

# Ashes



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Kennedy was born in the United Kingdom and spent her childhood traveling between various Australian states and the UK, due to her father's career in the Air Force. After studying at the Canberra College of Advanced Education (which later became the University of Canberra) and the Australian National University, she worked as a freelance writer, a teacher, and a community arts worker. In the 1990s, she spent two years as a volunteer teaching reading and writing in Central Mexico. This experience partially inspired her first poetry collection, *Signs of Other Fires*, published in 2001. Kennedy has since published several other volumes of poetry, one novel, and two short story collections, *Dark Roots* and [Like a House on Fire](#). Many of her stories were first published individually in magazines and newspapers. Her short story and poetry collections have won numerous awards, including the 2013 Steele Rudd Award and the 2013 Stella Prize, both for [Like a House on Fire](#). Kennedy lives in Victoria, Australia.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Given Chris's annoyance with the speeding sensor in his father's car in the story, it's likely that "Ashes" takes place in the 21st century. Governments in the UK and Japan began to study and heavily promote sensors and indicators like this in the early 2000s, and in the years since, some car companies have begun to include speeding sensors in their models. At the time that "Ashes" takes place, gay marriage wasn't yet legal in Australia (where the story is set)—though gay couples could enter domestic partnerships and adopt children, and they generally received comparable treatment under the law as their heterosexual counterparts did. Homosexual relationships were gradually decriminalized and then legalized in various Australian provinces beginning in 1973. Decriminalization efforts picked up in the mid-1990s, about the same time that Chris would've been in college and coming to terms with his sexuality as a gay man. Australia's government legalized gay marriage in all territories in 2017.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like "Ashes," a number of Kennedy's other short stories tackle issues of family life. "Cake" follows a young woman on her first day back to work after having her first child; "Whirlpool" features a mother figure who is controlling and obsessed with the perfect family in much the same way that Chris's mother is; and "Flexion" explores a broken marriage. As a writer of realist short fiction, Kennedy pays close attention to the mundane

nature of everyday life. In this sense, her stories can be compared to famed short story writer Raymond Carver, whose stories tend to favor casual dialogue and everyday moments over dramatic plots. In addition, Kennedy has cited Russian author Anton Chekhov, often hailed as the creator of the modern short story, as an inspiration for her own writing. She's also said that at the time she published her first short story collection, *Dark Roots*, in 2006, there were few short story collections being published in Australia. Most authors—including Kennedy herself—were publishing individual stories for competitions. Since then, a number of Australian short story writers have risen to prominence and published award-winning collections, including Ceridwen Dovey (*Only the Animals*) and Debra Adelaide (*Letter to George Clooney*). In its focus on the experience of a gay man trying to make peace with his family, "Ashes" is also similar to books like Kristen Arnett's *Mostly Dead Things* (in which the lesbian protagonist is, like Chris, reeling after her father's recent death) and *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernadine Evaristo.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Ashes
- **When Written:** 2009
- **Where Written:** Victoria, Australia
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Australia
- **Climax:** As Chris scatters his late father's ashes in the lake, he realizes that he could've made more of an effort in their relationship.
- **Antagonist:** Chris's Mother; Chris's Father/Alan
- **Point of View:** Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**The "Ow" Factor.** In a 2008 interview with *Overland* magazine, Kennedy stated that the "ow factor"—the ability to elicit painful emotions in readers—is something she appreciates in short stories.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Chris and his mother are having morning tea in a café; Chris is already exhausted from being around her, and it's only 10:30 a.m. He reminds himself that he just has to stay on the good side of surliness—and given the occasion, his mother should

forgive him if he slips up. She's dressed up in heels, even though Chris warned her they'll have to do some walking today. He knows, though, that the blisters she'll get will give her something to complain about to her friends, whom Chris privately refers to as "the Book Club Women." Chris's mother has pictures of the Book Club Women's grandchildren up on her fridge, and he believes that she talks about them specifically to torment him.

Whenever the conversation about his mother's friends' children and grandchildren fizzles out, Chris and his mother look out to the leaf-covered yard, where Chris's father's yard tools still sit. Ever since his father died, Chris feels as though reminders like this are everywhere, waiting for him like mousetraps or landmines. Today, he and his mother are taking his father's **car**, which still smells like his father's characteristic scent.

Earlier this morning, Chris tried to tuck the box that contains his father's ashes in the backseat, but Chris's mother insisted that the box go at her feet. Chris snidely thought that this made sense, but he kept his response to himself. Back in the present, Chris's mother gets sidetracked with shopping at a store near the café. When they'd gotten to the café, his mother had been worried about leaving the box in the car in case of theft—but she didn't want to bring it inside with them, either.

Chris's mother can barely touch the box. When she and Chris went to pick it up from the crematorium, she made Chris fill out all the paperwork and ask for a bag. Outside, his mother had gotten upset that they had to ask for a bag at all. She didn't cry, though—she simply unlocked her antique cabinet so Chris could put the box there with the good dishes. In that moment, Chris wished he was with Scott.

As Chris's mother browses a craft store's display, Chris recalls how his father used to joke that his mother could shop anywhere. He knows that his mother will want a souvenir, and sure enough, she returns with a silver picture frame.

Chris is sure that he'll remember the turn for the **lake** when he sees it, even though it's been 25 years since he's been there. As he drives, the car's cruise-control check beeps at him whenever he exceeds the speed limit, which startles him and makes him feel guilty. As Chris puts a CD into the player, he realizes that he would've last smelled his father's scent two Christmases ago, when he gave his parents this CD. He wouldn't have smelled it at the hospital more recently; there, everything smelled like cleaning supplies.

As Chris's mother chats away in the passenger seat, Chris knows that he'll need to change the subject soon. She begins talking about her choice to scatter the ashes at the lake, which she thinks will be meaningful. Chris can barely contain his anger as his mother notes how meaningful their many fishing trips to the lake were to his father. In reality, Chris and his father only went twice, and both trips were disasters. By the

end of each trip, Chris felt like he'd failed a test; on the way home after the last trip, Chris's father had even said, "I don't know what's bloody wrong with you." At that point, he was aware that there was something about him his parents found embarrassing, but he didn't realize what it was until college. When he'd told Scott about the fishing trips, Scott laughed—he insisted that Chris isn't the only gay man with parents who didn't understand. Scott eventually left when Chris waited too long to introduce him to his parents.

Chris thinks of the last time he saw his father in the hospital. The morphine seemed to lower his father's inhibitions, and he'd told Chris that his mother is proud of him. But then, he insisted that Chris's mother would die if Chris were to throw his sexuality at her. Chris realizes, though, that the truth of his sexuality killed his father, not his mother.

Ever since the funeral, Chris's mother has been rewriting history to make the past seem happier—and less truthful. When Chris's father was alive, his mother always spoke poorly of him; these days, she talks about how kind he was. Presently, she laments that Chris never took photos on the father-son fishing trips. Chris fumes. He thinks that in reality, he and his mother are going on a pathetic excursion to someplace with invented symbolism. As Chris takes the turnoff for the lake, he thinks about his mother's dinner invitations, which have been increasing in frequency. She always asks him to stay the night, and Chris knows that if he keeps refusing, she'll start noting that Chris doesn't have a wife and kids to return home to.

Chris and his mother arrive at the campsite and begin walking out to the lake. Chris remembers being here with his father. He feels sick at the possibility of having to say another farewell—the eulogy was bad enough. But fortunately, Chris's mother insists they should scatter the ashes without saying anything. She frets that she should've kept some ashes for herself, so Chris suggests that they put some in the camera bag and jokes about what his father would say to that. His mother says that at least it's not a matchbox, given how much Chris's father hated her smoking until she gave it up.

Out on the jetty, Chris pulls out the box. He remembers sitting out on a boat with his father: his father had smiled hopefully as he noted their slim chances of catching anything. Chris stands, takes a picture of his mother, and asks her to pick up the box. She hesitates, and Chris suddenly wishes that he'd complimented her outfit this morning. Her expression makes Chris choke up. Finally, Chris opens the box to reveal the ashes. His mother panics and says, "You." Chris knows he has to scatter the ashes, no matter his thoughts or desires.

Chris picks up ashes and scatters them in the water. As he does so, he remembers washing saucepans with his father and putting out their campfire with lake water. The smell of wet ash was the same then as it is now. Chris remembers his father looking around and asking him to agree that the lake is beautiful. Chris had merely shrugged—and now, he can't

understand why. Now, his mother whispers, “Goodbye, Alan” over and over as Chris dumps handfuls of ash into the water.

When the box is empty, they stand on the jetty. Chris’s mother cries, and Chris wonders why he didn’t answer his father years ago. Back at the car, his mother asks if they could return to the gift shop so she can purchase frames for the Book Club Women. Chris agrees that they can make it in time before the shop closes, and that it’d be a nice gesture. He gently brushes some ash off his mother’s lapel.



## CHARACTERS

**Chris** – Chris, the story’s protagonist, is a 35-year-old man whose father recently died. He and his mother are on their way to a [lake](#) to scatter his father’s ashes, and as they drive, Chris reflects on his fraught relationship with his parents. Chris is gay, and although he’s had at least one relationship with a man named Scott, he never came out to his parents because they made him feel ashamed of his sexuality and gender expression when he was a child. This childhood trauma has turned Chris into a secretive adult who doesn’t speak his mind about anything, no matter how much he wants to or how angry something makes him. This is particularly evident in his terse exchanges with his mother, who’s critical of the fact that Chris is unmarried and childless. Indeed, Chris is so closed-off that he reveals little about himself, even to the reader. Most of the story consists of Chris’s inner monologue, and although the story is full of hints that Chris is devastated about his father’s death, his grief is mixed up with lingering trauma and resentment over his parents’ disapproval. On the drive to the lake, then, Chris can’t help but dwell on his unhappy memories and his pessimistic imaginings of the future. However, Chris begins to question this outlook once they arrive at the lake, and he scatters his father’s ashes into the water. He begins to feel more empathetic toward his mother, and as he thinks about his memories of camping with his father, he realizes that he didn’t try very hard to connect with his father, either. The story ends with Chris humoring his mother in a simple way and extending compassion to her for perhaps the first time, implying that their relationship may improve going forward. In this way, Chris’s development over the course of the story is a testament to how acknowledging both sides of a situation, rather than staying mired in one’s own preconceptions, can help people improve their relationships and better cope with trauma and grief.

**Chris’s Mother** – Chris’s mother recently lost her husband (Chris’s father), Alan, and is still grieving. From early on in the story, it’s clear that Chris and his mother have a strained relationship. His mother seems to care a great deal about keeping up appearances: most of her conversations with revolve around gossiping about her friends’ children and grandchildren, and she seems ashamed of the fact that Chris is unmarried and childless at 35. Chris is gay, and when he was a

child, his parents seemed embarrassed by him whenever they had guests over. They could tell that he was somehow different—but the story never reveals whether his mother knows for sure that he’s gay. As a result of this secrecy and lack of communication, she and Chris aren’t close. In the story’s present, the two of them are on their way to a [lake](#) to scatter Alan’s ashes, and Chris’s mother rambles about the past while Chris remains silent and privately resentful. Chris’s mother has started to rework history as a way of coping with her grief: she speaks as though her marriage was perfect and Chris’s relationship with his father was healthy. This offends Chris, as it minimizes the pain that his parents’ disapproval has caused him throughout his life. However, the story suggests that Chris’s mother does this to try to come to grips with her past mistakes. It may be easier for her to mourn her late husband if her memories of him are happy—and, possibly, she can feel better about the harm she’s caused Chris if she pretends that the past was rosier than it was. All of this, though, simply pushes Chris away, and the two never talk much about their differing views of Chris’s father. However, after Chris and his mother perform the cathartic ritual of scattering Alan’s ashes on the lake, the story ends on the hopeful note that they’ll be able to be more open with each other going forward.

**Chris’s Father/Alan** – Chris’s late father, Alan, died not long before the story’s action begins. In life, Alan was—according to Chris and Chris’s mother—wry, secretive, and exacting. This caused issues with both his wife and son: Chris’s mother felt that her husband trapped her in a boring life, and Chris found it extremely hard to connect with his overbearing father. Much of Chris and his father’s struggle to connect stemmed from the fact that Alan never accepted Chris’s sexuality. When Chris was young, his father tried twice to take Chris on father-son camping and fishing trips to the [lake](#)—the same lake where, in the story’s present, Chris and his mother are going to scatter his ashes. Alan couldn’t understand what was “wrong” with his son, since Chris showed no interest in camping or fishing—activities that Chris’s father presumably associated with masculinity. But while his father’s lifelong habit of simply refusing to address Chris’s sexuality was difficult for Chris, it was particularly hurtful when Chris’s father’s last words to his son were a warning that being too open about being gay would kill his mother. Chris recognizes that this wasn’t entirely true—having a gay son, he believes, killed his *father* rather than his mother. After Alan’s death, both Chris and his mother struggle to process their memories of him. Chris’s mother copes by embellishing her memories to make her husband into a bumbling man with good intentions—but Chris is simply angry. However, as he scatters his father’s ashes at the lake, he begins to realize that his father wasn’t all bad. Alan may have made mistakes, but Chris acknowledges that he also failed to make an effort to connect with his father when he had the chance.

**Scott** – Scott is Chris’s ex-partner; he never appears in person in the story. He broke up with Chris about three years before the story’s action begins, at least in part because Chris was delaying introducing Scott to his parents. Chris remembers Scott as being the kind of person who always knew what to do and how to comfort someone going through a rough time. So, as Chris muddles through the weeks following his father’s death, he often wishes that Scott were around to comfort him and help make sense of it all. Scott’s insights were also important to Chris as he tried to come to terms with his parents’ disapproval of his sexuality. Scott insisted that having parents who don’t understand isn’t uncommon, and that it would be better for Chris if he didn’t hold it against his parents and tried to move on instead.

them [...] had any idea how to name what the thing was.” By refusing to raise the subject, Chris’s parents inadvertently taught him that his sexuality is something to be ashamed of and something to stay quiet about. But by mirroring his parents’ tendency to brush issues under the rug, Chris ends up creating more strain on his relationship with his parents. For instance, at the end of his final camping trip with his father, his father good-naturedly asked Chris if he agreed that the lake was a beautiful place to camp. Rather than take this easy opening and opportunity to connect with his father, Chris just shrugged—and at the time, he took pleasure in making his dad feel bad. But decades later, in the present, he regrets his silence: answering his father’s question may have been a way to spark a closer relationship and build up some level of trust. Insisting on silence, “Ashes” shows, means that people (even family members) never really get to know each other.

Further, “Ashes” shows that that without communication, people become stuck in their preconceptions and struggle to reevaluate their views in light of new information. The clearest example of this is Chris’s secrecy about his sexuality. Importantly, the story never reveals just how much Chris’s mother knows about her son’s sexuality. Chris’s father knew his son was gay and was disapproving and unsupportive the one time they spoke about it, but Chris’s mother seems to only have acted embarrassed of Chris when he was a child. Now that Chris is an adult, she openly hopes that he’ll marry a woman and father children. Chris finds this grating and offensive, yet he chooses not to set his mother straight about his sexuality and tempering her expectations. And while he seems to imply that he expects her to react poorly if he were to tell her the truth, all of his mother’s worst offenses are committed in Chris’s imagination, not in real life. For instance, Chris believes that before long, his mother is going to try to convince him to stay the night in his childhood room by noting that he doesn’t have a wife and kids to get home to. In this way, the lack of communication between Chris and his mother makes him stuck in his perception of her, just as he believes she’s stuck in her disapproval of him. Furthermore, Chris’s father’s dying words to his son were a warning that Chris’s mother would die if Chris “threw” his sexuality in her face. Yet Chris admits that this final warning reflects his *father’s* homophobia, not his mother’s. When considered alongside Chris’s imaginings of his mother’s rudeness, both Chris and his father seem to be set in their preconceptions about Chris’s mother. A lack of openness, this shows, only reinforces people’s misguided perceptions of one another and stunts relationships from developing further.

The only way to remedy the situation, “Ashes” suggests, is to take small steps toward communicating openly, while also being mindful of the ways a lifetime of silence has molded the family. Indeed, the story ends on a hopeful note when, after finally accepting his role in keeping his father at a distance, Chris takes active steps to close that distance with his mother. His internal



## THEMES

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



### COMMUNICATION AND MISUNDERSTANDING

“Ashes” follows 35-year-old Chris as he accompanies his mother to scatter his recently deceased father’s ashes on a **lake**—the same lake where Chris camped with his father as a child. On the way there, Chris is annoyed by his mother’s attempts to sugarcoat and idealize both her marriage and Chris’s relationship with his father. In contrast to his mother, he reflects on times throughout his life when his parents failed to support or celebrate him for who he is. This difference in perception, the story suggests, is due to the fact that Chris and his parents have never been able to communicate with each other truthfully. This is why, for instance, Chris and his mother see the past so differently—and both of them remain stuck in their perceptions of the past, rather than actually trying to talk about and solve their problems. With this, “Ashes” shows that a lack of open, honest communication can create misunderstanding and resentment that erodes relationships over time.

Throughout Chris’s life, his family’s interactions have been defined by staying silent and holding back, even when they have important things to say. For instance, Chris (who’s gay) recalls that his parents never broached the question of Chris’s sexuality with him, even though they suspected he was gay since he was a young child. Instead, he could only understand that “there was something deeply dissatisfying about him, something that baffled his father and pinned a strained, mortified smile on his mother’s face.” He notes that “Neither of

monologue shifts—no longer does he think about his mother rambling on about untrue things. Instead, he agrees without scorn or sarcasm to do what he can to help his mother purchase tokens of thanks for her friends on their way back from scattering this father’s ashes, and he even tenderly brushes some ash off of her jacket without interrupting her chatter. With this, “Ashes” shows that it’s possible to improve difficult, unhealthy relationships if a person is willing to give others the benefit of the doubt, recognize one’s own responsibility for the poor relationship, and treat others with kindness and compassion.



## GRIEF AND MEMORY

As Chris drives his mother to a lake where they plan to scatter his later father, Alan’s, ashes, he endures her constant chatter about her marriage to Alan, as well as Alan and Chris’s relationship. The rosy way she portrays these memories, Chris thinks, is revisionist to the point of being offensive. He recognizes, though, that this is a product of his mother’s grief: in order to come to terms with her husband’s death, his mother is rewriting the story of their lives in a way that makes her feel better. As Chris comes to realize why his mother is doing this, he also recognizes that as annoying and untrue as his mother’s stories are, they may serve a purpose. Misremembering his father like this is comforting in the midst of grief—but the story also suggests that acknowledging the truth of their family history, as painful as that might be, may also be a way for Chris and his mother to move on from his father’s death.

At first, Chris is offended by his mother’s exaggerated (or downright untrue) stories about his father, as they gloss over the pain that Chris’s parents caused over the years. Chris is gay, but he never came out to his parents because they made him feel ashamed of his sexuality and lack of stereotypically masculine traits as a child. For instance, when 12-year-old Chris was uninterested in going fishing or having man-to-man conversations during a camping trip, his father said, “I don’t know what’s bloody wrong with you.” For Chris, then, his mother’s desire to gloss over this painful history is hurtful. She doesn’t seem to know the full extent of Chris’s father’s thinly-veiled homophobia—but whether intentional or not, the way she sugarcoats the past (talking about how much his father enjoyed the father-son fishing trips, for instance) makes Chris feel like she’s minimizing his difficult childhood. Chris’s anger shows that his mother is hurting him by reworking the family’s history in this way, whether she means to or not. Her inability or unwillingness to acknowledge the way she and her husband judged and mistreated Chris in the past alienates her son and strains their relationship even more.

However, Chris’s mother likely isn’t trying to be offensive through these retellings. Rather, reimagining the past is a way for her to grieve and reframe her memories of her husband to

make them more palatable. For instance, when Chris’s mother focuses on how much the fishing trips meant to Chris’s father, she can more easily gloss over the fact that she and her husband did real harm to their son by shaming him for who he is. This suggests that, on some level, Chris’s mother understands how difficult Chris’s childhood was and perhaps even regrets her own complicity in making it so difficult. Again, while this doesn’t excuse Chris’s parents’ thinly-veiled homophobia, it opens up the possibility that Chris’s mother wants to improve her relationship with him. Similarly, Chris’s mother has begun to talk very differently about her marriage since her husband’s death, versus how she spoke about it when he was still alive. Before Chris’s father died, his mother resented her husband and reacted dramatically every time he did something wrong. Their marriage, at least from Chris’s perspective, didn’t seem happy. But now, Chris’s mother talks about her late husband as being merely “bumbling” and full of good intentions. By reworking her relationship to her husband through these stories, Chris’s mother seems to be trying to cast their marriage in a better light. This, presumably, makes it easier for her to grieve when she can essentially focus on her husband’s positive aspects—invented though they may be—and feel more at peace with the past and with his death.

But “Ashes” suggests that these attempts to reframe history can only go so far. It’s important, the story suggests, that Chris and his mother also acknowledge the pain they experienced in the past. Chris’s tone undergoes a major shift when, to his surprise, his mother brings up the fact that his father disapproved of her smoking habit—to the point that she eventually quit to appease him. This seems to be the only entirely truthful thing she says about her deceased husband’s behavior over the course of the story. And at its heart, it’s an admission that she and her husband didn’t have a perfect relationship—just as Chris and his father’s relationship was similarly imperfect. Indeed, Chris privately acknowledges that his strained relationship with his father wasn’t one-sided—he could have been kinder to his father, as well. Even though Chris resents his parents for shaming him throughout his childhood, this nevertheless speaks to the idea that nobody in the family behaved perfectly. In this way, Chris’s mother’s rosy memories seem to open Chris up to acknowledging his father’s good-hearted efforts and his own flaws, just as Chris’s refusal to sugarcoat the past seems to subtly prompt his mother to remember the imperfect aspects of the past. Just after this, Chris’s mother shows emotion for the first time that day, openly weeping and repeating “Goodbye, Alan” as Chris scatters his father’s ashes on the lake. Honestly coming to terms with the past—which involves considering both the positive and the negative aspects of their lives—is what allows Chris’s mother to grieve in an authentic and cathartic way. Acknowledging past mistakes and lingering pain, then, is just as important in the grieving process as remembering the good times.

Grieving and remembering a deceased loved one, the story shows, doesn't just mean rewriting history or sticking only to unhappy, regretful memories. Rather, grief is complex—and, within the world of "Ashes," Chris and his mother handle it by calling on a combination of the two. The story ends with a rare moment of tenderness between Chris and his mother: he asks her if she's okay and tenderly brushes ash off of her lapel. The gesture is simple but nonetheless significant for the estranged mother and son. The story thus implies that by being understanding of how the other person is handling their grief, Chris and his mother will be able to cope with their loss and even improve their relationship going forward.



## SEXUALITY, GENDER, AND PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS

The central conflict of "Ashes" is that between Chris, a 35-year-old gay man, and his parents. His mother and his late father wanted their son to look, act, and live his life in a stereotypically masculine way. But throughout his childhood, they treated Chris as if something was wrong with him—he felt "an obscure sense that he'd failed some test," even though his parents never fully articulated their disapproval of his gender expression and sexuality. This feeling continues into adulthood, as Chris's mother regularly laments that Chris is unmarried and childless. The root of all of this, Chris reveals, is his parents' thinly-veiled disapproval: he's never felt comfortable expressing his sexuality and his true self around them. Thus, Chris struggles to reconcile what he somewhat secretly wants for his life with what his parents want for his life. And while navigating parental expectations is something that many people struggle with, the story implies that for LGBT or gender-nonconforming people like Chris, this process can be particularly difficult.

Chris's narration shows that although he's a 35-year-old adult in the story's present, this doesn't mean his mother treats him like an adult. Instead, Chris's mother constantly infantilizes him. She's begun inviting him for dinner more frequently—and after dinner, she insists that he stay the night in his childhood bedroom, using the same tone of voice that she used whenever he misbehaved as a child. Her behavior implies that she doesn't accept that her son is an independent adult with a life and a home of his own, which Chris finds stifling and insulting. Furthermore, as Chris drives his late father's **car** in the story's present, the cruise control beeps at him whenever he exceeds the posted speed limit, which startles him and makes him feel strangely guilty. Chris describes this as feeling like his father is nudging him in the ribs from beyond the grave. His father still seems to be urging compliance in his son, even after his death. Taken together, these instances make it clear that Chris is struggling to establish himself as an independent adult in his parents' eyes—and to a degree, in his own mind too.

As the story progresses, Chris reveals that one of the reasons

his parents behave the way they do is because, due in part to his sexuality, Chris isn't willing or able to fulfill his parents' expectations for his life. To Chris's mother, adulthood is tantamount to getting married and having children. She often talks to Chris about her friends' grandchildren, or their children's wedding plans. These comments are hints that she disapproves of Chris's lifestyle—she's subtly guilt-tripping him for not giving her grandchildren and blaming him for not stepping into the role of what she considers to be the proper adult. However, Chris's mother's fixation on grandchildren implies that, in her mind, a person must marry someone of the *opposite* sex and have biological children. From this, it's clear that the expectations parents place on their children can be especially difficult to navigate when those children have a sexual orientation or gender identity that doesn't line up with societal norms. Indeed, the story implies that this pressure to be heterosexual is even to blame for Chris's breakup with a man named Scott. Chris shares that he'd been "waiting for the right moment" to introduce Scott to his parents, suggesting that Chris isn't opposed on principle to finding a romantic partner and being open about that relationship with his parents. But he continually put off telling them—and his defensiveness in retrospect that "It wasn't as if he was ashamed of [Scott], God no" suggests that, on some level, Chris was ashamed to introduce Scott to his parents. Chris knew that his parents expected him to one day bring home a woman, and he likely feared that bringing a man home—even if a male partner didn't necessarily rule out marriage or children—would disappoint or upset them. And in this way, even well-intentioned expectations can put undue pressure on people (particularly those in the LGBT community)—which can, in turn, prevent them from being themselves and finding genuine happiness.

"Ashes" implies that for LGBT people, parental pressure to hit specific milestones in life is uniquely damaging, both to the person in question and to the parent-child relationship more broadly. For instance, the story never reveals whether Chris even *wants* to get married and start a family—in fact, readers never find out much about Chris's likes and dislikes, or what he wants out of his life more broadly. Put another way, Chris's parents' expectations for their son are so great that Chris never feels like he even has the option to be who he really is around them, which contributes to his anger at them and keeps them from connecting on a deeper level. With this, the story suggests that it's essential that parents take care when talking about their hopes for their children's future, especially if their child is LGBT. Framing one's hopes as expectations that must be met at any cost creates a heavy burden for a child to bear—and, as Chris's story demonstrates, this can be isolating and demeaning for the adult child in question.



## SYMBOLS

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



## ALAN'S CAR

The car that Chris and his mother drive out to the **lake** symbolizes Chris's late father, Alan. The car—which belonged to Chris's father—brings back difficult, painful memories for Chris, due to the fact that it smells so much like his father used to. Furthermore, the car's cruise-control sensor, which beeps loudly anytime Chris exceeds the speed limit, makes the connection between the car and his father far more difficult for Chris to bear. Each time the sensor goes off on their drive to the lake, it startles Chris—and, strangely, it makes him feel guilty. In this way, driving his father's car makes Chris feel like his overbearing father is still nudging him and trying to control his behavior, even from beyond the grave. Sometimes, Chris only jumps at the noise; other times, it makes him angry as it reminds him of all the ways that his father failed him in life.

Interestingly, the car and its sensor only seem to bother Chris on the drive to the lake to scatter his father's ashes. As he and his mother get back in the car to head home, Chris makes no mention of not looking forward to smelling his father's characteristic scent. He also doesn't acknowledge the possibility that in order to make it back to the gift shop his mother wants to visit before it closes, he might have to speed—thereby triggering the sensor. With this, the story suggests that the ritual of scattering his father's ashes has made his father's memory (and the accompanying grief and mixed emotions about the past) easier for Chris to face. Following the ritual, Chris is able to focus on his mother and on improving their relationship rather than on his father's mistakes. By the story's end, then, the car seems to have become just a car in Chris's mind—just as Chris's father will gradually become a memory that will perhaps become easier to live with over time.



## THE LAKE

At first, Chris believes the lake where he and his mother go to scatter his late father's ashes represents how dysfunctional his relationship with his father was. But eventually, it comes to symbolize a brighter future for Chris—one that isn't overshadowed by painful memories. When Chris was a child, his father took him on two fishing trips to the lake. Both trips were disasters, as Chris didn't enjoy camping or fishing. To make matters worse, Chris understood that his father intended the trips to be male bonding experiences—they were supposed to connect father and son

through the shared experience of doing stereotypically masculine outdoor activities and engaging in “blokey conversation.” Chris's father took his son's disinterest in these things to mean that Chris was perhaps gay (which turned out to be true) or shamefully feminine, which strained their relationship. Indeed, on the drive home from one of these trips, Chris's father even went so far as to mutter, “I don't know what's bloody wrong with you,” affirming for Chris that he failed some test of masculinity by not enjoying himself. Thus, Chris looks back at the trips and at the lake and thinks of them as proof that his father wanted him to be someone he wasn't. The lake is, in other words, the site of intense emotional trauma.

Since Chris's father's death, though, Chris's mother has embellished these camping trips to the lake and turned them into something entirely different. In her mind, Chris and his father went to the lake many times, and each trip was deeply meaningful for her husband especially. The lake, to her, symbolizes the close bond that she imagines her husband and son had. This is why she insists on scattering her husband's ashes at the lake—she wants his final resting place to be meaningful, and a place where he could connect with his son. Chris, however, tells the reader that his mother's idea of the lake's symbolism is “entirely invented”—and, in this sense, is even offensive to him. With this, “Ashes” suggests more broadly that a place's symbolism can differ wildly from person to person and can even change over time. Indeed, even Chris's understanding of the lake's symbolism begins to change as he scatters his father's ashes. As he sprinkles handfuls of ash into the water, he thinks that it wasn't just his father who messed up on those trips. Chris realizes that his father was genuinely trying to connect with him, and that he could've made more of an effort to respond in kind. In this sense, coming to the lake becomes a way for him to say goodbye not just to the troubled relationship he had his father, but also to the relationship he wishes they could've had.

After this, as the story draws to a close, the lake begins to symbolize new beginnings. Chris is far kinder in his thoughts and actions to his mother after they scatter his father's ashes, and the story implies that having completed this cathartic ritual, the two of them will be better able to work on their fraught relationship as well. Put another way, Chris begins to see that the lake doesn't have to represent his poor relationship with his father, or the relationship they never had. This place can also represent the beginning of a future in which Chris is able to move past his childhood trauma, and one in which he and his mother are able to honestly and respectfully engage with each other.




## QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribe edition of *Like a House on Fire* published in 2012.

## Ashes Quotes

☛ Since his father died, Chris keeps coming across small reminders everywhere, set like mousetraps ready to snap, like little buried landmines. Today, for instance, they're in his father's car, which his mother says she can't bear to sell. It smells so characteristically, still, of shoe polish and peppermints, and in the back seat lies the woollen tartan scarf his father had worn for years. Each detail had assailed Chris as he'd opened the door, reaching over to stow the box in its calico bag on the back seat.

**Related Characters:** Chris's Mother, Chris's Father/Alan, Chris

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 18-19

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Chris mentions seeing his late father, Alan's, neglected gardening tools in his mother's backyard, the narration explains that Chris keeps finding "small reminders" of his father everywhere he goes. This is something new that started when his father passed away, not long before the story begins.

It's important that the narration describes these reminders as being like "mousetraps" or "landmines," as this language gives the reminders a distinctly violent feel. Mousetraps and landmines are both deadly traps that catch people (or mice) by surprise. Describing Chris's memories in this way, then, implies that Chris usually tries to avoid thinking about his father—and when he does, it's accidental, and his reaction to the memories is jarring and emotionally painful. As the story progresses, readers find out why that is: Chris and his father had a difficult relationship, primarily because Alan disapproved of Chris being gay. In this way, Chris's grief for his father is complicated: it's something that he tries to avoid by repressing his painful memories rather than directly addressing and processing them.


By contrast, it seems likely that Chris's mother is purposefully keeping reminders like her late husband's garden tools around to help her deal with her own grief. For instance, she insists that she can't bear to sell Alan's car—probably because it smells so characteristically of her husband. For Chris, the smell of the car "assail[s]" him—again, the story uses violent language to emphasize how fraught and painful Chris's relationship with (and now memories of) his father was. For Chris's mother, though, the

familiar smell of Alan's car might soothe her or make her feel close to her late husband. The details about the car (the smell and Alan's scarf laid in the backseat) also suggest that Chris's father hasn't been gone very long—these memories, and the pain associated with them, are still fresh. This may partially explain why Chris is in a fragile emotional state. With time and distance, it's possible that Chris could arrive at a happier, more comfortable relationship with his father's memory.

☛ "Here, here," his mother had remonstrated. "At my feet." *Where else?* he'd thought sourly, finding the right key for the ignition, as the lifetime habit of keeping his responses to himself closed his mouth in a firm and well-worn line. A line that suggested nothing, broached nothing, gave nothing away.

**Related Characters:** Chris's Mother (speaker), Chris's Father/Alan, Chris

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 19

**Explanation and Analysis**

Rather than let Chris put the box containing his father's ashes in the backseat of the car, Chris's mother insists that he tuck them in at her feet on the passenger floor. To Chris, this fits in with what he knows of his parents' relationship. Oftentimes, one person bows or rests at another person's feet as a way of showing subservience or inferiority. Chris implies that this was his family's dynamic (both in life and in death), which would suggest that life revolved around Chris's mother, while Chris and his father could do nothing but go along with whatever she wanted. They were, in this sense, bowing at Chris's mother's feet all the time. Clearly, Chris still feels stifled and annoyed by his mother's need for control, and he may feel bad for his father as well.



However, because of his "lifetime habit of keeping his responses to himself," Chris chooses not to say anything. His family is in no way open or communicative and—and given that this is a "lifetime habit," they never have been. Chris's bad mood seems exacerbated by this silence, as there's no way for him to deal with his anger if he can't say anything. With this, the story begins to show how a lack of communication can create resentment that damages relationships over time. An unwillingness to talk through




problems also means that Chris is unwilling to see things from his parents' perspective, meaning that he'll remain stuck in his preconceptions without much chance of rewriting the narrative in his mind.

His father's car has some kind of cruise-control check that beeps at him every time he inadvertently goes above the set limit, and he keeps jumping when he hears it, feeling a ludicrous amount of guilt.

**Related Characters:** Chris's Father/Alan, Chris

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 22

### Explanation and Analysis


As Chris drives his mother to the lake where they'll scatter his late father's ashes, he jumps whenever the cruise-control sensor in his father's car alerts him that he's speeding. To Chris, the alert feels as though his father is literally prodding him and pushing him to behave from beyond the grave. This speaks to how controlling Chris's father was in life—and how this affected Chris. It seems as though Chris's father expected his son to be obedient and conform to whatever was expected of him. Given how guilty Chris feels when the speeding sensor goes off, it seems that Chris's father's preferred method of encouraging his son to toe the line was to make him feel guilty whenever Chris didn't measure up.

In a broader sense, this might explain why Chris is generally so private and shares so little about himself. The story later reveals that his parents made him feel guilty for being gay, so Chris turned to hiding that aspect of himself—and anything else about himself that his parents wouldn't like—to appease his them. Now, it's become a habit for Chris to hide things he doesn't think his parents would approve of, and to feel guilty if he happens to accidentally reveal something. Essentially, Chris has been guilted into silence—and now, he doesn't feel like he can make his own choices or even drive without his parents offering their disapproval.

“I told Shirley, that's where he'd rather be laid to rest, in the place where he shared such precious times with his son. He had lots of happy memories of all those fishing trips.”

*All those fishing trips.* They'd been twice. Once at the Easter break, and once for the first week of the September school holidays. After that his father had given up. Both trips are still etched vividly in Chris's mind, like so many of the powerless indignities of childhood.

**Related Characters:** Chris's Mother (speaker), Chris's Father/Alan, Chris

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 23

### Explanation and Analysis

As Chris drives in silence, his mother rambles about her decision to scatter her late husband's ashes at the lake. To hear Chris's mother tell it, her husband wants his final resting place to be somewhere meaningful, especially someplace that was important to both him and to Chris. The lake seems to fit the bill: taking father-son camping trips here apparently meant a great deal to Chris's father, and Chris's mother seems to believe that the memories of the fishing trips are happy ones for both her late husband and for her son.

Chris, though, sees those fishing trips very differently—they were just one of “the powerless indignities of childhood,” implying that his parents frequently made him do undesirable or embarrassing things when he was young. Chris also makes it clear to readers that there were only two trips, whereas his mother's reference to “all those fishing trips” makes it seem as though Chris and his father went often. Finally, Chris seems to think that the trips were failures that were miserable for both him and his father. This, he believes, is why his father ultimately gave up on the trips: they weren't able to bond as father and son, so his father eventually stopped trying. Chris's anger at the way his mother seems to be reframing these memories in a more favorable light suggests that he finds it offensive to sugarcoat the past and turn these trips into something they weren't. This implies that, in Chris's mind, the only way to deal with his grief and his complicated feelings about his father is to accept the truth.


However, it's worth noting that Chris's memories of the trips as horrible don't necessarily mean that the trips weren't meaningful for his father. The story is skewed

toward Chris's perspective, so readers have no way of knowing his father's true opinions. Later in the story, Chris recalls his father's good-natured attempts at conversation, which suggests that his father really did want to connect with Chris and genuinely enjoyed spending time with his son. This speaks to the idea that when people stay stubborn in their perspectives rather than openly communicating and trying to solve problems, it can erode relationships over time. In the case of Chris and his father, this rift in communication prevents them from ever knowing each other's true feelings, to the point that Chris only begins to see things from his father's perspective after he's gone.

●● His father's forced cheeriness slowly evaporating into his usual taciturnity as he got tired of trying. Chris coughing into the acrid smoke. Trying not to move too much in the stuffy sleeping bag at night. Then the packing of the car on the last day, the esky empty and leaking melted ice, and his obscure sense that he'd failed some test.

**Related Characters:** Chris's Father/Alan, Chris

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 24

### Explanation and Analysis



When Chris was a young boy, he and his father took a couple of fishing trips to the lake—the same one where he and his mother are now headed to scatter his late father's ashes. Here, Chris gives a brief rundown of how awful the trips were. Most of what he didn't like were the trappings of camping and fishing themselves: the uncomfortable sleeping bag, the campfire smoke, the shame of having to go home from a fishing trip with an empty cooler (the esky). But, notably, Chris makes no effort to separate his dislike of camping from his issues with his father. In his mind, being forced to camp was an extension of the way his father misunderstood and disapproved of him.

But because Chris focuses so much on hating camping, he seems to gloss over his own descriptions of his father making genuine overtures. Indeed, he admits outright that his father was trying to connect with him, even if his efforts were a bit forced. Furthermore, it's important that Chris's father felt like his only option was to stop trying: as Chris explains later, his father gave up on the trips in part because Chris never made an effort to respond to his father's

attempts at conversation. So, while Chris believes that the "test" he failed was a test of whether he was traditionally masculine enough to please his father, it may be that his father only wanted him to show a bit of effort in return. This again speaks to the breakdown of relationships that a lack of communication can cause: neither Chris nor his father seemed to have an understanding of what the other expected, and as a result, they were never close in the way that Chris's father seemed to want.

●● It was Scott who'd moved on, though. Chris had been going to introduce him to his parents, he just had to wait for the right moment, he'd told Scott in increasing tones of self-recrimination. It wasn't as if he was ashamed of him, God no. But he'd gone anyway.

**Related Characters:** Chris's Father/Alan, Chris's Mother, Scott, Chris

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 25

### Explanation and Analysis

Chris gives a brief explanation of how his relationship with a man named Scott ended: they broke up, at least in part, because Chris waited so long to introduce Scott to his parents. This tragic ending makes it clear that Chris's family's habit of staying silent about important things and never speaking candidly with one another can have disastrous consequences. Given how Chris characterizes his parents as disapproving (and, in his father's case, openly homophobic) throughout the story, readers can assume that the "right moment" to come out as gay to his parents and introduce them to Scott was probably never going to come. And in any case, it's impossible to make a person react well to news that they're not going to like. Chris was, in other words, fighting a losing battle from the start: he never learned how to stand up for himself and speak his mind, and there was nothing he could do except tell his parents the truth and hope for the best.



The aside that Chris wasn't ashamed of Scott is phrased in a way that suggests that, at least on some level, Chris was ashamed. This no doubt contributed to Scott's decision to leave, as Chris treating him like a shameful secret probably hurt him. Again, Chris's parents' habit of brushing difficult subjects under the rug, and of making Chris feel bad for who he is, had far-reaching consequences. Chris lost someone he truly loved—and to this day, he still feels

pressured to hide his identity as a gay man from his mother.

“You obviously... you’ve got to live the way you see fit.” He was whispering. Every word like a pulling stitch as he panted slightly, eyes shut tight against the possibility of looking his son in the eye. “But there’s no need to... well...throw it in her face. It would kill her.”

Spending his last hours worrying about her. It had killed him, not her. He’d taken that tiny admission, heavy and impervious as a lead sinker, and clung on to its icy weight all the way down to the depths.

**Related Characters:** Chris’s Father/Alan (speaker), Chris’s Mother, Chris

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 26

### Explanation and Analysis

Chris recalls his father, Alan’s, last words to him when Alan was in the hospital after a surgery: his father insisted that Chris’s mother would die if Chris were open about his sexuality as a gay man. Now, after Alan’s death, Chris recognizes that his father’s words weren’t actually about his mother at all—rather, they only revealed his father’s homophobia.

This revelation may explain why Chris never felt comfortable coming out to his parents or introducing his now-ex-boyfriend Scott to them. His father clearly doesn’t approve of his son’s sexuality, even if he allows that Chris has “to live the way [he] see[s] fit.” But his words, at their core, insist that Chris shouldn’t be *openly* gay—at least, not around his mother. Readers can infer, then, that Chris’s father wouldn’t have reacted well if Chris had brought Scott home. In his father’s view, Chris being open about the fact that he was in a relationship with a man may have constituted “throw[ing]” his sexuality in his parents’ faces. This speaks to how deeply Chris’s parents’ expectations for their son have hurt him: in pressuring him to be outwardly heterosexual and stereotypically masculine (both subtly during his childhood and overtly in this passage), they’ve actually prevented Chris from being himself and finding happiness in adulthood.


As much as this passage speaks to Chris’s father’s homophobia, though, it says comparatively little about what Chris’s mother might have to say on the matter. Chris realizes this; his father, after all, held onto his admission that

he didn’t approve of his son’s sexuality and took that to the grave, which would imply that he never told his wife that Chris is gay. The story is also unclear as to how much, if anything, Chris’s mother knows or suspects about Chris’s sexual orientation. This means that it’s possible Chris’s mother would be accepting if Chris chose to trust her and come out to her—after all, there’s little in the story to suggest that she’s as homophobic as her husband was. This is yet another example of how a lack of communication can erode relationships: rather than speaking candidly with his mother and allowing her to form her own opinions about his sexuality, Chris takes his father at his word and stays quiet. As a result, Chris’s relationship with his mother is now just as strained and impersonal as his relationship with his father was.

It’s nauseating, this revisionism; it infuriates him. This, he thinks savagely, this is the best she can summon: the two of them travelling alone to enact a ceremony in the presence of no lifelong friends, no neighbours who care enough, no extended family, in a place whose symbolism is wholly an invention. *This is the reality*, he imagines saying to her, *just you and me, your 35-year-old son who you cast as the perennial bachelor, this pitiful pilgrimage I can’t wait to be finished with.*

**Related Characters:** Chris’s Father/Alan, Chris’s Mother, Chris

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 27

### Explanation and Analysis

After listening to his mother talk about how meaningful Chris and his father, Alan’s, trips to the lake were to Alan, Chris is seething. To him, his mother’s conviction that the fishing trips were meaningful only drives home that she doesn’t understand him or care about how his troubled relationship with his father affected him. Instead, she’s trying to “summon” something that makes her feel better about the past. Indeed, Chris seems to believe that he and his mother are going to scatter his father’s ashes without anyone else there to support them because his mother doesn’t want to have to acknowledge Chris’s truth (that the lake is a site of childhood trauma) in front of anyone else. In Chris’s mind, his mother invented the lake’s symbolism—to him, the lake isn’t a place where he and his father made



pleasant memories. Rather, it's where his father made him feel small and inadequate.

In the present, Chris still feels small and inadequate. He doesn't feel comfortable voicing his concerns and telling his mother how he feels. And while this tendency to keep his emotions bottled up may help Chris avoid conflict in the short term, it also hurts him (and his relationship with his mother) in the long term. For instance, Chris is tired of his mother casting him as a "perennial bachelor"—that is, he resents the way his mother misunderstands and disapproves of his single status. In reality, Chris hasn't married a woman and had children because he's gay—but the decades-long lack of communication between him and his mother prevents him from sharing this important aspect of his identity.

This is part of why this trip to scatter his father's ashes feels like a "pitiful pilgrimage": to Chris, it seems clear that his mother is trying to hide or ignore uncomfortable truths, as well as to reframe the past in a way that's more palatable to her. However, this ignores the possibility that Chris's mother may honestly see the lake as a meaningful place and may not understand Chris's perspective. Again, the secrecy and lack of communication between Chris and his mother prevents either of them from seeing where the other is coming from.

●● Soon she won't camouflage her disappointment so well, and then she'll raise the stakes. "I don't understand why you can't just *stay*," she'll say petulantly. "I know you'll think I'm stupid but I feel nervous here alone in the house at night." She will pause, he is certain, and then add, "And it's not as if you've got a wife and children at home waiting, is it?"

**Related Characters:** Chris's Mother (speaker), Chris

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 28

### Explanation and Analysis

As Chris thinks about his mother's new habit of asking him to come over for dinner and then insisting that he stay the night, he imagines about where her badgering is going to lead. He believes that, eventually, his mother will resort to insulting him for being single in a bid to convince him to stay.


Chris's imaginings may contain kernels of truth: his mother has exhibited selfish behavior throughout the story, so it's possible that she may eventually try to manipulate Chris

into spending time with her. From Chris's perspective, his mother doesn't believe that adulthood is meaningful if a person is unmarried and childless, which leaves no room for the fact that Chris has a home, a job, and a life separate from his mother. This attitude infantilizes Chris, even though he's 35 years old, which makes him feel resentful and stifled. This speaks to the pitfalls of parents placing strict expectations on their adult children, as pressuring them to reach specific life milestones may push them away and make their lives more difficult.

However, it's important that this conversation only takes place in Chris's mind. Readers have no way of knowing whether Chris's mother has actually said things like this to him in the past, or if she will in the future. This opens up the possibility that Chris isn't giving his mother as much credit as she perhaps deserves. It's possible that if Chris were willing to assert himself and make it clear that he has a life outside of his relationship with his mother, she'd accept that, even if that life didn't include a spouse and children. But because the lines of communication between mother and son are so closed off, Chris doesn't seem willing to consider this—and, as a result, their relationship continues to suffer.

●● Chris imagines her looking in the mirror that morning, trying the scarf on, lifting her chin in that way she has, every small decision an aching effort. He wishes he'd told her she looked nice, when he'd arrived at her door. Her expression as she faces the camera, obedient and tremulous and trying not to blink, makes his throat feel tight; there is a stinging behind his eyes.

**Related Characters:** Chris's Father/Alan, Chris's Mother, Chris

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 31

### Explanation and Analysis

As Chris and his mother prepare to scatter Chris's late father, Alan's, ashes on the lake, Chris gets out his camera and stands back to take a picture of his mother holding the box that contains the ashes. Seeing her holding the box fills Chris with regret, presumably for how he's thought about her over the course of their drive to the lake. He seems to finally realize just how crushing his mother's grief is—he acknowledges, for instance, that every decision she made earlier that morning as she got dressed would've been an


“aching effort.” And now, Chris wishes he’d done the bare minimum to alleviate some of her pain and suffering by telling her she looked nice today.

With this, Chris starts to realize that taking the first steps to repair a dysfunctional and uncommunicative relationship isn’t all that difficult. It’s possible to start out with something very small, like a compliment; by extending kindness in this simple way, Chris could’ve begun the process of healing his relationship with his mother. His crushing regret as he looks at her through the viewfinder suggests that, at the very least, Chris is experiencing enough regret to take these small steps in the future.

●● “You,” is all she says.

No possibility that Chris might be permitted to feel the same violent shirking resistance, no likelihood that he will just be able to stand upend the box and shake the contents into the water without touching them. No. Now that push has come to shove, it’s going to be him.

**Related Characters:** Chris’s Mother (speaker), Chris’s Father/Alan, Chris

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 31

### Explanation and Analysis

When Chris finally opens up the tub containing his father’s ashes, his mother seems to experience a moment of panic. She refuses to look at the ashes and then insists that Chris scatter them.



Even though Chris is starting to think more generously of his mother, her reaction here suggests that he still has a long way to go. As he sees it, this is proof that his mother wants everything done to her liking, no matter what anyone else’s thoughts on the matter are. Indeed, she doesn’t acknowledge that Chris might feel just as averse to touching the ashes as she does. Thus, this moment encapsulates Chris’s fraught relationship with his mother: he believes that she has all the power to dictate how things happen, while he’s powerless to push back and insist that they do things differently. However, Chris also doesn’t know for sure how his mother would react if he *did* speak his mind. It’s possible that she would sympathize with Chris and hear him out—but because neither of them feels comfortable openly communicating with the other, their relationship stays mired in silent resentment.


This is also perhaps why Chris doesn’t feel like he can just upend the tub of ashes into the lake, as he probably believes that his mother would react poorly if he did. And while the story never explores what would happen if Chris were to refuse to scatter the ashes, the fact remains that he doesn’t feel like he has the power to do that. Even though he’s a 35-year-old, his mother’s judgmental nature and staunch expectations for Chris continue to make him feel like a small child.

●● His father had trodden the coals down, crushing them neatly, scattered some soil over the top just like Chris is scattering the contents of the box now over the water. Small handfuls. That smell of wet ash, and the cicadas beating like the ticking of a clock, and his father giving the site one last glance around and saying, “Great spot anyway, don’t you reckon, Chris?”

Why hadn’t he answered with enthusiastic assent? What would it have cost him to give his father that, instead of a shrug, just for the small mean pleasure of feeling his father turn away, defeated?

**Related Characters:** Chris’s Father/Alan, Chris

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 32

### Explanation and Analysis



As Chris scatters his father’s ashes on the lake, his experiences in the present blend with his memories of camping along this lake with his father as a child. This melding of past and present suggests that the lake is more than just a place where Chris was unhappy as a child—indeed, the memories that Chris dredges up are, on the whole, neutral if not positive. The smell of the wet ash and the cicadas’ song doesn’t make Chris angry or upset, and he also doesn’t mention the feelings of inadequacy and failure that he did earlier in the story.


Instead, what upsets Chris is remembering his own reaction to his father’s kind overture. Rather than reciprocate his father’s attempt at conversation, Chris chose to brush his father off, just so he’d feel like he won something. While this might not be surprising, given how inadequate Chris’s father made Chris feel throughout Chris’s childhood, it nevertheless fills Chris with regret now that he’s an adult.

With this, the story makes it clear that a place's symbolism can change over time. While the lake once only symbolized Chris's failed relationship and painful memories with his father, Chris now sees that the lake is more than that. Instead, it's come to represent his ability to reevaluate what happened in the past and consider his own role in some of the poor outcomes. This, the story implies, is a crucial part of the grieving process: only by evaluating the past honestly can a person truly come to terms with their grief and with complicated memories.

☛ Chris thinks they can probably get back there by 4.30. As he nods and agrees what a nice gesture it would be, he sees a small smear of ash on the lapel of her jacket, and absently, tenderly, without interrupting her, he brushes it off.

**Related Characters:** Chris's Father/Alan, Chris's Mother, Chris

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 33

### Explanation and Analysis

After Chris and his mother finish scattering his late father's

ashes, Chris's mother wants to get back to a gift shop so that she can buy gifts for her book club friends, which Chris openly supports. This is a major change in tone for Chris: early in the story, he referred to the "Book Club Women" as existing in "formidable capitals," suggesting that he found them imposing and difficult to deal with. But now, he seems to recognize that although he may find the Book Club Women's penchant for gossip off-putting, they're still his mother's friends—and they've supported her through her grief in their own way. Essentially, Chris seems to accept that while his mother's behavior and choice of friends might not make sense to him, this doesn't mean that he shouldn't support her in any way he can.

Furthermore, the way Chris gently brushes the ash off of his mother's lapel drives home how much he's changed throughout the course of the story. He now seems to recognize why his mother brought him to the lake and tried to sugarcoat their memories of his father: for her, this was simply a way of making the past easier to cope with. Although the gesture of brushing off her jacket here is simple, it's nevertheless meaningful for a mother and son who have long had trouble openly communicating and showing each other affection. This subtle change in their dynamic perhaps suggests that, in recognizing each other's grief and extending empathy in whatever ways they can, Chris and his mother may be able to repair their fraught relationship.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

## ASHES

Chris feels his goodwill dissipating by the time he and his mother stop at a café for morning tea. It's draining to be in her presence, and that hasn't changed just because he vowed to be attentive and kind. He knows he'll feel guilty later, but as he sits and listens to his mother complain about the fake whipped cream on her scones, he can feel his patience evaporating. It's only 10:30 in the morning. Chris tells himself that he just has to stay on the right side of surliness—and even his mother should forgive him any bad behavior today, given the occasion.

Chris watches his mother make sure the waitress is looking as she scrapes the whipped cream off her scone. She dressed up and did her hair today; even though Chris told her to wear sensible shoes, she chose a pair of black heels. They'll have to do some walking, but trying to tell her that didn't go well. But now, his mother will be able stop on the walk to grimace—and later, she can talk about her blisters with the women at her book club.

*From the start, "Ashes" makes it clear that Chris and his mother have, at best, a strained relationship. Chris seems to struggle to be the kind of son his mother wants (namely, one who's attentive and willing to listen). But this is, perhaps, not surprising—his mother seems to want things to be perfect all the time, as evidenced by her vocal displeasure about the whipped cream on her scone. This begins to imply that Chris's mother is perhaps judgmental of him, just as she's critical of more trivial things in her life, which would explain why he feels the need to alter his behavior to appease her. Meanwhile, Chris's belief that his mother should forgive him for acting out today, because of the occasion, suggests that Chris and may be spending time with his mother not because he genuinely wants to. Rather, whatever special occasion he's referring to may have made this meeting obligatory.*



*This passage hints at a rift in communication between Chris and his mother. His mother seemingly expects others to listen to her, as she wants the waitress to overhear (and care) about her complaints. Yet she doesn't seem very good at listening herself—for instance, she ignored Chris's advice about what kind of shoes would be best suited for whatever they're doing today. Chris suspects that there's a reason for this: he implies that his mother actually enjoys complaining, as it gives her something to discuss with her friends. But this tendency has seemingly damaged her relationship with Chris, as he finds it frustrating to spend time with her and endure her constant negativity.*



Chris thinks of the “Book Club Women” in “formidable capitals.” The Book Club Women always sit around in modern living rooms, criticizing books. Chris’s mother keeps photos of the women’s grandchildren on her fridge, specifically to torment him every time he walks past.

*The way Chris thinks of the “Book Club Women” in “formidable capitals” suggests that they’re an intimidating presence in his life. This is perhaps because his mother and her friends share intimate details about their children and grandchildren with one another, and Chris doesn’t want to be gossiped about. It may or may not be true that Chris’s mother displays photos of her friends’ grandchildren just to torment him—this is Chris’s subjective perception of the situation, after all. But if this is the case, it would suggest that Chris’s mother wants to guilt him about not having children, which would explain why she doesn’t have photos of her own grandchildren on the fridge. This dynamic provides further insight into Chris and his mother’s relationship: although they don’t seem to communicate well, Chris is still well aware of his mother’s disapproval.*



Sometimes, Chris’s mother tells him news about people he doesn’t know—for instance, she shares that her friend Sandra’s grandson, “little Justin,” recently started his swimming lessons. While Chris is trying to remember who Sandra is, his mother continues onto another tangent about Caroline’s wedding. Caroline apparently wants Pam—her mother and a Book Club Woman—to go up to Brisbane to help with the wedding. But Chris’s mother thinks that Caroline will have to shape up and stop asking her mother for help once she gets married. Then, Chris’s mother pauses and reminds him (as she does every time Caroline is mentioned) that when Caroline was a teenager, the family had to get counseling for her.

*Mentioning “little Justin” may be a way for Chris’s mother to needle him about presumably not having children. Given that the story doesn’t mention Chris’s mother having photos of or stories about her own grandchildren, it seems that she’s only able to be a grandparent vicariously, through women like Sandra. Talking about her friends’ grandchildren, then, could be her way of making sure that Chris knows exactly how annoyed she is by this state of affairs. The way Chris’s mother eagerly brings up Caroline, meanwhile, indicates that she probably takes a perverse kind of delight in the failures of her friends’ children. She isn’t sympathetic to the fact that Caroline probably went to therapy because she had mental health issues or another form of personal hardship—instead, she seems to be using Caroline’s slip-up as a way of feeling superior about her own parenting.*



Chris always nods dutifully and follows his mother’s gaze out the back door. The garden is covered in leaves and now, his mother is considering hiring a gardener to deal with the mess. Chris’s father’s yard tools are propped up behind the locked garden shed.

*The way Chris nods without saying anything when his mother brings up people he doesn’t know implies that he thinks it’s futile to voice his opinion. This again hints at a rift in communication between mother and son, as Chris likely stays silent because he believes his mother will shame him for saying what he thinks (perhaps because she’s done so in the past). Meanwhile, the fact that the garden is covered with leaves, coupled with Chris’s father’s neglected yard tools, hint that his father is no longer in the picture. The garden has fallen into a state of neglect, and the way his mother’s gaze lingers on the leaves outside is a subtle indication that she misses his presence in her life.*





Since his father's death, Chris feels like he continually comes across reminders of the man. They seem like mousetraps ready to snap, or like landmines. Today, for example, he and his mother are driving his father's **car**—his mother insists she can't bear to sell it. It smells so much like shoe polish and peppermint, and Chris's father's tartan scarf is still in the backseat. Every smell and detail assaulted Chris earlier, as he tucked a box in its cotton bag onto the backseat.

*This passage confirms what the previous one hinted at: Chris's father has passed away. When Chris describes reminders of his father as mousetraps or as landmines, it suggests that his memories and his grief are difficult for him to process. They surprise him in a violent way—which perhaps suggests that most of the time, Chris tries to ignore his grief and suppress his emotions. The unpleasant nature of these comparisons with vermin and war could also imply that Chris and his father didn't have a particularly close or healthy relationship, which is why Chris's memories of his father are so painful and jarring now. This passage also introduces Chris's late father's car as a symbol of the influence that his father still has in his life, regardless of Chris's efforts to forget the past. Given that Chris's mother can't bear to sell the car, she may be trying to hold onto these reminders in any way possible. She and Chris, then, seem to have opposite ways of dealing with grief: his mother wants to cling onto happy memories, whereas Chris wants to avoid the pain that remembering the past stirs up.*



Chris's mother had told Chris to put the box at her feet instead. Sourly, Chris thought "Where else?" But he found the **car** key and, as he's done his whole life, kept his response to himself. His mouth formed a "well-worn line" that gave nothing away.

*When Chris isn't surprised that his mother wants the box (which presumably contains his father's ashes) at her feet, it suggests this is a natural extension of their marriage in life. This would indicate that Chris's mother ran the show, while his father bowed to her every demand, a parallel to the way his ashes now rest at her feet. Chris's silence, and the way he puts his mouth in the "well-worn line," therefore suggest that Chris watched this dynamic without ever commenting or speaking up for himself or his father. Staying quiet and keeping his opinions to himself seems to be a "well-worn" habit that Chris has adopted over time as a way of navigating his stunted relationship with his parents.*



As Chris and his mother walk to the **car** from the café, she gripes that the scones cost too much. Chris knows that the Book Club Women will hear about this indignity. When he reaches the car, he fumbles with the keys while he waits for his mother. He finds the key for the trunk so they can take the bag out. When they'd arrived at the café, Chris's mother insisted that they park the car where they could see it, in case someone tried to steal something. She said that it's bad enough leaving "him" in the trunk without risking the possibility that someone would steal "him." But when Chris suggested they take the bag into the café, Chris's mother refused.

*Again, Chris's mother seems to take pleasure in holding a grudge about the ways people have wronged her, even over something as trivial as the scones in the café. This further implies that Chris's mother probably applies this same critical outlook to most things in her life. Her behavior in this regard has seemingly had a negative effect on her relationship with her son, as he doesn't feel comfortable speaking openly around her. This passage also confirms that the box in the car does indeed contain Chris's father's ashes. This is why Chris's mother is so scandalized about leaving "him" (her husband) in the car. However, she's also concerned about appearances, as evidenced by her refusal to bring the box into the café for fear of being embarrassed. This, again, hints at why her relationship with Chris is so strained: she's a highly critical person, and one who is perhaps more concerned with what others think of her and her family than with actually nurturing her relationships.*



Chris has noticed that his mother can barely bring herself to touch the box—it seems to possess some supernatural power. When they'd gotten it from the crematorium, she'd stood silently; it fell to Chris to pick up the box, sign for it, and ask for a bag to put it in. Only after they got outside did his mother explode about how disrespectful it is to not provide families with urns or something more appropriate than a box. Though Chris expected his mother to cry, she didn't. Instead, when they got home, she'd unlocked her antique cabinet and stood aside so he could put the box there alongside the gold-leaf tableware. In that moment, Chris longed to be with Scott so much that it hurt.

Even now, three years later, it still hits Chris in unexpected moments; sometimes he misses Scott with such an intensity that it aches. Scott would've known just what to do: pour Chris a whisky and drink together until the bottle was empty. If Scott had been there, Chris wouldn't have felt so useless and embarrassed about how he and his mother communicated like strangers. It felt like they were observing some other person's ritual. Scott, though, would've known how to make this feel more like a ceremony.

Chris stands by the **car** with the cotton bag, waiting for his mother as she browses a craft shop's outdoor display. There's a rustic wheelbarrow filled with miniature bears, sachets, and fabric bits. His mother has a wardrobe full of unfinished craft projects already—though, thankfully, Chris thinks that she's finally stopped knitting baby clothes. His mother, absorbed in her shopping, examines a bag of bath salts.

*Grief is a complex emotion that can be expressed in any number of ways, so it's possible to read Chris's mother's behavior as an expression of intense grief. It may be legitimately hard for her to wrap her head around the fact that her husband—once a living, breathing person she shared her life with—is now reduced to something as small as a box that she can hold in her hands. Chris, however, is seemingly unwilling to give his mother any grace in this regard. Instead, he resents that she forces him to take on the responsibility of handling the box and filling out the paperwork. And indeed, Chris's mother doesn't seem to consider that her son might harbor similar objections about handling his father's remains; she expects him to be stoic and responsible in this situation, regardless of his feelings. Because of her selfishness, Chris has had to turn elsewhere for support—presumably, to Scott (though it's not yet clear what his relationship with Scott is or was).*



*Here, Chris implies that he and Scott were in a romantic relationship but have since broken up. By comparing how he engaged with Scott versus how he engages with his mother, Chris makes it clear that he and his mother aren't on good terms and don't communicate well. The only way Chris feels appreciated and seen is to talk to people outside the family. Given how much he still misses Scott, this implies that Chris might not have anyone to talk to at this point—which could hint that his communication issues with his parents have bled into other realms of his life, making it difficult for him to sustain other close relationships.*



*Although Chris and his mother are clearly feeling the loss of his father, his mother seemingly wants the lighthearted distraction of browsing at a craft shop. Rather than dwelling on pain and negativity, her way of grieving involves making the day as enjoyable as possible—a stark contrast to Chris's desire to drink a bottle of whiskey and mourn his father in a more morose and ceremonial way. The aside that Chris is glad his mother has stopped knitting baby clothes implies that she was knitting these clothes for the children she hoped Chris would have, and that she's since given up on the project. With this, readers can infer that his mother has specific expectations for her son: namely, she wants him to father children. Chris's relief that she's stopped knitting implies that he might not want to have children—or, at the very least, that he doesn't appreciate his mother's pressure to do so.*



Chris's father used to joke that Chris's mother could shop in a service station. He spent his life waiting outside shops for her, just like Chris is now. Chris knows that his mother will want something to commemorate the trip—it'll be a souvenir she can put on a shelf and "refer to bravely." She finally gets back in the car with a paper bag and murmurs that she bought a silver picture frame that was on sale. She notes that there were others; maybe she should've picked one up for Pam. Chris's mother sighs and seems comforted by the frame; it seems to distract her from the slight of the fake whipped cream.

*Here, the narration reinforces the fact that the people in Chris's mother's life tiptoe around her and are perhaps even afraid to raise their concerns or object to her. This further characterizes Chris and his parents as people who are fundamentally uncommunicative, at least with one another; they allow their resentment to build rather than openly discussing annoyances or deeper problems. Importantly, though, Chris seems to judge his mother much in the same way that he thinks she judges him. Without knowing what she's actually thinking, Chris assumes that she's buying a souvenir merely so that she'll be able to "refer to [it] bravely" and make people feel sorry for her. In this way, Chris and his mother's poor communication seems to be a two-way street: he has preconceptions of her, just as she has preconceptions of him. Readers, however, can see that Chris's judgement of his mother may be misguided: after all, shopping seems to be a relatively harmless and even therapeutic activity for her, particular now that she's trying to cope with the loss of her husband. Buying the picture frame may be a way for her to gain a small amount control over her life, or a way to reframe events (both literally in the form of a photograph, and figuratively within her memory) so that they're easier to deal with.*



As they drive, Chris keeps an eye out for the turnoff. He thinks he'll remember it when he sees it, but he hasn't been out here in 25 years. After the turnoff, it's another 20 kilometers to get to the **lake**. He remembers there being a jetty past the campsites. It'll be a good place to "stand and do it," rather than on the muddy bank. Chris even charged the digital camera for the occasion.

*Chris's thinks he may still remember the route to the lake even after 25 years, which suggests that this place holds deep significance for him—perhaps, like his father's car, it's symbolic of his and his father's relationship. The reference to Chris and his mother going to "stand and do it" on the jetty suggests that they're taking this trip to scatter Chris's father's ashes, an event that Chris wants to commemorate—hence why he charged the digital camera.*



Chris's father's **car** has a cruise-control check that beeps at him whenever he exceeds the posted speed limit, startling him and making him feel guilty. Meanwhile, the heat in the car makes the lingering scent of his father even stronger. Chris tries to remember when he was last close enough to his father to smell him—it wouldn't have been at the hospital, which smelled only of drugs and cleaning agents. Chris shoves a CD in the car's player, and another "memory-bomb" goes off in his head. The CD is the Three Tenors; he bought it for his parents two Christmases ago. That moment would've been the last time Chris smelled his father, when they exchanged their usual quick hug and slap on the back.

*The car's cruise-control check has a peculiar effect on Chris, as it goes beyond just startling him—strangely, it makes him feel guilty. Given that the car represents the memory of Chris's father more broadly, his reaction to the cruise-control check perhaps suggests that Chris feels like his father still has a level of control over him and is urging him to be compliant, even from beyond the grave. This is why Chris feels guilty when it beeps at him—the car, a stand-in for his father, is telling him when he does something wrong. This all becomes harder to bear given how much the car smells like his father, reinforcing its role as a symbol for their relationship. Chris's realization that it's been two years since he was close enough to his father to smell him, coupled with the memory of their awkward and hasty show of affection, indicate that they weren't very close. Yet, even if Chris and his father didn't have a great relationship, the memory is still painful for Chris to think about. This is why he describes the memory of their last Christmas together as a "memory-bomb": this language has connotations with violence and war, hearkening back to the story's earlier comparison of Chris's memories of his father to "land mines."*



Chris feels a headache starting: he knows what's coming. His mother wants to talk, and he'll have to pay attention to steer her away from "dangerous territory." Chris's mother says that people told her the service was wonderful. Graham and Laura asked Chris's mother about a memorial plaque for Chris's father at the crematorium gardens, so she went with Neil and Shirley to check it out. Elaine went that route for John, but according to Laura, it costs thousands of dollars—and the ashes aren't even buried, just scattered in garden beds.

*The "dangerous territory" Chris wants to avoid in a conversation with his mother likely refers to topics that will make him feel ashamed or uncomfortable (like his perceived failure to provide her with grandchildren). In this way, he'd rather they avoid difficult subjects than discuss them openly, which further speaks to the gulf between them as they struggle to communicate and understand each other. Chris also feels a headache coming on, which further indicates that spending time with his mother is stressful rather than enjoyable—especially when compounded by grief. Meanwhile, the people Chris's mother mentions are likely her friends. But the story's narration doesn't give any details about them, which is perhaps a hint to readers that these are shallow acquaintances rather than deep, meaningful friendships. This again implies that Chris's mother is chiefly concerned with keeping up appearances in her social sphere (which, readers know, is largely built on sharing gossip and trivial complaints). This, too, is perhaps why Chris feels so uncomfortable speaking openly with his mother: he's afraid of disappointing her and of being judged and gossiped about in the same way his mother talks about other people. And again, rather than showing her emotions and openly grieving, Chris's mother would rather stick to lighter topics like the crematorium garden plot.*



Chris waits for his mother to bring up the **lake** next. He knows his mother is grieving and needs someone to listen to her, but he can't help his "roiling, sneering intolerance." Chris clenches his jaw as his mother says that she told her friends they'd just go to the lake. It's better to do something meaningful for her and for Chris, and Alan (Chris's father) would've wanted this.

After a pause, Chris's mother says what Chris expected her to say: that the trips to the **lake** that Chris and his father took were very special to his father. Chris grunts; if he answers with words, he might get a detail wrong. His mother told Shirley that Alan would rather be laid to rest in a place where he shared "precious times with his son." He had many happy memories of "all those fishing trips." But Chris remembers that he and his father only went twice—after that, his father gave up.

The fishing trips are etched in Chris's mind alongside the other "powerless indignities of childhood." His father always tried to have "blokey conversation" with him—but his attempts sputtered out like a boat's engine, and he eventually stopped. Chris always felt sick at the smell of the fishing boat's gasoline, and his father could barely conceal his disgust when Chris asked to bring a book out on the boat the next day. At night, they'd sit by the tent with nothing to say. Chris's father's forced good humor would evaporate slowly as Chris coughed in the campfire smoke. At night, Chris tried not to move too much in his sleeping bag. When they finally packed the car to return home, the cooler was still empty and leaking ice, and Chris felt like he'd somehow failed a test.

*Chris's reaction makes it clear that he's heard this line about the lake multiple times, and he doesn't find it particularly useful—or even true. However, Chris acknowledges his own "sneering intolerance" when he listens to his mother talk about how meaningful the lake is. This signals to readers that although Chris's mother may be embellishing about how important the lake was to Chris and his father, it's just as likely that it was important to them, and that Chris is just reluctant to admit it and cede any ground to his mother. Given how reluctant Chris is to express himself around his mother, it seems likely that his parents may be just as closed-off around him. He might not understand just how important the lake was to either of his parents, which speaks to how a lack of communication can create misunderstanding and subsequent strain on relationships.*



*Chris feels like he has to respond to his mother with grunts rather than words, which again shows the extent to which a lack of clear communication has damaged their relationship. He seems to fear that if he says what he really thinks about the fishing trips, his mother will reprimand or harshly correct him. Chris doesn't seem to believe that going to the lake meant anything to his father—but since the story is skewed to focus on his perspective, it's entirely possible that these trips were "precious time" to his father. In this way, much like Chris's difficulties with his mother are two-sided, he and his father may have both played a role in their strained relationship. Chris, however, makes it clear that his mother is exaggerating the details and won't accept any corrections; this is why he only grunts for fear of getting some part of the story wrong. For his mother, rewriting the story to turn two fishing trips into "all those fishing trips" could be a way of grieving—it may serve as a way for her to rewrite the past in a way that makes it easier to accept and move past.*



*Regardless of how Chris's mother feels about the father-son fishing trips, these experiences weren't fun for Chris—indeed, they made him feel powerless and as though he had to submit to whatever "indignities" his father wanted. It seems like Chris's father was very interested in cultivating his son's interest in traditionally masculine pursuits, hence the camping trips themselves and the man-to-man conversation attempts in the boat. But Chris wasn't able to be masculine in a way that pleased his father—instead, he found the whole thing uncomfortable and boring. Ultimately, then, the trips had the opposite effect that Chris's father wanted them to have, driving them further apart rather than closer together.*



On the drive home after the second trip, Chris's father had muttered, "I don't know what's bloody wrong with you." Chris had wanted to say something that would save his pride, but his mouth felt dry. He'd only been 11 or 12, and he was vaguely aware that something about him was dissatisfying. Whatever it was baffled his father and made his mother act embarrassed whenever they had guests over. Neither of his parents could name what it was, but Chris would sometimes look up and catch something like fear in their expressions.

It wasn't until Chris was in college that he figured out what was "wrong" with him. The realization was comically cliché: when he'd told Scott about the fishing trips once, he'd expected commiseration. But instead, Scott collapsed with laughter. Chris insisted that it wasn't funny, since the trips were excruciating and felt like punishment. But Scott told Chris to lighten up—he's not the first gay man with parents who didn't understand him. Bitterly, Chris told Scott not to say that it's "all part of the journey," but Scott didn't take the bait, instead gently saying that it is part of the journey. It's not worth it to blame his parents—instead, Chris should move on.

But instead, Scott moved on. Chris had been on the cusp of introducing Scott to his parents and was just waiting for the right moment, which he'd told Scott in increasingly self-accusing tones—he wasn't ashamed of Scott, of course. But Scott had left anyway.

*Here, the story heavily implies that the reason why Chris's father was so upset about the fishing trip (and why his parents felt embarrassed of him) was that they noticed his lack of stereotypically masculine traits and perhaps even suspected that he was gay. His sexual orientation and gender expression are likely what his parents found "dissatisfying" about him—his father even went so far as to imply that something was "wrong" with Chris. Together, all of this explains why Chris is so withdrawn around his mother, and why there's so much lingering pain around the memory of his father. His parents treated him as though he was an embarrassment; it makes sense, then, that Chris has never felt comfortable opening up to them.*



*This passage confirms that Chris is, in fact, gay. But he wasn't fully aware of his own sexuality until college, which explains why his parents' thinly-veiled disapproval of his sexuality and gender expression was so confusing and hurtful to him over the years. As an adult, he sees the father-son fishing trips as proof that his father was homophobic and unaccepting of his son. Scott, however, encouraged Chris to see his father's actions less as a calculated attempt to make him feel bad and more as a reflection of the fact that his father didn't understand him but still wanted to make an effort. It is, in Scott's understanding, "part of the journey" for gay kids to have to put up with parents who don't fully understand them. And Scott also suggests that Chris should move on, a bit of advice that it doesn't seem like Chris took. If he had, he wouldn't be dwelling on the trips now—and perhaps he wouldn't be feeling so resentful of his mother, either.*



*The insistence that Chris wasn't ashamed of Scott reads as something Chris told himself and Scott to try to cover up the truth. On some level, Chris likely was ashamed of his sexuality, given his parents' lifelong disapproval—and, by extension, this would mean that he was ashamed of introducing Scott as his boyfriend. In this sense, the way Chris's parents treated him as a child still makes him feel ashamed and embarrassed of his identity, even decades later.*



Chris thinks of the last time he saw his father, in the hospital after surgery. The morphine must've let his father drop his usual standoffish nature. With a wry smile, he'd asked Chris if Chris's mother had gone down to check out the gift shop. Chris squeezed his father's arm and said she had. He smiled at his father, too hard. Chris's father had started to say, "Your mother," but he paused. Then, he picked up again and told Chris that his mother has, in her own way, always been proud of him. Chris kept his hand on his father's arm and patted it. Disbelievingly, he thought that it was too late to address this now—his father shouldn't dare to bring this up.

But Chris's father continued anyway. Panting a little, he said that Chris has to live how he sees fit—but there's no need for Chris to "throw it in her face." Keeping his eyes closed, his father insisted that it would kill his mother.

Chris's father spent his last hours worrying about Chris's mother, but it had killed *him*, not her. He'd taken that heavy admission and held onto it until his death. Chris thinks now that his father was a secretive man. He can recognize that because, ironically, Chris has also become secretive.

*Chris's mother's shopping habit seems to be the butt of a joke between Chris and his father, suggesting that the men may have at least been able to connect over something. It's implied that when Chris's father changed the subject, he was poised to bring up Chris's sexuality—this is the topic that Chris believed was too late for his father to broach. From the way Chris clammed up at the mere prospect of discussing his sexuality, it's clear that it wasn't something he wanted to discuss. But because Chris's family generally isn't comfortable either speaking openly or asking people to leave certain subjects alone, Chris probably didn't feel like he could ask his father to stop.*



*Chris's father essentially told him that he could be gay in secret, but that he shouldn't let any indicators of his sexuality show in front of his mother. Indeed, Chris's father characterized Chris being openly gay as "throw[ing] it in her face." Essentially, he encouraged Chris to keep quiet and hide who he is. Given that these were his father's dying words, it's no wonder that Chris now feels unable to speak up for himself or contradict his mother.*



*Chris realizes, on some level, that his father's last words reflected his own homophobia, not necessarily his mother's. In fact, it's possible that Chris's mother would be supportive of her son if she knew for sure that he's gay. But because Chris has become secretive, like his father, he doesn't think he should tell her. It may feel easier to him to live with this secrecy than to come out and tell his mother he's gay. But, in doing so, Chris is arguably just as guilty of shutting down lines of communication as his mother is. Just as Chris's mother alienates her son by placing her own expectations and judgment on him, Chris has preconceptions of his mother that stand in the way of them connecting and bettering their relationship. These opinions may or may not be true, yet Chris believes them so wholeheartedly that he shuts his mother out entirely.*



Since the funeral, Chris's mother has been embellishing past events to make them seem happier and richer. Each time Chris visits her, it's like past events have been covered in more embellishments until the truth of what he remembers is totally buried. For instance, when Chris's father was alive, his mother had hated his "morose passivity" and had blamed him for trapping her in a boring, predictable life. She used to speak to him like he was stupid and overreact when he did the slightest thing wrong. Now, she reminisces with a smile about how patient and well-intentioned he was.

Chris's mother laments that it's such a shame Chris never took pictures on the fishing trips with his father. His father, she insists, would've loved the record of the trips. The **car** beeps again, and Chris jumps. His mother sighs, looks away, and says (half to herself) that Chris's father loved coming here with Chris. Chris finds this revision of the past nauseating and infuriating.

Angrily, Chris thinks that this is the best his mother can come up with: the two of them going out to carry out a ceremony all alone, in a place where the symbolism is just an invention. He imagines telling her that the reality is just the two of them, him the supposed 35-year-old "perennial bachelor," embarking on a "pitiful pilgrimage" that he can't wait to be over. These words spin through his head and seem to smoke like acid. Chris sees the sign for the **lake**, flips on the turn signal, and jumps again as the **car** beeps at him. It feels like Chris's father nudging him in the ribs.

*It's possible Chris's mother is rewriting these stories because she disliked and resented her husband. So, to make it easier to grieve for him now that he's gone, she may be trying to recreate her image of him in her head. Essentially, she may be crafting for herself the kind of memories that would make her want to mourn him—and the kind of memories that would sound more palatable to the Book Club Women and her other acquaintances. It's also important to note the way Chris describes his father, particularly as having had a "morose passivity" about him. This perhaps implies that, at least from Chris's perspective, his mother was domineering to the point that his father became withdrawn and apathetic. In this way, it doesn't seem like his father was happy in their marriage, either.*



*To Chris, his mother's new habit of rewriting history is offensive, as it ignores the harm his parents caused in making him feel ashamed of his sexuality. But again, there may be a more complicated reason for why Chris's mother is reframing her memories. She might feel bad for her complicity in pressuring her son to hide who he is, and rewriting the past may make her feel better about her role in all of this. It could even be possible that Chris misunderstood his mother's behavior when he was a child—that she wasn't actually embarrassed of him, and that she doesn't share her late husband's homophobic sentiments. Chris isn't willing to consider any of this, though, which suggests that he's stuck in his way of thinking and isn't willing to consider a new perspective—to give his mother the benefit of the doubt, as Scott suggested years ago.*



*To Chris, his own perception of the situation seems unquestionably true. The lake, rather than symbolizing a close father-son relationship, symbolizes his humiliation. He thinks that this trip to scatter his father's ashes is a "pitiful" sham that glosses over what his relationship with his father was really like, and he also seems to believe that his mother thinks of him as a "perennial bachelor." But again, Chris doesn't consider whether the lake might have meant something more to his father and, by extension, to his mother. He also doesn't acknowledge that his mom might not think of him in such condescending terms, as it's not clear whether she knows he's gay, and she may genuinely believe that getting married and having children would make him happy. Again, just as Chris's parents have long misunderstood him, he is seemingly unwilling to see things from their perspective, which only fuels the resentment that underpins their family dynamic. The beeping car, meanwhile, feels to Chris like his father's way of expressing his disapproval from beyond the grave—his memories of his father are, at this point, haunting and jarring rather than comforting.*





Recently, Chris's mother has begun inviting him to dinner during the week. He sees what she's doing: she delays serving dinner until later and later in the evening, and then she begs him to stay and watch the news with her. Chris always agrees, but he desperately wants to leave. Then, his mother always notes that if it's too late for him to drive home, he could just stay the night and leave for work straight from her house in the morning. Though he protests, she simply reminds him that there are towels and shirts for him, in the same tone of voice she'd used to make him behave when he was a child.

Chris knows where this is going, and he's already exhausted at the prospect of having to squash her hopes in the near future. Soon, his mother won't be able to hide her disappointment so well when he refuses to stay, so she'll escalate. She'll take a petulant tone and say that she feels nervous alone in the house at night—and then she'll add that Chris doesn't have a wife and kids to get home to, anyway.

Back in the present, the campsite looks different. Now it has big signs, composting toilets, and designated fire pits. Chris remembers gathering wood so many years ago as his father lectured him about snakes and bushfires. His father had taken out a special trowel to dig a rectangular hole for their campfire and then laid out the sticks in a grid.

Presently, Chris's mother struggles a little on the sandy path from the parking lot to the jetty, so Chris slows down to accommodate her. He feels nauseous and panicked at the prospect of his mother asking him to say some sort of farewell. Giving the eulogy was bad enough; he'd amazed himself by dissolving in tears while talking to the minister afterward. The minister had stood patiently while Chris tried to pull himself together. Chris couldn't tell the stranger what he was even grieving for—he couldn't articulate it, even to himself. Now, he thinks it was just the strain of the day and of having to keep himself together.

*Chris's mother seems lonely without her husband, which is likely why she's trying to cling onto Chris and convince him to spend more time with her. However, she's also (perhaps unintentionally) infantilizing her son, speaking to him as though he's a child rather than a 35-year-old man. The way Chris's mother treats him suggests that she still wants to control him, perhaps because he's failed to live up to her expectations and she wants to play a more active role in shaping his life as she sees fit. But alongside this, it's significant that the story never reveals much about Chris's personal life or career. This may be because Chris feels compelled to hide things about his life from his mother (and, by extension, from readers) for fear of being judged or dismissed.*



*Although this exchange is imaginary, it nevertheless shows how Chris sees his mother. In his mind, she's selfish and critical, and he doesn't believe his mother truly considers a person an adult until they're married with children. This would explain why she infantilizes Chris—in her mind, he's not an adult anyway. But, importantly, readers have no way of knowing if this is what Chris's mother actually believes, since the story is skewed toward Chris's perspective. He may or may not be correct, but he's nevertheless making assumptions rather than openly communicating with his mother, which continues to drive a wedge between them.*



*The pained reaction that Chris previously had to memories of his father is notably absent here. It's possible, then, that returning to the lake is helping Chris better process his grief and his conflicted emotions about his father.*



*Although Chris is extremely nervous about having to make a speech, he doesn't openly express his worries to his mother. Instead, he simply assumes that he'll be pressured into saying something now, just as he was pressured into giving his father's eulogy at the funeral. Again, this points to a lack of communication between Chris and his mother: rather than voicing his concerns and being vulnerable with her, he allows his grief and resentment to fester. This struggle to express himself and articulate his emotions also spilled over into Chris's interactions with the priest. It seems that Chris doesn't know exactly what he's feeling, nor is he sure how to grieve a man who hurt him so deeply in the past.*



When Chris and his mother reach the jetty, his mother exclaims in relief that it's lovely. In a trembling voice, she says that she doesn't want to say anything—she just wants to scatter the ashes, even though it's hard. His mother laments not opening up the box and saving some of the ashes for herself, so Chris tells her that they can put some ashes in the camera bag. She can take them home and scatter them under the roses. Chris is desperate to come up with a quick solution to keep his mother from breaking down; he has to be the strong one in this situation.

Chris chuckles and asks his mother to imagine what his father would say about putting ashes in the camera bag. His mother smiles back and says that it's better than a matchbox. She asks if Chris remembers how much his father hated her smoking, so much that she finally gave it up.

Chris walks to the end of the jetty, pulls the box out of the bag, and crouches down to open it. There's a foam tub inside the box that's sealed with tape. As Chris picks at the tape, his mother hands him a pair of nail scissors. The gesture surprises him, and he holds the scissors for a moment to stall. His mother murmurs how nice it is that they have the **lake** to themselves; it would be awful to have someone else here for this private moment.

*Contrary to what Chris assumed, his mother doesn't want either of them to say anything before scattering the ashes. Given the poor communication readers have witnessed between Chris and his parents throughout the story, it's possible that his mother has just as much trouble articulating herself and being emotionally vulnerable as her son does. Meanwhile, Chris is terrified that his mother will break down—likely because he hasn't quite figured out how to face his own grief yet, let alone how to comfort his mother.*



*The anecdote about quitting smoking seems to be Chris's mother's way of acknowledging that her marriage wasn't perfect. There were clearly things the couple didn't agree on, and there were likely other compromises that they had to make. Furthermore, readers know from Chris's perspective that his mother felt trapped in the marriage and often got frustrated with his father. Both Chris and his mother, then, had difficult relationships with his father. However, they're dealing with their grief in different ways: Chris's mother wants to remember the past, while Chris wants to run from it.*



*Chris's mother's offer of the scissors is a simple gesture, yet her uncharacteristic kindness in this moment is enough to catch Chris off guard. This hints that scattering her late husband's ashes might be an occasion capable of changing how Chris's mother interacts with her son, if only because it forces her to confront her emotions. However, she also mentions that it's nice to have the privacy, which could imply that she's still concerned with what others think and with maintaining appearances. It's unlikely that anyone would think poorly of Chris and his mother for scattering ashes and expressing their emotions as they do so—but Chris's mother still seems unwilling to do anything out of the ordinary in front of an audience.*



As Chris looks out across the sparkling water, he wishes he'd brought sunglasses. Suddenly, he remembers sitting in the boat with his father. Their rods swung without bait, and his father had squinted at the water. He'd looked so unfamiliar in his bucket hat. His father asked Chris if he didn't think they'd catch anything, and Chris shook his head in reply. His father had said that it didn't really matter; it was just nice to be out here. Chris had forgotten that moment and his father's hopeful smile until now.

*This memory paints Chris's father as someone unfamiliar and foreign to him—even though they were father and son, Chris felt alienated in their relationship. But the memory also characterizes his father as a man who was genuinely trying to bond with his son. From this, readers can infer that Chris's father was probably a more complex and even sympathetic person than Chris tends to remember him as. Although his homophobic sentiments certainly hurt his son, he nevertheless wanted to connect with Chris—something that their lack of clear communication prevented from happening. The fact that Chris forgot the smile on his father's face until now perhaps suggests that coming to acknowledge his father's virtues alongside his flaws will be an integral part of his grieving process.*



Getting up, Chris takes a photo of his mother on the end of the jetty in her blazer. He asks her to pick up the box and peers into the viewfinder. Though she hesitates, she lifts the box and holds it to her chest. The plain box contrasts with her flowered scarf, and Chris imagines her looking in the mirror and choosing her scarf that morning. She would've raised her chin, and he knows that each tiny decision would've taken effort. Now, he wishes he'd told her she looked nice when he picked her up.

*Even though Chris and his mother aren't especially close, Chris still thinks about his mother as though he knows her very well. He sympathizes with her grief and recognizes that getting ready for this difficult day was probably an ordeal for her, which is why he wishes that he'd complimented her outfit. These thoughts hint that Chris and his mother's shared grief over his father's death could present a bonding opportunity for them, as seeing his mother in pain is allowing Chris to develop empathy for her. Moreover, Chris is beginning to realize that he's made mistakes in their relationship, too.*



Chris's mother faces the camera with an "obedient and tremulous" expression. She tries not to blink. Chris's throat feels tight and his eyes sting. After he takes the picture, he returns to her and slices the tape. When he lifts the lid of the tub, he watches conflicting emotions cross his mother's face. She takes one panicked look into the tub, looks away, and says, "You."

*The "obedient and tremulous" expression on Chris's mother's face hearkens back to Chris's own thought that he has to be strong for his mother. Although he holds this belief about his role in their relationship, his mother's strained expression indicates that she's trying to be strong for Chris as well. In addition, she may want to put on a brave face so that she looks happier in the photo than she really is, which would be another way of reframing the past and deciding how moments like these are remembered. Seeing how much of an effort she's making is likely what makes Chris start to choke up. Things take a turn for the worse, though, when Chris's mother has such an adverse reaction to seeing the ashes. She puts all the responsibility on Chris, much like she did at the crematorium, without giving him any room to push back or express what he wants this ritual to look like.*



Chris's mother leaves no room for Chris to feel the same resistance that she does. He knows that he's also incapable of just standing and turning the tub over to dump the contents into the water—he's going to have to touch the ashes.

*This passage suggests that, on some level, Chris feels just as much aversion to touching his father's ashes as his mother does. But again, rather than expressing this, he stays silent because he doesn't want to rock the boat by unceremoniously dumping the tub or outrightly refusing to scatter the ashes. The pressure Chris's mother puts on him here is arguably unfair—his mother, after all, was the one who decided that they should scatter the ashes on the lake. Again, the lack of communication between mother and son makes this day more stressful and painful than it perhaps needed to be.*



As Chris pinches some of the ashes between his fingers and sprinkles them into the water, he notices that they feel like a handful of coarse sand. He remembers crouching here with his father, cleaning saucepans with river sand and filling them up to pour onto the campfire coals. His father had crushed the coals and then neatly scattered soil on top—he'd used the same motion then that Chris is using now to scatter his father's ashes into the water. The air had smelled like wet ash, and the cicadas' song beat like a clock. Chris remembers his father glancing around and asking him to agree that it was a great spot anyway.

*Here, Chris's memories of the past seem to meld with his actions in the present. Scattering his father's ashes in the lake immerses Chris back in the past—and again, his memories seem neutral, if not fond. His father comes off as competent, in control, and even happy with the trip despite Chris's unhappiness. This is a stark contrast to how Chris previously remembered the fishing trips (as disasters), and it's another indicator that the trips actually meant a great deal to Chris's father. This again speaks to the dangers of staying mired in one's own perspective and refusing to talk things out or change one's point of view. Perhaps, like Chris's mother suggested, it is for the best that his father's final resting place will be the lake, as this location represents the complexity of Chris and his father's relationship—for better or worse.*



Now, Chris wonders why he didn't agree enthusiastically. It wouldn't have cost him anything to do more than shrug, which he'd done for the "small mean pleasure" of making his father turn away in defeat. Chris scoops up another handful of ashes, and he can't quite believe that this dust and grit is all that's left of something "hard and unyielding" like bone. His mother repeatedly whispers, "Goodbye, Alan," until the box is empty.

*Here, Chris realizes—perhaps for the first time—that he made mistakes in his relationship with his father, too. He might not have been having fun, but he also didn't have to act cruelly when it was clear that his father was trying his best to reach out and bond with his son. Again, his relationship with his father was complicated, and his father's homophobia was undoubtedly hurtful—but Chris also didn't help matters. Meanwhile, as Chris describes the ashes and the "hard and unyielding" bones they came from, he's describing his father in this way as much as he's describing the actual bones. His father, in his mind, may have been set in his ways and unable to change. But now that his father is gone and has been diminished to something as insignificant as ash, it seems possible that Chris's memories will begin to change too—Chris may be able to finally put the past in the past.*



As Chris and his mother stand on the jetty, his mother weeps and folds the cotton bag again and again while shifting in her uncomfortable shoes. Chris rinses his hands and wonders again why he didn't answer his father that day. The memory makes him feel sick; it seems like such a waste. In the afternoon heat, the cicadas' song picks up. It sounds like a heartbeat that measures out "uncounted hours."

Finally, Chris asks his mother if she's ready to leave. By the time they get back to the **car**, she's pulled herself together enough to ask if they can get back to the gift shop before closing time. She'd like to buy the other frames as gifts for the Book Club Women, to thank them for all their support. Having this purpose seems to make her animated again. Chris thinks they can get back to the shop by 4:30 and agrees that it'd be a nice gesture. He notices a small bit of ash on the lapel of his mother's jacket, and without interrupting her, he brushes it off "absently, tenderly."

*In this moment, Chris seems to fully accept his role in his poor relationship with his father. He acknowledges that it would have been easy to make an effort—all he'd needed to do was answer his father. But because Chris didn't answer, the afternoon—and the ensuing years of his strained relationship with his father—now seem like a waste. They lost "uncounted hours" of time together, all because they couldn't speak openly with each other or trust the other to accept them.*



*Though Chris can't make amends with his father now that he's gone, his revelation about his role in their relationship also seems to have made him realize that he can work on his relationship with his mother. This is likely why Chris kindly agrees to get his mother back to the gift shop before closing, and why he brushes the ash off her lapel with newfound tenderness. It doesn't take much, Chris now knows, to improve a relationship. If he's a little more open and generous with his mother, there's a real possibility that he can steer their relationship in a better direction than his relationship with his father.*





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