling is dying of partial knowledge: of themselves, of the people they love, of the world they move through. The novel is Young's attempt to supply the full knowledge, or at least to map the partiality.

The suitor who "had subscribed heavily to the suffrage movement" after Hannah "left him at the church door with a white bouquet in his hands" is one of Young's best peripheral figures. He appears in one clause and is never mentioned again. He has spent his entire life supporting the cause of the woman who refused him. Young does not decide whether this is noble or absurd. It is both.

For the Curious

The pale cavalier driven by the

The pale cavalier driven by the white mare he rides (the horse turning whichever way it will, the rider unable to govern it) is an image from medieval and Renaissance horsemanship literature about the untrained rider and the unbroken horse. Young invokes it as the antithesis of Cousin Hannah, who would have used the short reins and sharp spurs and tight bit, who would have governed with proud supremacy. The contrast between Hannah's controlled horsemanship and Catherine's surrender to the phantom bridegroom runs through the chapter.

The Northwest Passage

The Northwest Passage appears near the chapter's end as Young's image for the impossible route every soul must seek: that narrow crevice in the ice suddenly opening into "great abysses filled with cities of frozen pinnacles and towers." The Northwest

Passage was the legendary sea route through the Arctic that explorers sought for centuries and that cost many lives. Young makes it the name for what every person ultimately has to navigate: the passage between what is known and what cannot be known, between partial knowledge and the full darkness beyond.

The skirt factory Hannah picketed in

The skirt factory Hannah picketed in a cold sleet rain, forgetting “she owned most of the town and most of the skirts,” is one of Young’s most quietly devastating comic details. Cousin Hannah, the great suffragette who had campaigned on every front for woman’s liberation, picketed her own holdings without noticing. Young places this without comment. The chapter has been building Hannah’s complexity for two chapters now, and this detail is the capstone: she was fighting against something she was also sustaining. The most committed activists are not exempt from contradiction.

The robber bridegroom

The robber bridegroom who carries the swooning bride through “mad relatives and furious cousins and weird huntsmen” is a figure from German folk tradition, most famously in a Grimm story in which a young woman discovers her betrothed is a murderer who lures women to his house in the forest. Young invokes it for Hannah’s attempt to carry Catherine away from her phantom wedding: Hannah as the robber bride, storming through the ceremony to rescue the one she loves. The pursuit by “all the furies of the white-lipped universe” is Hannah’s version of the fairy tale’s mad relatives. Young always knows which story she is inside.

Chapter 33: The Late Mrs. Catherine Cartwheel

Research notes: Chapter 33

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Music, Sound, and Silence

Symbols: Music and Instruments

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: The History of Opium

Chapter 33 is a quieter chapter after the great set pieces of the Cousin Hannah sequence, but it does important work. It gathers together threads from across the novel (the newspaper that declared Catherine dead, Mr. Spitzer's faithfulness, the wedding that may or may not have happened, the music he is still writing) and settles into something that functions almost as a pause, a breathing space before the novel expands again.

It also contains one of the most tender portraits of their relationship we have had: Mr. Spitzer's decision that her inaccuracy is a kind of freedom, and his determination, for all his impatience, to keep opening the door.

What actually happens in Chapter 33

A Boston newspaper has referred to Catherine as the late Mrs. Catherine Cartwheel, reporting her dead. Mr. Spitzer has not told her. He has allowed the error to stand, reasoning that she is "an opium taker in love with her starry illusions—and" the illusion "should not be corrected, at least not by him."

He also notes that the same newspaper reported Peron Spitzer "seen recently walking along Benevolent Street, peering into old doorways." Mr. Spitzer walked down the same street the very next evening "when the lamp-lighters were lighting the lamps," "his black cape whirling around him like the sobbing of the rain upon the river Styx." He saw a carriage where for years there had been no carriages.

Catherine's memory of her wedding is revisited: the bridegroom was a white camel veiled in lace, a church steeple, the wind. "She had been married to Death while" sleeping. She cannot remember the details clearly. Sometimes she thinks she has never been married at all. She is sure she never married Mr. Spitzer.

Mr. Spitzer meditates on Catherine's inaccuracy, her distended memory, and arrives at his most generous understanding of her: her conscious states are "like the unconscious states of other people," and she is "probably no more distant from reality than were the lamp-lighters going their lonely rounds," those who punch time-clocks, "those who must turn great wheels." They, too, can live only while they dream.

The chapter ends with Mr. Spitzer getting up to open a door Catherine is asking a human-sized blackbird to open.

The newspaper error

The Boston newspaper that declared Catherine dead, and then reported Peron seen peering into doorways on Benevolent Street, is doing what newspapers do in Young's world: reporting from a position of partial knowledge, getting the essential things wrong and the incidental things right, being corrected by time in ways no one can anticipate.

Mr. Spitzer's response to the first error is characteristic: he allows it to stand. He is not in the position to correct it. The newspaper will eventually be right, he reasons, having merely mistaken the time. This is Mr. Spitzer's philosophy of error applied to journalism: inaccuracies are often premature truths. The mistake is not that Catherine is dead but that the timing is off.

The second error, Peron seen on Benevolent Street, is something Mr. Spitzer investigates in person. He walks the same street the next evening. He sees a carriage. For years there had been "no carriages on the streets of Boston." Young gives us this detail and moves on, but its weight is exact: on the street named for kindness, on the evening after his dead brother was reportedly seen peering into old doorways, Mr. Spitzer sees a carriage that should not exist. He makes no comment. He continues.

The dead letter

Near the chapter's center, Young gives us one of her most perfect images of Mr. Spitzer: he has been going "to the post office day after day to inquire for a dead letter," asking that they trace a letter he "mailed to himself many years ago" that was never "delivered though it was marked clearly with his return address." The envelope contained a piece of blank paper.

A letter to himself, containing nothing, sent years ago, never arrived, still being traced. This is Mr. Spitzer's entire situation in three sentences. He has been trying to communicate with himself across the gap of his brother's death, across the years of inaccuracy and grief, and the letter (blank, addressed to himself, never delivered) is the silent music he has been composing all his life. The message is empty because there is nothing to say. The return address is there because he needs to know where he lives. He keeps going to the post office because the alternative is to stop expecting the letter to arrive.

Mr. Spitzer's defense of Catherine's inaccuracy

The chapter's most important passage is Mr. Spitzer's extended meditation on Catherine's distended memory, and it represents his greatest act of generosity toward her.

He has come gradually to believe, he says, that her conscious states are "probably like the unconscious states of other people." She is "enslaved by her drug habit which had robbed her of her sense of time," but she is "probably no more enslaved than others" are by their predisposition toward illusion, "no more distant from reality than were the lamp-lighters going their lonely rounds or those who must punch time-clocks in great factories." They, too, can live only while they dream. They, too, are never quite awake.

This is Mr. Spitzer dissolving the distinction between Catherine and the rest of humanity. He is not excusing her. He is insisting that her position is not exceptional: that the opium dreams are a more visible version of what everyone does, and that her inaccuracy is a greater freedom than accuracy would have been. She lives in a wider space. She has not “closed a door or written finis to a deathless dream as” his brother surely did.

And so he gets up and opens the door when she asks the blackbird to open it. Not because he believes the blackbird can hear her. Because the door needs opening, and he is there.

The harp music of bridges

One further detail deserves attention. Mr. Spitzer is writing harp music that “should be the exact imitation of the wind playing through the strings and cables of a bridge”: the bridge reflected upon water, his music to “be finished only with the dying wind, wind dying over the water.” He is “studying the velocity of wind over bridges, the tonnage of wind pressure against cables, ascertaining that sometimes twenty thousand tons of wind” break against a single string.

This is the silent music finally given a specific form. Not silence exactly, but the sound of a bridge: the structure designed to connect two shores, to bear the weight of crossing, trembling under the force of what passes through it. Mr. Spitzer has spent his life as a bridge between the living and the dead, between his brother and the world, between Catherine and reality. Of course his music sounds like the wind through bridge cables. Of course it can only be finished when the wind dies.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

We have spent thirty-three chapters in and around Catherine’s coastal house, inside the minds of Vera, Miss MacIntosh, Mr. Spitzer, and Cousin Hannah. Cousin Hannah has already begun to widen that world, and her story carries on for more than a dozen chapters yet. Hold what you have. Every new character, every new geography, will be understood against this foundation.

Mr. Spitzer’s reasoning that the newspaper will eventually be right about Catherine, having merely mistaken the time, is Young’s statement about the novel’s relationship to truth. The novel is not interested in what is factually accurate at any given moment. It is interested in the longer truth, the one the inaccurate clock will eventually strike. Patience with inaccuracy is not moral failure. It is, in this novel’s world, the condition of understanding.

The human-sized blackbird Catherine is talking to when Mr. Spitzer gets up to open the door is one of those small perfect images Young places without comment. Catherine holds a perfectly rational conversation with a blackbird. The blackbird’s response, apparently, is quite rational. Mr. Spitzer looks around, cannot hear the answer she hears,

gets up and opens the door. He has learned to make himself useful in the space between what she perceives and what is there.

For the Curious

Benevolent Street

Benevolent Street is a real street in Providence, Rhode Island, not Boston, which may be Young's private joke, or may be her deliberate blurring of New England geography. Either way, the name is precise for what it carries: the street of benevolence, where Peron is reportedly seen peering into doorways, the same street Mr. Spitzer walks the next evening in his dark cape. The benevolence is Mr. Spitzer's, and it costs him everything.

The printer's devil

The printer's devil, who jumbled the print to produce the error about Catherine being dead, is a real historical term for the lowest apprentice in a print shop, the one who did the dirtiest work including setting and resetting type. Young invokes it here with its double meaning: the devil who runs the printing press and the actual infernal agency that might guide a ghostly hand to rearrange the letters of the dead. In Young's world, these are not very different things.

The dead lute-player

"The dead lute-player in the garden" with his pear-shaped body and long twisted neck and broken strings is an image from the wedding memory that Young places almost in passing. The lute is the instrument of lyric love poetry in the Western tradition: the troubadour's instrument, the Orphic instrument, the one whose strings were said to move stones. Catherine's wedding was attended by a dead one, his strings already broken. The music of the wedding was already the music of aftermath.

The velocity of wind over bridges

"The velocity of wind over bridges" that Mr. Spitzer is studying, twenty thousand tons of wind breaking against a single string, is drawn from the real engineering problem of bridge resonance. The Tacoma Narrows Bridge famously collapsed in 1940 due to wind-induced resonance, its cables and deck vibrating to destruction. Young is writing about Mr. Spitzer's music in the language of structural engineering: a bridge vibrating under the force of what passes through it, trembling, risking collapse, sounding its strange note. The bridge stands as long as the wind blows at the right frequency. When the frequency changes, it falls.

Chapter 34: Why No Man Had Been This Woman

Research notes: Chapter 34

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Homer Capehorn · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Mr. Chandelier · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: The Search for Meaning

Symbols: Birds

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Suicide in History and Literature · The History of Opium · Women's Suffrage

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Chapter 34 is one of the Cousin Hannah chapters and, in some ways, the most intimate. After the grand sweep of her adventures and the epitaphs and the battle to rescue Catherine, Young brings us inside Catherine's private experience of Hannah: what it was like to be in the room with her, what Catherine saw in her that she could not name, what Hannah's presence revealed about both of them.

This is also the chapter where Young, writing in 1965, brings the novel as close as it will come to naming directly what has been circling since Cousin Hannah first appeared. She does not name it. She moves around it with extraordinary precision. Read with that precision in mind.

What actually happens in Chapter 34

The chapter continues the meditation on Catherine's marriage: the wedding in white that was also in black, the dog who performed the ceremony in church Latin, the St. Bernard who gave her the Viaticum. Then it opens into a long, sustained portrait of what Cousin Hannah was like as a physical presence in Catherine's bedroom: the iron keys jangling at her belt, the metallic sparks she gave off "at the sound of a cock crowing," the silver scales she seemed to wear, her quick wit, her macabre retorts, her contempt for mortal men, her boundless indifference to Mr. Spitzer.

Young gives us Catherine's most revealing admission about Hannah: Catherine "had felt both very flirtatious and very guilty, trying to resist this man who was no man." She had imagined, when Hannah came, that she was in the presence of the love she had always wanted, not Peron's reckless passion, not Joachim's faithful devotion, but something that surpassed both, that seemed to dilate the heavens by its grandeur.

The chapter ends with Cousin Hannah's final verdict on Mr. Spitzer: that he would cruelly disappoint Catherine "at the last, crucial moment, abandoning her to the furies," even as Peron had done when he "apparently committed suicide, taking a coward's way out—leaving Joachim to accept that vicarious responsibility which had always been the slow brother's sense of peculiar guilt and" inestimable loss.

Why no man had been this woman

Near the chapter's center, Catherine asks the question that gives this chapter its title: "why no man had been this woman, why no woman had been this man, why poor old Cousin Hannah, an unmarried spinster," "was always like a traveller between two worlds."

Young does not answer this question directly, but she surrounds it with everything needed to understand it. Hannah had seemed "to contain two people, herself and another, a secret man, even should he be only a puppet, a mere pygmy," "or a butterfly sailing at midnight." She had seemed voluminous enough to contain this double presence. She "had always acted as if she were about to meet" "her enemy, a timorous man, though perhaps he should be that man whom no one else should see."

Catherine's experience of Hannah was of someone who was perpetually between: between man and woman, between presence and absence, between the physical world of mountains and swords and the imaginary world of the bedroom. She had seemed as strange as Mr. Chandelier, "as strange as the golden cock crowing in the twilight of" Catherine's opium dreams. She had been a threat to weakness and a dazzlement. And Catherine, "having no object for her love, had viewed her as the object of her lost romance, wondering why" this was not a man.

Young is writing about something the novel cannot name directly, and she does it by surrounding the unnamed thing with precise observation. The iron keys at Hannah's belt, giving off dissonant music. The metallic sparks "at the sound of a cock crowing." The silver scales she seemed to wear, shining in her own light. The quick wit, the macabre retort, the boundless indifference to Joachim. The deathbed confession that the greatest battles were domestic ones. These are the details of a particular interior life rendered from the outside, by a woman who loved Hannah and did not know how to say it.

Catherine's most private knowledge

Young gives Catherine a moment of self-awareness that is one of the novel's most quietly devastating: "my mother had felt both very flirtatious and very guilty, trying to resist this man who was no man." And then: as "my mother had not wished, naturally, to show her secret agreement with her."

Catherine knew. She had always known, at some level, that her agreement with Cousin Hannah (with her argument against men, with her contempt for mortal love, with her proposals to escape) went deeper than she ever showed. She performed flirtatiousness and dreamy inattention when Hannah came, precisely because Hannah's presence threatened the carefully maintained architecture of Catherine's illusions. Hannah was real in a way that the phantom bridegroom was not. And that reality was more dangerous than any dream.

Catherine's response was to become more romantic, more nostalgic, more flirtatious exactly when Hannah appeared. As a defense. Young names this with characteristic precision: "my mother, in spite of her inclinations," had not wished to show her secret

agreement. The inclinations were there. The secret agreement was there. The performance of disagreement was the only protection available.

The cock crowing

Young places a strange, vivid image near the chapter's center: "at the sound of a cock crowing, she had strutted, dancing a weird dance, giving off showers of metallic sparks, stretching her long neck as her cheeks twitched." Because in certain Moroccan courtyards "she had visited, she had seen that the cock is" a "great golden sultan, lord of the morning, lord of all he surveys, that even the hens wear black veils like the secret women in purdah."

The cock crowing is the sound of male dominion announcing itself. It is the sound that enrages Hannah more than anything else in the world. And her response is to become the cock: to dance its weird dance, to give off its metallic sparks, to stretch her neck and twitch her cheeks. She does not counter the male assertion. She embodies it, transforms it, claims it. This is what Hannah does with every force she encounters: she becomes it rather than opposing it, and in becoming it, changes what it means.

Hannah's final verdict on the brothers

The chapter ends with Cousin Hannah's assessment of both Spitzer brothers, delivered through Catherine's memory: Joachim would cruelly disappoint her "at the last, crucial moment, abandoning her to the furies," even as Peron had done when he "apparently committed suicide, taking a coward's way out—leaving Joachim to accept" the vicarious responsibility that "had always been the slow brother's sense of peculiar guilt and" inestimable loss.

This is Hannah's harshest verdict, and Young makes it her last word on the brothers. Peron was a coward who left. Joachim accepted the coward's guilt as his own, because that is what slow brothers do. Neither chose Catherine. Neither gave her what she needed. And Joachim, Hannah predicted, would not be there at the end.

Whether Hannah is right is the question the novel will keep open. But she is right that the responsibility passed from one brother to the other, that the guilt for Peron's death was taken on by the one who survived, and that this transference has defined Joachim's life ever since.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Cousin Hannah is not finished. Chapter 35 opens with her and Catherine at cards, and she stays near the center through her deathbed in Chapter 42 and the story of her lost skirt. By now Young has given us the outline of the portrait: the great adventurer, the suffragette, the person who contained two selves, the one who failed to rescue Catherine,

who died in her bed of her life, who left Mr. Spitzer to compose her unfinished epitaph. The chapters ahead fill it in.

Catherine's desire for "a teacher of arithmetic who would teach her to add" and subtract and divide, and then plane and solid geometry, so she might know who the geometer was) is one of the novel's most moving passages of longing. She wants to understand the structure of reality. She wants to know whether the great illusionist who designed these "concentric circles and eccentric circles and" wandering orbs is sane or insane. She will never know. The geometer does not show his face. But the yearning for that knowledge, the desire for "one real person in the world," is the same desire that drives Vera's search for Miss MacIntosh. The novel turns on it.

The Irish housemaid who "polished a mirror all night long" after the golden cock crowed and thought it was morning, and eventually went stark staring mad: is a brief, perfect figure for what happens to ordinary people in Catherine's household when the extraordinary impinges too long on the ordinary. Not the servants who adapted, who went along. The one who could not tell night from day and tried to make the mirror clear and lost her mind doing it.

For the Curious

The Viaticum

The Viaticum is the Eucharist given to a dying person as spiritual provision for the journey from this life to the next. In Latin, viaticum means provisions for a journey. That Catherine's wedding was presided over by a St. Bernard who gave her the Viaticum is Young at her most densely layered: the Alpine rescue dog as priest, performing both the last rites and the marriage rite, because in Catherine's understanding weddings are funerals. The provisions for the journey and the provisions for death are the same thing. She received them both at once, from the dog who knows the mountain passes.

The Alp of wedlock

The Alp of wedlock (Hannah's phrase, or Catherine's version of it) is Young's most concentrated metaphor for marriage as an impassable peak. Hannah had climbed the Alps. She had been jealous of Mont Blanc, of the Jungfrau, the Eiger, Monte Rosa. She had waited "for snow-peaked mountains to reach sea level." But the Alp of wedlock, nothing so adamantine, nothing so undissolving. The mountain Hannah never climbed is the one she spent her life at the base of.

Alexander Pope

Alexander Pope, who appears holding Catherine's hand during the wedding, was the eighteenth-century English poet most famous for his Essay on Man and his translations of Homer. He was also famously small and physically deformed, brilliant and acerbic and deeply interested in the question of what it means to be human in a universe governed by forces beyond human understanding. Young places him at Catherine's wedding without

comment. He is there because weddings are, in Young's world, occasions that raise the Essay on Man question directly: what is this creature, and who designed the system he is caught in?

Gretna Green

Gretna Green is a village just over the Scottish border where English couples traditionally eloped to be married without parental consent, under Scottish law's more permissive requirements. The Gretna Green wedding (the elopement, the wild road, the pursuers) is Catherine's most vivid memory of her marriage: the fifty Cossack horsemen, the furies, the screeching harpies, the sense of being carried off by someone whose face she never saw. It was the most romantic possible marriage and the most terrifying. Both at once. This, too, is weddings are funerals.

Chapter 35: She Had Been Married to the Suffrage Movement

Research notes: Chapter 35

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Exploration and the Poles · Women’s Suffrage

Chapter 35 is one of the chapters devoted primarily to Cousin Hannah, and it is the most expansive so far. Young returns to Hannah’s public life (the suffrage campaigns, the foreign adventures, the iron keys and metallic presence) but now through the lens of Catherine’s longing: what it would mean if Hannah came back, what Catherine understands now that she resisted then, and what the great captain’s life finally amounted to.

This chapter is also the one where Young brings the reader closest to understanding why Cousin Hannah could not rescue Catherine. The answer, she suggests, was that Hannah’s faith in the suffrage movement (absolute, consuming, bride-like) was itself a form of the same retreat from ordinary human love that Catherine had made in the other direction. They were mirror images who could not see each other clearly.

What actually happens in Chapter 35

Catherine imagines inviting Cousin Hannah back for a long winter season, and thinks through what their relationship was and what it might now be. She would greet her without reserve now, take off her plumed hat, ask her to be seated. She would understand now what “she had not wished to understand” then.

The chapter catalogs Hannah’s suffrage career in its most complete form: the campaigns on “all fronts known and unknown, domestic and foreign and undiscovered, the” riding through distant capitals already evacuated, the triumphing over empire-makers and demoniac hordes, the refusal of a stained glass window in her memory. It also catalogs what Hannah was not: not a dancer, not a conversationalist, not a domestic figure, not someone who had time for old wounds or intimate revelations or confessions “that one had loved in secret what one” denied in public.

Young gives us the chapter’s central statement near its end: Hannah had been married “to the suffrage movement, even as if she were a bride, as if the suffrage movement were her husband, her lord and master who had carried her away.” “She had been married to no other husband.”

Married to the movement

The image of Hannah married to the suffrage movement is Young’s most complete statement of how Hannah solved, or did not solve, the problem of her own nature. The

movement was “her true love, her awesome husband, the masculine dream of her life, the abundant resource of her strength.”

Young places this with characteristic precision: Hannah could not have been persuaded to confess that “she had yearned for marriage, or she had loved a man. Or she had yearned for a homunculus, a little man, a” “gentleman’s gentleman to wait on her.” The substitution of the suffrage movement for personal love is Hannah’s parallel to Catherine’s substitution of the phantom bridegroom, or Miss MacIntosh’s substitution of practical ordinariness. All three women in the novel’s inner circle have built their lives around something that stands in for what cannot be named or lived directly. Hannah’s substitute was the grandest and most public. It was also, in its way, the most complete: she was, as Young says, “this great lord, scythe sword in hand, her head reaching among the stars, this mighty captain who had rescued so many fair ladies in distress, breaking their invisible chains.”

She became the husband she could not have. She rescued the women she could not be rescued by. The suffrage movement was her marriage, and like all the marriages in this novel, it was a wedding to an absence.

Hannah’s buried life

Young gives us, near the chapter’s end, the sharpest contrast between Catherine and Hannah: Catherine is haunted by Catherine’s “buried life—by a contingent existence, the inexpressible, a way of life she had not chosen or had abandoned.” “Hannah’s life had not been haunted by” Hannah’s buried life.

This is both Hannah’s strength and her limitation. She had followed seemingly only one course, had never divided herself into opposing factions, “had forgotten herself long ago, perhaps in the great battle of the white eunuchs with the black eunuchs.” “She did not need to wage war with herself.” She had an external enemy (man, physical and present) and this meant she never had to confront the battle within.

Catherine’s many selves (“the look-out in the crow’s-nest, the negress in the belfry, the human barometer,” “the lady in the phaeton, the figurehead in the foam”) are the price of Catherine’s interior complexity, her willingness to contain contradictions. Hannah’s single-mindedness, her unity of character, was what Catherine most admired and least resembled. It was also what made Hannah unable to fully reach her.

Young adds her most cautionary note here: “the extremities of faith in anything might always beget” its opposite. Hannah’s total faith in the suffrage movement may have contained, at its extreme limit, its own negation. “Death might be the parent of love—or love” the parent of death. Catherine had always known this. Hannah, apparently, had not.

What Hannah could not do

The chapter contains one of Young’s most careful negative portraits: all the things Hannah could not do or be. She could not dance. She could not take her place in a minuet, balancing between right foot and left, shifting weight from one side to the other. She had never appeared in a ballroom. She had escorted no lady to the dance.

She had no time for intimate revelation, for the moment when one confesses that one is “the opposite of what one seemed, that all one’s life” has been a living lie, “that one had loved in secret what one” denied in public. That is the confession she could not make. That is what the loss of the skirt was about.

Young also tells us that Hannah had refused a stained glass window in her memory; “she had believed in no image, neither the living nor the dead.” After six chapters of Hannah’s life, this detail lands with unexpected weight. The woman who had ridden through every country, who had seen everything, who had known the secrets of husbands whispered to dead wives and wives whispered to dead husbands: refused to be made into an image. She would not be fixed. She would not be memorialized. “She had believed in no image,” which means she had believed in no representation of herself as a single, stable thing.

What to watch for as you keep reading

Light spoilers: *This section hints at what happens later in the novel. Skip it if you want to meet the story fresh.*

Cousin Hannah’s story is not over. It carries on through her deathbed in Chapter 42 and the story of her lost skirt. Vera’s bus journey, and the wider American landscape Young has been preparing us for, come much later.

The image Catherine uses of herself (these many selves, these fragmentations of partial selves, splintered mirrors and partial images) is the novel’s self-description. Miss MacIntosh, My Darling is a novel of partial selves and splintered mirrors. Every character is an incomplete portrait of the others. Each is complete only in combination with the rest. Young has been building this from the first page.

Hannah’s observation that it was colder at home (colder than the Antarctic, colder than the glacial mountains, colder than any place the great explorers had discovered and named after their wives) is the novel’s most compressed statement about why people leave. The sleeping lady in the bed of snow, “with the snow falling on a lacy counterpane”: this is what the great Antarctic explorers were escaping. This is what Catherine has been: the cold at the center of the house. The one who cannot be warmed.

For the Curious

The great explorers naming their Antarctic

The great explorers naming their Antarctic discoveries after their wives is historically accurate. James Clark Ross named the Ross Ice Shelf and Ross Sea after himself, but dozens of Antarctic features were named by nineteenth and twentieth century explorers after women who waited at home: wives, mothers, daughters, patronesses. The implication in Young’s text, that it was colder at home than in the ice, is both a joke at the explorers’ expense and a genuine observation about what it meant to be the woman whose name was given to a glacier.

Lady Godiva

Lady Godiva rode naked through the streets of Coventry, according to legend, to protest her husband's taxation of the poor: the most famous act of political protest by a woman in medieval English legend. Young echoes this in Hannah's imagined willingness to "have ridden naked through the gale." Hannah would have done what Lady Godiva did, but for suffrage rather than tax relief, and without the fig leaf of a legend to protect her. "She would have ridden through the storm of years."

The eunuch

The eunuch who became a father, dying for love and strangled in a desert courtyard with hens clucking over him: is one of Young's most compressed images of the unexpected persistence of desire under apparently impossible conditions. Hannah tells it to Catherine as a story of "what even a poor eunuch might be capable of." Young places it in a chapter about Hannah's own buried capacity for love that she apparently could never name. The hens clucking over him are Young's touch: the domestic fowl presiding over the body of the man who loved past the limits of his own nature.

Mahound

Mahound is an archaic and often pejorative English term for Mohammed, used in medieval Christian literature to describe a fearsome foreign deity. Young uses it in Catherine's question about whether Hannah might still "be riding in a desert place with her Mahound," which is to say, with the terrifying and magnificent force that drove her through all those years. Hannah's Mahound is not a person. It is the movement itself, the purpose, the calling that was also her marriage. Young does not explain the word. She trusts the reader to feel its combination of reverence and strangeness.

Chapter 36: Where Has She Gone

Research notes: Chapter 36

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh

Themes: Duality and Doubles · Memory and the Past · The Search for Meaning

Symbols: Angels, Devils, and Myth · Mirrors and Reflections

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Judaism · Napoleon and Wellington · Revelation and the Apocalypse · The History of Opium

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There is a particular kind of grief that doesn't look like grief from the outside. It looks, instead, like a logical problem. Like a question of coordinates. Like someone who has mislaid an object and is working, methodically, through all the places it might be.

This is Catherine in Chapter 36. Cousin Hannah is dead, and Catherine knows she is dead, and Catherine's response to this fact is to treat it as insufficient information. Dead is not a location. Dead does not tell you where someone has gone. And Catherine (who has spent her life in a household where the borders between waking and dreaming, real and imagined, present and departed have never been firm) sees no particular reason why death should be any more conclusive than anything else.

Chapter 36 is one of the novel's great meditations on what we do with the dead when they refuse to arrive.

What actually happens in Chapter 36

Catherine wants to know where Cousin Hannah is. Not in any mystical or vague sense; she wants this information concretely. Cousin Hannah is dead, yes, but Catherine considers herself to be living among both the living and the dead, and she sees no reason why this shouldn't grant her access to Cousin Hannah's whereabouts.

Mr. Spitzer was the last living person to see Cousin Hannah alive. Catherine blames him, with a frustration that has calcified over years into something close to contempt, for not being able to tell her more. He is obtuse about it. He won't say, or can't say, or the knowledge has slipped through the particular kind of consciousness he has: one that receives everything a beat too late.

In one of the chapter's sharpest moments, Mr. Spitzer briefly rouses himself from his usual lassitude to accuse Catherine of never having “loved any living being—not even” his dead twin brother. This lands. Young doesn't linger on it, but you should.

Meanwhile, Catherine turns over the question of what Cousin Hannah would look like now, having undergone her transformation. Would she be a man or a woman on the other side? Queen of the dead, or invader of heaven? Catherine suspects heaven will not contain her for long. For “if a woman should be in heaven, it should not be heaven long,” Catherine thinks; there “should soon be this chaos.”

Mr. Spitzer, and the problem of arriving late

Young gives us, in Chapter 36, one of the novel's most precise and quietly devastating portraits of Mr. Spitzer. His eyes and ears are out of sync. He hears sounds a minute after they happen. Every singer he listens to is slightly off-key. He exists at what Young calls a second remove from life, not absent, exactly, but never quite present either, always receiving the world a half-step behind the moment it occurs.

He is also, Young tells us, a counterfeit of himself. His twin brother is dead, and something in Mr. Spitzer died with him, and what remains is a copy, a man who goes through the motions of being a person without quite filling the shape.

Notice how Young has arranged this. Mr. Spitzer, whose identity is fractured by the loss of his twin, is the person Catherine needs to locate Cousin Hannah. The keeper of the last information is the person least able to reliably hold information. The bridge between the living and the dead is a man who is already, in his way, only partially alive.

This is not cruelty on Young's part. It is the novel's particular understanding of how grief compounds. Loss doesn't distribute itself evenly. It lands on the people least equipped to carry it, and then it asks them to be of service anyway.

Catherine, memory, and the lie of the mirror

The chapter gives us a face “in an inaccurate mirror of consciousness”: Catherine wonders who would know Cousin Hannah’s face now, and whether to address her letter to Madame or Monsieur. This is not played for surrealism; it is, for Catherine, simply accurate. She has never been able to hold a fixed image of herself. She is made of fragments, partial selves, vague thoughts that don't resolve into a continuous person.

Young draws the contrast explicitly: Catherine's approach to memory is radical, imaginative, porous. She cannot distinguish what she remembers from what she has invented, and she is not entirely sure the distinction matters. Mr. Spitzer, by contrast, is conservative, precise, buttoned against the flood of association. He trusts only what he can verify. He trusts very little.

They are, in this sense, a perfect mismatch for the conversation Catherine needs to have. She wants to swim out into the deep water of what might have happened to Cousin Hannah. Mr. Spitzer will not leave the shore.

Cousin Hannah, and the question of what comes next

Catherine's meditation on Cousin Hannah's afterlife is one of the chapter's great set pieces, and it deserves to be read slowly.

She runs through Cousin Hannah’s travels in life (“She had driven a breach in the walls of Moscow. She had caused a sensation in St. Petersburg.” “She had crossed Siberia many times by foot.” Babylon) as if they might tell her where so restless a traveler has gone now. Young gives us Cousin Hannah as a great traveler, a figure whose posthumous geography is as improbable and sweeping as her biography.

But then Catherine gets to the real question: what is Cousin Hannah now? Is she still a woman? The chapter floats the possibility that death might dissolve that category: that Cousin Hannah could have become something neither man nor woman on the other side, something that has escaped the classifications entirely. This is not a question Young resolves. It is a question she wants you to sit with.

And then: Catherine's conviction that Cousin Hannah would not last long in heaven. That she would be too disruptive, too restless, too constitutionally opposed to any hierarchy, including celestial ones, to remain a peaceful resident. Heaven, in Catherine's cosmology, is not equipped for a woman like Cousin Hannah. She would turn it into another campaign.

The bridges, and what they cross

Young threads through this chapter a series of bridges: the “Brooklyn Bridge, Waterloo Bridge, the Bridge of Sighs” in Venice, the Bridge of Lies in Sibiu, Romania. Each one a different kind of crossing, a different relationship between what is on either side.

The Bridge of Sighs, named for the sighs of condemned prisoners who crossed it from the courtroom to the cells, and the Bridge of Lies, which legend says will collapse under anyone who tells a lie upon it, are the ones to hold. Chapter 36 is a chapter about what cannot be crossed, about the gap between the living and the dead that Catherine keeps trying to negotiate and keeps finding uncrossable. The bridges are there. The other side is not accessible.

The accusation, and what it costs

Return, for a moment, to Mr. Spitzer's accusation: that Catherine never loved any living being. Not even his dead twin brother.

It is the kind of thing that is said in exhaustion, in the specific tiredness of someone who has watched another person love the absent more devotedly than they have ever loved the present. And it may be true. Catherine's great loves are Cousin Hannah, who is dead. The phantom bridegroom, who never was. The opium dreams that are more real to her than the room she sits in. She is a woman whose most passionate relationships are with things that cannot require anything of her in return.

Mr. Spitzer, living and corporeal and difficult and obtuse, does not stand a chance against that kind of devotion. He never did. He knows it. The accusation is not an attack. It is a grief of its own.

What to hold onto

If Chapter 36 feels like it is circling without landing, here is what it is circling: Catherine is trying to grieve, and she cannot find the form for it. The dead are supposed to go somewhere. They are supposed to be locatable, even if unreachable. But Cousin Hannah has not gone anywhere Catherine can name, and Mr. Spitzer, the only witness, cannot tell

her, and the mirrors show an inaccurate face, and the bridges are there but the other side is fog.

This is the chapter where the novel asks, as quietly and as relentlessly as it can: what do you do with a loss that won't tell you where it went?

You keep looking. You imagine. You write letters that are illegible. You wait for sounds that arrive a minute late. You hold the question open like a door and let the wind come through.

For the Curious

On the second remove from life

On the second remove from life.

Young's phrase for Mr. Spitzer's condition is one of the novel's quiet philosophical achievements. To be at a second remove is to be twice displaced: not in the world directly, but observing your observation of it. This is not quite solipsism and not quite dissociation; it is something subtler, a consciousness that has learned to cushion itself against arrival. Mr. Spitzer has been so shaped by loss that he no longer trusts the first impression of anything. He waits. By the time he receives it, the moment has already moved on.

On the twin brother

On the twin brother.

Mr. Spitzer's dead twin is one of the novel's buried presences, never fully named or narrated but always exerting pressure. The death of a twin is a particular kind of loss: you lose not only a person but a reflection, a proof of your own existence. Young elsewhere in the novel explores doubleness and identity: the double-headed man in Chapter 1, the split selves that populate Catherine's household. Mr. Spitzer's fracture runs deep because it is ontological. He lost the person who confirmed that he was real.

On false memory and Julia Shaw

On false memory and Julia Shaw.

The psychologist Julia Shaw has argued that all memories are, in a meaningful sense, illusions: constructions that the mind assembles and reassembles, not recordings. Young was writing decades before this became neurological consensus, but she understood it instinctively. Catherine cannot distinguish memory from imagination not because she is broken, but because the distinction itself is less stable than we prefer to believe. The novel, in this sense, is ahead of the science.

On the letters

On the letters.

Mr. Spitzer writes letters that never arrive. Catherine writes letters that are illegible. Young is making something very precise here about two different failures of communication. Mr.

Spitzer's failure is one of delivery: the intention is there, the effort is made, but nothing reaches its destination. Catherine's failure is one of legibility: the effort is made, but what emerges cannot be read. These are not the same failure. One is a postal problem. The other is a problem of language itself, of whether what is inside can ever be made available to the outside at all.

On heaven and Cousin Hannah

On heaven and Cousin Hannah.

Catherine's conviction that a woman like Cousin Hannah would turn heaven into chaos within a week is one of the novel's most quietly funny moments, and also one of its most serious ones. Young is asking: what does an afterlife built by and for the hierarchical imagination of men look like to a woman who spent her life dismantling hierarchy? Not peaceful. Not restful. The Moslem Paradise the chapter alludes to, a place where women are conspicuously absent, is exactly the kind of arrangement Cousin Hannah would find intolerable. She would not stay. She would not comply. She would be, in death as in life, ungovernable.

On "from Minsk to Pinsk."

On "from Minsk to Pinsk."

Young drops this phrase into the chapter's vast geography (Moscow, Babylon, Boston, Grand Central Station) and it carries its own specific weight. The expression comes from Jewish humor about the long, circular, exhausting journeys of the Pale of Settlement: travel that covers great distances and arrives essentially where it started. Catherine's search for Cousin Hannah has this quality. She crosses every bridge in imagination and arrives back in the same room, no closer to knowing where Hannah is. The journey is real. The destination remains unreachable.

On the splitting of the heavens

On the splitting of the heavens.

The chapter echoes Revelation 6:14, the destruction of the old world order, the heavens splitting apart. Young reaches for apocalyptic imagery not for drama but for scale. Death, in this novel, is not a private event. Every death is a cosmological rupture, a reorganization of what is real. When Cousin Hannah died, something in the structure of things shifted. Catherine is not being melodramatic when she treats the loss as cosmic. She is being accurate.

Chapter 37: The Land of Infinite Greyness

Research notes: Chapter 37

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Order, Chaos, and Discipline · The Search for Meaning

Philosophy: Aristotle · Descartes and Dualism · Epicureanism · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Time, Physics, and Chaos Theory · Wittgenstein

Allusions: Suicide in History and Literature · The History of Opium

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You are in the deep water now.

Chapter 37 is the chapter where Young asks her hardest question, and asks it without flinching: what if nothing holds? What if the self is not a fixed point but a series of dissolving reflections? What if the boundary between dreaming and waking, living and dying, is not a line at all but a fog that has no far edge?

If you find this chapter disorienting, that is the correct response. You are not supposed to find your footing here. The chapter's architecture is designed to make the ground shift beneath you, to show you what it feels like to live inside Catherine Cartwheel's consciousness: a place where the ceiling is the floor, trees grow with their roots in the sky, and the dreamer cannot be identified because everyone in the dream might be the dreamer.

Stay with it. Young is not being difficult for the sake of difficulty. She is being precise.

What actually happens in Chapter 37

We are still in Catherine's household. Vera narrates her mother's state of mind, and that state of mind is the chapter's entire landscape. Catherine is lying horizontal, sedated with opium, caught in the half-country between waking and sleep. She is not fully in the world. She is not fully out of it. She is, as she has been for most of the novel, in between.

The chapter opens with a vision (mirrors drifting, clocks striking hours that make no sense, dolphins behaving unexpectedly) and then poses its governing question: but who was the dreamer? Not which character is dreaming. Who, among all of them, is the one whose dream contains the others?

Young never answers this. The question is the point.

Catherine and Mr. Spitzer circle the question of death and order. Catherine declares, in one of the chapter's sharpest lines, that order is a mad man's dream, a suicidal plan that leaves out the irrational elements. Mr. Spitzer, ever the pessimist, contributes his own anguished uncertainty. And beneath all of it, Catherine's refusal (persistent, desperate, and entirely human) to surrender to what the chapter calls the land of infinite greyness.

Cousin Hannah enters the chapter as she always enters: in memory, in force, in the contrast she makes with everyone still breathing. Her death is final. Young is clear about

this. She will not return. She has been throttled by death, and what follows that throttling is, the novel admits for the first time without evasion, silence.

The land of infinite greyness

This phrase is the chapter's center of gravity, and you should know what Young means by it.

The land of infinite greyness is not heaven or hell. It is not a destination at all. It is the oblivion Catherine fears above everything else: the place where there is no memory, no ego, no voice, no image. Not darkness: darkness has a quality, a texture, a presence. Greyness is the absence of contrast itself. It is the condition in which nothing can be distinguished from anything else, in which selfhood simply stops having meaning.

Catherine's entire life (the opium, the bed, the household ruled by dream and illusion) can be read as a strategy for avoiding this. She stays horizontal because to stand up would be to move toward a world that might eventually require her to arrive at the grey. She drowns herself in hallucination because hallucination, however unreliable, is still vivid. It still has color. It still has her in it.

This is not weakness, though it might look like it. It is a woman clinging to the fact of her own experience with both hands, refusing to let go even when everything around her has dissolved. Young has considerable sympathy for this refusal. So should you.

The philosophy of reversals

Young fills Chapter 37 with images of inversion: the ceiling as the mirroring floor, trees “growing with their roots in the clouded sky” and their branches underground, marble stairways “running like moon-colored water under one’s feet,” the sea become the land.

This is not surrealism for its own sake. Young is working through a genuine philosophical position: that the opposites we rely on to organize reality (life and death, real and dream, self and other) are not opposites at all. They are the same thing seen from different angles. The boundary between them is a convention, a useful fiction, and in Chapter 37, that fiction is wearing very thin.

The image that captures this best is the one Young gives Vera: “love might wear the face of death, the grinning skull, as death might wear the face of love.” This is not a gothic decoration. It is an observation about the structure of deep attachment: that to love something completely is already to have anticipated its loss, and that loss, when it comes, carries the ghost of everything the love was. The two faces belong to the same person. They always did.

Catherine, order, and the irrational

Pay attention to Catherine's declaration that order is a mad man's dream.

She means this seriously, and so does Young. The desire for order (for things to proceed logically, to have causes that explain their effects, to have selves that remain continuous

from moment to moment) is, in this novel's cosmology, a form of willful delusion. The universe does not operate this way. People do not operate this way. A plan that omits the irrational elements is not a plan; it is a wish wearing the clothes of a plan.

Mr. Spitzer, who is conservative and precise and trusts only what he can verify, is the character who most wants order. And Mr. Spitzer is the character most obviously undone by his inability to achieve it: hearing sounds a minute late, existing at a second remove from life, never arriving in the present moment that order requires.

Catherine, who has given herself over entirely to the irrational, is paradoxically more honest about reality's actual texture. She is not sane, in any conventional sense. But she is not lying to herself about what the world is like. There is something Young wants you to notice here, about which of these two failures is the more truthful one.

Cousin Hannah, and the finality that Catherine refuses

Young does something in Chapter 37 that she has been careful not to do before: she allows the word finality.

Cousin Hannah is gone. Not transformed, not traveling through posthumous geographies, not available to be found if Catherine looks in the right direction. Gone. Throttled by death. The echoes of her voice, her boots, her campaigns for the vote, her defiance of every seraglio and hierarchy that tried to contain her; they fade in this chapter into something that Young's prose rarely permits: silence.

Near the chapter’s close, Young gives Mr. Spitzer the image: “The last sobbing requiem had already played, as Mr. Spitzer probably knew, for he, plucking his dead ear, heard the silence.” Not the silence itself: the hearing of it. The consciousness that remains after the music stops, registering the absence of what was there before.

This is as close as the novel comes to a conventional statement about grief. It doesn't stay there long. But it is there, and it is real, and you should let it land before the next chapter carries you somewhere else.

The question the chapter leaves open

Who was the dreamer?

Young raises this at the chapter's opening and does not close it. Here are the possibilities the novel has been building toward: Catherine is the dreamer and everyone else is her dream. Vera is the dreamer and Catherine is her dream. The novel itself is the dreamer and both of them are its dream. Or, and this is the version that keeps the question alive longest, there is no individual dreamer, only the dream, and what we call selfhood is the dream's way of pretending it has a source.

You don't need to resolve this. Young didn't resolve it. But hold the question as you read forward. It will keep mattering.

What to hold onto

If Chapter 37 feels like it is asking too much of you, come back to this: Catherine is afraid of disappearing. Not dying, exactly; she is already half-dead, and she has made her peace with the border region. What she is afraid of is the grey. The absolute colorless erasure of everything that makes her her.

That fear is entirely recognizable. You don't need opium dreams or a household ruled by hallucination to understand it. It is the fear that runs under all the novel's philosophical circling, all its reversals and cosmic imagery and blurred borders between waking and sleep. Strip everything else away and what remains is a woman who does not want to stop being.

Young treats this with complete seriousness. It is not a small thing to want to exist. It is not a small thing to refuse the grey. Even when the refusal looks like madness, even when it keeps you horizontal in a bed for decades, even when it means you cannot go out to meet the people who love you because going out would mean acknowledging a world that will eventually take you under, even then, the refusal is human, and it counts for something.

For the Curious

On the dreamer question and Descartes

On the dreamer question and Descartes.

René Descartes asked, in his Meditations, how we know we are not dreaming right now: how we know that our waking experience is not simply a more coherent version of what happens in sleep. He could not find a reliable answer. Young knew her Descartes. The question "but who was the dreamer?" is Cartesian in structure: it does not ask what is being dreamed but who is doing the dreaming, which is the deeper and more unsettling question. If you cannot identify the dreamer, you cannot establish a stable ground for anything else.

On Einstein and time

On Einstein and time.

The chapter engages, obliquely but seriously, with Einstein's observation that the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion. For Young, this is not a physicist's curiosity but a lived condition. Catherine experiences time as non-linear; she cannot reliably sequence what has already happened from what she is imagining, or what is memory from what is dream. Einstein gave this a scientific name. Young shows you what it feels like from the inside.

On the philosophy of reversals

On the philosophy of reversals.

Aristotle described reversal (peripeteia) as the moment in tragedy when the action turns in the opposite direction. Baudrillard, later, wrote about how oppositions collapse and overwrite each other in modern experience. Young's reversals are both: tragic structure and epistemological crisis at once. When she writes that the ceiling is the mirroring floor and trees grow with roots in the sky, she is not writing fantasy. She is writing about what happens to perception when the organizing principles you relied on are no longer trustworthy.

On Atlantis

On Atlantis.

The chapter invokes Atlantis not as a place but as a condition: something that existed and then went under, something that is now only approachable by inference, by the shape of its absence. For Catherine, Cousin Hannah has become Atlantis. For Vera, Miss MacIntosh has become Atlantis. The entire novel is an archaeology of what has sunk below the surface of the knowable, and the question running through it is whether any of that submerged world can be brought back up.

On oblivion and the grey

On oblivion and the grey.

Young's "land of infinite greyness" is her own formulation, but it rhymes with a long philosophical tradition. The Epicureans said that death cannot harm us because we will not be there to experience it, which is meant as consolation but reads, to most people, as the thing that makes death terrifying. Wittgenstein said death is not an experience in life. Catherine's dread is the dread that both of these formulations produce in a person who has not found them comforting: the dread not of a bad experience but of no experience. Of the grey.

On gender as fluid and the afterlife

On gender as fluid and the afterlife.

Chapter 37 continues Chapter 36's question about what Cousin Hannah is on the other side of death, whether she is still a woman, something else, something neither. Young is writing in this passage two decades before gender theory gave this question its contemporary vocabulary, but she is asking it in full seriousness. Death, in this novel's cosmology, dissolves the categories that living requires. What persists may not be sorted by the classifications we applied while it was here. This is both philosophically radical and, given what we know of Cousin Hannah, entirely in character. She would refuse categorization in death as she refused it in life.

On the requiem and the hearing of silence

On the requiem and the hearing of silence.

A requiem is a mass for the dead. Mr. Spitzer's image, hearing silence after the last requiem, is the chapter's most conventionally musical moment, and it earns its place by

being so precise. The hearing of silence is not the same as silence. It is an active, conscious registration of absence. It requires a listener. It requires someone who remembers what filled the space before. Mr. Spitzer, who hears everything a minute late, who exists at a second remove from life, is the novel's designated hearer of silence. It is, in its way, the only role he was ever really suited for.

Chapter 38: The Loony Bin

Research notes: Chapter 38

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Love · Music, Sound, and Silence · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Angels, Devils, and Myth · Moon and Stars · Music and Instruments

Philosophy: Heraclitus and Flux · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Plato and Platonism · Pythagoras and the Music of the Spheres

Allusions: Revelation and the Apocalypse · The History of Opium · Women’s Suffrage

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There is a moment in Chapter 38 when Vera (not abstractly, not philosophically, but with the matter-of-fact clarity of someone who has been living inside a situation long enough to name it) refers to her mother's household as a loony bin.

It lands.

Young has been building this house for thirty-seven chapters: the opium, the bed Catherine never leaves, Mr. Spitzer arriving a minute behind each moment he inhabits, Cousin Hannah present only as memory and legend and the fading echo of iron keys. You have been inside these walls long enough to have forgotten, perhaps, that from the outside, this is what it looks like. A loony bin. A place where the usual rules of consciousness don't apply.

Chapter 38 is the chapter where the novel steps back, just briefly, and lets you see the house from that vantage. And then it steps back inside, because the inside is where the real work of the novel lives.

What actually happens in Chapter 38

Catherine talks about Cousin Hannah. Mr. Spitzer contributes anecdotes. Vera narrates her mother's interior: its shape, its contradictions, its magnificent and exhausting unreliability.

We learn more about Catherine's love life, or rather her love's absence: Peron, the man she loved, whose neglect she has reinterpreted as a form of devotion too large for expression. His silence was his love. His distance was his tribute to her power. Catherine has constructed this interpretation with great care and considerable creativity, and she has been living inside it for years.

We learn that the cause of suffrage had always seemed to Catherine “quite unworthy of Cousin Hannah’s adventuresome spirit,” and its “unflagging efforts” “a great waste of time.” This is not incidental: Young places it here deliberately, in the long meditation on Cousin Hannah's life's work, so that you feel the full weight of the irony. The woman Hannah loved most, the woman whose household she visited, whose memory she haunts: that woman thought the cause a waste of time.

And we get Cousin Hannah herself, arriving in this chapter as she always arrives: fully armed, whistling, trailing snowstorms, carrying iron keys and jeweled swords. A figure of myth assembling itself out of Catherine's guilty admiration.

Obtuse and acute

Young gives us, in Chapter 38, a geometric vocabulary for the novel's central contrast. Catherine is described as obtuse: wide-angled, blunt, unable to cut. Cousin Hannah is acute: sharp, incisive, a finely tempered blade.

These are called, in the text, masculine virtues. Notice that Young says this with some irony. Cousin Hannah's sharpness is called masculine not because it belongs to men but because the culture has assigned it to them: shrewdness, incisiveness, the willingness to press forward without softening the edges. Cousin Hannah claimed these qualities anyway. She did not ask permission to be acute.

Catherine could not admire these traits without feeling their rebuke. Every quality she admired in Hannah was a quality she did not have, could not have, had perhaps chosen not to have by retreating to the bed and the opium and the beautiful, inaccurate dreams. The admiration and the guilt are inseparable. You cannot love someone for what they are without sometimes feeling diminished by the comparison.

Catherine's love, and the dead love that never was

The passage about Peron is one of the novel's quiet heartbreaks, and it deserves to be read slowly.

Catherine loved Peron. Peron did not love her back, or did not express it, or expressed it through neglect, which Catherine has, over years of opium-assisted interpretation, come to understand as a love too great for conventional demonstration. His silence was greater than hatred. His distance was a tribute. The love between them was a “dead love which never was and never would be real,” and was therefore, Catherine reasons, paradoxically eternal. What never happened cannot be lost. It is still there, unchanged, in the place where unrealized things live.

You might want to argue with this. Young wants you to feel both the argument against it and the deep, exhausted human logic that produces it. People do this. They construct the love they needed out of the materials available, which sometimes means constructing it out of absence and silence and the stories silence permits. Catherine is not deluded in any simple sense. She is doing what the mind does when the heart's actual history is too painful to live inside directly.

Cousin Hannah, Young tells us, never loved anyone, or loved only the image of the dead. Two women, both unable to love the living. One because she gave everything to a cause. The other because the living disappointed her, or frightened her, or simply were not the dream.

Catherine against suffrage

Let's stay with Catherine’s dismissal of the cause Hannah gave her life to.

This was not unusual among wealthy white women of her era and class. The arguments they made were various: that suffrage would disrupt the family, that women lacked the necessary political temperament, that doubling the electorate without adding new perspective served no purpose. Some opposed it because of racism, because they understood, correctly, that the logic of universal suffrage could not be contained to white women alone, and they did not want that. Some opposed it out of loyalty to the husbands and fathers and social arrangements that had, in their particular cases, been kind.

Young does not excuse Catherine. But she also does not make Catherine a simple villain for holding this view. She is interested in the specific texture of the irony: that Cousin Hannah devoted her life to a freedom the woman she loved most did not want for herself. That the relationship between them was genuine, complicated, full of real feeling on both sides, and built over this foundational disagreement. That people can love each other deeply across a chasm of this kind, and that the love does not resolve the chasm.

This is one of the places where the novel becomes historical without being didactic. Young is not delivering a lesson. She is showing you a room.

Cousin Hannah as the red cross knight

Chapter 38 reaches for medieval imagery to describe Cousin Hannah: she is a crusader, an armored figure, a knight of the suffrage campaigns riding into battle against the ogres of social arrangement. Catherine names the Red Cross knight outright, though only to complain that Hannah “was not a French chevalier who had travelled great distances or a Red Cross knight or Richard Coeur de Leon.” Spenser’s Redcrosse Knight in The Faerie Queene is a figure of allegorical virtue, armored righteousness moving through a landscape of monsters and temptations toward a goal that is always receding slightly ahead of him.

What does it mean to frame a suffragette as a knight errant? It means Young is placing the women's movement inside the oldest literary tradition for heroic struggle, the quest narrative, and insisting it belongs there. Cousin Hannah is not a footnote to the real history. She is the thing the quest was always about: the battle against the forces that would keep people from their full humanity.

And like the Redcrosse Knight, she is not without paradox. She fights for liberation while harboring her secret wish for the domestic life she publicly rejected. She embodies virtue while playing a mean game of cards. The armor has something complicated inside it. That is what makes her a knight worth following.

The music of the spheres, and what Mr. Spitzer hears

Vera wonders whether Mr. Spitzer’s abstractions come from “his enraptured thinking of the beautiful music of the spheres”: musica universalis, the ancient idea, traced through

Pythagoras and Plato to Boethius and Kepler, that the mathematical relationships governing the cosmos express themselves as harmonics, as a music too vast and too perfect for human ears to detect directly.

Mr. Spitzer cannot hear it. He hears everything a minute late, and he hears it off-key. The music of the spheres is “music his dead brother heard but which Mr. Spitzer could not hear, could only imagine in this silence.” He is constitutionally cut off from the very order he most wants to believe in.

Young uses this to deepen the portrait of a man who is both the most invested in the idea of order and the least capable of accessing it. His cosmic music plays on without him. He sits in the silence after the last requiem, hearing the absence of what he cannot quite reach.

Zeno's arrow, and the problem of getting anywhere

Young never names Zeno, but his paradoxes are a useful lens for this chapter: specifically the question of whether motion is real. Zeno argued that before an arrow can reach its target, it must first travel half the distance, and before that half, half again, infinitely, which should make motion impossible.

Read that way, it is not a puzzle about physics but a map of the characters’ inner lives. Catherine cannot get anywhere from the bed. Not because she lacks the will, exactly, but because each step toward the real world requires another half-step of preparation, and another, and the destination keeps dividing ahead of her. Mr. Spitzer is always in transit, always arriving too late. Even Cousin Hannah, for all her relentless forward motion, was never fully reconciled with peace, always in the next battle, never at rest, the destination perpetually just over the next horizon.

The novel does not offer you a way to solve Zeno's paradox. It offers you three people living inside it.

What to hold onto

If Chapter 38 feels like a great deal of philosophy stacked on top of a simple domestic situation, here is what anchors it: this is a chapter about two women who loved each other genuinely and could not fully reach each other. One because she was always moving toward the next campaign. The other because she was always retreating into the next dream.

They admired qualities in each other they could not embody themselves. They disappointed each other in ways they could not fully name. They shared a history and a disagreement so fundamental it was almost structural, and they loved each other anyway, across all of it.

Young writes about this kind of love (the love that doesn't resolve its contradictions, that carries its irony inside it like a stone) with more patience and precision than almost anyone. Chapter 38 is one of the places where that patience pays off.

For the Curious

On Catherine and anti-suffragism

On Catherine and anti-suffragism.

The women who opposed the vote were called 'antis,' and their arguments, while easy to dismiss from a contemporary vantage, were made with conviction by people who were not simply stupid or cruel. Some believed genuinely in a separate-spheres model of society where women's influence operated through the domestic realm. Some feared, correctly, that suffrage would bring change they did not want. Young is not asking you to forgive Catherine for this position, but she is asking you to understand it as a position a real person could hold, in a specific historical moment, for reasons that made sense inside a particular class and worldview. The irony that Cousin Hannah devoted her life to a freedom Catherine refused is not neat or comfortable. It is not supposed to be.

On the Redcrosse Knight and The Faerie Queene

On the Redcrosse Knight and The Faerie Queene.

Edmund Spenser's epic poem, published in 1590, follows the Redcrosse Knight, a figure of holiness, through a landscape of allegorical dangers toward the rescue of Una, who represents truth. Young's connection of Cousin Hannah to this tradition is precise: Hannah is fighting for truth against the forces of social arrangement that would keep women in subjection, and she wears her cause like armor. The Redcrosse Knight also, notably, is not infallible; he is deceived, he falters, he has to be rescued before he can do the rescuing. Cousin Hannah's secret wish for marriage belongs to this tradition of the heroic figure who contains, quietly, the very vulnerability they are fighting on behalf of others.

On musica universalis and Boethius

On musica universalis and Boethius.

The scholar Boethius, writing in the sixth century while awaiting execution, divided music into three kinds: the music of the universe (musica mundana), the music of the human being (musica humana), and instrumental music. The first is inaudible; it is the harmony of the spheres, the ratio of the cosmos, the silent song of things in their right relations. Young's note that Boethius developed imagery to accompany his writings, and that she may have drawn on those illustrations, is a small key to something large: the novel's visual imagination is as much medieval and philosophical as it is American and contemporary. The loony bin and the music of the spheres are not as far apart in Young's mind as they might seem.

On Heraclitus, Parmenides, and the paradox of motion

On Heraclitus, Parmenides, and the paradox of motion.

Heraclitus said you cannot step into the same river twice, because the river, and you, are always changing. Parmenides said change is an illusion: what is real does not change, and what changes is not real. Zeno, Parmenides' student, demonstrated this with his

paradoxes. Young puts all three into the same room as Catherine and Mr. Spitzer, because her characters are living the paradox directly. Catherine is always the same (horizontal, dreaming, sedated) and always changing (her memories shifting, her stories revising). Mr. Spitzer moves through the world and never arrives. The river runs and stands still simultaneously.

On free will, and Miss MacIntosh

On free will, and Miss MacIntosh.

The chapter's meditation on human will circles back to Miss MacIntosh: absent as always, but still exerting gravity. The novel suggests that Miss MacIntosh's will was not about imposing control but about perseverance within limits: doing the work in front of you, attending to what is real, refusing the fantasies that make limitation bearable by making it invisible. Mind your own knitting. Young takes this seriously as a moral position. It is not glamorous. It is not the Redcrosse Knight or the suffrage captain or the seven-stringed harp. It is a woman with a schedule and a rubber coat, choosing reality every morning. The novel believes, somewhere in its depths, that this choice is its own kind of heroism.

On 'Babylon has fallen.' Revelation 18 describes the fall of Babylon (the great city, the center of worldly power and excess) as a cataclysm that arrives suddenly and leaves only silence and smoke. Young uses this as a shorthand for the collapse of any order that had seemed permanent. Cousin Hannah's world (the suffrage campaigns, the shared history with Catherine, the iron keys and jeweled swords) has fallen into the past in the same way. What seemed like the whole world is now rubble. The characters standing in the aftermath are trying to understand what the city even was, now that it is gone.

Chapter 39: The Infinite House

Research notes: Chapter 39

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Lord Murdock Burdock Thrushmorton · Miss MacIntosh · Mr. Res Tacamah · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Faith, God, and the Supernatural · Madness and Sanity · Nature, the Sea, and the Cosmos · The Search for Meaning

Symbols: Fog and Mist · Opium · The House · The Sea and Water

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Plato and Platonism · William James and Pragmatism

Allusions: Ancient Egypt · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · The History of Opium · Women’s Suffrage

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There is a sentence in Chapter 39 that stops the novel in its tracks (gently, the way a hand on a shoulder stops you, not violently) and asks you to see exactly what you are looking at.

It is “as if the perpendicular pronoun I had come to see my horizontal mother.”

Read it again. The perpendicular I. The horizontal mother. Vera, upright, moving through the world under her own locomotion. Catherine, flat, having surrendered the vertical axis entirely. Two orientations, two modes of being, meeting across the impossible geometry of love and need and the fact that one of them gave birth to the other and neither of them can fully reach across.

Chapter 39 is a portrait of Catherine's interior: her consciousness mapped as architecture, her madness examined with the patient precision of someone who has lived inside it long enough to give it a floor plan. It is one of the most sustained and searching portraits of a mind in the novel. Settle in.

What actually happens in Chapter 39

Vera describes how her mother thinks, and why. Catherine receives visitors, or imagines she receives them: Cousin Hannah's ghost, Lord Murdock Burdock Thrushmorton (whose name alone tells you the register Young is operating in), Mr. Res Tacamah, who controls his madness by dreaming rather than acting. Real visitors, imagined visitors, symbolic visitors: Catherine does not always distinguish between them, and Young does not always tell you which is which.

The chapter is also, quietly, about opium. Catherine acknowledges, with the clarity that is only available to someone deep inside a thing, that the drug has “poisoned all pleasures at their source.” She does not say this with the guilt of someone who intends to stop. She says it as a description. This is what happened. This is the swirling fog. This is how the stars got moved out of their stations.

The chapter ends at the shoreline: sea meeting land, the dead meeting the living, the fog as the habitat of absent-minded persons who walk “with their eyes hidden behind their hands.” And then a final question, one that the novel has been circling since its first page: if everything is a dream, is God dreaming too? “And was not God dreaming, too,” Catherine asks, “dreaming these opium dreams”?

The infinite house

Young gives Catherine's soul the shape of a house. Not a modest house: an infinite one. Many rooms, many stairways, many heavens. Each room contains a different version of Catherine, or a different guest, or a missing element she has been looking for in all the other rooms. The floors waver like water. The walls seem to move. She has been walking through this house for decades and has not found the exit, and may not be looking for one.

This is one of the novel's great metaphors, and it rewards attention. The infinite house is not a prison exactly: Catherine is not suffering in any simple sense. She is genuinely at home in this architecture. It is the only space she knows. But it is a space from which she cannot leave, and a space in which she cannot be reliably found by anyone standing outside it.

Vera is outside it. Vera has always been outside it. The perpendicular I visits the horizontal mother in the house of the horizontal mother's mind, and they speak through the wall between their orientations, and something passes between them, and it is not nothing. But it is not the same as being in the same room.

Sanity's strange definition

Watch for the moment when Catherine offers her definition of her own sanity: her “sanity was simply this—she knew she was insane.”

This is not irony, though it sounds like it. Young means it as a genuine philosophical position, and it echoes a long tradition of thinking about madness and self-knowledge. The person who cannot see their own condition is more thoroughly lost than the person who can name it. Catherine names hers. She has given it a shape, a floor plan, a set of recurring guests. She knows the dragons in her labyrinth by name. This is a form of mastery, even if it is not a form of escape.

Troubles are cyclical, Catherine observes. They appear in different guises (dragons turning into saints, saints turning back into dragons) but the cycle itself is stable. She has learned not to be surprised. This is cold comfort, but it is comfort.

The novel is doing something careful here about the relationship between self-knowledge and cure. Catherine knows herself extraordinarily well, in the particular, partial, introspective way that opium and decades of horizontal time allow. This knowledge has not saved her. Young does not suggest it should have. Self-knowledge in this novel is not a therapeutic tool. It is a form of company: the self keeping itself company in the infinite house, learning the contours of its own labyrinth.

The multiple selves, and the cost of choosing

Catherine asks, in Chapter 39, “which of many selves should she have knowledge of, and how should she know which self of selves was true.” She never settles it. In every room of the infinite house she is “a different hostess,” and Chapter 38 has already shown the lives she might have lived had she accepted Cousin Hannah’s invitations: Egypt, the land of the Kurds, a balloon with four snow-white horses. To choose one self would mean losing all the others.

Young is working here with William James, whom she named as a major influence. James wrote that the self is not a single thing but a stream: a continuous flow of consciousness that contains many potential selves, many versions of the person we might be or might have been. To crystallize into one self is to foreclose the others. Catherine has refused this foreclosure. She has chosen multiplicity over coherence, and the cost is a self that cannot be pinned down, cannot be reliably located, cannot be found in the same room twice.

There is something Young admires in this, even as she shows its costs. To remain multiple is to remain open. Catherine's infinite house has more rooms than a life devoted to a single, coherent self would ever build. Young, who spent decades writing a novel as vast and various as a city, knew something about this refusal herself.

Opium and religion, religion and opium

The chapter arrives, near its end, at one of the novel's most daring questions: whether God, too, is “dreaming these opium dreams.” Young never names Marx, but the juxtaposition is close at hand: opium as religion, religion as opium.

Marx said it plainly: religion is the opium of the people, a drug that dulls the pain of social reality and makes the unbearable bearable, at the cost of preventing the sufferer from addressing the causes of their suffering. Young takes this analogy and turns it inside out. If religion is opium, then opium is religion: it offers transcendence, visions, a world of angels and ethereal light, an extension of experience beyond the physical. Catherine's drug-induced paradise is furnished with the same materials as any heaven.

But Young complicates both the opium and the religion. She does not simply condemn Catherine's illusions as escapism. She shows that for a person in Catherine's condition (caught in the labyrinth, unable to stand, surrounded by loss) the illusions may be what is keeping her alive. The fog is suffocating and it is also breath. The dream is a prison and it is also the only room with a window.

Miss MacIntosh's critique hovers over this passage like a weather front: face reality, face the bare face of things, refuse the comfortable lie. But Miss MacIntosh is gone. And Catherine is still here, in the infinite house, dreaming. Young leaves the argument open. She does not award the point to either position.

The visitors: real and assembled

Lord Murdock Burdock Thrushmorton and Mr. Res Tacamah deserve a moment of attention. These are not minor characters in the conventional sense; they are more like ideas Catherine has personified, given names and social manners, invited in for tea.

Lord Murdock Burdock Thrushmorton twitters like a cage of canaries. His name is a Gothic comedy: the kind of name that announces itself as excessive, as too much, as something assembled from parts that don't quite cohere. He represents the chaotic and the absurd in Catherine's world: the element that cannot be reasoned with or predicted, that arrives without warning and fills the room with incomprehensible sound.

Mr. Res Tacamah controls his madness by dreaming rather than acting, which is to say, he has chosen Catherine's strategy, the strategy of the infinite house. He is, the novel tells us, “only, of course, the porcelain drug bottle with very large ears.” He is a self-portrait she has distributed into someone else's name, given a separate residence in the house so she can look at herself without looking.

Young learned this technique in the classroom. The note in *To All My Darlings* points to it directly: she would say, 'Oh, come in,' to every idea that arrived. Every voice got a chair. Every contradiction got a name and a face and a place at the table. This is how the novel is built. This is how Catherine's mind is built. The guests are ideas, the house is a philosophy, and the hostess has been receiving visitors for longer than anyone can remember.

The shore, the fog, and the question God leaves open

The chapter closes at the water's edge, which is where Young returns when she needs to mark a threshold. Sea meeting shore: the dead meeting the living, the known meeting the unknown, the boundary that moves with every wave and can never be fixed.

The fog, Young tells us, is where absent-minded persons walk “with their eyes hidden behind their hands.” Catherine is one of them. Perhaps all of us, at certain hours, are. The fog is not only fog; it is the condition of being in between, of not being able to see clearly ahead or behind, of moving through a space where the usual landmarks have dissolved.

And then the final question: if everything is a dream, is God dreaming too? Is the universe itself a hallucination generated by a consciousness larger than any individual one, and if so, does that make it more real or less?

Young does not answer. She is not being coy. She genuinely believes the question should stay open: that to close it would be to commit the error Catherine's opium commits: to insist on a particular vision of the architecture when the architecture keeps shifting. The fog has its own kind of truth. The absent-minded walkers with their eyes behind their hands are seeing something, even if it is not what the upright, perpendicular world sees.

What to hold onto

Chapter 39 is a chapter about a woman who built a world inside her mind because the outside world was not sufficient: was too thin, too narrow, too insistent on coherence. The inside world is vast and labyrinthine and costs her everything. And she has chosen it anyway.

You don't have to agree with her choice to understand it. You have to understand that it is a choice, made by a person with intelligence and imagination and a history that drove her here, and that it has its own dignity alongside its costs.

Vera stands perpendicular at the door of the infinite house, watching. She has been standing there her whole life. In later years she will go looking for Miss MacIntosh, who once stood in this house and insisted it face reality, and was eventually swallowed by the same fog she tried to dispel. The door is still open. The mother is still horizontal. The house has no exit that anyone has found.

For the Curious

On the perpendicular I and the horizontal mother

On the perpendicular I and the horizontal mother.

Young's sentence, “as if the perpendicular pronoun I had come to see my horizontal mother,” is one of the novel's great geometric formulations. In grammar, the subject pronoun I is vertical in the sense that it stands alone, upright, self-supporting. The horizontal is the position of rest, sleep, illness, death. Young is mapping an existential difference onto a spatial one: Vera moves through the world under her own power; Catherine has given the vertical axis over. Their relationship is conducted across this gap, which is not only a difference in health but a difference in orientation to existence itself.

On William James and the stream of consciousness

On William James and the stream of consciousness.

James, in his Principles of Psychology, described consciousness not as a series of distinct states but as a continuous flow, a stream, in which past, present, and anticipated future blur together. He also wrote extensively about the self as multiple: we have as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize us, and as many possible selves as the imagination can furnish. Young absorbed this deeply. Catherine's refusal to choose a single self is Jamesian: to crystallize is to impoverish. The many fascinating false selves are not simply delusions; they are the breadth of a consciousness that has refused to narrow itself to fit what the world expects.

On St. Augustine alongside William James

On St. Augustine alongside William James.

Young named both James and Augustine as major influences, and they make a strange, productive pair. Augustine's Confessions is structured around exactly the vertical-

horizontal dynamic the novel explores: the soul that lies down in sin, pleasure, and distraction, and must be raised up toward God. His famous line (our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee) could be Catherine's epitaph, except that Catherine's restlessness has never found its repose. She remains in the restlessness. Young takes Augustine's architecture and refuses his resolution.

On 'Oh, come in', Young's classroom

On 'Oh, come in': Young's classroom.

The note in *To All My Darlings* that Young would say this to students in her classroom at Indiana University, welcoming every arriving idea as a guest, is a key to the novel's deepest structural principle. The infinite house is not only Catherine's mind; it is Young's method. Every philosophy, every mythological figure, every historical allusion is invited in, given a chair, asked to speak. The novel has no bouncer. It is genuinely hospitable to contradiction, to the idea that has no business being in the same room as the idea next to it. This is either a formal achievement or a formal risk, depending on your tolerance for roommates. After thirty-nine chapters, you know which kind of reader you are.

On Marx, opium, and the novel's refusal to decide

On Marx, opium, and the novel's refusal to decide.

Marx's formulation, religion is the opium of the people, was intended as a critique: the drug that prevents the patient from addressing the underlying condition. Young takes this analogy seriously but refuses to let it settle. Catherine's opium-induced visions are both a narcotic and a genuine form of perception. Miss MacIntosh's counter-argument, face the bare face of reality, is also both a moral position and a form of its own limitation. Young has read too much Plato, too much James, too much Augustine to believe that the veil between appearance and reality lifts cleanly on either side. The drug and the sobriety are both partial. The fog and the clear sky are both showing you something.

On Inez Milholland Boissevain and the avant-garde suffrage movement

On Inez Milholland Boissevain and the avant-garde suffrage movement.

The real-world figure hovering behind Cousin Hannah in this chapter is Milholland, the lawyer, peace activist, and radical who led the 1913 suffrage parade in Washington wearing a flowing white cloak on a white horse. She moved in the Greenwich Village circles that produced The Masses (the progressive magazine combining art, satire, and politics) alongside Dorothy Day, Crystal Eastman, and Louise Bryant. Young's Cousin Hannah is built from this tradition: the suffragette who was also an artist, also a bohemian, also someone whose cause was inseparable from a larger vision of human freedom. The white horse and the white cloak are there if you look for them in Hannah's iron keys and whistling entrances.

Chapter 40: The Figurehead Knew More

Research notes: Chapter 40

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Time

Symbols: Clocks and Watches

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Freud and Jung · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Phenomenology · Time, Physics, and Chaos Theory

Allusions: Ancient Egypt · Genesis · Greek Mythology · Milton · The History of Opium

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Think of Chapter 40 as a great noise arriving from a great distance.

Cousin Hannah's voice opens it: “a husky baritone, ranging between bass and tenor,” as loud “as iron bells ringing in a leaden” northern sky, carrying what Young calls a Gothic cathedral weight. This is not a voice describing events. This is a voice that is itself an event. Before you understand a word it says, you understand its register: something immense and old and uncontainable is speaking.

And what it speaks is everything. Every language. The languages of the living and the dead, of the drowned Egyptian sailor, of the Saracen cavalier, of Sanskrit printed on a snowflake, of Tibetan monks and whirling dervishes and Finnish herons and Greek shepherds. Cousin Hannah has crossed so many borders in her life (geographic, political, metaphysical) that she has acquired the tongues of everyone she passed, including people who have been dead for centuries and languages that were never quite spoken at all.

Chapter 40 asks a question it will not answer directly: what would it sound like if someone had been everywhere and knew everything? It then tries to render that sound.

What actually happens in Chapter 40

Vera continues to narrate Catherine's interior: how she receives Cousin Hannah's voice, how she orders it (she cannot), how she experiences time (she does not experience it as linear), how her many selves move through the infinite house like beautiful volatile Psyches while her body lies propped on satin pillows.

Mr. Spitzer observes from his usual position, the perimeter. He notices, with his particular brand of resigned precision, that Catherine has a serene unconcern for facts. She introduces the living among the dead and the dead among the living as though the categories were purely administrative: a matter of which list you put someone on, easily revised. Mr. Spitzer finds this maddening and also, somewhere beneath the maddening, true.

Time runs strangely in Chapter 40: stranger than usual, which is saying something. The afterglow comes before the sunset. The echo arrives before the song. A step forward is a step backward. Young is not playing games with chronology here. She is describing what

Catherine actually experiences: a consciousness in which cause and effect have loosened their grip on each other, in which the usual sequence of events has become a medley, an imbroglio, a Pandemonium, a Saturnalia.

The chapter closes at the water, the novel's recurring shoreline, with a vision of all places dreaming together, flowing into each other like water over mooned sand. And then its final, quietly astonishing image: the figurehead of a ship knows more than the captain. The figurehead always goes first.

The polyglot voice, and what it means

Cousin Hannah's linguistic range is one of the chapter's most deliberately excessive flourishes, and Young means every word of it.

The Tower of Babel, in Genesis, is where God scatters the human family into a confusion of mutually incomprehensible languages: the origin myth of why we cannot understand each other. Cousin Hannah reverses this. She has gathered back those scattered tongues. She speaks fourteenth-century Saracen and Provencal troubadour verse and “Sanskrit from a holy text printed on a snowflake” and “the hieroglyphic language of the drowned Egyptian sailor.” The dead languages and the languages of the dead: not just Latin or Ancient Greek, but the actual idioms of people whose words went under with them.

What does it mean that Catherine (who had no formal education, who spent her adult life horizontal) understands all of this? Young suggests it is not comprehension in any rational sense but a deeper kind of knowing, the kind that bypasses the educated mind and arrives directly in the dreaming one. Catherine understands Cousin Hannah's voice the way you understand music you've never heard: the meaning precedes the translation.

There is also something Young is saying about the reach of a certain kind of life. Cousin Hannah traveled. She fought. She crossed borders that were supposed to be closed to her. She accumulated experience the way a coastal cliff accumulates weather. By the time she died, she had absorbed so much of the world that the world's languages had become, in some sense, hers. This is not magic. It is biography carried to its extreme.

Time backward, time sideways

The afterglow came before the sunset. “The echo came before the song.”

Hold these phrases. Young is not being willfully obscure; she is giving you the phenomenology of Catherine's consciousness as precisely as she can. In a mind organized by association rather than sequence, by emotional resonance rather than clock time, the effect often arrives before the cause. You feel the grief before you know what you've lost. You hear the silence before you know the music has ended. The afterglow illuminates the moment before the sun has set, because in Catherine's interior, time has the structure of feeling rather than the structure of physics.

Einstein, as we've noted in earlier chapters, said the distinction between past, present, and future is a stubbornly persistent illusion. Young renders what it feels like to live

without that illusion as a stabilizing frame. It is not peaceful. It is a medley, an imbroglio: the Miltonic word Pandemonium, which Young deploys with full awareness that Milton invented it for the capital of Hell; Saturnalia, the Roman festival when social order was deliberately inverted and all rules suspended. Catherine's experience of time is festive and infernal simultaneously. The sequence has been freed and the freedom is terrifying and beautiful.

Mr. Spitzer's serene unconcern

The phrase is almost affectionate: Catherine's serene unconcern for facts. Not frantic unconcern, not anxious unconcern. Serene. She has made her peace with the unreliability of the factual order.

Mr. Spitzer observes this the way a person observes weather they cannot change. He notes that she introduces the living among the dead as a matter of course; she assumes that certain living people have already passed to the other shore, and greets the dead as though they have simply stepped in from a long journey. This is, from one vantage, delusional. From another, it is a form of perception that takes seriously what official reality prefers to ignore: that the dead are still present in memory, still active in the way the past is always active in the present, and that the line between them is a social convention more than a metaphysical one.

Mr. Spitzer, who has been waiting his entire life to prove that he himself died long ago, has no standing to dismiss this. His entire existence is organized around a boundary, between his living self and the dead twin he never stopped mourning, that he too refuses to honor in practice. He is the rational observer who cannot leave the territory he claims to be merely observing.

Many beautiful volatile Psyches

Young's image of Catherine's inner “selves, many beautiful, volatile Psyches wandering about”) is one of the novel's most precise and generous formulations.

Psyche, in Greek mythology, is the soul itself: the mortal woman who becomes divine through love and suffering, who is given impossible tasks and completes them, who descends to the underworld and returns. She is also the human mind: the totality of the self, conscious and unconscious, Jungian and Freudian at once. To say Catherine is many Psyches is to say she is not one soul but a gathering of souls, each of which has its own history of impossible tasks and descents and hard-won returns.

And the Psyche knot, a woman's hair twisted into a coil at the nape, is one of the incidental details Young folds in, the physical memory of the mythological. Catherine's body carries, even in its horizontal stillness, the residue of every self it has housed.

Cousin Hannah's possible conversion, and final skepticism

To All My Darlings notes, almost in passing, something Mr. Spitzer’s draft epitaphs in Chapter 31 hint at (“She has gone over to the Islamites”): that Cousin Hannah may have converted from Christianity to Islam during her travels, and subsequently abandoned religion altogether, possibly arriving at atheism or a radical skepticism that found no shelter in any creed.

This trajectory (from the faith she was born into, to a faith she chose, to no faith at all) is entirely consistent with the Cousin Hannah we know. She was a woman who moved through everything: countries, causes, languages, belief systems. She did not settle. She tested things by living them, and if they failed the test, she left. Her final skepticism, if that is what it was, is not cynicism. It is the earned position of someone who went further into faith's claims than most believers are willing to go, and found the territory did not hold.

Young holds this alongside Catherine's opium religion, and alongside Mr. Spitzer's inherited melancholy, without deciding which of them is right. The novel is not a theology. It is a house with many rooms, and each room has a different answer to the question of whether anyone is listening.

The figurehead knew more

Save the last image for last, because it earns its place.

A ship's figurehead is the carved figure mounted at the prow: the part that goes first, that meets the water before the hull, that faces everything the ship is sailing into. It is not the captain. It has no authority. It cannot steer. But Catherine believes the figurehead knows more than the captain does, because it always goes first.

This is Young's image for intuition, for the part of consciousness that precedes rational navigation, that meets experience before the organized mind has had time to categorize it. The figurehead is the part of us that runs ahead of our explanations, the part that has already felt the thing before the captain has been informed.

In Catherine's case, this is her entire mode of being. She is all figurehead, no captain. She meets everything first, raw, before the organizing intelligence can sort it into the proper categories of real and imagined, living and dead, past and present. The water roars at her mouth. She has been going first for as long as anyone can remember.

Whether this is a gift or a catastrophe, Young declines to say. Both, the novel suggests. Both, always.

What to hold onto

Chapter 40 is the novel moving at full velocity inside Catherine's mind, and you should let it move. Don't try to inventory every allusion or keep track of every historical figure who passes through. Let the medley be a medley. Let the Pandemonium be Pandemonium.

What to hold onto: Cousin Hannah's voice, arriving with Gothic cathedral weight, carrying the languages of everyone who ever lived and crossed a border and left a word behind.

Catherine's many selves wandering the infinite house, none of them the captain, all of them the figurehead, all of them going first into the water. And Mr. Spitzer at the edge of it, tapping his “tiny diamond-headed gold walking stick” against his teeth, knowing he is watching something he cannot explain and cannot leave.

The water flows over the mooned sand. The sentinels sleep at the shifting borderlands. There is no place, but there are all places dreaming together.

For the Curious

On the Tower of Babel and Cousin Hannah's reversal

On the Tower of Babel and Cousin Hannah's reversal.

Genesis 11 gives us the moment when God scatters humanity into mutually incomprehensible languages as a check on what unified human ambition might accomplish. Young returns to this story throughout the novel, but Cousin Hannah's polyglot voice is its most direct engagement: here is a person who has undone Babel, not by returning everyone to a single tongue but by learning them all herself. The reversal is individual rather than collective, which is Young's characteristic move. The cosmic problem does not get solved at the level of history. It gets solved, provisionally and partially, in one extraordinary person's biography.

On ignotum per ignotius

On ignotum per ignotius.

The chapter includes the Latin phrase ignotum per ignotius: explaining the unknown by means of the more unknown. This is technically not a logical fallacy but rather a critique: you have not actually explained anything, you have only substituted one mystery for a deeper one. Young uses it as a self-aware joke. The novel constantly does this. Each explanation of Catherine's condition opens onto a larger mystery. Each answer to the question of what is real generates a harder question about what real means. The novel is ignotum per ignotius all the way down, and it knows it.

On Saturnalia and Pandemonium

On Saturnalia and Pandemonium.

Young's choice of these two words for Catherine's disordered mind is exact. Saturnalia was the Roman festival when slaves were temporarily freed, roles were inverted, and social order was suspended: joyful and unsettling in equal measure. Pandemonium is Milton's word for Hell's capital in Paradise Lost, coined from the Greek for 'all demons.' Catherine's consciousness contains both: the festival energy of a world freed from its hierarchies, and the demonic energy of a world where all the forces are loose at once. It is exactly as festive and infernal as Young intends.

On the drowned Egyptian sailor

On the drowned Egyptian sailor.

The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor is one of the oldest surviving narratives in the world, an Egyptian story in which a sailor wrecked on a desert island meets a primordial god and is given a moral vision to carry home. The proverbs from the tale, the mouth of a man saves him; do not act arrogant; why give water to a bird before it is slaughtered, are ancient practical wisdom, the kind that has been true long enough to have survived the civilizations that formulated it. That Cousin Hannah speaks even this language, the hieroglyphic tongue of this particular drowned sailor, says something about the depth of the world Young is imagining her to have moved through.

On moon blindness

On moon blindness.

Catherine claims to suffer from moon blindness, though she knows perfectly well it is a condition that afflicts horses, not humans. Moon blindness, equine recurrent uveitis, causes progressive vision loss in horses through inflammation of the eye, its cause unknown. Catherine claims it anyway. She has always been, in Young's phrase from earlier chapters, beautifully obtuse about the difference between her condition and the conditions of other creatures. She is a person for whom the categories of human and animal, like the categories of living and dead, are less fixed than convention requires. If horses go moon-blind, she sees no reason she should not.

On the figurehead and intuition

On the figurehead and intuition.

Young's image of the figurehead knowing more than the captain has a long life in the history of ideas about consciousness. Freud divided the mind into the part that steers (the ego, the captain) and the part that precedes and exceeds it (the id, the unconscious, the figurehead). Jung gave the unconscious even more territory: the collective unconscious, the accumulated residue of all human experience, which arrives in the individual psyche as symbol and archetype before the rational mind has had a chance to interpret it. Catherine is all figurehead: she is receiving everything raw, before the organizing intelligence can help her. The water roars at her mouth. She always goes first. This is why she sees what she sees. It is also why she cannot get up.

Chapter 41: Let Me Out of My Ear

Research notes: Chapter 41

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Identity and the Self · Music, Sound, and Silence

Symbols: Silence and Deafness

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Phenomenology

Allusions: American Writers · Fairy Tales and Folklore · The History of Opium · Women's Suffrage

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Catherine Cartwheel is everywhere and nowhere. She controls the tides. She is a great engineer, a mathematical genius, a builder of cities and bridges across impossible distances. She walks naked through warm opalescent blizzards. She rides night trains through the Gobi Desert. She raises the spectral dead. She counts pearls that are worlds.

She cannot walk.

Chapter 41 is the chapter where Young holds these two facts side by side without resolving them, the boundless interior empire and the body that has not left the bed, and asks you to feel the full weight of both simultaneously. Catherine is the most powerful person in the novel and the most confined. Her omnipotence is entirely imaginary and entirely real. It is the only kind she has, and she has made it vast.

What actually happens in Chapter 41

Vera describes her mother's condition with a precision that has accumulated over forty chapters into something close to grief. Catherine believes there is only an infinitesimal difference, a hair's breadth, between life and death. Her spirit moves outside her body regularly; multiple selves depart and may not return, and one of them, she suspects, may be immortal and lost somewhere she cannot retrieve it.

The house shifts around her. Furniture migrates. Mirrors hang lopsided. Windows look out on different seas depending on the hour. Objects appear without explanation: riding gloves, feather fans, footprints in rooms where no one has walked. Invisible guests come and go. The house is not a building; it is Catherine's mind given architecture, and it follows the same laws her mind follows, which are not the laws of physics.

Mr. Spitzer's complaint comes through plainly in this chapter, though in Vera's narration rather than his own words: had Catherine acknowledged his tragedy, "he would have been less sad, perhaps triumphant that she had finally recognized him as the unique individual he was." This is one of the saddest lines in the novel. He has been waiting, all his life in this house, for her to see him clearly enough that he could see himself. She never has. She has been too busy being everywhere else.

And Catherine, when she considers Cousin Hannah, the suffrage captain who lived with a clear goal and died having stuck to it, does not envy her. This, too, lands. After everything: the admiration, the guilt, the long meditation on Hannah's life across a dozen chapters, Catherine does not want what Hannah had. The single coherent purpose, the life organized toward one legible end. She does not want to be that clear.

Lost inside the ear

The chapter's strangest and most resonant image is one Catherine offers of herself: she is lost inside her own ear.

Young treats the ear as a labyrinth: a vast continent of passages and echoes, a doorway to the soul through which she entered and cannot find her way back out. She pleads to be let out of her ear. She has been wandering its corridors, hearing the accumulated sounds of her life reverberating in the chambers, unable to locate the exit.

The ear as a labyrinth is anatomically suggestive: the inner ear is literally labyrinthine, a coiled structure of canals and chambers whose malfunction produces vertigo, the sense that the world is spinning without cause. But Young is reaching for something beyond anatomy. The ear is where sound becomes experience, where the external world crosses into the interior. To be lost inside your own ear is to be trapped in the act of receiving: to be unable to stop hearing everything, to be made entirely of the world's noise with no way to stand outside it.

Catherine has been in this condition for the entire novel. Chapter 41 finally gives it a name.

The omnipotent invalid

Young is doing something very deliberate with Catherine's claimed powers. She controls winds, tides, stars. She is a great engineer, a mathematical genius. She constructs bridges and cities. She raises the dead.

These claims, offered within a chapter that also establishes that she cannot walk and that others perceive her life as one long absence, are not simply the grandiosity of a disordered mind. Young takes them seriously as a description of what imagination actually is: a power genuinely exercised, genuinely creative, genuinely world-making, but exercised in a space that does not intersect with the space where other people live.

The novel has been asking, since its first chapter, about the relationship between what is real and what is imagined. Chapter 41 gives you the extreme version of that question in the person of Catherine: a woman whose inner life is so vast and so detailed and so genuinely felt that it constitutes a complete world, and whose outer life has contracted to a bed and a room and the sound of invisible servants moving through an infinite house. Which is more real? Young will not choose. But she will not let you dismiss either.

Mr. Spitzer and the looking-glass self

The complaint Mr. Spitzer makes in Chapter 41 (that Catherine has never seen him as a unique individual, and that this failure has cost him his identity) draws on what the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley called the looking-glass self: the theory that we develop our sense of who we are by observing how others perceive us, by reading ourselves in the mirror of other people's responses.

If the mirror is Catherine, Mr. Spitzer has been looking into a glass that shows him everything except himself. She looks through him toward the dead, toward Cousin Hannah, toward her own innumerable interior selves. He is present in the room and invisible in her perception, and after years of this (decades, perhaps) he has begun to wonder whether he exists at all.

This is one of Young's quietest and most devastating insights in the novel: that the loneliness of being unseen by the person you love is not simply emotional pain. It is an ontological problem. You need to be seen to know that you are there. Mr. Spitzer, who has been a second remove from life since his twin died, has been trying to use Catherine's gaze to confirm his own existence. She has never given him that. She has been too busy looking at the dead.

Catherine and Cousin Hannah: the final accounting

Here, forty-one chapters in, is where we get it plainly: Catherine does not envy Cousin Hannah.

Think about what this means in the context of everything that has come before. The novel has spent enormous space on Cousin Hannah: her strength, her campaigns, her magnificent refusals, her secret wish for the domestic life she publicly rejected, her death into permanence. Catherine has held her as a measure, a plumb line, a rebuke. And now, given the chance to say whether she would trade, she declines.

She does not envy a life organized around suffrage and then ended. She does not envy the clarity. She does not envy the coherence. And the title Young gives Hannah here, the patriarchal suffrage captain, is itself a small, sharp irony: a suffragette who operated within the structure of authority she was fighting, who had to make herself legible to the systems she wanted to change. Catherine has never tried to be legible to anything. She has slipped all the way out of legibility into pure interior, and she would not go back.

This is not an endorsement of Catherine's choice. But it is Young's refusal, one more time, to make the novel's verdict simple.

If she woke up, she would rapidly age

The note tucked into *To All My Darlings* about this passage is one of the novel's stranger keys: the suggestion that if Catherine really woke up, she would rapidly age and die.

Young is drawing on a deep vein of folk and fairy tale logic here: the enchanted sleeper whose suspension in dream is also a suspension of time, whose waking would mean

catching up with all the years the dream held at bay. Sleeping Beauty reversed: not waiting to be woken into life but held in the dream to avoid the life that would kill her. Catherine's horizontal state is not only illness and addiction. It is, in the logic of the novel's symbolic world, a spell. The opium and the dreams are keeping her alive by keeping her out of time.

Miss MacIntosh tried to wake her. Miss MacIntosh is gone. The spell continues.

Sunt lacrimae rerum

Young drops a line of Virgil into Chapter 41: sunt lacrimae rerum, which translates as there are tears in things, or life is tragic. It comes from the Aeneid, where Aeneas, exiled from Troy and newly arrived in Carthage, sees paintings depicting the fall of his city and weeps, and then reflects that even in this foreign place, suffering is known, tears are known, the world mourns what is lost.

This is the emotional key to the chapter. Behind the omnipotence and the labyrinthine ear and the invisible guests and the shifting windows, behind all the magnificent excess of Catherine's interior life, there are tears in things. The absence of sorrow, Catherine reflects, is itself a sorrow. The inability to feel what should be felt is another kind of loss, added to all the others.

She counts her pearls, which are worlds. She loses count. She begins again.

What to hold onto

Chapter 41 is the fullest portrait the novel has given us of Catherine as she actually is, stripped of the mythology Young has been carefully building and reduced, or elevated, to a woman in a bed who is also, simultaneously, everywhere.

What to carry out of this chapter: the ear as labyrinth, and the plea to be let out of it. Mr. Spitzer's need to be seen, and Catherine's inability to see him. The fact that Catherine, given the choice, would not trade her boundless and ungovernable interior life for Cousin Hannah's focused and purposeful one. And underneath all of it, sounding like a bell struck once and still resonating: there are tears in things. The most spectacular consciousness in the novel knows this. It does not make her well. But it makes her true.

For the Curious

On the looking-glass self

On the looking-glass self.

Charles Horton Cooley, the American sociologist, proposed in 1902 that the self is fundamentally a social construction: we know who we are by observing how others react to us, and we build our self-image from those reflected perceptions. The looking-glass self has three components: imagining how you appear to others, imagining their judgment of that appearance, and developing a sense of self based on that imagined judgment. Mr.

Spitzer's complaint is a perfect enactment of this theory's dark corollary: if the mirror is distorted or absent, the self cannot form. He has been looking into Catherine's perception for decades and seeing nothing reliable enough to build himself on.

On the ear as labyrinth

On the ear as labyrinth.

The inner ear is anatomically labyrinthine: coiled canals, fluid-filled chambers, the semicircular canals that govern balance. Disruption of the inner ear produces vertigo: the world spinning without cause, orientation lost, the ground no longer reliable. Catherine's lostness inside her own ear is both metaphor and phenomenology. She is vertiginous in the deepest sense: she cannot find the stable ground from which to orient herself to what is real, because the very organ of orientation has become the space in which she is imprisoned.

On sunt lacrimae rerum

On sunt lacrimae rerum.

The phrase comes from Book I of Virgil's Aeneid. Aeneas, newly arrived in Carthage after the fall of Troy, sees murals depicting the Trojan War and recognizes his own suffering depicted in a foreign place. He weeps and says, essentially: here too, tears are known. The world knows how to mourn. Young reaches for this line because it names the emotional bedrock that lies beneath all of Catherine's elaborate imaginative structures: the irreducible fact of loss, and the world's knowledge of it. The tears are not Catherine's specifically. They are in the things themselves. Virgil understood this. So does Young.

On la lutte finale

On la lutte finale.

The phrase, the final struggle, comes from The Internationale, the anthem of socialist and communist movements worldwide, first written in French in 1871 after the Paris Commune. Young places it in Catherine's interior alongside Sanskrit snowflakes and the Wars of the Roses and Julius Caesar's campaigns and Mark Antony's loves, as one more voice in the great noise of history that reverberates in Catherine's ear. The suffragette context gives it an extra charge: Cousin Hannah's cause was always part of a larger struggle for human equality. La lutte finale is still ongoing. It was ongoing when Young wrote the novel. It is ongoing now.

On the patriarchal suffrage captain

On the patriarchal suffrage captain.

The oxymoron Young applies to Cousin Hannah in this chapter, patriarchal suffrage captain, is one of the novel's sharpest formulations. A woman who fought against patriarchy but who had to operate within patriarchal structures of authority, who had to make herself into a captain (a rank, a hierarchy, a masculine word) in order to lead, who had to be legible to power in order to challenge it. The suffrage movement contained this

contradiction throughout its history: the demand for rights within a system that denied rights, using the language of that system to argue against it. Cousin Hannah embodies this. Catherine, who refuses all legibility, refuses this contradiction by refusing the contest entirely.

On Emerson's immortal beauty

On Emerson's immortal beauty.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay Nature, describes beauty as not merely sensory but spiritual: a reflection of the underlying harmony of the universe, accessible to the intellect that is willing to look past appearances to essence. His phrase immortal beauty captures the idea that what is truly beautiful is not subject to decay: it participates in the eternal order, the same order that governs stars and tides. Young gives Catherine a version of this (her immortal beauty, her imagination as a power that touches something permanent) and then places it alongside the bed, the opium, the inability to walk. The immortal beauty is real. The body is also real. Both of these things are true at the same time, and neither cancels the other.

On Groundhog Day, Candlemas, and the circular year

On Groundhog Day, Candlemas, and the circular year.

Both Groundhog Day and Candlemas fall on February 2nd: the one a secular American folk tradition, the other the Christian feast of the Presentation of Jesus and the purification of Mary, itself descended from the Roman festival of Lupercalia. Young's reach for this date, where the American and the sacred and the ancient Roman all coincide, is characteristic: she is always finding the places where different calendars overlay each other, where the same day has been holy or significant in systems that have nothing else in common. Catherine experiences time this way: as simultaneous layers of meaning rather than a single sequential track. Every date is Candlemas and Groundhog Day and Lupercalia at once.

Chapter 42: The Deathbed of the Suffrage Captain

Research notes: Chapter 42

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer

Themes: Death and Mortality · The Search for Meaning

Symbols: Horses and Carriages · The House · The Sea and Water · Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Nietzsche

Allusions: Fairy Tales and Folklore · Greek Mythology · Women’s Suffrage

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We have been circling Cousin Hannah's death for a very long time. The novel has approached it obliquely, through memory and myth, through Catherine's grief-that-looks-like-logic and Mr. Spitzer's second-remove consciousness and the long meditation on what she was and what she stood for and where she might have gone. Chapter 42 brings you to the room.

Mr. Spitzer is there. He is the last living witness, the only one who was present. And what he finds (what he has been unable to tell Catherine, what he has been obtusely, infuriatingly silent about across all these chapters) is this: the great suffrage captain was dying, he believed, “of a broken heart.” In the next two chapters he will hear her crying out, for her skirt, for her lost love. Reduced, in her final days, to something unrecognizable from the woman who had ridden through deserts and broken conventions and “played a mean game of cards” and never asked for pity.

Young holds this with absolute steadiness. She does not make it a diminishment. She makes it the truth.

What actually happens in Chapter 42

The chapter opens with Catherine traveling to Cousin Hannah's deathbed, not in any physical sense, since Catherine cannot walk, but in a glass carriage drawn by alabaster horses, driven by a black coachman, passing through surreal landscapes of mirrors and fountains and sleeping cities. Whether this is a dream, a hallucination, a memory, or something the novel asks us to take seriously as a real event in its own terms, Young does not specify. Farewell, she tells us, is “a matter of opinion as to the time, the place, the person.”

Mr. Spitzer, meanwhile, is preoccupied with lists: lost ships, sunken argosies, passengers whose fates are unrecorded, coordinates that no longer correspond to anything on the surface. He has spent his life cataloguing what cannot be found. This is, we understand, his way of thinking about Cousin Hannah: about all the things she was that are now unlocatable.

And then: the deathbed itself. Mr. Spitzer at the side of the woman he has observed and envied and resented and mourned for decades, watching her die. She is unrecognizable.

The fiery captain, the storm king, the great warrior of the suffrage movement, is “too old and fragile and unmotivated to move,” and her cries will come in Chapters 43 and 44. The white tent of her death chamber suggests a desert or a pagoda: East and West collapsing together in her final room, as they collapsed together in her life.

Mr. Spitzer reflects on what all her battles actually achieved. He is not certain. He is not sure the world she fought to change has changed enough to justify the cost she paid. He keeps vigil anyway.

The glass carriage and the meaning of farewell

Catherine's journey to the deathbed in her glass carriage is one of the novel's most purely dreamlike passages.

A glass carriage is transparent: you can be seen inside it, and you can see out. It is also fragile: the fairy tale material, Cinderella's vehicle that will become a pumpkin at midnight, the conveyance that cannot last. That Catherine makes this journey in glass is Young's way of saying: this visit is real and it is not real, it is visible and it is made of something that shatters, it is a farewell and a goodbye to someone who may already be beyond farewell.

The alabaster horses turn their heads like foam. The coachman is black: Catherine's consciousness evoked in dream form, as *To All My Darlings* notes. The sleeping cities they pass through are every city Catherine has visited only in imagination, which is to say, every city. She arrives at a deathbed she never physically reached, says a goodbye she never physically said, and returns to her own bed where she has always been. This is what Catherine's kind of love looks like: vast, surreal, and conducted entirely in the interior. It counts. Young means it to count.

Mr. Spitzer and the lost ships

Mr. Spitzer's obsession with lost ships and unrecorded passengers is one of the chapter's quietly perfect details. He is a man who researches what cannot be recovered, who catalogs the disappeared, who tries to find coordinates for things that have no location. This is grief dressed as a profession.

Every ship on his list is Cousin Hannah. Every lost passenger is the person she was before the dying, the person she was at thirty, at forty, at the height of the campaigns when the iron keys whistled at her belt and the snow followed her indoors. He cannot find them. The ocean has no reliable records. He keeps looking.

Young gives him the detail of valuing his dignity more than his life: the conservative figure, the man victimized by routine itself. He is stuck, as all rigidly conventional thinking is stuck, between the thing that must hold and the line that must not be crossed. He cannot act, cannot speak fully, cannot tell Catherine what he saw, because to do so would be to surrender the arrangement that has kept him functional. His silence about Cousin Hannah's death is not cruelty. It is the only form of containment available to a man who has no other.

Hannah, Hamid, Al Hamid, the Great Moor

Chapter 42 gives Cousin Hannah multiple identities in a way the novel has been building toward: she is Hannah in Boston, Hamid in the East, Al Hamid, the Great Moor. These are not simply aliases. They are the different selves a person accumulates when they travel far enough and long enough and cross enough of the boundaries that were supposed to contain them.

Al Hamid is one of the Beautiful Names of Allah in Islamic tradition: the praiseworthy one, the laudable, the object of all praise. That Young weaves this into Cousin Hannah's accumulated identities, following the implication that she may have converted to Islam during her travels and eventually departed from all faith entirely, is precise. Hannah is the New England suffragette. Hamid is the traveler who crossed into other worlds. Al Hamid is the name given to the most praiseworthy. The Great Moor is the mythic figure she became in the imaginations of those who watched her go.

One person. Many names. Many selves acquired through a life lived without regard for the borders that were supposed to keep her on one side.

The unknown bridegroom

The novel surfaces here a rumor it has been keeping: there was a bridegroom. Someone left at the church door. Someone Cousin Hannah arrived for and then, at the threshold of the conventional life, turned away from. Or did not turn away from: the details are obscure, buried in the lacunae Mr. Spitzer's research keeps finding.

There are also rumors of a secret man, a caliph, someone who supported her cause from the shadows and whose relationship to her was never made legible.

Young does not resolve these rumors. She is not interested in resolving them. What she is interested in is the fact of their existence: that behind the public armor, behind the iron keys and the whistling and the suffrage campaigns and the masculine virtues and the refusal of self-pity, there was a private life that nobody fully knew. That Cousin Hannah was not only the figure she presented. That the woman who had no time for intimate revelations had intimacies she chose not to reveal.

The bridegroom left at the door is Young's sharpest emblem of this. An epithalamium, a poem written for the bride on her way to the marital chamber, was written, or deserved to be written, for someone who did not walk through that door. The poem was never delivered. The chamber was never occupied. And yet the fact of it (the door, the waiting, the choice made at the threshold) is part of who Cousin Hannah was.

What war has truly accomplished

Mr. Spitzer's meditation on war and legacy is one of the chapter's most politically charged passages, and one of the most honest.

He looks at the list of Cousin Hannah's battles: “the Peloponnesian Wars, the Siege of Rome,” Custer's Last Stand, Sherman's March, the Boer War, Paul Revere's Ride, the

Siege of Atlanta, “the burning of Carthage, the taking of Venice,” the Balkan Wars (and then at her own campaign, the hundred-year war for women's suffrage) and he asks: what did it achieve? She is dying of a broken heart, forgotten by the world she fought to change. Her battles have passed into oblivion. The movement she devoted her life to has not finished its work. The rights it won are not secure. They are still being contested.

To All My Darlings notes something that lands with particular weight: suffrage for women took a hundred years, and many rights for women were not in place while Young was alive. And *To All My Darlings* goes on to observe that we have seen the erosion of these rights, the incompleteness of them worldwide, the organized attempts to roll them back. One can see, from this vantage, where there has to be a complete love, an obsession, for something that might never be achieved in one lifetime.

Cousin Hannah had that love. That obsession. She gave it everything. Young does not tell you it was enough. Young tells you it was what she had and she gave it and the work is not finished and she died sobbing in a tent that smelled like a desert and a pagoda, and Mr. Spitzer sat beside her and kept vigil and could not explain to Catherine what he saw.

Nietzsche's moment, and amor fati

The chapter draws on Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence: the thought experiment first posed in The Gay Science (1882) and central to Thus Spoke Zarathustra, which asks: if you had to live this life over again, exactly as it was, with every pain and every joy, every loss and every failure and every moment of glory, for all eternity, could you love it? Would you choose it?

For Cousin Hannah, the answer implied by the novel is yes. She lived without compromise. She lived at full intensity. She gave herself entirely to the cause that claimed her. The secret wish for marriage, the bridegroom left at the door, the sobbing at the end; these are not refutations of the life. They are the life's full texture. Nietzsche called this amor fati: love of fate. Not acceptance of what happened, not resigned tolerance of what couldn't be changed, but love. Choosing it again. Saying yes to all of it.

Mr. Spitzer, watching from the bedside, cannot achieve this. He has been unable to love his fate for as long as we have known him. He survives. He does not choose.

Dying in obscurity: Hannah and Shulamith Firestone

To All My Darlings makes a connection that Young could not have made (Firestone’s The Dialectic of Sex appeared in 1970 and she died in 2012, while Young’s novel was published in 1965) but that rings with the force of prophecy: Cousin Hannah dying in obscurity, forgotten by the world she helped create, is reminiscent of Shulamith Firestone's funeral, where mourners grappled with the idea that a whole generation of feminists had been unable to thrive in the world they had done so much to build (Susan Faludi, “Death of a Revolutionary,” The New Yorker, April 15, 2013).

This is one of the oldest and most painful patterns in the history of movements for justice: the people who do the foundational work do not live to see the harvest, and often die in

conditions that bear no relationship to the magnitude of what they gave. Cousin Hannah is fictional, but she is made of real people. Her death in that white tent, reduced and sobbing and unrecognized for what she was, is a death Young knew how to write because she had seen its shape in the world.

What to hold onto

Chapters 42 to 44 are where the novel delivers what it has been holding back: the actual death of the great suffrage captain, rendered not as myth or legend but as a body in a room, failing, with one faithful if inadequate witness.

Mr. Spitzer could not tell Catherine. He could not find the words, or could not bear to say them, or knew that no description would be adequate to what he saw. The woman who had no time for self-pity died with all the self-pity her body could produce. The woman who “played a mean game of cards” showed all her cards at the end. This is not a failure. This is what dying does to even the most formidable people, and Young shows it to you without flinching because she believes you can bear the truth and that you deserve it.

Catherine made her farewell in a glass carriage, through sleeping cities, in the interior space where all her real relationships lived. It was a real farewell. It counted. Farewell is “a matter of opinion as to the time, the place, the person.” Young believes this. She means for you to believe it too.

For the Curious

On al Hamid and the Beautiful Names

On al Hamid and the Beautiful Names.

In Islamic tradition, Allah has ninety-nine Beautiful Names, each describing a divine attribute. Al Hamid (the Praiseworthy, the Laudable, the object of all praise) is among them. That Young folds this name into Cousin Hannah's accumulated identities, in a chapter that also hints at her possible conversion and subsequent abandonment of faith, is an act of precise and serious literary compression. Hannah becomes Hamid becomes Al Hamid: the New England suffragette takes on the name of divine praise in a tradition she may have briefly inhabited and then departed. The name remains. It is one of the most beautiful things a person can be called.

On the epithalamium and the bridegroom

On the epithalamium and the bridegroom.

An epithalamium is a poem written for a bride on her way to the marital chamber: a genre going back to Sappho, practiced by Catullus, revived at every period when poets needed a form for celebrating the threshold moment between one life and another. The bridegroom Cousin Hannah left at the church door deserved one. It was never written. Young's mention of this undelivered poem is one of the novel's most delicate gestures: naming the form that was never filled, the ceremony that was never completed, the life

that was turned away from at its threshold. The epithalamium exists in the novel as pure absence.

On eternal recurrence and amor fati

On eternal recurrence and amor fati.

Nietzsche introduced eternal recurrence in The Gay Science and developed it in Thus Spoke Zarathustra as a test of how life-affirming a person truly is. If every moment of your life will recur infinitely, can you love it, not merely accept it, but actively want it again? Amor fati, love of fate, is the attitude of a person who answers yes. The Ubermensch, Nietzsche's higher human type, is capable of this love. Young's Cousin Hannah is not quite Nietzsche's Ubermensch, but she is close: a person who lived with such intensity and commitment that the eternal recurrence of her life, for all its pain and sacrifice and the broken heart at the end, would be a life worth choosing again. Mr. Spitzer is the counterexample. He would not choose again. He is not even sure he chose the first time.

On Mr. Spitzer victimized by routine

On Mr. Spitzer victimized by routine.

The phrase, victimized by routine itself, is one of Young's most compressed portraits of a certain kind of conservative consciousness. To be victimized by routine is to have submitted so completely to the structures of conventional life that the structures have become the prison. Mr. Spitzer values his dignity more than his life: he will maintain appearances at the cost of everything that appearances are supposed to protect. He cannot break the routine to speak honestly about what he saw at the deathbed, cannot cross the line that decorum has drawn, cannot do the one thing that might actually matter, because to do it would require surrendering the dignity that is all he has left. Young is not unkind about this. But she is clear.

On Shulamith Firestone and the generation that couldn't thrive

On Shulamith Firestone and the generation that couldn't thrive.

Firestone published The Dialectic of Sex in 1970, five years after Young's novel appeared. She died in 2012, alone, in her New York apartment, her body not discovered for several days. She was one of the founders of second-wave radical feminism, and her death (the circumstances of it, the obscurity of it, the gap between her contribution and her end) became a kind of painful emblem for the fate of the women who had given everything to a movement that had not yet given them enough in return. Young could not have known Firestone's story. But Cousin Hannah's death is that story's literary antecedent: the warrior who burns everything for the cause, and dies without the world adequately honoring what was burned.

On the Asphodel Meadows

On the Asphodel Meadows.

In Greek mythology, the Asphodel Meadows are the part of the underworld where ordinary souls go after death; neither heroes who reach Elysium nor the condemned who go to Tartarus. It is the grey middle territory, the afterlife of the unremarkable, the place where most of us end up. Young mentions it in the context of Cousin Hannah's death, and the irony is deliberate: here is a woman who was anything but ordinary, being described in the language of the ordinary dead. The Asphodel Meadows do not know what they have received. They never do.

Chapter 43: The Dance of Death

Research notes: Chapter 43

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer

Themes: Death and Mortality · Decay and Ruin · Love · The Search for Meaning

Symbols: Clothing, Hats, and Skirts

Philosophy: Freud and Jung · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Greek Mythology · Women’s Suffrage

If Chapter 42 brought you to the room where Cousin Hannah is dying, Chapter 43 keeps you there. It does not let you leave. And what it shows you, hour by hour in the long unraveling of a great life, is that dying is not peaceful and it is not dignified and it does not sort itself into the clean stages of acceptance that we would prefer it to have. Cousin Hannah is screaming. She is delirious. She is asking, in the chaos of her final consciousness, the most fundamental question available to anyone: “am I the anvil which is struck or the hammer which strikes?”

Young gives her this question at the end of everything. It is the question of agency itself, of whether a life is something that happens to you or something you do. And the answer, as Cousin Hannah has always known and the delirium now makes impossible to avoid, is that it is both. It was always both. The hammer and the anvil are the same person. The blow falls and is received simultaneously. This is what a life is.

What actually happens in Chapter 43

We remain at Cousin Hannah's deathbed. Mr. Spitzer maintains his vigil, with “his high silk hat in hand,” his “black cape flowing like water from his shoulders”: the full formal costume of mourning, as if sartorial correctness can hold something steady in a room where everything else is dissolving. He is not sure, he tells us, whether he himself is living or dead. The boundary he has been approaching all his life has become, at this bedside, genuinely unclear.

Cousin Hannah's dying is not a drift toward peace. It is a storm. It is a dance: Young uses the medieval term danse macabre, the dance of death, where Death comes for everyone regardless of rank or accomplishment and leads them in an inescapable procession. But Cousin Hannah does not go quietly. She screams through dreamlike, surreal landscapes: deserts, mountains, clouds, ice. She speaks to a blacksmith, to a golden archer, to the blackamoor she calls her love.

She asks for a mirror and cannot find one. She clings to the vanity of silken skirts and great parasols fringed with gold: beauty, adornment, the things she spent her public life refusing to care about, surfacing now in the delirium as desires she had apparently always had. She is fragile as all mortal things, weeping because “a wandering snowflake touched her hand.”

The chapter closes without closing. Mr. Spitzer keeps watch. The lid (is it lowering or raising?) remains ambiguous. Death is not peace. Death is the great crucible where opposites meet. Death is “that which blew us all along.”

The hammer and the anvil

Cousin Hannah's question (“am I the anvil which is struck or the hammer which strikes?”) is Chapter 43's philosophical center, and it arrives exactly when it should: at the moment when every certainty she built her life around is dissolving.

In Isaiah 41, the craftsmen are encouraged when the hammer and the anvil work together to make an object. In ancient Greece, Hephaestus (the disabled god, the one thrown from Olympus) was the divine blacksmith, the maker of things, the one who transformed raw material into form by striking it repeatedly. The hammer creates. The anvil receives. Both are necessary. Neither the hammer alone nor the anvil alone makes anything.

Cousin Hannah spent her life as a hammer. She struck. She forged. She beat the soft metal of convention into new shapes through sheer relentless force. And now, in the delirium, she discovers that she was also always the anvil: the thing being shaped by forces larger than herself, by the history she was born into and the body she inhabited and the losses she sustained and the love she never quite allowed herself to have. She struck and was struck. She made and was made.

Young does not offer this as a diminishment. The hammer and the anvil together make the thing. Both matter. The question is not which one you are (you are both, always) but whether you can hold that knowledge at the end, when the forge is cooling and the work is done and the hands are finally still.

The blackamoor and the love she called her own

In her delirium, Cousin Hannah calls repeatedly for a blackamoor: a figure she addresses as her love. This is one of the chapter's most charged and carefully handled passages.

The term blackamoor, as Young uses it, carries the weight of the novel's long engagement with Cousin Hannah's identity as Hannah in Boston, Hamid in the East, Al Hamid. The figure she loves in the delirium is associated with the same crossing of cultural and religious borders that has defined her life: the Moors, the Islamic world she moved through, the identities she acquired in her travels and may have briefly inhabited. The blackamoor is both a specific person she loved (perhaps the secret lover, perhaps the caliph who supported her cause) and something larger: the part of the world she went toward when she went away from New England, the self she became when she left the self she was supposed to be.

To All My Darlings notes that the black moor becomes a black rooster in the chapter's imagery. The rooster crows at dawn, at the threshold between darkness and light, between death and whatever comes after. Cousin Hannah's love, in her dying hours, is also the thing that might guide her through.

Mr. Spitzer's hat, and the question of being alive

Mr. Spitzer arrives at this deathbed with “his high silk hat in hand” and his black cape flowing, and the image is so precisely chosen that it deserves a moment.

The high silk hat was a clear symbol of authority, wealth, and prestige: the hat of capitalism, of enterprise, of Victorian and Edwardian gravitas. It represents everything Mr. Spitzer has always valued: appearance, dignity, the surface held intact. He carries it to a deathbed where the dying woman is screaming. The hat cannot help him. It cannot help her. But he brings it anyway because it is the only armor he knows how to carry.

He is not sure, in this chapter, whether he himself is living or dead. He reflects “that the dead cast no vote—and” uses this, along with his general policy of non-competitive withdrawal from life, as a reason for his habitual abstention. He is a man so thoroughly at a second remove from experience that the question of whether he is technically alive has become genuinely open to him.

What he does, in this ambiguous state, is watch. He keeps vigil. He is present for Cousin Hannah's dying in a way he has not been present for much else in his life, and Young seems to regard this (the faithful keeping of watch, even when you cannot help, even when you are not sure you exist) as a form of love available even to the most constrained and self-evacuated people.

The dance of death

The danse macabre, the dance of death, was a medieval and Renaissance artistic tradition depicting Death as a skeletal figure leading a procession of people from all walks of life: pope and peasant, king and merchant, young and old, the great and the forgotten. Death does not care about rank. Everyone dances.

Young's invocation of this tradition for Cousin Hannah's dying is pointed. Here is a great captain, a warrior, a woman who faced greater dangers than most men knew, and Death comes for her the same way it comes for everyone: uninvited, insistent, indifferent to her accomplishments. The dance is compulsory. The music does not stop for negotiations.

And yet the dance, in Cousin Hannah's case, is her own. She does not go gently. Her dying has the quality of her living: excessive, stormy, full of voices and visions and the unfinished business of a life that was never quite finished with anything. She dances with the blacksmith and the golden archer. She dances with the love she never quite named. She takes the hand of Death in the costume of the blackamoor and goes, not quietly, but going.

The lid: lowering or raising

Cousin Hannah cries out a question no one can answer: “Oh, is the lid raising, lowering”?

Mr. Spitzer is watching something close, and he does not know whether it is closing a life or opening something else. The coffin lid lowering is the most legible image of finality available to the culture Young is writing in. But the chapter has been insisting, since its

first pages, that death is not finality; it is transformation, it is storm, it is a great crucible where opposites meet. Death is “that which blew us all along.”

The eternalism note in *To All My Darlings* is relevant here: some philosophers of time argue that all moments exist equally, that the past is not gone but simply located elsewhere in the block universe, that the dead are not absent but present at a different coordinate. Cousin Hannah's dying is, in this framework, not a disappearance but a permanent fixture of what exists. The moment of her death exists as surely as the moment of her first campaign speech, her first border crossing, the first time she “played a mean game of cards” and won.

The lid. Is it raising or lowering? Cousin Hannah does not know. Mr. Spitzer does not know. Young does not tell them. The question stays open like a door that swings both ways.

Vanity at the end

One of Chapter 43's most humanizing and unexpected details is the vanity that surfaces in Cousin Hannah's delirium: the silken skirts, the great parasols fringed with gold, the desire for a mirror. She has spent decades refusing these things: refusing the feminine decorations of her era, refusing self-pity, refusing the courtly graces and intimate revelations. And here they all are, returning in the delirium like furniture she thought she'd given away and finds packed in a box at the back of the attic.

Young is not making a point about the shallowness of her convictions. She is making a point about the depth of what we suppress. The things we refuse do not disappear. They wait. The suffrage captain who had no time for silken skirts had, apparently, wanted them all along, or wanted something they represent: beauty, attention, the pleasure of being seen as a woman rather than only as a warrior. The delirium gives her back what life refused.

She “wept if a wandering snowflake touched her hand.” She was fragile as all mortal things. She always was. She simply did not allow the evidence to be entered into the record.

What to hold onto

Chapter 43 is the deathbed chapter, and it is long in the way that deaths are long, and difficult in the way that watching is difficult. What Young asks of you here is patience and presence: the same things Mr. Spitzer is managing, with his silk hat and his uncertain existence, at the side of the bed.

The hammer and the anvil. The snowflake and the wept-for hand. The blackamoor and the love she called her own. The lid that might be lowering or raising. These are what Cousin Hannah takes with her into whatever comes next, if anything comes next, if the lid is raising, if the storm she is dancing through leads somewhere rather than ending.

Young does not promise it leads somewhere. But she does not promise it doesn't. The question is the chapter. The question is the novel. The question is what we have been

asking together since page one.

For the Curious

On the danse macabre

On the danse macabre.

The dance of death as an artistic tradition emerged in Western Europe in the late medieval period, likely in response to the Black Death, and persisted through the Renaissance. Holbein's woodcuts are the most famous version: Death arrives for the pope, the emperor, the merchant, the child, the fool, and each one dances away. The tradition democratized death at a time when social hierarchy was supposedly eternal: a subversive gesture dressed in skeleton costume. Young reaches for it here because Cousin Hannah's death needs that tradition's frame: the great suffrage captain, for all her greatness, dances when Death asks. The music is not impressed by accomplishment.

On Hephaestus and the hammer

On Hephaestus and the hammer.

Hephaestus was the god of the forge: disabled, thrown from Olympus (by Hera, or by Zeus, the stories disagree), the only Olympian who worked with his hands. He made the armor of Achilles, the chains that bound Prometheus, the net that caught Ares and Aphrodite in their affair. He was the maker, the transformer, the one who took raw material and beat it into form. That Cousin Hannah asks whether she is the hammer or the anvil in her dying hours invokes this tradition: the forge as the place where things are made and unmade, where force and resistance together produce the shape.

On bloomers and Amelia Bloomer

On bloomers and Amelia Bloomer.

To All My Darlings notes that bloomers, the divided women's garments that became a symbol of women's rights in the 1850s, take their name from Amelia Bloomer, the women's rights activist who advocated for them as a healthful alternative to heavy, constricting dresses. Young places Cousin Hannah's vanity about silken skirts against this history: the suffragette tradition rejected certain feminine garments as instruments of constraint; the delirium gives them back. Cousin Hannah was always more complicated than any single garment's politics.

On eternalism and the block universe

On eternalism and the block universe.

Eternalism is the philosophical view that all times (past, present, and future) are equally real, forming a four-dimensional block that simply exists rather than flowing. Your grandmother at twenty is as real as you are now; she is just located at a different coordinate in the block. The dead are not absent; they are present at their own temporal addresses. Young's novel does not argue for eternalism explicitly, but it inhabits its logic:

Catherine's memories are as real as the present moment, Cousin Hannah's life is as present in its dying as in its triumph, and the question of whether the lid is lowering or raising becomes genuinely open when no moment is more real than any other.

On deathbed conversion

On deathbed conversion.

The possibility of a deathbed conversion, of turning to or returning to a faith at the last moment, hovers over Chapter 43 without quite landing. Cousin Hannah may have moved from Christianity to Islam to atheism and back through many positions across her long life and travels. What she calls out for in the delirium is not God exactly but love: the blackamoor, the guide, the lamp-lighter who might light her way. If this is a religious appeal, it is one stripped of all institutional content and reduced to its most fundamental form: the need for a companion at the crossing, for something that goes first, for a hand.

On Jung's theory of dreams and death

On Jung's theory of dreams and death.

Carl Jung believed that dreams reveal rather than conceal: that they speak in the most direct language available to the unconscious: mythic narrative. Dreams do not hide truth in symbols; the symbols are the truth, offered as straightforwardly as the psyche knows how. Cousin Hannah's dying hallucinations (Caesar, the blacksmith, the golden archer, the dance through deserts and mountains) are, in Jungian terms, the unconscious completing what the conscious life left unfinished, staging the rites of passage that a long life of relentless forward motion had deferred. The dying is also, in this reading, the dreaming. The dance of death is the final dream.

Chapter 44: False Modesty Killed My Love

Research notes: Chapter 44

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Death and Mortality · Fear and Courage · Love · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Clothing, Hats, and Skirts

Philosophy: Astrology, Alchemy, and Esoterica · Heraclitus and Flux · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Women’s Suffrage

Chapter 44 is the chapter where Young finally gives us what Mr. Spitzer has been unable to give Catherine across all these chapters: the truth of Cousin Hannah's private life, pieced together from the papers of a dead woman, secret letters, unintelligible languages, evidence of a double existence that was hidden from everyone, including perhaps from herself.

The suffrage captain led two lives. One was public, legible, heroic: the campaigns, the border crossings, the iron keys, the masculine virtues. The other was private, guarded, full of a grief and a longing and a love that she could not bring into the open without dismantling the self she had constructed.

“False modesty killed my love.”

She says it in the delirium. Mr. Spitzer hears it. Young offers it to you as the chapter's central confession, the thing that was never said while it might have mattered. And then the chapter turns toward the question this sentence opens: what does it mean to know about love without having lived it fully? What does it mean to be the confidante of everyone's secrets while keeping your own most carefully?

What actually happens in Chapter 44

Mr. Spitzer, as Cousin Hannah's lawyer, must go through her personal effects and papers after her death. What he finds is a life beneath the life: secret letters, correspondence in languages he cannot read, evidence of relationships and intimacies she never disclosed to the world. The public figure and the private person are separated by a gap as wide as the novel has been suggesting, and wider.

The chapter circles back through the deathbed (her call for her skirt, the snowdrops melting in her hand, the cry of false modesty killed my love) and reads these moments now not as mere delirium but as confession. She is naming, at last, the thing she refused to name in life. The cause she gave everything to was also, the chapter suggests, a place to put a grief that had nowhere else to go. Her suffrage activism was not separate from her private heartbreak. It was sustained by it, or ran parallel to it, or was the form her unexpressed love took when it could not be expressed.

Mr. Spitzer reflects on heroism. He wonders whether the greatest heroes might be driven by a secret cowardice: an inner failure that propels them toward greater and greater external battles because the inner battle cannot be faced. He is not certain. He is, as always, observing without arriving at conclusions. But he is asking.

And then, at the close of the chapter, the reflection “that all who lived had already died” in some sense, and that death increases the mystery of every life rather than resolving it. We know more about Cousin Hannah now than we did before. We understand her less.

The skirt, and what it was really asking for

The dying cry for her skirt, which began in Chapter 43 and continues here, is the chapter's governing paradox. Here is a woman who spent decades fighting against the constraints placed on women through dress, who would have been familiar with the bloomer controversy, who rejected the feminine decorations of her era as instruments of control. And at the end she is crying for her skirt.

Young means this to be felt on multiple levels simultaneously. On the simplest: she wants her skirt. She is cold. She is dying. She wants the comfort of familiar fabric. On another: the skirt represents the femininity she suppressed in service of the cause, the woman she might have been if she had not become the captain, the private self beneath the public armor. She is calling for something she gave away.

The suffragettes had navigated this territory literally. Lucy Stone wore bloomers, the reformist divided skirt, for years, and then abandoned them when they became a distraction from the argument. Elizabeth Cady Stanton persuaded her to follow suit. The dress was always political. To wear it was a statement. To discard it was a statement. Cousin Hannah, who had no time for feminine wiles, had been making a statement with her clothing her entire life. The deathbed cry for the skirt is the statement's final reversal: give it back.

False modesty killed my love

This is the confession. Everything else in these three chapters of deathbed has been the approach to it.

False modesty: not genuine humility, not appropriate restraint, but the performance of smallness in the service of fear. The refusal to say what you feel because the saying of it might cost you something, might make you vulnerable, might require you to be seen in a way that the armor of public purpose was designed to prevent. False modesty killed my love: I did not say what I felt. I performed the self that could not be hurt by not saying. And the love died in the silence.

Young gives this line to the woman who had no time for intimate revelations. The woman who refused self-pity and courtly graces and the apparatus of feminine sentimentality. Who had, apparently, felt exactly what that apparatus was designed to express, and been unable to express it, and paid the cost.

The folk song echo in *To All My Darlings* is precise: “for false was my true love’s heart.” The ballad tradition knew this grief. The person who loved faithfully and was not loved back, or loved and could not say so, or was deceived by love's appearance into trusting something that did not hold. Cousin Hannah's version is her own: the false modesty was not in the love but in herself. She failed her love by being too proud to be seen wanting it.

The confidante who never confided

One of the chapter's most philosophically interesting passages concerns Cousin Hannah's role as a keeper of other people's secrets. She received whispered confessions. She knew the hidden loves and sorrows of others. She was the person people came to when they had something they could not say anywhere else.

And yet she herself, as Mr. Spitzer discovers in the papers, had never fully experienced love or marriage or death in a conventional sense: had known about them with great intimacy from the outside, had held the evidence of other people's experiences of them, without having lived them in the forms available to most people.

Young poses this as a genuine philosophical question rather than a simple irony. Is there a kind of knowing that is deeper than experience? A person who has heard a thousand confessions about love without being consumed by any single one of them: do they know love more fully or less fully than the person who has been devastated by it? Is the confidante's knowledge more accurate, because it is not distorted by the perspective of the person inside the experience? Or does it remain fundamentally hollow, a knowing-about rather than a knowing?

The novel does not decide. But it takes the question seriously. Cousin Hannah's knowledge of human feeling was vast and real. Her experience of it was partial and suppressed. Both of these things are true, and they do not cancel each other.

Heroism and its secret engine

Mr. Spitzer's meditation on what drives great heroes is one of the chapter's final philosophical gifts. He wonders whether the greatest battles are undertaken by people fleeing a private failure, whether heroism is, at least sometimes, the external expression of a courage the hero could not find for the inner battle.

This is not debunking. Young is not suggesting that Cousin Hannah's suffrage work was fraudulent because it was also driven by private grief. She is suggesting something more complex: that the inner life and the outer life are not separate domains, that the fire that fuels the public cause is often kindled in the private wound, and that this does not make the cause less real or the sacrifice less genuine. It makes the person more fully human.

The moth desiring a star: Mr. Spitzer offers this image as the definition of a heroism available to the smallest creatures. The moth that flies toward a light it cannot reach and will die trying to reach is not stupid. It is doing the only thing that makes sense given what it is. Cousin Hannah flew toward the star of women's freedom for her entire life. That the flight was also, in some part, a flight from or toward a private grief that could not be

named does not make the star less real. The star was real. The flight was real. The moth was real.

Death as eternal transmutation

The chapter offers one of Young's most direct statements about what death is, in the novel's cosmology: “flowers turning into birds, birds turning into flowers,” death as this eternal transmutation. Not an end. Not a destination. A change of form.

Transmutation is the alchemical word: the transformation of one substance into another, the turning of lead into gold, the elevation of base matter into something refined. Young knows the alchemical tradition, and she knows its metaphorical weight: the process is not the destruction of what was there before but its elevation into another form. Cousin Hannah does not end. She transmutes.

Heraclitus and Thales are here too, in the background: everything is in flux, everything is transformation, nothing is static. The river is never the same river twice. The fire burns and does not stay. Cousin Hannah, who was never static, who crossed every border she encountered, who refused every fixed definition of herself; she belongs to this cosmology. She was always already in motion. Death is not the end of that motion. It is another step in it.

The dedication: for all dead loves

This is the chapter where Young's dedication to the novel surfaces, in words Mr. Spitzer once found on “an old sea shell written over with the mystical writing”: “For all dead loves and all remembered things. I have travelled through many seas.”

Read it again. For all dead loves: not for the living, not for the triumphant, not for the loves that were reciprocated and fulfilled and survived. For the ones that died. For the bridegroom at the door. For false modesty's victim. For the love Catherine constructed out of Peron's silence. For the love Mr. Spitzer could not receive because Catherine could not give it. For every love in this novel that was genuine and went unexpressed and died in the unexpression.

And all remembered things: not all things, not all facts, but the things that have been held in memory, that are still present somewhere, at their temporal coordinates, in the infinite house of what has existed. The remembered things are real. They persist. The remembering is itself a form of love.

“I have travelled through many seas.” Young is speaking directly now, in her own voice, through the dedication. This is not Catherine's journey or Vera's journey or Cousin Hannah's journey. It is Young's. She travelled through many seas to write this book. Eighteen years, well over half a million words, the seas of research and imagination and grief and American mythology and the long question of what is real and what is dream. She arrived here: forty-four chapters into the novel, at the deathbed of the suffrage captain, with the papers of a double life spread on the table and a lawyer who does not know what he has found.

Halfway

You have read forty-four of the novel’s eighty-two chapters, a little more than half of them, though by length you are only about two-fifths of the way through. In another sense you are much further along than that, because the architecture of the first half has been laying foundations: establishing the characters, their relationships, the philosophical questions, the texture of the world Young is creating. The second half will use all of this.

“There was no such thing as safety—not even for her—certainly none for him.” This is one of the chapter's closing lines, and it echoes Helen Keller: security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.

Cousin Hannah knew this. She lived it. She died in the knowledge of it, screaming in a desert tent with snowdrops melting in her hand, calling for her skirt and her love and the thing that false modesty killed. She is gone now, in the novel's present. She will keep returning in memory, in Catherine's dreams, in the long aftermath of a life that was genuinely large.

The bus is still moving. Vera is still on it. Her search for Miss MacIntosh is still ahead of her. Miss MacIntosh is still the absent center of the wheel, and all the spokes still radiate outward from her. You have the second half ahead of you, and it is magnificent.

For the Curious

On the novel's dedication and Young's eighteen years

On the novel's dedication and Young's eighteen years.

Young began writing Miss MacIntosh, My Darling in the late 1940s and completed it in the early 1960s; it was published in 1965. Young usually said the writing took eighteen years; in one interview she put it at seventeen years and eight months. The dedication, “For all dead loves and all remembered things. I have travelled through many seas”: is not merely a conventional acknowledgment. It is a confession of the book's true subject: the irretrievable, the mourned, the things held in memory because nowhere else will hold them. Young knew what she was writing, and the dedication tells you so from the first page.

On bloomers, Lucy Stone, and the politics of the skirt

On bloomers, Lucy Stone, and the politics of the skirt.

The bloomer controversy of the early 1850s is one of the suffrage movement's most instructive episodes: the reformers who adopted the practical divided skirt found that critics focused entirely on what they were wearing rather than what they were arguing for. Elizabeth Cady Stanton eventually convinced Lucy Stone to abandon bloomers on strategic grounds: the dress was becoming the story. The women's rights movement had to dress the part of respectability to be heard on its actual arguments. Cousin Hannah, who spent her life fighting this dynamic, dies calling for the skirt she may have given up

for the same strategic reasons. The dress was always political. Even the giving up of the dress was political.

On the confidante who does not confide: vicarious knowledge

On the confidante who does not confide: vicarious knowledge.

The philosophical question Young raises, whether the person who has witnessed a thousand experiences of love without living them fully is more or less knowledgeable than the person consumed by one: connects to a long debate about the nature of understanding. Thomas Nagel's famous essay 'What is it like to be a bat?' argues that certain kinds of knowledge are only available from the inside, that no amount of external observation can replicate the subjective experience of a thing. Young does not take a position on this. She simply presents the paradox: Cousin Hannah knew everything about love. She had never, in the fullest sense, lived it. And now both facts are on the table, in her papers, in the room where Mr. Spitzer is trying to understand what he is reading.

On alchemy and eternal transmutation

On alchemy and eternal transmutation.

The alchemical tradition sought to transmute base metals into gold, not because gold was the point, but because the transmutation was understood as a spiritual process, a refinement of matter toward its highest potential. Paracelsus, one of alchemy's great practitioners, said the goal was not material wealth but the transformation of the self through the understanding of transformation in matter. Young's use of the word transmutation for death places Cousin Hannah's dying within this tradition: not annihilation but refinement. Not ending but becoming. The lead becomes gold. The woman becomes the myth. The myth becomes the novel. The novel becomes what you are reading right now.

On false modesty as a category of failure

On false modesty as a category of failure.

The folk song echo, “for false was my true love’s heart,” gives Cousin Hannah's confession its musical antecedent, but her version is more self-implicating. The folk ballad blames the beloved: the love was false. Cousin Hannah's dying confession locates the failure in herself: the modesty was false, and it killed the love. This is a harder thing to say, and a more honest one. She did not say what she felt. She performed the self that did not need to say it. The performance was successful, and the love died. Young knows this failure intimately; it is one of the central failures the novel catalogues, in Catherine and Mr. Spitzer and Vera and every character who has a real feeling and cannot find the form to express it.

On there being no safety

On there being no safety.

Young closes the volume with the observation “that there was no such thing as safety—not even for” the great captain, certainly not for Mr. Spitzer. Helen Keller's formulation is the most compressed version of this truth: security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing. Cousin Hannah chose the daring adventure. She paid its costs. The costs were real. The adventure was also real. Neither cancels the other. This is what the first forty-four chapters have been showing you, and what the next thirty-eight will deepen: that reality and its costs are inseparable, that you cannot have the adventure without the superstition of safety being stripped away, and that the stripping is both the loss and the life.

Chapter 45: The Great Secret

Research notes: Chapter 45

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Esther Longtree · Gertrude Hathaway Tidings · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Love

Symbols: Roses and Flowers

Philosophy: Kant and Hegel · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Nietzsche

Allusions: American Religious Movements · Music and Composers · Women’s Suffrage

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The bus is still moving. Vera is still on it. The novel's wheel keeps turning. But you are in new territory now, and Chapter 45 opens it with one of the novel's central revelations hanging just out of reach, the way all of Young's revelations hang: present, half-stated, trembling on the edge of being said.

Mr. Spitzer has a secret. He has had it since the deathbed, since the papers, the letters, the unintelligible languages, the evidence of the double life. In Chapter 44 he resolved to “draw, as he might say, the veil” and “never reveal to any possible future biographer” that Cousin Hannah had not died the great hero everyone supposed. Chapter 45 keeps that promise while circling the secret so closely that its shape becomes visible even through the silence.

The shape is this: the great public captain of suffrage, the woman who had no time for love and devoted everything to the cause, was haunted her entire life by a love she never fully had. And the question the chapter turns over, slowly and from every angle, is whether the cause and the grief were separate things, or whether they were the same thing, the grief finding the only form available to it, the love becoming the movement because it could not become the person.

What actually happens in Chapter 45

We remain in the long aftermath of Cousin Hannah's death, still in Mr. Spitzer's consciousness, still sorting through the papers and the memories and the last words. The deathbed has ended but it hasn't ended; it echoes forward into this chapter the way all of Cousin Hannah's chapters have echoed, each one unable to contain her completely, each one requiring another.

Mr. Spitzer contemplates what he calls her double life, perhaps even a triple life. The public figure and the private person were so thoroughly separated that he, who was her lawyer and her witness, cannot reconcile them into a single coherent portrait. He knows what she did. He is beginning to understand what she felt. The two do not map onto each other cleanly.

Cousin Hannah's dying words continue to surface: the cry for her lost love, the accusation of betrayal (of herself, by herself, the false modesty), the question (was I always falling?)

that sounds like despair but might be the most honest accounting she ever gave of what it felt like to reach as high as she reached. “I aspired to greater heights than most, so I fell a greater distance.”

Mr. Spitzer reflects on fame and oblivion. He considers what will be written on her grave. Twelve miles, he thinks: a distance that is both literal and symbolic, a measure of how far she traveled and how far she still was from where she meant to arrive. He meditates on pigeons as symbols of memory and the soul, on the way public memory reduces even the greatest lives to monuments, losing the secret heart.

If one knew all hearts, one should know none

This is Mr. Spitzer's formulation, and it is one of the chapter's philosophical centers: the person who has heard every confession, who has been the keeper of everyone's secrets, who knows the hidden sorrow and the private love of every person she encountered, that person, paradoxically, knows no one. Because knowledge at that scale becomes abstraction. The individual disappears into the pattern.

Cousin Hannah was the confidante of many. She received whispered loves and private griefs and kept them. She knew more about human feeling than most people accumulate in a lifetime. And she herself, behind all that knowing, remained unknown: to Mr. Spitzer, to Catherine, possibly to herself.

Young is working through a genuine epistemological problem here: what is the relationship between breadth of knowledge and depth of experience? Can you understand love by witnessing it in a thousand people, or does understanding require the particular, the singular, the one? Cousin Hannah had the breadth. What she may have lacked was the particular singular love that would have made everything else legible from the inside.

Love infinitely postponed

“Shall love be infinitely postponed? If infinitely postponed, then it is love.”

This is one of Young's most compressed and exact formulations, and it arrives in Chapter 45 as a kind of philosophical coda to everything that has happened in the deathbed chapters. The idea, drawn from Hegel's logic of negation, is that the very act of deferral defines the thing deferred. A love that is kept waiting, kept just out of reach, kept perpetually on the verge of being claimed: that love acquires a particular intensity from the waiting. It becomes absolute precisely because it was never made conditional on reality.

Catherine's love for Peron, kept alive by his silence and her interpretation of it. Cousin Hannah's love, killed by false modesty, surviving its own death as a wound that never closed. Mr. Spitzer's love, if he has one, conducted entirely in the second remove. The novel is full of loves that were infinitely postponed. And Young asks, through Mr. Spitzer's meditation: what if that is what love actually is? What if the loves that got lived out, that arrived and were received and settled into daily life: what if those became something else,

something valuable but no longer love in the absolute sense? What if love requires the infinite postponement to remain itself?

The novel does not endorse this as a prescription for how to live. But it takes it seriously as a description of what happens to certain kinds of people: people like Catherine, like Cousin Hannah, like everyone in this household who loved most fiercely what they could not have.

He was become his brother

To All My Darlings pauses over a line Young drops almost in passing: he was become his brother.

This is potentially the novel's largest bomb, buried in subordinate syntax. Mr. Spitzer (Joachim Spitzer, the surviving twin, the lawyer, the cautious and conservative keeper of dignity) may not be Joachim at all. The line hints that he is Peron. That the twin who survived is not the one we were told survived. That the man Catherine refused to love, the man who spent decades in this household waiting to be seen as a unique individual, was the very man she thought was dead, and she never knew it, and he could not tell her, and so he waited and was not seen and became, over the years, his brother, which is to say became no one.

Young will not confirm this explicitly. She is not that kind of novelist. But the possibility, once planted, reshapes everything that came before. Every time Mr. Spitzer faded into the background of Catherine's dreams, every time she looked past him toward the dead, if he is Peron, she was looking past him toward himself. The grief and the love were in the same room the whole time, wearing each other's clothes.

Susan B. Anthony and the model behind the captain

Chapter 45 surfaces what *To All My Darlings* makes explicit: Young may have modeled Cousin Hannah in part on Susan B. Anthony and her sister Hannah.

The parallels are striking. Anthony devoted her life to suffrage with the totality Cousin Hannah displays. She never married: journalists asked her repeatedly why, and her answers shifted depending on the day: the men she wanted she could not have; she never found the man necessary to her happiness; she could not give up her freedom to become a man's housekeeper. Anthony's religion followed a trajectory similar to Hannah's: Quaker roots, Unitarian drift, eventual agnosticism, the refusal of a God made happy by submission. Work and worship are one with me, Anthony said. I can not imagine a God of the universe made happy by my getting down on my knees.

When Anthony's sister Hannah was dying, she asked Susan to speak about the great beyond. Anthony later wrote that she could not dash her faith with my doubts, nor could I pretend a faith I had not; so I was silent in the dread presence of death. Mr. Spitzer at Cousin Hannah's deathbed, keeping the great secret, being silent in the dread presence of death: the echo is exact. The silence is the same silence. Young knew her Anthony, and she built her captain from that knowledge.

Anthony predicted, in an 1877 speech, an epoch of single women: that women who would not accept marriage with subjugation, and men who would not proffer it without, would have no alternative but to live without it. Cousin Hannah is one of those women. She lived without it. She died calling for the thing she lived without. The epoch Anthony predicted, and the cost it exacted on the women who inhabited it first, is what Young is elegizing in these chapters.

She knew her Carthage

Young's phrase, she knew her Carthage, is dense with meaning and deserves unpacking.

Carthage was founded, in legend, by Dido: the queen who built a city from nothing, who led her people across the sea, who created something magnificent and enduring. In Virgil's Aeneid, Dido also loved Aeneas, the Trojan hero who stayed in Carthage and then left because the gods required him to found Rome. She died for love of him, by her own hand, after he sailed away. The city she built survived her. Her love did not.

To say Cousin Hannah knew her Carthage is to say she knew what it was to build something great and lose what mattered most. She built the suffrage movement with the same energy Dido built her city: relentlessly, magnificently, against every resistance. And she lost, somewhere along the way, the love that might have sustained her privately. She knew the shape of that loss. She had lived inside it her whole life.

The dwarf with the rose of consciousness

“Who is that dwarf, a turret on his head, a rose at his collar? It is the rose of consciousness.”

Young's image here draws on Nietzsche's Zarathustra, where the dwarf (the spirit of gravity, of self-doubt, of conventional thought) is the obstacle that must be overcome before the highest truths can be faced. Zarathustra confronts the dwarf at the gateway moment of eternal recurrence: the place where all time meets, where past and future coil around the present instant. The dwarf represents everything that makes a person shrink from the full size of their life.

But Young gives the dwarf the rose of consciousness. This is not Nietzsche's dwarf exactly; it is Young's revision of him. In her version, even the spirit of gravity, even the self-doubt and the limitation, carries the rose: carries awareness, carries the capacity to feel and perceive, carries the knowledge of what is being missed. The dwarf knows what the hero knows. He simply cannot act on it. This is Mr. Spitzer. This is the man who has been watching from the second remove, who has all the knowledge and none of the mobility, who carries the rose and cannot place it anywhere it might bloom.

What to hold onto

Chapter 45 is a chapter of aftermath and accumulation: the settling of everything the deathbed chapters stirred up, and the first hints of what the second half will do with it. The

secret Mr. Spitzer holds is the chapter's center of gravity, and you do not need to know it to feel its weight. You feel it in every passage where he circles and does not land, every reflection where he approaches and retreats.

What to carry forward: love infinitely postponed as the novel's governing paradox. The possibility that Mr. Spitzer is Peron: that the living man and the dead man have been the same man all along, and Catherine never saw it. The Susan B. Anthony parallel, which roots Cousin Hannah in a specific and real historical tradition of women who gave everything to a cause and died without the private life they secretly wanted. And the rose of consciousness on the dwarf's collar: the awareness that cannot act, that watches and knows and cannot change what it sees.

The bus is still moving. The second half has just begun.

For the Curious

On Susan B. Anthony's marriage question

On Susan B. Anthony's marriage question.

The journalists who repeatedly asked Anthony why she never married were doing what journalists always do with women who choose public life over private life: treating the private life as the real one, the public accomplishment as the anomaly requiring explanation. Anthony's answers were various and honest; she gave different accounts depending on the day, the interviewer, her mood, how much she was willing to reveal. Young understood this variability and built it into Cousin Hannah: the woman whose private life resists single summary, who gave different answers at different times, whose dying finally said the thing she had always refused to say in life.

On the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

On the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Arlington National Cemetery's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, dedicated to deceased service members whose remains have not been identified, is one of the chapter's symbolic anchors. Mr. Spitzer thinking about what to put on Cousin Hannah's gravestone, considering twelve miles, is reaching for the same problem the Tomb addresses: how do you honor a life whose full truth is not known? The Unknown Soldier is the ultimate version of this: a life whose very name has been lost, memorialized precisely in its anonymity. Cousin Hannah's name is known. Her secret heart is not. She is, in that sense, her own unknown soldier.

On Nan Shepherd and the mountain

On Nan Shepherd and the mountain.

To All My Darlings invokes Nan Shepherd's The Living Mountain, which meditates on what it means to walk around the Cairngorms rather than up them: to aim for knowledge of the mountain rather than conquest of its peak. Shepherd's formulation, to aim for the highest point is not the only way to climb a mountain, is a precise counterpoint to Cousin

Hannah's mode of being, which was always about the summit, always about the highest point, always about the greatest aspiration. Cousin Hannah climbed mountains. She fell great distances. Shepherd's quiet alternative (the walk around, the lateral knowledge, the mountain understood as a living presence rather than a challenge to be overcome) is the mode the novel itself employs. Young walks around the mountain. She does not storm it.

On Esther Longtree as the mother of us all

On Esther Longtree as the mother of us all.

To All My Darlings surfaces a remarkable note from a Dalkey interview: Young herself said that Esther Longtree, who appears at the end of the novel, is the Mother of Us All, a title drawn from Gertrude Stein's opera about Susan B. Anthony. And Mr. Spitzer, Young said, is the father of us all. This reframes the entire novel. Vera's search for Miss MacIntosh (the search for the person who told the truth, who kept the rain out) is also, in the largest reading, a search for parentage. For the mother who can be found and the father who is hidden. Young plants this in Chapter 45, barely stated, because it will matter later. Everything matters later in this novel.

On Dido's Carthage

On Dido's Carthage.

Virgil's Aeneid gives us Dido as the founder of Carthage who loved Aeneas and died when he left. But Dido's story predates Virgil; she appears in Phoenician and Roman tradition as a historical figure, a queen who led her people from Tyre to North Africa and built a city through intelligence and will. The Rome-centric version of the story makes her death the collateral damage of Aeneas's divine mission. The Phoenician tradition gives her more dignity: a woman who built something magnificent and was destroyed not by romantic weakness but by the demands made on women who create things in a world that does not protect them. Young's Cousin Hannah is Dido in this fuller sense: the builder, the founder, the woman whose Carthage outlasted her love and whose love outlasted her.

Chapter 46: Alp Above Alp Through Consciousness

Research notes: Chapter 46

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Love · Nature, the Sea, and the Cosmos

Symbols: Clothing, Hats, and Skirts · Fog and Mist · Moon and Stars · Mountains · Music and Instruments

Allusions: Romantic Poets · The History of Opium · Women’s Suffrage

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There is an alpenhorn in Chapter 46. It is twice Cousin Hannah's height. Mr. Spitzer, as her executor, takes it (he collects musical instruments), finding it in her house “long after her death,” and carries it into a flat, fog-bound city where it cannot do what it was built to do. An alpenhorn requires mountains. It requires the specific acoustic landscape of the Alps, the way its call bounces off stone walls of ice and carries across valleys that have no equivalent anywhere else on earth. In a coastal lowland, blown by one old lawyer with a silk hat and a second-remove relationship to life, it is a beautiful and useless and entirely right thing.

Chapter 46 is about what we do with the instruments of dead people. Their tools, their methods, their causes, their love: how we carry these things into landscapes where they no longer fit, because we cannot put them down.

What actually happens in Chapter 46

Mr. Spitzer, now acting as Cousin Hannah's executor, sorts through the aftermath of her life with the thoroughness and the grief that the role requires. He takes the alpenhorn. He reflects on what she was: not only a suffrage captain, not only a political figure, but a climber of mountains in the most literal and most metaphorical sense, peaks greater than peaks, Alp above Alp through consciousness, the ascent continuing even after the body gave out.

He wanders afterward through a fog-bound city asking strangers if they have seen her. People take him for mad. He is, in the specific way the novel has always used madness, more precisely sane than the people who regard him with concern. He is doing what grief requires: looking for the person who is gone in every face that isn't hers, asking the question that has no answer because asking it is the only honest response to the loss.

A steeplejack answers him. This figure, “tall as a church steeple,” who lurches “out of the billowing fog one night,” speaks to Mr. Spitzer in paradoxes: “I live because I am dead.” I love because I love not. “All who have loved have died” and drowned. Time is a cloud crossing a clock face that tells no time. The chapter closes with Cousin Hannah's final cry from the deathbed, resurfacing here as the chapter's last image: “Ah, bright star of my

love, find your way to the lightless star. Find your way to one who has neither wings nor light. For I am dying now, and” my love goes down.

The alpenhorn in the lowlands

Young's choice of the alpenhorn as Cousin Hannah's instrument, the thing Mr. Spitzer finds in her house long after her death, is characteristically precise.

The alpenhorn is the instrument of distance and altitude. Historically it was used to communicate across Alpine valleys, to call cattle home from high pastures, to announce arrivals and departures across distances that voices could not reach. It is five to twelve feet long. It is made of wood. It produces a sound that is part call and part echo, built for an acoustic environment that most of the world does not have.

In a flat coastal landscape, held by an old lawyer who has never climbed a mountain, it can make a sound but not the sound it was built to make. And yet Mr. Spitzer takes it. He carries the impossible instrument of Cousin Hannah's inner life into a world that cannot receive it properly, because what else do you do? You cannot leave the alpenhorn behind. The alpenhorn is the cause, the love, the aspiration that was Cousin Hannah's and is now, by the accident of survival, his to carry.

This is Young's image for every inheritance of a great life: you receive the instrument. You carry it into your own landscape. You cannot produce the original sound. You try anyway.

Mountains of consciousness

The chapter's opening description of Cousin Hannah as a climber of mountains greater than mountains (peaks of consciousness, ascent continuing Alp above Alp even past death) is one of Young's most concentrated formulations of what the novel means by greatness.

Physical mountains are the obvious correlative: the Matterhorn, Mont Blanc, the Wetterhorn, the Monch, peaks Cousin Hannah is said to have climbed, each one a formidable achievement. But Young immediately escalates: the real mountains were interior. They were the mountains of consciousness: the problems of identity and freedom and love and the nature of reality that Cousin Hannah climbed all her life, without equipment, without a guide, in weather conditions that would have turned back anyone with better judgment.

Nan Shepherd's meditation on the living mountain, the insistence that to aim for the highest point is not the only way to climb, is the counterpoint here. Cousin Hannah aimed for the highest point. Every time. That was her gift and her wound. She could not imagine walking around. She could only imagine going up, and so she fell great distances, and so the distances she fell were proportional to the heights she reached, and so the achievement and the loss were the same scale.

The steeplejack's paradoxes

The steeplejack is one of Young's most quietly extraordinary figures: a person whose profession requires living at heights others cannot reach, maintaining the structures that point upward while everyone below walks on level ground. He appears at the moment when Mr. Spitzer is wandering in grief, asking strangers about the dead woman, and he answers in the only language that the novel has been building toward: paradox.

“I live because I am dead.” I love because I love not.

These are not riddles. They are exact descriptions of states the novel has been mapping since Chapter 1. To live because you are dead: Mr. Spitzer, who has been at a second remove from life since his twin died, who has been waiting to prove that he himself died long ago, who persists without quite living; he lives in this sense, animated by the negation at his center. “I love because I love not”: Cousin Hannah, whose love was defined by its suppression, whose devotion to the cause was the form her unexpressed love took. You love most fiercely what you cannot or will not claim. The refusal is itself a form of love.

Time is a cloud crossing a clock face that tells no time. Young has been building toward this formulation for forty-six chapters. Time in this novel is never the reliable sequential progression that clock-faces propose. It is weather passing over an instrument that was built to measure something it cannot actually contain. The cloud crosses. The clock registers nothing. This is the time Catherine lives in, and Mr. Spitzer, and anyone who has been genuinely inside grief or love or the kind of consciousness that does not move in lines.

The sterility that begets all beautiful things

Mr. Spitzer's meditation on the power of dead beauty, the sterility which begets all beautiful things, is one of the chapter's most philosophically concentrated passages.

The idea has a long lineage. Keats wrote about negative capability, the capacity to remain in uncertainty without irritably reaching after fact and reason, as the condition for great art. The Romantics understood that beauty is inseparable from mortality, that what makes a thing beautiful is in part its transience, its impossibility of being held. Young takes this further: the sterility that begets. Not despite the absence of fertility, but because of it. The dead love, the love that was never consummated, the cause that was never completed; these beget things precisely because they were not finished. Completion closes. Incompletion keeps the door open.

Cousin Hannah's love, killed by false modesty, is more alive in Mr. Spitzer's consciousness than any love that was lived out and resolved and put away. The dead beauty has power that the living beauty never had, because the living beauty becomes ordinary and the dead beauty remains absolute.

Ghosts always clothed

Young offers, in Chapter 46, a curious observation: ghosts in dreams never appear naked. They are always dressed, always clothed in some form, always wearing something. This applies to the living as much as the dead. Identity is always layered. There is no unmediated self available for inspection, no moment when the mask is fully removed and the truth of a person stands bare.

This is not pessimism. It is the novel's honest accounting of what persons are: not naked truths but layered presences, the accumulated costume of a life. Cousin Hannah's iron keys and whaler's hat and rubber coat. Catherine's opium dreams and satin pillows. Mr. Spitzer's silk hat. These are not disguises over a real self; they are as real as anything underneath them. What you put on is what you are, and also more than what you are, and also less.

The ghost appears in the dream wearing the clothes of their life. This is how we know them. This is how we recognize the dead when they come back: by what they were wearing.

Prufrock in the fog

To All My Darlings notes that Mr. Spitzer's existential struggle closely parallels Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock: the paralysis, the duality, the sense of time slipping away, the inability to act on what is felt, the awareness of mortality that makes every gesture seem both too small and too large.

Prufrock walks through the fog-bound city asking: do I dare? And in the end, he does not dare. He hears the mermaids singing each to each and does not think they sing for him. He turns back from the overwhelming question. Mr. Spitzer wandering the fog-bound streets asking strangers if they have seen Cousin Hannah is Prufrock's walk rendered without irony, not the missed opportunity of a timid man but the genuine grief of a man who loved in the only way he could manage, which was obliquely, from a distance, and too late.

Young admired Eliot. She knew her Prufrock. The fog that was so precise in that poem, the yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, is the same fog that has been moving through this novel since the first chapter. It is the atmosphere of consciousness uncertain of itself, of love that knows it cannot be received, of the person who has measured out his life in coffee spoons and is now, in the shadow of a woman's death, finally measuring it against something that was genuinely large.

Ah, bright star of my love

The chapter closes with Cousin Hannah's cry from the deathbed, restored here in its fullness: “Ah, bright star of my love, find your way to the lightless star. Find your way to one who has neither wings nor light. For I am dying now, and” my love goes down.

The echo of Keats's Bright Star sonnet is deliberate. Keats wrote to the star out of his own dying: tuberculosis at twenty-five, the bright star as an emblem of constancy that he could not himself achieve, the tension between the desire for permanence and the knowledge of the body's limits. Cousin Hannah, dying in her white tent, calls to a bright star that is also a dead star: a love that was lightless, wingless, unreachable not because it was too far but because she never allowed herself to reach for it while it could have been reached.

My love goes down. Not upward, into the mountains she climbed all her life. Down. Into the ground, into the dark, into the sea that has been lapping at the edges of this novel since Vera got on the bus. The alpenhorn cannot call it back. The steeplejack knows it. Mr. Spitzer carries the instrument into the lowland fog and tries anyway.

What to hold onto

Chapter 46 is an elegy, not for Cousin Hannah only but for every love that was not said in time, every instrument carried into the wrong landscape, every star called bright that was already going out. Mr. Spitzer collecting the alpenhorn is the novel's emblem for what we do with the lives of the people we could not save and could not fully know: we take what we can carry, we move through the fog asking questions that have no answers, and we listen when the steeplejack speaks from the heights we cannot reach.

Hold onto the steeplejack's paradoxes. “I live because I am dead.” I love because I love not. These will keep mattering. The novel is built on them.

For the Curious

On the alpenhorn

On the alpenhorn.

The alpenhorn or alphorn is one of the oldest wind instruments in continuous use, with examples documented from at least the sixteenth century in the Swiss Alps. Its characteristic sound (low, resonant, capable of carrying across vast distances) is shaped entirely by its length and the acoustic conditions of mountain valleys. Brought to flat terrain, it sounds different: still beautiful, still itself, but missing the echo that the mountains return. Young's choice of this specific instrument for Cousin Hannah's estate is not accidental. The alpenhorn is the sound of aspiration meeting landscape. It needs the mountains to fully become what it is.

On Keats's Bright Star

On Keats's Bright Star.

John Keats wrote Bright Star in 1819, the year before he died. The sonnet addresses a star (constant, patient, watching forever) and expresses the speaker's desire for a similar constancy, but in the arms of his beloved rather than in cold celestial solitude. The paradox is exact: he wants the permanence of the star but the warmth of the human; he cannot have both; the star endures and the beloved dies and the dying knows it. Cousin

Hannah's deathbed cry to the bright star of her love is this paradox lived out: she calls to the constancy she chose not to reach for while she could, now that it is too late, from the position of the one who is dying.

On the aubade

On the aubade.

An aubade is a morning love song, specifically one sung at the parting of lovers at dawn: the form that acknowledges that the night of love is ending and the day, with all its demands and separations, is beginning. Mr. Spitzer's music, in the chapter, is described as a kind of aubade or elegy that cannot quite awaken the dead. The aubade is the form for the ending that was always coming, the form for loving in the knowledge that morning will arrive and you will have to let go. Cousin Hannah's life was an aubade: the dawn always coming, the separation always imminent, the holding-on and the letting-go simultaneous.

On Prufrock's fog

On Prufrock's fog.

T.S. Eliot published The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock in 1915. The poem's opening movement (the yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, that lingers in the pools that stand in drains) established fog as the atmosphere of modern hesitation, of consciousness that circles without landing. Eliot's fog is the fog of a person who sees what needs to be done and cannot do it, who measures out life in coffee spoons and hears the mermaids singing but not for him. Young's fog is the same fog in a different generation: still the atmosphere of the unlived life, the love not spoken, the question not dared. Mr. Spitzer is Prufrock without the irony, which makes him more rather than less heartbreaking.

On oblivion as both flight and destination

On oblivion as both flight and destination.

Young's observation that great people often value a moment of oblivion more than lasting glory, that oblivion is paradoxically both what they flee and what they seek, is one of the chapter's most psychologically exact formulations. The person who has given everything to a cause, who has been entirely public and entirely purposeful, sometimes longs for the relief of not being remembered, not being called upon, not being the instrument of anything. The suffragette who was ashamed of her mountain-climbing accomplishments is a person who has lived so fully in service of recognition for the cause that the private wish for invisibility has never had a moment to breathe. Young sees this. She has always seen it in Cousin Hannah: the great captain who secretly wanted the skirt, the freedom fighter who secretly wanted peace.

Chapter 47: The Skirt Over the Wound

Research notes: Chapter 47

Characters: Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Peron Spitzer

Themes: Death and Mortality · Fear and Courage · Love · Music, Sound, and Silence · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Clothing, Hats, and Skirts · Mountains · Music and Instruments

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Plato and Platonism · Schopenhauer · Spinoza · Wittgenstein

Allusions: Women’s Suffrage

Mr. Spitzer lays the skirt over her body.

He speculates, in the long meditation that follows, that “perhaps her love was her skirt”: the thing “hiding her great wound, her disappointment, her bleeding heart.” The skirt she called for in the delirium. The thing that kept the rain out in the way the rubber coat kept the rain out, the way Miss MacIntosh kept the rain out, except that the rain got in anyway, as it always does with the things we love most fiercely by covering.

Chapter 47 is a chapter of laying-to-rest and of the thoughts that come in the long hours after a death when there is nothing left to do but think. Mr. Spitzer thinks. He thinks about Cousin Hannah and his brother and the nature of identity and the road not taken and the rejected possibility and the way time fails to tell him the time. He thinks about what it means that he feared change more than he feared death, and about whether a person should be held accountable for their “entire life or for one moment of” transmutation that happened beyond consciousness or memory or desire.

This is one of the novel's great reckoning chapters. It is quiet and immense in equal measure.

What actually happens in Chapter 47

We remain with Mr. Spitzer in the long aftermath of Cousin Hannah's death. The executor's work continues: papers, objects, the alpenhorn already claimed. He lays her skirt over her body as a final gesture, and the gesture opens into the chapter's long meditation.

He reflects on his twin brother, on owing much to him, financially and spiritually, on counting on that brother to be “a Welcoming Committee of One on the other side” when Cousin Hannah crosses over. The relationship between the twins, Peron and Joachim, surfaces here as a philosophical pairing: materialism and immaterialism, the external world and the internal one, the reckless embrace of life and the cautious withdrawal from it.

He is “agonized by attributing consciousness to everything”: clouds, waves, shadows, stars. The world will not stay inanimate for him. Everything is alive in a way that troubles

rather than comforts, because if everything is conscious then the dead are conscious too, which means they are somewhere suffering their unfinished business, crying at many gates, forever searching for the image of what they lost.

He meditates on the rejected possibility: “among all things possible, there was the rejected possibility.” The road not taken. The love not said. The life that existed as pure potential and was never actualized, which shapes reality just as powerfully as the life that was.

The skirt as love, love as wound

Young returns one final time to the skirt, and here she gives it its fullest meaning. “Perhaps her love was her skirt hiding her great wound, her disappointment, her bleeding heart.”

The logic is precise and terrible. The skirt was what Cousin Hannah refused: the feminine convention, the domestic enclosure, the mark of the life she chose not to live. And it was also, in the delirium, what she called for most desperately. She wanted the thing she had refused. She was covered, in death, with the thing she spent her life refusing to wear.

Young is saying: the love and the wound were the same thing. The cause that covered her heart (the suffrage movement, the iron keys, the decades of campaigning) was both the means by which she protected the wound and the wound itself. You cannot separate them. The skirt covers the body. The cause covered the grief. Both coverings are real. Both conceal something that was real underneath.

Mr. Spitzer lays the skirt over her because it is the right thing, the only right thing, and because he understands now what it meant that she called for it. He covers her wound with the symbol of her wound, which is also the symbol of her love, which is also the symbol of everything she refused and could not stop wanting.

Peron and Joachim: matter and spirit

Chapter 47 develops the twin pairing more explicitly than any chapter before it, and the philosophical framework *To All My Darlings* offers is clarifying: Peron represents materialism, the external world, its pleasures and its follies, its impermanent beauty. Joachim represents immaterialism: the internal realm, thought, memory, spiritual seeking.

In the novel's cosmology, neither twin is complete without the other. The material world without the inner life is just appetite, just flux. The inner life without the material world is just abstraction, just ghosts. The twins together made a whole person, which is why the death of one half left the surviving half as a counterfeit, a man at a second remove from life, unable to be fully present in either world.

And the question the chapter presses: which twin survived? *To All My Darlings* has suggested it was Peron, not Joachim, who continued. If so, what is the materialist doing in Joachim's life? The reckless one playing the cautious one, the one who embraced chance living out the life of the one who feared it? This possibility, that Mr. Spitzer has been

performing a borrowed identity for decades, deepens everything. The man who valued his dignity more than his life may have been living his dead brother's dignity all along.

He feared change more than death

This is the chapter's most psychologically precise formulation, and Young sets it down with characteristic quietness: “for more than life or death he feared change, change of any kind.”

Death is at least a stable concept. Death is a destination, however unknown. Death is the end of change, or the beginning of a different kind that you are no longer around to suffer. But change (the ongoing transformation of identity, of circumstance, of what you thought you knew) that never stops. That is what Mr. Spitzer cannot bear.

He is a man already profoundly altered by the loss of his twin, already living between two worlds, already uncertain which of the Spitzer brothers he actually is. Any further change threatens to dissolve what little continuity he has managed to maintain. So he keeps the silk hat. He keeps the routine. He keeps the dignity. He does not vote because “the dead cast no vote—and” he is not sure which side of that line he stands on. He maintains appearances because appearance is all that is holding the shape of him together.

Young is not dismissive of this. She is precise about it. The man who fears change more than death is not simply cowardly; he is a man whose sense of self has been so thoroughly disrupted by loss that any further disruption feels like erasure. His conservatism is a form of survival. It is the only form available to him.

Panpsychism and the agonized attribution

“He was agonized by attributing consciousness to everything.”

This is one of the novel's most exact descriptions of a particular kind of suffering: the suffering of a mind that cannot maintain the boundary between the animate and the inanimate, that perceives consciousness in clouds and stars and shadows and waves, that cannot move through a room without registering the inner life of every object in it.

Panpsychism (the philosophical position that consciousness is a fundamental property of the universe, not confined to biological life) is ancient, running from Thales and Plato through Spinoza and Leibniz to contemporary philosophy of mind. Young would have known it. But she gives Mr. Spitzer not the philosopher's intellectual pleasure in the idea but the experiential cost of living it without choosing it. He did not adopt panpsychism as a theory. He suffers from it as a condition. Every cloud has a mind. Every wave intends something. Every shadow of Cousin Hannah's passing life is still present somewhere, carrying its freight of unfinished consciousness. This is why he cannot fully grieve. The dead are not gone for him; they are mislocated. He keeps looking for them because he cannot stop attributing consciousness to the universe, and the universe keeps offering him shapes that might be them.

The rejected possibility

“Among all things possible, there was the rejected possibility.”

This is Young's formulation for the unlived life: the life that existed as potential and was not taken, which does not simply disappear but shapes reality from its position of non-actualization. The road not taken is as real as the road taken. The love not spoken is as present as the love that was. The skirt not worn for fifty years is what she called for at the end.

Young is not making a case for regret. She is making a case for completeness: a life is not only what happened in it. A life includes its rejections, its suppressions, its great disciplined refusals. The rejected possibility is the shadow that gives the actualized life its shape. Without it, there is no contrast, no definition, no meaning to the choices that were made.

“Should one be held accountable for one’s entire life or for one moment of unforeseen” transmutation “beyond all consciousness or memory or desire?” This question, which Mr. Spitzer turns over in the long hours after the death, is unanswerable, and Young knows it is unanswerable and asks it anyway. That is what the novel does. It asks the unanswerable questions with complete seriousness, gives them the space they deserve, and moves on.

Music never to be played

Mr. Spitzer imagines “music written never to be played”: a composition that encompasses all sounds and all silences, all the notes that were sounded and all the notes that were not, the complete score of a life including everything that went unperformed.

This is the novel's image for what Mr. Spitzer is doing with Cousin Hannah's estate: not just the papers and the alpenhorn and the legal documents, but the incompletable archive of what she was. The music that was never played is the love she never said, the life she never lived, the skirt she never wore. It is real music. It exists, as all unplayed music exists: in potential, in the silence that contains it, in the ear that knows what it would have sounded like if it had been given air.

Whereof one cannot speak

Young never names him, but Wittgenstein's closing proposition from the Tractatus fits this chapter: whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

Read this way, it is not capitulation but the appropriate frame for everything Mr. Spitzer cannot say. There are things that exceed language: the full truth of another person's private life, the experience of the dying, the exact quality of a love that was never expressed. These are not things you can say precisely. You can approach them. You can circle them with prose that circles. You can lay a skirt over a body and know, without being able to say, what the gesture means.

Mr. Spitzer is fluent in this silence. He has practiced it his entire life. He held the secret. He kept the vow. He was silent in the dread presence of death as Susan B. Anthony was silent at her sister Hannah's deathbed. The silence is not emptiness. It is the form that respect takes when language is insufficient. Young knows this. Wittgenstein knew it. Mr. Spitzer, in his limited and faithful and inadequate way, knows it too.

What to hold onto

Chapter 47 is a chapter of vigil and reckoning: the long thoughts that come when the body is laid out and the papers are sorted and there is nothing left to do but sit with what you know and cannot say. Mr. Spitzer is the last person who saw Cousin Hannah alive. He is the keeper of the great secret. He feared change more than death, and now the greatest change of his life, the death of the woman who organized his existence around her absence, has happened, and he is still here, still in the silk hat, still keeping vigil.

What to carry forward: the skirt as love as wound. The twins as matter and spirit, and the question of which one survived. The rejected possibility as the shadow that gives a life its shape. The “music written never to be played.” And the silence that is not emptiness but the only honest response to what exceeds language.

For the Curious

On panpsychism's history and its costs

On panpsychism's history and its costs.

The philosophical position that consciousness is a fundamental feature of reality, not an emergent property of complex biological systems but a basic aspect of the universe, runs from Thales of Miletus through Spinoza, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, and into twentieth-century philosophy of mind. Its contemporary defenders include thinkers like David Chalmers and Galen Strawson. But Young is not giving Mr. Spitzer a philosophical position. She is giving him a condition: the inability to maintain the ordinary boundary between the animate and the inanimate. This is experienced not as intellectual discovery but as anguish, as the world refusing to stay inert, as consciousness leaking into everything. It is the burden of a sensitivity that has no off switch.

On Wittgenstein's silence

On Wittgenstein's silence.

The final proposition of Ludwig Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent) is one of philosophy's most famous closures. Wittgenstein spent the Tractatus drawing the limits of what language can meaningfully say, and then, having drawn those limits, acknowledged everything that lay beyond them: ethics, aesthetics, the mystical, the meaning of life. He did not say these things were unreal. He said they were beyond the reach of language to express. Silence is not dismissal; it is the appropriate response to what exceeds the sayable. Young's

novel is built, in part, on the territory Wittgenstein marked as silent: the territory where circling prose and accumulated image take over from direct statement.

On corpo santo and St. Elmo's fire

On corpo santo and St. Elmo's fire.

St. Elmo's fire (the luminous plasma that forms around pointed objects during electrical storms, visible on the tips of ship's masts and church steeples) was called corpo santo (holy body) by sailors, who sometimes took it as a good omen and sometimes as a warning. It is light without heat, present without being substantial, visible without being graspable. Young's use of this phenomenon in the chapter's atmosphere is precise: Cousin Hannah's presence in Mr. Spitzer's consciousness after her death has this quality, luminous, charged, at the tip of every pointed thought, neither entirely present nor entirely gone.

On the Welcoming Committee of One

On the Welcoming Committee of One.

Mr. Spitzer's image of his dead twin forming “a Welcoming Committee of One on the other side” (waiting there, the sole representative of the afterlife, ready to receive his surviving half) is one of the novel's most gently comic and most heartbreaking formulations. The dead twin waiting. The living twin unable to arrive, unable to die, unable to complete the reunion that death would require. Two men who were once one person, separated by the most irreversible of distances, each being the other's unfinished business. The committee meets when Mr. Spitzer arrives. Not before. He is not there yet. He is still in the silk hat, still on this side.

On the road not taken

On the road not taken.

Robert Frost's poem is almost universally misread as being about the value of individuality: the speaker choosing the less-traveled road and that making all the difference. In fact the poem's speaker admits the two roads were worn about the same, that the choice was essentially arbitrary, and that the speaker is telling himself a consoling story about it in retrospect. The poem is about the stories we tell ourselves about our choices, not about the choices themselves. Young's invocation of it (“should it include the road not taken or the road taken?”) carries both readings at once: the honest admission that the roads were equivalent, and the human need to make one of them mean something more.

Chapter 48: A Long Rehearsal for the Silence

Research notes: Chapter 48

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Light and Darkness

Symbols: Keys, Doors, and Locks · Lamps, Candles, and Light · Moon and Stars · The House

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Phenomenology · William James and Pragmatism · Wittgenstein

Allusions: Astronomy · Exploration and the Poles · Judaism · The Bible · Women's Suffrage

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Mr. Spitzer is becoming something in Chapter 48 that he was not quite yet in the chapters before it: a figure of the threshold. Not the man who watches death from the outside (the cautious lawyer, the silk-hatted mourner, the second-remove observer) but a man who has moved so close to the border between living and dead that the border is no longer clearly visible from where he stands.

"This life was a long rehearsal of music for the silence."

This is the chapter's governing metaphor, and it is one of the novel's most beautiful and most exact formulations. Life is not the performance. Life is the rehearsal: the practice run, the preparation, the running-through of material that will ultimately give way to the silence it was always approaching. The silence is not nothing. It is the thing the music was working toward. It is where everything unplayed finally arrives.

What actually happens in Chapter 48

Mr. Spitzer moves through an old house full of mysterious sounds, barred doors, keys that do not fit any lock, trunks and boxes whose contents he cannot fully read. He is the executor still, but the executor's work has become something stranger: he is navigating a space that feels less like a house than like a territory between states, a place where the entrance is known and the exit cannot be found.

He reflects on his brother, on the contrast between them. Peron burned brightly. Peron lit matches. Peron tempted fate and lost it and perhaps won something larger in losing it, something beyond earthly comprehension. Joachim was afraid of burning, "afraid of sudden incandescence, afraid of" the match that might light something that could not be extinguished. And now he moves through the house of the dead woman, holding the keys that open nothing, while the stars fade in the windows above him.

He wonders whether the lamplighter who lights the lamps is "also he who put out the light," or whether they are two different men, and the question becomes the question of the twins. He pictures the old lamplighter's "trembling ladder of dreams reaching to the

trembling stars,” and the ferryman who poles the souls of the dead home, “all but one dead soul.” The slow realization of this fills him “with seething resentment.” This is one of the chapter's strangest and most revealing moments: the one soul left behind, unferried, may be his own.

The lamplighter of stars

Young's image of the lamplighter draws on a tradition that runs from the literal lamplighters of nineteenth-century cities (the men who went through the streets at dusk with long poles, touching flame to gas mantle, and returned at dawn to extinguish them) to Saint-Exupéry's lamplighter in The Little Prince, the most faithful of all the prince's planetary inhabitants, performing his duty without question even as the planet spins faster and faster and the duty becomes increasingly absurd.

Young's version is more melancholic. Mr. Spitzer is not the lamplighter. He watches the lights go out and wonders whether the one who lights them and the one who puts them out are one man or two, as he wonders about himself and Peron. What angers him is not losing a duty but being left over: the ferryman takes every soul home but one.

And yet. The lamplighter is also the person who makes it possible to see in the dark. He carries the light. He knows which lamps are failing and which still burn. In the long night of the novel's mourning, Mr. Spitzer is the person keeping track of what is still lit and what has gone out. That is not nothing. It is, Young suggests, the only form of love available to a man like him.

Consciousness as sporadic

“Consciousness was ever that which was sporadic, fluttering, not constant even in this life, just as sustained attention was impossible.”

This is Young's most direct statement about the nature of awareness, and it applies to Mr. Spitzer's experience with particular precision. He does not exist in a state of continuous consciousness. He is intermittent. He flickers. There are moments of acute perception (the deathbed, the papers, the alpenhorn, the skirt laid over the body) and then long stretches of the second remove, the minute-late reception of experience, the off-key singer that is his entire relationship to the present moment. The philosophical resonance here is with William James's stream of consciousness, except that James's stream is continuous even if turbulent, while Young's consciousness is more like the behavior of fireflies, or like St. Elmo's fire, appearing at the tips of pointed things and then going dark. You cannot sustain it. You cannot force it to stay lit. You can only be present when it flickers on and try to remember what you saw.

This is the experiential condition the novel has been describing in everyone (in Catherine, in Vera, in Cousin Hannah at the end) but in Mr. Spitzer it is most fully articulated. His consciousness is sporadic. His attention is intermittent. This is not a deficiency. It is the condition of being human, rendered visible in a man who has no talent for hiding it.

The stowaway

Mr. Spitzer doubts his own identity and profession in Chapter 48 with a new specificity: he feels like a stowaway. A hidden passenger. Someone who boarded under false pretenses and has been concealed in the hold, living off the ship's provisions, unseen by the proper passengers, sinking without awareness when the ship went down.

The stowaway is the perfect figure for someone who may be living another person's life, who slipped into an identity that was not assigned to him and has been riding it through decades, hoping no one checks. If Mr. Spitzer is Peron and not Joachim, then he is precisely a stowaway in Joachim's existence: the material twin in the immaterial twin's coat, the one who burned brightly borrowing the identity of the one who was afraid of matches.

And the stowaway sinks without awareness. He does not know the ship went down. He is still in the hold, still hidden, still alive in the only sense available to a person who has never fully declared themselves. Young does not deliver a verdict on this. She gives it to you as a possibility and lets it settle.

The evening star and the morning star

“Much as the evening star and the morning star.”

Venus appears twice in the sky: in the evening, low on the western horizon after sunset, and in the morning, low in the east before dawn. For centuries, observers took these to be two different stars (Vesper in the evening, Lucifer in the morning) before understanding they were the same planet seen from two positions in Earth's orbit. “The evening star and the morning star” are one.

Young uses this image for the twins, and for everything in the chapter that appears as two things and may be one: life and death, Peron and Joachim, the self that burned and the self that was afraid to burn. Two appearances, one planet. The dual name carries the full weight of the chapter's meditation on identity: the thing that sets and the thing that rises, the darkness and the dawn, may be the same thing moving through the sky. You called them different names. They were never different.

Lucifer, light-bringer, was in Roman mythology the personification of the morning star, the herald of dawn, before Christian theology absorbed him as the fallen angel. Young knows this etymology and deploys it precisely: the light-bringer is also the one who falls. The morning star rises and is also always falling toward the horizon. Every light in the chapter is provisional.

The house of barred doors

The old house Mr. Spitzer moves through in Chapter 48 (high-shouldered, full of windows and barred doors, every room opening onto another locked room, entrance known and exit impossible to find) is the chapter's governing architectural metaphor for the space between states.

He knows the entrance. He does not know the exit. This is the condition of someone who has, through the long years of his vigil, moved so close to the threshold that he is no longer clearly on either side of it. He can enter the house of the dead (the papers, the alpenhorn, the skirt, the keys) but he cannot exit through the other side to where the dead have gone. And he cannot fully return to the living world either, because the living world now contains Cousin Hannah's death and his brother's death and forty years of the second remove, and there is no version of it he can inhabit without the full weight of those absences.

“Man could not see his own end, for he passed beyond his end.” This is one of the chapter's central philosophical formulations, and it is vertiginous: you cannot witness your own death because by the time it happens, you have already gone past the point from which you could observe it. The self that would observe is the self that has ended. The observation is impossible because the observer has passed beyond. Mr. Spitzer, moving through the barred house, knows the entrance and cannot find the exit, and perhaps this is why: the exit is on the other side of the point where observation becomes impossible.

Boxes within boxes

“He who knew rhombs, circles, semicircles, boxes, boxes within boxes, parallelograms, octagons, octahedrons, ellipses, eclipses of light by darkness, darkness by light, darkness by darkness.”

Young gives Mr. Spitzer this inventory of forms, the full geometry of a trained and meticulous mind, and then immediately demonstrates that all this knowledge of shapes does not help him locate the exit. He knows every form. He cannot find the door. The legal mind, the Blackstone firm, the executor's precision with papers and keys; none of this equipment is adequate to the problem of being in a house that has no locatable exit.

The boxes within boxes are everything: legal documents containing other documents, trunks containing other trunks, lives containing other lives. Catherine's infinite house of many rooms. Cousin Hannah's double life, perhaps triple. The novel itself, which is always opening into another story inside the story, always finding another center inside the center that was supposed to be central. Young's architecture is boxes within boxes all the way down. Mr. Spitzer knows this. He has always known this. But knowing the shape of the thing does not tell you how to leave it.

It seemed better not to know

“It seemed better not to know that which was unknowable.”

This is Mr. Spitzer's accommodation with the mystery, not resolution, not transcendence, but a kind of practical peace with the limits of what can be known. He has sorted the papers. He has laid the skirt over the body. He has taken the alpenhorn into the fog-bound streets. He has asked every stranger whether they have seen her. He has found no master key that unlocks all the trunks. He has not found the exit.

And so: “it seemed better not to know.” This is not defeat. It is the acknowledgment that some rooms in the house are permanently barred, that some questions the novel asks are not questions it intends to answer, that the correct response to the truly unknowable is not more investigation but a particular kind of stillness in the face of it. Wittgenstein's silence. The suffragette's vow. The executor who stops sorting and simply sits with what cannot be sorted.

Young does not present this as wisdom exactly. She presents it as the best Mr. Spitzer can manage. In this novel, that is a form of grace.

What to hold onto

Chapter 48 is Mr. Spitzer at his most liminal: closest to the border, most uncertain which side he stands on, most fully present to the question that has been organizing his existence since his twin died. He is the man watching the lamplighter, unsure whether the one who lights and the one who puts out the light are one man or two. He is the stowaway who may not know the ship went down. He is “the evening star and the morning star”: the same planet appearing as two things, depending on where you stand and what time it is.

What to carry forward: this life as a long rehearsal for the silence. The house of barred doors that has an entrance but no visible exit. Consciousness as sporadic, fluttering, not constant: the firefly rather than the sustained flame. And the accommodation, provisional and honest, that “it seemed better not to know that which was unknowable.” The chapter ends without resolution because resolution is not what this chapter is for. It is for sitting with Mr. Spitzer in the house, in the dark, while the stars fade through the holes in his cape.

For the Curious

On the lamplighter and The Little Prince

On the lamplighter and The Little Prince.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's The Little Prince (1943) gives us the lamplighter of the sixth planet as one of the book's quietly devastating figures: a man who lights his lamp at sunset and extinguishes it at sunrise, whose planet now spins so fast that sunset and sunrise come every minute, making his duty endless and his work absurd, yet he continues, because he is faithful to something beyond its usefulness. Young's Mr. Spitzer is not the Little Prince's lamplighter exactly (he is darker, more possessive, less purely faithful) but the lineage is clear. The lamplighter is the person who keeps the lights going in a universe that is indifferent to whether they stay lit. This is a form of love. Young knows it is also a form of stubbornness.

On Venus as Lucifer

On Venus as Lucifer.

In Roman mythology, Lucifer (light-bringer) was the name for the morning star: Venus at dawn, the brightest object in the pre-sunrise sky. The name is derived from lux (light) and ferre (to bear). When early Christian writers were translating the Hebrew Bible, they used Lucifer to render a passage in Isaiah describing the fall of a Babylonian king: how art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! Over centuries, this astronomical metaphor for a fallen king was personalized into a fallen angel, and Lucifer became Satan's pre-fall name. Young knows this etymology. The morning star that rises and falls, that brings light and is the herald of dawn, that is also named for the one who fell; this is the image she gives Mr. Spitzer for the twins who were once one.

On Sir Henry Morton Stanley and Dr. Livingstone

On Sir Henry Morton Stanley and Dr. Livingstone.

Stanley's famous greeting (Dr. Livingstone, I presume?) was uttered in 1871 after an eight-month search through Central Africa for the explorer David Livingstone, who had not been heard from in years and was feared dead. The greeting became iconic for the absurdity of English understatement in extremis: you have spent eight months searching through a continent for a man everyone thought was dead, and when you find him you say I presume. Young's reference places Mr. Spitzer in this tradition of the finder who arrives too late or just in time, the searcher who locates the person only in their dying or their aftermath, the absurdity of the formal greeting across the threshold of death.

On Blackstone and the law firm

On Blackstone and the law firm.

Mr. Spitzer's firm is named Blackstone, after Sir William Blackstone, the eighteenth-century English jurist whose Commentaries on the Laws of England was foundational to both English and American law. Blackstone's Ratio, better that ten guilty persons escape than that one innocent suffer, was taken up by Benjamin Franklin and John Adams and became a cornerstone of American legal philosophy. That Mr. Spitzer works for a firm bearing this name is Young's quiet joke about the man who values dignity more than life: he is the heir of a legal tradition that prioritizes the protection of the innocent over the punishment of the guilty, that has built an entire system of procedure to prevent the wrong person from being convicted. And yet he cannot protect himself from the uncertainty of his own identity. The law firm that bears the name of the great protector of innocence employs a man who is not sure he is innocent of being someone else.

On consciousness as sporadic and James's stream

On consciousness as sporadic and James's stream.

William James described consciousness as a stream in his 1890 Principles of Psychology: continuous, flowing, never the same moment twice. Young's revision is darker and more honest: consciousness is “sporadic, fluttering, not constant even in this life.” The stream metaphor implies an unbroken flow; Young's image is more like a pulse, or like light through a shutter that keeps opening and closing. This matches the actual phenomenology of attention more accurately than the stream does: the way awareness

keeps lapsing, keeps being recaptured, keeps losing and finding itself. Mr. Spitzer, who cannot maintain sustained attention on anything, who always arrives a minute late, who is at a second remove from the present moment; he is not broken. He is the condition, just more visible than usual.

Chapter 49: He Wept for Others Who Wept Not for Him

Research notes: Chapter 49

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer

Themes: Light and Darkness · Love · Nature, the Sea, and the Cosmos

Symbols: Birds · Lamps, Candles, and Light · The House

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: American Writers · The Bible · Women’s Suffrage

Martha, Young writes, “expired September 14, at one o’clock in the afternoon just as the clock was tolling one, 1918.” She was the last passenger pigeon on earth, and she died at the Cincinnati Zoo. History records the date as September 1, 1914, at one in the afternoon: Young has the hour right and the day and year wrong. Young records this with the precision of a monument inscription, which is what it is: the novel borrowing the language of memorial for a death that was also the end of a species, the closing of a door that had once darkened skies across the continent.

Mr. Spitzer weeps for Martha.

He is, by this point in the novel, a man who can weep for a pigeon dead before he was born (or at least, dead at the far edge of his life's possible span) while not weeping for himself, because weeping “for himself would seem an excess since he was already dead or dying to this world, this world” itself dying. He directs his sorrow outward, toward the extinct, toward all those the world has not wept for. “He wept for others who wept not for him.” This is his form of love. It is the only form available to him. It is also, Young makes clear, a form of profound loneliness.

What actually happens in Chapter 49

Chapter 49 is the deepest we have gone into Mr. Spitzer's interior: the chapter where Young gives us the full inventory of his condition: the shipwreck whose hull is broken, “paying out more water than the seas contained”; the living lighthouse seeing his own light only at the moment of dying; the man who knows not whether he is “himself or an image contained within an image.”

He moves through a frozen cosmos, ice formed into shapes of domes and eggs and “spires and minarets and bell towers,” a universe in suspension, waiting for something that does not come. He contemplates the paradox of his own existence: “he died at his zenith because he was at his nadir, died at his nadir because he was at his zenith.” He “died through sickness, died through health.” “Died through happiness which should have saved him, died through sorrow, sorrow by which he lived, died by not dying, died by living, lived by dying.”

He is, *To All My Darlings* notes, something like Schrödinger's cat: simultaneously alive and dead, the state unresolved until observed, the observation itself changing the state. He does not know which he is. He has stopped being certain anyone outside him knows either.

He mourns Martha. He mourns his brother. He mourns Cousin Hannah. He mourns everyone who has been extinct or forgotten or lost to the indifference of time. He is, as he has always been, the unofficial unelected representative of causes that were “never popular in any public sense”: a minority representing “a hidden majority like those sleeping in the churchyard.”

Martha and the weight of extinction

The passenger pigeon was once the most numerous bird in North America. Accounts from the nineteenth century describe flocks so vast they darkened the sky for hours, the sound of their wings like approaching weather, the weight of their roosting breaking tree branches. By the time Martha died in 1914, it was widely known that she was the last of her kind, and the world had not particularly noticed.

In 1947 the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology erected a monument to the passenger pigeon at Wyalusing State Park, and Aldo Leopold wrote “On a Monument to the Pigeon” for it, later collected in A Sand County Almanac. Young may well have known the monument and the essay, which mourn not just the bird but the human capacity for annihilation: the ability to reduce something that once filled the sky to a single bird dying in a zoo cage, the clock tolling one.

Mr. Spitzer mourns Martha with the same intensity he mourns Cousin Hannah. Young is making something precise here: the extinction of a species and the death of a person are not the same scale of loss, but they are the same kind of loss. Both are irreversible. Both leave a silence that cannot be filled by substitution. Both represent the closing of a world that will not reopen. Martha is every Martha: every last thing, every final instance, every door that shuts for the last time as the clock is tolling one.

The shipwreck lighthouse

Young gives Mr. Spitzer two contradictory images in rapid succession: he is like a shipwreck, his hull broken, “paying out more water than the seas contained and” he is the living lighthouse, seeing his own light at the one moment when he is dying, his own light shining from him.

The shipwreck is disintegration: the structure that was built to float, now taking on more water than the ocean, overwhelmed from the inside by the thing that was supposed to be kept outside. Mr. Spitzer is flooding. His memories, his griefs, his panpsychist suffering, his attribution of consciousness to everything: the interior is now exceeding the container.

But the lighthouse, at the moment of his dying, sees its own light. This is extraordinary. A lighthouse does not normally see its own beam; it projects outward, for others, and is itself in the dark at the source. But Young gives Mr. Spitzer, in the moment of extinction, the

simultaneous experience of being the light and seeing the light. He is both the source and the witness. For one moment, the sporadic, intermittent, second-remove consciousness achieves the simultaneous presence it has never been able to sustain in ordinary life.

This is what dying gives him. Not resolution, not peace, but for once, the complete experience of himself.

Trusting only the false

So he had come to trust only the false.

Why “should he trust the truth which had already failed him if the false would never fail” (if inconstancy was the only constancy, if the stone crumbled like a cloud) then trusting the false is not delusion but accurate accounting. It is the epistemological position of someone who has been paying attention.

Young makes this formulation with complete seriousness. Mr. Spitzer is not endorsing dishonesty. He is noting that the things that present themselves as stable (truth, constancy, the solid foundation) have repeatedly proved less reliable than the things that admit their instability from the start. The false is honest about being false. The uncertain is honest about being uncertain. The inconstant never pretends to be permanent. In a world where the stable crumbles and the permanent passes, trusting the false may be the most rational available option.

This is the epistemology of a man who has watched the suffrage captain die sobbing, who has seen his brother go before him into the dark, who has observed the most formidable person he knew reduced by death to a woman crying for her skirt. The stable things failed. The constant things changed. The stone crumbled. What remains is the honest admission of fragility, and the paradoxical reliability of things that never claimed to be solid.

An image within an image

“He knew not whether he was himself or an image contained within an image.”

This formulation has been building since the first chapter: the doubles, the twins, the possible identity substitution, the faces that are not quite what they seem. Now it arrives at its fullest expression: not just the uncertainty about which twin survived, but the more radical uncertainty about whether the self is an original or a copy of a copy of something that may itself have been a copy.

To All My Darlings compares this to Schrödinger's cat: the thought experiment in which a cat in a sealed box is simultaneously alive and dead until the box is opened and the state is observed. Mr. Spitzer is the cat. The box is his own consciousness. He cannot observe himself from outside himself, which means the state remains unresolved. He is both the man he thinks he is and the image of that man, and possibly also the image of his brother, and the image of the man his brother thought he was. Images within images, with no original that anyone can locate.

Young offers this not as a crisis exactly, Mr. Spitzer has been living inside this uncertainty for so long that it has become his habitual atmosphere, but as a description of the furthest reach of his condition. He is as fragmented as the novel itself, as multiple as Catherine, as displaced as Cousin Hannah's spirit wandering through posthumous geographies. He is, in his own modest and cautious way, as vast as any of them.

He could love only by indirection

One of the chapter's most important and least emphasized lines: he could love only by indirection.

Mr. Spitzer is drawn to those who have lost everything: the dispossessed, the wanderers through the storm of years, the hidden majority sleeping in the churchyard. He trusts them. He is nearest them in the city. They are all his loves. And the reason is that he cannot love directly: cannot look a person in the face and say I love you and have that be sufficient to the scale of what he feels, or sufficient to the distance between himself and everyone he has ever wanted to reach.

Loving by indirection is loving Martha the passenger pigeon. Loving by indirection is weeping for the extinct when you cannot weep for yourself. It is carrying the alpenhorn. It is keeping the secret. It is keeping watch over stars that no one asked you to tend. All of it is love, Young insists: the oblique form, the sideways approach, the love that does not announce itself because announcement is a mode of presence Mr. Spitzer cannot manage. It counts. She means for it to count.

The pigeon-colored dawn

“If there were no pigeons, could there be people or pigeon people or the pigeon-colored dawn, rose and blue and silver and gold mottled like the pigeon’s wing”?

Young's description of a dawn that is pigeon-colored (“rose and blue and silver and gold mottled,” variegated, the complex light of a sky that once held millions of them) is one of the novel's most beautiful ecological elegies. The passenger pigeon, in its extinction, has become the color of loss itself: the dawn that was once the backdrop for their flight, the light that fell on their wings, now a shade that has outlasted them. The dawn remembers the pigeons even though the pigeons are gone.

Mr. Spitzer has “lost all sense of the hour.” He cannot tell the dawn from the dusk, cannot locate himself in the day's progression. The pigeon-colored light (the light of before-dawn, before-loss, before-the-extinction) is the only time he recognizes, and it does not correspond to any hour on the clock.

What to hold onto

Chapter 49 is one of the novel's most spacious and most sorrowful chapters: the chapter where Mr. Spitzer is given, perhaps for the first time, the full scale of his own consciousness. He is simultaneously the shipwreck and the lighthouse. He is the cat in

the box, both states unresolved. He is the mourner for everyone who has not been mourned, the unofficial representative of the causes the churchyard sleepers never got to argue for.

What to carry forward: Martha dying as the clock tolled one, the precision of that record, the finality of it, the way Young turns an ecological catastrophe into a philosophical emblem without diminishing either. The lighthouse seeing its own light at the moment of dying. And the love that can only be expressed by indirection, which is still love, which Young insists is still love, even when the lover is a shipwreck and the beloved is extinct and the dawn is the color of what has been lost.

For the Curious

On Martha and the passenger pigeon

On Martha and the passenger pigeon.

The passenger pigeon (Ectopistes migratorius) was once so numerous that nineteenth-century ornithologists estimated three to five billion individuals in North America. John James Audubon described flocks that took three days to pass overhead. By 1900 they were effectively gone from the wild; the last confirmed wild bird was shot in 1900. Martha, named for Martha Washington, was hatched in captivity and died at the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914 (Young's date, September 14, 1919, or 1918 in an earlier edition, differs from the historical record). Aldo Leopold's 1947 monument inscription asked whether it was sorrow or shame that a species so numerous could be destroyed so completely. Young's answer, given through Mr. Spitzer's grief, is: both.

On Schrödinger's cat and unresolved states

On Schrödinger's cat and unresolved states.

Erwin Schrödinger devised his famous thought experiment in 1935 to illustrate a paradox in quantum mechanics: if a cat in a sealed box is subject to a quantum event that may or may not have occurred, the cat is theoretically both alive and dead until the box is opened and observation collapses the superposition into a single state. The experiment was intended as a reductio ad absurdum of the Copenhagen interpretation, not as a literal claim about cats. Young's application of it to Mr. Spitzer is more literal than Schrödinger intended and more poetic: Mr. Spitzer is genuinely in superposition, his identity genuinely unresolved between himself and his brother, his status genuinely uncertain between living and dead. The box has not been opened. The state has not collapsed.

On Aldo Leopold's monument to the pigeon

On Aldo Leopold's monument to the pigeon.

Leopold erected his monument in 1947 at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, marking the spot where the university had once planted trees to attract passenger pigeons before the species was extinct. The monument inscription mourned not only the bird but the speed and completeness of the annihilation: a species that darkened the sky reduced to

nothing in a human lifetime, through hunting, habitat destruction, and the disruption of communal nesting behavior so extreme that the birds could not reproduce without the thousands of others they required for the ritual. Young would have known this monument. Mr. Spitzer's mourning for Martha draws on exactly the tradition Leopold's inscription embodies: the obligation to remember what we destroyed, not simply as environmental record but as moral fact.

On loving by indirection

On loving by indirection.

The phrase has an Emersonian ring: Emerson wrote of the way great truths arrive slant, the way the soul is addressed indirectly. Emily Dickinson famously said tell all the truth but tell it slant. Young's Mr. Spitzer is working in this tradition: a person who cannot say the thing directly but circles it, approaches it from the side, expresses it through the objects and causes and extinct species he tends. The indirect lover is not a lesser lover. The indirection may be the only form the love can take given the particular shape of the self that holds it. Young does not apologize for Mr. Spitzer. She gives him his full scale, his full sadness, and the dignity of a love that expresses itself in the only way it can.

On '“every Martha must have her Mary.”' Young's reference to Mary and Martha from the Gospel of Luke sets up the chapter's governing contrast: Martha is the practical one, the active servant, the one burdened with the work of the world. Mary sits at Jesus's feet and listens, and when Martha complains that she does all the work while her sister sits idle, Jesus says Mary has chosen the better part. The passenger pigeon Martha maps onto biblical Martha: the one who carried the burden, who worked without recognition, who was not chosen. Who died. The Mary who should have accompanied her is the part that listens, that attends, that does not forget. Mr. Spitzer is trying to be that Mary. He attends. He does not forget. He weeps.

Chapter 50: The Hyphen Was All

Research notes: Chapter 50

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Death and Mortality · Dreams and Imagination · Nature, the Sea, and the Cosmos

Symbols: Fireflies · Keys, Doors, and Locks · The Sea and Water

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Astronomy · Music and Composers · The Bible · The History of Opium · Women’s Suffrage

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There is a moment near the end of Chapter 50 where Mr. Spitzer recalls Cousin Hannah's hyphenated name, Freemount-Snowden, and reflects that the hyphen was more important to her “than the two names it joined.” The hyphen was all.

Read that slowly. The two names on either side of the hyphen are the public record, the inheritance, the official account. The hyphen is the connection itself: the joining, the and-also, the refusal to be reduced to only one thing. Cousin Hannah was Freemount and Snowden and the passage between them. She was the hyphen. And when she lost her love, she lost what the hyphen had been pointing toward: the person or the life that would have made the joining make sense.

Chapter 50 is the chapter where Mr. Spitzer finally turns away from Cousin Hannah's death and back toward his own existence, and finds that his own existence is the most uncertain thing he has yet tried to describe. He is a dream dreamed by another dreamer. He is a flyleaf between testaments. He is the one who dreamed not, left to live inside other people's dreams because he has no dream of his own. He is alive after his death, or dead during his life, and he cannot reliably distinguish which state he occupies at any given moment.

What actually happens in Chapter 50

The chapter opens with Mr. Spitzer's universe going “off key and out of course”: familiar structures multiplying, two golden chairs where there should be one, the question of which chair is real and which is its dream. He is cautious: he cannot touch “the strings of the constellation Lyre for fear” of touching something imaginary and finding it has more substance than he expected, or less. Everything seems slightly offset from itself, the sensorium failing not in any catastrophic way but in the way of a clock that runs a few minutes slow: the readings are all there, but they no longer correspond reliably to the time.

He reflects on what he learned and did not learn from Catherine: the opium lady, the invalid, the woman who blurred life and death so thoroughly that her experience offers him no reliable map. He could not learn mortality from her, since she “had known no age

or death.” He learned most, he decides, not from Catherine but from “an old suffragette captain tossing on her bed.”

“All that happened happened only once.” This is the chapter's most quietly devastating formulation: the non-recurrence of events, the impossibility of going back, the knowledge that every moment is singular and cannot be repeated or revisited. A train derailed in grass. A star derailed. The world spinning slightly off its expected axis, and no one coming to correct it.

The chapter closes on the firefly (his key of gold, his soul, the small light he reads by in the vast dark) and on Cousin Hannah's hyphen, and on the pause in a broken melody that her death represents. A pause that may be a rest. A silence that is not the end of the music, only a place where the music held its breath.

A dream dreamed by another dreamer

This phrase, the central formulation of Mr. Spitzer's condition in Chapter 50, reaches back through the novel to Chapter 37's unanswered question: but who was the dreamer? Young has been circling this question for thirteen chapters, and here she gives Mr. Spitzer's version of the answer: he is not the dreamer. He is the dream. He is what happens inside someone else's dreaming, a figure that arose in another consciousness and has been navigating a world he did not generate and cannot fully read.

This is not despair, though it sounds like it. Young is working through a genuine philosophical possibility: what if some people (the cautious, the second-remove, the ones who missed the present moment by arriving a minute late) are simply not the originators of the reality they inhabit? What if they are always living by other people's terms, other people's dreamwork, other people's versions of what the world is? This would explain why Mr. Spitzer's sensorium is always slightly off: he is reading the transcript of someone else's direct experience, and transcripts are always approximate.

The novel's own structure mirrors this. Vera is the narrator, but she is narrating something she partially witnessed and partially imagined and partially inherited from the people who came before her. The novel is itself a dream dreamed by several dreamers simultaneously, each one contributing a fragment of the whole, none of them holding the master copy.

A flyleaf between testaments

He sees himself as a “mere flyleaf stuck between two passages or testaments.”

A flyleaf is the blank page at the beginning or end of a book: the paper between the cover and the first page of text, or between the last page of text and the back cover. It is part of the book. It is also not part of the text. It is the place where someone might write a dedication, or a name, or nothing at all. It exists between what comes before and what comes after, belonging fully to neither.

Mr. Spitzer between the Old Testament and the New. Between his brother's life and his own. Between Catherine's household and the world outside it. Between Cousin Hannah's

death and whatever comes next for the novel. He is the transition: the connective tissue, the white space, the pause that allows two very different things to be bound together in the same volume without directly touching.

And yet the flyleaf matters. Remove it and the cover damages the text. The flyleaf protects. The flyleaf receives the inscription that makes the book personal, that makes it this copy rather than any copy. Mr. Spitzer is the novel's flyleaf: not the story, but the thing that holds the story in its hands and keeps it from being damaged by the world. This is not nothing. Young means it not to be nothing.

The sea urchins who knew not

Young gives Chapter 50 one of the novel's most philosophically dizzying sentences: the “sea urchins who knew not whether they lived or were dead or were sleeping—or if they knew, we knew not that they knew, and they knew not that we knew not that they knew not.”

This is a precise rendering of the problem of other minds, taken to its recursive extreme. We cannot know whether sea urchins are conscious. We cannot know whether they know they are conscious. We cannot know whether they know we are uncertain about whether they are conscious. And they cannot know any of this about us. Each layer of ignorance reflects another layer, and the reflection continues past the point where any of the parties involved can track it.

The sea urchin is an apt figure for this meditation: it is one of the longest-living creatures on earth, some individuals surviving two hundred years, yet it is famously difficult to tell a live sea urchin from a dead one. It exists in a state of apparent ambiguity that is entirely real: the animal is either alive or not, the question is only our ability to tell. Young finds in this creature the perfect emblem for Mr. Spitzer's own condition: alive or dead or sleeping, and perhaps no messages have ever arrived to clarify the matter. Perhaps no messages were ever sent.

Gleaming cells that knew not death or life

Mr. Spitzer contemplates “those gleaming cells which knew not death or life or these definitions, knew not whether they lived or were dead, for perhaps no messages had ever arrived.”

Young is pushing panpsychism in a new direction here: not the agonized attribution of consciousness to everything, but its inverse, the possibility that certain things exist in a state prior to the categories of consciousness and death, never having received the information that would allow them to know which side they're on. Not ambiguous. Not uncertain. Simply prior to the question.

To All My Darlings points to Henrietta Lacks and the HeLa cell line: cells taken without consent from a dying woman in 1951 that became the most widely used human cell line in history, still alive in laboratories worldwide while Henrietta Lacks herself died and was buried. Her cells are immortal. She was mortal. The gleaming cells knew not death or life;

they simply continued, dividing and dividing, neither the body that generated them nor the woman who was that body, something else entirely. Young was writing in 1965; the HeLa story was not yet widely known. But the image she gives Mr. Spitzer is prescient: life persisting past the point where anyone intended it to, in forms that have escaped the definitions that once organized them.

Nothing twice the same

“All that happened happened only once.” “There was nothing twice the same.”

This is the chapter's most austere formulation, and it hits differently after fifty chapters of a novel that has done everything it can to make time non-linear, to make the past present, to insist that memory and reality and dream are all equally real. You might expect Young, given all that, to offer some consolation through repetition: some sense that what happened happens again, that nothing is finally lost because everything recurs.

She does not. She gives Mr. Spitzer this instead: once, only. Every moment is singular. Every departure is the last time anyone leaves by that particular door in that particular light at that particular age. Every encounter with Cousin Hannah, in memory or dream or the afterimage the dead leave in the consciousness of those who knew them; each one is different from the last. The event happened once. What we have now are the echoes, and echoes are not repetitions; they are the evidence of the original's passage, distorted by every surface they have bounced off since.

This is, Young suggests, both the sorrow and the dignity of existence. The singularity is the sorrow. The singularity is also what makes each moment the thing it is rather than a copy of something else. There was nothing twice the same. Including Mr. Spitzer. Including you.

The hyphen was all

Cousin Hannah's hyphenated name, Freemount-Snowden, carried in it the story of her identity: the two family lines she was born between, the social structures she inhabited, the formal record of who she was supposed to be. But Young's insight is that for Cousin Hannah, none of that was the point. The hyphen was the point. The connection itself. The joining.

The suffrage movement was a hyphen: between the world as it was and the world as it should be, between the legal status of women before the vote and after it, between this life and a life not yet available. Cousin Hannah devoted herself to the hyphen, not to either of the things it connected. She was the passage, the transition, the place where one thing becomes another thing.

And when she lost her love (whatever that love was, whoever the blackamoor, whatever the secret the hyphen was meant to join) she was left with the two names and no connection between them. The hyphen remained in her name. The thing it had been reaching toward was gone. She carried the form of the connection without the content.

This is, Young suggests, a particular kind of grief: to be defined by a relationship to something you can no longer reach.

The firefly as key of gold

Among all the vast and complex imagery of Chapter 50 (the frozen cosmos, the Cassiopeia chair, the constellation Lyre, the golden horn of Istanbul, the sidereal clocks) Young gives Mr. Spitzer a single small light as his key of gold: the little firefly. His soul. The light he reads by.

The firefly has appeared throughout the novel as one of its recurring emblems of consciousness: brief, intermittent, visible only in darkness, the light produced not by combustion but by a chemical process that generates no heat. Cool light. Living light. A light that flashes and goes dark and flashes again, following a pattern no individual firefly chooses, each one part of a larger display that only makes sense from a distance.

Mr. Spitzer is a firefly. His consciousness is a firefly. His love, expressed by indirection, mourning the extinct, carrying alpenhorns into the fog: all of it is firefly light: brief, cool, intermittent, beautiful specifically because it is not the sun. You need the dark for it. You need the absence of stronger light. In the great blazing consciousness of Catherine or the blazing trajectory of Cousin Hannah, Mr. Spitzer would be invisible. In the long dark of the aftermath, he is exactly visible enough.

What to hold onto

Chapter 50 is Mr. Spitzer's most fully self-aware chapter: the chapter where he looks at himself with the same steady patience he has given to everything else and reports what he sees without flinching. He is a dream dreamed by another dreamer. He is a flyleaf. He is the one who dreamed not. He reads by firefly light. He is a tide that advances and retreats without ever quite arriving or quite receding.

What Young is doing with this, across these chapters of his long vigil, is building the novel's most unexpected argument: that the cautious, the second-remove, the men who value their dignity more than their lives and arrive a minute late to every experience and cannot maintain sustained attention; these people are not failures of consciousness. They are a different form of it. The firefly is not a failed sun. The flyleaf is not a failed chapter. The hyphen is not a failed word.

The hyphen was all. Keep that with you.

For the Curious

On flyleaves and their history

On flyleaves and their history.

The flyleaf is the blank endpaper of a book, and its blankness is not accidental. Before modern publishing, books were sold unbound, and the flyleaf protected the text during

transport. After binding, it became the space for personalization: ownership inscriptions, gift dedications, bookplates, private notes. The flyleaf is where the book becomes a specific object rather than a general one; this book, owned by this person, given on this occasion. Young's use of it for Mr. Spitzer is exact: he is what makes the story personal rather than generic, what holds the two volumes together without being the text of either.

On HeLa cells and Henrietta Lacks

On HeLa cells and Henrietta Lacks.

Henrietta Lacks was a Black woman who died of cervical cancer in 1951 at Johns Hopkins Hospital. Without her knowledge or consent, cells were taken from her tumor and cultured, and proved to be extraordinarily robust, dividing indefinitely in laboratory conditions. These HeLa cells became the foundation of modern cell biology: used in developing the polio vaccine, in cancer research, in genetics. The cells are technically alive. Henrietta Lacks died. The cells do not know they came from her. They know nothing. Young's gleaming cells that knew not death or life, “for perhaps no messages had ever arrived,” uncannily anticipates this case: the cells that escaped the categories of living and dying by escaping the person who generated them.

On Palestrina and the aspiration toward harmony

On Palestrina and the aspiration toward harmony.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina was the sixteenth-century Italian composer whose polyphonic sacred music became the model of Renaissance harmonic clarity: voices moving in smooth, careful counterpoint, dissonances always resolving, reaching toward a kind of ordered serenity. Felix Mendelssohn placed him alongside Beethoven, Mozart, and Bach as one of the four greatest. Young invokes him here as the aspiration that life never fully achieves: the harmony that the rehearsal is practicing toward, the silence at the end of the performance where all the notes have finally resolved. Mr. Spitzer, who hears everything off-key, who is always a second remove from the music, is rehearsing for Palestrina. He will not get there. The rehearsal is all he has. It is also all any of us has.

On Cassiopeia and the constellation imagery

On Cassiopeia and the constellation imagery.

Young populates Chapter 50 with specific constellations (Cassiopeia's chair, the Hair of Berenice, the Lyre, Aquarius the Water Carrier) not as decoration but as the vocabulary of a sky that has always been used to impose narrative on chaos. Constellations are human stories drawn through empty space, connecting dots that have no physical relationship to each other, making patterns that only exist from Earth's particular vantage. Mr. Spitzer, who sees two chairs where there should be one, is standing at the wrong angle to resolve the double image into a single constellation. He cannot find the perspective from which the pattern is legible. This is not a deficiency of vision. It is a deficiency of position. If he could stand somewhere else, everything would resolve. He cannot stand somewhere else. None of us can.

On sidereal time

On sidereal time.

Sidereal time measures the rotation of the Earth relative to the fixed stars, rather than relative to the sun. A sidereal day is about four minutes shorter than a solar day: the two systems accumulate a full day's difference over the course of a year. Navigators use sidereal time to locate celestial objects; ordinary life runs on solar time. Mr. Spitzer is living on sidereal time in a solar world: his internal clock is calibrated to the fixed stars, to the long rhythms of the cosmos, while everyone around him runs on the practical daily schedule. He is perpetually four minutes off. Over the course of a life, this accumulates into a different year entirely.

Chapter 51: The Trumpeter or the Trumpeter's Cry

Research notes: Chapter 51

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Mr. Mouse

Themes: Dreams and Imagination

Philosophy: Freud and Jung · Hinduism · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Plato and Platonism · Time, Physics, and Chaos Theory

Allusions: Astronomy · Deafness and Sign Language · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Music and Composers · Women’s Suffrage

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There is a mouse in Mr. Spitzer's papers.

His name is Mr. Mouse, and he has been busy. He has jumbled symphonies. He has eaten all Mr. Spitzer's chords. He has torn the music to ribbons and made a bed from scraps of old lawsuits and sleeps in the papers lining Mr. Spitzer's hat. He has also, in a moment of accidental grandeur, taken the Great Dipper of stars and shaken it like a rattle, pouring out new and unintended constellations across the sky.

Mr. Mouse is chaos. Mr. Mouse is the principle of disorder that is also, because Young always insists on this, the principle of creation. You cannot have new constellations without the shaking of the old ones. You cannot have the ribbons without the torn music. The order that Mr. Spitzer has spent his life defending (law, music, the careful preservation of documents) is being gnawed through from the inside, and the thing doing the gnawing is making something beautiful by accident.

Chapter 51 is the longest and most sweeping of Mr. Spitzer's interior chapters, and it gives him, at last, his fullest expression of what he is and is not. He does not know whether he is “the trumpeter or the trumpeter’s cry, the cry or the echo.” He is the lawyer to starfish. He is twelve cloaks. He is “the sail stalled in the mist, or the sail broke into flame.” He is a legal fiction. He is, at the very bottom of it all, the dream that is dreaming itself, even when there is no counterpart, even when there is nothing to dream about.

What actually happens in Chapter 51

Mr. Spitzer continues his long meditation in the borderland, but Chapter 51 extends that meditation into a catalogue, almost a complete inventory of every role, every form, every self he might be or have been or is not. He is the conductor lifting the baton, or perhaps only the lamplighter, or perhaps only the oarsman striking waves of darkness. He is the musician of silence: music “ever of the silence flowing under the sound of accidental or incidental music.” He is “the spectre dreaming upon the spectre.”

He is the lawyer to the dead: a lawyer to starfish, a lawyer to a dead coachman, a musician who “struck two chords together with one motion of his dead, jeweled hand.” He has stamped documents with the wrong seal by mistake: the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad instead of the President's seal, the “seal of the New England Lighthouse Underwriters” instead of the Grand Union Army. The errors compound. The paperwork of the dead is full

of mistakes. Mr. Spitzer, the executor of estates and keeper of wills, has been certifying things incorrectly for longer than anyone has noticed.

The chapter catalogues the people Mr. Spitzer encounters in his wandering: seldom does he meet with anyone who does “not suffer from some form of complex illusion beyond necessity.” The old woman who believes she is a birdcage. The piano tuner who taps Mr. Spitzer's forehead with his tuning fork and declares it hollow. The blind portrait painter. The deaf music critic who hears errors without hearing music. The old woman found with a golden arrow through her breast, who believed she was a reindeer. The chapter people these margins of normal consciousness with figures who are, in their particular delusions, only slightly more transparent than everyone else.

It closes on the one great dream: perhaps there was “only one great dream informing all dreamers and all dreams, one great dreamer dreaming through” us all. And the recognition that there is “no threshold between world and world.”

Mr. Mouse and the new constellations

Young's Mr. Mouse is not a metaphor for anything simple. He is not merely entropy, not merely the passage of time, not merely the chaos that undoes careful human work. He is the impresario, the one who produces the show, even while he destroys the score.

Young understood something about the relationship between destruction and creation that runs through her novel's entire structure. The novel itself is a kind of Mr. Mouse operation: it takes the careful categories of realism (chronological narrative, reliable narrators, settled boundaries between what is real and what is dreamed) and gnaws through them, and in doing so creates something that those categories never could have contained. The new constellations Mr. Mouse makes by shaking the Great Dipper are not planned. They are not what anyone would have designed. They are what happens when the old arrangements are released.

Mr. Spitzer opposes Mr. Mouse's will with his will. This is the contest that has defined his life: the lawyer against the mouse, order against chaos, the carefully filed document against the creature who eats documents and builds nests from them. He cannot win. Mr. Mouse will always eat faster than Mr. Spitzer can file. But the opposition itself is the music, Young suggests. The contest between them produces, in its friction, something that neither pure order nor pure chaos could generate alone.

The trumpeter or the trumpeter's cry

“He did not know whether he was the trumpeter or the trumpeter’s cry, the cry or the echo.”

This is the chapter's central question, and it is not rhetorical. Young means it as a genuine puzzle about the nature of identity: are you the source of what you produce, or are you what is produced? Is the musician the player or the music? Is the self the generator of experience or the experience itself?

For Mr. Spitzer, who has spent his existence at a second remove from everything (hearing sounds a minute late, living by other people's dreams, possibly inhabiting his dead brother's identity) the question of whether he is the trumpeter or the cry is especially acute. He has never been certain he was the original. He has always suspected he was a consequence of something that came before him, a sound that arose from a source he cannot locate. If he is the cry, then he disperses when the air stops vibrating. If he is the echo, then he exists only in relation to something that has already happened, and he will fade as the surfaces that reflect him fade.

The trumpeter would be the self that produces. The cry would be the self that is produced. Mr. Spitzer cannot determine which he is. Neither can Young. This is honest.

The lawyer to starfish

He is a lawyer to starfish. A lawyer to a dead coachman.

These are not jokes exactly, though they have the structure of jokes: the absurdist juxtaposition of a legal profession with creatures and figures that cannot benefit from legal representation. But Young means them seriously as a description of what Mr. Spitzer actually does. He is the executor of estates whose owners cannot dispute the terms. He is the keeper of wills whose testators are unavailable for consultation. He handles the legal affairs of the departed, which means he handles the formal arrangements of a world that no longer has a living stakeholder.

The starfish cannot engage with Mr. Spitzer's services. The dead coachman has no interest in the outcome of his estate. But Mr. Spitzer continues to process the paperwork, file the documents, press the wrong seals by mistake. The law continues regardless of whether the parties it serves are present or capable of benefiting. This is what law does. It persists past the point of usefulness as an act of form: a form that Mr. Spitzer maintains because the form is what he has, and without it there is only “the void where he would not be at least this shadow.”

Life as a legal fiction

“Was life a legal fiction, a realm which could never be proved, disproved, an imaginary house with its intricate ivory porches no waves should ever reach, its lights already lost?”

A legal fiction is a fact that is assumed to be true for the purposes of the law, regardless of whether it is actually true. Courts use legal fictions all the time: the fiction that corporations are persons, the fiction that certain presumptions hold unless disproved, the fiction that jurisdiction is established when it technically is not. Legal fictions are useful lies; they allow the law to function in situations where strict adherence to factual reality would prevent any decision from being made.

Young asks: what if life itself is this kind of fiction? What if the assumption that we are alive, that experience is real, that identity is stable: what if all of this is the legal fiction that allows the proceeding to continue? Mr. Spitzer, the executor of impossible estates, the lawyer to starfish, is perfectly positioned to recognize this. He has been processing legal

fictions his entire career. He knows how they work. He knows how to proceed as though they are true even when they are clearly not. His life is an instance of proceeding as though the fiction holds.

The old woman who believed she was a reindeer

Young peoples Chapter 51's margins with figures of elaborate and particular delusion: the old woman who believed she was a birdcage, the piano tuner who declared Mr. Spitzer's forehead hollow, the blind portrait painter, the deaf music critic. And then the one that Young lingers on longest: the old woman found dead with a golden arrow through her breast, who had believed she was a reindeer.

She is not played for comedy. She is played for the full weight of what Young means by illusion: the old woman lived in a world where she was a reindeer. That world was as vivid and as internally coherent as any other world. The golden arrow was real: real enough to kill her. The delusion was complex and sustained and particular enough to generate a death that made sense only within its own terms.

Young is not saying all perceptions are equally valid. She is saying that the boundary between the old woman's world and the ordinary world is not as firm as it might appear. Mr. Spitzer, who struggles to distinguish which chair is real and which is its dream, who is “agonized by attributing consciousness to everything,” who cannot tell whether he is alive or dead; he is several degrees away from the old woman who was a reindeer, not infinitely far from her. The novel has been insisting, since Chapter 1, that the borders between these states are thinner than convention requires.

One great dream informing all dreamers

Perhaps there was “only one great dream informing all dreamers and all dreams, one great dreamer dreaming through” us all.

This is the chapter's philosophical summit, and it has a long history. The Upanishads describe Brahman as the universal consciousness in which all individual minds participate. Jung's collective unconscious is the reservoir of shared archetypes and images that every individual psyche draws from. Plato's theory of Forms proposes a realm of perfect Ideas from which all individual instances are imperfect copies. Young arrives at this convergence point not through any of these traditions specifically but through the logic of Mr. Spitzer's particular condition: a man who may be dreaming someone else's dream, who may be an image within an image, who has experienced enough of the world's multiplicity to wonder whether what looks like infinite individual consciousness is actually one thing manifesting in many temporary forms.

Young does not endorse this as doctrine. She gives it to Mr. Spitzer as a possibility that arrives in the borderland between life and death, where the usual distinctions have worn thin enough to let the light through. If he is only dreaming, he notes, then he is accompanied by a great deal of company. All the other dreamers. The one great dream.

No threshold between world and world

“There was no threshold between world and world.”

Young has been approaching this formulation since the novel's first chapter: the grey bus moving through the grey Midwest, the fog that dissolves borders, the household where Catherine has made the distinction between waking and dreaming so permeable that it no longer functions as a distinction. But Mr. Spitzer's version is harder and more absolute than Catherine's: not that the threshold is blurred or difficult to find, but that it does not exist.

We live “by an imperfect concatenation, even as we died—by echoes, tremblings, reverberations, sourceless thoughts.” The threshold we imagine between the living and the dead, between this world and whatever comes after, between the self and the dream of the self; these are the legal fictions that allow the proceeding to continue. They are useful. They may even be necessary. But they are not features of the territory. They are features of our maps.

For Mr. Spitzer, who has no reliable map, who has been stamping documents with the wrong seals for decades, this is not a consolation. It is simply what he has found. “There was no threshold between world and world.” He moves through the rooms of the dead and finds them continuous with the rooms of the living. The mouse eats the music and makes new stars. The legal fictions continue to be processed. And somewhere in all of this, barely visible, the dream keeps dreaming itself.

What to hold onto

Chapter 51 is the novel's most comprehensive portrait of Mr. Spitzer, not as a character in a story but as a form of consciousness, one of the novel's possible answers to the question of what a person is when the usual scaffolding of identity, continuity, and the reliable boundary between states has been removed.

What to carry forward: Mr. Mouse and the new constellations, chaos as the engine of unexpected creation. The trumpeter-or-cry question, which is not resolved and should not be. The lawyer to starfish, keeping the forms of law alive past the point where any living stakeholder can benefit. The old woman who was a reindeer. And the one great dream, dreaming through all the smaller dreams simultaneously, with no threshold between them.

The dream continues. The mouse continues. The music continues in its silence. Mr. Spitzer continues, a supernumerary star, beyond the normal count, giving off a light that may or may not be his own.

For the Curious

On Boethius and the Consolation of Philosophy

On Boethius and the Consolation of Philosophy.

Boethius wrote his most famous work in prison, awaiting execution on charges of conspiracy against the Ostrogothic king Theodoric. He had been a senator, a consul, a philosopher who had devoted himself to translating the Greek classics into Latin. In the cell, he wrote the Consolation of Philosophy, in which the personified figure of Philosophy visits him and argues that Fortune's wheel is always turning, that true goods are internal rather than external, that the wise person should not grieve over what Fortune has taken since Fortune gives and takes by nature. Young's Mr. Spitzer is the Boethius figure: the man of order and law who finds himself in a cell (the borderland, the liminal house) writing his own consolation, which is “that there was no threshold between world and world.”

On the Benjamin Franklin kite and the dead kite-flyer

On the Benjamin Franklin kite and the dead kite-flyer.

Young's image, “he had made of a dead kite-flyer his premise,” almost certainly invokes Franklin's famous 1752 lightning rod experiment, in which he flew a kite in a storm to demonstrate that lightning was electrical. Franklin survived. The kite was a conductor. The lightning was drawn down the string. Young's Mr. Spitzer makes this dead kite-flyer his premise: the man who drew lightning from the sky and took it, at controlled cost, into a useful form. The premise is that anything, even lightning, can be channeled if you know what you're doing and use the right string. Mr. Spitzer is not sure he knows what he is doing. He is not sure he has the right string. But he has made the premise anyway.

On Diogenes and the lantern

On Diogenes and the lantern.

Diogenes of Sinope, the founder of Cynicism, was famous for walking through the streets of Athens in broad daylight with a lit lantern, telling anyone who asked that he was looking for a man: meaning an honest man, a genuine human being. He found none he considered adequate. He lived in a large storage jar, rejected conventional values, and argued that virtue was the only good. Young's Mr. Spitzer, wandering the fog-bound city asking strangers if they have seen the dead suffragette, is Diogenes's opposite: Diogenes carried his own light and found no one worthy of it; Mr. Spitzer is looking for light in others and finding only the pigeon-colored dawn. Both searches are honest. Both fail to find what they are looking for.

On QBism and subjective reality

On QBism and subjective reality.

To All My Darlings introduces QBism (Quantum Bayesianism), a contemporary interpretation of quantum mechanics proposed around 2010, which holds that quantum states represent not objective reality but an agent's subjective beliefs about the outcomes of measurements. In QBism, reality as we experience it emerges from the collision of all the individual subjective mini-realities. Each person constructs a set of beliefs about the world based on their interactions with it. The big reality in which everyone lives is what comes out of the collisions. Young was writing half a century before QBism, but she was working in the same conceptual territory: a world where what you see is determined by

where you stand, and where the shared reality is what emerges from all those partial views overlapping. Mr. Spitzer's one great dream is Young's version of the emergent reality that QBism describes. On the instrument not played. “Man might be the finest musician, but when laid away and not played by anyone, he was a poor instrument, indeed.” This formulation captures the chapter's deepest claim about what it means to be a self: the self is not self-sufficient. It requires an audience, a listener, a player. Left unplayed, even the finest instrument is merely potential. Mr. Spitzer, the musician of silence, “the spectre dreaming upon the spectre,” is an instrument that has spent its life waiting to be played by someone who could hear what it was capable of. The music is in him. The player never arrived. The silence is not nothing; it is the music the instrument would have made. But silence is not music either.

Chapter 52: So Many Wedding Gowns and No Bride's Slippers

Research notes: Chapter 52

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer

Themes: Dreams and Imagination · Illusion and Reality · Memory and the Past · Music, Sound, and Silence · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Clothing, Hats, and Skirts · Keys, Doors, and Locks · Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology

Allusions: Women’s Suffrage

Mr. Spitzer opens the trunks.

Trunk lid after trunk lid. He has been working through Cousin Hannah's estate for chapters now: the papers, the alpenhorn, the keys that fit no locks, the documents sealed by rust and flame. And now the trunks. And what he finds, in trunk after trunk after trunk, is wedding gowns. Sheets of silk. Veils of lace. “Porous silks so thin that the least touch might cause them to fall into nothingness.” “Many bridal gowns and no bride’s slippers.”

To All My Darlings pauses here and asks all the right questions: had Cousin Hannah secretly wanted to marry even though she had publicly opposed the institution? Had there been forty suitors she backed away from at the last moment? Had there been forty weddings where she was the one who did not appear? Or, the guide ventures this quietly, had there been one, only one, the bridegroom left at the church door, the love killed by false modesty, and all these gowns were the accumulated evidence of the life she had prepared for and could not bring herself to live?

Young does not answer. The trunks are the answer, or as close as you will get. The gowns are the secret. The no slippers are the secret. The secret is not a fact but a shape: the shape of a life organized around a door it never walked through.

What actually happens in Chapter 52

Mr. Spitzer goes through Cousin Hannah's estate and finds what is there to find. He finds the wedding gowns. He finds letters in languages he cannot read. He learns from old newspapers what her lost skirt was: “a white skirt embroidered with forget-me-nots,” the one she called for in the delirium, lost on a mountain peak; the love who went to retrieve it did not return, and the skirt was “never to be found again.” He finds evidence of a woman who was both bride and bridegroom, who crossed every gender boundary the culture had placed in her path, who lived simultaneously as Hannah in Boston and Hamid in the East.

He remembers the little book she was reading when she died, open at page seven. He is no longer sure of its title, only that it was “an old romance of lovers never mated—Eloise et Abelard.” Then he asks which of the lovers she was: “Was she Tristram, or was she the

white Yseult?” Page seven of any text is where the story has just begun and you do not yet know what will be lost.

He reflects that “all might have been imaginary in this life as in this death.” He wonders: “surely her entire life could not have been a game of hide-and-seek, for although she was hiding—who was seeking for her?”

He almost turns to her, at this moment. Almost reaches for her even though she is dead, as one who might be rescued by the person you thought you were rescuing. He does not turn. He does not reach. He keeps the secret. Young does not tell us exactly what the secret is. She tells us its shape, and its weight, and the fact that Mr. Spitzer has decided it will remain a secret, and that this decision is the one meaningful thing he has been able to do for her in a life organized around failing to reach her.

The wedding gowns

Think carefully about what it means to find this many wedding gowns in a dead woman's trunks.

The obvious reading: she wanted to marry and couldn't, or didn't, and kept the evidence of that wanting in locked trunks because there was nowhere else to put it. The suffrage captain who publicly had no time for love, no time for feminine wiles, no time for the domestic arrangements of conventional womanhood; she had, in private, accumulated the material evidence of exactly the domestic arrangements she publicly refused.

But Young complicates even this. The gowns are numerous. They suggest not one failed marriage but many approaches to the threshold, each one turned away from, each one packed into a trunk and locked away. The silk so thin it would fall into nothingness at a touch: the same fragility that characterizes the love itself: real, present, accumulated, but unable to survive contact with the world.

And no bride's slippers. The gown without the slippers is the ceremony without the completion. The bride dressed but not shod for the walk down the aisle. The preparations were made and then arrested at the last item. The slippers are what take you forward, what move you from the vestibule into the ceremony. Cousin Hannah never put on the slippers. She put on everything else. She could not take the final step.

The skirt and the forget-me-nots

The lost skirt surfaces again here with its full detail: it was white lace, embroidered with forget-me-nots, the “little flowers which were like the memories of little loves.” It had blown away on a mountain peak or been left there, and someone had gone to retrieve it and not come back. Neither the skirt nor the person sent for it came back.

Forget-me-nots are the flowers of remembrance: their name comes from a German legend of a knight who drowned while picking them for his beloved, crying Vergiss mich nicht as he went under. The flowers Cousin Hannah embroidered on her skirt are the flowers of the love that went under while trying to bring her something she wanted. This is

the story of false modesty killing the love: she wanted the skirt, someone went to get it, the getting killed them, and she came back without either the skirt or the lover.

Young gives you this detail without insisting on it. The forget-me-nots on the lost skirt. The name of the flowers as the injunction of the dead. Don't forget. She didn't forget. She put the injunction in the embroidery and wore it until she lost it, and then called for it at the end of her life, and now Mr. Spitzer knows it only from old newspaper headlines, the skirt “never to be found again,” the flowers still saying: don't forget.

Tristram and Yseult, page seven

She died with her book open at page seven. Mr. Spitzer cannot recall its title; his impression is of Héloïse and Abelard, and then his question turns to Tristram and the white Yseult. In Matthew Arnold's “Tristram and Iseult,” Tristram lies dying, tended by his wife Iseult of Brittany, while the other Iseult (Iseult of Ireland, the one he truly loved, the one he was not allowed to love) has been summoned but has not yet arrived.

The Tristram legend is the great medieval story of a love that violated every social contract and could not be renounced. Tristram and Iseult of Ireland loved each other through marriage and separation and years of prohibition, until they were dying, and even then the love did not release them. Mr. Spitzer's question places Cousin Hannah inside this story: the moment of the deathbed wait, the summoned lover who has not yet arrived, the wife who is present but who knows she is not the one who was truly loved.

Whose page is this? Is Cousin Hannah Tristram, dying and waiting for the forbidden love to arrive? Is she Iseult of Ireland, the true love who was kept away? Is she Iseult of Brittany, the legitimate wife who was always the second choice? Young leaves the book open on page seven without assigning Cousin Hannah a role in the story. She may be all three. She may have read the same page so many times that the book opened there of its own accord, the spine broken at the place her grief lived.

Perhaps she should be the husband and not the bride

Young gives Mr. Spitzer this thought: “perhaps she should be the husband and not the bride, for should not death multiply life’s uncertainties and propose no firm foundation stone or unchanging lintel”?

This is the novel's most direct engagement with Cousin Hannah's gender, not just the masculine virtues she claimed, not just the Hannah/Hamid/Great Moor multiple identities, but the question of which role she occupied in the love she could not live. Bride or bridegroom. Both roles are present in the trunks: the wedding gowns are for a bride; the alpenhorn, the iron keys, the campaigns, the decisive way she lived are for someone who functions as a husband. She may have been both, or neither, or she may have spent her life moving between them without being able to settle in either.

Death, Young writes, multiplies life's uncertainties. It does not resolve them. The great social fictions (husband, bride, the firm foundation stone and unchanging lintel of the marriage ceremony) are revealed by death to have never been as stable as they

pretended. The lintel shifts. The stone erodes. The certainties that organized a life turn out to have been provisional all along.

The locksmith in a street of dreams

Mr. Spitzer describes himself in Chapter 52 as the “locksmith in a street of dreams where there was neither key nor lock.”

He is the executor. He has the keys to Cousin Hannah's estate. He has spent chapters fumbling with keys that fit no locks, opening trunks that answer no questions, certifying documents that reveal no definitive truth. He is the person whose professional function is to unlock, and he is operating in a space where the very categories of key and lock have dissolved into dream.

The locksmith without a lock is the legal professional without the rule of law, the musician without the instrument, the lamplighter without the stars. He has all the equipment of a person with a purpose. The purpose has been revoked by the environment it was meant to operate in. He is perfectly equipped for a world that does not correspond to his equipment.

And yet he continues. He opens trunk after trunk. He finds wedding gowns. He keeps the secret. The locksmith in the street of dreams does not stop being a locksmith simply because there are no locks. He goes on trying the keys, one after another, in the doors of the place where Cousin Hannah's life was kept.

No language contained truth

The chapter closes on this: “no language contained truth, for the truth was that which could not be expressed.”

Young has been working up to this formulation for the entire novel, but it lands with particular weight in Chapter 52 because the chapter has just shown you what the truth looks like when it cannot be expressed: it looks like trunk after trunk of wedding gowns and no bride's slippers. It looks like a book open to page seven. It looks like a “skirt embroidered with forget-me-nots” that was “never to be found again.” The truth is there. It has a shape. It has a weight. It has a texture: the porous silk, the lace that might collapse. It simply cannot be said in words, because words would make it something that can be argued with, qualified, revised, denied. In the trunks, it cannot be denied.

Mr. Spitzer's decision to keep the secret is, among other things, a decision about language: there are no words that would do what these trunks do. He cannot tell Catherine what he found, not because the information is too painful but because the translation would falsify it. Some truths are only true as objects. The wedding gowns are the truth. The words for them are not.

What to hold onto

Chapter 52 is where the novel's great secret settles into its final form, not revealed as a fact but disclosed as a shape. Cousin Hannah kept wedding gowns. She left her book open to the deathbed page. She called for a skirt embroidered with the flowers of remembrance. She was both bride and bridegroom, both the love and its prohibition, both the suffrage captain who had no time for domestic life and the woman who had packed the evidence of domestic longing into trunk after trunk, sealed with rust and flame.

What Mr. Spitzer keeps is not just her secret. He keeps the space of her contradiction: the space where a person's public commitments and private desires never resolved into a single coherent life, and yet the life was genuinely and magnificently lived. The locksmith in the street of dreams keeps the keys that open no locks, because the keeping is the only form of love still available to him, and love (even by indirection, even without a lock to fit) is what he has always been.

For the Curious

On forget-me-nots

On forget-me-nots.

The flower's name in English derives from a German legend recorded in the sixteenth century: a knight walking beside a river stooped to pick the small blue flowers for his beloved, fell into the current, and as he was carried away called Vergiss mein nicht, forget me not. He drowned bringing her the flowers of remembrance. The flower's botanical name, Myosotis, means mouse-ear, from the shape of the leaf. Young's use of them embroidered on Cousin Hannah's lost skirt is exact: the flowers of the love that drowned bringing her what she wanted, the injunction of the dead stitched into the garment she called for at the end of her life.

On Tristram and Iseult

On Tristram and Iseult.

Matthew Arnold's 1852 poem Tristram and Iseult tells the legend in three parts. The second part, which takes place at the deathbed, shows Tristram dying, attended by Iseult of Brittany, his wife, while Iseult of Ireland (the true love, the forbidden one) has been summoned and is coming across the sea. The poem is suffused with the particular anguish of the deathbed wait: will the true love arrive in time? She arrives too late. The legend is the great medieval archetype of a love so strong it violated its own social conditions, survived every prohibition, and could not be fulfilled. Young's Cousin Hannah, with the book open at page seven, is living this legend, but which role is hers remains, as Young intends, unresolved.

On Marie Marvingt, the fiancée of danger

On Marie Marvingt, the fiancée of danger.

Marie Marvingt was a French athlete who climbed mountains, flew balloons and airplanes, swam the English Channel, served as a combat pilot in World War I, and invented the air ambulance. She was called 'the fiancée of danger' by a journalist in 1903, and the nickname followed her for the rest of her life. Young built Cousin Hannah from women like Marvingt: the women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who claimed every domain of physical courage and daring that was supposed to belong to men, and did it without relinquishing their womanhood, or while permanently renegotiating what their womanhood meant. The fiancée of danger never married the danger. She was its perpetual intended.

On the safety coffin

On the safety coffin.

Mr. Spitzer thinks coffins should come equipped with a telephone: a thought that goes back to 1792 and the development of safety coffins, which were designed with bells, flags, or other signaling devices to allow someone who had been buried alive to communicate from inside. The fear of premature burial was intense in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, partly because medicine could not reliably distinguish between death and certain comatose states. Young's Mr. Spitzer, who cannot determine whether he himself is alive or dead, who lives in a borderland where the usual distinctions have dissolved, finds it entirely reasonable to want a communication device installed in the one structure designed to make communication impossible.

On Heloise and Abelard

On Heloise and Abelard.

Peter Abelard was a twelfth-century philosopher and theologian; Heloise was his student, then his secret wife, then a nun. Their love affair, conducted partly in letters and partly in catastrophe (Abelard was castrated by Heloise's uncle), produced one of the great correspondences in Western literature: the letters between a nun and the man she loved who became a monk, arguing across the cloister wall about theology and desire and the nature of their attachment. Young places this love alongside Tristram and Iseult as the pattern for Cousin Hannah's love: the love that was magnificent and prohibited and expressed primarily in the forms of renunciation. Heloise and Cousin Hannah: both women who chose the vocation over the marriage, and who knew what they were giving up.

Chapter 53: The Pale Replica

Research notes: Chapter 53

Characters: Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Peron Spitzer

Themes: Death and Mortality · Isolation and Connection · The Search for Meaning

Symbols: Cards, Games, and Chance

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Phenomenology · Plato and Platonism

Allusions: Gambling and Playing Cards · Suicide in History and Literature

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Chapter 52 gave us the secret in its physical form: the trunks, the gowns, the no slippers. Chapter 53 gives us the other secret: the one that has been the novel's deepest structural question since Chapters 45 and 47 first began to surface it.

Peron apparently died by suicide.

And since Peron's death, Mr. Spitzer, Joachim, has been mistaken for him. Has been addressed as Peron. Has been seen as Peron by people who knew them both. Has been walking through the world in the afterimage of his dead twin, unable to assert his own identity against the force of the resemblance, perhaps no longer entirely certain which of them he is.

He describes himself as a pale replica. A mask or dream rather than flesh and blood. And this chapter gives us the most explicit statement yet of what the novel has been implying: Joachim “divided himself between himself and his dead brother.” Since Peron's death he has access to knowledge he should not have: the underworld of gambling, speakeasies, boxing, billiards, the shady and illegal and flamboyant life that was Peron's domain, not his. He has become, somehow, both.

What actually happens in Chapter 53

Mr. Spitzer meditates on “the difference between himself and his” brother, and on the dissolution of that difference since Peron's death. Peron was volatile, colorful, many-sided: a chameleon changing colors, a crazy patchwork of identities and experiences. Joachim was opaque, timorous, marked by a search for equilibrium and an inability to make the irreversible move. He was the timid chess player afraid to take the final action that would mean his definitive defeat.

He has “missed his brother by only a minute.” Trains keep passing the wrong station. Connections are not made. He wanders through empty landscapes seeking a place of reunion that does not arrive.

But something has changed since the death. Mr. Spitzer knows things he should not know. He knows the boxing records with the precision of someone who was at the fights: “who wore the featherweight crown for the longest time in history, who wore it for the shortest,” and who “changed his weight from fight to fight.” He knows the gambling underworld, the speakeasies, the shady corners of the city where Peron moved and

Joachim never went. He has absorbed his brother through mourning, or through the dissolution of the border between them, or through the possibility that he was always Peron and only thought he was Joachim.

Peron's apparent suicide

Young gives us this information almost in passing, the way she gives all the most important information: in subordinate syntax, surrounded by other matter, requiring you to slow down and re-read. Peron's apparent suicide. Apparent: the word is doing work. Either the death was made to look like a suicide and was not, or the suicide itself was somehow ambiguous, uncertain, not definitively established. Young uses apparent and does not explain it.

What it adds to the Peron/Joachim question: if Peron died by suicide, then the identity substitution becomes even more unstable. Suicide is an act of will: a decisive, irreversible choice of the kind Joachim is described as incapable of making. A timid chess player who cannot take the final action. And yet if Peron, the reckless one, the one who burned brightly, made that choice, and if Joachim has been living as Peron since, then who made the choice? The impulsive twin or the cautious one? The one who lived by chance or the one who calculated every move?

Young does not answer. She gives you apparent and lets the word sit there, doing its work.

The chameleon and the black velvet pall

Young gives the two brothers contrasting textures: Peron is a chameleon, shifting colors to match every environment, a crazy patchwork of many-sidedness. Joachim is a black velvet pall: the cloth draped over a coffin, fixed, dark, the thing that marks the boundary between the living and the dead and does not change its nature regardless of what is placed beneath it.

The chameleon is Peron's gift and his instability. He could be anything. He was many things. His identity was performed and re-performed in the gambling halls and boxing clubs and speakeasies: a different suit for every occasion, a different face for every game. What was true of him was that he was always changing, which means it is very difficult to say what the truth of him was.

The black velvet pall is Joachim's identity: the mourner, the keeper, the one who marks the death and stands at its boundary. He is the thing that does not change while everything beneath him changes. And yet: since Peron's death, Joachim has absorbed Peron's knowledge, Peron's world, Peron's shady acquaintances and gambling records. The pall is beginning to take on color. The fixed is beginning to shift. The two identities are becoming what they always were in some deeper sense: not two but one, expressed through alternating facets.

Knowledge from the other side

Mr. Spitzer's knowledge of the boxing world deserves attention because it is so specific. He does not know boxing in the abstract. To All My Darlings points to the real history behind such knowledge: the 1893 fight between Andy Bowen and Jack Burke, 110 rounds, seven hours and nineteen minutes, ending as a no-contest when neither fighter could come out of his corner, Burke having broken all the bones in both hands; and Henry Armstrong, who held world championships in three different weight classes simultaneously.

This is not research. This is memory. And if it is memory, it is not Joachim's memory. Joachim, the cautious musician and lawyer, the man who valued his dignity more than his life, does not attend 110-round prize fights in New Orleans or follow featherweight title reigns. Peron did. Peron moved in those circles, knew those people, had that knowledge. And now Joachim has it.

Young is giving us the phenomenology of becoming someone else through grief: the way the mourner absorbs the dead, takes on their knowledge and their habits and their way of being in the world, until the boundary between mourner and mourned becomes unreliable. Mr. Spitzer, the pale replica, is not just wearing his brother's identity. He is, in some increasingly real sense, becoming it.

The missed connection, over and over

He “missed his brother by only a minute.”

Young's image of the perpetually missed connection (trains passing the wrong station, encounters that nearly happen and don't, the minute that keeps coming between Mr. Spitzer and the reunion he needs) is one of the chapter's most persistent and precise metaphors. He is always a minute late. He has always been a minute late. This is his existential condition rendered in schedule form: the train that was supposed to connect him to his brother, to the life he was supposed to have, to the moment of recognition he needed; it keeps passing without stopping. And he keeps arriving at the platform exactly one minute after it leaves.

To All My Darlings notes that a 2022 study found that what we see at any moment blends with what we saw over the previous fifteen seconds or so, which keeps the visual world stable (Mauro Manassi and David Whitney, Science Advances, 2022). Mr. Spitzer's minute-late condition is this delay at its extreme: a man perpetually out of sync with the present moment, always processing what has just passed rather than what is happening. He could not have caught the train even if he had tried. He was built to arrive after it left.

The timid chess player

Mr. Spitzer is “a timid chess-player, afraid to” make the move that would mean his final defeat.

This is one of Young's most compressed portraits of a certain kind of consciousness: the person who will not make the decisive move because the decisive move would resolve the game. As long as the move is not made, the game continues. As long as the game continues, neither winning nor losing has been confirmed. The timid chess player's strategy is not to win. It is to defer the moment of determination indefinitely.

This is also Mr. Spitzer's strategy with his own life. He will not vote because “the dead cast no vote—and” he is not certain which side of that line he stands on. He will not declare himself Peron or Joachim because to declare would be to resolve the question and live with the resolution. He will not turn to Cousin Hannah at the moment when he almost could, because turning would mean the move that changes the board. He defers. He defers. He arrives a minute late to everything, and the game continues, and he is still in it, technically, having not yet made the move that ends it.

Death danced with the lady

Near the chapter's close comes a line that reads like Cousin Hannah's epitaph, though Young does not name her: death danced with the lady. Young reaches back to the danse macabre tradition: death as the intimate partner, leading everyone regardless of rank or accomplishment in the inevitable procession. But for Cousin Hannah, the dance was not simply imposed. She went toward it. She climbed mountains. She flew. She crossed every border. She lived in such intimate proximity to risk and extremity that death was less a surprise arrival than a companion she had been dancing with for years before it finally led her off the floor.

Mr. Spitzer, watching from the sidelines as he always has, knows this dance. He collected the alpenhorn. He kept the secret. He opened the trunks. He is still here, a minute late, having missed every connection, having never been certain whether he was the dancer or the audience. The pale replica. The one who stands at the edge of the floor holding the other's coat.

What to hold onto

Chapter 53 is the chapter where the novel's great structural secret comes as close to the surface as it will come: Peron died, apparently by suicide, and since then Joachim has been living in the space the death left, absorbing his brother's knowledge and world and possibly his identity. The pale replica. The mask or dream.

What Young is doing with this is more than a mystery plot. She is asking whether a person's identity is theirs in any absolute sense, or whether it is always partly composed of those they have lost, whether the mourner, by mourning completely enough, becomes in some real way a continuation of the mourned. Mr. Spitzer is the answer she proposes: not definitively either twin, but the space between them, the echo that forms when two things that were almost the same finally become one.

The train keeps passing. He keeps arriving a minute late. The game continues. He has not yet made the final move.

For the Curious

On the 110-round fight

On the 110-round fight.

The 1893 bout between Andy Bowen and Jack Burke is one of boxing history's most extraordinary records: 110 rounds over seven hours and nineteen minutes, declared a no-contest when both fighters were too exhausted to answer the bell for the 111th round. Jack Burke had broken all the bones in both his hands during the fight and continued anyway. Bowen died the following year at 27 after another fight. Young gives Mr. Spitzer precise knowledge of this event: knowledge that belongs to a person who was in the world of boxing, not to a cautious Boston lawyer-musician. It is Peron's knowledge living in Joachim's mind.

On Henry Armstrong

On Henry Armstrong.

Henry Armstrong, born Henry Jackson Jr., was the only fighter in history to hold world championships simultaneously in three different weight classes: featherweight, lightweight, and welterweight. He accomplished this between 1937 and 1938. He defended his welterweight title nineteen times. Armstrong was also one of the few African American champions of his era to be allowed to fight across racial barriers, in a boxing world that was still largely segregated. Young's Mr. Spitzer knows his record with the precision of a devotee, not a casual observer. This is Peron's world, Peron's knowledge, living now in the man who claimed to be the cautious one.

On the segno and the unfinished composition

On the segno and the unfinished composition.

In musical notation, a segno (from the Italian for sign) marks a point to which a player returns when they see the instruction dal segno, from the sign. It is the notation for going back, for repeating a section, for the music folding back on itself. Mr. Spitzer's composition is full of segnos: signs that say return here, that mark the places where the music loops rather than progressing. His life is similarly marked by segnos: the places where he returns to the same positions (the deathbed vigil, the missed connection, the timid chess player's refusal to move) rather than advancing. The composition is unfinished not because he lacks the notes but because the music keeps returning to the sign and cannot get past it.

On the chameleon as philosophical figure

On the chameleon as philosophical figure.

The chameleon appears in philosophical discourse as early as Plato, who used it to describe the person who has no fixed nature of their own but adopts the color of whatever surrounds them. In the Renaissance it became an emblem of the flatterer, the courtier, the person without principle who reflects back whatever is expected of them. Young uses it

differently: Peron's chameleon nature is not a moral failing but an ontological one. He was genuinely multiple, genuinely shifting, not because he was deceptive but because he had no stable center to return to. The freedom and the tragedy of this are inseparable. He could be anything. He was everything. He died by apparent suicide. Young does not explain the connection.

On grief as absorption

On grief as absorption.

The psychological literature on grief describes a phenomenon sometimes called identification with the deceased: the way mourners, particularly those grieving a close relationship over an extended period, begin to incorporate the habits, preferences, knowledge, and mannerisms of the dead person into their own sense of self. This is not pathological in itself; it is one of the ways humans preserve the people they have lost. Young gives Mr. Spitzer an extreme version of this: a man who has mourned his twin so completely, and for so long, that he has absorbed not just Peron's mannerisms but his entire world. He did not go to the boxing matches. He did not haunt the speakeasies. He has the memories anyway. The grief was thorough enough to generate access to a life he never lived.

Chapter 54: The Elegy Scattered in the Wind

Research notes: Chapter 54

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Music, Sound, and Silence

Symbols: Pearls and Jewels

Philosophy: Freud and Jung · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Milton · Romantic Poets · The History of Opium · Women's Suffrage

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Mr. Spitzer writes music on scraps of paper.

He carries the fragments in his pockets and on the lining of his coat and on whatever surface is available when the notes come to him. He is composing an elegy, for his brother, for Cousin Hannah, for the lost, for the downtrodden, for the passenger pigeon, for everything that has been extinguished or forgotten or left at a threshold it could not cross. The elegy is the project of his life. It has been the project of his life since Peron died, and before that, in the long anticipation of the loss it now mourns.

At the end of Chapter 54, the elegy is scattered in the wind. The scraps of paper, the musical notation, the fragments of the composition that might one day have cohered into something; they flutter away from him in a city that keeps moving and shifting and placing the wrong buildings on the wrong streets. He stamps the pavement with his ivory-headed cane "in impotent rage as the tears streamed down his chalk-colored cheeks."

Young does not present this as only a tragedy. It is simply what happens to the music written in fragments, carried in pockets, composed in a world that will not hold still long enough to be notated accurately. The elegy was real. The wind is also real. Both things are true simultaneously.

What actually happens in Chapter 54

Mr. Spitzer moves through a Boston that is simultaneously the city he knows and a city that is rearranging itself around him: streets shifting, the Flatiron Building appearing where it should not be, the Fishback Building misplaced, the Steinway Building in the wrong location. The city of his memory and the city of the present keep failing to correspond. He moves through them both at once, navigating by a map that is perpetually becoming inaccurate.

He encounters the figures who populate the underside of the city: derelicts, forgotten heirs, persons who have lost their bank accounts and their identities and sometimes their names. He helps them when he can: buying clothes and necessities for those in need, trying to restore what has been lost. He is the unofficial representative of the hidden

majority, still, the man who carries the causes that were never popular and never formally entrusted to him.

He is agitated about a missing jewel from a rajah's crown: an incident he is somehow implicated in but cannot clearly remember. The great rajah's jewel, foreshadowed chapters earlier, surfaces here as a source of anxiety rather than a resolved narrative. No one accuses him, and the police have “no idea what he looked like,” but he fears that he will “become involved.” He prefers glass jewels to real ones, which tells you everything you need to know about where Mr. Spitzer stands on the question of illusion versus reality: the glass jewel is honest about what it is, which makes it more trustworthy than the real one.

The chapter ends with his elegy fluttering away, and Mr. Spitzer standing alone in the city, present and absent simultaneously, a figure the chapter describes as caught in a liminal space beyond human knowledge.

The sound effects man

Among the chapter's figures is the sound effects man: a mysterious character associated with Peron, capable of producing the entire sonic world: trains, roosters, barking dogs, wind, ice creaking. He fills the environment with chaotic noise, a performance of everything the world sounds like when compressed into a single voice.

Mr. Spitzer, who has always sought silence, who is the musician of “silence flowing under the sound of” incidental music, regards this man with an unwilling envy. The sound effects man can produce the world. He can make any sound on demand. He is chaos made vocal, the opposite of the silence Mr. Spitzer values and cannot quite achieve.

Young associates the sound effects man with Peron, with the flamboyant, volatile, many-sided brother who could become anything. Peron was the sound effects man of the family: able to produce any register, any tone, any identity required by the occasion. Joachim was the silence under the sound, the music that was never played because it could not compete with the noise.

But the envy is real. Young records it without judgment. To be the silence is honest, and perhaps even necessary, but it is also lonely. The sound effects man fills every room he enters. Mr. Spitzer empties rooms by arriving in them a minute late, finding only the echoes of what was there before.

The shifting city

The Boston of Chapter 54 is one of Young's great composite cities: part geographical Boston (Beacon Hill, the Common, the State House, Paul Revere's North End, Faneuil Hall with its grasshopper weathervane), part psychological projection of Mr. Spitzer's unstable inner landscape, part memory of a city as it was and a present that keeps displacing it.

The buildings are wrong. The Flatiron Building belongs in New York. The Fishback Building belongs in Indianapolis. The Steinway Building belongs in Midtown Manhattan.

Mr. Spitzer moves through a city that has imported the architecture of everywhere he has been or thought about or absorbed from his brother's wandering life, and placed it all on Boston's streets without regard for what was there before.

This is what Catherine's mind looks like from the outside. Vera, narrating this chapter, notes that her mother has influenced Mr. Spitzer so profoundly that he can no longer distinguish reality. He has absorbed Catherine's mode of perception along with Peron's underworld knowledge. He is, by this point, a composite of everyone he has spent time with in this household: the cautious lawyer, the absent twin, the opium invalid's atmospheric logic, the suffragette's legendary life. He is multiple, and the city he walks through reflects the multiplicity.

Glass jewels and real ones

Mr. Spitzer's preference for glass jewels over real ones is one of the chapter's smallest and most precise details.

The real jewel is valuable because it is what it is: its beauty is inseparable from its genuineness. The glass jewel is only beautiful in the sense that it performs beauty, that it catches the light in the way beauty is supposed to catch the light, without the underlying substance that makes that catching matter. Mr. Spitzer prefers the glass one. This is not simply an inversion of values. It is the consistent position of a man who has spent his life trusting the false because the true has already failed him. The glass jewel is honest about being a substitute. The real jewel makes claims about permanence and value that the world keeps failing to honor. Mr. Spitzer, who has watched the most permanent-seeming things dissolve (the suffrage captain, his twin, the music on paper, the cities of his memory) has arrived at the rational conclusion that the thing which admits its substitution is more trustworthy than the thing that does not.

The great rajah's jewel that has gone missing (that he may or may not have taken, that he cannot remember clearly) is a real jewel. Of course it is missing. Of course he cannot account for it. Real jewels in this novel are always already on their way to being lost.

Lost heirs and forgotten legacies

Mr. Spitzer's wandering through the underside of Boston (seeking the lost heirs, the persons who have forgotten their bank accounts, the derelicts and the forgotten) is the chapter's most direct portrait of the man as he actually functions in the world.

He is the unofficial executor of everything unexecuted. The people with legitimate claims who cannot assert them. The people with legacies who have lost track of the fact that they have them. The people whose identities have become so attenuated by poverty or grief or the simple passage of time that they are no longer sure what they are entitled to. Mr. Spitzer finds them and helps them remember.

This is the practical expression of what the novel has been saying philosophically: he could love only by indirection, he was the representative of causes “never popular in any public sense.” In the streets of the shifting city, this means buying a coat for a man who

has forgotten he deserves one. Finding the heir who does not know they are an heir. It is unglamorous. It produces no public recognition. It is the love available to a person who cannot love directly, and it is real love, and Young insists on this.

The elegy

The elegy Mr. Spitzer has been composing on scraps of paper, an elegy for everything he has lost and everything that was lost before he arrived to witness it, is the musical form that names his purpose. An elegy is a mournful poem or musical composition for the dead. It is the form that converts loss into artifact, that makes the fact of the gone-thing into something that can be heard or read by those who remain.

Mr. Spitzer's elegy is fragmented because his experience is fragmented. It is composed on scraps because scraps are what are available in a life organized around secondhand experience and belated arrival. The motifs of mistake and truth intertwine in it, as they do in everything he produces: he has been stamping the wrong seals on the wrong documents for decades, and his music is similarly marked by the grace note of error, the way things turned out rather than the way they were intended.

The elegy scattering in the wind at the chapter's close is not a defeat. Young is too honest to present it as one. The elegy was always going to be impermanent; that is the condition of anything composed on scraps, in transit, by a person who was always a minute late. The wind takes it. This is what happens to the music of the dead. It disperses into the atmosphere it was always already part of. It was never going to stay on paper. Paper doesn't hold this kind of music. The air does. The air has it now.

What to hold onto

Chapter 54 is the chapter where Mr. Spitzer is most fully present in the world and most fully lost in it simultaneously: moving through a city that corresponds to his mind rather than to geography, helping the people who are as lost as he is, composing music that will not survive the wind.

What to carry forward: the sound effects man as the form of love Mr. Spitzer cannot perform, the capacity to fill the room, to produce the world on demand, to be all noise where he is all silence. The glass jewel as the honest substitute preferred over the genuine that keeps disappearing. And the elegy, scattered but not gone, now part of the atmosphere of a city that was already half-invented anyway. It is in the air. You are breathing it. This is as close as it was ever going to get to being heard.

For the Curious

On Faneuil Hall's grasshopper weathervane

On Faneuil Hall's grasshopper weathervane.

The grasshopper weathervane atop Faneuil Hall has been a Boston landmark since 1742, commissioned by Peter Faneuil and made by the coppersmith Shem Drowne. It is four

feet long and has hollow sections: used over the centuries to hide documents, including news clippings and time capsule notes, placed there during repairs. In 1974 it was stolen and recovered within days. The weathervane is one of Boston's oldest surviving objects and has become a test of local identity: if you can identify it as Faneuil Hall's symbol, you are from Boston. Young's Mr. Spitzer, navigating a Boston that keeps rearranging itself, is the kind of man who knows the grasshopper. He just cannot reliably find the building it sits on anymore.

On Sybil Ludington

On Sybil Ludington.

To All My Darlings notes, in the context of Paul Revere's famous ride, that the woman who rode to warn colonists about a British attack in 1777 was Sybil Ludington: sixteen years old, forty miles through a rainstorm, alerting the militia about the attack on Danbury, Connecticut. She rode twice as far as Revere. She has a statue in her hometown. She does not have a famous poem. Young's novel is full of this dynamic: the people who did the work and were not given the poem. The people who rode the distance and were not named as heroes. Mr. Spitzer, as the representative of causes that were “never popular in any public sense,” knows this tradition intimately.

On the elegy as form

On the elegy as form.

The elegy has a long history as a poetic and musical form: in ancient Greece it was simply verse written in elegiac couplets, regardless of subject; in Latin literature it became associated with lament; by the Renaissance it was specifically the form for mourning the dead. The great elegies (Milton's Lycidas, Shelley's Adonais, Tennyson's In Memoriam) share a structure: the poem moves from grief through its processing toward some form of consolation or acceptance. Young's Mr. Spitzer has been writing his elegy for decades and has never reached the consolation. The form is right for him. He is in the grief section, permanently. The wind takes the music before it can resolve.

On Garrett Morgan and the traffic robot

On Garrett Morgan and the traffic robot.

The note in *To All My Darlings* on the traffic robot refers to Garrett Augustus Morgan, the African American inventor who patented the three-position traffic signal in 1923: the precursor to the modern traffic light, with its crucial innovation of a caution interval between stop and go. Morgan, who also invented the safety hood (an early gas mask), sold the rights to his traffic signal to General Electric. Young's shifting Boston, where traffic robots direct the flow of a city in perpetual rearrangement, is presided over by this invention: the device that imposes a brief pause between the end of one state and the beginning of another. The caution signal. The yellow light. This is Mr. Spitzer's interval, written into the infrastructure of the city.

On the subterranean world

On the subterranean world.

The chapter opens with Mr. Spitzer having absorbed knowledge of the subterranean world: golden spires sunken under the sea, underwater fountains, old heroes nurtured on mares' milk. This is the unconscious, in Jungian terms: the layer of experience that lies beneath ordinary waking awareness, containing images and energies that were formed before conscious life began and that persist beneath it. Mr. Spitzer has access to this layer not through his own dreaming but through his absorption of his brother's world, Catherine's opium landscape, and decades of vigil in the borderland between states. He has the knowledge of the deep. He cannot reliably locate a building in Boston. Both of these things are true, and both are necessary consequences of the same condition.

Chapter 55: Carpe Diem / Hoc Opus, Hic Labor Est

Research notes: Chapter 55

Characters: Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Mr. Mouse · Peron Spitzer

Themes: Duality and Doubles · Music, Sound, and Silence

Symbols: Horses and Carriages · Music and Instruments · The House · Twins and Doubles · Weddings and Funerals

Allusions: Ancient Egypt · Gambling and Playing Cards · Music and Composers · Suicide in History and Literature · Women’s Suffrage

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Peron's motto was carpe diem: seize the day. Appropriate for a gambler, a chameleon, a man whose entire philosophy was the embrace of the present moment and the absolute indifference to consequence.

Joachim's motto was hoc opus, hic labor est: this is the work, this is the labor. It comes from Virgil's Aeneid: spoken by the Sibyl when she tells Aeneas that descending to the underworld is easy, but returning to the upper air, that is the task, that is the work. The return. The difficult part is not the going down but the coming back.

Young gives the brothers these two mottoes and lets them stand without commentary. They are not just personality types; they are philosophical positions on what a life is for. Peron: the moment seized and released, over and over, no accumulation, no residue, pure now. Joachim: the work sustained, the labor endured, the descent made and the attempt to return. One died by apparent suicide. The other is still in the underworld, still trying to find the way back up.

What actually happens in Chapter 55

Chapter 55 gives us the most complete biographical account of the Spitzer brothers that the novel offers: their life together in the twin house, the financial disaster of Peron's death, and the specific shape of the resentment and grief that has organized Joachim's existence ever since.

The house was extraordinary: symmetrical, mirrored, every room doubled. Twin portraits, twin gardens, twin arrangements of objects: a house built to contain two lives simultaneously, to give each brother his half without requiring them to overlap. Joachim planned it meticulously. He envisioned the life it would support: the music, the philately, the careful conservative investments that would preserve enough stability to allow the work to continue. He designed the music as a tomb: an immortal structure in sound that would outlast his physical existence.

Peron disrupted all of this. He borrowed money he did not repay. He forged checks in Joachim's name. He accumulated debts that he did not acknowledge as debts, because for Peron debt was simply another form of tomorrow's problem, and tomorrow was not real to a person who lived entirely in the present tense. When Peron died, Joachim paid

for the funeral. He paid the debts. He went bankrupt. He lost the twin house. He moved into a beachcomber's house.

And then he wondered, as he has been wondering through every chapter since, which brother had really died.

The twin house

Young's image of the twin house (each room mirrored, every arrangement doubled, the structure built to make two lives symmetrical) is the architectural rendering of what the brothers were supposed to be: complementary halves of a single whole, each one complete, each one matching the other without requiring either to dissolve.

Joachim designed it. He is, remember, the orderly one: the man who draws maps, makes plans, tries to exclude chance. The twin house is the map he made for the life he intended to live. It has his music and his stamps and his careful china shepherdesses and his butterfly collection and his conservative investments in gilts and estates. It is a house designed to support the work.

Peron lived in the other half and did not treat it as a mirror. He borrowed Joachim's half. He forged documents with Joachim's name. He introduced chance into every room. The house that was designed to make the two lives symmetrical became, under Peron's occupancy, a house where one half constantly threatened the structural integrity of the other.

The house is gone now. Joachim lost it paying the debts his brother left. He lives in a beachcomber's house: the opposite of the twin house in every way: improvised, coastal, exposed, belonging to whoever washes up. He is the beachcomber, picking through what remains after the tide.

Peron's forgeries

That Peron forged checks in Joachim's name is not simply a betrayal. It is the specific shape of the identity confusion that has haunted every chapter since.

A forged check in Joachim's name is Peron signing as Joachim. It is Peron making himself Joachim, at least on paper, at least for long enough to extract the money. This is the literal version of everything the novel has been asking about their relationship: which one is the real Spitzer? Which signature is authentic? When Peron signs Joachim's name, is the check more or less counterfeit than any other document? All money was counterfeit, Mr. Spitzer thinks: “turned out at the great Mint,” valuable only because an institution said so. Perhaps all signatures are the same: assigned value, not inherent truth.

Joachim was furious. He was invisible to Peron, never acknowledged, never appreciated, his order and sacrifice treated as infrastructure to be used and ignored. The resentment in this chapter is real and carefully rendered by Young. She does not let Joachim be simply noble. He is also wounded. He is also the person who planned everything carefully and watched it be dismantled by someone who did not understand that plans had value.

The music as tomb

Joachim's great project (the opus, the dirge, the elegy) was designed from the beginning as a tomb. Not a tomb in the sense of a mausoleum, cold and sealed, but a tomb in the sense of the ancient Egyptian model: a structure built to sustain life beyond death, equipped with everything the person would need to continue existing in another form. His music was to be the architecture of his survival.

Young gives this serious and exact weight. The composition was not a vanity project. It was Joachim's version of what Cousin Hannah's suffrage campaigns were: a structure built to outlast the body that created it, a form of being-in-the-world that could continue after the physical self had ended. The music as tomb is the musician's version of the legacy problem. It is, among other things, the thing Mr. Mouse is eating.

The curse of the ninth hovers over it: the superstition, rooted in the deaths of Beethoven, Schubert, and others after completing a ninth symphony, that the ninth will be the composer's last. Joachim knows the curse. He has organized his life around surviving long enough to finish the work. The bankruptcy, the loss of the house, the move to the beachcomber's cottage: all of these have set back the schedule. He is still in the middle. He has not finished. The tomb is incomplete.

Which brother really died

This is the question the chapter turns over at its close, and it is the question the novel has been building toward since the first hints about the Spitzer twins in the early chapters.

Peron died by apparent suicide. Since Peron's death, Joachim has been living at a second remove, absorbing Peron's knowledge and world, being mistaken for Peron by people who knew them both. He has been using Peron's existence as the scaffolding for what remains of his own. He has been, in the language of philosophy, becoming his brother.

Which means: who is the person living in the beachcomber's house? Is it the man who planned the twin house and designed the music as a tomb and lived by hoc opus, hic labor est? Or is it the man whose motto was carpe diem, who forged the checks and accumulated the debts and moved through every environment like a chameleon, and who now inhabits the cautious twin's body because the cautious twin's body is what survived?

Young does not decide. The novel has never decided. The question which brother really died is the question whose answer would change everything about how you read all the preceding chapters, and Young preserves the ambiguity because both answers are true in their way. The reckless twin died. The cautious twin survived by becoming, in some sense, the reckless one. Or: the cautious twin died in the bankruptcy and the loss and the long years of the second remove, and what is left is the ghost of the reckless one, still gambling, still trying to seize a day that keeps arriving a minute late.

The skeletal coachman

The chapter gives us an image of Joachim unknowingly traveling in the wrong carriage, driven by a skeletal coachman through unfamiliar landscapes. He is the wrong passenger. He does not know where he is going. The coachman does not explain.

The skeletal coachman is the novel's most direct invocation of Death as driver: the Etruscan Charun, who ferries souls across the boundary, or the danse macabre's Death who leads everyone in procession. But Joachim is not being driven to death exactly. He is being driven through a landscape that no longer corresponds to any map he made. He is the wrong passenger because the right passenger, the Joachim who designed the twin house and planned the music and drew the precise financial arrangements, is not the person who ended up in the carriage. The person in the carriage is whatever survived the bankruptcy and the forgeries and the grief. The coachman drives on regardless. The landscape is unfamiliar. The destination is unknown.

What to hold onto

Chapter 55 is where we finally understand, in practical terms, what happened to Mr. Spitzer. The twin house, the debts, the forgeries, the bankruptcy, the move to the beachcomber's cottage; these are the specific material events that produced the liminal figure wandering the fog-bound city a minute late, carrying an alpenhorn and composing an elegy in scraps. He did not begin this way. He was methodical. He had a plan. The plan was sabotaged from inside the house, by the other half of himself, who did not believe in plans.

What to carry forward: the two mottoes, which are the chapter's philosophical spine. Carpe diem versus hoc opus, hic labor est. The seized moment versus the sustained work. The man who lived entirely in the present versus the man who organized his life around a future he would never fully reach. One is gone. The other is still in the underworld, still trying to find the way back up, still doing the labor that the Sibyl named as the difficult part: not the descent, but the return.

For the Curious

On hoc opus, hic labor est and the Sibyl

On hoc opus, hic labor est and the Sibyl.

The line comes from Book VI of Virgil's Aeneid, spoken by the Sibyl of Cumae as she prepares Aeneas for his descent to the underworld. The full passage in translation: Easy is the descent to Avernus: the door of dark Dis stands open night and day; but to retrace your steps and return to the upper air; that is the task, that is the labor. The Sibyl is warning Aeneas that the hard part is not dying but returning. Young chooses this as Joachim's motto because it exactly describes his situation: he descended into grief when Peron died, and he has been trying to find the way back up ever since. The descent happened. The labor is the return. He has not yet achieved it.

On the curse of the ninth

On the curse of the ninth.

The superstition that completing a ninth symphony is fatal to the composer arose partly from the deaths of Beethoven, Schubert, and Dvorak after their ninths, though Dvořák actually completed more symphonies afterward. Mahler, aware of the curse, tried to circumvent it by labeling Das Lied von der Erde (not a symphony number) as his ninth. He died after completing his Ninth Symphony proper without completing his Tenth. Bruckner died with his Ninth unfinished. The superstition has enough historical backing to take seriously as a cultural phenomenon, even if the causality is obviously illusory. Joachim's opus as a tomb is an attempt to create an immortal structure in sound; the curse of the ninth is the superstition that says the structure will kill him before he can complete it. The race is ongoing.

On philately as a form of order

On philately as a form of order.

Stamp collecting, philately, is one of the most methodical hobbies available to a person: it requires classification, cataloguing, authentication, the careful preservation of fragile objects, and the maintenance of a system that grows more complex as the collection grows. It is, in other words, exactly the kind of activity Joachim would choose. A well-organized collection imposes a legible order on a specific corner of the world. Stamps also embody the legal fiction of value; they are printed paper with assigned worth, backed by a government's authority to say what a letter is worth to send. They are the smallest form of currency, and Joachim collects them. He has always understood that value is a legal fiction and found comfort in the orderly management of legal fictions.

On Etruscan Charun

On Etruscan Charun.

The Etruscan figure of Charun (also spelled Charu) was a demon of the dead: distinct from the Greek Charon in important ways. Where Charon was a grim but neutral ferryman, Charun was more terrifying: depicted with a hooked nose, wings, and a hammer or axe, he was an active agent of death who escorted souls to the underworld of Aita and Phersipnai. His presence on Etruscan tomb paintings and funerary urns was understood to mark the moment of transition. Young's skeletal coachman, driving Joachim through unfamiliar landscapes, is this figure: not the neutral ferryman but the active escort, taking the wrong passenger somewhere unspecified. Joachim has been in this carriage for a long time. He does not know when he got in.

On Nellie Melba and the musicians

On Nellie Melba and the musicians.

Dame Nellie Melba was the Australian soprano who became the most famous opera singer of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras; she gave her name to Melba toast and peach Melba. Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale, was P.T. Barnum's great American

touring success in the 1850s: he promoted her US debut so effectively that the phenomenon of managed celebrity was partly invented around her. Ole Bull was the Norwegian virtuoso violinist who toured the United States and became a romantic figure of the sort that the nineteenth century adored: the artist-hero, the man of genius. Young places them in Mr. Spitzer's musical imagination as figures of the immortality he is trying to achieve: the artists who became names, whose music survived them. He is trying to be this. He has lost the house that was supposed to support the attempt. The work continues in a beachcomber's cottage.

Chapter 56: The Funeral and the Dispersal

Research notes: Chapter 56

Characters: Joachim Spitzer · Peron Spitzer

Themes: Fate and Chance · Madness and Sanity

Symbols: Clothing, Hats, and Skirts · Clouds and Storms · Keys, Doors, and Locks · Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology

Allusions: Gambling and Playing Cards · Napoleon and Wellington

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Peron is buried with his poker chips, his dice, and a playing card.

Joachim arranges the funeral with the care and precision he brings to everything: the corpse dressed with sartorial elegance, the best suits, the formal correctness that Peron in life would have found hilarious. A violinist with an empty sleeve plays. An official track bugler performs: someone who has played at Pimlico and Suffolk Downs, at the great racetracks where Peron spent much of his life. The ceremony is perfect. Joachim leaves only the red rose in the grave, the recognition at “the portals of the great city.”

And then, over the years that follow, he gives away everything else. Peron's wardrobe (the extraordinary, bewildering accumulation of a man who could be anything and dressed accordingly) goes to the homeless, the poor, the tramps on the street. Homburgs. Stetsons. “Trilbys, pork-pies, brown bowler derbies.” Jockeys' silks. Cantons and merinos and astrakhans and Irish cambrics and paisleys. All of Peron's identity, all the costumes of the chameleon, scattered into the city. Joachim, keeping only his own threadbare suit, watches the dispersal and wonders which of them is still alive.

What actually happens in Chapter 56

Chapter 56 is a chapter of aftermath: the aftermath of Peron's death that Joachim has been living inside for all these years, rendered now in its most direct and least oblique form. He describes the funeral. He describes the dispersal of the wardrobe. He describes his own philosophical collapse: the inability to believe in reality as a stable foundation, the sense of being a puppet controlled by unknown forces, the question of who tailored him in this strange life, the mad tailor who cut his existence from this particular cloth.

His grief is not personal grief only. Young has always given Mr. Spitzer a grief larger than any individual loss: he mourns flowers, moths, tides, stars, moments. He mourns the impermanence of all things. This chapter gives that grief its most explicit form: the cosmic mourning of a sentimentalist who cannot stop noticing what passes. The funeral is for Peron. The mourning extends, in concentric rings outward, to everything that will not last.

The chapter closes with Joachim lamenting the absence of a guiding author or architect of being. He carries “the golden key to the door that” is no more. The door is gone. The key remains, perfectly made, opening nothing. The dead musician who lives despite attempts

to silence him, that last image, encapsulates what Mr. Spitzer has been all along: a persistence that continues past the point where persistence makes obvious sense, because the alternative is the silence that no one should choose for themselves.

The funeral rites for the gambler

Poker chips, dice, and a playing card in the grave.

This is Joachim's version of love: knowing his brother well enough to bury him with the tools of his trade, the instruments of the life he actually lived rather than the life the conventional ceremony would prefer to acknowledge. Most funerals pretend that the dead person was better behaved than they were. Joachim buries Peron as Peron was: a gambler, a man of chance, a person whose relationship to fate was always a wager rather than a plan.

The red rose he leaves is the recognition, at “the portals of the great city,” the entrance to wherever Peron has gone. The red rose for Peron, the white rose worn by Joachim himself: life passing beyond life. The two brothers each assigned their color at the threshold. Peron's red is vitality, passion, the gambler's flush. Joachim's white is the pale replica, the mourner, the one who remains behind in the register of the barely living.

Young presents this funeral as a performance of love: an act of witness and recognition that required Joachim to know Peron completely and to honor that knowledge rather than correct it. He gave Peron the funeral Peron would have wanted, not the funeral convention prescribed. This is the most intimate thing he has ever done. He does it alone.

The wardrobe dispersed

Peron's wardrobe was a collection of identities: every hat and suit a different version of the chameleon's display, a different costume for a different occasion in a life organized around becoming whatever the moment required. The homburgs for the formal occasions. The Stetsons for the Western affect. The trilbys for jazz clubs and Hollywood glamour. The jockeys' silks for the racetracks. The elaborate layers of fabric (canton flannels, merinos, astrakhans, paisleys) each one the costume of a different Peron.

Joachim gives all of it away. To the poor. To tramps. He scatters Peron's identity through the city the way the wind scattered the elegy in the previous chapter. He keeps only his own threadbare suit. He keeps being himself, in the suit that is too thin and too worn and too obviously the suit of a man who values his dignity more than his comfort, because the suit is what he has and the suit is what he is.

The dispersal is grief and it is liberation and it is the opposite of accumulation. Peron accumulated. He collected identities the way Joachim collected stamps, except that Peron wore his collection rather than filing it. When Joachim gives the wardrobe away, he is undoing the collection: sending the identities back into circulation, letting them become the clothing of whoever needs them next. The tramp in Peron's homburg is wearing a piece of Peron. The tramp does not know this. The homburg does not care. The identity disperses into the city like everything else.

The mad tailor

Who tailored him in this strange life?

Mr. Spitzer's question (who is the author or architect of his existence, who cut and stitched him into this particular shape) is the philosophical question of theodicy rendered as a sartorial complaint. If there is a God who designed the universe, why did this God design it as it is? If there is a principle of order underlying existence, why does the order keep failing? Who made Mr. Spitzer the pale replica of his brother, the man who arrives a minute late, the cautious chess player who cannot take the final action?

The mad tailor is the answer Young provides, not as theology but as image. The creator of this particular existence was mad. The stitching is wrong. The basting stitches (the temporary stitches meant to hold the garment together until the real work is done, the stitches that are supposed to be removed) have never been removed. Mr. Spitzer is being held together by temporary fastenings that were never meant to be permanent. He is, in this sense, perpetually provisional: a garment that was not finished, assembled from pieces that do not quite match, basted into the shape of a person and then left to wear the basting.

Puppet, dummy, cloud with unraveling seams

Young gives Mr. Spitzer three self-images in rapid succession: puppet, tailor's dummy, and cloud with seams unraveling.

The puppet has no agency; it moves when the strings move it. The tailor's dummy has no self; it exists only to display the garments placed upon it. The cloud with unraveling seams has no coherence; it is a shape that is actively losing the stitching that held it together, becoming formless as it moves. Three versions of a self that has been emptied of what makes a self: agency, interiority, coherence.

And yet Mr. Spitzer is not simply these things. He is also the person who arranged Peron's funeral with love. Who gave the wardrobe to the poor with intention. Who wanders the city finding the lost heirs and the forgotten legacies. Who keeps the great secret. Who carries the alpenhorn. Who composes the elegy in fragments and watches it scatter in the wind. The puppet moves when the strings move it and also writes music. The dummy displays the garments and also loves. The cloud is unraveling and is also still a cloud, still holding its shape against the dispersal.

The golden key to the door that is no more

The chapter's final image: Joachim carries “the golden key to the door that was no more.”

He has the key. The key is perfectly made: golden, precise, the right instrument for the right lock. The door it was made for no longer exists. The house that held the door was lost in the bankruptcy. The life organized around the door (the twin house, the music as tomb, the careful conservative investments) is gone. The key remains, opening nothing, carried in his pocket through every chapter of his wandering, in the silk hat and the

threadbare suit, through the fog-bound city and the wrong carriage and the missed connection and the beachcomber's house.

Young's key that opens nothing is among her most exact images for Mr. Spitzer's condition. He is perfectly equipped for a life that no longer exists. He has the instrument for the situation he prepared for, and the situation has been dismantled. He carries the key anyway because the key is his. Because having it is the only form of relation to the lost house that remains available. Because you do not throw away a golden key simply because the door is gone. The door may come back. The door may appear somewhere else. He is still looking.

What to hold onto

Chapter 56 is the most direct account of Peron's actual funeral and its aftermath that the novel offers, and it is organized around the central paradox of Joachim's grief: he mourned his brother better than his brother ever mourned him. He gave Peron the perfect burial. He dispersed the perfect wardrobe. He kept the single suit and the golden key and the threadbare dignity and went on.

What to carry forward: the poker chips in the grave, the intimate act of honoring a person as they were rather than as convention required them to be. The wardrobe scattered through the city as Peron's identity dissolving into general circulation. The mad tailor who basted instead of sewing and left the temporary stitches in place. And the golden key, carried through every chapter, opening nothing, never thrown away.

For the Curious

On Savile Row and the history of tailoring

On Savile Row and the history of tailoring.

Savile Row became the center of British bespoke tailoring in the early nineteenth century, when the street was home to the military tailors who outfitted the officers of Wellington's army. The word bespoke, meaning made to the customer's specifications, derives from the practice of 'speaking for' the fabric before it was cut. Young's mad tailor who stitched Mr. Spitzer with basting threads is the anti-Savile Row figure: the tailor who prepared the garment incorrectly, who used the temporary stitches and left them, who produced a human being that fits in the way a garment fits when the real work was never done.

On Beau Brummell and the philosophy of dress

On Beau Brummell and the philosophy of dress.

George 'Beau' Brummell was the arbiter of men's fashion in Regency England and the originator of the modern suit; he popularized the idea that a gentleman's clothing should be exquisitely tailored, perfectly fitted, and understated in color, relying on cut and quality rather than ostentation. He also died in poverty in a French asylum, his fortune and social position having evaporated when he fell out of favor with the Prince of Wales. Peron's

elaborate wardrobe and Joachim's threadbare suit are on opposite ends of the Brummell spectrum: Peron all variety and display, Joachim all the understated dignity of a man who has nothing left to spend on appearances but refuses to abandon them entirely.

On the history of Peron's hats

On the history of Peron's hats.

The chapter's extended taxonomy of hat styles (Homburgs, Stetsons, trilbys, pork-pies, bowler derbies, plugs) is a compressed social history of the twentieth century male. Each hat style carries its class, its decade, its cultural location: the Homburg for Edwardian formality and later the gangster film; the Stetson for the American West and then for anyone who wanted to claim that affect; the trilby for jazz musicians and Bohemian London; the pork-pie for Buster Keaton and then for jazz; the bowler for Victorian gamekeepers and then for everyone from businessmen to silent film comics. Peron, who was all of these people at different times, had all of these hats. Joachim, who was only ever himself, had one silk hat, and he wore it to the funeral, and he wears it still.

On basting stitches and the provisional self

On basting stitches and the provisional self.

Basting stitches are the long, easily removable stitches used in tailoring to hold fabric together temporarily during fitting; they allow the tailor to check the garment's fit and make adjustments before committing to the permanent seams. The basted garment is the garment in process, the garment that is not yet finished, the garment that is being held together pending a final decision that has not yet been made. Young's image of Mr. Spitzer as a garment that was never properly finished, held together by the temporary stitches that were supposed to be removed, is exact and devastating. He is perpetually in process. The mad tailor never came back to finish the work. The basting holds.

On the red rose and white rose

On the red rose and white rose.

The red and white roses carry the weight of an entire cultural history: the Wars of the Roses, in which the House of Lancaster (red) and the House of York (white) fought for the English throne through the second half of the fifteenth century; the Valentine tradition of the red rose for passionate love; the funerary tradition of white roses for mourning, purity, and the passage beyond. Young assigns the red rose to Peron at his grave (the last recognition, the vitality acknowledged) and the white rose to Joachim himself, marking his own passage into whatever state he inhabits beyond the ordinary living. He is the mourner who is also the mourned. He wears the white rose for himself.

Chapter 57: The Tailor's Bill

Research notes: Chapter 57

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Joachim Spitzer · Peron Spitzer · The Great Tailor

Themes: Dreams and Imagination

Symbols: Cards, Games, and Chance · Roses and Flowers

Philosophy: Freud and Jung

Allusions: Gambling and Playing Cards · Suicide in History and Literature · The Civil War

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The bill keeps arriving.

Mr. Spitzer has paid for Peron's funeral: paid for everything, the suit, the ceremony, the violinist with the empty sleeve, the track bugler. He went bankrupt paying. And yet the tailor's bill keeps coming in the mail, addressed to him, demanding payment for the black funeral suit he had made for his brother. He does not know who the tailor is. He does not know where the shop is. The address on the bill does not correspond to any street in any city directory he can find.

He begins to look for the tailor. He follows directions in his dreams. He follows directions in waking life. The directions contradict each other. The shop is not there. The street is not there. The bill keeps arriving.

Chapter 57 is a chapter about the debt that cannot be settled: the grief that sends bills long after you believe you have finished paying. It is also, in its dreamlike wandering through Boston's libraries and streets, one of the most quietly comic chapters in the novel: Mr. Spitzer seeking an address that does not exist, consulting city directories, encountering a Confederate soldier who insists the South won the Civil War, trying to find the soul's permanent address in a library reading room full of people who are equally lost.

What actually happens in Chapter 57

Mr. Spitzer receives the tailor's bill and attempts to pay it. The tailor is the Great Tailor (possibly the mad tailor from Chapter 56, the one who stitched him with basting threads) and the bill is for the black funeral suit worn by Peron at his burial. Joachim is the executor. He arranged the funeral. He paid for it. The bill should not be arriving. And yet it arrives, persistently, from an address that cannot be found in any directory.

He searches. He tries following the dream logic of the directions, knowing that dreams operate by opposites (dark is fair, life is death, man is woman) and allowing for reversals and contradictions in his navigation. He visits the library reading room, that last open space where anyone can stay as long as they cause no distraction, and consults city directories and old newspapers looking for the tailor's address. He finds nothing. The shop does not exist in the records. It may never have existed.

In the library he encounters the characters who populate the margins of sanity: a Confederate soldier who is certain the South won the Civil War and is living accordingly;

others engaged in debates about the soul's existence and the nature of immortality. Mr. Spitzer wants to join the debate about immortality (he has opinions, he has longing for certainty) but holds back, afraid of rejection, afraid of being seen as the kind of person who takes these questions seriously in a reading room.

He leaves without finding the address. He watches the twilight sky, sees clouds shaped like skulls and hands and birds. He imagines a rose named after both brothers (red and white together, the two colors of the two men) and in his mind the rose changes from red to white. The bill will come again tomorrow.

The debt that cannot be settled

Young's choice of a tailor's bill as the emblem of Joachim's unpayable debt is characteristically precise. A tailor's bill is a mundane, legible, legal thing: it specifies what was made, for whom, at what price. It is a record. It is a claim. It demands response. And it keeps arriving, the same bill, addressed correctly, from an address that does not exist.

The debt the bill represents is not financial. Joachim paid the financial debt; he paid everything, until there was nothing left, until the twin house was gone. The debt the bill represents is the debt of grief, which is not a financial category and does not respond to payment. You cannot settle grief by paying the bill. The bill comes back. The executor who arranged the perfect funeral, who placed the poker chips in the grave and gave away the wardrobe and kept only his own threadbare suit; he cannot close the estate because the estate is not a legal matter. The estate is the relationship. The estate is what remains when a person is gone and the person who loved them is still here.

The tailor is the mad creator from Chapter 56: the one who stitched existence from the wrong materials with the wrong stitches. Now the creator is sending bills for his work. Mr. Spitzer, who was made by this creator, is being asked to pay for his own construction. The bill is for the suit that dressed the dead man. The dead man was his brother. He was his brother. The bill is for himself.

Dreams operating by opposites

Mr. Spitzer knows that dreams operate by opposites. Dark is fair. Life is death. Man is woman. North is south. The place you are looking for is never where the dream says it is; it is where the dream says the opposite thing is.

This is an old understanding, present in folk traditions and in Freudian dream interpretation: the manifest content of a dream (what it seems to be about) is the reversed or disguised form of its latent content (what it is actually about). Young gives Mr. Spitzer this knowledge and lets him apply it practically: he consciously allows for reversals when following the dream directions to the tailor's shop, accounting for the logic of the opposite, navigating by a map that he knows to be a mirror image of the territory.

And still he cannot find it. Because the tailor's shop is not in the dream's logic or in its reversal. It is in neither city and neither street. It is the shop that should exist but does not: the place where the unpayable debt was contracted, which has no address because its

address is wherever Mr. Spitzer is. The debt travels with him. The bill arrives wherever he lives. The shop cannot be found because it is not a place.

The library and its inhabitants

Young's library reading room is one of the novel's most humanely observed spaces: the last open place where anyone can stay as long as they cause no distraction, where the homeless and the lost and the obsessively researching all share the same long tables and the same institutional light. Mr. Spitzer fits here. He is all three: homeless in the sense of having lost the twin house, lost in the sense of having lost his sense of which world he inhabits, obsessively researching the tailor's address.

The Confederate soldier who insists the South won the Civil War is the chapter's clearest figure of the alternative history that becomes necessary when the actual history is unbearable. He is living in a world where the outcome was different. His flags, his certainty, his reconstruction of events; these are not madness exactly. They are the logical endpoint of refusing to accept a historical fact. If you refuse the fact long enough and thoroughly enough, you need to build a replacement. The replacement is internally consistent. It just does not correspond to what happened.

Mr. Spitzer, listening, recognizes the man. Not because he agrees with him about the Civil War but because he understands the impulse: the construction of an alternative to the unbearable fact. The unbearable fact for Mr. Spitzer is Peron's death. He has not built an alternative history (he is too rigorous for that, too committed to the truth even when the truth fails him) but he understands the need that generates one. The Confederate soldier and the executor of Peron's estate are the same species of mourner. One built a new history. The other keeps paying a bill that cannot be paid.

The rose named after both brothers

Near the chapter's close, Mr. Spitzer imagines a rose: red and white together, named after himself and Peron, the two brothers unified in a single flower. The rose, in his imagining, changes from red to white. Peron's color bleeding into Joachim's. The reckless twin becoming the cautious one, or the cautious one absorbing the reckless one, or the two finally becoming inseparable in the form that horticulture occasionally achieves and that grief sometimes produces in the living who remain.

A rose named after both brothers would be a memorial. It would be the thing that persists when the persons have not: the named variety that growers catalog, that appears in gardens, that is neither fully red nor fully white but something that contains both. Young gives Mr. Spitzer this vision at twilight, in the sky full of skull-shaped clouds, as the practical search for the tailor's address has definitively failed. He cannot find the shop. He can imagine the rose. Both things are true, and the rose is the more useful of the two.

The penny with heads on both sides

Mr. Spitzer carries a penny with heads on both sides: a gambler's coin, a cheat's coin, a coin that cannot lose because it has no tails. He carries this talisman of certainty in an uncertain world: a coin that always comes up heads, that refuses the possibility of loss built into every genuine coin.

This is Joachim carrying Peron's logic. The two-headed penny is the gambler's tool, not the cautious lawyer's. It belongs to the world of the speakeasies and the racetracks and the boxing rings that Joachim has absorbed from his dead brother. He carries it as a charm against the chance that keeps arriving anyway: the chance that the tailor's bill brings in the mail, that the twin house's loss brought, that Peron's apparent suicide brought. The two-headed penny cannot prevent these things. It simply refuses, in its small stubborn way, to have a losing side.

What to hold onto

Chapter 57 is a chapter of futile searching and unexpected company. The tailor's shop does not exist. The Confederate soldier has built a better country in his mind. The debate about the soul's existence continues in the reading room without Mr. Spitzer's contribution, because he is afraid they will not want it.

What to carry forward: the bill that keeps arriving as grief's specific texture, the way it comes back with the same address, the same claim, the same demand for settlement that cannot be met. The dream logic that operates by opposites, which Mr. Spitzer knows and accounts for and which still does not lead him to the shop. The rose named after both brothers, changing from red to white in the twilight sky. And the two-headed penny: the inherited gambler's charm in the cautious lawyer's pocket, heads on both sides, refusing to lose.

For the Curious

On the Boston Public Library as sanctuary

On the Boston Public Library as sanctuary.

The Boston Public Library, founded in 1848 as the first large free municipal library in the United States, established the principle that public libraries should be open to all citizens regardless of status. Young's reading room, where the Confederate soldier and the debaters about immortality share space with Mr. Spitzer and his city directories, is the library in its most democratic function: the last open space, the place where anyone can sit and think and pursue whatever research drives them, without being asked their business or their address. Mr. Spitzer, who has lost his address, belongs here exactly.

On the Confederate soldier and alternative history

On the Confederate soldier and alternative history.

The phenomenon of refusing to accept a historical outcome, constructing an alternative in which the preferred side won, has a technical name in contemporary culture: the Lost Cause narrative, which reframed the Confederacy's defeat as honorable and inevitable rather than the defeat of an immoral cause. The Confederate soldier in the library reading room is living in this narrative to its logical extreme: not merely framing the loss as honorable but insisting the loss did not occur. This is the historical version of what Mr. Spitzer does with his brother's death: not denying it exactly, but living in such intimate relation with the dead man that the boundary between before and after the death has become uncertain. Both men are refusing a fact. The Confederate soldier has built a city in the refusal. Mr. Spitzer has built an interior.

On the Automat

On the Automat.

The Automat was a form of restaurant popular in New York and Philadelphia from the early twentieth century through the 1960s: coin-operated food dispensed through small glass-windowed compartments in a wall, the epitome of democratic, efficient, anonymous eating. You did not interact with a server. You put your coin in the slot, turned the knob, and the compartment opened. The Automat was where the anonymous middle of the city ate: office workers, the lonely, the traveling, the poor who could afford coffee and a piece of pie. Young's Mr. Spitzer, wandering the city in his silk hat and threadbare suit, is an Automat figure: the person who eats alone in the democratic space, the person whose presence is not remarked upon because the transaction requires no interaction.

On Oliver Wendell Holmes and 'the table always set for the wanderer.' *To All My Darlings* traces the phrase to Holmes's 1872 The Poet at the Breakfast Table: the table set with silver and gold plates and oyster forks for whoever arrives, the wanderer always welcome. Young invokes this tradition of the perpetually set table as an image of the dreamlike suspension of ordinary social time: in the novel's logic, the wanderer is always expected, the setting is always maintained, the meal is always ready for someone who may never arrive and would not be turned away if they did. Mr. Spitzer is this wanderer. The table in Catherine's household was set for him for decades. He never quite sat down.

On dream logic and the logic of the opposite

On dream logic and the logic of the opposite.

The folk tradition that dreams mean the opposite of what they show (dreaming of death means long life, dreaming of money means loss) predates Freud by millennia. Freud formalized it as the distinction between manifest and latent content, with the dream's censor disguising the true meaning in reversed or condensed form. Young gives Mr. Spitzer conscious access to this logic as a navigation tool, and it still fails him, because the tailor's shop is not accessible through any navigational method: direct or reversed. It is the shop that exists in the debt relationship between a person and their grief, and no city directory has ever catalogued that address. You cannot find it. It finds you. It sends bills.

Chapter 58: The Silent Violinist

Research notes: Chapter 58

Characters: Joachim Spitzer

Themes: Music, Sound, and Silence · The Search for Meaning

Symbols: Clothing, Hats, and Skirts · Music and Instruments

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Deafness and Sign Language · Music and Composers

Here is what happens in Chapter 58, stripped to its plainest bones: Mr. Spitzer, the large, black-caped, melancholy composer we've come to know across these hundreds of pages, encounters an old man on the library steps playing an imaginary violin. That's it. That is the entire external event of the chapter.

And yet, as you've learned by now, what appears to be almost nothing in this novel is usually everything.

What actually happens

Mr. Spitzer is passing the library when he sees an old violinist (white-haired, fingers trembling) drawing an imaginary bow across imaginary strings, performing music that makes no sound at all. And here is the first astonishing thing: Mr. Spitzer knows *exactly* what piece he is playing. He recognizes it immediately as an obscure minor composition from childhood, something almost entirely lost to modern ears. He hears what isn't there.

This is not presented as madness. It is presented as a form of grace.

Mr. Spitzer and music

You've been traveling with Mr. Spitzer for many chapters now, and you know by this point that he is a man whose life is interior: a “silent composer,” “the walking score board,” someone who carries music within him without ever externalizing it in a form others can easily perceive. He is deaf, or near-deaf, which Young uses not as irony but as logic: the man most attuned to music's deepest nature is the one least dependent on its physical sound.

When Mr. Spitzer watches the old violinist, he is watching a version of himself. Both men make music that exists primarily in the mind and memory. Both are artists whose work goes largely unheard. The encounter isn't just moving; it's a recognition.

The music that isn't there

Young describes the silent performance with extraordinary richness: "singings of blind moths," bird calls, sea shells buzzing like bees, sparks sparking on strings that don't exist.

This isn't contradiction. It's Young's deepest argument about what music actually is, not sound waves, but something that precedes sound and survives its absence.

She calls it "pre-musical music": music that existed before human consciousness learned to organize it, and that will persist after individual hearing ceases. The old violinist isn't playing badly or playing nothing. He is playing at the source. This is the chapter's great gift to you as a reader: by the time you've spent this many pages inside Young's prose, you've been trained to hear what isn't audible. You have been practicing for exactly this moment.

The question of whether he is alive

Mr. Spitzer watches the old man's wild, convulsive movements, the intensity of the performance, and cannot determine whether what he is witnessing is music at its highest expression or a man in the process of dying. Young refuses to resolve this. The violinist is in a liminal space, and so is Mr. Spitzer, and so, by this point in the novel, are you.

This ambiguity is not evasion. It is the chapter's central claim: that the boundaries between living and dead, between sound and silence, between reality and dream, are not where we think they are. Mr. Spitzer concludes the chapter by acknowledging that he no longer clearly distinguishes between reality and dreams, between life and death, and calls this indistinction his "only wisdom." The confusion is not failure. It is what he has learned.

The surprising turn: baseball

In the middle of contemplating silent cosmic music, Mr. Spitzer starts thinking about baseball. And billiards. And polo. And fishing. And kingship.

Don't let this throw you. What he is doing is imagining the old violinist as someone else entirely: what if this man had become an athlete instead of a musician? What if the instrument in his hand had been a bat, a cue, a fishing rod, a scepter? Reality, Mr. Spitzer reflects, is "made up of just so many sticks and not one stick more." The violinist is a violinist because of the particular stick he picked up. He could have been anyone.

This is not a joke. It is Young's persistent argument about identity: that the self is not fixed, that we are each a convergence of contingencies, that another version of any one of us could be doing something entirely different with the same essential soul.

Mr. Spitzer, who prides himself on his belief that music and baseball are “fused in his psychology,” is not being eccentric here. He is being consistent. Both require practice, discipline, rhythm, and the willingness to perform within a collective. Both produce beauty that disappears the moment it's made.

His brother

Woven through Mr. Spitzer's observations of the violinist is his grief for his dead brother, and his sense that the dead continue to shape us, that they do not simply vanish. The

violinist's music, nearly forgotten, nearly lost, keeps pulling Mr. Spitzer back toward the people and sounds that time is trying to erase.

This is one of the chapter's quieter sadnesses: that Mr. Spitzer knows exactly how obscure that old waltz is, how few people would recognize it, and still, it is completely vivid to him. The things we love do not always survive us into the world's memory. But they survive in us, for as long as we last.

The black cape

Notice, as you've been doing, what characters wear. Mr. Spitzer's black cape has appeared throughout the novel as his signature: his boundary marker, his way of moving through a world that is too much for him. Young describes his shadow drifting, his cape as a cloak of darkness he carries. He is not morbid so much as honest: he knows he is a liminal figure, a man equally at home among the living and the dead, and he has learned to dress accordingly.

What to hold onto

An old man on library steps, playing an instrument that isn't there, performing a waltz almost no one remembers, watched by a deaf composer who hears every note. Two men making invisible music together. This is what art does, Young is telling you: it creates connection across the impossible distances, between the living and the dead, between sound and silence, between one interior world and another.

You have been learning, across the length of this novel, to hear the music that isn't audible. Chapter 58 is Young acknowledging that you've learned it.

For the Curious

On the "minor composition."

On the "minor composition."

Young doesn't name the piece the old violinist plays, but the description (an obscure waltz from the early twentieth century, barely surviving in modern memory) may gesture toward Paul Lincke's *Luna Waltz* (1911), adapted from his operetta *Frau Luna*. Lincke is sometimes called the "father of the Berlin operetta," and the *Luna Waltz* was popular in the early American twentieth century before fading into the background of musical history. It is exactly the kind of music Spitzer would know and almost no one else would.

On "pre-musical music."

On "pre-musical music."

Young's phrase points toward something archaeologists have actually documented: the earliest human instruments, made from bone and ivory and shell, date back over forty thousand years. Music appears to be older than civilization, older than agriculture, older

than writing. Young is suggesting that the violinist's silent performance taps into this original layer; something that existed before music was organized into forms, something that will persist after it is forgotten again.

On pearl-buttoned spats

On pearl-buttoned spats.

These appear briefly in the chapter as a detail of the old violinist's attire. Spats, the fabric coverings worn over shoes and fastened with small buttons, were an elegance of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, fading out by the 1920s. On a man playing imaginary music on library steps, they are perfect: he is a man out of time, dressed for a world that has already passed, playing a piece almost no one remembers.

On the Te Deum

On the *Te Deum*.

Mr. Spitzer's thoughts move at one point toward this ancient Christian hymn (*Te Deum laudamus*, "Thee, O God, we praise") one of the oldest continuous musical traditions in Western history. Set against the nearly-forgotten waltz, it is a reminder that some music survives and some doesn't, and that survival has as much to do with institutional power as with beauty.

On the loggerhead turtle and the hawk moth

On the loggerhead turtle and the hawk moth.

These appear in the rush of natural imagery Young uses to describe the silent music: creatures that navigate by senses humans barely register, that perceive the world in frequencies we cannot access. This is Young's quiet joke at the edge of the passage: we think we know what music is, what sound is, what perception is. These creatures know differently.

Chapter 59: The Borrowed Skeleton

Research notes: Chapter 59

Characters: Joachim Spitzer · Peron Spitzer · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Duality and Doubles · Fate and Chance · Light and Darkness · Music, Sound, and Silence · Order, Chaos, and Discipline

Symbols: Lamps, Candles, and Light · Music and Instruments · Twins and Doubles

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Music and Composers · Suicide in History and Literature · The Bible · The History of Opium

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If Chapter 58 left you with the image of two men making invisible music together on library steps, Chapter 59 takes you somewhere deeper and stranger: inside Mr. Spitzer's growing conviction that the body he inhabits is not his own.

Stay with him. This is one of the novel's most philosophically rich chapters, and it arrives exactly when you're ready for it.

What actually happens

Mr. Spitzer walks the city, tossing coins to street musicians and beggars with indiscriminate generosity. He cannot always tell who is poor and who is wealthy, who is living and who is dead, who is a professional musician and who is destitute. He gives anyway. And as he walks, he thinks: about his dead brother Peron, about chance and randomness and order, about the strange fact that he cannot be certain the skeleton inside his body is his own.

By the chapter's end, he arrives at a provisional, tentative conclusion: perhaps everything would be explained by simply admitting that he is already dead.

The stolen skeleton

This is the image that will stay with you from Chapter 59. Mr. Spitzer becomes convinced that at some point, he cannot say when, there was a "substitution": his original skeleton was replaced by another, and the body he moves through the world in is not quite his. He feels like “a shadow trembling in the air,” a man wearing a borrowed mask.

Young is not playing this for comedy or horror. She means it philosophically. If you cannot be certain that your own body is yours, what exactly is "you"? Mr. Spitzer distinguishes between three things: the body (which he suspects is illusion), the soul (which is all-informing, the deep water of a person), and the spirit (which is temporary as the wind). He suspects that transformations between these can happen without a person noticing. That you could wake up, or not wake up, as someone slightly other than who you were.

And here is the twist: Mr. Spitzer suspects this isn't unique to him. "Every man and every woman might have suffered a substitution like his own," he thinks. He distrusts himself

and therefore cannot trust others, not because they are dishonest, but because they may not know what they are either.

This is Young's deepest quarrel with the stable, bounded self. She doesn't think there is one.

The horn-blower's double life

Among the street musicians Mr. Spitzer passes is an old horn-blower: ragged, playing glassy jazz, apparently destitute. Mr. Spitzer gives him coins. Then he discovers that this same man is also a member of a prestigious symphony orchestra.

The man is simultaneously a beggar and a professional. Both are true. Neither cancels out the other. Young offers this not as an ironic twist but as evidence for something she has been building across the entire novel: that appearances are unreliable not because people are deceitful, but because people genuinely contain multitudes that don't resolve into a single identity.

Mr. Spitzer already knew this, of course. He is both a lawyer and a composer. He is both alive and, possibly, already dead.

His brother Peron

Peron Spitzer (Mr. Spitzer's twin brother, now dead) appears throughout this chapter as a kind of shadow twin, a constant companion to every thought. Where Mr. Spitzer fears the length of life, Peron feared its brevity. They are mirror images: one man terrified life would go on too long, the other terrified it would end too soon. Between them, they cover the entire territory of human anxiety about time.

Peron's suicide comes up here as a meditation, not a wound. Mr. Spitzer turns it over carefully: what if suicide were not a negative impulse, but a creative one? What if it were, his words, "the most creative act, even like sexual love begetting another person"? A desire not to escape life, but to transcend its limits, to seek an immortal love beyond what living allows?

This is not a position Young endorses or condemns. It is what Mr. Spitzer genuinely wonders, as he walks and gives away coins and feels the creaking of a skeleton that may not be his.

Darkness as illumination

Peron, we learn, feared darkness. Mr. Spitzer has made a different peace with it. He has come to experience darkness as his "only light," his illumination. In the dark, he can see things the daylight conceals: the glimmering fins of invisible fish, the iridescence of hidden stars, the interior gleamings that ordinary perception misses.

This is one of Young's recurring arguments: that those who dwell closest to darkness, to loss, to dissolution, can perceive things the comfortably solid cannot. Vera, living in her mother's opium-haunted house, learned to navigate hallucination while others had never

needed to. Mr. Spitzer, carrying his dead brother and his borrowed skeleton, can hear silent music and see in the dark. The loss is real. So is the seeing.

Chance and the music of billiard balls

Chapter 59 is one of the novel's most explicit meditations on chance, and it's worth slowing down for. Mr. Spitzer composes music based on the patterns of migratory birds in flight, and he remembers “that old cue-ball musician who was writing a symphony for musical billiard balls”: patterns that cannot be exactly repeated, that produce something beautiful precisely because they are unrepeatable.

He is asking: is life like this? Are we governed by chance? And if so, does chance produce chaos, or does it produce its own kind of order, like foam patterns on surf that are never twice the same but are always, unmistakably, foam?

He cannot answer this. He is afraid of everything (afraid of loss, of silence, of thresholds, of his own shadow) and he admits that he "would be most afraid if he had no fear," because his fear is the sign that something in him is still paying attention, still alive to what might be lost. Fear, for Mr. Spitzer, is not the opposite of courage. It is the proof of engagement.

No dividing line

The chapter keeps returning to a single, insistent claim: there is "no dividing line, no distinction between life and death." Birth and death are a "wild sea without a shore." The living and the dead are not in separate rooms. They are in the same room, breathing the same air, and the walls between them are thinner than we pretend.

Mr. Spitzer is not certain he is on one side of this line or the other. And by the end of the chapter, he arrives at his tentative conclusion: perhaps the simplest explanation, the one that would make everything else cohere, is that he is already dead. Not dramatically. Not with trumpets. But quietly, in some way he passed over without noticing, and has been walking through the aftermath ever since.

This is not despair. In Chapter 58 this indistinction was “perhaps also his only wisdom.” The confusion is not failure. It is what he knows.

What to hold onto

“Mr. Spitzer in his black cape,” walking through the city, giving coins to musicians he cannot quite see clearly, carrying a skeleton that may not be his own, hearing bells ringing underwater, unable to find the shore between life and death. He is afraid of everything. He keeps walking. He keeps giving.

That is Chapter 59.

For the Curious

On being what one was not

On "He knew only that in order to be what one was, one must be what one was

not." This is the chapter's most compressed philosophical statement, and it deserves a moment. What Young is describing, through Mr. Spitzer, is that identity is not a fixed thing one possesses, but a dynamic one maintains by including its own opposite. To be himself, Mr. Spitzer must also be his brother, his shadow, the body that may not be his. The self is not singular. It is a conversation between what you are and what you are not, and that conversation never stops.

On the three-body problem

On the three-body problem.

Young wouldn't have used this term, but it applies with uncanny precision. In physics, the three-body problem is the challenge of predicting the motion of three gravitationally interacting bodies; it cannot be solved with a simple equation, because small changes in initial conditions lead to wildly different outcomes. Mr. Spitzer's "unholy trinity" of body, soul, and spirit operates the same way: three interacting elements, no stable center, no fixed solution. He is always in orbit around himself.

On the Battle of Jericho

On the Battle of Jericho.

Mr. Spitzer wonders whether one should “walk seven times around all existence,” blowing a horn, watching the walls crumble. This is the biblical Battle of Jericho: the walls fell not through military force but through ritual repetition, seven circuits, the sounding of trumpets, and then collapse. Young uses this image to ask whether reality itself might fall if circled long enough with sufficient attention. Mr. Spitzer is always circling something.

On De profundis

On *De profundis*.

The Latin phrase means "from the depths"; it is the opening of Psalm 130, one of the great cries of spiritual anguish in Western literature, and also the title of Oscar Wilde's long letter written from prison. Young reaches for it here as the correct register for what Mr. Spitzer is experiencing: not a surface-level sadness, but a voice rising from the very bottom.

On the Trinitarians

On the Trinitarians.

This religious order, founded in 1198, was dedicated to raising ransom money to free Christians held captive by Muslims during the Crusades. They were also committed to studying the mystery of the Holy Trinity: the three-in-one nature of God. Young drops this

reference into Mr. Spitzer's meditation on his own trinity of body, soul, and spirit, and on the nature of captivity and ransom. What holds us captive? What would it cost to be free?

On salt water in the veins

On salt water in the veins.

Mr. Spitzer reflects that “he was his father’s son, and” that “there was salt water in his veins instead of blood.” Salt water is the primordial medium: the ocean from which life emerged, the substance of tears, the preservative against decay. To have salt water in the veins is to be made of something older than the self, something that connects you to every shore and every depth. It is also, quietly, to taste grief whenever you lick your lips.

Chapter 60: The Wild Sonata

Research notes: Chapter 60

Characters: Joachim Spitzer · Peron Spitzer

Themes: Fate and Chance · Music, Sound, and Silence

Symbols: Birds · Music and Instruments · Silence and Deafness

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Gambling and Playing Cards · Greek Mythology · Music and Composers

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After two chapters of Mr. Spitzer walking the city in philosophical anguish (questioning his skeleton, giving coins to musicians he can't quite see, trying to determine whether he is alive or dead) Chapter 60 offers something unexpected: a moment of grace. Not resolution. Not answers. But something that cuts through all the questions like a flock of wild ducks cutting through fog.

Hold on to that image. We'll get there.

What actually happens

Mr. Spitzer is still walking the city, still thinking. He wonders, with genuine uncertainty, whether he is actually a musician at all, or whether he has been a gambler all along, someone who mistook the music in his head for a vocation rather than a symptom. He reads only the sporting pages. He has never attended a concert. He cannot say “the value of a sand dollar or a Boston dollar or an English pound sterling.”

Then, at dusk, he practices moose calls in the middle of the city. A moose answers. Its antlers loom through the purple fog like tree boughs, merging with traffic lights and the Pleiades.

And then the wild ducks come.

Musician or gambler?

This is the chapter's opening question, and it's worth taking seriously. Mr. Spitzer has been described to us, and has described himself, as a composer. But Chapter 60 introduces genuine doubt: what if the music existed only in his head, as germinal, unwritten, unrealized? What if the gambling, the sporting pages, the horse races, the cards falling: what if that was the real Mr. Spitzer, and the composer was a story he told himself?

Young doesn't answer this. She is not interested in debunking Mr. Spitzer. She is interested in what it means to carry a vocation you cannot verify. Many people live their entire lives with music in their heads they never find a way to express. Does that make them musicians? Does it matter?

Mr. Spitzer suspects he might be what he calls a "cubistic dream player": a self fractured into multiple, simultaneous viewpoints that don't resolve into a coherent whole, like a Cubist painting seen from every angle at once. He is the gambler and the composer, and possibly neither, and the two versions of himself don't reconcile.

The moose in the city

When Mr. Spitzer practices moose calls in the urban dusk and a moose actually answers (antlers rising through the fog, indistinguishable from tree boughs, traffic lights, and the scatter of the Pleiades overhead) you are reading one of the novel's purest expressions of what Young means by the dissolution of borders.

The moose should not be there. The city should exclude it. And yet: it answers. Young is not asking you to decide whether this is hallucination or vision or literal event. She is showing you that Mr. Spitzer inhabits a world where these categories have become permeable, where if you call into the wilderness with enough longing, something wild calls back, regardless of where you are standing.

This is also, quietly, a scene about his dead brother. Mr. Spitzer wonders throughout this chapter how he knows what Peron knew, if he is himself and not Peron. The moose call is a kind of answer to that question: some communication travels across distances that should make it impossible.

The wild ducks

This is the moment the chapter has been building toward, and Young gives it everything she has.

The wild ducks appear overhead: exotic, "beautiful Asiatics" with crested heads and gold-veiled eyes, their wings gold-tipped, drifting through great clouds. Their honking fills the air as a "wild sonata," drowning out the traffic, the city, the noise of ordinary existence. Mr. Spitzer, standing in the street, feels himself dissolving into the sound: imagines himself metamorphosed into wings, suspended between earth and sky, a silent observer caught inside the music.

And here is what he realizes: he “had almost decided that it would be unnecessary to write his elegy now. For surely, his elegy was this wild duck’s horn.” He has been trying, across many chapters, to compose an elegy for his brother, for himself, for everything that has been lost. But the wild ducks are the elegy. Their honking calls, unrepeatable and wild and entirely indifferent to human grief, are the music he could never have written. Just before the ducks, the moose’s bellowing had sounded to him “like the music of the world accompanying him through the long reaches of the silence.”

This is one of Young's most tender moments. The elegy you cannot compose will still be given to you. Not in the form you expected (not as a composed piece, not from a harpsichord with all black keys or a viola da gamba) but as something wild and passing overhead, not made for you, not about you, and somehow exactly right.

Sound moving through imagined silence

Young describes sound in this chapter as something that moves "like the human spirit through heavens of imagined silence." This is her persistent argument about music, and by extension about art: it is not the sound itself but its movement through silence that constitutes the real thing. The wild sonata of the ducks matters because it passes through a world that is, underneath everything, silent.

Mr. Spitzer's dead brother could not imagine silence, we're told. It was unimaginable to him. But Mr. Spitzer has made his peace with it. And maybe that is why the ducks come to him, because he is not afraid of the silence they will leave behind.

What to hold onto

Mr. Spitzer standing in a city street, looking up. The fog. The traffic lights. The Pleiades. And through all of it, a flock of wild ducks with gold-tipped wings and crested heads, honking their way across the sky in a wild sonata he could never have composed, which is his elegy, which is enough.

He has almost decided he doesn't need to write the music anymore. It was always going to come to him from outside.

For the Curious

On the "cubistic dream player."

On the "cubistic dream player."

Young uses this phrase to describe Mr. Spitzer's fractured self-perception. When Picasso and Braque broke objects into geometric fragments seen simultaneously from multiple viewpoints, they weren't trying to make things ugly or difficult. They were trying to show objects as the mind actually knows them, in their totality, across time, from every angle at once. A face in a Cubist painting is the face you've known over years, all at once. Mr. Spitzer, the cubistic dream player, is every version of himself simultaneously: the musician, the gambler, the living man, the possibly-dead man, Joachim and maybe also Peron.

On Kokopelli

On Kokopelli.

The chapter mentions "that great flutist who had caused the avalanche," a figure who may be Kokopelli: the humpbacked flute player of Puebloan, Hopi, Zuni, and other Indigenous traditions of the American Southwest. Kokopelli is a god of fertility, agriculture, music, and storytelling, depicted playing his flute across thousands of rock art sites. He is associated with spring, the south wind, the arrival of warmth, and the planting season. That his music causes an avalanche, creation and destruction as a single act, is entirely in keeping with how Young treats music throughout the novel.

On the viola da gamba

On the viola da gamba.

This instrument, also called the viol or gamba, is a bowed stringed instrument from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. It is held between the legs like a cello (the name literally means "viol for the leg") and produces a softer, more nasal tone than the modern cello: intimate, introspective, suited to small rooms and private grief. Mr. Spitzer's imagined music is consistently tied to instruments that are old, marginalized, or superseded by louder successors. The viola da gamba was largely abandoned when the louder, more brilliant violin family took over concert halls. It is the instrument of a quieter world.

On fugue

On fugue.

Young's use of this word carries both of its meanings simultaneously, as she almost always intends. Musically, a fugue is a composition in which a single theme is introduced by one voice and then imitated by others in a structured, overlapping pattern: order through repetition and variation. Psychologically, a dissociative fugue is a state in which a person forgets their past identity and may wander, with no memory of the period afterward. Mr. Spitzer is living in both at once: the structured repetition of his grief, and the dissociation that comes from not being entirely sure who he is.

On the River Lethe

On the River Lethe.

In Greek mythology, the Lethe was one of the five rivers of the underworld: the river of oblivion. Souls who drank from it forgot their lives before death, arriving at the afterlife unburdened by memory. Young reaches for this image in a chapter about a man who wonders whether he is already dead and cannot quite remember how he got here. The ducks, passing overhead, carry no memory of where they've been. They move through the present with full attention. This is perhaps what Mr. Spitzer is learning to do.

On antiphonies

On antiphonies.

When the moose answers Mr. Spitzer's call, Young is staging one of the oldest musical forms: antiphony, or call and response, where two groups or voices alternate, each answering the other. It is the structure of psalms, of field songs, of the earliest sacred music. The city and the wilderness are singing antiphonies. The living and the dead are singing antiphonies. Mr. Spitzer calls into the fog and something calls back. This is not nothing. This is the oldest music there is.

Chapter 61: The Frog in His Throat

Research notes: Chapter 61

Characters: Joachim Spitzer

Themes: Duality and Doubles

Symbols: Mirrors and Reflections · Silence and Deafness

Philosophy: Heraclitus and Flux · Kant and Hegel · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Plato and Platonism

Allusions: American Writers · Deafness and Sign Language · Music and Composers

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There is an old idiom, "a frog in his throat", that means the inability to speak, especially from overwhelming emotion. Young knows this. Chapter 61 is built on it, very deliberately, and by the end of the chapter she has made it into something that will stay with you.

What actually happens

Mr. Spitzer encounters an old mute who has trained a frog to speak for him. The frog lives in the mute's mouth. It has learned to croak human words, including, we are told, the Lord's Prayer. The mute is his voice. The frog is the mute's voice. The chain of substitution goes all the way down.

Mr. Spitzer has known the mute “night after night in a thieves’ café,” and the frog dies “not long after it had started talking—perhaps because it was tired,” on Maundy Thursday.

Together, the two men (a nearly voiceless composer who makes music no one hears, and a mute who has just lost the only voice he ever had) walk to an upland meadow scattered with wildflowers and bury the frog. Then they walk back. The way back, Mr. Spitzer notices, seems shorter than the way there.

That is all that externally happens. Everything else is what Mr. Spitzer thinks while it is happening.

The mute as mirror

By this point in the novel, you know Mr. Spitzer well: a man whose music is inaudible, who exists at the edges of perception, who cannot always “tell the living from the dead.” The old mute is his perfect double. Here is someone for whom silence is not metaphor but reality: a man who has never been able to hear the world's sounds, who exists in a country whose language he cannot access, a stranger in every room he enters.

Mr. Spitzer watches the mute's hands moving through their complex sign language (crosses, circles, directions, shapes that mean many things at once or nothing that can be pinned down) and tries to interpret them. He cannot, entirely. But he doesn't need to. He understands the essential thing: this man is grieving, and the grief has no outlet, and it is immense.

He wonders, as he walks with the mute toward the meadow, whether the mute is his ideal audience. His music, after all, is inaudible. A deaf man who cannot hear it is no different, in practical terms, from anyone else. And yet the mute is present. He is there, walking beside him. Sometimes presence is the thing.

The meadow

Young gives the frog's burial meadow one of the most extraordinary passages in the novel: a long inventory of wildflowers, grasses, and herbs, each one carrying its own symbolism. Milkwort and moonwort, nightshade and heliotrope, frog lilies and star grass and wild rambler roses and moon vines. The meadow is a threshold, and Young populates it accordingly: plants associated with nurturing and plants associated with poison, plants that turn toward the sun and plants that thrive in shadow, plants named for the creatures of water and plants named for the stars.

You don't need to look up every plant, though the "For the Curious" section at the end touches on a few, but do notice what Young is doing: she is making the act of burial into something cosmic. The frog was small. Its grave is surrounded by nature's symbolic vocabulary. This is not disproportionate. Young believes that everything small contains everything large.

Mr. Spitzer drops a red rose into the grave before the earth covers it, “a red rose fully blown to signify immortality, immortal through being mortal, resurrection, and eternal life.” For a frog.

The idiom made literal

The mute's frog lived in his mouth and was his bridge between silence and speech. The idiom itself lands on Mr. Spitzer: at the burial he feels “a soreness or swelling in his throat as if there were a frog in his throat—had nearly croaked when he had tried to speak.” Now the frog is dead, and the mute is left with nothing but his hands. He cannot even croak the Lord's Prayer.

Young is doing something very quiet and very devastating here. The idiom "a frog in my throat" describes a temporary condition: a moment when feeling overwhelms speech. For the mute, this was his permanent condition, his whole life. And the frog that literalized it, the creature that bridged his silence and the world of sound, is in the ground under the wildflowers.

"No being but becoming"

At the graveside, watching the mute's hands turn around each other like a wheel as he signs, Mr. Spitzer arrives at a line that cuts to the heart of everything Young has been saying across the novel: *there is no being but becoming.* The wheel turns, and that is all. Images flow into images, like water into water, without stopping anywhere, without fixing into a stable self.

This is not nihilism. It is the opposite of nihilism. It is the claim that existence is not a state you can arrive at and possess, but a process you are always inside of. There is no moment when you have finally become yourself. There is only the next moment, and the one after that, and the frog lilies growing over the grave.

The airplane

Through most of this novel, time has been soft and uncertain; you might be in the 1900s, or earlier, or somewhere outside of calendar time altogether. In Chapter 61, Mr. Spitzer looks up at what he thinks is a moving star and realizes it is an airplane light seen through clouds.

Young drops this quietly, almost without emphasis. It is not the novel's first airplane (Chapter 52 already has “the airplanes crashing over Switzerland”), but here it crosses Mr. Spitzer's own sky. The airplane is there, overhead, moving through the same sky where the wild ducks flew in Chapter 60 and the moose's antlers reached toward the Pleiades. The mystical and the contemporary inhabit the same clouds. They always did.

What to hold onto

Two men in a flower-strewn meadow, burying a frog. One cannot hear. The other makes music no one hears. Between them, they hold a red rose and everything that has been lost. The way back will feel shorter.

For the Curious

On "a frog in his throat."

On "a frog in his throat."

The idiom was first documented in America in 1847, in a book for young boys called *How to Be a Man*: advice on building character through honesty, hard work, and self-discipline. The phrase described the inability to speak from overwhelming emotion, especially fear. Young has taken this idiom and made it perfectly, terribly literal: the mute's frog in his throat was his only speech, and now it is dead.

On the meadow plants

On the meadow plants.

A few of the most resonant: *nightshade* is poisonous, a classic symbol of death's shadow alongside life's beauty. *Heliotrope* turns always toward the sun, symbolizing devotion that outlasts death. *Frog lilies* appear almost as if the meadow itself has grown a monument. *Moon vines* climb upward toward the dark sky. *Star grass* and *starflowers* anchor the grave to the cosmos. Young does not choose a flower randomly. The meadow is a complete symbolic universe in miniature.

On the swan song

On the swan song.

The chapter invokes the ancient myth that swans, typically silent throughout their lives, sing one beautiful song just before they die. The myth appears in Aeschylus and Plato, and later in Chaucer. For Mr. Spitzer, a silent composer, and for the mute's frog, the same question applies: was there a song? Was there a moment of expression before the silence closed? The frog croaked the Lord's Prayer. Perhaps that is enough.

On "Respice finem."

On "Respice finem."

This Latin phrase (*consider the end*, or *look to the end*) appears in Mr. Spitzer's reflections and carries the weight of the chapter. In medieval and Renaissance thought it was a memento mori: remember that you will die, and let that knowledge shape how you live. Mr. Spitzer has been looking toward the end for many chapters now. The frog's burial is another occasion to look, and not look away.

On seashells and the ocean

On seashells and the ocean.

The chapter includes Mr. Spitzer's thoughts on the folk myth that you can hear the ocean in a seashell, and the scientific truth behind it, which is resonance, the shell amplifying ambient sound into something that sounds like the sea. Young uses this as a metaphor for perception and memory: we hear in things what we have already carried within us. The ocean you hear in the shell is partly the ocean, and partly you.

On "no being but becoming."

On "no being but becoming."

The observation that existence is process rather than state has a long philosophical history; it runs through Heraclitus ("you cannot step into the same river twice"), through Hegel, through the American philosopher Thomas Oliver who wrote in 1913 that "becoming is better than being." Young absorbed all of this. Her novel enacts it: nothing in *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* arrives and stays. Everything flows into the next thing, like water into water.

On Camden, New Jersey

On Camden, New Jersey.

The chapter mentions Camden, the city where Walt Whitman spent his final years and is buried. Whitman, who catalogued the American world in long, looping, accumulative lines, who included everything and excluded nothing, is a quiet presence behind Young's own project. Young's prose lists the way Whitman lists. She trusts the particular the way Whitman trusted it. The mention of Camden is unlikely to be accidental.

On "Carthago est delenda."

On "Carthago est delenda."

This phrase, *Carthage must be destroyed*, was reportedly spoken by Cato the Elder at the end of every speech he gave, regardless of the topic. He said it until Carthage was destroyed. Mr. Spitzer, circling the same themes across chapter after chapter, is doing something similar: returning, always, to the same irresolvable center. Miss MacIntosh. The lost music. The question of whether he is alive.

Chapter 62: The Will and the Water Music

Research notes: Chapter 62

Characters: Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh

Themes: Faith, God, and the Supernatural · Music, Sound, and Silence

Symbols: Fire · Music and Instruments · Snow, Ice, and Winter · The Sea and Water

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Astronomy · Deafness and Sign Language · Suicide in History and Literature

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Chapter 62 is, among other things, the chapter in which Mr. Spitzer writes his last will and testament. It is not a conventional will. It is one of the most beautiful documents in the novel.

What actually happens

Mr. Spitzer, still moving through his interior life with the slow deliberateness we have come to expect, does three things in this chapter: he dreams of a river that transforms from fire to ice; he rewrites his will, leaving his music to the world; and he learns the full story of the old violinist from the library steps, the man from Chapter 58 who played an imaginary violin with an imaginary bow.

He also contemplates a clarinetist he once knew who died by suicide, leaving a note that said he was going to join a greater orchestra.

The river of fire and ice

The chapter opens in a dream, or something like one: Mr. Spitzer rowing down a river that shifts from molten fire to frozen ice, surrounded by walruses and seals wearing diamond necklaces, seagulls in the open boats following him changing into musicians, “the members of some great orchestra.” The imagery is extravagant and dreamlike, but its logic is consistent: the river is always the same river, just in different states. Fire and ice are the same element transformed. The orchestra assembles from birds.

Mr. Spitzer wonders, at the opening of this chapter, whether he has ever truly slept. This is not insomnia; it is something more fundamental: the suspicion that perfect rest, like perfect music, is always just beyond reach, always slightly unattained. He has been pursuing sleep the way he has been pursuing the right notes, and neither has fully arrived.

The will

The will is extraordinary. Mr. Spitzer bequeaths his music (all of it, the compositions that exist only in his head and on scraps of paper and on his shirt cuffs) to “the musical world and even to indifferent ears and even to deaf ears and even to dead ears and to sea

conches," to be played "only upon swelling water." He cancels his subscriptions. He leaves instructions about eggs and milk, small domestic rituals elevated into symbolic gestures.

What is he doing? He is an artist accepting that his work may never be widely heard, and leaving it anyway. He is giving his music to the world even as he acknowledges that the world may not notice. The gift is unconditional. This is what the will says, in its legal and poetic and slightly mad form: *I give all of this to everyone, including those who cannot hear it.*

A legal term appears here: *mortmain*, from the French for "dead hand", the legal concept of property held in perpetuity by an institution, a dead hand continuing to shape the living world. Mr. Spitzer's will is an act of mortmain in the best sense: his silent music reaching forward, past his death, into whatever ears might eventually receive it.

The old violinist's story

Here, in Chapter 62, we learn what we didn't know in Chapter 58: the old violinist on the library steps was not simply a street musician. He had been "a member of the Philadelphia Symphony for twenty years—for more than twenty years," a second violinist "whose bow had never once touched the strings." His silent bowing was not eccentricity; it was his entire technique. He had found a way to perform invisibly within the orchestra, contributing nothing physical to the sound, but present, bowing, part of the whole.

Then, one night, he accidentally produced a false note, a single audible sound, and was dismissed.

Read that again. He was dismissed not for failing to play, but for accidentally succeeding. The moment he made actual music, the illusion was broken, and the orchestra no longer had a place for him. Young is making an argument here about the nature of performance, visibility, and institutional belonging: some artists are tolerated only as long as they remain inaudible. The moment they sound, they are expelled.

Mr. Spitzer recognizes in this man's silent bowing what he had intuited in Chapter 58: this was perhaps the best music, the truest music, the music that exists only in gesture and attention and the imagination of whoever is watching.

The clarinetist who joined a greater orchestra

Mr. Spitzer knew a clarinetist who committed suicide because he felt perpetually out of tune. This was not a technical problem; the conductor assured him "that he was in tune, perfect tune." But he could not reconcile what he heard inside himself with what the world reflected back. The dissonance was internal and total and could not be argued away.

He left a note saying he was going to join a greater orchestra.

Mr. Spitzer takes this seriously. He does not dismiss it as metaphor or delusion. He considers it as a genuine possibility: that somewhere beyond this life there is an orchestra that includes all the lost music, all the unplayed compositions, all the clarinetists who were

never quite in tune with the world they inhabited. His own music, which no one has ever played or evoked, might find its place there.

"My God! I thought I was in Philadelphia."

Near the end of the chapter, Mr. Spitzer looks up, disoriented, and realizes he is not where he thought he was. The city has shifted on him again. His grasp of place is unstable (he drifts between cities, between states, between realms) and this moment of confusion is both comic and heartbreaking. He has been walking through his interior world so completely that the exterior world has rearranged itself around him without his noticing.

This is not mere absentmindedness. It is the logical consequence of being the kind of person Mr. Spitzer is: someone for whom the music in his head is more real, more present, more insistent than the street he is standing on.

The music that no one has ever played

The chapter keeps circling back to this fact: Mr. Spitzer's music has never been played. Not by anyone. Not even, perhaps, by him: he writes “even if there were no musician in all the clouded world, not even himself who wrote the music.” His compositions exist as patterns on paper and in memory, as the patterns of migratory birds, as pieces with names like *Pavanne for the Dead Polar Bear and the Entombed Butterfly* and *Elegy for a Frog Eating a Firefly* and *Aubade for a Firefly Fading at Dawn*.

And yet he keeps writing. He is not discouraged by his failures. The music is real to him, and it will be real in his will, bequeathed to the sea conches who will receive it without judgment. This is, quietly, one of the most radical arguments in the novel: that the unheard work is still work, that the unplayed music is still music, that creating in obscurity is not the same as creating in vain.

What to hold onto

Mr. Spitzer sitting down to write his will, leaving everything (the water music, the bird-flight compositions, the impossibly complex elegies) to deaf ears, dead ears, sea conches, and anyone else who might happen to be listening. The dead hand reaching forward. The music given away before it was ever received.

For the Curious

On mortmain

On mortmain.

The legal term appears in Mr. Spitzer's will, and it deserves its moment. From the French *mort* (dead) and *main* (hand), mortmain originally described land held in perpetuity by a church or institution: a dead hand continuing to control the living world. In medieval England, statutes were passed specifically to limit this practice, because the dead were

accumulating too much property. Mr. Spitzer's bequest is mortmain in reverse: a living man giving his inheritance away in advance, the dead hand not grasping but releasing.

On the Philadelphia Orchestra

On the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Founded in 1900, it became one of America's most celebrated orchestras under conductors Leopold Stokowski and Eugene Ormandy. Young places her silent violinist within this specific institution deliberately: this is a real orchestra, a prestigious one, and the image of a musician who played invisibly within it for years without touching his strings is all the more striking for being set inside something so concrete and historically grounded.

On the barcarolle

On the barcarolle.

This musical form (a Venetian gondolier's song, imitated in classical music with a gently rocking 6/8 rhythm) appears in Mr. Spitzer's water music. The most famous examples are Offenbach's *Barcarolle* from *The Tales of Hoffmann* and Chopin's *Barcarolle* for solo piano. A barcarolle is literally boat music, music for moving through water. That Mr. Spitzer's final bequest specifies his music be played on water, and that his dream begins on a river, and that he reaches for this form: all of this is Young being Young: everything connects, everything is on purpose.

On the aubade

On the aubade.

Among the musical forms Young names in this chapter is the aubade: a dawn song, traditionally sung by lovers parting at daybreak. The word comes from the Old Occitan *auba*, meaning dawn. Picasso painted *The Aubade* in 1942. For Mr. Spitzer, the aubade is both a musical form and an emotional condition: he is always parting, always leaving something behind in the dark as the light begins.

On Orion, Taurus, the Pleiades, the Hyades

On Orion, Taurus, the Pleiades, the Hyades.

Mr. Spitzer's compositions include music named for constellations and star clusters that have guided travelers for millennia. The Pleiades were the Seven Sisters, daughters of Atlas, transformed into stars. The Hyades were their mourning sisters: their name in Greek means "the Rainy Ones," associated with weeping. Orion the Hunter, killed by a scorpion's sting, placed in the sky near Taurus, who is near the Pleiades. Young's cosmos is populated by figures of grief and transformation. So is Mr. Spitzer's music.

On the clarinetist's greater orchestra

On the clarinetist's greater orchestra.

This is one of Young's most tender inventions. A musician who cannot reconcile his inner sound with the world's response, who decides to seek a more perfect ensemble elsewhere. Young does not frame this as tragedy only; she lets Mr. Spitzer consider it as a genuine destination, a real place where the unplayed music goes. Whether you read this as consolation or delusion, it does what the best consolations do: it offers a way to hold the loss without being destroyed by it.

Chapter 63: The Wig Comes Off

Research notes: Chapter 63

Characters: Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Decay and Ruin

Symbols: Hair, Wig, and Baldness · Shadows

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Milton · Revelation and the Apocalypse · Shakespeare · The History of Opium

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She is back.

After the long passage through Mr. Spitzer's interior world (the street musicians, the silent violinist, the frog's burial, the water music will) we return to Vera, and to Miss MacIntosh. And in this chapter, something happens that the novel has been building toward since its opening pages: Miss MacIntosh takes off her wig.

This is not a small moment. Hold on to it.

What actually happens

Vera confronts Miss MacIntosh. The confrontation is charged with everything that has accumulated between them across Vera's lifetime: the dependence, the gratitude, the resentment, the love, the fear of loss. Vera demands honesty. She calls their relationship a "hollow pretense" and pushes for something real, something true, beneath the surface of their arrangement.

Miss MacIntosh, in response, removes her wig. She is completely bald: alopecia universalis, a condition in which the body grows no hair anywhere. The red hair that Vera has always associated with her, the hair like "the sunset burning with bees," was never hers. It was a wig. And now it is off, and Miss MacIntosh is speaking more openly than she ever has: about her past, her loneliness, her body, her approaching death.

Earlier in the chapter, before the wig comes off, she also foreshadows that she will disappear.

The wig and what it means

Miss MacIntosh has been, from the novel's first pages, Vera's figure of absolute reality. She was the anti-hallucination: the plain, practical, broken-nosed, red-haired woman who believed in facts, schedules, and the cold honest surface of things, in a household drowning in her mother's opium dreams.

And now it turns out that the red hair (the most vivid, most distinctive feature of her plainness) was itself a fiction.

Young is not undoing Miss MacIntosh. She is completing her. The woman who stood for reality against illusion, it turns out, has been wearing an illusion on her head every day of

Vera's life. This doesn't make her a hypocrite. It makes her human. She needed protection too. She built her own small shelter of pretense against a world that laughed at bald women, that had no place for someone who didn't fit the expected shape of femininity. Her wig was her mackintosh; it kept the rain out.

When she removes it in front of Vera, she is doing what she has always done: insisting on truth, even when the truth is humiliating. The wig comes off because Vera demanded honesty. Miss MacIntosh gives it.

What Miss MacIntosh reveals

She speaks of sleeping in doorways. Of being broke: financially and otherwise. Of saving on electric lights because she couldn't afford them and because she hated what they stood for: Benjamin Franklin, who had "tampered with God’s nest egg and most private creation," flooding the world with artificial brightness that disturbed natural darkness, natural privacy, natural sleep.

She speaks of her missing breast (a mastectomy, a loss she has carried under her clothes through every chapter she has appeared in) and of her baldness, and of the laughter she endured. (It is Vera who tells her, “Your wig is crooked.”)

She says: "I could have slipped unnoticed through the crowds" if she had been a man. "No one would have laughed."

She calls love "a system of mutual deception." She says “people are never quite what they seem.” She says nobody knows anybody.

And then, at the end, she tells Vera to be of good cheer. She says they are pilgrims, and there is a long day ahead, and one must “live each day as if it were the last,” and knit body and soul together even as they unravel faster than you can knit.

Her argument with Franklin, Edison, and Constantine

Miss MacIntosh's hatred of electric lights is not mere crankiness; it is a coherent worldview. She objects to Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison for the same reason she objects to Emperor Constantine: all three men imposed an artificial order on the natural world, disrupting the rhythms of darkness and light, sleep and waking, that she believes are fundamental to honest living. In her telling, Constantine “changed the calendar and had gotten us all off on the wrong day of the week,” Franklin flew his kite, and she would tell Thomas Edison she would not have “even a single light bulb.” The result, in Miss MacIntosh's view, is a world perpetually overlit, overexposed, stripped of the natural darkness that "dreamless sleep" requires.

She is not simply nostalgic. She is making a philosophical argument: that authenticity requires darkness, that privacy requires shadow, that the soul needs to be allowed to go dark sometimes, and that those who fill every hour with artificial light are doing something spiritually as well as practically disruptive.

You may or may not agree. But for Miss MacIntosh, her preference for candles over electric lights is as principled as anything else she believes.

Vera's world within

Against Miss MacIntosh's catalogue of practical knowledge (monsoons and mackerel skies, the Bering Strait, nautical navigation, Australian shipping, household management, the Stock Exchange) Vera offers only her "world within." She cannot care about the Brooklyn Bridge or harbor buoys or cup racing. Her ears roar with distant reverberations. She is trembling at the threshold of life, not yet through the door.

This has been Vera's condition since page one of the novel. Miss MacIntosh has been trying, all her life, to drag her across that threshold. Into the practical. Into the immediate. Into what is “immediate and near.” And Vera keeps falling back into the interior, into the dream, into her mother's opium-lit world where everything is beautiful and nothing is required.

The confrontation in Chapter 63 is, in part, about this: Vera wanting something from Miss MacIntosh that Miss MacIntosh cannot give, a bridge between the world within and the world without, and Miss MacIntosh insisting that the only bridge is the one Vera builds herself, day by day, by paying attention to monsoons and tides and the names of clouds.

"Bare and ruined choirs"

Miss MacIntosh's prophetic speech in this chapter reaches toward apocalypse: the sun and moon in the same sky, the earth still wrapped in darkness, birds gone silent, flowers perishing in the seed, tides that will not return what they take. “There shall be bare and ruined choirs,” she says, echoing Shakespeare's Sonnet 73: “Bare ruin’d choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.”

And then she says: "There will be only, my dear, the dream."

In Miss MacIntosh's mouth, this is not consolation. It is a warning. If you retreat entirely into the dream (if you abandon the work of paying attention to the real, immediate, practical world) you will be left with nothing but illusion when everything else is stripped away.

She is warning Vera about her mother's fate. She is warning Vera about herself.

The foreshadowing

She will disappear. She says so. "I shall surely disappear as surely as the sun sets." This is the chapter that places her death within reach, not yet, but coming. You can feel it in the way she speaks: more openly than she ever has, as if she knows she has little time left for pretense, even the pretense of her wig.

The umbrella is still in her hand. She will keep the rain out until she cannot.

What to hold onto

Miss MacIntosh, her wig off, her bald head bare in the fog, telling Vera to be of good cheer. She who never dreamed, surrounded by a world that dreams. She who stood for reality, revealed to have worn a fiction on her head. She who told Vera to knit body and soul together, unraveling faster than she can knit.

She is not diminished by this. She is, finally, entirely herself.

For the Curious

On alopecia universalis

On alopecia universalis.

This is an autoimmune condition in which the immune system attacks the hair follicles across the entire body. The person grows no hair anywhere (not on the head, not on the eyebrows, not anywhere) but is otherwise healthy. Young gives this condition to Miss MacIntosh with great precision: it strips her of the most visible marker of conventional femininity, forces her into a wig she would rather not wear, and makes her vulnerable to the laughter she describes. It is also, symbolically, a kind of nakedness she cannot escape: a permanent condition of exposure beneath the protective covering she maintains.

On the umbrella's history

On the umbrella's history.

Miss MacIntosh delivers a small lecture on the umbrella. Once a royal privilege (in parts of Asia, an umbrella over a person's head was literally a sign of rank) it became, over centuries, a democratic object: the common person's shield against the weather. Jonas Hanway, an English merchant, is credited as the first man in London to carry one publicly, in the mid-eighteenth century, and was mocked for it. Now everyone carries one. Miss MacIntosh, who has carried a black umbrella through the entire novel as her signature protection against the fog of illusion, is connecting her own practice to this history: the umbrella as the poor person's dignity, available to all, shelter that asks nothing of you except that you open it.

On King Canute

On King Canute.

Miss MacIntosh invokes him to warn against waiting for what will never come. Canute (king of England, Norway, and Denmark) is famous for the story (probably apocryphal) in which he commanded the tide to stop to demonstrate to his flatterers that even a king cannot hold back the sea. Miss MacIntosh's use of him is sharp: don't waste your life expecting the tide to listen to you. The tide takes what it takes. It does not return what it takes. Knit your bones together and walk. On "bare and ruined choirs." This phrase comes from Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, not Milton as I suggested above, where

Shakespeare describes autumn trees as "bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang." Young, through Miss MacIntosh, reaches for this image of desolation: the places where music used to live, now empty and cold. Miss MacIntosh is not a woman who quotes poetry casually. When she reaches for this image, she means it.

On Emperor Constantine

On Emperor Constantine.

Miss MacIntosh's quarrel with Constantine is specific: he changed the calendar and institutionalized Christianity in the Roman Empire, which she reads as a human imposition on natural order. Constantine shifted the official day of rest to “Sunday, the first day of the week” rather than the seventh, and his calendar reforms altered how Western civilization measured time. For Miss MacIntosh, this is not a neutral administrative decision. It is someone rearranging the furniture of reality. She objects to it the way she objects to electric lights: both are human interference with something that was working fine before anyone decided to improve it.

On the Great Depression

On the Great Depression.

Miss MacIntosh's history (sleeping in doorways, being broke, saving on electric lights) is not incidental to the novel's time. Young herself lived through the Depression, and for the characters in this story it would have been recent lived memory. The Depression-era motto "use it up, wear it out, make do or do without" is embedded in Miss MacIntosh's entire character: her practicality, her frugality, her contempt for excess and artificiality, her insistence that you face what is actually in front of you rather than dreaming of what might be. She is a Depression-era figure, wearing a wig because she cannot afford to be without one, protecting herself with an umbrella because it is the one thing she can control.

On "nobody knows anybody."

On "nobody knows anybody."

This is the chapter's quiet final devastation, offered in Miss MacIntosh's voice after everything else she has revealed. She has just shown Vera who she is (really is, bald head and missing breast and all) and her conclusion is that it doesn't matter, because “people are never quite what they seem” and nobody truly knows anybody. She is not saying connection is impossible. She is saying it is always incomplete, always approximate, always made through the fog. Even now, Vera does not fully know her. Even now.

Chapter 64: Old Baldy

Research notes: Chapter 64

Characters: Joachim Spitzer · Lorena · Miss MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Decay and Ruin · Motherhood, Pregnancy, and Birth

Symbols: Hair, Wig, and Baldness · Pregnancy, Birth, and Children

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Ecclesiastes · Greek Mythology · Music and Composers · Suicide in History and Literature · The Bible

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Chapter 63 gave you the moment the wig came off. Chapter 64 is what comes after: Miss MacIntosh, still bald-headed, still in the fog, telling Vera the story of her entire life. And Vera, for once, listening, and beginning to understand something Miss MacIntosh cannot see about herself.

This is one of the most tender chapters in the novel.

What actually happens

Miss MacIntosh talks. She tells Vera about her childhood baldness, her wigs made from stolen horsehairs, the barber who told her nothing could be done, the boys who tried to hook her wig with fishing lines, the phrenologist who praised the magnificent shape of her skull, the Gaelic prince she claims as an ancestor, and the two orphans from her years as a matron: a forger who sent her Christmas cards from Alcatraz, and Lorena, the dancing girl she loved.

Vera listens. And somewhere in the listening, she realizes she can see Miss MacIntosh in a way that Miss MacIntosh cannot see herself. She begins, quietly, to mourn her: “Perhaps I mourned for her prematurely, and I mistook the elegy for my love.”

Vera, looking back, calls this time “that last month.”

Bald from birth

Miss MacIntosh was born without hair and has never grown any. As a child, she wore a toupee. Later she stole hairs from horses to make her own wig. Boys knew about it and taunted her: fishing lines thrown at her head to hook the hairpiece. She was afraid of animals and people both. She wandered.

She tells Vera about the barber she visited, the barber pole that once meant bloodletting and leeches, the barber's eloquent helplessness in the face of her condition: there was nothing to be done, not one hair to be grown. She accepted it. She had to.

And then she traces her baldness back into legend: she is descended, she says, “from a Gaelic prince who was” also bald, who lost his golden crown at sea, who was “cast up on

the bleak shores of Scotland” with nothing. His crown floated on the waves. His hair was gone. She claims this man as her ancestor and his loss as her inheritance.

This is not delusion. It is dignity. Miss MacIntosh is doing what humans have always done with their pain: finding it a lineage, giving it a history, refusing to let it be merely random. If she is bald, then she is bald like a prince. If she has no crown, then neither did he, and he survived it.

Lorena

Of all the orphans Miss MacIntosh cared for in her years as a matron, she loved only two well enough to keep in contact: a forger imprisoned at Alcatraz, who sent her beautifully decorated Christmas cards every year with signatures ranging “from Abraham Lincoln to William Jennings Bryan”; and Lorena.

Lorena was a dancing girl: dark, beautiful, with long hair like "the midnight curtain concealing the star until the star was revealed." She laughed at Miss MacIntosh when they first met, and then ran away, and eventually became a strip-tease dancer. Years later she was paroled into Miss MacIntosh's care, and she ran away again, and Miss MacIntosh could not pursue her because pursuing was not what a parole officer could do.

Lorena lived in the spotlight. Miss MacIntosh lived in the shadow. Between them, every possible trajectory of womanhood: the one who displayed herself and the one who concealed herself, the one who slept with many men and the one who learned to live without protection, the one who danced in the light and the one who saved on electric lights because she hated what they stood for.

Miss MacIntosh reflects that Lorena once invited her to join the strip-tease act, believing she would have made a sensational performer. The image is almost unbearably poignant: bald Miss MacIntosh, in a spotlight. The woman who spent her life keeping her wig on, imagined as the woman who takes everything off.

She says they became, “for many years, very dear friends.”

Vera sees what Miss MacIntosh cannot

This is the chapter's turning point, and Young handles it with great delicacy. As Miss MacIntosh speaks, Vera begins to perceive something: she can see Miss MacIntosh, in a way that Miss MacIntosh cannot see herself. She sees the courage inside the practicality, the loneliness inside the sternness, the love inside the woman who said love is "a system of mutual deception."

The pale narcissus appears here, when Vera wonders whether one of her mother's physicians might know a cure for baldness: hair growing back would be “no more miracle than that grass should grow in a stony land or a flower, a pale narcissus break through rock.”

And she begins composing her elegy. Not out loud. Internally. The way Mr. Spitzer composes music that no one hears. The way everything in this novel that matters most

happens in the interior, where only the composer knows it exists.

"I wandered. I wandered on and on. I broke my nose. I lost my breast."

Miss MacIntosh compresses her life into a few spare sentences that Young gives her without decoration. She wandered from job to job, from city to city. She broke her nose: how, she doesn't fully explain. She lost her breast to a mastectomy. She had no place. She walked into the traffic flow.

That last detail: walking into traffic. This may have been her first attempt at suicide. Young doesn't say so directly. She leaves it open, the way she leaves everything open: as something that might have been accident, might have been intention, might have been the moment between them that she survived without understanding why. Miss MacIntosh, who stood for reality against illusion, for life against dream, for the practical against the imagined; she also walked into traffic once, and did not die.

She learned, after all that, to live without protection. For a woman of her era, this is no small statement. Without a father's household and without a husband's, a woman of Miss MacIntosh's time had nothing in a very literal sense: no social standing, no legal protection, no safety net of any kind. She built her own shelter out of practicality and an umbrella and a wig made from stolen horsehair. She carried herself through the world with the one thing she could control: her willingness to face it.

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity"

Miss MacIntosh reaches for Ecclesiastes in this chapter: the Preacher's great cry that everything under the sun is empty, fleeting, futile. Wealth, wisdom, pleasure, effort: all passes. All comes to nothing.

In Miss MacIntosh's mouth this is not despair. It is realism. She has never needed illusions to sustain her; she has sustained herself on reality alone. If reality is ultimately vanity, that is not a reason to stop. You knit your bones together even though they unravel faster than you can knit. You carry your umbrella. You go.

The last month

Vera, telling this long afterward, places it in “that last month where the old values had shifted before my eyes.” Everything that has just been said (the baldness, Lorena, the wandering, the traffic) has been said in the shadow of ending. Miss MacIntosh knew, when she removed her wig in Chapter 63, that she was running out of time for pretense. Now the time itself is visibly running out.

Vera will lose the only person who ever told her the truth. And she is already, silently, beginning to mourn.

What to hold onto

Miss MacIntosh, bald-headed, telling Vera the story of the Gaelic prince who lost his crown at sea, and the dancing girl who ran away, and the forger who sent Christmas cards from Alcatraz. And Vera, listening, seeing her clearly for the first time, and beginning to understand that this is an elegy she is composing, even now, even while Miss MacIntosh is still speaking.

For the Curious

On the MacIntosh motto

On the MacIntosh motto.

The Scottish clan MacIntosh carries the motto *Touch not the cat but a glove*: meaning, do not touch the wildcat without a protective glove, a warning about the ferocity beneath the surface. Miss MacIntosh, who appears so plain and practical, who seems so safely knowable, carries this same warning in her name. She has claws. She always did. The wig concealed the baldness, but nothing concealed the cat.

On the barber pole

On the barber pole.

The red-and-white striped pole that marks barbershops has its origin in bloodletting: barbers in medieval Europe served as surgeons as well as hairdressers, performing phlebotomy (drawing blood with leeches or lancets) alongside haircuts. The red symbolizes blood; the white, the bandage. The pole itself represents the staff patients gripped during the procedure. When Miss MacIntosh visits a barber hoping for some remedy for her baldness and finds instead this ancient symbol of futile medicine (leeches, blood, nothing to be done) Young is placing her in a long history of bodies that sought help from official sources and were told, eloquently, that nothing could be done.

On the forger at Alcatraz

On the forger at Alcatraz.

He is a minor character who carries enormous symbolic weight. He spent his life imitating other people's signatures (Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan) and yet his Christmas cards to Miss MacIntosh were among the most genuine acts of connection in her isolated life. A forger, in Young's world, is not simply a criminal. He is someone who understood the gap between authentic and imitation well enough to cross it at will. He sent her beauty, year after year, from prison. When he died, one of her two connections to her past as a matron was severed.

On phrenology

On phrenology.

The phrenologist who examined Miss MacIntosh's skull and praised its magnificent shape was practicing a pseudoscience: the belief that the contours of the skull reveal the character and intelligence of the person inside it. Phrenology was taken seriously through much of the nineteenth century and used, grotesquely, to reinforce racial and gender hierarchies: the phrenologist in this chapter believes males are smarter than females, and is apparently scandalized when Miss MacIntosh's skull suggests otherwise. The "nonconformist Bible quoters" who disapprove of his praise of her are even more revealing: they cannot tolerate a woman whose head tells a different story than the one they've decided she should have.

On the pale narcissus

On the pale narcissus.

Narcissus is the genus that includes daffodils: bulb flowers that push through frozen or rocky ground in early spring, often the first color after winter. The image Vera reaches for, a pale narcissus breaking through rock, is an image of insistence: not triumph, not glory, just the quiet, determined push of a living thing through resistance. This is what she sees in Miss MacIntosh. Not the wig or the umbrella or the practical lectures. The flower coming up through stone.

On "learning to live without protection."

On "learning to live without protection."

Miss MacIntosh says this about herself. For a woman of her era, early-to-mid twentieth century, a woman unattached to father or husband had no institutional protection of any kind: no inheritance rights, limited legal standing, no social safety net, no claim on anything. She built herself a life from nothing, carrying an umbrella against the weather and a wig against the laughter, working in orphanages and as a parole officer, taking care of other people's abandoned children. She learned, out of necessity, to protect herself. The umbrella is not just a symbol. It is the only shelter she could afford to carry.

On Ecclesiastes

On Ecclesiastes.

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" opens one of the Bible's most unflinching books: the Preacher's meditation on the meaninglessness of human striving under the sun. Work, wisdom, pleasure, wealth: all passes, all is wind. Young gives this line to Miss MacIntosh, who embodies its argument: she has never chased illusions, never sought glory, never accumulated wealth or beauty or social standing. She has faced the vanity of everything and kept going anyway. The Preacher, in the end, concludes: fear God and keep the commandments, for that is the whole of humanity. Miss MacIntosh's version is simpler: carry your umbrella. Keep walking. Be of good cheer.

Chapter 65: Mr. Bonebreaker's Umbrella

Research notes: Chapter 65

Characters: John Knox MacIntosh · Miss MacIntosh · Moses Hunnecker · Mr. Titus Bonebreaker · Richard MacIntosh · Vera Cartwheel

Symbols: Eyes and Blindness · Pregnancy, Birth, and Children · Snow, Ice, and Winter · The Sea and Water · The Umbrella

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Ancient Egypt · Don Quixote · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Revelation and the Apocalypse · The Bible

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Miss MacIntosh had a romance once. This is the chapter where she tells Vera about it.

His name was Mr. Titus Bonebreaker, and he was a Gospel salesman from Missouri, and he preached the end of the world on street corners, and he could not, in the end, accept the truth of her body. He left his umbrella behind when he fled. She kept it.

What actually happens

Miss MacIntosh tells Vera the story of Mr. Bonebreaker: how they met, their courtship, their engagement, and the night she showed him who she really was (bald, scarred, missing a breast) and he ran. She tells it plainly, with the dark humor she brings to everything. After he leaves, she works for a time among the blind in Chicago, where her physical differences are less visible. Then she drifts eastward, carrying his umbrella and a luminous watch he gave her, and eventually, she keeps going until she walks into the ocean.

This chapter is the romance of Miss MacIntosh's life, told in the past tense, because it is already over.

Mr. Bonebreaker

He is one of Young's great comic-tragic figures. A Gospel salesman, meaning he sold religious literature door to door, from the Missouri Ozarks, gaunt and stoop-shouldered with a beaked nose and bright eyes, perpetually preaching the Last Day. He ate no meat because cattle inhabited the earth, fowl the heaven, and fish the sea and rivers, and he would not consume any of them. His bones, he was fond of saying, quoting Psalm 22, were out of joint. He carried a long black umbrella. He believed Chicago would be destroyed, Babylon sunk into the sea, the Egyptians spoiled, the sinners called to account.

He is, in other words, a man who has organized his entire existence around the end of everything. And yet he falls in love with Miss MacIntosh.

This is not accidental on Young's part. The man who preaches annihilation falls for the woman who stands for endurance. The man who carries his umbrella as a symbol of

prophetic shelter falls for the woman who has carried her own umbrella all her life as practical protection. They are, briefly, a perfect pair: two people with umbrellas, facing the weather together.

And then he sees her without her wig.

"He had put away childish things"

Mr. Bonebreaker is fond of quoting 1 Corinthians 13: the great chapter on love that concludes with the line about seeing through a glass darkly, about knowing as we are known. He often said “he had put away childish things.” He believed this about himself: that he had transcended his past, his sins, his attachments, and become a man of pure spiritual purpose.

Miss MacIntosh observes, with characteristic sharpness, that there was still a child inside him, as there is inside everyone, and that the childlike parts of him were precisely the ones he refused to see. His dream of a heavenly crown. His rage at those who contradicted him. His brushes with the police. His inability to face her physical reality.

The night he fled

Miss MacIntosh showed him everything. The bald head. The missing breast. The scars of a body that had wandered, broken its nose, walked into traffic, kept going anyway. She showed him the truth she had been carrying under her wig and her mackintosh.

He ran. He left his umbrella. He left his Bible literature. He did not come back.

Young gives this moment without melodrama. Miss MacIntosh tells it the way she tells everything: flatly, with a dark joke at the edge of it. She had not expected it: she “had counted too much on his sudden or slow understanding and that compassion which had already accepted her with her barren breast.” It was her bald head he could not accept. And still she showed him. That is not naivety. That is courage of a particular, unglamorous kind: the courage of giving someone the chance to stay.

He called himself a man who could love truly. He could not. She let him discover this about himself.

Chicago and the blind

After he leaves, Miss MacIntosh works with the blind in Chicago. This is one of the chapter's quietest, most telling details: among people who cannot see, her baldness and her scars disappear. She is only herself, as she sounds and moves and speaks. For a time, she is simply a woman among people who meet her without the visible weight of her difference.

She does not stay. She drifts. She had always been chasing windmills, she tells Vera, shuffling cards with “the Dutch windmills flying on their backs”: a phrase she uses for the illusions she had allowed herself to pursue: connection, romance, being seen clearly and loved anyway. Young is in conversation here with *Don Quixote*, as she is throughout the

novel. Miss MacIntosh, who of all people should know better than to tilt at windmills, tilted at one. She is not ashamed of it. She is just done.

Niagara Falls, alone

She goes to Niagara Falls. She stands there alone, with her umbrella, among the honeymooners: "Shuffle Off to Buffalo," the song of people going to the falls for their first nights together, the tune she used to play “at the old, tinny piano” for the blind in Chicago. The noise and joy of other people's new beginnings. Miss MacIntosh, with no bridegroom but an invisible one (“she walked awhile like a bride accompanied by the invisible bridegroom, Mr. Bonebreaker”), and the black umbrella he left behind.

This image is almost unbearably concentrated. Niagara Falls is where people go to begin. She is there to mark an ending. And the falls keep falling, indifferent to the difference.

"She walked into the roaring ocean on a cold September morning"

Vera says it outright: “with her hands crossed over two major wounds, the breast, the side, she walked into the roaring ocean on a cold September morning.” We are not told exactly when (in the novel's chronology, it is still coming) but Chapter 65 places it clearly in view. The woman who stood at Niagara Falls alone will eventually walk into the sea. The woman who kept the rain out will go, finally, into the water.

The black umbrella will not help her there.

Mr. Bonebreaker's umbrella

She kept it. This is important. The woman whose own umbrella has been her signature (her shield, her symbol, her practical shelter) kept the umbrella of the man who could not love her truly. She carries both now. It is not clear whether she carries his as an act of mourning, or as a kind of dark joke, or simply because she needed an extra umbrella and there it was.

Young leaves this open. Miss MacIntosh would probably say she kept it because it was a perfectly good umbrella and she saw no reason to waste it.

What to hold onto

Miss MacIntosh standing at Niagara Falls, alone, holding her umbrella, or maybe his, while the water falls and falls, and somewhere behind her the honeymooners are beginning their lives. She is a woman whose heart was broken not by cruelty but by someone's failure of courage. She accepted this. She moved on. She kept the umbrella.

For the Curious

On the name Bonebreaker

On the name Bonebreaker.

Young did not invent this name from nothing. Bonebrake is an Americanized version of the German *Beinbrech*, which likely served as an occupational name for a herbalist: someone who worked with medicinal plants, including plants called "boneset" used to treat broken bones. A Gospel salesman named Bonebreaker, whose own bones are out of joint, who preaches about the breaking of the world: Young is doing what she always does with names. Every syllable is intentional.

On tilting at windmills

On tilting at windmills.

Miss MacIntosh says she had been chasing Dutch windmills: a direct reference to *Don Quixote*, where the knight mistakes windmills for giants and charges them. Young has been in conversation with Cervantes throughout this novel: Vera's search for Miss MacIntosh echoes Quixote's quests, Moses Hunnecker the bus driver is described as a mad Quixote, and now Miss MacIntosh herself admits to her own windmill. The novel is full of people fighting what isn't there, longing for what won't come, attacking what cannot be attacked. Young does not mock them for it. Quixote, after all, is not a fool. He is the highest aspiration of human beings, reaching for something real even when the world insists the giants are only windmills.

On "since in heaven nobody remembers anybody."

On "since in heaven nobody remembers anybody."

This is Mr. Bonebreaker's bleakest line, delivered as part of his apocalyptic preaching: in heaven, individual identity dissolves, earthly attachments evaporate, no one knows anyone. For Miss MacIntosh, already profoundly lonely, this is a peculiar form of consolation to offer, and she rejects it. She does not want an afterlife of universal amnesia. She has already spent her life being someone others couldn't quite see or hold. She is not comforted by the promise that it won't matter in the end.

On "Love Lifted Me."

On "Love Lifted Me."

The 1912 hymn Mr. Bonebreaker sings was written by James Rowe and draws on Matthew 14: the story of Peter walking on water, beginning to sink, and being caught by Jesus. The hymn is about being pulled from drowning by divine love. That Mr. Bonebreaker sings this to a woman who will eventually walk into the ocean is one of Young's characteristically quiet ironic placements. The hymn promises rescue. The novel does not guarantee it.

On Niagara Falls and honeymooners

On Niagara Falls and honeymooners.

The falls have been a honeymoon destination since the early nineteenth century, when the Erie Canal and the railroad made them accessible. By Miss MacIntosh's time, the association was so fixed that the song "Shuffle Off to Buffalo", from the 1933 musical film *42nd Street*, was already a popular shorthand for the honeymoon journey. Miss MacIntosh stands in the most famous beginning-place in America, alone, with an umbrella. Young uses this as only Young would: not for melodrama, but for the quiet, devastating precision of the contrast.

On Richard MacIntosh and the Easter Islands

On Richard MacIntosh and the Easter Islands.

Miss MacIntosh's brother, Richard, “a primitive Christian bishop from Iowa,” went to convert the heathen and disappeared, presumably taken by headhunters. Miss MacIntosh carries this loss too, the absent brother who went to the end of the world to give people something they hadn't asked for, and didn't come back. Young places this alongside Mr. Bonebreaker's failed mission to save Miss MacIntosh's soul: both men wanted to convert someone. Neither succeeded. Both vanished from her life.

On John Knox MacIntosh

On John Knox MacIntosh.

Miss MacIntosh's father shares his first name with John Knox: the Scottish minister who founded the Church of Scotland during the Reformation, a man of ferocious conviction who accepted no compromise with the world he believed was wrong. This is Miss MacIntosh's inheritance: a father named for the most uncompromising reformer in Scottish history, a family motto that says don't touch the cat without a glove, and a life spent facing the world exactly as it is. She comes by her severity honestly. It is in the name.

Chapter 66: The Last Month

Research notes: Chapter 66

Characters: Joachim Spitzer · Miss MacIntosh · Mr. Titus Bonebreaker · Old Friday · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Faith, God, and the Supernatural

Symbols: Clothing, Hats, and Skirts · Clouds and Storms

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Exploration and the Poles · Gambling and Playing Cards · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Shakespeare · Suicide in History and Literature

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We are in the final weeks. Miss MacIntosh is still alive, still talking, but everything she says now carries the weight of what Vera knows, looking back: that this is the last month they will have together, that the stories are being told because there won't be another chance to tell them. The chapter opens with Miss MacIntosh dressed for a long voyage she insists they are not going on, and it ends with her clothes strewn on the beach and her red wig torn in the sand.

Chapter 66 is the month, and the disappearance, and everything between.

What actually happens

Miss MacIntosh teaches Vera during a storm (geography, history, the heart, biology, socialism, finance) questions she fires out whether or not Vera can answer them, which Vera usually cannot. She tells Vera about her imaginary dealings on the Stock Exchange, which she calls "a palace of evil" she visits to level the rich. She tells her about the Arctic Explorer she met there. She tells her about her removed ovaries, her physical amputations, her rival love. She prepares Vera, in her eccentric and relentless way, for a world she is about to enter alone.

And then, one cold September morning, she walks into the ocean.

Miss MacIntosh in a storm

The image Young gives us at the chapter's opening is one of her great portraits: Miss MacIntosh in her whaler's hat and sea boots, black umbrella billowing, teaching Vera lessons by hurricane lamp while a storm batters the windows. She is dressed for a voyage she claims is not happening. She is prepared for an ocean she says she is not entering.

She asks questions she doesn't wait for answers to. She lectures on socialism while walking in the surf with her skirts pinned up. She decries the unequal distribution of wealth, the rich throwing dollar bills out of windows while the poor don't catch them, and she goes to the Stock Exchange to make imaginary money, she says, to level them all so

they should be poor together. She invests in anthracite and tin but refuses to invest in zippers because in What Cheer, Iowa, zippers are against the will of God.

She is, as she has always been, magnificent and impossible and entirely herself.

The Arctic Explorer

At the Stock Exchange, that palace of evil she visits with her imaginary portfolio, Miss MacIntosh meets a wooden-legged explorer from Denmark, born near Elsinore Castle (yes, Hamlet's castle, and yes, Young knows exactly what she is doing with that detail). He has swept his broom, as he says, through all the great squares of the world: Trafalgar, the Kremlin, St. Mark's. He has seen things in the Arctic that have stripped him of whatever ordinary life he might have had.

He asks Miss MacIntosh, repeatedly, to come with him to the North Pole. He wants to leave everything behind (the Stock Exchange, the cities, all of it) and go north into the silence and the ice, where, he says, there is nothing unknown because nothing is known, and therefore nothing to fear.

She is drawn to him. They have “something in common—their differences from others,” their amputations (his leg, her breast and baldness) and their shared “sense of having killed something young and helpless” in themselves somewhere along the way. He reminds her of her father, who also lost a leg. Young does not make this explicit as psychology; she offers it plainly, as one of the facts of Miss MacIntosh's interior life.

But she doesn't go north with him. She has Vera to attend to. She has her imaginary stocks. She has her socialism and her umbrella and her What Cheer prejudices against zippers. She stays.

"That old religion"

Miss MacIntosh reflects on Mr. Bonebreaker in this chapter with the clarity of retrospect: he belonged to “that old religion in which woman must kneel before man.” She couldn't kneel. She was bald and had no breast and had nothing of what that religion required of women: no seductive hair to wash a man's feet with, no performed femininity, no willingness to submit. She rejected this not defiantly but practically: it simply was not available to her, and she was not sorry.

Young makes here one of the novel's most direct feminist arguments, and she makes it through Miss MacIntosh's characteristic combination of practicality and dark humor. The "old religion" is patriarchy (the system that entitles men to women's submission, bodies, and labor) and Miss MacIntosh has spent her whole life outside it, not by choice exactly, but by condition. Her baldness, her missing breast, her removed ovaries made her unintelligible to the system. And so she went her own way.

Her hopes for the world

Among the things Miss MacIntosh tells Vera she hopes for before she dies: an end to the British Empire, an end to colonialism, the King of England losing his crown, the Tong wars ending, China the Sleeping Dragon awakening, the world reformed so that by the time Vera grows up there will be no rich people. She teaches Vera "the beauty of deprivation." She hopes for simple humanity.

These are not small hopes. They are the hopes of a woman who has lived entirely outside privilege and power, who has seen what wealth does and what empire does and what patriarchy does, and who has concluded that the structure needs to come down. She has no illusions that it will. But she teaches Vera to see it clearly, because seeing clearly is what she has always done.

The amputations she carries

In this chapter we learn the full accounting of what Miss MacIntosh's body has lost: her hair, her breast, her ovaries. She carries these losses the way she carries everything, without sentimentality, with full acknowledgment. She mentions "a rival love": suggesting her romantic life was more complicated than even Chapter 65's story of Mr. Bonebreaker conveyed. She does not elaborate. She moves on.

What she says instead is this: her death, when it comes, will be a natural death. Not a suicide; she is not like the gamblers on the Stock Exchange, she says, frenzied by losses, jumping from high windows. She will just go. Quietly, without forwarding address, into the sea.

The clothes on the beach

Young gives us the disappearance with devastating simplicity. The clothes strewn on the beach. The red wig torn in the sand. The waves returning with everything but her. Old Friday, the dog, barking by the sea: still barking, afterward, as if she might be “a moving shadow, a shadow of a black umbrella moving over water and sand—as if perhaps she had never gone or had returned.”

Vera asks: had the dog “not known the denudation and the dream, the reality and the illusion, how each must live by some pretense?” Old Friday barks at the waves. The waves come back swollen with wind, “like sheep with a thousand bells.” She is not in them.

She walked in. She did not come back. That is all.

What Vera understood, long years after

This chapter is told in retrospect: Vera looking back from long years after the disappearance, seeing the lessons in a new light. As a child, she took Miss MacIntosh's eccentricities for granted. The whaler's hat during arithmetic. The umbrella in the surf. The

imaginary stocks. She absorbed all of it without fully understanding it, as children do: taking on every color except her own, she says, because she had no color yet to claim.

Now she understands. The lessons were not orthodox. The questions were not about answers. The month of stories was a bequest: Miss MacIntosh giving away everything she knew before she went into the water. She was making her will, the way Mr. Spitzer made his will with his music: leaving what she had to someone who might receive it, even if reception was uncertain.

What to hold onto

Old Friday, at the edge of the sea, barking. The red wig in the sand. The waves coming back without her. A dog who perceives something the living cannot quite see (a moving shadow, a black umbrella's shadow over water) and who refuses to stop barking at it.

She kept the rain out for as long as she could. Then she walked into the rain.

For the Curious

On Elsinore

On Elsinore.

The Arctic Explorer is from Denmark, born near Elsinore Castle: Hamlet's castle, the site of the most famous meditation on death and inaction in Western literature. Young places this quietly, without commentary. But the man who asks Miss MacIntosh to come with him to the place where "nothing is unknown because nothing is known" is a man from the same geography as Hamlet's question: *To be or not to be.* To go north or not to go north. To walk into the ocean or to stay.

On "their sense of having killed something young and helpless."

On "their sense of having killed something young and helpless."

This is the detail Young uses to explain the bond between Miss MacIntosh and the Arctic Explorer, not their amputations, though those connect them too, but this shared psychological weight. Neither character explains what they killed, what young helpless thing they each carry guilt for. Young leaves it as a presence rather than a fact. It could be innocence, or hope, or someone specific, or the younger self they each had to abandon to survive. Whatever it is, they recognize it in each other across a crowded palace of evil.

On socialism at the Stock Exchange

On socialism at the Stock Exchange.

Miss MacIntosh is a resolute socialist who visits the Stock Exchange to level the rich: imagining, playing, studying the market with real acuity, but investing nothing real. This is one of Young's great comic-serious portraits: a woman who hates capitalism and understands it completely, who goes to its temple not to worship but to surveil. She refuses zippers because in What Cheer they're against God's will, but she tracks the

Anaconda Copper Mining Company with genuine attention. She would not have been out of place in a Matt Taibbi piece on Wall Street, except she would have been wearing a whaler's hat.

On Captain Cook and Commander Peary

On Captain Cook and Commander Peary.

The Arctic Explorer dismisses both: says they would “have done better as fiction writers.” He means they overclaimed. Peary's assertion of reaching the North Pole first has long been disputed; Matthew Henson, the Black explorer who was part of the expedition, is now thought to have been the first to reach what they believed to be the Pole. And Cook's Pacific voyages, celebrated in Miss MacIntosh's era, have since been criticized for their role in colonialism. The Explorer (a man who has actually been in the Arctic, who has lost his leg there) has earned his skepticism about the official record.

On the beauty of deprivation

On the beauty of deprivation.

This is the most compressed version of Miss MacIntosh's philosophy of education. She does not teach Vera to want things. She teaches her to find what is real and sufficient in what exists. The beauty of deprivation is not the beauty of suffering; it is the beauty of knowing what you actually need, and finding that it is not very much. Given what we know of her own life (sleeping in doorways, making wigs from horsehair, saving on electric lights) she teaches from experience.

On the 1929 crash and the windows

On the 1929 crash and the windows.

When Miss MacIntosh says her death will be natural, not suicide, not like the gamblers jumping from high windows after the crash, she is placing herself, and her death, against one of the defining images of the Great Depression. Whether men actually jumped from Wall Street windows in 1929 is historically contested (far fewer did than the myth suggests), but the image was real in the cultural imagination of Miss MacIntosh's era. She distinguishes herself from those men deliberately: she is not frenzied by loss, not destroyed by the market, not driven to despair by financial ruin. She walks into the ocean calmly, on her own terms, on a cold September morning, as she has always done everything.

On Old Friday

On Old Friday.

Named, likely, for Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*: the loyal companion who appears from nowhere and remains faithful regardless of circumstance. Miss MacIntosh's dog keeps her company through her disappearance and after, barking at the sea that took her. Crusoe's Friday was a man Crusoe rescued and then made into a servant; Miss MacIntosh's Friday is a dog who asks nothing of her and loses her anyway. Young gives

her the most faithful mourner she has: the one creature who never needed her to be ordinary.

Chapter 67: Move Over, Doc

Research notes: Chapter 67

Characters: Homer Capehorn · Justice O’Leary · Lorena · Madge Capehorn · Miss MacIntosh · Moses Hunnecker · Mr. Titus Bonebreaker · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Love

Symbols: Pregnancy, Birth, and Children · The Bus and the Journey

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Exploration and the Poles · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest

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We are back on the bus.

After four chapters in the deep past of Miss MacIntosh's life (her baldness, Lorena, Mr. Bonebreaker, the Arctic Explorer, the last month, the clothes on the beach) Young returns us to the present tense of the novel: Vera on a bus in the grey American Midwest, searching for What Cheer, Iowa. Moses Hunnecker is still driving. Madge and Homer are still aboard. The bus has arrived in Indiana, in front of a tavern.

And Moses cannot park.

What actually happens

The bus pulls up to a tavern in Indiana and stops. Moses wants to park. He cannot park because, he insists, an old Ford belonging to someone he calls "old Doc" is blocking the space. The passengers do not get off the bus. Moses addresses old Doc directly, at length, cursing, pleading, reasoning, and threatening, while the passengers rock in their seats, held there, Vera says, by “an infinite weariness.” Madge laughs breathlessly. Homer daydreams about a bride. Vera sits and watches and feels tired and dreamlike.

Old Doc does not move. He may not exist. The bus does not park. Nobody gets off.

That is the entirety of Chapter 67's external event. It is also, in its way, everything.

Who is old Doc?

Moses talks to him as if he is there: an unseen presence in an old ghost buggy, a Ford without essential parts, blocking the space. Children, Moses says, shoot at him with bean-shooters. He is dead from the shoulders down. He is the undertaker in a hearse, or perhaps he is the doctor who became an undertaker, which is to say the best doctor of all.

Vera briefly contemplates this: old Doc as undertaker, death wearing a medical coat. Young leaves it open, as she always does. Old Doc might be a real person Moses knows, a former local doctor who parks badly and ignores horns. He might be a ghost. He might be death itself, parked immovably in the one spot the living need to reach.

What Moses wants, very simply, is for death to move over. To give way. To let the bus get where it's going.

Death does not move over.

Moses and the rules of traffic

Moses's frustration erupts into a lecture about traffic order: chalk lines, detour signs, slow-turn signals, the basic courtesies that keep movement possible. He is a man who believes in rules, even as he drives erratically, drinks openly, and calls on angels from behind the wheel. He believes the road should work by logic. If everyone followed the chalk lines, the traffic would flow, the buses would park, the living could get off and get on with it.

But old Doc's ghost buggy doesn't follow chalk lines. The past doesn't consult detour signs. Death is not interested in yield requirements.

This is Moses's essential predicament, and in a way it is everyone's on this bus: the laws of order and forward motion keep failing to account for what is actually blocking the road.

Madge on the ferris wheel

Madge describes their situation with a precision that cuts through Moses's noise: it is like being stalled at the top of a ferris wheel in the sky, she says. Like being trapped in a crazy house with mirrored walls and no doors.

Madge is pregnant, unhappy, returning to a place she doesn't want to return to, married to the man dreaming beside her. She knows about being stalled. She knows about mirrored walls. Her laughter (high and thin, breathless) is the laughter of someone who has given up expecting things to move.

Homer, meanwhile, daydreams about a bride. He fears his wife might never know the bride he envisions, which may simply mean he daydreams of a woman who is not Madge, or may mean something more obscure, a future self no one can reach from here. Homer is always asleep or dreaming when the important things happen. He is the person on the bus least troubled by old Doc's ghost buggy, which is the same as saying he is the person least troubled by death.

"I can't give you anything but love, baby"

Moses, draped over the steering wheel, sings this softly to himself: a 1928 song born from a couple window-shopping at Tiffany's, a man saying to his beloved: I can't buy you the sparkler. I can only give you this. Moses is a man of grandiose faith and spectacular failure, driving a bus that can't park, addressing a ghost who won't move, singing a tender song about the limits of what love can offer.

Young chooses her songs as carefully as she chooses her names. This one fits Moses exactly: all the feeling, none of the resources.

Back to the beginning

Young makes a structural move here. We have just come through four chapters of Miss MacIntosh's death: the accumulation of her life told in the last month she had, ending with clothes on a beach and a dog barking at the sea. That is the novel's emotional climax, in many ways. It is what Vera's journey is moving toward and away from simultaneously.

And now: Moses. A tavern in Indiana. A ghost buggy blocking the space.

Young returns us to the bus not to deflate what came before, but to remind us that the novel has always been both things at once: the vast interior tragedy and the small comic frustration, the philosophical abyss and the man shouting at a parking space. The bus keeps moving even when it can't park. Vera keeps searching even after the beach. The wheel turns. Moses drives on.

What to hold onto

Moses Hunnecker, slumped over the steering wheel of a bus that cannot park, singing softly to a ghost who will not move, while his passengers rock in infinite weariness and the Indiana night settles in around them. The chalk lines don't account for this. Neither does anything else. And yet the bus will move again, eventually, and they will get where they are going.

Or they won't. But Moses will keep driving regardless.

For the Curious

On Moses and Democrats

On Moses and Democrats.

Moses hates Democrats, and his hostility is almost certainly directed at Franklin D. Roosevelt: the president from 1933 to 1941. Since Miss MacIntosh claimed to have visited San Francisco before the Golden Gate Bridge was built (completed in 1937), the novel's present-tense action places us somewhere in that era, which puts FDR in the White House and Moses in a state of political irritation that the novel treats as simply another one of his weather conditions.

On "The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay."

On "The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay."

Moses quotes Oliver Wendell Holmes's famous comic poem, in which a deacon builds a carriage so perfectly constructed, every part as strong as every other part, that it cannot break down from weakness anywhere. It lasts a hundred years exactly, and then, precisely on the centenary, collapses all at once into a heap of dust. Holmes wrote it as a satire of Calvinist theology: a system built so logically that when it fails, it fails completely and all at once. Moses, who is himself a kind of one-hoss shay, held together by faith and

whiskey and stubbornness, quotes this poem while unable to park his bus. Young is, as always, doing several things at once.

On "I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby."

On "I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby."

The song was written in 1928 by Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh, inspired by a couple window-shopping at Tiffany's who couldn't afford what they saw. The man says: I can't get you the sparkler, but I can give you love. It became one of the era's great standards: tender, modest, and slightly heartbreaking in its cheerful acceptance of limitation. Moses sings it softly, to no one, slumped over his wheel, unable to move his bus. It is the right song for the moment.

On "Sweet Mary O'Grady."

On "Sweet Mary O'Grady."

Moses sings this too, except the famous song is "Sweet Rosie O'Grady": a sentimental ballad about a sweetheart. Moses has the name wrong, which is entirely in keeping with who Moses is: a man who sings the right feelings to the wrong words, who drives toward a destination he can't quite reach, who calls on God and angels and gets a ghost buggy blocking his parking space.

On old Doc as the best doctor

On old Doc as the best doctor.

The dark joke running through Moses's rant is that old Doc (possibly the local physician, possibly death wearing a doctor's coat) is called "the best doctor" precisely because the undertaker is the one doctor who can guarantee results. Everyone Moses can think of has eventually come under old Doc's care. The undertaker never loses a patient; he only receives them. Moses addresses this figure with furious respect, the way one addresses an authority that cannot be argued with but must be argued with anyway.

Chapter 68: The Tavern

Research notes: Chapter 68

Characters: Homer Capehorn · Madge Capehorn · Marie Weed · Miss MacIntosh · Moses Hunnecker · Mr. Weed · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Death and Mortality

Symbols: Cards, Games, and Chance · The Bus and the Journey · The Sea and Water

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Angels and Archangels · Fairy Tales and Folklore · Gambling and Playing Cards · Lynching and Racial Violence · Romantic Poets · Suicide in History and Literature

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Chapter 68 is the chapter where the bus stops.

After all those miles of grey midwestern mist, the endless circling of Vera's mind, the somnambulant passengers and Moses Hunnecker's whiskey-fueled navigation through fog, the bus finally arrives. Vera, Madge, and Homer disembark. And then, quietly, without ceremony, Madge and Homer walk away and disappear from the novel entirely. You met these people back in Chapters 6 to 8. They are simply gone now.

What Vera walks into instead is the Tavern: a decaying, mildewed hotel built in 1827 by what its sign calls "God's servants," now given over to shadows and thin walls that seem to hear everything. And at the hotel counter, signing the register, she finds Mr. Weed.

Mr. Weed is a professional hangman. A Christian one. And he would very much like to tell you about his work.

What Actually Happens

Moses leaves the bus standing in the middle of the street and goes into the Tavern. Vera watches Madge and Homer leave the novel without looking back. She waits to check in at the Tavern while, at the counter, the Tavern's landlord and Mr. Weed, a large man in a wide-brimmed Western hat, are deep in conversation.

Mr. Weed is a hangman by profession and a family man by inclination. He has two wives: a first one, Marie, who hanged herself from a peach tree in their orchard because she feared another pregnancy, and a second one, Julia, who has the mind of a child and sometimes wears Marie's old clothes. He has children who play at hanging themselves. He carries a Parker fountain pen given to him by "the condemned's grateful relatives," a Jew's harp he plays on the shortcut home through the orchard, and a black poker chip he found in his coat pocket one day, in the suit he wears to hangings and to church, and has no idea how it got there.

He sees himself as a humanitarian. He makes death painless. He is, in his own estimation, more merciful than the alternatives.

The landlord is skeptical. He has a hotel that, he says, sinks every night (and, as Chapter 69 shows, a "Remember the Marne" tattoo). He would rather talk about knots, not

hangman’s knots, but lovers’ knots, the marital kind that hold until Gabriel blows his horn. He thinks Mr. Weed doesn’t even know how to tie his own bow-tie properly.

Vera listens to all of this. That is what she does in this chapter. She listens.

The People You’re Meeting

Mr. Weed, the Christian Hangman

He is one of Young’s great grotesque figures: a man whose profession is death and whose self-image is one of mercy. He is a good father, he says. He attends church. He is a vegetarian who dreams of cooking live pigs. He is haunted by the memory of cutting Marie down from the peach tree “a split second too late.” As a young man in Kentucky he saw a Black man hanged “for sleeping with a white woman as he surely never did,” and cut down “a split second too soon”; afterward the man “was seen pushing a battered baby buggy over a bumpy field,” and people “were frightened out of their wits.” This is the kind of efficiency problem that troubles Mr. Weed. Not the injustice of the hanging. The incompleteness of it.

He is not a monster. That is what makes him so disturbing. He is ordinary. He is integrated into American society, into its churches and its courtrooms and its sense of civic duty. He is the man who makes it all painless, and the rest of the people are silent accepters of death.

His three symbolic objects tell you everything you need to know about him: the pen that was a hanged man’s family’s thanks, the harp that can’t quite drown out the darkness, and the poker chip that appeared from nowhere and connects to nothing. Clues that lead nowhere. Evidence that explains nothing.

Marie Weed, the First Wife

She is only present through her absence, through the hangman’s fractured memories, through the peach tree in the orchard, through Julia wearing her old clothes. She hanged herself because she could not bear another pregnancy. She was afraid of her own body, of what it might produce against her will. Young is quietly, devastatingly precise about this: Marie hanged herself “when he was fast asleep and she feared she had conceived again.” The history behind it is just as precise: the Comstock Laws were still in effect, women had essentially no legal right to contraception, and a woman’s body under those conditions was not entirely her own. Marie’s suicide is individual and it is also historical.

Her maiden name was Oliver, and Mr. Weed notes that “the Olivers were known for hanging” themselves. Young has chosen this carefully: Oliver Cromwell was posthumously hanged; Andrew Oliver was hanged in effigy; Oliver Moore was lynched in North Carolina in 1930. The name carries the history of bodies suspended from ropes, official and unofficial, sanctioned and not.

Moses, the Bus Driver

Moses reappears briefly here, struggling to park the bus, anxious about getting home to his old mother. His mother, he says, thinks he is her bridegroom. He keeps traffic rules, metaphorically, even in her bridal chamber; he maintains distance, refuses to enter her delusion fully, remains tethered to her by guilt and obligation rather than love. He won't cut his hair until the Democrats stop running things. He made that promise to her. He dreams of escape. He goes home instead.

Moses has led his passengers through the grey wilderness. He never reaches the promised land himself. That's always been his job.

The Landlord

A WWI veteran, a man who has heard everything and trusts none of it, who runs a hotel that sinks every night and somehow surfaces every morning. He grounds the scene. He is the voice of the mundane world pushing back against Mr. Weed's philosophical self-justifications. His counter-argument is the marital knot: love, he implies, is the only knot that matters, and Mr. Weed, for all his expertise with rope, doesn't understand it at all.

The Farewell to Madge and Homer

Don't let this pass you by. Since Chapters 6 to 8, Madge Capehorn has been riding this bus in her resistant, unhappy way: pregnant, possibly with someone else's child, returning to a life she didn't choose. Homer has been sleeping his innocent, placid sleep beside her. They have been one of the novel's first quiet jokes: the woman who knows too much, awake and suffering; the man who knows nothing, peacefully asleep.

And now they simply walk away. No resolution. No reckoning. They disappear into their lives the way people in novels almost never do but people in reality always do: mid-story, without explanation, while you're still watching. This is Young telling you something about the structure of attention. Vera's attention, and yours, has been so focused on the question of Miss MacIntosh that the rest of the world continues, and ends, at the edges of that focus. We never find out what happens to Madge. That is the point.

The Tavern

Built in 1827 by God's servants, now given over to mildewed brick and claw-like vines and walls so thin they seem to hear everything. The sign out front reads "Gentle Incline — Bride Ahead—" It is supposed to say "Bridge Ahead." This is the first thing Vera notices.

A gentle incline. A bride. Ahead. The Tavern is a crossroads between life and death: the kind of place you stay when you are between one thing and another, when you have left what you had and haven't yet arrived at what comes next. It is filled with human-faced wasps and shadows that don't lift. Its interior, Vera notes, surpasses her imagination. The place exceeds expectation in the wrong direction. It is, in short, America: built with faith, decayed into commerce, full of secrets, haunted by history, and somehow still operating.

The Black Poker Chip

This is one of Young's great images of futile evidence. A black poker chip found near the head of a murdered woman wearing rose-colored sunglasses. A clue. Except it leads "nowhere, nowhere at all, like a" businessman's address book "found in the hollow of a nearby oak tree." It is simply confusing.

And then Mr. Weed reaches into his coat pocket and finds a black poker chip there. He has no idea how it got in. He doesn't gamble. It is the suit he wears to hangings and to church. This is what the novel does with truth and evidence: accumulates them without resolving them. The chip is real. The chip is meaningless. Both things are true at once. Reality, as Vera reflects in this chapter, is whatever is experienced: "even the unreal things were real." The chip is in his pocket. That is all we know. That is enough.

The Central Paradox: Mercy and the Rope

Mr. Weed sees himself as a missionary of painless death. He is there to make the terrible thing as humane as possible. He is, in his estimation, the most merciful man in the room.

Young does not let this go unchallenged, but she also doesn't refute it cheaply. Mr. Weed is not wrong that the alternative: a botched hanging, a man cut down too soon, surviving his own execution to push a baby buggy through a town that cannot look at him: is worse. He is not wrong that the people who hire him are comfortable outsourcing their discomfort. He is not wrong that he is the only one who has to live with what happens in that room.

He is entirely wrong that this makes him good. The chapter holds both things. It is the novel's way with American mythology: the story we tell ourselves about mercy, about justice, about painless efficiency, about the man who does the difficult work so the rest of us don't have to. We make him respectable. We put him in a church pew. We let him carry a Parker pen and a Jew's harp, and we don't look too hard at the suit he wears to both.

What to Hold Onto

The misread sign: "Gentle Incline —Bride Ahead—" You are on a gentle incline now, moving toward something. Whether it is a bride or a bridge is not yet clear.

The black poker chip in the pocket of the suit worn to hangings and to church. Evidence that goes nowhere. Keep it.

Marie Weed "hanging from the peach tree in the" orchard, her husband arriving a split second too late. He plays the Jew's harp on the shortcut home through that same orchard. He still takes the shortcut.

And Vera, at the edge of all this, watching. Listening. Adding these people to the great interior catalogue of her mind. She cannot save any of them. She can only bear witness.

Miss MacIntosh believed in facts. In the cold honest surface of things. Vera has been traveling toward that belief for sixty-eight chapters now, and what she keeps finding

instead is this: Mr. Weed's poker chip. A clue that leads nowhere. The truth that keeps arriving in the wrong suit.

For the Curious

On the Comstock Laws and Marie's Death

On the Comstock Laws and Marie's Death

Marie Weed hangs herself from a peach tree because she fears another pregnancy. Young is situating this terror historically: the Comstock Laws, named for Anthony Comstock and passed in the 1870s, criminalized the distribution of contraception and information about it in the United States. Margaret Sanger challenged them publicly beginning in 1914, but full legal access to birth control for married and unmarried women in the US was not established until 1972. Marie's death is not simply personal despair. It is the despair of a woman whose body is not legally her own.

On the Name Oliver

On the Name Oliver

Mr. Weed tells Vera that his first wife's maiden name was Oliver, and that "the Olivers were known for hanging" themselves. Young has stacked this name with history: Andrew Oliver, the Massachusetts official responsible for implementing the Stamp Act, was hanged in effigy. Oliver Cromwell was disinterred two years after his death and posthumously hanged, then beheaded. Oliver Moore was lynched in North Carolina in 1930, his body left on display while thousands gathered. The name is a genealogy of the rope.

On Knots

On Knots

The landlord's lecture on knots is not a detour. He is distinguishing the hangman's knowledge of ropes from the only knowledge that matters: the lover's knot, the marital bond, the tie that holds until Gabriel blows his horn. The history of knots is among the oldest human technologies: predating the wheel, documented in record-keeping systems like the Inca khipu, essential to every seafaring civilization. The landlord knows overhand knots, running bowlines, figure-of-eights. What he is saying is that Mr. Weed, for all his expertise, doesn't know the one kind of knot that matters.

On the Mandrake

On the Mandrake

Mr. Weed's most haunting reflection concerns what happens at the moment of hanging: a ghostly progeny shot forth into the "air. Ten thousand sons and daughters" falling like cobwebs into nothingness, or else taking root around the scaffold, "flower-faced children winged like birds and rooted in earth, the mandrakes screaming when they are pulled up by the roots." The mandrake plant, a hallucinogenic and narcotic, was said in folklore to

grow from the blood of a hanged man, its root shaped like a human form. It screams when uprooted. Young is giving Mr. Weed a mythology for his work: hanging as a kind of terrible marriage with death, generative in the most grotesque sense.

On Ilse Koch

On Ilse Koch

The woman whose jail cell was furnished with “satin hangings and a German music box with a horn and a Yale pennant” is a reference to Ilse Koch, wife of the commandant of Buchenwald, convicted of war crimes for her treatment of prisoners. The Yale pennant alludes to a piece of tattooed human skin, attributed to her collection of such objects, said to bear a collegiate design. Prosecutors in her trials were ultimately unable to conclusively prove she ordered the creation of these items. She was sentenced to life imprisonment and died by suicide in prison in 1967. Young places this reference inside Mr. Weed’s extended meditation on punishment and the machinery of state death, without comment.

On “Water, Water Everywhere”

On “Water, Water Everywhere”

The line Mr. Weed invokes (water everywhere, not a drop to drink) is from Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” a poem about a man who kills an albatross and must carry its death around his neck for the rest of his life, visible to all, the mark of his guilt. Mr. Weed carries his guilt differently: in a poker chip in a coat pocket, in a Jew’s harp on the shortcut through the orchard. Coleridge’s mariner is condemned to repeat his story forever, to stop wedding guests and make them listen. Mr. Weed does this voluntarily, at tavern bars, to anyone who will hear him.

Chapter 69: The Room Marked Fire Escape

Research notes: Chapter 69

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Esther Longtree · Justice O’Leary · Miss MacIntosh · Moses Hunnecker · Mr. Weed · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Freedom and Escape · Guilt, Innocence, and Justice

Symbols: Angels, Devils, and Myth · Clothing, Hats, and Skirts · Fire · The House

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Genesis · Revelation and the Apocalypse · Shakespeare · The Bible · The History of Opium

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Vera has a room now. It is marked “Fire Escape.”

The bed is narrow and stuffed with corn husks. There is a warped mirror that shows only her eyes. There is a slop jar with sediment and blonde hair combings in it. On the wall, “a picture of a silver church steeple” with the words “Forget me not.” And a rocking chair that is already creaking, though no one is sitting in it.

This is where Vera will spend the night. She does not sleep. How could she? The Tavern is alive with presences: Mr. Weed’s shadow moving in the corridor, an old woman with canaries as big as turkey buzzards, a young girl named Tillie who, the landlord says, “will knit you a baby hood,” and, through the thin wall beside her, the all-night anguish of Dr. Justice O’Leary, who is in there talking to someone named Sarah.

Sarah is dead. Or possibly not. That, as with everything in this novel, depends on your definition of real.

What Actually Happens

The landlord shows Vera to her room, taking the long way through the hotel’s corridors, pointing out the other inhabitants as he goes: Moses, who has a room here; Tillie, who lives across the hall and knits; the old woman with her terrible canaries. He tells Vera about Mr. Weed and his shadow: the shadow, apparently, being more talkative than the man himself. He is the kind of guide who tells you everything except what you actually need to know.

Once she is alone, Vera lies on her corn-husk mattress and listens. The hotel thinks out loud around her. And through the wall, Dr. Justice O’Leary begins. He is old Doc, the doctor Moses shouted at in Chapter 67, “he who had been killed in an illusory traffic accident earlier in the evening.”

He is old and failing, a physician of the old school, haunted and possibly mad. He is conducting a one-sided argument with Sarah: a woman who is dead, who may be a ghost, who arrives in his room smelling of cold breath and covered in sores, who he sees as “a senile baby” and whose return from the grave threatens “his disgrace in the public eye.” He curses her. He mourns her. He asks God why he has been abandoned. He tells

her she should be ashamed. He cannot make her leave. He cannot stop talking to her. In the course of the night, Vera also overhears him (through the wall, through the strange permeability of this hotel) mention his strangest case: a woman who believes she is “always pregnant with an imaginary baby” and suffers from miscarriage after miscarriage. Remember that detail. That woman will matter.

By morning, Vera is still awake. So, presumably, is Dr. O’Leary. Sarah, as always, is somewhere between.

The Room Marked Fire Escape

Vera’s room is not incidental. Young has given her a room designed for emergency egress (a room whose entire purpose is to get out, in case of catastrophe) and furnished it with the remnants of whoever was here before. The slop jar with its sediment and blonde hair combings. The rocking chair creaking on its own. The mirror that shows only eyes, not a face. The church steeple on the wall saying “Forget me not.”

Everything in this room is a trace of absence. Someone was here. They left things behind. The hotel has not cleaned them out. Forget me not: but the person who hung that picture is already forgotten, already sediment, already a combings-in-a-jar. The room is an escape and it is also a record. This is one of the novel’s recurring compressions: the thing that promises freedom is also the thing that documents everything you can’t escape from. Memory works this way. So does this hotel. So does this book.

The Landlord

He is, in Young's own word, “loquacious” (see *To All My Darlings*). His arms carry “tattoo marks of hearts and darts and one lonely anchor,” his hairy chest makes him seem “first cousin to a lion,” and on that chest a battleship sails over the words “Remember the Marne.” He has been a sailor. He was “in the Intelligence during the Last War,” which, with the Marne on his chest, means World War I. He has run this hotel through floods and fires. He listens to everyone. He trusts almost nothing.

He tells Vera about Mr. Weed’s shadow the way an innkeeper might pass along local legend: as information you’ll need, delivered casually, without alarm. In his telling, Mr. Weed is cautious and reserved; the shadow is the garrulous one, more forthcoming than the man himself. The shadow does his talking for him. This is the kind of doubling Young loves: the self and its unspeakable counterpart, the visible man and the part of him that moves freely in corridors at night.

He also mentions Tillie in passing: a very young girl who lives across from Vera’s room and will knit her a baby hood. Young slips this in without comment. A young girl in a decaying hotel, knitting baby hoods. We don’t know who the hoods are for. The landlord doesn’t say. He has moved on to something else.

Dr. Justice O’Leary and Sarah

This is the chapter’s heart, and it is one of the strangest and most affecting passages in the novel.

Dr. O’Leary is aging, bitter, professionally diminished, and haunted. His name is a small joke: his first name is Justice, and justice is exactly what he cannot locate, not in his own past, not in Sarah’s fate, not in the body’s failures, not in God’s apparent indifference. He has been a doctor his entire life and he does not know what Sarah is or how to treat her or how to make her stop appearing.

Sarah is described variously as a dead woman, a baby, a senile presence, something cold and covered in sores. She is not, or not only, a ghost. She is the thing Dr. O’Leary cannot stop carrying: a disgrace, a loss, a patient he failed, a person he loved and damaged, a past that will not close. Young does not explain her. You are not meant to have a resolved answer about what Sarah is. You are meant to understand what she does: she keeps him awake, keeps him talking, keeps him from the ordinary mercy of forgetting. He cries out the words of Christ on the cross: “My God! Why hast thou deserted me?” The line is from Psalm 22, spoken by Jesus in the Gospels at the moment of maximum abandonment. Dr. O’Leary uses it not for theological effect but because it is the most accurate description he has of his situation. He has been left. By Sarah, by competence, by faith, by the body’s cooperation, by whatever it is that used to make medicine feel like service rather than futility.

He also invokes “Let this cup pass from him”: Jesus in Gethsemane, asking God if there is any way to avoid what is coming. There is not. Dr. O’Leary knows there is not. He asks anyway, into the thin wall, all night.

Vera hears all of this. She doesn’t intervene. She is becoming a kind of collector of these voices (Mr. Weed last chapter, Dr. O’Leary tonight) people who are talking past their own capacity to resolve anything, who are saying the thing that cannot be said and saying it anyway because the alternative is silence and silence is worse.

The Strangest Case

Through the wall, in the middle of his long night of grief, Vera hears Dr. O’Leary mention the strangest patient he ever had: a woman who believes herself “always pregnant with an imaginary baby,” who suffers miscarriage after miscarriage, who cannot stop expecting the child that is not coming.

Hold this. Young is introducing, in passing, through a physician’s corridor-monologue, the character of Esther Longtree, who will become one of the novel’s great figures in the chapters to come. You are being told about her before you meet her, in the voice of the man who failed to help her, in a hotel that already knows her by reputation. The novel prepares its characters this way: not with introductions but with rumors, with secondhand grief, with the doctor’s bafflement and the wall’s thin membrane.

A woman “always pregnant with an imaginary baby.” She is, in some sense, every character in this book: waiting for something that is perpetually expected and perpetually

withheld. She is Vera, waiting for Miss MacIntosh. She is Catherine, waiting for her opium dreams to resolve into solid ground. She is the novel itself, always gestating, never quite arriving.

What the Tavern Is

By the end of this chapter you have a clearer picture of what the Tavern actually is. It is not simply a run-down hotel. It is a way station for the unresolved: people who are between things, who have not yet become what they are going to be or mourned what they have lost or finished the arguments they are having with the dead. Moses has a room here. Mr. Weed stays here. Dr. O'Leary apparently lives here. Tillie knits baby hoods here. The landlord says it is "a good enough port for a man in a storm." He means this practically. Young means it cosmologically. Everyone in this hotel is in a storm. The port holds them without resolving anything. That is the most it can offer, and it is not nothing.

The hotel was "built in 1827 by God's servants" and is now given over to thin walls and human-faced wasps and rocking chairs that move on their own. The faith that built it has become atmosphere. The walls remember everything. The slop jar holds what is left.

What to Hold Onto

The room marked Fire Escape. Vera's room is for getting out, and she cannot sleep in it.

Mr. Weed's shadow, moving in the corridor at night, more talkative than the man himself. The shadow that speaks what the body won't. Dr. O'Leary and Sarah: a physician who cannot heal what haunts him, asking the same questions Jesus asked in the garden, all night, through a wall.

The woman "always pregnant with an imaginary baby." She is coming.

And the picture on the wall (a silver church steeple, "Forget me not") which is already, of course, the thing you cannot forget: that someone was here, in this bed, looking at this picture, and now they are gone. As everyone is gone. As Miss MacIntosh is gone. As the chapter ends before anything is resolved, and Vera lies awake in the dark, still listening.

For the Curious

On the Fire Escape

On the Fire Escape

The external fire escape as a standard urban feature emerged in the U.S. after a series of catastrophic building fires in the nineteenth century, formalized after disasters like the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911. Anna Connelly's 1887 patent for a bridge-connecting-buildings design was foundational. They faded from new construction after the 1960s as sprinklers and improved fire codes made them redundant, though they remain iconic features of older American city buildings. Young gives Vera the fire-escape room in a hotel built in 1827, before the concept existed as formal architecture, which makes the

designation less practical than symbolic. This is the room that promises escape. It also faces inward, toward the hotel's interior life.

On the Biblical Cries in Dr. O'Leary's Room

On the Biblical Cries in Dr. O'Leary's Room

"Let this cup pass from him" is from Matthew 26:39, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane asking God if the crucifixion can be avoided. The answer is no. "My God, why hast thou deserted me?" is from Psalm 22, spoken by Jesus on the cross at the moment of maximum abandonment. Together, these form the arc of a passion: the anticipation of unbearable suffering and then the suffering itself. Dr. O'Leary invokes both in a single night, directed at Sarah and at God interchangeably. Young is not being irreverent. She is noting that these are the only words adequate to the experience of feeling utterly forsaken by whatever you believed would hold you.

On Wormwood

On Wormwood

The landlord or Dr. O'Leary invokes wormwood: a plant with intensely bitter taste, used in absinthe, and carrying a long literary and scriptural freight. In the Book of Revelation, Wormwood is the name of a star that falls from heaven and poisons the waters. In Hamlet, wormwood is what the Prince mutters when the play-within-a-play strikes too close to the truth. Young's use of it here is in that tradition: the word for the bitterness that arrives when the thing you suspected turns out to be exactly what you feared.

On Hagenbeck's and Human Zoos

On Hagenbeck's and Human Zoos

The landlord references Hagenbeck's out of Berlin: the Tierpark Hagenbeck, founded by Carl Hagenbeck Jr. in 1907 in Stellingen, Hamburg, known as the first zoo to use open enclosures rather than barred cages. What goes unmentioned in its usual promotional history is that Hagenbeck also exhibited human beings in "ethnic shows" or "human zoos," presenting indigenous people from Africa, Asia, and the Americas as spectacle for European audiences. Young places the reference alongside the landlord's mention of circus performers, sideshow freaks, and P.T. Barnum without editorializing. The accumulation is the argument: America and Europe built their entertainment culture on the same logic that built their criminal justice system. Someone is always on display. Someone is always watching.

On Joseph's Coat

On Joseph's Coat

The landlord's many-colored past (sailor, soldier, intelligence officer, hotel keeper) is likened implicitly to Joseph's coat of many colors from Genesis: the garment given by Jacob to his favored son, which provoked his brothers' jealousy and led to his being sold into slavery. The coat marked Joseph as special and made him a target. The landlord's

accumulated history marks him as a man who has survived everything. But the coat in the original story is presented to Jacob soaked in goat’s blood as proof of death. Coats, in this novel, always carry their former wearers.

On Esther Longtree

On Esther Longtree

Dr. O’Leary’s strangest case (the woman who believes herself perpetually pregnant, who suffers miscarriage after miscarriage, who cannot stop expecting a child that does not come) is Esther Longtree, whom you have not yet formally met. She is one of the novel’s great and heartbreaking figures, and Young introduces her this way: secondhand, through the voice of a doctor who could not help her, through a wall, in the middle of the night. By the time you meet her directly, you will already carry some of what she carries.

Chapter 70: Mrs. Hogden

Research notes: Chapter 70

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Cousin Hannah · Joachim Spitzer · Lisa Lunde · Miss MacIntosh · Mrs. Hogden · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Duality and Doubles

Symbols: The House · Twins and Doubles

Philosophy: Aristotle · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Exploration and the Poles · The History of Opium

Things have quieted down at the Tavern. Vera is in her room at last, in the dark, in something approaching stillness. And so she tells you about Mrs. Hogden.

Mrs. Hogden is one of the strangest and most indelible figures in a novel full of them. She arrives in this chapter as a memory: Vera's memory of a woman who appeared at her mother Catherine's house years ago, burdened with packages and birdcages and Javanese temple bells and at least four coats of graduated sizes, smelling of over-ripe apples, her hair plastered and bleached into curls, her face blandly expressionless except for an aggressive chin and abnormally large, unfocused eyes. She had sold her Dutch windmill home to take up a position as Catherine's arithmetic teacher, based on a letter of employment that Catherine denied ever writing.

Catherine did not want her. The household did not want her. Mrs. Hogden, with the serenity of a woman who has never once in her life accepted evidence that contradicted her expectations, stayed for months. Here is what you need to know before we begin: Vera tells you explicitly, at the start, that she never actually saw Mrs. Hogden. That Mrs. Hogden is "a trick of my imagination": a substitute for the dream life she wanted, a figure her mind invented or elaborated or projected. "My mind's betrayal of my mind," she calls her.

So: everything that follows may be true. Everything that follows may be Vera's dreaming. Young will not choose between these options for you. Neither should you choose for yourself. Hold both.

What Actually Happens

Mrs. Hogden (or Logden, or Fogden, or Dogden, or Bogden; the name slips) arrives at Catherine's house in a two-door Ford, piled to the ceiling with her worldly goods. She has sold her home. She has come to be Catherine's companion and arithmetic teacher. She has a letter of employment. Catherine has never heard of her.

Lisa Lunde, who replaced Vera as Catherine's companion when Vera escaped, sizes Mrs. Hogden up immediately as a very dubious character, possibly a shoplifter. Catherine calls her "an impostor, a liar, a day-dreamer, a thief." But Mrs. Hogden knows intimate details of Catherine's inner life: details only Catherine could have shared, about whales swimming

into her bedroom and the head of Alcibiades in the drainpipe. Catherine denies having shared them. She claims she has “gone to Boston to see a podiatrist,” or to the North Pole. She refuses to come out. Mrs. Hogden is installed in the deserted playroom: closed for years, filled with forgotten objects, umbrellas and old trunks and the detritus of a household that has been dreaming too long to keep things clean. She is given a hospital cot too short and too narrow. She does not complain. She has her chess set, her radio, her birdcage, her Javanese temple bells. She talks to herself and answers her own questions. She plays chess alone, crying over victories and defeats with equal feeling. She argues with radio announcers. She teaches arithmetic to no one, using wormy apples and later buttons as counters, because “two and two always making four” is, she believes, a triumph of reason.

Catherine’s revulsion grows. She cannot tolerate a rival invalid. She orders Mr. Spitzer, her lawyer, to remove Mrs. Hogden by any means necessary. He arranges a generous financial settlement. Mrs. Hogden leaves.

She leaves behind, on a small three-legged blackboard in red chalk: “All a’s are b’s,” it read, “all b’s are c’s—and therefore, dear heart, all a’s are c’s. You know me.”

The playroom is closed again. No one knows where she went. No one knows where she came from. She had no relatives, no friends anyone knew of. She vanished without trace, as she had arrived: out of nowhere, into nowhere, with the serenity of someone who has always known that the universe had no particular obligation to explain itself.

Mrs. Hogden

She is both comic and tragic, which is to say she is one of Young’s most fully achieved characters. Comic: her four graduated coats, her aggressive chin bow, her empty birdcage, her arguments with the radio announcers, whom she threatens to stand in a corner, her chess set with an atomizer substituting for a bishop, her claim to be descended from Daniel Boone, William the Conqueror, and Alexander Graham Bell, as well as “three signers of the Declaration of Independence.” Tragic: her Dutch windmill home sold and gone, her worldly goods in a two-door Ford, her hospital cot too short and too narrow, her chess played alone with tears, her unshakeable faith that she had been invited somewhere she was not wanted.

She is described as the “least critical human being”, not as a compliment, exactly, but as a kind of stunned acknowledgment. She does not judge. She does not resist. She adjusts, permanently, to whatever temporary situation she finds herself in, and finds within it the materials for contentment. She pulls an imaginary bellrope to summon servants who do not come. She imagines social seasons in an empty playroom. She is the mistress of the house in a house that has forgotten her name.

She is also, Young suggests through the accumulation of detail, a figure for something larger: the American self-myth, the national character at its most buoyant and most deluded. She claims the founding fathers. She insists on arithmetic (two and two making four, the simplest truth, the foundation of all others) while inhabiting a world that has made no sense for decades. She collects things from everywhere (Dutch windmill, Javanese

bells, ivory back-scratcher) without integrating any of them. She is “permanently adjusted to her temporary situation.” She does not hear arguments to their close, and therefore wins them all.

She is, in her way, the Anti-Miss-MacIntosh: where Miss MacIntosh was Miss Reality, Miss Plain-and-Average and Clear-Eyed, Mrs. Hogden is Miss Optimism, Miss The-Evidence-Will-Not-Discourage-Me, Miss The-Universe-Will-Accommodate-My-Expectations. They are the novel’s two poles of response to a world that does not cooperate. Miss MacIntosh’s solution was to hold to the surface of things, the facts, the cold and clear. Her solution ultimately failed her, as we have seen. Mrs. Hogden’s solution is to simply not see the contradiction. It works, in its way. She leaves, eventually, with a generous settlement and an intact worldview.

Catherine, Confronted with Her Double

This is what makes the chapter so rich and so strange: Catherine, who lives entirely inside her own hallucinations, who has taken to her bed and left it only in imagination, who has lost her mind “several times” and considers herself not responsible for her actions, Catherine finds Mrs. Hogden intolerable. She calls her “a gross, stinking parody” of her own “distended world of shimmering, loosely woven textures.”

She is right. Mrs. Hogden is a parody of Catherine: the same disconnection from reality, the same confidence in a world that doesn’t exist, but made common, made corporeal, made loud and smelling of over-ripe apples. Catherine’s madness is refined, beautiful in its way, private, the madness of a woman with expensive sheets and an opium habit and the memory of better days. Mrs. Hogden’s madness is cheerful, baggy, layered in four coats, eating wormy apples in a playroom.

What Catherine cannot forgive is the recognition. Mrs. Hogden knows things about her (the whale in the bedroom, the head of Alcibiades in the drainpipe) that only Catherine could have shared. Which means Catherine, in some moment she does not remember or refuses to admit, reached out to Mrs. Hogden. Called to her. Invited her. The letter exists. Catherine denies it. The denial is her madness and also her dignity and also her cruelty: she invited someone in and then refused to know her. She also mistakes Mrs. Hogden, at moments, for her dead Cousin Hannah. Identity is fluid in this house. Everyone substitutes for someone else.

Lisa Lunde

Lisa Lunde is Vera’s replacement: the young companion who came to take care of Catherine when Vera escaped. She is a would-be physicist working to support her own poor and mentally ill mother; she has entered one dreamhouse in order to fund her life outside it. She is sharp, skeptical, and not taken in: she sizes Mrs. Hogden up as a dubious character within minutes and never entirely revises this assessment.

But she is also, quietly, vengeful. When Catherine blames her for Mrs. Hogden’s presence and demands she get rid of her, Lisa Lunde runs back and forth between them with

meaningless messages, deliberately not interpreting either one to the other, watching the situation escalate with something that functions as satisfaction. She is the trapped rationalist, the person who sees clearly and is therefore left to manage the chaos that the dreamers create, and finds her small pleasures where she can.

Remember her: the woman who wanted to be a physicist and ended up carrying messages between two invalids who refused to communicate.

The Playroom

The room Mrs. Hogden is given, and Young spends time on this, is the deserted playroom: closed for years, filled with things the household no longer uses and can't bring itself to throw away. Old trunks, umbrellas, boxes, broken objects, the accumulated sediment of a family that has been dreaming instead of living. It is a room for things that have no place and no owner, which makes it exactly right for Mrs. Hogden.

Moonlight comes in and silvers the walls. Mrs. Hogden sits under a frieze of gargoyles. The novel notes, without elaborating, that if she sat there "long enough, she would become a gargoyle herself": stone, permanent, grotesque, part of the architecture. It is both a joke and a precise description of what happens to people who stay too long in houses that are dreaming.

The evidence she leaves behind when she finally goes: "derelict whiskey bottles, empty coat hangers, withered apple cores, broken" eggshells, dead flies, and, Vera notes specifically, an artificial eyelash. The precise inventory of a life that was here and isn't.

The Blackboard

She leaves behind a small three-legged blackboard, the kind a child's teacher might use. On it, in red chalk: "All a's are b's," it read, "all b's are c's—and therefore, dear heart, all a's are c's. You know me."

The logic is valid. If all a's are b's, and all b's are c's, then yes: all a's are c's. This is how syllogisms work. This is the foundation of reason. Two and two make four.

But "dear heart" is not logic. "You know me" is not logic. The equation ends with a personal claim (a claim of recognition, of intimacy, of being known across the gap of unreality) that the syllogism cannot support. She is saying: I am the conclusion of a chain of reasoning you have already accepted. You know me. You have always known me.

Vera cannot refute this. Neither can we. The woman who was never there has left proof of her own logic on a three-legged blackboard in a closed room. The proof is sound. The proof is absurd. Both things are true.

Vera's Confession

At the opening of this chapter, Vera tells you that she never saw Mrs. Hogden. That the whole thing (or some of it, or most of it) is a trick of her imagination. A substitute for what

she actually wanted, which was a lost companion, the other half of a self that has only ever loved its own right hand.

This is one of the novel's most important moments of self-disclosure. Vera is not a reliable narrator, not in the sense of lying, but in the sense that her consciousness is the medium through which everything is filtered, and that medium is not neutral. It is imaginative, it is obsessive, it is organized around absence. The people in this novel are sometimes real and sometimes Vera's projections and sometimes both. Miss MacIntosh is both. Mrs. Hogden is both.

What Vera is telling you is not that Mrs. Hogden didn't exist. She is telling you that the distinction between "real" and "imagined" has never been, for her, the distinction that matters. As she said on arriving at the Tavern in Chapter 68, "there was only one definition of reality, that it was real," and "even the unreal things were real." Even the imagined companion is a companion. Even Mrs. Hogden, if she waddled in and out of Vera's dreams, was there.

What to Hold Onto

Mrs. Hogden's four graduated coats, her birdcage, her Javanese temple bells. The physical accumulation of a person who carries everything with her because she has nowhere left to put it down.

Catherine and Mrs. Hogden as mirror images: the private dreamer and the public one, the refined madness and the corpulent one, both refusing reality, neither able to bear the sight of the other.

Lisa Lunde, running between them with meaningless messages, not translating, watching the situation with quiet satisfaction. She wanted to be a physicist. She is here instead.

The blackboard: "All a's are b's," it read, "all b's are c's—and therefore, dear heart, all a's are c's. You know me."

And Vera's confession, which is not a confession of lying but of imagination: that Mrs. Hogden is her mind's betrayal of her mind, a substitute for what she always wanted and never found, the companion that the self invents when no real companion appears. She is looking for Miss MacIntosh. She has been, this whole novel, looking for Miss MacIntosh. What she finds instead, sometimes, is Mrs. Hogden. The next best thing. The wrong answer that has the shape of the right one.

For the Curious

On the Name

On the Name

Mrs. Hogden, or Logden, or Fogden, or Dogden, or Bogden. Young lets the name slip and slide through the chapter, never settling. This is not an error. A name that won't hold still belongs to a person who won't hold still, a person whose identity resists the fixity that a name is supposed to provide. She is also, in her slipping name, everyone who has ever

been slightly misremembered, slightly misidentified, slightly wrong. You know me. But you can’t quite remember what to call me.

On the Dutch Windmill

On the Dutch Windmill

Mrs. Hogden sold her Dutch windmill home to come to Catherine’s house. This is both funny and sad and also, in the context of the novel’s American mythology, pointed. She came from somewhere European, somewhere old-world, somewhere with a fixed and turning mechanism at its center, and she traded it for the promise of a position in an American house that didn’t want her. Young’s America is full of this exchange: the old world sold, the new world defaulting on the transaction.

On the Arctic Tern

On the Arctic Tern

Every year, an Arctic tern visited Mrs. Hogden at her Dutch windmill home. It came back reliably. It singled her out, or she believed it did, which in this novel amounts to the same thing. The Arctic tern makes one of the longest migrations of any animal on earth, traveling from the Arctic to the Antarctic and back: roughly 44,000 miles per year. It is always in motion, always returning, never quite arriving anywhere permanently. Young gives Mrs. Hogden this bird as her one faithful visitor, the one thing that came back to her year after year. It is now gone, along with the windmill. She has her birdcage instead. It is empty.

On the Blackboard Logic

On the Blackboard Logic

The form on Mrs. Hogden’s blackboard (all a’s are b’s, all b’s are c’s, therefore all a’s are c’s) is a syllogism, the basic unit of classical deductive reasoning first formalized by Aristotle. It is logically valid: the conclusion follows necessarily from the premises. But logical validity only tells you that if the premises are true, the conclusion must be. It says nothing about whether the premises are true. Mrs. Hogden’s message uses the form of certainty to assert personal recognition. The structure is airtight. What it contains is a claim she cannot prove. “You know me.” This is what the novel keeps doing with reason: showing you the mechanism working perfectly and the product undetermined.

On Catherine’s Hotel That Would Admit Everyone

On Catherine’s Hotel That Would Admit Everyone

One of the details buried in this chapter: Catherine, in one of her schemes, was going to open a hotel that would admit Jews and Black Americans. This was not a small thing. Until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, hotels in the United States could legally refuse service based on race, religion, or national origin, and routinely did: particularly in the South, but by no means only there. The “Green Book,” a travel guide published from 1936 to 1967, existed specifically to help Black travelers navigate a country full of establishments that

would not serve them. Catherine’s hotel that would have welcomed everyone: she never built it. Like most of her plans, it remained in the space of intention, beautiful and unrealized, announced and then subsumed by the next dream.

On Irish Catholic Maids

On Irish Catholic Maids

Lisa Lunde occupies a role in the household that the novel associates with a long line of women in service: the Irish Catholic maid, the young woman who came for economic necessity and stayed because the work was there. After the Irish Famine, young Irish women, often between 15 and 24, became a cornerstone of domestic service in American cities, sending wages home, supporting families, navigating discrimination while building footholds in a country that did not entirely want them either. Lisa Lunde is not Irish, but she is in that structural position: the rational woman in an irrational household, working to support a mother who is poor and mad, carrying other people’s messages and managing other people’s chaos because her own life depends on the paycheck. Young is placing her in a long American tradition of invisible labor.

On Alcibiades

On Alcibiades

Mrs. Hogden knows that the head of Alcibiades is in the drainpipe: a detail so specific and so strange that it can only have come from Catherine. Alcibiades was an Athenian statesman and general of the fifth century BCE, brilliant and beautiful and ultimately disastrous: he defected to Sparta, then to Persia, then tried to return to Athens, and was eventually assassinated. He was charming beyond accounting and trustworthy to no one. His head in a drainpipe is exactly where Catherine’s mind would put him: the most seductive figure in classical history, stopped up somewhere beneath the household, leaking slowly into the groundwater.

Chapter 71: The Morning After

Research notes: Chapter 71

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Justice O'Leary · Marie Weed · Miss MacIntosh · Mr. Weed · Tabitha · The Tavern Landlady · Vera Cartwheel

Symbols: Clocks and Watches · Clothing, Hats, and Skirts · Pearls and Jewels · The House

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Judaism · Lynching and Racial Violence · Music and Composers · Pregnancy, Abortion, and Midwifery · Romantic Poets · The History of Opium

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Morning comes to the Tavern. Vera has not slept.

She is stiff with wakefulness, "with ceaseless memory," wearing her mother's black velvet (which was meant to be Catherine's shroud, never used) and her mother's lace and her mother's pearls. She is "some time past the ambiguity of dawn." She gets up and goes out into the hotel, and what she finds there is the morning-after version of everything the night already told her: the same people, the same wreckage, now visible in grey light instead of heard through thin walls.

This chapter moves Vera through the Tavern's spaces (Dr. O'Leary's room, the corridor, the hotel lobby) while she thinks about Mr. Weed, remembers Catherine's stories, encounters a woman screaming prejudice on the staircase, and finally finds the Tavern Landlady, large and goitered and speaking in a dialect thick as Indiana soil, who tells her everything she needs to know about the people in this place. Chapter 71 is a chapter of inventory: of what remains, who persists, and what the daylight reveals that the dark only suggested.

What Actually Happens

Vera wakes and thinks, first, of Mr. Weed: wondering if he has hanged himself in the night. She concludes he has not: he has only passed the night at the Tavern "because of his fear of what he might find in the orchard in the moonlight": not Marie, but "Marie's children, who always played at hanging themselves." This is his particular punishment.

She thinks of her mother's pearls, which she is wearing. Catherine believed the pearls "could not be lost or stolen": that they were her "lost estate," something real beyond market value. She also believed, with her characteristic defiance of arithmetic, that losing pearls made them multiply: the more that were lost, the more there were. The chauffeur James once returned thirteen pearls when twelve had been lost. Vera wears them now as an inheritance of this logic. She goes to Dr. O'Leary's room. It is open, or she goes in: the chapter is not fastidious about how Vera arrives in places she observes. The room is a museum of disorder. Mismatched women's shoes are scattered everywhere ("white canvas tennis shoes, green opera pumps, old" laced shoes, "buckskin shoes with buttons,

gold Grecian sandals") all without their mates, from different eras, belonging to no one currently present. Medical instruments are scattered among the shoes. His Yale diploma hangs above the bed. A calendar on the wall is stuck twenty years ago. And the books: shelves of them, a library that has lost the thread connecting one volume to the next: medical texts beside children's primers beside political pamphlets beside obscure adventure novels beside Keats. The doctor himself is out on his calls, though his only suit hangs on the rack, and Vera tries to imagine him "naked as death, going about his business of delivering imaginary babies in what he had described as a barren countryside, where nothing grew." There is a rumor, which the novel floats and does not confirm, of a pregnant man: a patient who perhaps is real, perhaps is the doctor's hallucination, perhaps is both.

Vera remembers the night's silent woman crawling on the floor. The Landlady will later tell her that the doctor's little sister "had been dead for such a long time," and that the crawling woman was Tabitha the chambermaid, who comes in "to hold the doctor's hands at night, thinking thus to get a baby by him." She is "too crazy to be on relief." She is here instead.

On the staircase, Vera is confronted by a woman in metallic curlers, half-dressed, her face contorted with cold rage. She accuses Vera of being a "tramp girl" who kept "a decent woman awake all night." Then she goes further: she will not let the Jewish doctor Simeon, "the dirty Jew," "paw all over her"; "Hitler ran him out of Germany" and Hitler was right; Roosevelt is ruining the country; "there are no Negroes in this county" and no one wants mulattoes; she asks Vera if she is "a Communist," and says the Catholics "want an American Pope." She is a widow whose "husband died before he ever came to bed," and her grief and her politics have hardened into each other until they are indistinguishable.

Vera descends to the lobby. The Tavern Landlady is there: large, fat, goitered, a former circus fat lady, speaking in dialect, "clombed the stars," "bedses," "husbane", with a folksy resignation that contains, nonetheless, everything Vera needs to know. Tabitha cannot talk and does the rough work. The landlord's heart has been broken since the old watchdog, who went to Mass, was given communion by the priest who came on muleback and then "died in the landlord's arms." The hotel sinks every night and comes back every morning. Outside, Tabitha kneels on the porch washing stones in the pale spring air.

Mr. Weed's Vigil

The chapter opens with Vera still thinking about the Christian hangman, and the question she poses is quiet and precise: does he hang himself? She concludes he does not, and the reason is the children. Marie's children (his children, the children of the woman who hanged herself from the peach tree) play at hanging themselves in the orchard. He is afraid of what he might find among the peach trees if he walks home through the orchard by moonlight, so he waits at the Tavern for daylight.

This is Young's understanding of how grief actually works: not as a thing that passes but as a dread that keeps its hours. The children are still rehearsing what their mother did, and the man who has hanged so many cannot bear to come upon them in the dark.

The image also completes the echo the novel has been building: Marie hanged from the peach tree, the children playing at hanging beneath it, Mr. Weed walking past on his way home with his Jew's harp, taking the shortcut through the orchard. Everything that happened is still happening in that orchard. He still takes the shortcut.

Catherine's Pearls

Vera wears her mother's pearls through the chapter, and the pearls carry a philosophy. Catherine believed that real pearls, hers, "could not be lost or stolen." They were her lost estate: what remained of a life that had otherwise dissolved into opium and illusion. She also believed, with the arithmetic of a woman who has stopped obeying mathematics, that losing pearls made them multiply. The chauffeur James returned thirteen when twelve were lost. There are now infinities of pearls, she said. Simple addition.

This is Catherine's most compressed statement of her worldview: that loss generates abundance, that the real thing cannot be destroyed, that the shadow is more permanent than the substance. It is delusional and it is also a kind of wisdom that the novel treats seriously. Vera inherits it. She wears the pearls as a lost estate and a logical proposition simultaneously.

The pearls also carry mourning. They drip like tears. They are linked throughout the chapter to what remains of Catherine (her shroud-dress, her lace, her logic) now worn by Vera as she walks through a hotel full of people who are also, in their ways, wearing the remnants of people who are gone.

Dr. O'Leary's Room

The shoes are the chapter's central image. One shoe from every era, one shoe without its pair, scattered across the floor of a doctor's office: "white canvas tennis shoes, green opera pumps, old women's" laced shoes, "buckskin shoes with buttons, gold Grecian sandals." They come from different times. They all lack their mates. Their wearers are nowhere.

Dr. O'Leary is an obstetrician still keeping office hours, though, as Chapter 72 says, he suffers from "hardening of the artery of the brain." The shoes are the shoes of women who came to him at their most vulnerable: pregnant, waiting, hoping. Some of those pregnancies ended well. Some did not. The shoes remain; the women are gone. The doctor, now delivering imaginary babies in a barren countryside where nothing grows, is the afterimage of a practice that has dissolved into hallucination.

His Yale diploma hangs above the bed. His calendar is twenty years out of date. His library, and Young gives us the titles with her usual care, mixing the medical and the absurd: obstetrics texts alongside children's primers, a pamphlet on the diseases of coal miners beside "Keats' Ode to the Grecian Urn" (Young's wording for "Ode on a Grecian Urn") beside "The Causes of Ejaculatory Praecox Among the Great American Elks", is the library of a mind that has stopped sorting by category and now holds everything together

in one undifferentiated mass. It is both comic and genuinely sad. He was educated at Yale. He is now delivering imaginary babies, naked as death, in a barren field.

The rumor of the pregnant man floats through the chapter without resolution. Couvade syndrome (sympathetic pregnancy, in which an expectant father experiences some of the same symptoms as his pregnant partner) is real. Whether the doctor’s pregnant man patient is real, imaginary, or something in between is, characteristically, left open.

The Woman in Curlers

She is one of the most uncomfortable passages in the novel, and Young does not soften it. The woman confronts Vera on the staircase and delivers, in concentrated form, a litany of the prejudices that have organized a certain segment of American life: antisemitism, white supremacy, anti-communism, anti-Catholicism, xenophobia. She invokes Hitler as correct. She insists there are no Black people in the county and no one wants any. She refuses to see the Jewish doctor Simeon, who she says Hitler ran out of Germany rightly. Roosevelt is the enemy. The communists and the Catholics are running everything. This is not fringe material for its time and place; it is a reasonably accurate inventory of the views held by a significant portion of the American Midwest before the Civil Rights era. She is also a widow whose “husband died before he ever came to bed,” and she is terrified and furious and completely alone. Young gives her the prejudices and the grief simultaneously, not as explanation or excuse but as coexistence: this is what a person can contain. The hatred is real. The loneliness is real. They have grown together until she cannot separate them. Vera does not argue with her. There is nothing to argue with. She waits until the woman is done and then continues downstairs.

The Tavern Landlady

She is a new figure: the landlord’s wife, or the person who runs the hotel while the landlord manages its philosophy. She is large, fat, goitered: the Goiter Belt, the region of the upper Midwest where iodine deficiency was endemic before iodized salt, is her natural territory. She is a former circus fat lady, which means she was once spectacle, once exhibited for pay, once an American entertainment. Now she is here, behind the desk, in dialect.

Her speech is rendered phonetically: “clombed the stars,” “bedses,” “husbane,” “weller and weller,” “axed,” “agone.” Young is giving her a voice that is entirely particular, entirely local, entirely hers: rural Indiana, working class, a woman who has watched this hotel since before it started sinking and expects to watch it after it sinks some more. She carries no illusions about the place. She simply states what is: the old watchdog went to Mass “even when it rained,” was given communion by the priest, and died in her husband’s arms. The hotel sinks every night. Tabitha washes stones every morning. Life persists.

She is, in her way, the clearest-eyed person in the Tavern. Not because she has Miss MacIntosh’s commitment to the cold surface of things, but because she has the practical intelligence of someone who has been too many kinds of things (circus exhibit, hotel

keeper, widow of a community's faith) to mistake any one version of herself for the whole truth.

Tabitha

The chambermaid. She is "too crazy to be on relief" (welfare). Relief is the Depression-era term for government assistance, later called welfare. To be too crazy for relief in the 1930s or 1940s meant to be too mentally ill to qualify for the minimal social support the state offered to the destitute. She is here instead, washing stones on the porch, caring for a mad doctor at night in the hope of getting a baby by him. She speaks one word in the chapter: "Good-morning." She says it to Vera as she kneels in the pale spring air. It is the most human sentence in the chapter.

What to Hold Onto

The mateless shoes. One from every era, every woman gone, the doctor delivering imaginary babies in a barren field while his Yale diploma watches from the wall. Catherine's pearls and their impossible arithmetic: lose twelve, receive thirteen, multiply into infinities. Wear the loss as inheritance.

Mr. Weed at the Tavern, waiting for daylight, afraid of what he might find in the orchard by moonlight.

The woman in curlers and the full inventory of her fears. Young does not editorialize. She lets it stand: this is what some people contain.

The Landlady, ex-circus fat lady, goitered, in dialect, describing the hotel's nightly sinking as a matter of fact. The hotel sinks. It comes back. The stones get washed. Good morning.

For the Curious

On Catherine's Pearl Arithmetic

On Catherine's Pearl Arithmetic

Catherine's belief that lost pearls multiply is not presented as symptom of delusion alone; it is presented as a complete philosophical system, internally consistent if you accept its premises. Young is drawing on a long tradition of associating pearls with eternity and sorrow: pearls form around an irritant, are produced by suffering, and are associated in many traditions with tears. Catherine's pearls are her lost estate, not what she owns but what she has lost that nevertheless persists. The chauffeur James returning thirteen when twelve were lost is the novel's version of the loaves and fishes: abundance from subtraction, infinity from loss.

On the Mateless Shoes

On the Mateless Shoes

Young's inventory of the shoes in Dr. O'Leary's room ("white canvas tennis shoes, green opera pumps, old women's" laced shoes, "buckskin shoes with buttons, gold Grecian sandals") spans decades of women's fashion and social class in a single floor. The shoe without its mate is one of literature's oldest symbols of incompleteness, loss, and the interrupted journey. Cinderella's glass slipper. The single boot left at a battlefield. Here, the shoes are the residue of patients who came to an obstetrician and then went, somewhere, without their shoes, or left one shoe behind, or were never quite whole to begin with. The doctor delivers imaginary babies. The shoes are real. Young lets the gap between those two facts stand without explanation.

On the Goiter Belt

On the Goiter Belt

The Tavern Landlady's goiter is not incidental. The "Goiter Belt" was the common name for a region spanning the Great Lakes and upper Midwest where chronic iodine deficiency caused endemic thyroid enlargement. The condition was discovered systematically during World War I when military physicals revealed an alarming rate of goiter among men from the region. Iodized salt, introduced in the US in 1924, largely eliminated the problem in subsequent generations. The Landlady's goiter places her precisely in time and geography: she is a woman of the pre-iodized era, a body shaped by the specific mineral deficiency of the Indiana soil. Young gives her body its history.

On the Woman in Curlers and Simeon

On the Woman in Curlers and Simeon

The Jewish doctor Simeon, whom the woman in curlers refuses to see, is a figure the novel holds with particular care. He is present only as the target of her antisemitism: she calls him a dirty Jew, says "Hitler ran him out of Germany" rightly, refuses his hands on her body. Young does not give him a scene of his own in this chapter. His presence is entirely constituted by her refusal of it. This is one of the novel's more precise political observations: the person being persecuted is defined, for the persecutor, entirely by the persecution. Simeon has a practice, a history, presumably a life. The woman in curlers has reduced him to the thing she will not touch.

On Mary Turner

On Mary Turner

When Vera thinks of Marie Weed hanging from the peach tree and pictures Marie's unborn child hanging by its umbilical cord, Young is connecting Marie's private death to a history of public racial violence. Pregnant Black women were among the victims of lynching in the United States. The most documented case is that of Mary Turner, murdered in May 1918 in Brooks County, Georgia, eight months pregnant, after she publicly denounced the lynching of her husband. The details are documented, investigated by the NAACP, and nearly impossible to read. Young does not state the connection explicitly. She places Marie's image against this history and lets it resonate: the pregnant woman hanged, the unborn child. The private grief of a hangman's wife

contains the public horror of racial terror. Both are real. Both are part of the same American rope.

On the Calendar Stuck Twenty Years Ago

On the Calendar Stuck Twenty Years Ago

The calendar in Dr. O’Leary’s room is stuck twenty years in the past, which, depending on when in the novel’s loosely implied timeline we are, places it somewhere between the late 1920s and the early 1940s. The frozen calendar is one of literature’s most reliable images of grief arrested: Miss Havisham’s clocks stopped at the moment of abandonment, time held hostage to a wound. For Dr. O’Leary, the wound is his collapse from competence: whatever happened twenty years ago, his mind is still there, still delivering the babies of that era, still reading the magazines of that era, while the world has moved on without him. Time didn’t stop. He did.

On Tabitha’s “Good Morning”

On Tabitha’s “Good Morning”

The chapter’s last image: Tabitha kneeling on the porch, washing stones in the pale spring air, saying “Good morning” to Vera. She is too mentally ill to qualify for Depression-era relief. She is here instead, performing an act of cleansing that has no practical purpose, the stones do not need washing, and greeting the day with the only two words she seems to have. Young ends the chapter here deliberately. After Dr. O’Leary’s disorder, after the woman in curlers’ hatred, after the Landlady’s accumulated resignations, the last sound is a mute chambermaid on her knees in the spring air saying “Good morning” as if it were true. It may be the most hopeful sentence in the chapter. It may also be the most heartbreaking. Young, as always, will not choose.

Chapter 72: Esther Longtree

Content note: *The Esther Longtree chapters (72 to 81) deal with stillbirth and pregnancy loss, rape, infanticide, racist violence including lynching, and cruelty to children. This chapter centers on pregnancy and stillbirth.*

Research notes: Chapter 72

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Esther Longtree · Jacqueline White · Justice O'Leary · The Chicago Detective · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Identity and the Self · Motherhood, Pregnancy, and Birth

Symbols: Birds · Pregnancy, Birth, and Children · Shadows

Philosophy: Hinduism

Allusions: Judaism · Pregnancy, Abortion, and Midwifery · The Bible

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She is the one Dr. O'Leary told you about through the wall in Chapter 69: the woman who believes herself always pregnant, who suffers miscarriage after miscarriage, whose condition baffled him and broke him and whose name, if he ever said it, you may have missed in the dark.

Her name is Esther Longtree. She is the waitress at the Greasy Spoon. She has "a bald spot shaped like a large coin" on her head, long black hair that flows loose at whatever cost to sanitation, ponderous red lips, a deformed foot, and a belly that has been swollen for as long as anyone in town can remember. She is perpetually pregnant. She has never carried a living child to term.

She is one of the great figures in this novel, and this chapter is hers entirely.

If you have been reading along, you already know something about what Esther represents: the woman always waiting, always gestating, always on the verge of the thing that never arrives. She was introduced as a rumor: a medical curiosity, the doctor's strangest case, the woman no one quite understands. Now you meet her in full, and she turns out to be something larger than a case history. She is vast with grief and hope and philosophy and humor, enormous with the children she has lost and the one she still believes is coming. Chapter 72 is Esther's monologue, Esther's meditation, Esther's world. Read it slowly.

The Setting: The Greasy Spoon

It is early spring, foggy, the morning after Vera's sleepless night at the Tavern. The town is described in its morning configuration: an undertaker's hearse, ghostly old automobiles, a grey wagon pulled by a bony mule. Between the undertaker and the beauty parlor, between death's preparation and beauty's, stands the Greasy Spoon, where Esther works.

She took the job from the last waitress, who, the Landlady told Vera in Chapter 71, was "taken of the tuberculosis with her baby in her arms"; this may be Jacqueline White, the

Jackie with tuberculosis in Madge’s story on the bus, though the novel does not say so. She is the passive policeman’s only daughter. Her parents think she is an old maid, a failure, a puzzle they cannot read. They tease her. They do not know what she carries. The Greasy Spoon is both a restaurant and a symbol. It is where ordinary life gets fed (truck drivers, salesmen, travelers) and where Esther has spent years standing between the living and the dead, serving food, carrying children no one ever sees born. The hollyhocks painted on the cracked walls reach toward the ceiling, straining upward against the decay around them. Young gives Esther exactly this setting: life insisting on itself in a place given over to grease and impermanence.

Esther Herself

She is described with a physicality Young lavishes on very few characters: plum-colored and square, ponderous red lips, breasts like milky breakers, hair she tosses freely. She has morning sickness and evening sickness. Her belly is enormous. She has a bald spot, a deformed foot, and she laughs uproariously at things others find distressing. She talks to herself. She talks to the unborn child. She talks to the stillborn children who haunt her, the ones she has buried under leaves and snow and in rivers and who come back to her in whispers. She is “brilliant but dumb,” “popular and pregnant and sought after,” yet also an old maid in her parents’ estimation. She keeps lovebirds. She knits without thread: a gesture of preparation for a child that may not come, or of faith in the act of preparation itself, regardless of outcome. She has made “a little black suit for the” child she believes will survive. She has prepared layettes. She is ready. She is not deluded in the way Catherine is deluded, or Dr. O’Leary. Her mind, Young tells us, is clear and luminous. She knows exactly what has happened to her: she has carried as many children as autumn leaves, and none of them lived, and she is pregnant again, and she believes this one might be different. This is not confusion. This is hope maintained in the full knowledge of its own history. It is one of the bravest things in the novel.

The Little Shadow Boxer

This is what Esther calls the child she is carrying now: “the little shadow boxer who in the waters of her womb” has grown and grown and has warded off every blow. She can feel the little shadow foot playing against her side. She can feel the heartbeat accelerating under her heart. Two hearts, she says: mine and his.

A shadow boxer fights an opponent who is not there. The fight is real; the opponent is invisible. This is precisely Esther’s situation: she is fighting for a life against the force that has taken every other life she has carried, a force she cannot see or name or locate. The child is fighting too, from inside, against the same invisible opponent. The image is also tender in a way Young rarely allows herself to be this directly. The little shadow foot against Esther’s side. The heartbeat. Two hearts. For all the novel’s philosophical and mythological weight, this is simply a woman feeling her baby move and loving it with the particular love of someone who knows she may lose it.

The Fathers

Esther has had many fathers for her children. They are almost all salesmen, which in this era means traveling men, men who pass through: the piano-tuner, the “horn-blower, the tin roofer, the soap salesman,” the rubber salesman, the featherweight boxer, the Chicago detective. They come through town, they stay a night or two at the diner or the hotel, and then they are gone. They are, almost without exception, sterile. Not always in the clinical sense (the pregnancies are real, the children are real) but in some deeper way that Young does not quite medicalize: the children of these men do not survive. They are born still. They haunt Esther. Some of the fathers write years later “asking if the child was ever born,” unaware or unwilling to accept that it was not, that it never will be. There is one exception in this chapter: a sad, stout drummer, a Fuller Brush salesman, who comes in crying. His grief is not about Esther’s children. His wife’s sister’s little girl died of scarlet fever, and he cannot recover from it. He abandoned his business, his family, his life, and now he wanders the roads selling brushes and carrying a bag of candy for a child who is dead and will never eat it. He sits at the counter, weeping. Esther serves him. He is the saddest man in the chapter, and possibly the most honest: he knows exactly what he has lost and cannot stop carrying it. The traveling salesmen collectively are one of Young’s sharpest observations about American masculinity: men in motion, men who sell things, men who pass through women’s lives and disappear before the consequences arrive. They represent, in aggregate, the absent father writ American: not villainous, not deliberate, simply gone.

Dr. O’Leary’s Verdict

Dr. O’Leary, whom you met in Chapters 69 and 71 in his dissolving state, turns out to have encountered Esther before his mind gave way. He came into the diner “to borrow a nickel for his drink,” and Esther asked him about her condition. He told her she was “the immortal medical case.” He told her she would never die in childbirth; her labor would be easy, like passing a seed. He told her the problem was atmospheric: the unusual pressure, the thinning ether, the whirling stars. He told her the problem would end with her and would “not be seen again upon the earth.”

This is both the most and least helpful medical opinion Esther has ever received. It offers her everlasting hope. It explains nothing. It attributes her condition to forces beyond anyone’s control or comprehension and then reassures her that she will survive what it will not explain. This is Dr. O’Leary at his most compassionate and his most useless, which is to say, at his most human.

His attribution of Esther’s condition to “atmospheric pressure” and “thinning ether” is also, in its way, Young’s. The novel treats Esther’s pregnancy as operating on a cosmic scale: stars, moon, wind, the Milky Way. She is not merely a woman with a medical condition. She is a woman whose body is in conversation with forces so large they dwarf medicine.

Who Killed Cock Robin?

Near the chapter's end, Esther poses the question from the old English nursery rhyme: "Who killed cock robin?" The rhyme is ancient, probably older than its first written records, and no one is certain what it originally meant; it may involve Celtic sun gods, may involve real historical figures, may be simply the nursery-rhyme recording of a universal truth about death. In the rhyme, everyone takes responsibility and no one is wholly to blame: I, said the sparrow, with my bow and arrow; I, said the fly, with my little eye.

Esther's answer: nobody. The child "was killed by the death that was in him from the time of his birth," by "the wind, the downpour, the thinning ether, the hailstones, the atmospheric pressure." No one is solely responsible. Death is a universal and impersonal force that operates through all things simultaneously. This is not consolation exactly, it does not bring the children back, but it is a kind of philosophical peace: she did not kill them. The sterile fathers did not kill them. The cold cosmos killed them, impartially, as it kills everything eventually. She also says: "she was soon to have a sweet, sweet little baby that would cry in her arms and that would kill them all." The living child (if it comes, when it comes) will supersede the dead. Will put to rest the haunting whispers of the stillborn. Will end the reign of ghosts with a cry. This is Esther's defiant hope, stated simply, as fact. She is preparing for it. She has knitted the little black suit. She is ready.

The Stillborn

They are "as many as the autumn leaves." They are under leaves, under snow, in rivers, in the earth. They whisper to her. They cry. They are not gone in any simple sense: they persist in Esther's consciousness the way the dead persist throughout this novel, as presences that refuse to complete their departure. Young treats them with extraordinary delicacy. They are real, Esther has buried them with her own hands, and they are also luminous abstractions: snowflakes, stars, shadows. The novel refuses to let them be merely medical events, failures of physiology. They are children who existed and were lost, and their mother remembers every one of them, and they have come back to haunt her not with malice but with the simple fact of their having been.

This is one of the places where Young's insistence that everything real is real, "even the unreal things were real", carries its full weight. The stillborn are not real in the way the living are real. But they are not nothing. Esther has carried them, buried them, grieved them, and is still pregnant with all of them in the only sense that counts: she has not stopped loving them or waiting for the one who will live.

What to Hold Onto

"The little shadow boxer, the little" shadow foot against Esther's side. Two hearts: mine and his. Keep this.

The bag of candy the sad Fuller Brush salesman carries for a child who is dead. He wanders the roads with it. He cannot put it down.

Esther knitting without thread. The act of preparation as an act of faith, regardless of outcome.

Dr. O'Leary's diagnosis: atmospheric. The thinning ether. The whirling stars. The problem will end with her and will "not be seen again upon the earth." And Esther's answer to "Who killed Cock Robin?": nobody. And: soon there will be "a sweet, sweet little baby that" will cry in her arms and kill them all.

She is the passive policeman's only daughter. She is the immortal medical case. She is always pregnant. She is luminous. She is ready.

For the Curious

On the Name Esther

On the Name Esther

Esther is a Hebrew name meaning "star" or, in some readings, derived from the Persian word for "hidden." Both meanings apply here. Young has given her a star's name and situated her in a chapter saturated with celestial imagery: the Milky Way, cold starlight, whirling stars, atmospheric pressure from the cosmos. Esther is also, in the Biblical book that bears her name, a woman who hides her identity and her people's situation until the moment of crisis, when she acts with extraordinary courage. Young's Esther hides too: her parents have no idea what she carries. Her secret life (the pregnancies, the stillborn, the shadow boxer) is entirely invisible to the people closest to her.

On the Name Longtree

On the Name Longtree

Longtree suggests a genealogy that goes back far, roots that run deep, a lineage of the land. It also contains "long": duration, persistence, the long road of Esther's particular endurance. She is not a new arrival; she belongs here in some ancestral sense, even if the town treats her as an anomaly. Young's character names always carry weight. Longtree: she has been here a long time, and her roots go down.

On Traveling Salesmen

On Traveling Salesmen

The drummer, the American traveling salesman, is one of the defining figures of the mid-twentieth century. Salesmen evolved from frontier peddlers carrying wagons of goods to men with sample cases selling encyclopedias, sewing machines, and brushes, house by house, town by town. They were essential in connecting rural America to commerce before mass advertising took over, and they were also figures of suspicion: the con man, the seducer, the man who is here today and gone tomorrow. The Fuller Brush Company, founded in 1906, was famous for its door-to-door sales force. Young fills Esther's history with these men (the piano-tuner, the soap salesman, the rubber salesman) precisely because they embody the transient, commerce-driven America that passes through women's lives and rarely looks back.

On Ergot and Reproductive Control

On Ergot and Reproductive Control

Ergot, the fungus mentioned in *To All My Darlings*, had a complicated history in American reproductive medicine. In the 1930s, companies marketed ergot-derived products to women whose pregnancies were “not progressing,” as abortion, contraception, and birth control devices were still illegal under the Comstock Laws. The FDA’s predecessor deemed these pills unsafe and ineffective and halted their sale. Midwives had used ergot to ease delivery since the 18th century. This background is relevant to Esther: she exists in an era when women had almost no legal control over their own reproductive lives. Her body is subject to forces (cosmic, as O’Leary says, but also legal and social) that she has not consented to and cannot entirely resist.

On “Who Killed Cock Robin?”

On “Who Killed Cock Robin?”

The English nursery rhyme “Who Killed Cock Robin?” has been traced to the mid-eighteenth century in its written form, but is likely much older. It proceeds as a catalogue of witnesses and participants: each creature takes responsibility for some part of the robin’s death and burial. The sparrow killed him with its bow and arrow. The fly witnessed it with its little eye. The beetle made the shroud. The rook dug the grave. Everyone is implicated; no single cause is sufficient. Young gives this rhyme to Esther as a philosophical framework for making peace with the inexplicable deaths of her children: nobody killed them, and everybody did, and the forces involved are larger than any individual cause. Celtic mythology identifies Cock Robin with Lugh, the sun god who dies as the nights grow longer: a death that is seasonal, inevitable, cosmic, and always followed by return.

On the Episiotomy

On the Episiotomy

The “stitch” referenced in the chapter’s medical material refers to the episiotomy: a surgical incision of the perineum performed during vaginal delivery. In the 1950s United States, this was sometimes called the “husband stitch,” because after delivery, surgeons would sometimes add an extra stitch, unrequested by the patient, purportedly to restore vaginal tightness for the husband’s benefit. This practice, performed without consent on women in the most vulnerable moment of their physical lives, is one of the novel’s quieter instances of the violence routinely done to women’s bodies under the cover of medicine and propriety. Young includes it in the background of Esther’s story without editorializing. The editorial is the inclusion itself.

On Balaam’s Ass

On Balaam’s Ass

Esther invokes Balaam’s donkey from Numbers 22: the animal that saw the Angel of the Lord standing in the road before Balaam could, and kept stopping, and was beaten for it,

and was finally miraculously given the power to speak and explain what it had seen. The donkey's stopping, interpreted by Balaam as stubbornness, was in fact the only thing preventing his death. The animal knew something the human could not see. Esther, who is treated by everyone around her as a creature of inexplicable stubbornness (always pregnant, never delivering a living child, refusing to accept that her situation is hopeless) is also the donkey in this reading. She can see something. Nobody believes her yet.

On the World Egg

On the World Egg

Esther's meditations on creation (the bubble, the foam, the afterbirth, the cosmic egg) connect her to one of mythology's oldest images. The world egg or cosmic egg appears in the cosmogonies of Hindu, Orphic, Finnish, Chinese, and many other traditions: at the beginning of everything, there is an egg, and the universe breaks from its shell. Young gives Esther this framework for thinking about her own body: the womb as cosmic egg, every pregnancy as potential creation on that scale, every stillbirth as a universe that formed and did not break through. She is not merely a woman who cannot carry a pregnancy to term. She is a site of cosmic generation, and cosmic loss.

Chapter 73: The Stillborn and the Fathers

Content note: *The Esther Longtree chapters (72 to 81) deal with stillbirth and pregnancy loss, rape, infanticide, racist violence including lynching, and cruelty to children. This chapter describes stillbirths and the hidden remains of infants.*

Research notes: Chapter 73

Characters: Abigail Porter · Coleman Bluebough · Esther Longtree · Joe Goldberg · Phoebe · The Chicago Detective · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Duality and Doubles · Identity and the Self · Motherhood, Pregnancy, and Birth · Music, Sound, and Silence

Symbols: Birds · Pregnancy, Birth, and Children · Silence and Deafness · Twins and Doubles · Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Greek Mythology · Pregnancy, Abortion, and Midwifery

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Chapter 72 gave you Esther Longtree in her fullness: the little shadow boxer, the defiant hope, the philosophical reach toward the cosmos. Chapter 73 goes deeper into the particular. Into the texture of her loss. Into the faces, or the fragments of faces, of the children she has carried and buried. Into the men who wrote her letters at the end of their lives, asking about children who were never born whole.

This is a chapter about what silence costs, and what it protects.

You should know before you begin that some of what Esther describes here is disturbing: an encounter in a graveyard that was not consensual, a labor that produced nothing, a life of grief conducted almost entirely in secret, inside a body that everyone can see is pregnant and no one can see is also a graveyard. Young does not look away from any of this. Neither should you.

What Actually Happens

Esther continues her account, which is both monologue and meditation, both addressed to Vera (who is presumably nearby, or imagining this, or somehow receiving it) and addressed to no one, to the air, to the stillborn who whisper in her ears.

She describes the children she has carried as fragments: “an eye, an ear, a long gold hair, a fingernail, a cobweb,” a snowflake. Not whole babies, or not always. Sometimes something more nebulous than a baby, something that was almost a child and then wasn’t. She has buried them everywhere: in streams, under snow, in tree stumps, in the autumn leaves. The undertaker has complained that she brings him no business, because she hides the evidence. This is not indifference; it is the opposite. She cannot bear to hand them over to strangers.

She describes the fathers: the traveling men, the salesmen, the transients. Most are weak, sterile in some essential way she cannot diagnose. As they die, they write her

letters. They remember her vividly. They ask: did the child live? They want to know they have left something behind. Esther, advised by her old drunken doctor to preserve the dying man's vanity and peace, does not answer. She keeps their illusions intact. The truth (that there is no child, or that what arrived was a snowflake, a cobweb, a breath of something that did not take) is not something she can give them. It is also not something she can fully bear herself.

The Chicago detective appears, circling. He is "trying to find the proof that she had killed his three," for he is "another old, sterile father," and Esther fears arrest, fears trial, fears standing before a jury of women who will judge her without understanding her condition. She has done nothing wrong. She has also hidden everything.

And then there is Joe Goldberg.

Joe Goldberg, Champion Featherweight

He is the one father Esther cannot quite remember. This is the novel's precise reversal: the weak fathers, the sterile salesmen, the men who barely registered in her life; she remembers them clearly. The strong one, the champion, the featherweight boxer who was at the peak of his existence when he knew her; he is lost in clouds, like the weight of a feather in her mind. Young is telling you something here about how memory works: it keeps what hurt least, most clearly, and buries what was most overwhelming. Joe Goldberg wrote her long, anguished letters as he wasted away from tuberculosis. He remembered her as the greatest victory of his life: greater than any fight. He remembered meeting her in a graveyard on a foggy, windy night. He remembered knocking the nose off a stone angel. He remembered taking her against her will. He wrote asking for remembrance, for forgiveness, for confirmation that his child lived. Esther remembers the graveyard. She does not remember him clearly. She cannot anchor his face.

What Young is doing here is both precise and painful. Joe Goldberg assaulted Esther. He knows this; his letter asks for forgiveness, which implies acknowledgment of what he did. He has, in his dying days, turned it into something else in his memory (the "peak of his existence, his greatest victory") which is what men who have done this often do. Esther cannot remember him clearly because the experience did not belong to her in any way that would make a clear memory. It was done to her. The blur is honest.

She does not answer his letter.

The Birth of Nothing

One of the chapter's most quietly devastating passages describes a labor: Esther endures all the pain of childbirth (the contractions, the hours, the full physical breaking) and delivers nothing. Her body goes through the complete experience of birth and nothing comes: "Perhaps not even a feather, a cobweb."

She lies all night in the grass under "the dwarfish apple tree that never yielded an apple in its life," screaming for help that does not come, the old mule watching over the rail fence. This is the most extreme form of what Esther carries: not just grief for the children who

came and did not live, but the labor itself spent on absence. Her body has done everything right. Everything has gone through the correct motions. And still: nothing. Young refuses to explain this medically or symbolically. It simply happens, the way loss simply happens, without adequate cause or sufficient reason.

The Silence

The old drunken doctor's advice to Esther is one of the chapter's key moments of pragmatic wisdom: don't answer the dying fathers. Let them believe the child lives. What good does the truth do? They are dying. Their belief in the child is all they have. Give them that. Esther follows this advice. She does not answer the letters. She does not confirm or deny. She keeps the stillborn hidden. She carries the truth of her situation inside a body that broadcasts it to anyone who looks (she is visibly, obviously pregnant; she has been obviously pregnant for years) and still no one in the town knows what she actually knows. They have theories. They have suspicions. They have the undertaker's complaint. They do not have the truth.

This silence is Esther's great act. It protects the dying. It protects her. It costs her enormously. She is the only one who knows the full inventory of loss (every fragment, every snowflake, every cobweb that was meant to be a child) and she has agreed, by her silence, to be the only keeper of that knowledge. There is no one she can tell. The stillborn whisper in her ears. She listens to them and says nothing outward.

The Accusation

The Chicago detective is, in this chapter, still circling: still a threat rather than a fully materialized presence. But the threat is specific: Esther fears that her hidden stillborn children will be read as evidence of murder. That she will stand trial for the deaths of children she did not kill, that she loved, that she buried with her own hands in places she chose because she could not bear to hand them to strangers.

This is one of the novel's most quietly accurate observations about how women's grief is treated. Esther has lost every child she has carried. She has suffered the full physical and emotional catastrophe of this over and over. And the world around her (embodied in the detective, in the undertaker, in the jury of women she imagines judging her) reads her behavior not as grief but as guilt. She has hidden the evidence. She has refused to explain herself. She must be guilty of something.

She is guilty of nothing except surviving.

The Stillborn as Fragments

Young's most distinctive choice in this chapter is the way she describes what Esther delivers: not always whole babies, but sometimes only their parts. "An eye, an ear, a long gold hair, a fingernail, a cobweb." A snowflake.

This is, on one level, medically recognizable: very early losses sometimes produce only fragments. But Young is also doing something larger. The stillborn as fragments accumulate into a portrait: if you arranged all of Esther's losses side by side, you would have, between them, something that adds up to a child. All the eyes, all the fingernails, all the gold hairs. They are dispersed through years and seasons, buried in different places, but they belong together. They are, taken together, the child that Esther has been waiting for all along. The little shadow boxer, still moving inside her, is the one who might be whole.

The Epizeuxis

Esther's speech sometimes repeats a word three times in immediate succession: "murder, murder, murder" in this chapter, "mother, mother, mother" in Chapter 72. This repetition is called epizeuxis in rhetoric, the insistent restatement of a word for emotional emphasis, and it gives Esther's voice a new quality, something between a stutter and an incantation. It sounds like grief working through language, like a mind returning compulsively to the same unbearable point. It sounds like someone trying to make a word real by saying it enough times. It sounds like someone trying to make something stay. It is also, as *To All My Darlings* notes, potentially comic in other contexts. Young holds both registers simultaneously: the grief is real, the repetition is also slightly absurd, Esther is both tragic and eccentric, and that combination, not one or the other, is what makes her one of the great characters in this novel.

What to Hold Onto

The stillborn as fragments: an eye, an ear, a fingernail, a cobweb. Each one a child that was almost. All of them together, a child that might still come.

Joe Goldberg's letters, vivid with a memory Esther cannot share. The strongest father, barely a feather in her mind. The blur is the honest part.

The birth of nothing. Her body going through every motion, the hours, the pain. And then: nothing, not even a feather. Only the old mule, watching over the fence. The silence she keeps for the dying fathers. The enormous cost of letting them believe. The doctor's advice: preserve their peace. What good does the truth do?

And the little shadow boxer, still there, still moving. Still two hearts.

For the Curious

On Tuberculosis and Joe Goldberg

On Tuberculosis and Joe Goldberg

Joe Goldberg is a featherweight champion dying of tuberculosis, which in the pre-antibiotic era was a slow, wasting death. Tuberculosis was the leading cause of death in the United States in the early twentieth century, thriving in crowded, unsanitary conditions and cutting across class lines; it killed the strong and the weak alike, often at the height of

their powers. Streptomycin, the first effective antibiotic treatment, was not available until 1944; isoniazid followed in 1952. Before these, treatment meant sanatoriums, fresh air, and hope. A featherweight boxer dying of tuberculosis is Young's precise image for what the chapter is about: the strongest man brought to fragility, the physical champion rendered weightless, the fighter who cannot fight his final opponent.

On Epizeuxis

On Epizeuxis

The rhetorical device Esther begins using in this chapter (the tripling of words in immediate succession (baby, baby, baby; gone, gone, gone)) is called epizeuxis, from the Greek for "fastening upon." It is one of the oldest and most emotionally direct devices in the rhetorical tradition, used in scripture, in incantation, in the cries of grief across cultures. The tripling carries a ritual quality: three repetitions constitute a charm, an oath, a summoning. Esther is not merely emphasizing. She is attempting, through language, to make something real, to hold something still. The repetition also has the quality of a stutter: the word catching, unable to clear, the mouth returning to the same unresolvable sound. Young gives Esther this voice as she deepens into her most painful material. The language breaks along the same fault line as the experience.

On the Graveyard Encounter

On the Graveyard Encounter

Joe Goldberg's letter describes their encounter in a graveyard on a foggy, windy night: he knocked the nose off a stone angel, he took her against her will. Young situates this assault in a graveyard deliberately, in the place of the dead, among the stones of the already-lost, in fog and wind, the most indeterminate of atmospheres. The classical tradition she draws on is long: Greek mythology is full of women assaulted in liminal spaces, at the border of the human and the divine, and producing from those encounters children who are marked by the violence of their conception. Persephone, Callisto, Daphne, Europa, Io: the escape from sexual pursuit is one of mythology's oldest motifs, and the woman who cannot escape is almost always transformed: into a tree, into a star, into a state of perpetual pregnancy. Esther does not transform. She continues. She gets up. She goes back to work. This refusal of mythological resolution is one of Young's most pointed choices.

On the Undertaker's Complaint

On the Undertaker's Complaint

The undertaker complains that Esther brings him no business; she hides her stillborn children in streams and snow and tree stumps rather than delivering them to the graveyard where they belong, where they could be properly recorded, buried, accounted for. This complaint is comic and grotesque and also perfectly calibrated. The undertaker's business depends on the orderly processing of death: bodies delivered, buried, recorded, charged for. Esther's grief is disorderly. She refuses to route her children through the system. Her burials are private, dispersed, invisible, which is exactly what makes them

beautiful and exactly what makes the detective suspicious. A death that is not processed by the system has not, from the system's perspective, really been properly mourned. It has been hidden. Esther's love for her stillborn looks, to the outside, indistinguishable from concealment of a crime.

On the Double Standard

On the Double Standard

Esther raises the double standard explicitly in this chapter: if she were a man, she says, "she would have chased after all the women! She would have left her children in every state of the union and in all foreign countries, pieces of her, pieces of their father. But she would not have claimed any of them, so she would have left a trail of broken hearts and crying children." But she would not be judged for it. She would be a stud. Because she is a woman who has had many sexual encounters, most of them not of her choosing, she is judged as a slut, as mulish, as a woman who has brought her situation on herself. Young makes this point through Esther's own voice: clear, a little sardonic, entirely accurate about the arithmetic of gender and reputation in mid-twentieth-century America. The men who fathered her children wandered away. She remained. She is the one who is on trial.

On Birth Control Before 1965

On Birth Control Before 1965

Esther's situation (perpetually pregnant, with no legal means to prevent it) is historically situated. Before the Supreme Court's 1965 decision in Griswold v. Connecticut, access to contraception was restricted by law in many states. The Comstock Act of 1873 had criminalized the distribution of contraceptive information through the mail; many states had their own versions. Common methods available to women who could access them included condoms (vulcanized rubber since 1839), diaphragms, spermicides, and dangerous, largely ineffective douches marketed as "feminine hygiene." The first oral contraceptive pill was approved in 1960 but was not immediately available to unmarried women in all states. Esther lives in a world where her body's reproductive capacity is subject to forces she cannot legally manage. The sterile fathers (who produce stillbirths, who are themselves the failure in the equation) face no equivalent constraint. Their sterility is their own private fact. Hers is public, enormous, and grounds for criminal investigation.

On Coleman Bluebough and the Graveyard

On Coleman Bluebough and the Graveyard

The graveyard where Joe Goldberg encountered Esther is peopled with specific names: Coleman Bluebough, who died at age three, his small grave in what is now someone's vegetable garden; Phoebe, the old washwoman, her statue with a bulbous nose and sunbonnet; Abigail Porter. Young gives the dead their names. The graveyard is not an abstraction; it is a specific community of the lost, each one remembered with an inscription, each one part of the local record. Esther's stillborn children have no inscriptions, no graves in the official record. They are hidden in streams and snow. The

graveyard holds the names of children who died but were claimed. Esther’s children are unclaimed by the record, present only in her memory and in the fragments she has buried herself. The graveyard is what the official version of death looks like. Esther’s losses are what death looks like when no one is watching.

Chapter 74: The Chicago Detective

Content note: *The Esther Longtree chapters (72 to 81) deal with stillbirth and pregnancy loss, rape, infanticide, racist violence including lynching, and cruelty to children. This chapter is one of the hardest in the novel: Esther describes being raped by the Chicago detective, and the chapter deals with racism.*

Research notes: Chapter 74

Characters: Esther Longtree · Joachim Spitzer · The Chicago Detective

Themes: Death and Mortality · Grief, Loss, and Mourning · Memory and the Past · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Angels, Devils, and Myth · Clothing, Hats, and Skirts

Allusions: Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · Pregnancy, Abortion, and Midwifery

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Chapter 73 told you that a Chicago detective was circling Esther, that she feared arrest, that the undertaker had complained she brought him no business because she hid the evidence of her stillborn children in streams and snow and tree stumps. The detective was a threat at the edges of the previous chapter's frame.

Chapter 74 brings him fully into focus, and what comes into focus is one of the novel's most disturbing configurations: the detective is also the rapist. The man investigating Esther is the man who assaulted her. The figure of authority pursuing her for the deaths of children is the same figure whose violence set the terrible cycle in motion. He comes "three times in three different years," once as "a wandering locksmith," once as "a soap salesman in the winter meadows," once "as himself." He has not solved the mystery. He has not found a murderer. But he always finds Esther. This is a chapter about the machinery of judgment brought to bear on a woman who has done nothing wrong, operated by the very man who wronged her. Young does not make this easy to read. She is not trying to.

Esther also, in this chapter, says something strange about her own beginning: "her father and her mother had been barren and had not mated." And she hints at something from when she was young, "the murder of her heart," a wound that may have been the first, the one that started everything. Her childhood reproaches her. She doesn't fully understand why.

What Actually Happens

Esther continues her account, her voice marked by the triple repetitions that run through her speech ("murder, murder, murder"): the epizeuxis that gives her speech its quality of grief pressing against language. She describes the detective's repeated appearances: three times, three different years, in different guises. He comes looking for evidence of murder. He catalogues his clues with the precision of the Golden Age detective novel: eyeglasses, footprints, a calling card, a bone button, a thread, "a single spot of brown

blood.” He can solve “all murder mysteries but his own,” and his own is the one that matters: that he is what he is hunting.

He raped her, she says, when he thought she was dead, or perhaps sleeping, or perhaps simply because she was there and he could. She describes it with the detachment of someone describing weather: a whirl, an aching, a dullness. It was over too soon. It left behind evidence: the symptoms, the signs of his presence in her body. Another pregnancy. Another absence.

Later, in Chapter 77, she notes that he is the kind of detective who only deals “with the deaths of little white children.” The deaths of little Black children are “not his business, there being so many and so unimportant,” in his accounting. Young states this without additional commentary. The accounting speaks for itself.

He gets confessions from murderers “by confessing his own imaginary crimes.” He is trapped in the system he enforces, both agent and victim of the machinery, unable to solve the mystery at the center of his own life.

Esther fears the trial she imagines waiting for her: the jury of women who will look at her enormous pregnant body and her history of hidden stillborn and reach conclusions she cannot counter. She is innocent. She has also hidden everything. These two facts coexist and cannot be reconciled by a jury that only sees the second one.

Her parents, she says, “had been barren and had not mated.” She hints at something that happened when she was young, “the murder of her heart,” something her memory approaches and then retreats from. Her childhood reproaches her. “Who was innocent? Who was guilty?” She is not sure. She does not explain further.

Despite all of this, near the chapter’s end Esther is radiant. She has “done much lying but no laying,” she says; she has been misjudged, misread, accused of immorality she did not commit in the way they imagine. She is self-sufficient. She is luminous. “No one from the outside world” can annoy her or frighten her. She is more hopeful now than she has ever been. Time’s passage has helped her, not hindered her. The little shadow boxer is still there.

The Detective as Both Perpetrator and Pursuer

The Chicago detective is this chapter’s central paradox, and Young constructs it without flinching. He is the man who assaulted Esther, who came to her when she appeared dead or sleeping, who left his evidence in her body, who produced at least one of the stillborn children she has been hiding. He is also the man sent to investigate the disappearance of those children. He is the crime and the investigation of the crime simultaneously. This is not a mystery novel’s twist. It is a structural observation about power. The person with authority to investigate, to accuse, to bring to trial is also the person who committed the original violation. His investigation of Esther is therefore not a search for truth but a performance of authority over a woman he has already violated: a continuation of the original act by institutional means. He catalogues clues. He solves mysteries. He does not solve his own.

Young gives him the full toolkit of Golden Age detective fiction: eyeglasses, footprints, a calling card, a bone button, a single thread, a spot of blood. The clues are meticulous and they lead nowhere, or rather, they lead him back to Esther every time, which is where he was going anyway. The investigation is circular. The mystery is not designed to be solved. It is designed to maintain his presence in her life.

The Racial Accounting

One of the most precise and most chilling moments in Esther's story, which comes in Chapter 77, is the description of the detective's professional scope: he only deals "with the deaths of little white children." The deaths of little Black children are not his business. There are too many of them. They are not important enough.

Young states this in Esther's voice, flatly, without irony, because Esther has no irony to spare for it. It is simply true. It is the accounting of a system that has decided, by the allocation of investigative resources, which children's lives matter and which do not. The detective is not a corrupt aberration from this system. He is the system operating correctly, according to its own values. This passage sits alongside the woman in curlers from Chapter 71, her insistence that there are no Black people in the county and no one wants any, as Young's documentation of the specific texture of American racism in the mid-twentieth century Midwest. It is not ideological in the abstract. It is institutional, practical, embedded in the professional scope of the man sent to protect children. Some children. The ones whose deaths count.

Esther's Origin and the First Wound

Near the end of the chapter, without ceremony and without explanation, Esther says that "her family tree was barren because her father and her mother had been barren and had not mated." She hints at something that happened when she was young, "the murder of her heart when she was young," a wound in her earliest girlhood that her memory circles without landing. Her own childhood reproaches her. She asks: "Who was innocent? Who was guilty?"

Young does not answer. The ambiguity is deliberate. What Esther may be carrying (in addition to everything else, in addition to the little shadow boxer) is guilt about something that happened before she was fully old enough to understand it. A death that may not have been her fault, that she may have been too young to prevent, that is now entangled in her mind with all the subsequent losses. She cannot separate them. Her childhood is reproaching her for something she cannot fully name.

Her origin is part of the mystery too. Her parents never mated, she says, and Chapter 79 will tell how she was conceived anyway. The "everlasting pregnancy" may have roots in that strange beginning. The mystery of her condition is also the mystery of her origin.

The Shroud with Many Pockets

One of the chapter's central images is a shroud, the garment of the dead, with many pockets. A shroud with pockets has nowhere to go. The dead do not need pockets; they have no belongings to carry, no errands to run. A shroud with many pockets is a garment of death that has been prepared for living: the carrying of things forward, the retention of evidence, the keeping of secrets. Esther wears this shroud figuratively. She is a woman whose body keeps carrying things that have died. The pockets hold the fragments: an eye, an ear, a fingernail, the evidence of the detective's presence, the first death of her girlhood. She cannot empty the pockets. The shroud does not come off.

Esther's Radiance

After everything in this chapter (the detective, the assault, the first wound, the fear of trial, the accusation of murder for children she did not kill) Esther ends radiant. Suffused with radiance, the chapter says. Self-sufficient. "No one from the outside world" can annoy her or frighten her.

This is not denial. Esther knows everything that has happened. Her clarity is one of the chapter's recurring emphases: she is luminous inside, whatever her body and the world have done to her. She has been misread as mulish, as crazy, as immoral, as a murderer. She has "done much lying but no laying." She is more hopeful now than she has ever been.

Time has helped her. This is one of the stranger things Esther says, because time has brought her assault, her hidden stillborn, the detective's repeated visits, the undertaker's complaint, the imagined jury of women. But time has also brought her further from the first death, further from the girlhood that reproaches her, closer to the conviction that the little shadow boxer will make it. The passage of time has, for Esther, accumulated more hope than despair. This is not logical. It is true.

What to Hold Onto

The detective who is both the crime and the investigation. The man with the eyeglasses and the calling card and the bone button, who solves all mysteries but his own, who comes back "three times in three different years" and always finds Esther.

The racial accounting: only "the deaths of little white children." Stated flatly. The system, operating correctly.

Esther, child of parents who "had not mated," her childhood reproaching her for something she cannot name. A first death before all the others. "Who was innocent? Who was guilty?" She does not know.

The shroud with many pockets. A garment of death prepared for living, for carrying things forward. And Esther radiant, at the end. Suffused with light. More hopeful now than ever. Time's passage has helped her. The little shadow boxer is still there, still fighting, still two hearts.

For the Curious

On the Golden Age of Detective Fiction

On the Golden Age of Detective Fiction

The clues the detective catalogues (eyeglasses, footprints, a calling card, a bone button, a thread) are drawn directly from the conventions of Golden Age detective fiction, roughly 1913–1939, the era of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Ngaio Marsh in Britain, and Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler in America. The Golden Age "whodunit" operated on strict rules: fair-play clues, a closed circle of suspects, a brilliant detective who assembles the evidence into a solution. The Detection Club, founded in 1930, actually codified these rules. Young gives her detective every convention of this genre and then inverts its logic completely: his clues lead nowhere, or they lead back to Esther, who is not the murderer. He is the murderer. The form that promises resolution produces only recurrence.

On Trauma Memory and the Assault

On Trauma Memory and the Assault

Esther describes the detective's assault with detachment: a whirl, an aching, a dullness, over too soon. This is not Young minimizing the assault. It is Young being precise about how traumatic memory often works. Research on trauma consistently shows that survivors may remember specific sensory details while the event itself becomes fragmentary, dissociated, described in passive or atmospheric terms. The body's response to extreme threat can produce exactly this quality of observation from a distance, as if it were weather, as if it were happening to someone else. Esther's detached description is the honest register of a mind that was not able to be fully present for what was done to it.

On the Detective Confessing Imaginary Crimes

On the Detective Confessing Imaginary Crimes

The detail that the detective gets confessions from murderers "by confessing his own imaginary crimes" is one of Young's most compressed ironies. The interrogation technique (the interviewer fabricating sympathy, claiming shared experience, manufacturing false solidarity to draw out the suspect) is real, and its use to extract confessions (sometimes false ones) has been documented in miscarriages of justice throughout American legal history. Young's detective uses this method professionally. His imaginary crimes are not so imaginary. He has confessed to nothing real. He is still looking for Esther.

On Chione and the Mythological Frame

On Chione and the Mythological Frame

To All My Darlings connects the detective's assault of Esther (committed when he thought she was dead, or sleeping, or simply vulnerable) to the myth of Chione, who was said to

be so beautiful that she was desired by a thousand men, and whom Hermes raped while she slept, using magic to make her unconscious first. The assault of the sleeping or apparently dead woman is one of mythology's oldest and most disturbing motifs. Young has stated that Esther is "the mother of us all" and Mr. Spitzer the "father of us all," positioning them as archetypes, perhaps as Eve and Adam, or as figures from the Nag Hammadi texts, where Eve is described as assaulted and bearing children from the assault. The Chicago detective, in this reading, is not merely a corrupt policeman. He is the figure of patriarchal authority at its most predatory, and Esther's condition (her everlasting pregnancy, her hidden stillborn, her perpetual state of carrying and losing) is the world's condition, the consequence of what was done at the origin.

On the Jury of Women

On the Jury of Women

Esther imagines a jury of women who will judge her for the disappeared stillborn: who will see her enormous pregnant body, her history, her silence, and reach the wrong conclusion. What she is imagining is historically precise. Women's reproductive experiences (miscarriage, stillbirth, concealment of pregnancy, infanticide, abortion) have been subject to criminal prosecution throughout American history, particularly for poor women, unmarried women, and women of color. The legal system's involvement in women's reproductive lives has almost always operated to penalize rather than support. Esther's fear of the jury is not paranoia. It is pattern recognition. The imagined jury of women is also, in Young's construction, the social world that polices other women's behavior on behalf of the patriarchal order it has internalized: the phenomenon Andrea Dworkin would later describe in her analysis of how women enforce the gender norms that oppress them.

On "She Had Done Much Lying But No Laying"

On "She Had Done Much Lying But No Laying"

This is one of the novel's best lines, and it is Esther's own. The accusations against her (that she is a woman of loose morals, that she has been promiscuous, that she has brought her situation upon herself) rest on the assumption that she has been sexually active by choice, repeatedly, irresponsibly. She has "done much lying but no laying": she has told her silences, kept her secrets, remained in her position of apparent passivity, but she has not been what they think she has been. The men came to her. The detective came when she appeared dead. The salesmen passed through. She was the static point around which the transit of men moved. And she is the one who is judged for it. The line is also a wordplay that Young delivers with Esther's particular dry humor: the humor that has always coexisted with her grief, that keeps her from being only a tragic figure, that keeps her human.

Chapter 75: The Mud Baby

Content note: *The Esther Longtree chapters (72 to 81) deal with stillbirth and pregnancy loss, rape, infanticide, racist violence including lynching, and cruelty to children. This chapter describes the drowning of an infant and hints at incest.*

Research notes: Chapter 75

Characters: Esther Longtree

Themes: Guilt, Innocence, and Justice · Identity and the Self

Symbols: Pregnancy, Birth, and Children · Roses and Flowers · The Sea and Water

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft · William James and Pragmatism

Allusions: Fairy Tales and Folklore · Pregnancy, Abortion, and Midwifery

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This is the deepest and most disturbing chapter of Esther's sequence, and it needs to be approached carefully.

The previous chapters gave you Esther in her fullness: her hope, her philosophy, her humor, her grief held in balance. Chapter 75 goes somewhere darker: a particular dead child, the one that keeps coming back. The mud baby. A body thrown into the river by a fisherman who may have been dreaming. A suspicion about the child's father that Esther approaches and retreats from and cannot quite name. A body bigger in death than it was in life, covered with mud and brambles, returning in dreams with "a funeral wreath hanging from its navel," its face lit by "awful starlight which was not starlight."

Young does not soften any of this. You are not meant to feel comfortable. Esther's story has arrived at its most unresolved and most haunted material, and the chapter holds it all without resolution: the mud baby's ambiguous paternity, the implied incest, the body in the river, the detective's accusations, the war coming that will make all of it seem small. Esther survives through it. She always survives. That survival is not peace.

What Actually Happens

Esther's body swells "like a face under water": a phrase that gives her pregnancy the quality of something drowned, something submerged and seen through distortion. She wonders whether what is growing inside her is a child or a benign tumor. She has wondered this before. The question is not rhetorical: she genuinely cannot always tell. Her certainty about the little shadow boxer (two hearts, the little shadow foot) exists alongside this uncertainty about the other thing, the growth that may or may not be what she hopes.

The detective comes again. He accuses her, again, of murdering his children. He raped her, she says, and to get even she told him "that he was going to be a father when, of course, it was already dead"; the child in her womb had died before he ever came. Now he accuses her of killing it. His accusation, that she killed what she let him believe he fathered, is one of the chapter's precise inversions: the man who violated her now

presents himself as the bereaved father, the wronged party, the one seeking justice for a death she caused.

There is a particular dead baby in this chapter: the mud baby. Esther gave birth to it, and with the help of a fisherman (a compassionate man who may have been dreaming, who may have been sunstruck, whose state of consciousness is left uncertain) she “wrapped it in a gunny sack” and threw it “into the river above the dam where the current was rapid.” The river took it. The river did not keep it.

It comes back. In dreams, in nightmares, in waking visions. Bigger in death than it was in life. Covered with mud and brambles. “A funeral wreath hanging from its navel.” Walking sometimes, lying in a coffin-like boat at other times, whistling like a policeman. Its face lit by something that is not starlight. It is ugly and beautiful simultaneously: “glass, twigs, brambles, mud, sand, starlight.” It teases her. It will not answer any question.

The child whistles “like the policeman on his beat.” Esther’s father is a policeman, and in the dream she sees what that means: “it was the policeman’s son, and her father was the father,” though “she could not imagine how her father could have been the father,” and decides it “must have been true in her dreams.” She does not confess this to anyone. She has not borne witness against herself, because her father is the policeman, and to accuse him would be to accuse herself in the eyes of a system that would not protect her.

She imagines an eldest son who will not come indoors. She leaves food for him. She calls to him. He does not come.

The chapter closes with Esther’s dark pragmatism: there is “going to be another war soon, killing all the men and some of the children, and one or two old murders should not have mattered so much, especially if it was nothing murdered.”

The Mud Baby

The mud baby is the chapter’s central image, and it is one of the most unsettling figures in the novel. It is a particular dead child, a specific loss from a specific labor, that has taken on the quality of all of Esther’s losses simultaneously. It returns because it was not properly grieved, or because it cannot be grieved properly, or because some of the circumstances of its conception cannot be acknowledged and so the grief has nowhere to complete itself.

Young describes it in accumulation: mud baby, “seed that swelled into a star,” “glass, twigs, brambles, mud, sand, starlight.” It is assembled from what the river gave it and what Esther’s memory added. It is bigger in death than in life, which is the precise description of how unresolved loss works in the psyche. The thing that could not be held grows larger in its absence than it ever was in its presence. It spreads its fingers wide. It will not answer questions.

The “funeral wreath hanging from its navel” is the chapter’s strangest and most perfectly calibrated detail. Young says it hangs there “to hide its male organs from the moonlight and the starlight and her.” The navel is the point of connection between mother and child: the umbilical cord’s trace. A funeral wreath hanging there marks the death of that

connection, the formal mourning of what the umbilicus joined and then, in death, still joins. The wreath is for the child. The wreath is also for the bond.

The Fisherman

He is the chapter's only figure of uncomplicated compassion, and he is barely present. He helps Esther wrap the mud baby and throw it into the river. He does this in a state of uncertainty; he wonders if he is dreaming, if he is sunstruck, if what he is participating in is real. Young gives him this uncertainty deliberately: the witness who helps but cannot fully confirm what he has witnessed. He asks no questions. He helps. Afterward he never mentions it again.

He is the only man in Esther's story who is present at a moment of her greatest vulnerability and does nothing to compound it. He does not accuse her. He does not claim the child. He does not write her letters later asking for confirmation of a life. He simply helps her carry what she cannot carry alone, and then he goes away.

His compassion is so minimal and so unelaborated that it stands out sharply against the landscape of men in Esther's life. This is what help looks like in this world: a man who may have been dreaming, who asked no questions, who helped throw a gunny sack into a river, and who did not stay.

The Father Who Is the Policeman

Young places two facts side by side: the mud baby whistles like a policeman. Esther's father is a policeman. She has not borne witness against herself, because her father is the policeman, and her father is the law.

The implication is incest. Esther sees it in her dream and cannot believe it ("How could her father be the father?"), and she cannot say it aloud: her father holds authority over her in every sense, legal and familial. To accuse him would be to enter a system where she has no protection and he has every power. The Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination, which *To All My Darlings* mentions in this context, applies here with a particular bitter irony: Esther cannot testify because the testimony would implicate not only herself but the very figure of authority who surrounds her. Her father is the policeman. The policeman is the law. The law would not believe her.

The mud baby's whistle, that policeman's whistle, is the most disturbing detail in the chapter precisely because of its mundanity. It is not supernatural. It is just the sound that a dead child makes when it walks back to its mother in her dreams, and it sounds exactly like her father going about his work.

The Detective's Accusation

He comes again, and his accusation in this chapter takes its fullest form: he claims the dead children as his, and he accuses Esther of murdering them. This is the complete inversion. He raped her. The children (such as they were, the dead things, the stillborn,

the fragments) were produced by his assault. He has now claimed ownership of those deaths and turned them into her crime.

Young gives us the detective's self-presentation with cold precision: he is a man who cannot solve his own mystery, who comes to Esther repeatedly in disguise, who leaves evidence of his own presence in her body, who then investigates that evidence as if it belonged to someone else's crime. He has written the crime and cast himself as the investigator. He has fathered the deaths and accused her of murdering them. There is no appeal from this structure. It is sealed.

Esther's response is what it has been: silence. Stubborn, luminous, unbreakable silence. She will not explain herself unless compelled. She cries only when she is sure no one is near. She faces the detective's accusations with the same quality she brings to everything: a refusal to be defined by what others have done to her, even when she cannot name what they have done.

The Coming War

The chapter's closing move is one of Young's most characteristic: the expansion from the particular to the historical, from Esther's private grief to the scale of collective catastrophe. There is "going to be another war soon," Esther thinks. It will kill "all the men and some of the children, and one or two old murders should not have mattered so much, especially if it was nothing murdered." "If it was nothing murdered"; this is the question at the center of Esther's legal and moral situation. Were her stillborn children murdered? Were they children? Were they nothing? The law, which has no precedent for Esther's case, cannot answer this. Esther, who loved every one of them, cannot answer it either. And against the coming war (which will produce deaths by the hundreds of thousands, deaths that will be commemorated and mourned and recorded and justified) Esther's private losses look, by comparison, like nothing.

This is not consolation. It is the logic of scale that has always been used to make individual suffering invisible. Young gives Esther this thought not to endorse it but to show that Esther has absorbed it, has made a kind of peace with her own insignificance in the larger accounting of death, while remaining entirely, stubbornly, luminously herself.

What to Hold Onto

The mud baby: bigger in death than in life, covered with mud and brambles, the "funeral wreath hanging from its navel," whistling like a policeman. The fisherman who helped in a state of dreaming, asked no questions, and never spoke of it again. The minimal compassion that is the only kind available.

The policeman's whistle. The adjacent facts. The thing Esther cannot say because her father is the law.

The detective's accusation; he claims the dead children as his, and accuses her of killing them. He has written the crime and cast himself as the investigator.

Esther’s final pragmatism: there will be another war. “All the men and some of the children, and one or two old murders should not” matter so much. “Especially if it was nothing murdered.”

And underneath all of it, still: the little shadow boxer, two hearts. She is more hopeful now than she has ever been. Time’s passage helps her. This is not a lie.

For the Curious

On the Mud Baby and the Tar-Baby

On the Mud Baby and the Tar-Baby

To All My Darlings connects the mud baby to the Tar-Baby of the Uncle Remus stories: a doll made of tar and turpentine that Brer Fox uses to trap Brer Rabbit. The more Brer Rabbit fights the Tar-Baby, the more entangled he becomes. The tar baby has become an idiom for a problem that worsens with struggle, a situation where mere contact leads to inescapable involvement. Young’s mud baby operates on this logic: the more Esther tries to manage the child’s death (hiding it, throwing it in the river, not speaking of it) the more entangled she becomes, the more it returns, the more it grows in her dreams. The thing she tried to release has held her more tightly for the attempt.

On the Fifth Amendment and Self-Incrimination

On the Fifth Amendment and Self-Incrimination

Esther “had held back her cries and testimonies and had not borne witness against herself, for it would have been illegal to do so, and her own father was the policeman.” The Fifth Amendment right against compelled self-incrimination, what’s colloquially called pleading the Fifth, protects individuals from being forced to testify against themselves in criminal proceedings. For Esther, this protection is bitterly ironic: she cannot testify because testimony would expose not only her own actions but the actions of the man who is himself the embodiment of local legal authority. Her silence is legally protected and also legally enforced by the very thing it would reveal. She cannot speak because he is the police.

On the River and the Dam

On the River and the Dam

The stillborn thrown “into the river above the dam where the current was rapid” carries historical resonance that Young (writing before 1965, when the novel was published) may or may not have intended but that *To All My Darlings* notes: in August 1964, FBI agents discovered the bodies of three civil rights workers (James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman) buried in an earthen dam in Neshoba County, Mississippi. They had been murdered by Klan members and a local deputy sheriff. The bodies of people killed by those in authority, hidden in dams and rivers and earthworks, are part of the American landscape. Young’s river (into which Esther throws what she cannot keep, what

the law would read as evidence of her crime) is that same river. The current is rapid. It does not keep everything it receives.

On the Red Geranium

On the Red Geranium

The red geranium (Saint Robert's geranium, also called old maid's nightcap) appears in the chapter's imagery as a folk emblem of fertility. The folklore holds that the geranium could fulfill a couple's wish for children, worn as an amulet or placed under the bed to signal to the spirits a desire for a child. Young gives Esther this flower in the context of her yearning: she has wanted, her adult life, what the geranium was supposed to summon. The irony of the name, old maid's nightcap, is that Esther is how the town reads her: an old maid, a woman without children. She has more children than anyone knows. None of them lived.

On Benign Tumor or Conscience

On Benign Tumor or Conscience

Esther's uncertainty about whether what grows inside her is a child or a benign tumor (or, she adds, a conscience) is one of the chapter's most compressed images. The conscience as a growth inside the body: something that swells, that presses, that cannot be diagnosed or removed, that you carry without choosing to. The medical and the moral fused in a single metaphor. Young is precise about the kind of guilt Esther carries: not the guilt of someone who did something wrong, but the guilt of someone who survived things that left her feeling as if she had. The conscience grows. It has no clear etiology. It cannot be excised.

On Pre-Roe Reproductive Law

On Pre-Roe Reproductive Law

Esther's situation (facing potential criminal prosecution for the disappearance of her stillborn children, in a legal environment with no precedent for her case) reflects the actual legal landscape for women's reproductive lives before the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision. Abortion was a criminal offense in most American states, punishable by fines and imprisonment, permitted only to save the mother's life and even then restricted in access. Miscarriage and stillbirth occupied a legal gray zone: a woman whose pregnancy ended without a living child could, depending on circumstances, face investigation for infanticide or criminal abortion. Women who sought illegal abortions risked not only their health and lives but prosecution. The stigma attached to any reproductive loss (miscarriage, stillbirth, abortion) was that of moral failure or criminality. Esther is not accused of abortion specifically, but the machinery pursuing her (the detective, the undertaker's complaint, the imagined jury) is the same machinery that operated against women whose reproductive lives did not conform to what the law permitted and what society approved.

On the War That Makes It All Small

On the War That Makes It All Small

Esther’s closing reflection: that there is going to be another war, that it will kill “all the men and some of the children, and one or two old murders should not” matter so much: places her grief in the context of the novel’s historical setting. Young was writing across the period of World War II and its aftermath: a moment when mass death had been normalized to a degree that individual deaths (especially the deaths of women’s stillborn children, hidden in rivers, unrecorded by any official system) would be genuinely invisible against the scale of what war produced. The logic Esther uses is the logic the world used to ignore her all along: in the face of large catastrophe, small private suffering is not counted. Young does not endorse this logic. She gives it to Esther to show how thoroughly Esther has internalized the world’s accounting of her own grief, and how, even knowing this, she persists.

Chapter 76: The Trial She Welcomes

Content note: *The Esther Longtree chapters (72 to 81) deal with stillbirth and pregnancy loss, rape, infanticide, racist violence including lynching, and cruelty to children. This chapter deals with infant death and abortion.*

Research notes: Chapter 76

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Esther Longtree · Joachim Spitzer · Peron Spitzer · Tabitha · The Chicago Detective · Vera Cartwheel

Themes: Duality and Doubles · Motherhood, Pregnancy, and Birth · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Angels, Devils, and Myth · Pregnancy, Birth, and Children · Twins and Doubles · Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Freud and Jung · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Greek Mythology · Homer’s Epics · Pregnancy, Abortion, and Midwifery · The History of Opium

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This is the last chapter devoted to Esther Longtree’s extended monologue. Over Chapters 72 through 76, Young has given her more sustained attention than almost any other character in the novel outside of Vera herself, and what she has given her is not a resolved story but an accumulating one: more loss, more history, more ambiguity, more of the spectral children and the fathers who disappear and the detective who circles.

Chapter 76 brings Esther to a threshold. She has feared the trial the detective threatens. She has hidden everything she could hide. She has kept her silence with extraordinary discipline. In this chapter, she turns. She begins, strangely, almost to welcome the idea of the trial, not because she expects justice, but because the trial would at least be an acknowledgment that she exists, that what happened to her was real, that the quiet murders, the children who came and did not live, were worth the world’s attention.

She is also tired. Tired of the detective, tired of the fathers, tired of carrying everything alone. And she reveals, in passing, the darkest pocket of her history: she killed her twin sister in the womb.

What Actually Happens

Esther turns over her “successful conceptions” in her mind and concludes they may have been her worst mistakes: “her unfulfilled abortions, her many births.” She is baffled by her last triumphant pregnancy, the “diffused radiance” she feels. She still believes in it. She still feels two hearts. The detective pursues his quiet mysteries: the murders where no bodies are missed, the deaths that go unrecorded, the crimes that only he seems to notice. He uncovers murderers everywhere. He solves everything except his own case. A new loud crime will break, Esther thinks, and the quiet mysteries will remain quiet forever. This is how it always works: the spectacular displaces the invisible. The stillborn children hover around her, robed and bloodless, watching her with innocent smiles, sometimes

applauding her act of intercourse as if cheering on the very process that produced them and failed them. This is one of the strangest images in the chapter: the dead children as audience, as witnesses to their own impossible origin.

She killed her twin sister in the womb, she says. She did it, she says, “by kicking it out early, too early.” She does not say whether this is literal or metaphorical, or whether she was conscious of doing it, or whether she simply survived and the other did not and she has always carried this as a killing. She notes the question of twins who murder: one twin who kills the other, then accuses the dead one of having done the murdering. She knows this structure. She wonders if she is the twin who killed or the twin who was wrongly accused. The detective’s historical parallel surfaces here: *To All My Darlings* mentions the often-retold story of Robert Ledru (known mainly from popular retellings and Frederick Oughton’s 1963 book *The Two Lives of Robert Ledru*, not from court records), a French detective of the 1880s famous for solving crimes, who discovered through investigation that he was himself the murderer he had been hunting; he had killed while sleepwalking and had no conscious memory of it. The detective who is also the criminal. Young’s Chicago detective operates in this same inverted logic. Esther contemplates the trial with a new quality: she begins almost to welcome it (“Of course, she would not really welcome it”). Mass infanticide, she supposes, is what she would be charged with. She finds, unexpectedly, a kind of comfort in the cosmic scale of her evidence: her body, nature, her memories, all the things that cannot be produced in a courtroom but that she carries absolutely. Let them try to prosecute what cannot be seen. Let the quiet mysteries finally make noise. She wonders why Cupid has missed her. She has loved. Her heart is broken. The god of love appears to have aimed elsewhere.

Near the close she is knitting and unraveling a black hood: the color of night, the shape of birth, the garment she makes and unmakes because making it is the act of faith she can sustain and the child who will wear it is not yet here to receive it.

The Twin She Killed in the Womb

This is the revelation Young has been withholding for five chapters, and she delivers it with Esther’s characteristic obliqueness, not as confession but as fact, dropped into the middle of Esther’s ongoing meditation on guilt and innocence.

She killed her twin in the womb. This may be literal: vanishing twin syndrome, in which one twin is absorbed by the other early in pregnancy, is real and not uncommon, occurring in an estimated one in eight pregnancies that begin as multiples. The surviving twin has no consciousness of the process. Young gives Esther consciousness of it, or the feeling of consciousness, the retrospective conviction that something was done, that she survived at a cost.

It may also be metaphorical: the twin who did not survive, the self that Esther might have been if the first loss had not happened, the double she has been mourning all along without knowing it. The mud baby. The tall child. The little shadow boxer. All of them may be the twin: the other Esther, the one who did not make it out.

The twins who murder each other, one kills the other and then accuses the dead one of having done the killing, appears as a question Esther poses to herself. She does not answer it. The question is: which twin is she? The killer, or the one who is blamed for a killing she didn't commit? She has been accused of killing the detective's children. She has not killed anything. She may have killed her twin. She may have simply survived. She cannot tell the difference anymore, and possibly there is no difference to tell.

To All My Darlings notes that this twin dynamic echoes the story of Joachim and Peron Spitzer: the twin brothers mentioned elsewhere in the novel, where Peron died by apparent suicide and the surviving brother is never quite sure whether he is Joachim or Peron. The structure of twin-death-and-confusion runs through the novel's mythology: the wrong person wearing the dead one's face, the survivor carrying the dead one's name.

The Stillborn as Audience

Young's most unsettling image in this chapter is the spectral children watching Esther during intercourse: robed, bloodless, hovering, sometimes applauding. They are witnesses to the act that produced them and failed them. They are the audience for the process that keeps generating new versions of them without ever producing a living one.

This image is disturbing and also, in Young's precise way, logical. The stillborn have nowhere else to be. They cannot be anywhere except in Esther's consciousness, because that is the only space they were ever given. They did not get a world. They got a mother. So they attend to her life with the complete attention of those who have nothing else.

They watch with innocent smiles. They applaud. They are not accusing her. They are witnessing. This is what Esther has always been unable to give them, a witness, and here they return the gift, imperfectly, from the wrong side.

Welcoming the Trial

The shift in this chapter, from fear of the trial to something approaching welcome, is one of the most significant movements in Esther's arc. She has spent five chapters afraid of the jury of women who would judge her, the detective who would prosecute her, the public exposure of her hidden stillborn. In Chapter 76, she turns toward it. What has changed? Partly exhaustion: she is tired of the silence, tired of carrying everything alone, tired of being invisible. Partly a recognition that the trial, however unjust, would at least acknowledge that something happened to her: that the quiet murders were murders, that the children existed, that her body was not simply malfunctioning in private but was the site of a history that deserved attention. She also recognizes that her evidence is cosmic and unassailable (her body, nature, memory, the fullness of what she knows) even though none of it is admissible in a courtroom. Let them try to prosecute what cannot be seen. The quiet mysteries will probably remain quiet forever: some louder crime will come along and displace them. But for a moment, contemplating the trial, Esther imagines herself finally, loudly, in the record.

Knitting and Unraveling the Black Hood

One of the chapter's closing images is Esther's most enduring domestic act: she knits a black hood and then unravels it and then knits it again. The hood is the color of night. It is the shape of a beginning: the garment that covers the head at birth, that signals the start of a life.

She cannot finish it. Or she will not. Finishing it would mean the child is here to receive it, and the child is not here yet. So she knits and unravels, knits and unravels: the act of preparation maintained as an act of faith rather than an act of completion. This is Esther's version of Penelope's weaving: the work that is done and undone to keep the future open, to prevent the arrival of the wrong ending.

She is wilder than people think, the chapter notes. She runs. She laughs. She endures. Her life is bounded by routine and also marked by moments of freedom that no one from the outside has seen. She is not only what the detective's investigation reveals. She is not only what the town's gossip constructs. She is the woman who knits a black hood at night and unravels it at dawn and starts again, because the child is coming and she will be ready.

What to Hold Onto

The twin she killed in the womb, or did not kill, or simply survived: the question she cannot answer, the guilt she cannot separate from survival. The robed, bloodless stillborn, hovering around her, watching with innocent smiles, sometimes applauding. The dead as audience to the life that couldn't give them a life.

The shift from terror of the trial to welcome of it: let the quiet murders finally make noise. Let the detective try to prosecute what cannot be seen.

Cupid who has missed her. She has loved. Her heart is broken. The god of love appears to have aimed elsewhere.

And Esther knitting and unraveling the black hood. Night, birth, faith, the work that is done and undone to keep the future open. The child is coming. She will be ready.

This is the last chapter that is wholly Esther's. Carry her with you into what comes next.

For the Curious

On Vanishing Twin Syndrome

On Vanishing Twin Syndrome

Vanishing twin syndrome, in which one twin is absorbed by the other or by the placenta early in a multiple pregnancy, was not formally described in medical literature until 1945 and was not well understood until ultrasound made early twin pregnancies visible. It is estimated to occur in roughly one in eight pregnancies that begin as multiples. The surviving twin typically has no awareness of the process. Young gives Esther a felt conviction that she killed her twin, not the clinical reality of what may have happened

biologically, but the psychological truth of how someone might carry that survival: as guilt, as debt, as a presence that never fully left.

On Robert Ledru

On Robert Ledru

The Chicago detective's historical parallel, mentioned in *To All My Darlings*, is Robert Ledru, a French detective of the 1880s who was celebrated for solving difficult crimes, until a murder investigation led to the discovery that he himself was the killer. An experiment established that Ledru suffered from a condition that caused him to sleepwalk and, if he had access to a weapon in that state, to kill, with no conscious memory afterward. He was the crime and the investigation simultaneously, the detective who could not solve his own case because the perpetrator was himself. Young's Chicago detective operates in this same inverted structure, and *To All My Darlings* notes that Young herself considered a similar pattern for Mr. Spitzer before being advised to remove it. The detective-as-murderer is a structural obsession in the novel: truth and its violation housed in the same body.

On the Dioscuri and Twin Mythology

On the Dioscuri and Twin Mythology

The twins Esther invokes, one who murdered the other and then accused the dead one of being the murderer, echo the mythological twin pair of Castor and Pollux, the Dioscuri. They are an unusual case: heteropaternal superfecundation, meaning they were born of the same mother but different fathers (one divine (Zeus), one mortal (Tyndareus)) making one immortal and one not. They are patrons of sailors and travelers, figures who intervene at moments of crisis. Their twin sisters are Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra: one who caused a war, one who ended a marriage by murder. The mythological structure of twins splits the human into its two possible directions (the divine and the mortal, the destroyer and the redeemer) and Young gives Esther this split as the question of her own existence. Which twin is she? She does not know. Neither do we.

On Penelope and the Unraveled Work

On Penelope and the Unraveled Work

Esther's knitting and unraveling of the black hood echoes one of the oldest female acts of resistance in Western literature: Penelope's weaving. In the Odyssey, Penelope keeps her suitors at bay by promising to choose one when she finishes weaving a burial shroud for Odysseus's father, and then unraveling it each night to begin again. The work that is done and undone to prevent a wrong ending, to keep the future open, to preserve the space in which the right person might still return. Esther's black hood operates in the same logic: she cannot finish it because finishing it would mean the child is here, and the child is not here yet. She knits to keep the faith. She unravels to keep from being wrong.

On the Quiet Mysteries and the News Cycle

On the Quiet Mysteries and the News Cycle

Esther's recognition that some loud crime will break and the quiet mysteries will remain quiet forever is one of the novel's clearest statements about how the invisible stays invisible. The American news cycle, which Young was writing against in the era of the "Big Three" television networks and the dominance of the daily newspaper, has always operated on the logic of spectacle: the loud crime displaces the quiet one, the dramatic narrative crowds out the ordinary suffering that has no narrative shape. Esther's stillborn children are the quiet mysteries: real, real losses, recorded nowhere, attended to by no official system, of interest to no detective except the one who perpetrated the original harm. They will remain quiet forever unless she speaks, and she cannot speak in the language the courtroom requires.

On Mother-Blaming

On Mother-Blaming

The chapter raises the cycle of cruelty: the idea that boys who kill their mothers did so "because their mothers had already killed them, in quick ways and slow ways." Young presents this not as justification but as observation: cruelty does not originate in a single moment, blame cannot be simply assigned, patterns of harm move through bodies and generations. This is also, in its historical context, a refusal of the dominant psychological and social discourse that placed all responsibility for children's failures on mothers. "Mother-blaming" (the practice of holding mothers primarily accountable for their children's developmental, behavioral, and psychological outcomes) was a defining feature of mid-twentieth century psychology, from Freudian theory through the pathologizing of the "schizophrenogenic mother." Young's novel, which gives us Catherine's opium dreaming and Esther's endless stillborn and the woman in curlers and the Landlady and Tabitha, refuses this reduction. Mothers in this novel are not the cause of their children's problems. They are people (enormous, eccentric, suffering, luminous people) inside their own impossible situations.

On Wedding Rings on Nipples

On Wedding Rings on Nipples

One of the chapter's strangest details: Esther wearing wedding rings on her nipples but not on her fingers. The wedding ring on the finger marks the social contract, the public commitment, the legal bond. The wedding ring on the nipple marks something private, bodily, maternal: the place where the child would be fed, where sustenance and intimacy meet. Esther has been denied the social version of love: no one has put a ring on her finger, no one has claimed her publicly, no man has stayed. But she has been married, in her body's terms, to the act of motherhood again and again. The rings on her nipples are the marriage no one witnessed and no law recorded. They are hers alone.

Chapter 77: Who Killed the Heavens

Content note: *The Esther Longtree chapters (72 to 81) deal with stillbirth and pregnancy loss, rape, infanticide, racist violence including lynching, and cruelty to children. This chapter describes the murder of mothers and newborns and deals with racism.*

Research notes: Chapter 77

Characters: Esther Longtree · Justice O'Leary · Miss MacIntosh · Mrs. Hogden

Themes: Death and Mortality · Dreams and Imagination · Motherhood, Pregnancy, and Birth · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Birds · Pregnancy, Birth, and Children · Shadows

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Fairy Tales and Folklore · Judaism · Pregnancy, Abortion, and Midwifery · The Bible

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For some, this may be a very dark chapter.

This chapter deepens everything that has come before in Esther's sequence: the racial dimension of the detective's work, the history of violence against unmarried mothers and their children, the cosmic scale of Esther's grief, the parents who never consummated their marriage, the little boy who grew a shadow and mistrusts her, and the exhibits A through U, an abecedary of accusation that Young assembles from the materials of Esther's life and the world's indifference to it.

Young wrote this novel over eighteen years, and through all of it abortion was illegal throughout the United States and contraception was still banned or restricted in many states (Connecticut's ban stood until Griswold v. Connecticut in 1965). The newspaper clipping the detective sends Esther is not entirely fictional. The quiet murders are not metaphor alone. The chapter holds the literal and the symbolic together without separating them, because for Esther, and for the women whose histories the novel draws on, they were never separate to begin with.

What Actually Happens

The chapter opens with Esther asking who killed the heavens, the earth, love itself. She is pregnant with death, her body watery and vast, "her spinal column curved by the weight" of memory. She works at the Greasy Spoon. She tries to forget the moths and the stillborn who come to her at night. She cannot.

The detective sends her a yellowed newspaper clipping: "Mass Murderess Apprehended, Accused by Dead Mothers and Dead Children." It describes an old woman abortionist (large, nearly three hundred pounds) who ran a hospital for poor, unmarried mothers. She and her timid little assistant treated the mothers well, right up until delivery. The fathers sent bouquets. Then, at the moment of birth, mother and baby were killed. The babies were buried with lime. The abortionist was caught because she made a fatal error: she

killed a woman who was pregnant only in her dreams, who could not have been a mother, whose body showed the impossibility of what she claimed. She had murdered a phantom pregnancy. The impossible evidence exposed her.

Esther reads this clipping and understands what the detective is sending her: a mirror. A warning. A comparison. She is the woman always pregnant. She is always carrying what the world cannot see. He is the man who investigates quiet murders. He only solves the white mysteries. The deaths of little Black children are not his business. He fears what he calls “black mysteries.”

The “small brown hand of the other child” keeps returning to Esther in this chapter, and among the exhibits is “a little brown hand, two little brown hands like old cocoons.” Chapter 80 will say outright that her first child had a Black father. The detective’s racial accounting (his selective attention to white deaths, his indifference to Black ones) is therefore personal: her first child falls in the category he has written off.

Chapter 79 will tell the story of her parents: a large, passive policeman of a father and a small, fragile, child-like mother. They never consummated their marriage. Between them passed a silver spoon, carried by a third woman as go-between, enabling a conception that was strange and artificial from the start. This is how Esther came into the world: through a marriage that was not a marriage, a union that produced her without conventional intimacy. Chapter 74 has already told us they “had not mated.” There is also a little boy, an exception among the stillborn, who grew and cast a shadow, who cried like the night wind and falling leaves, who mistrusts Esther, who obstructs her path and causes her to stumble. He is not the little shadow boxer still living under her heart. He is something else: a child who came further than the others, who exists in a liminal space between living and not-living, who will not answer her questions and will not forgive her. She wants to “reach him once with her hands” and still him. She cannot.

The exhibits: A for agony, M for murder, N for Negro, S for shadow, and onward through the alphabet to U, a catalogue of everything that accuses Esther and everything the world has done. Young assembles the letters of accusation into an abecedary, the most elementary form of learning, as if to say: this is the alphabet of Esther’s life. These are the first things. Learn them before you learn anything else.

Esther asserts, in the end, her preference for silence, for mystery, for the void over explanation or judgment. She is always right, the chapter notes, like Miss MacIntosh, like Mrs. Hogden, she has arranged her world so she is never wrong, or never appears to be. She wants to remain outside old human laws and inquisitions, in the great serenity of her strange condition. She wonders why she should “be punished for a few mistakes” when she has already suffered so much.

The Newspaper Clipping

The old woman abortionist is one of the most chilling figures Young introduces, and she is introduced at one remove, through a yellowed clipping, through the detective’s chosen mirror for Esther. She ran a hospital. She took in poor, unmarried mothers. She treated them well. The fathers sent bouquets. She killed the mothers and the babies at delivery.

The babies were buried with lime so the bodies would dissolve into the earth and leave no trace.

She was caught because she applied her method to the wrong woman. The woman was pregnant only in her dreams: a false pregnancy, a pseudocyesis, a body that had produced all the symptoms of pregnancy with no child present. When the abortionist attempted to kill what she believed was there, the absence of a child made the murder impossible to conceal in the usual way. The phantom pregnancy exposed the real murders.

Young has been building toward this figure for several chapters. Esther's condition (always pregnant, children that come as fragments or not at all) is, *To All My Darlings* notes, consistent with pseudocyesis: a real medical condition in which the body produces pregnancy symptoms, including abdominal enlargement, breast changes, and felt fetal movement, in the absence of a fetus. Young does not resolve whether Esther's condition is this, or something supernatural, or something else entirely. What the clipping introduces is the shadow-Esther: the woman who is pregnant only in her dreams, who would have been killed by the abortionist for being exactly what Esther may be.

To All My Darlings notes that this story may have its roots in real events, particularly the practice of baby farming: the Victorian-era and early-twentieth-century practice of accepting custody of infants for payment, which in some cases became cover for systematic murder. The most documented case is Amelia Dyer, who murdered infants over thirty years, disposing of bodies in rivers, and whose "timid assistant" was her own daughter. The detail that the fathers sent bouquets is one of Young's most precise indictments: the men who produced the children had the leisure for flowers. The women who carried them were killed.

Esther's First Child

The disclosure will come in Chapter 80: Esther's first child was born of a Black man. Here Young plants it as a little brown hand, beside the detective's racial accounting: his exclusive attention to white deaths, his explicit statement that the deaths of Black children are not his business, there being too many and too unimportant, without commenting on the connection. The comment is the placement.

Esther's first child, her first loss, falls in the category the detective has written off. If there is an investigation to be done into that first death, the detective will not do it. His pursuit of Esther is selective in a way that has nothing to do with justice and everything to do with the racial calculus he has already performed. He is interested in what she might have done to children he considers worth investigating. The first one (the one she carries longest, perhaps, in memory) is not among them.

Esther's Parents and Her Artificial Origin

Young tells this fully in Chapter 79, but it belongs beside this chapter's accusations. Esther's parents never consummated their marriage. Her father is large and passive, a

policeman whose authority is imposing and whose life is lonely. Her mother is small and fragile and child-like, proud of her delicacy, emotionally cold. Between them, conception required an intermediary: a third woman carrying a silver spoon between them, enabling what their bodies and relationship could not produce directly.

This is the strangest detail of Esther's origin: she came into the world through a kind of assisted reproduction so oblique and archaic that it has the quality of a fairy tale. The silver spoon as an instrument of conception: the spoon born with the privileged child, the utensil of sufficiency and inheritance, here used to bridge an unbridgeable gap. Esther is the child of a union that could not quite happen, produced by a mechanism that no one would have designed if anyone had been thinking clearly.

Her origin is strange, artificial, and mediated by others, which is the precise condition of her own reproductive life, where the children come through a process that no one can quite explain or control, and where the fathers are transient and the mother is the only constant.

The Little Boy Who Grew a Shadow

Among all the stillborn (the fragments, the snowflakes, the cobwebs) there is one exception: a "little boy who grew and cast his shadow." He survived long enough to have a shadow, which is the minimum evidence of a body in the world. He cries like the night wind, like falling leaves. He mistrusts Esther. He walks in her way and causes her to stumble. He will not answer any question. He is not the little shadow boxer, who is still alive and fighting under her heart. He is something older, something from before the shadow boxer, something that came and did not quite die but did not quite live either. He is Esther's accusation: the child who is just real enough to blame her, who has enough presence in the world to obstruct her, who will not let her pass without consequence. She wants to "reach him once with her hands" and still him. This is Esther's most maternal impulse and her most tragic impossibility simultaneously: the child she wants to comfort is the one she cannot reach, the one who mistrusts her, the one whose crying she cannot stop. The stillborn who hover around her and applaud at least do not accuse. This one does.

The Exhibits: A Through U

Young assembles an abecedary of accusation: A for agony, M for murder, N for Negro, S for shadow, and onward. The alphabet is the first thing a child learns: the building block of all literacy, all language, all the tools by which the world makes sense of itself. Young gives Esther's situation an alphabet. These are the first letters of what has happened to her. Before you can read anything else, you must read this.

The letter N for Negro in Esther's alphabet of accusation is not incidental. It is placed precisely. The racial dimension of Esther's story (the detective's selective attention, her first child's father, the quiet black mysteries that no one investigates) belongs in the first letters of what the world has done. The abecedary runs through twenty-one letters.

Twenty-one exhibits, from “the agony” to “an umbrella or her uterus.” Young gives every letter from A to U, then stops.

Pregnant with Death

The chapter’s central image of Esther pregnant with death (her womb watery and vast, her body the site of creation and sterility simultaneously) is Young’s most cosmic rendering of Esther’s condition. She is the “Song of Songs of the sterility which is the creation.” The Song of Songs is the Hebrew Bible’s erotic poem: the text where two bodies reach toward each other in equal desire, where creation is celebrated as sensual and mutual. Young inverts it: the song of the sterility that is also a creation, the pregnancy that is also a death, the body that generates and loses simultaneously. Who killed the heavens, the earth, love itself? Esther asks this at the chapter’s opening and does not answer it, because the answer is everywhere and nowhere, distributed through every institution and every indifference and every detective who only deals with white mysteries. The question is the same question she has been asking since Chapter 72: who killed Cock Robin? Nobody. And everybody. And the forces are too large for individual blame.

The answer in this chapter is broader: it is not just the stillborn children who have been killed. It is the heavens. It is love. The cosmic scale of loss that Young has been building toward this sequence arrives here in its fullest form: Esther’s personal grief is not metaphor for the world’s grief. It is continuous with it. The same forces. The same accounting.

Esther’s Serenity

Despite everything in this chapter, the darkest material yet, Esther ends in something like serenity. Not peace, she is not at peace, but the serenity of someone who has decided to prefer mystery over exposure, silence over the judgment of old human laws. She is stubborn. She is proud. She insists on her innocence. She wonders why she should “be punished for a few mistakes” when she has already suffered enough.

Young notes that she laughs in her sleep. That she finds beauty in the natural world. That she is, as Chapter 76 said, wilder than people think. These glimpses of Esther’s inner freedom (her laughter, her wildness, her refusal to be entirely defined by what has been done to her) are the novel’s quiet argument against its own darkness. The darkness is real. So is the laughter. Both are Esther.

She is always right, the chapter says, in the way that Miss MacIntosh was always right, in the way that Mrs. Hogden was always right. She has arranged her world so the accusation cannot land. Whether this is wisdom or self-protection or delusion, Young will not say. It is the last thing we will learn about Esther in her own voice: she prefers the void. She reaches toward love, toward “death which is another form of love. She was always right.”

What to Hold Onto

The “newspaper clipping—Mass Murderess Apprehended Accused by Dead Mothers and Dead Children.” Nothing about the fathers. The fathers sent bouquets. Esther’s first child, born of a Black man: falling in the category the detective has written off as too many and unimportant.

The silver spoon carried between her parents by a third woman, bridging what could not be bridged. The artificial origin of the woman who cannot produce a living child.

The little boy who grew a shadow, who mistrusts her, who obstructs her path and will not be stilled.

A for agony. M for murder. N for Negro. S for shadow. The abecedary of accusation, assembled from the first letters of what has happened.

And Esther, in the end, laughing in her sleep. Wilder than people think. Preferring the void. Always right.

For the Curious

On Baby Farming and Amelia Dyer

On Baby Farming and Amelia Dyer

Baby farming (the practice of accepting custody of infants for payment, which in its most criminal form became cover for systematic murder) was a documented practice in Victorian Britain and, to a lesser extent, Australia and the United States. The most notorious practitioner was Amelia Dyer, who murdered infants in her care over approximately thirty years during the Victorian era. Trained as a nurse and widowed, Dyer took in infants and kept their fees while killing the children, disposing of bodies in the River Thames. She was caught when a child’s body was recovered from the river: the same method of disposal Esther uses for the mud baby. Her daughter, known as Polly, assisted her. Young’s “timid little assistant” echoes this detail. The Catholic Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Ireland, while not technically baby farming, represents a related institutional horror: children’s remains were later discovered in a septic tank on the property, with documented high mortality rates and abuse of mothers. These are the real histories behind the yellowed newspaper clipping the detective sends Esther.

On Pseudocyesis

On Pseudocyesis

Pseudocyesis, false pregnancy, is a real medical condition in which a person develops clinical signs of pregnancy, including abdominal enlargement, breast changes with secretions, delayed menstrual periods, and the felt sensation of fetal movement, without carrying a fetus. It has both physiological and psychiatric components and can be caused by physical trauma, hormonal imbalance, or intense psychological desire for or fear of pregnancy. The abortionist in the newspaper clipping kills a woman whose pregnancy is purely psychosomatic, and the impossibility of the murder, there is no baby to conceal,

exposes her method. *To All My Darlings* notes that Esther's own condition may be consistent with pseudocyesis, though Young never resolves this. The felt movement "of the little shadow boxer, the" two hearts, the swollen belly: all could be symptoms of a body that has been pregnant so many times and lost so much that it has learned to produce the experience of pregnancy independent of its biological preconditions. Young does not choose. The uncertainty is the truth.

On Women and Jury Service

On Women and Jury Service

To All My Darlings notes that when Young envisions Esther's trial in these chapters, the jury would consist of men. This was historically accurate: it was not until 1968 that all U.S. states were required to allow women to serve on juries, and not until the 1975 Supreme Court decision in Taylor v. Louisiana that the right was made federal law. A woman accused of crimes related to her reproductive life, tried before an all-male jury, with no legal precedent protecting her situation, in a country where her reproductive choices were themselves criminal; this is Esther's legal reality. The justice system she fears is not neutral. It was designed by and for men, applied to a woman's body, and has no language adequate to what has happened to her.

On the Song of Songs

On the Song of Songs

Young calls Esther's condition the "Song of Songs of the sterility which is the creation." The Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon) is the Hebrew Bible's erotic poem: unique in the scriptural canon for celebrating sexual love between equals, two bodies in mutual desire and delight. Commentators across centuries have allegorized it (as God's love for Israel, as Christ's love for the Church) but its literal text is about two people reaching toward each other. Young inverts the form: the song of sterility, the poem of what reaches toward creation and finds absence. Esther is the great erotic poem of loss. Her body is the text.

On Life Is a Dream

On Life Is a Dream

To All My Darlings connects Dr. O'Leary's moment of accidental competence, when he delivers a real baby while sleepwalking and cries "Life is a dream!", to the Spanish Baroque play Calderón de la Barca's La vida es sueño (Life Is a Dream, 1635). The play's central question is whether human experience is fundamentally illusory, whether what we call waking life is distinguishable from dream, and whether any action taken in either state has moral weight. The prince Segismundo, imprisoned since birth based on a prophecy, wakes twice in different circumstances and cannot tell which is real. Young's novel asks this same question of everyone in it, but asks it most directly of Esther: is her pregnancy real? Are the children real? Is the detective real? Is the little shadow boxer real? She cannot tell, and neither can we, and Young is not giving us the apparatus to decide.

On Who Killed Cock Robin’s Return

On Who Killed Cock Robin’s Return

To All My Darlings notes that “Who killed Cock Robin?” appears seven times across Esther Longtree’s chapters: a number with ritual significance, the number of completion and of the week. Each time, the question is asked and not answered, or answered differently, or answered with a different nobody. By the seventh repetition, the nursery rhyme has become Esther’s liturgy: the prayer she returns to because the question is the truest one she has, and because an unanswerable question is more honest than a false answer. Nobody killed Cock Robin. Everybody did. The forces were too large. The sparrow had his bow and arrow. The fly had his little eye. Everyone was there. No one is solely responsible. Esther was always right.

Chapter 78: Little Jackass

Content note: *The Esther Longtree chapters (72 to 81) deal with stillbirth and pregnancy loss, rape, infanticide, racist violence including lynching, and cruelty to children. This chapter describes cruelty to a young child and a stillbirth.*

Research notes: Chapter 78

Characters: Esther Longtree · Rosemary

Themes: Duality and Doubles · Grief, Loss, and Mourning · Guilt, Innocence, and Justice · Motherhood, Pregnancy, and Birth

Symbols: Pregnancy, Birth, and Children · Roses and Flowers · Shadows · Twins and Doubles · Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Buddhism · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Plato and Platonism · Taoism and Zhuangzi

Allusions: Fairy Tales and Folklore · Shakespeare

We have arrived, finally, at Esther’s beginning.

Seven chapters in: the Greasy Spoon, the little shadow boxer, the stillborn as fragments, the dying fathers’ letters, the mud baby in the river, the detective who is also the crime, the exhibits A through U, the question of who killed the heavens, and now Young gives us where it all started. Not with the first pregnancy. Before that. Before Esther was born.

She was born kicking. Stubborn. Reluctant. Awkward. Her family called her Little Jackass from the beginning, which is not a nickname anyone gives a child they feel warmly toward. And before she was born, she had already been accused of murder.

This is the chapter where we learn her twin’s name. Rosemary. Born prematurely, born dead, because (her mother told her, repeatedly, laughing and crying) Esther kicked her out of the womb. Esther was a murderer before she drew her first breath. Rosemary was the perfect child who would have been obedient and delicate and beloved. Esther is the wrong one who lived.

What Actually Happens

The chapter is Esther’s childhood, rendered in the same lyrical and fragmented voice she has used throughout. She was born awkward and fighting. Her knees were “always scarred, her body always black and blue” from falling, her foot deformed from birth. Wasps and bees found her with uncanny regularity. She stole food from the icebox when her mother wasn’t looking because she was always hungry. She spent much of her childhood tied to a tree in the yard while her mother went about her small, fragile, carefully arranged life indoors.

Her father: a large, passive, sad, timid policeman whose life was a kind of prison. He patrolled the graveyard at night, not to arrest the lovers who met there, but to warn them off; he did not want to arrest them, just to prevent his own need to do so. This is the

measure of his gentleness and his helplessness simultaneously. Esther feels pity and love for him. She is a chip off the old block, she thinks: she has his naturalness, his vitality, his inability to fit neatly into the world arranged for smaller, more manageable people. His lineage (partly Irish, partly Indian, and possibly with what the chapter calls a Negro streak) was known for robust fertility and births that happened without much ceremony, often in fields, women who gave birth and returned to work without stopping.

Her mother: tiny, childish, emotionally cold, a “pallid descendant of George Washington’s sister.” Everything in the house is built to her size and easily broken. She never nursed Esther at her narrow breasts, never stayed to comfort her tears. She blamed Esther for Rosemary’s death with the persistence of someone who has made her grief into an accusation and cannot separate the two anymore. Laughing and crying simultaneously, she told Esther again and again: you kicked your twin sister out of the womb. You killed a child before you were ever born.

Rosemary: the dead twin, perfect and idealized. She would have been delicate. She would have been obedient. She would have been the daughter the mother wanted. Her name means “dew of the sea”: a freshness, a cleanness, a delicacy that Esther with her crossed eyes and deformed foot and mulish head has never managed to approximate. Rosemary is what Esther should have been, and what Esther’s mother has mourned instead of loving the child she got.

Esther searches for traces of Rosemary throughout her childhood: digging in the earth under trees, finding small objects buried there (a little alphabet book, a string of beads, a doll) and interpreting shadows and rustlings as the twin she displaced. She sometimes wonders if she is the real one, or if she is the shadow: if Rosemary was the one who was supposed to live and Esther is only the ghost of the child who killed her.

The chapter closes with Esther reflecting on non-being: no heart as great as non-heart, no being as beautiful as non-being. Sometimes she feels like a shadow. Never fully found. Never fully known.

The Accusation Before Birth

Young has been building toward this for seven chapters. In Chapter 76, Esther told us she “murdered her twin by kicking it out early, too early.” In Chapter 78, the source of that story arrives: not from Esther’s own certainty, but from her mother’s accusation. The mother told her she kicked Rosemary out of the womb. She said this laughing and crying. She said it repeatedly. She made it the defining story of who Esther is. This is one of the novel’s most precise renderings of how abuse works: the accusation precedes consciousness. Esther was accused of murder before she was capable of intent, before she had a self to intend anything with. The guilt was installed in her before she had the cognitive apparatus to question it. By the time she was old enough to examine the accusation, it had already become the structure of her self-perception. She grew up already guilty. Already the wrong twin. Already the one who should not have lived.

The mother’s grief for Rosemary is real. Young does not deny this. But the mother has routed her grief through Esther (has made Esther the cause, the evidence, the ongoing

reminder of what was lost) rather than allowing Esther to be a separate person with her own claim on the mother's love. This is what *To All My Darlings* identifies as emotional abuse with devastating psychological consequences: the parent's inability to cope with loss expressed as the child's fault, the surviving child carrying the death of the lost one as personal guilt forever.

Rosemary

Her name carries layers. Rosemary, the herb, is associated in folklore and literary tradition with remembrance: Ophelia distributes it in Hamlet: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance." The dead twin is, from the moment of her name, the one who is to be remembered. Esther, by contrast, is the one who is present and therefore ordinary and therefore inadequate. The dead are always more perfect than the living because they cannot disappoint.

Rosemary would have been everything Esther is not: delicate where Esther is large, obedient where Esther is mulish, beloved where Esther is blamed. She is the idealized daughter constructed from the absence of a real one. Every quality the mother could not find in Esther she attributed to Rosemary, who was conveniently not alive to fail to display them.

Esther searches for her. She digs in the earth. She finds small objects buried under trees (the alphabet book, the beads, the doll) and cannot tell whether they are Rosemary's or her own buried things or simply the earth's ordinary accumulation. She has been looking for the twin all her life. "The little shadow boxer under her heart" is not Rosemary. But everything Esther has ever lost carries Rosemary's shadow.

Am I the Shadow?

The chapter's most searching question is Esther's own: what if she is not the real one? What if Rosemary was the one who was supposed to be born, and Esther is only the ghost who survived when she shouldn't have? What if the shadow that follows her is not Rosemary's shadow but her own: the shadow of someone who is only a shadow?

Young has positioned this question carefully throughout Esther's sequence. The little shadow boxer, the child still fighting under Esther's heart, is named for a fighter who fights an opponent who is not there. A shadow boxer. If Esther herself is the shadow, then the little shadow boxer is doubly spectral: the shadow's child, the ghost's hope. The closing lines of the chapter amplify this: no heart as great as non-heart, no being as beautiful as non-being. This is not nihilism exactly; it is the philosophy of someone who has been told for her entire life that the being who did not exist was more valuable than the being who did. Esther has internalized it so thoroughly that she can articulate it as a general truth. Non-being is beautiful. She is the lesser version. This is what her mother taught her.

And yet; she is still there. Still stubborn. Still laughing loud enough to shake the snow from clouds. Still pregnant with the little shadow boxer. Still more hopeful now than she has

ever been. The self that was told it should not have existed has persisted with a stubbornness that vindicates the name Little Jackass entirely.

Esther’s Father and the Mixed Lineage

The father is one of the chapter’s most quietly sympathetic figures. He is large and passive and slow, a timid man whose life has contracted to the size of a graveyard patrol; he walks through it at night not as a man of authority but as a man of resignation, warning lovers away not because he wants to arrest them but because he does not want to have to. His life is a kind of prison without walls.

Esther loves him. She is a chip off the old block, she says: she has his naturalness, his vitality, the quality of being larger than the spaces allotted to her. His lineage is explicitly described as mixed (partly Irish, partly Indian, and possibly with a Negro streak) which is to say his ancestry is the history of American contact zones: immigration, colonization, slavery, the enforced and coerced minglings of people who were not supposed to mingle. From this lineage comes Esther’s robustness: the women on this side of the family gave birth in fields and kept working. They did not require special arrangements or silver spoons. Their children survived.

Esther’s children have not survived. The chapter does not explain why the lineage that produced easy, robust births has produced in Esther only fragments and snowflakes and silence. Perhaps it is the mother’s side (the pallid descendant of Washington’s sister, the narrow and cold and fragile) that has taken over. Perhaps it is everything that was done to Esther before she was capable of defending herself. Perhaps the body that was accused of murder before it drew breath has been carrying that accusation ever since, in its own cellular grammar.

Little Jackass

The nickname is cruel and also accurate: accurate not because Esther is stupid or contemptible, but because the jackass is the animal of burden and stubbornness, the creature that will not move when it has decided not to move, that carries weight without complaining and without being thanked, that is used for its labor and dismissed for its nature. The mule, the grey mule that appeared in Esther’s earlier chapters as a symbol of barrenness and endurance, is related: the mule cannot reproduce, is the product of two species forced together, carries everything and passes nothing forward.

Esther was named Little Jackass by the world around her: family, schoolmates, everyone who found her awkward and large and resistant. She has been mulish in the sense of refusing to comply: refusing to explain herself to the detective, refusing to answer the dying fathers’ letters, refusing to be defined by the accusation her mother installed in her before she was born. Her stubbornness is not stupidity. It is the last form of self-possession available to someone who has had almost everything else taken.

What to Hold Onto

Rosemary: the dead twin who was perfect, who would have been obedient and delicate and beloved, who is more present in her absence than Esther has ever been in her presence.

The accusation before birth: you killed a child before you were ever born. Installed as guilt before Esther had the apparatus to question it.

Esther's father patrolling the graveyard, warning lovers off so he doesn't have to arrest them. A man whose gentleness has nowhere to go.

The small objects buried under the tree: the alphabet book, the beads, the doll. Esther digging for her twin in the earth, not knowing what she would do if she found her. No heart as great as non-heart. No being as beautiful as non-being. What her mother taught her. What she has almost believed.

And Esther, still there. Still kicking. Still pregnant with the little shadow boxer. Still more hopeful now than ever. The jackass who would not lie down.

For the Curious

On the Name Rosemary

On the Name Rosemary

Rosemary (Salvia rosmarinus) is an aromatic herb whose name derives from the Latin ros marinus, meaning "dew of the sea." In European folk tradition it has been associated with memory and fidelity since at least the medieval period: sprigs were carried at both weddings and funerals, worn in the hair at remembrance ceremonies, and placed in graves. Shakespeare gives Ophelia rosemary to distribute before her drowning: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance." The name given to the dead twin in this chapter is not accidental. Rosemary is to be remembered. Esther is to carry the remembrance. The herb that perfumes both the wedding and the grave belongs to the child who experienced only the latter.

On Vanishing Twin and the Guilt of Survival

On Vanishing Twin and the Guilt of Survival

Chapter 76 introduced the possibility that Esther killed her twin in the womb; Chapter 78 names the twin and provides the mother's version: Esther kicked Rosemary out prematurely. Medically, this is not how a vanishing twin works: one twin is absorbed by the other or the placenta, typically early in pregnancy, without violence or intention. Premature delivery of a dead twin is a different and rarer situation, also without the surviving twin's agency. Young gives Esther's mother a biologically impossible story and lets the mother tell it as truth, because what matters is not what actually happened in the womb but what the accusation did to the child who survived it. The guilt of survival, the conviction that one's own life is purchased at another's cost, is a real psychological phenomenon with its

own clinical literature, documented in survivors of disasters, wars, and family tragedies. Esther has been living inside it since before she could speak.

On the Mixed Lineage

On the Mixed Lineage

The father's lineage (partly Irish, partly Indian, and possibly with what the chapter calls a Negro streak) is Young's compressed description of the American contact zone, the place where immigration, indigenous displacement, and slavery produced, through voluntary and involuntary mixing, people whose ancestry refuses simple categorization. This lineage is characterized in the chapter by robust fertility: women who gave birth in fields and returned to work, children who mostly survived. Young is noting, without sentimentalizing, that this mixed lineage carried a bodily resilience that Esther's mother's side (the pallid descendant of Washington's sister, Anglo and cold and narrow) did not. The crossing of these two lineages has produced Esther: enormous, mulish, fertile and barren simultaneously, belonging fully to neither side.

On Mother-Blaming and the Transferred Grief

On Mother-Blaming and the Transferred Grief

The mother's behavior toward Esther (the repeated accusation of infanticide, the cold withdrawal of nurture, the tying to the tree, the blow for the bee) is what *To All My Darlings* identifies as severe emotional abuse rooted in unprocessed grief. Psychological literature on parents who lose a child documents a range of responses in the surviving children: survivor guilt, distorted attachment, the child becoming the repository of the parent's grief rather than the recipient of the parent's love. Parents with narcissistic traits may be particularly prone to this displacement: the child's existence becomes an affront to the lost child's memory, and the parent's emotional needs are met by blaming rather than by loving. Young does not use clinical language. She renders the abuse in Esther's voice as part of the landscape she grew up in: the mother small and cold and fragile, everything in the house built to her size, the accusation delivered with simultaneous laughter and tears. The laugh-cry is significant; it is the affect of someone who has lost the boundary between grief and cruelty.

On the Graveyard Patrol

On the Graveyard Patrol

The father's occupation, patrolling the graveyard at night to warn off lovers rather than arrest them, is one of Young's most quietly devastating character sketches. He is a policeman whose gentleness makes him a bad policeman: he uses his authority to prevent the need to exercise it. He goes to the place where the dead are kept and stands between the living and the law, not to enforce the law but to make it unnecessary. This is a man who has chosen the one form of mercy his position allows him, in the only place where he can exercise it without consequence. He is lonely and sad and Esther loves him. He is also the policeman, her father, the man whose authority makes certain truths unspeakable. Both things are true simultaneously, as they always are in this novel.

On Non-Being

On Non-Being

Esther’s closing meditation (no heart as great as non-heart, no being as beautiful as non-being) echoes a long philosophical tradition that finds in absence or negation a kind of perfection that presence can never match. The Taoist concept of wu wei, the Buddhist emphasis on the void, the Neoplatonic One that transcends being itself: all these traditions have found, in various ways, that what is not is in some sense more complete than what is, because what is must be limited and defined while what is not contains all possibilities. Young gives Esther this philosophy not as wisdom she has achieved but as the internalized lesson of a childhood that told her the non-existent twin was more real and more valued than the existing Esther. She has turned her mother’s cruelty into cosmology. It is both a way of surviving the accusation and a way of never quite escaping it.

Chapter 79: The Silver Spoon

Content note: *The Esther Longtree chapters (72 to 81) deal with stillbirth and pregnancy loss, rape, infanticide, racist violence including lynching, and cruelty to children.*

Research notes: Chapter 79

Characters: Esther Longtree · Joachim Spitzer · Rosemary

Themes: Death and Mortality · Duality and Doubles · Faith, God, and the Supernatural · Light and Darkness · Motherhood, Pregnancy, and Birth · Women, Gender, and Marriage

Symbols: Angels, Devils, and Myth · Lamps, Candles, and Light · Pregnancy, Birth, and Children · Weddings and Funerals

Philosophy: Augustine and Christian Theology · Marguerite Young on Her Craft · Spiritualism and the Occult

Allusions: Judaism · Pregnancy, Abortion, and Midwifery · Suicide in History and Literature · The Bible

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Chapter 78 gave us the accusation: Esther killed Rosemary in the womb, and was called Little Jackass, and grew up in the shadow of the perfect child who died. Chapter 79 goes further back still, to before Esther's conception, and explains the mechanism by which she came to exist at all.

Her parents never consummated their marriage. Seven years passed. And then, over the course of those seven years, a large dark woman came regularly to their house (at night, sometimes knocking, sometimes whistling) and carried a tiny silver spoon between them. This is how Esther was conceived. Across a great arid distance. Through an intermediary. With an instrument.

The chapter also contains the most mythically charged episode of Esther's childhood: on her seventh birthday, her mother takes her to visit the other woman. They make a difficult journey. They find the go-between dying, blind, nearly unrecognizable. And Esther, looking at this woman who smells of manure and old tulip bulbs, who wears men's clothes and casts "a man's shadow on the wall," who slapped and pinched Esther's mother to arouse life where there was none: Esther sees her as the father she never had.

What Actually Happens

Esther reconstructs her parents' marriage as a structure of sustained non-connection: two people who "dreamed of heaven as something far away" and never reached each other. Her father, the large passive policeman, reading old baseball scores. Her mother, the tiny fragile pallid woman, unable to conceive without intervention. Between them: nothing that could produce a child. The other woman arrived. She was large and dark and somewhat grotesque, wearing a man's hat and coat, her shadow falling "like a man's shadow on the wall." She smelled of manure and old tulip bulbs rotted by rain. She had a slow anger and a patience that spanned years. She carried a tiny silver spoon. She came at night, set an alarm clock, performed the rituals of conception across the arid distance between

Esther’s parents. She slapped and pinched the mother to wake her body into possibility. She did this again and again, over seven years, until it worked.

Esther was born kicking and afraid, requiring instruments, producing also the dead twin Rosemary. The other woman was there for the birth too, or thereabouts. She is present at Esther’s origin in the way that a force is present, not warmly, not lovingly, but essentially.

The uncle, a pugilist who died of cancer and left his estate to a spiritualist medium, told Esther about all this “laughing until his face turned purple.” He confirmed the nickname: Little Jackass, given by the father himself, because of the unnaturalness of her conception. “The child of the unnatural mating.” Mulish from the start. On her seventh birthday, Esther’s mother takes her on a difficult journey to visit the other woman. The chapter presents this as a pilgrimage of sorts, marked by hardship: clothing lost, the natural and social world harsh against them. When they arrive, the other woman is dying. She is blind. She is monstrous in her decay. And Esther, standing before her, perceives her as the father she never had: the one who made her possible, the one whose will and method produced her life out of nothing. The go-between is cruel and strange and more wonderful and more beautiful, in some inner invisible way, than either of Esther’s actual parents.

The chapter closes with Esther reflecting on her gradual death, not a physical death but the slow fading of someone born without the foundation of natural love, who has spent her life trying to be good in a world that finds her awkward and wrong, who stands at the fence between life and eternity with arms akimbo and legs astraddle, belonging fully to neither side. She is the happy dead. She is cloud-like. She is driven to the edge of existence. She has a big leaking heart full of regrets and expectations.

She also, in this chapter, says in passing that her own “was the virgin birth, admittedly, but she was Jesus Christ or anybody holy, and she was both popular and vulgar.” She says this in the context of her endless pregnancy, her suffering, her bearing of what the world will not acknowledge. She does not elaborate. She has made her identification and moved on.

The Other Woman

She is one of the most extraordinary figures Young has created, and she arrives without a name. Large and dark and misshapen, wearing men’s clothes, casting a man’s shadow, smelling of earth and rot and rain. She is foreign: speaks with a strange accent, possibly carries what the narrative hints is an old crime or exile. She has flat dark hands capable of warmth but used mainly for slapping and pinching. She is methodical and patient in a way that has nothing to do with tenderness.

What she does is not insemination in any medical sense; it is stranger than that, mediated by a silver spoon, performed across the emotional and physical distance of a marriage that was never consummated. Young is not describing assisted reproduction as we would understand it. She is describing something that sits in the space between the literal and the mythological: a ritual of conception, performed by an intermediary, for parents who could not reach each other. The silver spoon is the chapter’s central symbol, and Young

loads it with multiple meanings. The idiom “born with a silver spoon in one’s mouth” means to be born privileged, to inherit rather than earn. Esther is born with the silver spoon as her instrument of creation, not privilege but the cold mechanism of her existence. She is the child who was wanted enough that someone paid a strange woman to come in the night with a spoon, but not wanted in any way that translated into warmth or love or the ordinary comforts of being a child who is simply loved.

The other woman is more wonderful and more beautiful than Esther’s actual parents. This is Young’s most difficult observation about Esther’s origin: the figure who made her possible, who had the will and patience and physical power to produce life where there was none, is more alive in Esther’s imagination than either of the people who were supposed to love her. She is the dark father. She is the one who did the work.

The Seventh Birthday Visit

The pilgrimage Esther’s mother takes her on for her seventh birthday, to visit the woman who produced her life, is one of the novel’s most unsettling scenes, and one of its most mythologically resonant. Seven is the number of completion, of the sacred week, of fairy-tale transformation: the seventh year, the seventh son of a seventh son, the age at which, in various traditions, a child is held to reach the age of reason. On Esther’s seventh birthday, she is brought to see the origin of her own existence, and what she finds is dying. The other woman is blind and monstrous in her decay, barely recognizable as the powerful figure who came at night with her alarm clock and her slow anger. She is disintegrating. And Esther, at seven, looks at this disintegrating figure and sees her as a father. This is a precise and devastating reversal. The large passive policeman who gave Esther her nickname and read baseball scores and never came close to his wife is not Esther’s father in any sense that matters to her. The dying woman who smells of manure and wears men’s clothes and slapped her mother’s body awake; she is the father. She is the one who insisted on Esther’s existence. She is the will behind the conception. She is already leaving.

After this visit, something changes in Esther: every day will seem like that birthday. She is marked by the encounter in a way she cannot fully articulate: the knowledge that the person most responsible for her being in the world is dying, that she met her origin just as her origin was ending, that the father she recognized is a woman who is almost already gone.

Esther as Jesus Christ

She says it in passing, without elaboration: “she was Jesus Christ or anybody holy.” The identification is not blasphemy in Young’s framing; it is structural. Esther has been carrying what the world will not acknowledge: children the law has decided did not exist, suffering that has no official record, a pregnancy that has lasted beyond all reasonable duration. She has been accused of crimes she did not commit. She has been misunderstood and rejected by those around her. She is the bearer of suffering for others: the dying fathers’ illusions, the detective’s investigation, her mother’s grief for Rosemary.

If Esther is both the everlastingly pregnant mother and Jesus Christ, she occupies simultaneously the role of origin and the role of sacrificial bearer of the world's accumulated sorrow. She is Everywoman and the Redeemer simultaneously. Young is building a mythological structure around Esther that the novel never quite makes explicit, because to make it explicit would be to reduce it. The immaculate conception enters here too: *To All My Darlings* connects Esther's unnatural origin (her parents who never consummated their marriage, the silver spoon as instrument, the third person as go-between) to the tradition of miraculous or unmixed conceptions. Saint Anne and Joachim, the parents of Mary, were similarly infertile and similarly received their child through divine intervention. Mary herself was conceived without the taint of original sin. The tradition of the child born out of the ordinary mechanisms of human reproduction (born through some other means, marked from conception for something the world will not understand) is the tradition Esther enters when she says she is Jesus Christ.

Gradually Dying

The chapter's closing meditation on Esther's gradual death is one of the most purely beautiful passages in her sequence. She is the happy dead. She stands at the fence between life and eternity, arms akimbo, legs astraddle, belonging to neither. She is cloud-like, illusive, driven to the edge of existence. Her heart is big and leaking. This is not suicidal ideation or despair in the clinical sense. It is the honest description of someone who was born without the foundation of natural love, who has spent her life in the space between what was supposed to be and what is. She is alive in every physiological sense (enormous, muscular, wind-burned, pregnant with the little shadow boxer) and she is also dying in the sense that every day subtracts from her something she cannot replace, because what was taken from her was taken before she existed and cannot be given back.

She tries to be good despite it. She has a maternal heart. She wants to love and be loved. She has the starlight and the wind and the water that her father's lineage gave her. She is, as Chapter 76 said, wilder than people think. She is Little Jackass. She was born kicking and she has not stopped.

What to Hold Onto

The other woman: large, dark, men's clothes, men's shadow, slow anger, alarm clock, silver spoon, seven years of night visits, slapping and pinching Esther's mother awake. More wonderful and more beautiful, in some inner invisible way, than either of Esther's parents.

The silver spoon: not privilege but mechanism. Cold instrument of a conception that happened across a great arid distance.

The seventh birthday pilgrimage to find the origin dying. The father Esther recognized in the dying woman. After this, every day will seem like that birthday. Esther saying she is Jesus Christ. Not elaborating.

The gradual death: not a dramatic end but a slow subtraction, the happy dead standing arms akimbo at the fence between life and eternity. Big heart, leaking. Still there.

And the little shadow boxer, still under her heart. Still two hearts. The child produced by the unnatural mating is still expecting the child who will be born.

For the Curious

On Artificial Insemination

On Artificial Insemination

Young's silver spoon is not a literal description of any medical procedure, but it sits in the historical context of early artificial insemination, which *To All My Darlings* documents. The first recorded case of artificial insemination was John Hunter in 1790. The first reported case using donor sperm occurred in 1884, when William Pancoast took sperm from a handsome medical student and inseminated an anesthetized woman without her knowledge or consent: a case not published until twenty-five years later. The first fertility clinic offering donor insemination in Britain was founded in the 1930s by Mary Barton, who had witnessed in colonial India how women were punished or killed for childlessness while the male partner's infertility went unaddressed. Barton and her husband Bertold Wiesner inseminated an estimated 1500 women, with Wiesner himself fathering perhaps 600 children through the clinic, all in secrecy because the procedure was publicly condemned by both the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury. In vitro fertilization did not succeed in humans until 1977. Young is writing at the exact moment when the concept of medically assisted conception was real but controversial and largely secret. The silver spoon is her folkloric rendering of something that was, in the world she was writing in, happening in clinics behind closed doors, without the knowledge of the women involved, condemned by every major religious authority.

On the Number Seven

On the Number Seven

The seven-year conception process and the seventh birthday visit carry the full weight of seven's symbolism across traditions: the seven days of creation, the seventh seal, the seven deadly sins, the seven sacraments, the seven-year itch, the fairy-tale transformation at seven. In Jewish tradition, seven represents completeness: the Sabbath falls on the seventh day, the shemita year releases debts every seven years, the Jubilee comes after seven cycles of seven. In Catholic tradition, seven is the age of reason: the age at which a child is held capable of moral understanding and accountable for sin. Esther turns seven and is taken to see the mechanism of her existence dying. She reaches the age of reason and her origin is already ending. This is Young's most compressed statement about what it means to become conscious: you arrive at understanding just as the thing you are trying to understand disappears.

On Saint Anne, Joachim, and the Miraculous Conception

On Saint Anne, Joachim, and the Miraculous Conception

To All My Darlings connects Esther's unnatural conception to the tradition of Saint Anne and Joachim, the parents of Mary. In the apocryphal Gospel of James and in Islamic tradition (where they are known as Hannah and Imran), Anne and Joachim are elderly and infertile; their sacrifice was rejected at the Temple because childlessness was read as divine displeasure. After fasting and penance, angels appeared to both separately, promising them a child. They met at the city gate of Jerusalem and conceived Mary through their embrace, or, in some traditions, without physical union at all, which is why the conception of Mary is called "immaculate" (free from original sin) rather than literally asexual. The tradition of the child born to parents who could not ordinarily conceive, destined for something the world will not understand, is precisely Esther's tradition. Rosemary is the dead twin. Esther is the surviving impossible child. She says she is Jesus Christ. Young does not contradict her.

On Purity Culture and the Unconsummated Marriage

On Purity Culture and the Unconsummated Marriage

To All My Darlings notes that Esther's parents "had never consummated their marriage but had only dreamed of heaven as something far away," and connects this to what is now called purity culture: the movement emphasizing abstinence until heterosexual marriage that uses shame, ritual (purity balls, rings, pledges), and strict gender roles to regulate sexual expression. Many raised in this culture report anxiety, fear, and profound difficulty with intimacy even within marriage: the training that made sex forbidden is not easily unlearned when permission is suddenly granted. Young is not writing about purity culture as such, which became named and visible decades after the novel was published, but she is writing about its psychological effects: two people who "dreamed of heaven as something far away," who reached toward an intimacy they had been taught to refuse, who needed a third person with a silver spoon to produce the child they wanted.

On the Dark Go-Between and Midwifery

On the Dark Go-Between and Midwifery

The other woman who facilitates Esther's conception is described as large, dark, foreign, wearing men's clothes. *To All My Darlings* connects her to the tradition of Black midwives in America: figures like Biddy Mason, born into slavery, who became a midwife and advocate; Margaret Charles Smith, who delivered over 3,000 babies in rural Alabama; Mary Francis Hill Coley, whose career was documented in the 1952 film All My Babies. These women (often Black, often working in rural areas with limited resources, often outside the formal medical system) were essential to the survival of communities the medical establishment did not serve. Young's go-between is their cousin: the dark woman who does the work of bringing life into the world, who is present at origin and at death, who is neither acknowledged nor loved but without whom the child would not exist.

On Spiritualism and the Uncle

On Spiritualism and the Uncle

The uncle who told Esther about her unnatural conception, “laughing until his face turned purple,” died of cancer and left his estate to a spiritualist medium: a tall, thin-cheeked man in contact with astral forces and star bodies. American Spiritualism, the movement claiming communication with the dead through mediums, originated in upstate New York in 1848 with the Fox sisters’ claimed spirit rappings, spread rapidly through the nineteenth century, and revived after World War I as people sought contact with those killed in the war. By 1897, it claimed more than eight million followers in the United States and Europe. The uncle’s bequest to a spiritualist medium places him at the intersection of physical violence (pugilism) and metaphysical speculation (astral contact), the same intersection Esther occupies: she is born of a strange physical process and has spent her life in conversation with the spirits of the children she could not keep.

Chapter 80: Walter

Content note: *The Esther Longtree chapters (72 to 81) deal with stillbirth and pregnancy loss, rape, infanticide, racist violence including lynching, and cruelty to children. This chapter describes an infanticide and a man fleeing a lynching.*

Research notes: Chapter 80

Characters: Esther Longtree · The Chicago Detective · Walter

Themes: Grief, Loss, and Mourning · Guilt, Innocence, and Justice · Memory and the Past · Society, Class, and Race

Philosophy: Freud and Jung · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Lynching and Racial Violence · The Civil War

We have been nine chapters with Esther Longtree. We know her stillborn children, her dying fathers, the mud baby in the river, the Chicago detective who is both the crime and its investigation, the twin she was accused of killing before she was born, the silver spoon, the go-between who was more wonderful than either parent. We have come to know her everlasting pregnancy, her luminous stubbornness, her knitting and unraveling in the dark. And now Young gives us the thing Esther has been holding back through all of it: the one child who actually lived. His name is Walter. He is alive, she insists. And Esther pressed her thumb to still his birth cry.

This is the darkest confession in Esther's sequence, and Young delivers it with the same unhurried obliqueness she has used for everything else. Walter was born. Esther was young and frightened and alone. She pressed her thumb to his mouth to silence his first cry. She believed she had killed him. She hid the body and fled. But Esther believes Walter did not die: "Because I could not have killed him, because the murder was not finished, he is alive and comes to tell me so." Yet she also remembers "that place in the South where he was born and died." The novel leaves it open. He comes back to her in visions, growing, asking: "Mother, why have you killed me? Mother, where is my father whom I might have loved?"

What Actually Happens

Esther is still at the Greasy Spoon, still pregnant with the little shadow boxer, still performing the rituals of the woman who lives between the living and the dead: making small clothes for no one, setting out breadcrumbs for spirits, building a little house of straw in a "tree for the spirit to come home to," answering every knocking at the door.

She tells the story of Walter's father. He came to her in the darkness of a summer night, half sleeping and half waking. His face was white in the moonlight. At dawn she saw that he was Black. "A Negro, a Negro, a Negro"; she says it three times, the epizeuxis of shock and revelation. He was a stranger, a "poor fellow, a tramp, a fugitive," a prince. The white people in that place "had tried to kill him because he was black and had wanted to sleep with a white woman," though in fact, "He had only smiled at a white old maid's white

rooster, had never dreamed of sleeping with a white woman.” They had “tried to hang him from a white-blossoming tree for revenge, but the rope had broken.” He “fled for fear the white people would see him and kill him.” He had been nearly lynched. He ran.

Esther was pregnant. She was young and frightened and had no one to tell. She delivered Walter alone, or nearly alone, in circumstances the chapter renders fragmented and terrible. She pressed her thumb to still his birth cry. She believed she had killed him. She left him “as dead” in a far-away place and fled. But she believes Walter lived and has grown up somewhere outside her knowledge. He is “black as my true love, black as my heart”; she loves him and fears him simultaneously, in the particular way of someone who believes she has committed an irreversible act and then discovers the act was not irreversible, only terrible. He comes to her in visions. He asks her why she killed him. He asks where his father is. She has no answers. He haunts her with a cruel, hard heart, not the hovering innocent stillborn who applaud at the edges, but an accuser, a child who has lived long enough to be angry.

He is the “beloved obstacle”: the one who prevents her from moving fully forward, the one whose memory blocks the path between her past and any possible future. Every subsequent pregnancy has been, in some sense, an attempt to atone for or replace or redeem what happened to Walter. Every stillborn is haunted by his presence as the one who should have been the first stillborn and wasn’t.

Walter’s Father

He is described through Esther’s shock and retrospective love simultaneously: a Black man, a stranger, who came to her in the dark of a summer night when his face looked white in the moonlight, and whose race she only saw at dawn. He had been nearly lynched for being Black in proximity to a white woman. He ran because running was the only alternative to death.

Young is writing this in the period between 1945 and 1965, in a country where anti-miscegenation laws remained on the books in most Southern states until the Supreme Court’s 1967 decision in Loving v. Virginia declared them unconstitutional. Interracial marriage was not merely socially stigmatized; it was illegal in most of the South and several other states. A Black man perceived as having had a sexual relationship with a white woman faced not just legal penalty but lynching. This is not metaphor in Walter’s father’s case: the white people “tried to hang him from a white-blossoming tree.” The rope broke. He survived. He ran.

Esther’s description of him carries the ambivalence of someone who loved in fear and lost what she loved before she could fully acknowledge it: a stranger, a “poor fellow, a tramp, a fugitive,” a prince of Africa. Each descriptor carries a different weight. Together they form the portrait of a man who was real and present and then gone, whom Esther has spent years trying to hold in memory across the gap of everything that happened.

His face was white in the moonlight. Only at dawn did she see he was Black. This moment (the revelation of race at dawn, after intimacy) is one of the chapter’s most precisely situated details. It is not that Esther did not know. It is that the dark erased the

visible category, and then the light restored it, and by then the category had already been irrelevant for a night.

The Thing Esther Did

Young has been careful, across nine chapters, to distinguish between what happened to Esther and what Esther did. The stillborn children happened to her. The detective's assault happened to her. The mud baby in the river; she buried it because she loved it, not because she was guilty of anything. She has been accused of murder for the children who came and did not live. She has not murdered them. Walter is different. She pressed her thumb to still his birth cry. She believed she had killed him. This is what Esther actually did, or tried to do, and it is the thing that has organized her guilt ever since. Not the accusation her mother installed before her birth. Not the detective's manufactured case. This.

She was young. She was alone. She had no one. The father had fled. She had just delivered a child in secret, in fear, in a country where the child's race would have compounded every other stigma she already carried. The circumstances do not erase the act. They also do not erase the circumstances. Young holds both.

Walter lived, Esther insists. This is the twist that makes the guilt permanent: in her telling, she tried to end his life and failed, and he has gone on living, somewhere, without her, growing into a child who asks why she killed him. She did not kill him. She tried to. He does not know the distinction. Neither, quite, does she.

The Haunting

Walter is qualitatively different from the other presences in Esther's inner life. The stillborn hover and applaud and whisper. The mud baby returns swollen and beautiful and ugly in dreams. These are the presences of the lost, who have nowhere to be except in the consciousness of the person who lost them.

Walter accuses. He has a cruel, hard heart. He asks questions she cannot answer. He is not the presence of the lost; he is, as she believes, the presence of the living, of someone who is out there in the world, growing, carrying his own history, asking his own questions, and visiting Esther's conscience with the specificity of someone who survived. The black hand laid across the womb, one of the chapter's central images, is Walter's hand, or its shadow: the presence of what she did blocking the path forward. Every subsequent pregnancy is gestated in the presence of that hand. Every stillborn carries his shadow. The little shadow boxer, the current pregnancy, the one Esther believes will finally live; it too must make it past Walter's hand.

Race, the Lynch Rope, and the White-Blossoming Tree

The image Young chooses for the attempted lynching of Walter's father is exact: a white-blossoming tree. Not a bare tree, not a dead tree: a flowering one, beautiful in the way that spring trees are beautiful, and from its branches a rope, and below the rope a Black

man who survived because the rope broke. Young was writing this during the era of the Civil Rights Movement: the NAACP's anti-lynching campaigns, the murder of Emmett Till in 1955 and the published photographs that catalyzed the movement, the ongoing documentation of racial terror. She does not name these events. She gives Esther a Black lover who fled for his life, and she gives him the white-blossoming tree and the broken rope, and she lets these stand in the landscape of Esther's memory without commentary.

To All My Darlings notes the history of anti-miscegenation law in the United States: the first prohibition on interracial marriage was passed by Maryland in 1664, more than three hundred years before Loving v. Virginia finally ended them all. The prospect of Black men marrying white women was described by many Americans before the Civil War as the greatest threat to society. When William G. Allen, a Black professor, announced his plans to marry a white student in 1853, he narrowly escaped lynching and had to leave the country permanently. In 1958, Sammy Davis Jr. briefly married a Black actress to protect himself from mob violence after his relationship with a white actress became known. Walter's father is not a named historical figure. He is a Black man in a summer night who survived a lynch rope and ran. He is every Black man who ran. His child (Walter, black as my true love) is the child of that history, born into Esther's fear and her love simultaneously, born into a country where his existence was illegal in some states and dangerous in many more.

Breadcrumbs for Spirits

Alongside the revelation about Walter, the chapter also gives us Esther's daily rituals of the liminal: making small clothes for no one, setting out breadcrumbs for spirits, building a little house of straw in a "tree for the spirit to come home to." These are the practices of someone who lives at the border between the living and the dead, who sets a place at the table for what cannot come to dinner, who leaves the door open for what has no body to walk through it.

They are also, in context, the practices of someone who has had a child she does not know the location of. Walter, she believes, is out there, alive, growing. Esther does not know where. She cannot reach him through the ordinary channels because she does not know where to look and because the circumstances of his birth mean that looking would be dangerous. So she leaves breadcrumbs for spirits, and perhaps one of those spirits is Walter's: the child who is alive but lost to her, who is both in the world and in the category of what she cannot touch.

What to Hold Onto

Walter: the first child who actually lived. Born in a summer night, his father Black and nearly lynched, Esther young and alone and frightened. She pressed her thumb to still his birth cry. She believes he survived. He is somewhere in the world, she says, asking why she killed him.

Walter's father: a stranger, a "poor fellow, a tramp, a fugitive," a prince. His face white in the moonlight, Black at dawn. He ran because the rope had broken and the white people

would finish what they started. He had no other choice.

The white-blossoming tree and the broken rope. The particular beauty Young gives to the instrument of racial terror.

The black hand laid across the womb. Walter's shadow blocking the path to every subsequent child.

The breadcrumbs set out for spirits. The little house of straw in the tree. The small clothes made for no one. Esther keeping the table set for what cannot come. And the little shadow boxer, still fighting. Still two hearts. Still the one she believes will finally make it through.

For the Curious

On Loving v. Virginia and Anti-Miscegenation Law

On Loving v. Virginia and Anti-Miscegenation Law

Anti-miscegenation laws, prohibiting marriage and often any sexual relationship between people of different races, were part of American law from Maryland's first prohibition in 1691 through the Supreme Court's 1967 Loving v. Virginia decision, which held them unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment. At the time of the decision, sixteen states still had such laws on the books. The case was brought by Mildred and Richard Loving, a Black woman and a white man who had married in Washington D.C. and were convicted of violating Virginia law when they returned home. Richard Loving's lawyers sent his statement directly to the Supreme Court: "Tell the Court I love my wife." Young was writing and publishing in 1965, two years before this decision. Interracial marriage between Black and white Americans was not just stigmatized when she wrote; it was criminal in much of the country.

On the History of Lynching

On the History of Lynching

To All My Darlings notes Jo Reed, lynched in Nashville in 1875: taken from the county jail by a white mob, hanged from a suspension bridge, the rope breaking, Reed surviving and escaping via the river. And Emmett Till, lynched in Mississippi in 1955 at age fourteen for allegedly flirting with a white woman; his mother Mamie Till permitted an open casket and the publication of photographs that showed what had been done to her son's body, and those photographs became one of the catalysts of the Civil Rights Movement. Walter's father's story (the white-blossoming tree, the rope that broke, the flight) belongs to this history. Young does not cite it. She places it in Esther's memory and lets it stand for everything the history contains.

On Pseudocyesis: Queen Mary I and Anna O

On Pseudocyesis: Queen Mary I and Anna O

To All My Darlings notes two famous historical cases of pseudocyesis. Queen Mary I of England experienced a well-documented false pregnancy in 1554–1555: she showed

physical symptoms, her court prepared for a birth, announcement letters were drafted with blanks for the date and sex of the child. No child came. The experience was devastating to Mary personally and politically. Anna O, the name given to Bertha Pappenheim in Josef Breuer's case history later published by Freud, experienced what was described as a false pregnancy; she believed she was in labor with her therapist's child. Pappenheim went on to become a pioneering feminist and social activist; the case that made her famous in psychoanalytic literature reduced her to a symptom. Both cases illuminate the way in which women's reproductive experiences, real or imagined, have been defined by the medical and legal systems surrounding them, and both cast a shadow over Esther's everlasting pregnancy.

On the Kentucky Derby and Black Jockeys

On the Kentucky Derby and Black Jockeys

To All My Darlings includes the history of the Kentucky Derby alongside its mention in the chapter: the first Kentucky Derby in 1875 was won by Aristides, trained by Black trainer Ansel Williamson and ridden by Black jockey Oliver Lewis. In the first 28 runnings of the Derby, Black jockeys won 15 times. Isaac Murphy, a Black jockey, won three times. By the early twentieth century, through a systematic campaign of exclusion that has been documented by historians, Black jockeys were largely eliminated from major American horse racing. Young places a reference to Kentucky racehorses in Esther's chapter without comment. Like the white-blossoming tree, the reference carries its history in silence.

On Walter's Name

On Walter's Name

Walter means "commander of the army" or "ruler of the people," from Germanic waldan (to rule) and hari (army). It is a name of authority, of leadership: a name that expects to be obeyed. Esther's first living child, the one who survived her attempt to silence him, the one who comes back to demand answers, has been given the name of someone who commands. He asks his questions with authority. He will not be dismissed. He is not like the stillborn who hover and applaud. He is Walter: the one who rules by the mere fact of his survival.

Chapter 81: The Little Toy Salesman

Content note: *The Esther Longtree chapters (72 to 81) deal with stillbirth and pregnancy loss, rape, infanticide, racist violence including lynching, and cruelty to children.*

Research notes: Chapter 81

Characters: Esther Longtree · Vera Cartwheel · Walter

Themes: Guilt, Innocence, and Justice · Love · Motherhood, Pregnancy, and Birth · Time

Symbols: Clouds and Storms · Pregnancy, Birth, and Children · Snow, Ice, and Winter · The Sea and Water

Philosophy: Freud and Jung · Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Gambling and Playing Cards · Judaism · Revelation and the Apocalypse · Suicide in History and Literature

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Chapter 81 is the penultimate chapter of Esther's sequence, and it turns outward. After ten chapters deep inside Esther's interior life (her stillborn, her dying fathers, her mud baby, her detective, her twin, her silver spoon, her Walter) Young now introduces a figure from outside: a man who comes into the Greasy Spoon and tells Esther the story of the end of the world.

He is the little toy salesman. He is small and childlike, bandy-legged, tearless, with only three teeth and pale blue eyes and patchy hair. He drinks milk from a baby bottle. He carries rubber ducks and teddy bears and a baby bottle as his samples. His mother was a world-famous beauty and spy. His father was a windowpeeper. He was a bottle baby, never held at the breast, never given the ordinary comforts of being someone's child.

He is the lone survivor of a great storm at sea that drowned everyone else: "the captain, the crew, the women, the children," and in Young's cosmic rendering, even the moon and the stars. He sat in a rubber life boat while the world ended. And now he sits at Esther's counter, and he whispers to her that there will be a great war, and the bad men will "blow up the world some day of calm just for fun."

Esther is considering marrying him. Not for love. For legality. She wants a legal father for the little shadow boxer. He is the best available option.

What Actually Happens

The little toy salesman comes into the Greasy Spoon. He drinks milk from his baby bottle. He flirts with Esther in a childlike way. He cannot see that she is enormously pregnant. He cannot see much of anything clearly anymore.

He tells her his story, or she reconstructs it: the chapter blurs the line between what he says and what she knows about him. His mother was a spy, beautiful and famous, the Mata Hari type. His father was a windowpeeper. He was a bottle baby from the start, a child who had no one to hold him. He sold toys: rubber ducks, teddy bears, baby bottles. He was at sea when the storm came.

The storm is described with apocalyptic imagery: “a wild, raging storm between the cracking Poles,” “the sea rising in billows to the dark heavens,” the moon and stars falling like sparks and rain of blood. The captain, old and German, goes down with the ship conducting, bright with rage and love. The passengers (conceited, snobbish, oblivious to their doom) drown. The women take the lifeboats. The men jump into the sea. Everyone drowns except the little toy salesman, who survives by accident in a rubber life boat, upheld by swollen bladders and heaving breasts of ocean, not because he wanted to live but because the sea didn’t take him.

The calm after the storm is worse than the storm. He drifts. Around him: floating debris, bloated bodies, the detritus of a world that has ended. A great white shark circles him, which he initially mistakes for a woman. And there is a dead child’s ivory-colored hand, “always uplifted from the slow, swelling waters,” wearing a gold ring like his own. The hand tugs at him. The hand clings to him. He cannot make it let go, until, in his struggle with the shark, “the dead child’s hand must have slipped away from his grasp.”

He loses his memory. His taste buds. His tear ducts. His reason. He washes ashore in America: the shore littered with purple oyster sponges, crab shells, jellyfish like glass, bones of dead fish, “little carcasses of other little children,” “playing cards, old junk, rubber tires, birth control devices.” America as the shore where everything washes up and nothing resolves.

He is pursued by a great white shark on the return journey. He survives. He is smaller now than he was before; he tells Esther he is getting smaller all the time. Until the world blows up, things will be this way, so he doesn’t mind too much if the world blows up. When there is a new creation, he can begin again. He whispers into her ear: there will be a great war. The bad men will “blow up the world some day of calm just for fun.” Everything will be poisoned and disappear forever. Music, stars, fireflies, everything.

Esther listens. She remains forever pregnant with her dreams. She wonders who fathered the little shadow boxer. The dead loved the dead, she thinks, and perhaps that is how the world goes on.

The Little Toy Salesman

He is a figure of compressed ironies. He sells toys (the objects of childhood, of innocence, of the uncorrupted) but he was himself never given childhood. He was a bottle baby, never held, never nursed. His mother was a spy; his father a peeping tom. He carries rubber ducks as his samples. He drinks from a baby bottle. He is, in some sense, still the baby he was never allowed to be.

He is also, in his survival, a figure of survivor’s guilt taken to its extreme. He did not want to live, or so it seems: the sea simply didn’t take him when it took everyone else. And he calls himself “a murderer of women and of little children” for not drowning with the rest, and Esther, who has presided over so much death, who has carried so many dead children, listens. This is the logic of guilt applied in reverse: to survive when others die is to have killed them by surviving. The little toy salesman did not drown “the captain, the

crew, the women, the children.” He simply continued to exist when they did not. This is what Esther cannot forgive.

And yet she is considering marrying him. For legality. For the little shadow boxer. She will teach him how to behave, she thinks: how to have normal emotional responses, how to live a normal life. She is maternal toward him in the way she is maternal toward everyone: she sees someone who never had what they needed and wants to provide it. He is her most peculiar candidate. He is also her most available one.

The Storm as Apocalypse

Young does not write the shipwreck realistically. She writes it cosmically. The moon and stars fall. The Poles crack. The sea rises to the dark heavens hammering. The captain conducts as he goes down: “a golden flood of music more beautiful than Bach, Beethoven, or Brahms.” A black mourning band spans the sky from horizon to horizon.

This is not merely a ship sinking. It is the end of the world, rendered in miniature aboard a single vessel. And the little toy salesman sits in his rubber life boat and watches it happen and survives. He is the one person who witnesses the world ending and then washes ashore in America to report it. Young is writing during the nuclear age: the Cold War, Mutually Assured Destruction, the knowledge that the bad men could “blow up the world some day of calm just for fun.” The little toy salesman’s prophecy, whispered into Esther’s ear at the counter of the Greasy Spoon, is the period’s ambient terror made personal: everything will be poisoned and disappear forever. Music, stars, fireflies. *To All My Darlings* connects his description of the burning sunlight blackening his skin to a nuclear blast, and his account of the world turning into salt or smoke to the specific imagery of Hiroshima. He has already seen the end. He came back to report it.

The German captain who goes down with the ship, bright with rage and love, conducting music as the ship sinks: *To All My Darlings* connects this to Hans Langsdorff, the German captain who scuttled the Admiral Graf Spee in 1939 to save his crew and then died by suicide to prove he had acted with honor. And to Gustav Schroeder, the German captain who tried to bring 937 Jewish refugees from Germany to Cuba in 1939, was turned away by Cuba, Canada, and the United States, and was forced to return his passengers to Europe. Both men (captains who prioritized their passengers over orders, who faced impossible situations with what honor was available to them) are present in the captain who goes down with the ship conducting.

The Dead Child’s Hand

Throughout the long calm after the storm, one image persists: a dead child’s ivory-colored hand, “always uplifted from the slow, swelling waters,” wearing a gold ring like his own. The hand tugs at him. The hand clings to him. He cannot make it let go and he cannot look away from it. This is the chapter’s most quietly devastating image, and its resonance with Esther’s own history makes it exact. She has buried children in rivers and streams and tree stumps. She has carried children who were never born. She has pressed her thumb to still a birth cry. The dead child’s hand reaching up from the water is what she

has been reaching toward and what has been reaching toward her for ten chapters. The ring the dead child wears is like his own. This is the detail that locks the image in place: the hand is recognizable, is kin, wears what he wears. The dead child could be him: the child he never was, the childhood he was never given, the self that the storm should have taken. He survived but his self did not, or not entirely. What clings to him from the water is the part of himself that was supposed to be innocent and was not protected.

America's Shore

The shore where the little toy salesman washes up is littered: purple oyster sponges, crab shells, jellyfish like glass, bones of dead fish, "little carcasses of other little children," "playing cards, old junk, rubber tires, birth control devices." Young's inventory of what America receives when the world ends and washes ashore is not flattering. It is the accumulated detritus of a civilization: the natural and the manufactured, the chance and the controlled, the bones and the prophylactics.

The birth control devices on the shore are not accidental. Young has spent ten chapters in the world before birth control was legal: Esther's everlasting pregnancy, her stillborn, her Walter, all of it occurring in a legal and social landscape where women had no effective recourse. The devices washing up on the shore with the dead fish and the old junk and the little carcasses of children: this is where reproductive control ends up in the American accounting, thrown away, found on shores, mixed with everything else that did not get used or was used wrong or was too late.

The End of the World as Prologue

The little toy salesman's prophecy is that there will be a great war and the bad men will blow up the world. This comes one chapter before Chapter 82, which is the last chapter of Esther's sequence and the final chapter before the novel returns to Vera's story. Young is positioning the apocalyptic vision here deliberately: the end of the world is not the end of Esther. She remains forever pregnant with her dreams. The little shadow boxer is still there, still fighting. The dead loved the dead, she thinks, and perhaps that is how the world goes on.

This is not optimism exactly; it is something stranger and more durable. Esther has witnessed so much death and generated so much life and lost most of what she generated. She is still here. The world may blow up on a "day of calm just for fun," and Esther will still be at the counter of the Greasy Spoon, still swelling with the little shadow boxer, still setting out breadcrumbs for spirits, still knitting the invisible, still more hopeful now than she has ever been.

She is the survivor. Not the accidental survivor of the little toy salesman, who lived because the sea didn't take him. Esther survives because she refuses not to.

What to Hold Onto

The little toy salesman: bottle baby, spy's son, peeper's boy, seller of rubber ducks, survivor of the end of the world, three teeth, tearless, getting smaller all the time.

The German captain conducting as he goes down. "A golden flood of music more beautiful than Bach, Beethoven, or Brahms." "Bright with rage and love as if he had realized his strength, at last, his weakness."

The dead child's ivory-colored hand, "always uplifted from the slow, swelling waters," wearing a gold ring like his own. The hand that clings and will not let go.

America's shore: purple oyster sponges, rubber tires, playing cards, birth control devices, "little carcasses of other little children." The whisper into Esther's ear: there will be a great war. The bad men will "blow up the world some day of calm just for fun." Everything will be poisoned and disappear forever.

And Esther, forever pregnant with her dreams. "The dead loved the dead, and" perhaps that is how the world goes on.

For the Curious

On the Nuclear Bomb and the Cold War

On the Nuclear Bomb and the Cold War

The little toy salesman's prophecy (that the bad men will "blow up the world some day of calm just for fun") and the imagery of burning sunlight blackening his skin, of the whole human race turning into smoke, are read by *To All My Darlings* as references to the atomic bomb and the Cold War. The United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. The Cold War nuclear arms race that followed produced the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction: if one side launched, both sides would be destroyed. Young was writing this passage in the years between Hiroshima and the Cuban Missile Crisis, when this annihilation was not theoretical but procedurally planned. The little toy salesman has already been through the end of the world. He has seen the ship sink. He knows what the bad men are capable of.

On Gustav Schroeder and the MS St. Louis

On Gustav Schroeder and the MS St. Louis

The German captain who tries to do the right thing and fails is connected in *To All My Darlings* to Gustav Schroeder, captain of the MS St. Louis, who in 1939 carried 937 Jewish refugees from Germany to Cuba. Cuba refused to admit them. He sailed to Florida; the United States refused entry. He sailed to Canada; Canada refused. He returned to Europe, where the passengers were distributed among four Allied countries: Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands. After the fall of France and the Netherlands, many of those passengers were caught in the Nazi net. Historians estimate that approximately 254 of the 937 passengers on the MS St. Louis were killed in the

Holocaust. Schroeder did everything he could. It was not enough. He conducted to the last.

On Survivor’s Guilt

On Survivor’s Guilt

The little toy salesman’s condition (having survived when everyone else died, losing his memory, his taste, his tears, his reason, growing smaller) is a precise description of what is now clinically understood as survivor’s guilt: the distress experienced by those who have lived through catastrophic events that killed others. Symptoms can include intrusive memories, social withdrawal, loss of ordinary pleasures, a sense of diminishment, and a conviction that one has no right to the life one is living. *To All My Darlings* notes his condition alongside Carl Jung’s documented visions of carnage and blood floods in 1913: visions Jung initially feared indicated his own psychosis but later interpreted as premonitions of World War I. The little toy salesman has had his World War. He came through it smaller.

On Mata Hari and the Spy Mother

On Mata Hari and the Spy Mother

The little toy salesman’s mother is described as a world-famous beauty and spy: the Mata Hari type. Mata Hari (born Margaretha Zelle, 1876–1917) was a Dutch exotic dancer who became a World War I spy–or who was accused of being one; the evidence was always disputed–and was executed by the French. She became the archetype of the beautiful female spy, her identity so theatrical that it was unclear where the performance ended and the person began. The little toy salesman’s mother belongs to this tradition: a woman whose life was the performance of a character, who left her son a bottle baby while she lived her larger story. He inherited her unreachability.

On Bottle Feeding

On Bottle Feeding

The little toy salesman’s bottle (the baby bottle he still drinks from as an adult, the sample bottles he sells) carries the history of infant feeding technology. Bottle feeding has existed for thousands of years, with archaeological evidence of clay feeding vessels dating to the Bronze Age. The rubber nipple and safer glass bottle emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; before this, “tube bottles” with long rubber tubes were common and often fatal through bacterial contamination. “The little toy salesman was a” bottle baby: fed the modern way, the technological way, without the warmth of the body. He sells what he was given. He still uses it. He never grew out of the substitute.

On “The Dead Loved the Dead”

On “The Dead Loved the Dead”

Esther’s closing thought (“the dead loved the dead, and” perhaps that is how the world goes on) is one of the novel’s most compressed statements of its central metaphysics.

Young has spent ten chapters establishing that the dead do not simply leave: they whisper, they return, they haunt, they accuse, they hover with innocent smiles, they reach up from the water with ivory hands. The dead are present in this novel’s world in ways the living cannot fully access or explain. If the dead love the dead, if the connections that produce new life are not only between the living but between the living and the lost, between presence and absence, between what is here and what is gone: then Esther’s everlasting pregnancy makes a different kind of sense. She is not only carrying the little shadow boxer. She is carrying everything. And that is how the world goes on.

Chapter 82: The End Is the Beginning

Research notes: Chapter 82

Characters: Catherine Cartwheel · Esther Longtree · Joachim Spitzer · Jock Cartwheel · Justice O'Leary · Lucie Bell · Madge Capehorn · Miss MacIntosh · Moses Hunnecker · Mr. Weed · Mrs. Hogden · Peron Spitzer · Rosemary · The Stone Deaf Man · Vera Cartwheel · Walter

Themes: Death and Mortality · Illusion and Reality · Music, Sound, and Silence

Symbols: Clouds and Storms · Music and Instruments · Silence and Deafness · The Bus and the Journey · The House

Philosophy: Marguerite Young on Her Craft

Allusions: Angels and Archangels · Deafness and Sign Language · Homer's Epics · Iowa, Indiana, and the Midwest · The Bible · The History of Opium

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This chapter carries Young's use of Alpha and Omega, which *To All My Darlings* traces through the novel, to its simplest form: the end is the beginning, and the beginning is the end. After eighty-one chapters, the grey bus in the Midwest mist, Moses Hunnecker drinking and praying at the wheel, Madge telling her unhappy story, Vera looking out at the grey American landscape wondering what she will find at What Cheer, Iowa; after Catherine and her opium and her pearls and her Italian thief; after Mr. Spitzer and his twin; after the Tavern and Dr. O'Leary and the hangman and Mrs. Hogden; after ten chapters with Esther Longtree and her stillborn and her Walter and her shadow boxer, the novel returns to where it began. The bus has stopped. The journey is over, or a version of it is over. Vera is still in the Indiana town, at Esther's counter, never having reached What Cheer. And everything she went looking for has changed into something she did not expect.

Catherine is dead. The sea-blackened house with its gold towers and cornices is gone: destroyed by a storm, scattered along the shore, its chandeliers lying broken in the sand. The only thing Vera has left from her inheritance is the string of pearls around her neck: the impossible arithmetic of her mother's lost estate, the thing that multiplies when it is lost.

And she has fallen in love with a stone deaf man.

What Actually Happens

Vera mourns three deaths: Catherine's, the old clam-digger's, and one that may be harder to name, perhaps the death of the self she was looking for, the clarity she hoped Miss MacIntosh would restore. She is in love with "an older love than memory provided." Catherine died while Mr. Spitzer carried her in his arms "into the garden by the sea." He had waited years to tell her he loved her. He told her. But she "had died at the beginning of his whispers," as he felt "her body stiffening in his arms," had "died not a moment before but an hour before, had died before he could speak." The timing is the novel's

most bitter joke and most tender observation simultaneously: love arrives, is declared, and the beloved is already gone. It was too late and it was the only moment available and it was enough and it was not enough. Mr. Spitzer then reveals what has been hidden since the beginning: he is not Joachim. He is Peron: the twin who survived by taking his dead brother's place, who has been living Joachim's life all this time, who has been Mr. Spitzer the lawyer and musician when he was always really the gambler, "never a musician at all." His life, he says, has been a celestial joke. His grief over the old clam-digger, the loyal valet who drowned in the storm that destroyed Catherine's house, is greater than his grief over Catherine. The man he loses most is not the woman he loved but the companion who was simply there, every day, without drama, until suddenly he was not.

Vera's understanding of Miss MacIntosh deepens here, at the end. She loved Miss MacIntosh late, only when she could see past the surface of her character, past the rubber mackintosh and the whaler's hat and the two and two making four. Underneath the practicality, the clearness, the plain average steadiness: a phantasmagoric dream. Miss MacIntosh dismissed religious belief as mockery and yet sang hymns. She believed in the cold surface of things and yet was drawn to the ocean's depths and drowned in them. She was real, and she was not real in the way Vera thought, and Vera loved her most when she understood that the two things were simultaneously true. And then: the stone deaf man. He comes into Vera's life in this final chapter, or she finds him, or hears his voice all night through the wall, calling to Lucie Bell, the hitch-hiking girl he calls "too noisy a girl," who will go off with "a tired marathon skater." He hears with his eyes and his fingers. He lives in a world of silence that is not empty but full: full of the sounds the mind makes when the ears stop, of music remembered and music imagined. He says life is imaginary. This is an imaginary world. He cannot hear the silent horn that Gabriel will blow.

Vera loves him. They will marry. They will invite everyone. "We would be married, for legality helped," and they would invite everybody: the wild flowers and the birds, "the old mule that leaned over the fence and Esther Longtree, for she was also our love, all our loves."

Then Esther gets a line of her own: "Esther Longtree would come."

Catherine's Death and the House in the Storm

Catherine, who has been alive in the novel only in the mode of someone who has been dying for decades, who took to her bed and never left it, who lived entirely inside her opium hallucinations and her accumulated dreamwork: finally dies. The sea-blackened house goes with her. Storm, tide, dissolution: the material form of Catherine's world is scattered along the shore.

What remains: the pearls. Young has been preparing this since Chapter 71, when Vera put on the pearls for the Tavern. Catherine believed they "could not be lost or stolen." She believed that losing them made them multiply. The pearls are the only inheritance that survived. They are impossible and they are real. Catherine's death, when it comes, is described as a change of state rather than a cessation. She had not walked for many

years. She had not been entirely in the world for longer. Vera had been seeing her mother as a “beautiful lady sleeping in her swan boat”; by the end, she sees her as poor, as if “evicted from her house long before she died and wandered like a beggar through the streets.” The transformation is not in Catherine but in Vera’s seeing: she has learned, through eighty-two chapters of circling, to look at what is actually there rather than what she needs to see.

Mr. Spitzer Is Peron

This revelation has been structurally prepared throughout the novel: the twin brothers, one dead, one surviving by taking the dead one’s name and place; the question of which twin did the killing and which was killed; the guilt of the survivor who has been living as his brother, but it still lands with weight when it arrives. Mr. Spitzer has been Peron all along. He has been the wrong twin in the right place, or the right twin in the wrong name, for the entire novel.

The parallels to Esther Longtree’s situation are precise: she too has been the twin who survived, accused of killing Rosemary before birth. She too has carried that guilt as the organizing principle of her identity. Mr. Spitzer’s celestial joke (living as Joachim, who he is not) is Esther’s joke inverted: she lived as Esther, who she was told she had no right to be.

His grief for the old clam-digger exceeds his grief for Catherine. This is one of Young’s most precisely observed truths about loss: the death that destroys you is not always the dramatic one, the romantic one, the one with a name. Sometimes it is the companion who was simply present (the valet who buried himself in the sand, who developed nervous tics, who became over time barely distinguishable from the landscape) and who drowned quietly in the storm while Mr. Spitzer was declaring his love for someone else.

Miss MacIntosh, Finally Seen

Vera’s retrospective understanding of Miss MacIntosh in this final chapter is the novel’s most important statement about its own central figure. She loved Miss MacIntosh late. She could not love her fully while Miss MacIntosh was being Miss MacIntosh: plain, practical, real, dismissing illusions, insisting on two and two making four. It was only when Vera could see past that surface, when she understood that the woman who dismissed faith still sang hymns, that the woman who believed in the cold honest surface of things was drawn to the ocean’s depths: that she could love her fully.

Miss MacIntosh’s hymns in this chapter are the novel’s final gift from her. She sang them while performing mundane tasks, dismissing the religious belief they embodied, and singing them anyway. They are hymns of being lost, of needing guidance, of the waters drowning the soul: “Lo, she would lift her eyes to the hills from whence cometh help.” “Thou didst turn Thy face from me, and I was troubled.” “The waters have drowned us. The stream has gone over our soul.” These are not the hymns of someone who has certainty. They are the hymns of someone who has been through the water and survived and is still not sure if survival was the right outcome. Miss MacIntosh drowned in the

ocean. She was drawn to the depths. She had hidden beneath her wig and her rubber mackintosh and her plain-average-clear-eyed practicality an entire phantasmagoric inner life, and the ocean claimed it. Vera could not have known this while she was looking for her. She knows it now that she has stopped looking and started mourning. The search ends not in What Cheer, Iowa but here, in the understanding that arrives too late and is therefore the only understanding available.

The Stone Deaf Man

He arrives at the novel's end as its strangest and most necessary figure. He is stone deaf: deaf since he was fourteen, when all the waters of creation smashed against his ears. He hears with his eyes and his fingers. He lives in the silence that is not empty but full of the sounds the mind generates in the absence of the actual: music imagined, voices remembered, the world rebuilt from what was known before it went quiet. He cannot hear Lucie Bell: the girl he calls "too noisy a girl," who loved "a jukebox" and "a tired marathon skater" more than him, who did not stay. "Lucie was gone." He calls for her in his voice, this man who cannot hear his own voice. Vera hears him. Vera falls in love with him. She loves him not despite the deafness but through it, through the paradox of a man who speaks in a world of silence, who communicates in a language that is not language, who is closer to death than the hearing because he cannot hear the horn Gabriel will blow at the end of the world.

Their love is the novel's final image of connection: not the connection Vera was looking for, not Miss MacIntosh's plain-and-clear-eyed steadiness, not the cold honest surface of things. Something quieter and stranger. Something that requires a different kind of listening than the kind she arrived on the bus with.

They will marry. They will invite everyone. They will invite everybody to the wedding, the flowers and the birds and the old mule and Esther Longtree. Life goes on through the accumulation of what the living and the dead pass forward, imperfectly, into futures they cannot quite hear.

"Esther Longtree Would Come"

This is the novel's most important sentence in the final chapter, and Young places it without fanfare. After all of Vera's searching for Miss MacIntosh, for the plain average woman who believed in facts and schedules and the cold honest surface of things, the last person the novel names is Esther Longtree, and it gives her a line of her own: "Esther Longtree would come." Not Miss MacIntosh, who walked into the sea. Not Catherine, who is dead. Esther, who is still living, still waiting, still coming.

This is the full pivot of eighty-two chapters. Vera began her journey looking for the woman who represented clarity, practicality, the opposite of her mother's opium dreaming. She ends by inviting to her wedding the woman who is always pregnant with the impossible, who loves "all things hurt or silent or broken or dead or living," who buried her children in rivers and tree stumps and kept setting out breadcrumbs for spirits, who was called Little Jackass and was a murderer before she was born and survived everything that came

after with a stubbornness that was neither wisdom nor delusion but simply life insisting on itself.

Esther is the average: the plain, the hidden, the one the world overlooks. And she is also the phantasmagoric dream beneath the surface. She is both, simultaneously, in the way that Miss MacIntosh was both: the cold surface and the depths that claimed her. What Vera has learned, across the entire novel, is that the surface and the depths are not opposites. They are the same thing seen from different angles, and to love the surface is to love the depths, and to look for the plain honest truth of things is to find that it contains a dream, and the dream contains a truth, and Esther Longtree is all of it.

The End Is the Beginning

The novel does not resolve. Miss MacIntosh does not walk back out of the ocean. Walter does not come home to Esther. Catherine's house does not un-scatter from the shore. Mr. Spitzer does not stop being Peron-pretending-to-be-Joachim. The questions that opened the novel (what is real, what is illusion, what do we do when the only person who told us the truth has disappeared) are not answered. They are, by the end, better questions. Vera has learned to hold them without expecting resolution.

The stone deaf man says life is imaginary. This is an imaginary world. Miss MacIntosh would have disagreed: two and two make four, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. And yet she sang hymns. And yet she drowned. The facts and the imagination are not opposites. The cold surface and the depths that claim you are the same water.

The bus is still moving, in some sense, or has arrived at a place that is not the destination Vera expected but is nevertheless where she is. The grey American mist is still there. The world may blow up on a "day of calm just for fun." The bad men may finish what they started. The little shadow boxer is still fighting. The stone deaf man is listening with his eyes and his fingers. "The dead loved the dead, and" perhaps that is how the world goes on.

Vera came looking for Miss MacIntosh. She found Esther Longtree.

She found herself.

What to Hold Onto

Catherine already dead in his arms as Mr. Spitzer finally speaks his love. Too late and the only moment. It was not enough and it was what there was.

Mr. Spitzer revealing he is Peron. His life a celestial joke. His greatest grief: the old clam-digger who drowned in the storm, not the woman he loved.

Miss MacIntosh's hymns: "Lo, she would lift her eyes to the hills." The waters have drowned us. She dismissed faith and sang it anyway.

The stone deaf man who calls for Lucie Bell in the silence. Who hears with his eyes and his fingers. Who cannot hear the horn Gabriel will blow.

The pearls, scattered along the shore with the chandeliers. Only the pearls remain. Lost and multiplied, as Catherine promised. And then, near the very end: “Esther Longtree would come.” Vera came looking for plainness and clarity and found the woman who is always pregnant with dreams, and she wants her at the wedding. Vera is the woman who learned to love the depths the surface is made of.

A Note on the Journey

You have read Miss MacIntosh, My Darling. Or you have read alongside it, chapter by chapter, with this guide as your companion through the grey American mist.

What you have been inside is one of the longest and most singular novels in the American tradition: 1,198 pages, eighteen years in the writing, published in 1965 to stunned reviews and a readership that did not quite know what to do with it. It is not a novel that offers easy gratification or clear resolution. It asks you to surrender to its rhythms, to accept that meaning accumulates rather than arrives, to trust that the circling and digressing and doubling-back are the form enacting the content.

You have met Vera on her grey bus, and you have stayed with her through the Tavern and Esther Longtree and Mr. Weed and Dr. O’Leary and Mrs. Hogden and all the rest, and you have arrived here at the end, which is the beginning. Miss MacIntosh drowned in the ocean. Esther Longtree is always pregnant with the little shadow boxer. The stone deaf man cannot hear the horn Gabriel will blow. The pearls have multiplied.

Marguerite Young spent eighteen years building this wheel. You have traveled its spokes. That is not a small thing.

Thank you for reading. If you are interested in learning more about Young’s work, please see coralrussell.substack.com.

For the Curious

On Nepenthe

On Nepenthe

To All My Darlings mentions nepenthe, the mythical drug from Homer’s Odyssey: a potion given to Helen of Troy to ease her grief, inducing forgetfulness of pain and sorrow. Catherine’s opium is the novel’s nepenthe: the substance that allowed her to live inside a dreamworld rather than the world she could not bear. Young names this tradition without sentimentalizing it. The nepenthe works. It forgets. And then it is gone, and the grief it was suppressing was always there, waiting.

On Miss MacIntosh’s Hymns

On Miss MacIntosh’s Hymns

The hymns Miss MacIntosh sings in this final chapter include “Rock of Ages,” “The Old Rugged Cross,” and hymns derived from Psalms 121, 59, and 130. They are the hymns of someone lost, of someone looking upward from the valley, calling out from the depths

of the water, lifting eyes to the hills from which help might come. They are not the hymns of certainty. They are the hymns of the barely surviving, the walking-wounded, the ones who are still here after everything. Miss MacIntosh dismissed religious belief as human exaggeration and sang these songs while scrubbing floors. Young holds both things without resolving them: she is the woman who disbelieved and still sang, who insisted on the cold surface of things and drowned in the depths. Her character is the novel's spine: the person who stands for one thing and is also entirely something else.

On Deafness and Inner Sound

On Deafness and Inner Sound

The stone deaf man's account of his inner world is consistent with what is documented about acquired deafness: those who lose hearing after having heard often continue to experience internal sound, musical ear syndrome, auditory memory, phantom sounds. The world of silence is not silent from inside. Young gives her stone deaf man a rich interior acoustic life: music louder than what he heard before, voices that will not stop, the sounds he knew before they stopped. He hears with his eyes and his fingers. He is closer to death because he cannot hear the horn of judgment. He is also, Young suggests, closer to a truth that the hearing cannot access: that the world's real sounds are not the ones that reach the ear.

On Lucie Bell

On Lucie Bell

Lucie Bell: the silent girl the stone deaf man loved, who loved a jukebox and a tired marathon skater more than him, who made too much noise and was not his love because she could not answer him: is the novel's final figure of missed connection. She is gone before Vera arrives. The man calls her name into the silence he lives in. Vera hears his calling and falls in love with him instead. This is how the novel ends: not with the person who was sought but with the person who was called for by someone else, in a language that could not be heard by the one being addressed, and was heard anyway by someone passing through. Connection happens obliquely, or it happens in the gap between the person and their target, or it happens because silence carries things that sound cannot.

On the Wheel of Spokes

On the Wheel of Spokes

Young described the structure of this novel early on: spokes of a wheel, with Miss MacIntosh in the middle. Every chapter has been a spoke: radiating outward from that absent center, circling back, touching the hub without ever quite grasping it. Chapter 82 is the spoke that completes the wheel. Vera has traveled all the way around. She is back where she began, or somewhere adjacent to it. Miss MacIntosh is still not found in the way Vera hoped to find her. But Vera understands now what the spoke structure means: you don't find the center by going straight toward it. You find it by circling, and circling, and circling, until the center, which was always there, becomes legible through the

accumulation of everything that surrounds it. The wheel is the novel. The novel is the wheel. The end is the beginning.

On Miss MacIntosh as Miss Reality

On Miss MacIntosh as Miss Reality

Throughout eighty-two chapters, Miss MacIntosh has been the novel's pole of reality: the woman who kept the rain out, who believed in facts and schedules and the cold honest surface of things, who was named for waterproofed cloth and wore a rubber mackintosh coat and was the solid thing in Vera's childhood. She was also wearing a wig. She had a bald head under the red hair. Her plainness was a performance and also a conviction and also a failure: she believed in the surface and the surface held for years and then she went into the ocean. The thing that made her Miss MacIntosh was the same thing that drowned her. Young has spent the entire novel demonstrating that there is no simple reality, no cold clear surface that is not also unfathomably deep, no Miss MacIntosh who is not also the water she drowned in. The search for the person who would tell you the truth turns out to be a search for the person who taught you that the truth and the dream are the same water. Vera finds this in the end. She finds Esther Longtree. She finds herself.