

# Cross-Country



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Born in England to Australian parents, Cate Kennedy moved back to Australia and spent her childhood living across many parts of the country as her father travelled for his job in the Air Force. A graduate of the University of Canberra and Australian National University, Kennedy has taught creative writing at the University of Melbourne and several other schools in Australia. Besides teaching, Kennedy's employment record is quite varied, including working as a customs worker, tutor, and waitress. Well-known as a short-story writer, Cate Kennedy is also a respected writer in other genres such as poetry, memoir, and nonfiction. She has won numerous awards; impressively, she was shortlisted for the Australian Literary Gold Medal for her first novel, *The World Beneath*. Currently, Cate Kennedy resides in Victoria, Australia.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Cate Kennedy is a contemporary Australian writer. Though the exact year in which "Cross-Country" is set is unclear, it's evident that the protagonist's experiences with cyber stalking are unique to the 21st century. By the time Kennedy published "Cross-Country" in her 2012 collection *Like A House on Fire*, the internet had been around for decades, ultimately changing the way people communicate. Despite the internet's myriad benefits and unique ability to connect people with one another, "Cross-Country" illustrates the detrimental effects that this hyper-connectivity can have on emotionally vulnerable people.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

During a 2013 interview published in the *Griffith Review*, Cate Kennedy reveals her deep appreciation for ordinary life. Most of her fiction depicts ordinary people, illuminating some aspect of the human experience in an imaginative and poignant way. This tradition harkens back to classic works like George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, which focus on the rich complexities of everyday life. "Cross-Country," in particular, tackles the uniquely modern issue of the internet's impact on relationships and reputations, a topic that is becoming particularly popular in the YA genre, in such books as Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and Sara Darer Littman's *Backlash*. As a contemporary Australian writer, Cate Kennedy resides amongst an impressive canon of Australian literature that demonstrates the country's diverse populace. Beside Cate Kennedy at the forefront of Australian fiction are such writers as Liane Moriarty (*Big Little Lies*), Evie

Wyld (*All the Birds, Singing*), and Peter Carey, who is notably one of only four writers to ever win the Booker Prize twice (for his novels *Oscar and Lucinda* and *True History of the Kelly Gang*).

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Cross-Country
- **Where Written:** Australia
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Australia
- **Climax:** Rebecca realizes that she hasn't been following her ex-partner's running club results online; instead, the results belong to a child who shares her ex's name.
- **Antagonist:** Grief
- **Point of View:** First and Second Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Far from Home.** Cate Kennedy spent two years in Mexico during the 1990s, teaching literacy.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator, Rebecca has just experienced a painful breakup, but her friends' empty clichés and platitudes encouraging her to get over it and move on only make her feel worse and more isolated. Instead, she turns to the internet for solace and information. Rebecca decides to type her ex-partner's name into the search bar. Searching for information about an ex online surely isn't as deplorable as showing up at their house unannounced to harass them, she thinks. She also rationalizes that since she financially supported him through graduate school, she has a right to know what he's up to and if he's finished his thesis. Unable to resist peeping into his online life, Rebecca tumbles through pages upon pages of search results, quickly filtering out those that have nothing to do with him.

Eating instant noodles from a Styrofoam cup, Rebecca ruminates over grief. To her, people willingly console others when they've lost a loved one through death. But when someone has lost a loved one through a breakup, they are avoided instead. Rebecca isolates herself from her friends and coworkers, finding comfort in the internet and the answers she hopes it might provide. After sifting through the search results, she finds her ex's name listed on a **cross-country running** club's roster. She takes this small piece of information and uses it to create elaborate fantasies about what her ex has been

doing since he moved out of their shared apartment.

Certain that he's taken a step back from academia, Rebecca imagines her ex engaging in post-run barbecues and physically exerting himself past the point of exhaustion. Julie from work calls, interrupting Rebecca's daydreams. Rebecca divulges her new plan to Julie: she's going to start jogging then join a running club. But before she can go for her first jog, she has to go to the mall to buy the shoes. Maybe later, she thinks. Falling back into her fantasies about her ex, Rebecca pictures herself overtaking him in a race. He watches her, impressed by her poise and speed. In another version of her fantasies, Rebecca delivers a low blow by asking about the status of his thesis, having found out through more internet digging that he did not present it at the last conference he attended.

Looking through the stack of CDs her ex left behind, Rebecca stumbles across the CD of a country girl group she and her ex had seen together. She remembers enjoying their lip-gloss, big hair, and twang while her ex spent the entire evening complaining. Afterward, he even took to calling them the "Tammy Wynette Hormone Band" whenever Rebecca would play the CD at home. Listening to the "high and lonesome sound" of their music now, Rebecca muses over memories of her ex that make her realize that perhaps she deserves better than "a guy who checks his watch every three minutes" while they're out together. She wonders what the girls in the band are t doing now. Rebecca figures they're probably doing better than her current state, dressed in stretched-out sweatpants and eating a spinster's serving of dehydrated space food.

Drifting in and out of her cross-country running daydreams, Rebecca realizes something: she doesn't have any idea what someone actually does during a cross-country race. Running through various scenarios in her mind, she's interrupted by a phone call from her boss. He reminds her that she's exhausted her sick leave and is required to be back at work on Monday. While still on this call, Rebecca slips back into her reverie, checking her ex's running results online yet again. She sees that he is now ranked 42nd on the roster, and imagines him wallowing in defeat and calling her to reconcile. Deep inside an elaborate reconciliation fantasy, her boss briefly pulls her away from her imagination and back to real life.

After the phone call with her boss, Rebecca resolves to call the running club to ask about joining. On some level, she knows it's illogical to pursue this—her ex-partner made it quite clear he did not want to salvage the relationship and has no intention of allowing her back in his life. Yet she's still convinced that the next phone call she receives will be from her ex, certain that his cross-country failures have "beaten [him] into remorse and resignation" even though she knows he never played sports. She knows he actually hates sport altogether, and refuses to do "anything he wasn't an expert at."

Returning to the search portal, Rebecca refreshes the page with the running results from last week. She notices something

that she hadn't before: a title heading on the results page. Two words shatter her fantasies: "*Under-fourteens.*" Shocked, Rebecca stares at those two words, which tell her that she's been mistakenly following the running career of a child with the same name as her ex-partner. Rebecca clicks out of the screen, illuminated by the blue light of her computer shutting down. The machine's little melody plays, indicating that the computer has turned off and that it's finally time for her to move on.



## CHARACTERS

**Rebecca** – Rebecca is the protagonist and narrator of "Cross-Country." She spends most of the story experiencing various stages of grief about the recent end of her relationship. Feeling despondent after her breakup, Rebecca takes time off from work to heal. Desperate for answers and for distraction from her pain, she shuts her friends out and instead resorts to obsessively Googling her ex-partner's name online to find out what he's been up to since he moved out. After sifting through pages of irrelevant search results, Rebecca finds something intriguing: her ex has joined a **cross-country running** club. Instead of filling her doctor's prescription for antidepressants, Rebecca spends her time off work stalking her ex's running club results online and listening to the music her ex hated to soothe her wounds. Like a dog with a bone, Rebecca takes a tiny scrap of information (her ex's name on a cross-country running club roster) and squeezes every possible imagined scenario out of it. She luxuriates in all the possibilities it provides—maybe he has finally given up on his graduate thesis and stepped away from academia, or maybe he's finding new satisfaction in physically exerting himself. But it's not just a new version of her ex that Rebecca fantasizes about. Soon after these fantasies begin, Rebecca includes herself in them, easily outrunning her ex and impressing him with her athleticism and poise. These fictional scenarios become the stage where Rebecca plays out explanations for why their relationship ended. Ultimately, she finds out that her ex is not part of the cross-country club after all—he merely shares a name with a local 14-year-old runner. Rebecca is thus forced to recognize the futility of her fantasies, remarking at the human capacity "to invent what we need." Kennedy uses Rebecca's character to explore grief as it is experienced through a breakup (rather than a death), illuminating the unhealthy coping mechanisms that can go hand-in-hand with isolation after a major life change such as this.

**Rebecca's ex-partner** – The man who has recently broken up with Rebecca. The reader's understanding of Rebecca's ex-partner comes solely from Rebecca. Because the story is narrated from a first- and second-person perspective, it is difficult to determine if any of the information presented about Rebecca's ex can be interpreted as anything but biased. He isn't given a name even though most of the story's plot revolves

around her grief over their breakup. Her ex-partner's namelessness allows the reader to extrapolate his or her own details about an ex into the shell of this character, almost ensuring the reader's empathy for Rebecca throughout her narration. The actions of this character mostly occur inside Rebecca's fantasies about beating him in a race after searching for information about him online and discovering his name on the roster of a **cross-country running** club, rather than in actual interactions between him and Rebecca. Interspersed with running fantasies, Rebecca's memories about her ex start to surface, reminding her it's perhaps a good thing that their relationship is past saving. For Rebecca, healing comes with time and distance from her ex. Rebecca's healing occurs partially by grieving and accepting the loss of him, and partially by filling that void with endless made-up scenarios. By the end of the story, the reader learns that Rebecca's ex never joined a cross-country running club after all—he merely shares a name with a local 14-year-old runner.

**Julie** – Julie is Rebecca's friend from work. Interrupting Rebecca's nosedive into a sea of relevant search results for her ex-partner's name, Julie calls. Julie is Rebecca's first reminder that a real world exists outside her self-delusion and compulsive internet usage. Instead of using this phone call to tether herself back to reality, though, Rebecca tells Julie about her new plan to get fit: **cross-country running**. Julie is skeptical, but Rebecca insists upon her commitment to this lifestyle change by telling Julie, "I'm going out today to buy the shoes."

**Rebecca's boss** – While Rebecca is lost in her rich fantasy life in the wake of her breakup, her boss calls to inform her that she's exhausted her sick leave. Lost in a philosophical reverie over the pointlessness of **running**, Rebecca receives a call from her boss telling her that she has to come back to work on Monday. Up until now, she'd been screening all his calls. Amidst her boss's empty platitudes, Rebecca slips back into a reconciliation fantasy about her ex-partner. Using Rebecca's name for the first time in the story, her boss asks if she's still on the line. However, not even a call from her boss shakes Rebecca from her indulgent fantasies. Although it doesn't seem that Rebecca has jeopardized her job by taking time off work to grieve this breakup, it is clear that her boss isn't giving her any more time to wallow in her sweatpants.



## THE INTERNET, CYBER-STALKING, AND PRIVACY

Cate Kennedy's short story "Cross-Country" explores a particular way the internet can affect relationships after they end: cyber-stalking an ex-partner. Through the use of first- and second-person narration, the narrator and protagonist, Rebecca, makes the reader complicit in her online stalking. She makes it seem inarguable: anybody would Google their ex after a bad break-up. By positing cyber-stalking as just the uglier side of human nature, Rebecca makes her actions seem innocuous rather than invasive. Beyond her ex-partner's right to privacy, she is seemingly indifferent about how seeing his name or his pictures will make her feel, not caring if they make her sad or jealous. The internet offers Rebecca a temporary relief after a breakup—but while viewing snippets of her ex's life online may help ease the immediate pain of him moving out, it doesn't change the fact that the relationship is over, nor does it help her move forward with her life. In "Cross-Country," Cate Kennedy considers the internet's potentially detrimental role in healing after a bad breakup, suggesting that the ease and relative anonymity of the internet has blurred the line between what's harmless and what's invasive when it comes to searching other people online.

Kennedy's protagonist attempts to justify her questionable Google searches, asserting that seeking out information about her ex online isn't just acceptable, it's her right to do so—even though her ex-partner appears to disagree. She rationalizes her cyber-stalking by claiming, "It's just a few shreds of information I want. I supported him for a year, after all; surely I have a right to know whether he's finally submitted that thesis and where, incidentally, the graduation ceremony is going to be held." Rebecca struggles with the harsh transition from being her ex's life partner (and financial supporter) to being a veritable stranger, and thus decides that since she was at one point privy to the happenings of her ex-boyfriend's life, she should still be allowed to know what he's up to. However, the story suggests that Rebecca's ex-partner has no intention of letting her back into his life. She notes, "It takes a special kind of thoroughness [...] for him to redirect even his superannuation statement and subscriptions to his new address [...] suggesting that he'd do anything rather than leave a single excuse for re-contact." Rebecca seems to be aware that her ex-partner does not want her to contact him, which makes it clear that her search efforts are indeed invasive and undesired.

As Rebecca continues her search, the story raises the question of whether the ease and anonymity of typing someone's name into a search engine really means that it's a harmless thing to do—or if that ease and anonymity means that it's dangerously easy to invade someone's privacy. Continuing to rationalize her behavior, Rebecca suggests that what she is doing is nowhere near as bad as in-person stalking. She claims, "It's not as if I'm going to go over there, drive past his house, lie on his lawn



## 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.

drunk and make a scene, harass him.” Instead of invading her ex-boyfriend’s physical space, Rebecca is able to hide behind the anonymity of a computer screen. Because she’s just lying around in her pajamas in the middle of the night and typing things into the computer, it seems like her searches aren’t all that bad—after all, she’s not harming anyone. However, the story emphasizes that the person whose “desk drawer Google has no qualms about throwing open” typically has no idea it ever happened, making internet searches seem eerie and violating in their one-sidedness. So, while Rebecca feels a comforting sense of anonymity as she sifts through search results to find where her ex is now living and what groups he belongs to, the story suggests that it’s not a good thing that she’s able—and willing—to unearth this kind of information about someone who clearly no longer wants her in his life.

When Rebecca finally stumbles upon a piece of information about her ex, she fantasizes about how she might use that information to weasel her way back into his life—yet another indication that her online searching is intrusive and arguably creepy. She notes, “He’s on some kind of roster. [...] A roster for a sporting club. [...] Just on the other side of the city, probably. One of those beachside suburbs he always said he’d like to live in.” Upon finding her ex’s name on a roster for a local **cross-country running** club, Rebecca quickly uses that small shred of information to discern where he is now living, which leaves readers to wonder if she actually *does* intend to stalk him in-person. Rebecca immediately begins to daydream about joining the very same running club. The daydream, of which there are several versions, is a “short film looping in [her] head” of her running effortlessly during one of the club’s events and dazzling her ex with her independence and poise, presumably to either win him back or make him regret ending the relationship.

At the end of the story, Rebecca’s hopes of impressing her ex are dashed when she finally realizes that the roster is headed with the words “*Under-fourteens*.” After all her planning and daydreaming, Rebecca has only found information about a local kid with the same name as ex. After grappling with the shock of this, Rebecca clicks out of the window and turns off her computer with a sense of finality. The distraction she felt while cyber-stalking her ex was a digital bandage for grief, but pixelated names and photos of an ex aren’t the same as actually processing the loss of that person. Though she doesn’t seem repentant for her invasive searches, she does grasp that they were fruitless. Scouring the internet for any sign of her ex didn’t change the fact that the relationship is over and that she now must move on.



### FANTASY AND SELF-DELUSION

In Cate Kennedy’s “Cross-Country,” Rebecca’s daydreams about her ex-partner offer a form of escapism from her grief. In the wake of the breakup, she is deep in a depressive episode, swaddled in her “spare-

room quilt” and eating noodles from a Styrofoam cup while scouring the internet for information about her ex and his new life. After sifting through pages and pages of search results, she finally finds a lead: her ex’s name is now on the roster for a **cross-country running** club across town. As the story unfolds, the narrator fantasizes about casually joining the same running club as him and impressing him with her extraordinary speed and impeccable poise. By the end of the story, a disappointing discovery shatters the narrator’s happy delusions: she realizes the roster is for kids 14 and younger, and that her ex has not, in fact, joined a running club, making all of her fantasies a waste of time. With this, Kennedy suggests that while Rebecca’s elaborate fantasies about her ex offer temporary relief from her pain, they are ultimately harmful because she is putting her healing on pause in favor of escaping reality.

Part of the elaborate fantasy Rebecca creates includes how she will turn herself into a cross-country runner to win her ex back, or at least impress him. This scenario, which ends in the possibility of the couple getting back together and presents her in a flattering light, dulls the pain of the breakup—but only temporarily. Rebecca imagines, “I’m pounding easily along the hilltop in an interclub event. I’m not even puffing as I overtake him, despite the spurt he puts on. [...] I flash him a surprised-yet-calm smile of recognition, a flutter of the fingers, and pull away.” This fantasy allows the narrator to feel self-assured and light as air as she breezily waves hello to her ex and effortlessly glides down the road. When the narrator momentarily snaps out of her fantasy, though, she feels “heavy as a stone.” Her fantasy may have allowed her to feel breezy and light for a minute, but the feeling quickly dissipates. Later, Rebecca resolves to get up, shower, get dressed, and go to the mall to buy running shoes—the first step to having a “torso tight as a rubber band, my number tied and flapping across my chest, my shapely arms working like pistons as I make him eat my dust.” Here, her simple to-do list quickly dissolves into full-out fantasy. She envisions herself, tanned and taut with muscle, easily overtaking her ex in a race, allowing her to momentarily forget that she’s actually lying around with “greasy hair and unwashed pajamas” and doesn’t know the first thing about running.

Even though these daydreams make Rebecca feel better while she’s indulging in them, the story suggests that this kind of escapism prevents her from accepting the breakup and adjusting to life without her ex-partner. At one point in the story, Rebecca’s boss calls to inform her that she’s used up all her sick leave and is expected to be at work on Monday. However, mid-call, Rebecca slips into yet *another* daydream about her ex. With this, the story suggests that Rebecca has spent so many days Google searching and fantasizing about her ex that it’s taken over her life. This kind of behavior has chained Rebecca to her computer and to her house, preventing her from picking up her life—and her work—and moving forward.

Rebecca’s fantasizing also seems unproductive because it completely contradicts what her ex-partner wanted for their breakup. She remembers him saying, “*I think it’s pointless considering mediation at this stage. I think it would be best to make a clean break.*” In fixating on fantasies of her ex wanting to work things out—when he clearly has no interest in doing so—she is preventing herself from also making the “clean break” that will allow her to move on. Toward the end of the story, when Rebecca suddenly realizes that the running-club roster she’s been looking at is for children, not adults, this new information “go[es] off in a blinding flash like a grenade,” snapping her out of her daydreams and waking her up to real life. As she sits in shock, “dully open-mouthed,” it’s clear that all her fantasizing has been for nothing. Her ex is not part of some cross-country running club across town, the narrator can’t show up at an event and outrun him, and they’re not getting back together.

Throughout the story, Rebecca’s fantasies about her ex are interspersed with unpleasant memories of him: he never could manage to finish his thesis, she had to support him financially, and he could never relax and have fun. Although her fantasies often dredge up these kinds of memories throughout the course of the story, it’s not until the end that these bad memories pile up and she begins to realize that maybe he’s not worth pining over. And while all of her fantasizing *did* keep her from moving on, it perhaps also helped remind her that the relationship ended for a reason, and that she’s better off on her own: “ready or not, it’s time to roll the credits.”



## BREAKUPS AND GRIEF

In “Cross Country,” Cate Kennedy explores how grief can play out after the end of a relationship.

Denoting feelings of deep sadness, grief is most

commonly associated with the sorrow one experiences after a loved one passes away. However, Kennedy expands that typical association to include the pain of losing a loved one through a breakup. After Rebecca’s partner leaves her, she feels further isolated by her friends who offer her cheap platitudes for her pain (“*What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger*”) during this difficult period in her life. As Rebecca moves through various stages of grief due to her breakup—like isolating herself from others or denying that her ex is really gone for good—Kennedy suggests that grieving the loss of a partner at the end of a relationship can be as pointed and complex a process as losing someone through death.

While losing a partner through a breakup might not be as permanent as losing them through death, Rebecca’s ex-partner made it very clear that he doesn’t want her in his life. Because of this, there is a sense of finality to their breakup—her ex might not be dead, but it’s unlikely she’ll ever see him or speak to him again. Rebecca remembers her ex telling her in a “clipped and guarded” tone, “*I think it’s pointless considering mediation at this stage. I think it would be best to make a clean break.*” Regardless of

how Rebecca thought the relationship was going, her ex-partner shut down the possibility of talking it through: “*I think it’s clear to both of us it’s not working.*” With this, Rebecca’s ex swiftly pulled the plug on their relationship, stamping out any hope of mending things between them. Once he’s moved out, Rebecca’s ex-partner does everything in his power to make sure Rebecca can’t contact him again, essentially erasing all traces of himself from her life. She notes, “It takes a special kind of thoroughness, a particular grim determination to sever all ties, for him to redirect even his superannuation statements and subscriptions to his new address.” The language in this passage—particularly “thoroughness,” “grim,” and “sever all ties”—paints the breakup like a death, tragic and final. Rebecca continues, adding, “Even the mail he would have thrown away immediately never arrives now, suggesting he’d do anything rather than leave a single excuse for re-contact.” Rebecca’s ex-partner effectively makes himself dead to *her*, ensuring that she can never reach him again.

Grappling with the shock of her loss, Rebecca desperately searches for answers that would explain why they broke up—one of many iterations of her grief. At the beginning of the story, Rebecca explains, “I don’t know about you, but I don’t need to talk. I need someone else to talk. I need answers.” Given that Rebecca’s partner was not interested in talking through the breakup—instead simply announcing that “*it’s not working*”—it seems that Rebecca doesn’t really understand why he left her (or found his reasons unsatisfactory) and is now looking for “an explanation that makes sense” to gain some closure.

Overwhelmed by her loss, Rebecca feels like nobody understands her pain, and she becomes increasingly isolated. Rebecca is critical of “people who tell you to get out and move on” after a breakup, depicting their advice as thoroughly unhelpful. Rather than offering her empathy, people feed her “easy clichés like something off a desk calendar,” like “*Living well is the best revenge*” which do nothing to help her grief. She notes that there is a “queue” of these kinds of text messages on her phone, including lots of offers to call if she needs to talk—but Rebecca is adamant that this is the last thing she needs and thus lets these messages pile up. Rebecca feels like her grief over her breakup is taken less seriously than actual bereavement, but that this shouldn’t be the case. She explains, “Your partner dies, and everyone comes over with casseroles; they clean your house and hang out your washing. Your partner leaves though, and you don’t need nurturing apparently; you need avoiding.” Of course, Rebecca is at this point wearing “unwashed pyjamas” and eating a cup of microwavable noodles, suggesting that she *does* need things like casseroles and someone to help her with laundry. With this, Rebecca again suggests that dealing with the aftermath of a breakup is a lot like grieving a death, even if other people don’t see it that way.

Rebecca’s grief also manifests as denial. Unable to come to

terms with the fact that the relationship is over, she tries to convince herself that there's a chance they will reconcile. Feeling helpless, Rebecca tries to regain control of the situation by fantasizing about various "what-if" scenarios about her ex-partner. In these fantasies, she wants to overtake him in a **cross-country running** race, winning him over with her running abilities and confidence. She comes up with several iterations of these fantasies, culminating in one particular fantasy in which her ex-partner calls her up and asks her to dinner so they can talk, implying that they'll get back together.

Throughout the story, Rebecca's grief manifests itself in all sorts of ways, from isolation to denial, but she ultimately comes to a begrudging acceptance that the relationship is over, and that, "ready or not, it's time to roll the credits." As Rebecca makes her way through the grieving process, Kennedy suggests that grieving a breakup is not all that different than grieving the death of a loved one: both cases involve a significant, heart-wrenching loss, a multi-layered grieving process, and an uncomfortable period of adjusting to one's "new normal" after acceptance has set in.



## SYMBOLS

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



## CROSS-COUNTRY RUNNING

Kennedy uses cross-country running fantasies as both a symbol of Rebecca's desire to escape her grief and a route by which to do so. After Rebecca's breakup with her ex, she discovers his name on an online roster for a cross-country running club, and proceeds to develop obsessive fantasies about winning him back by running against him in a race and impressing him with her athleticism. Though running tends to represent broader themes such as freedom-seeking or escapism in literature, in the context of this story, cross-country running could be any other activity and still have a similar effect. For Rebecca, it's less about running and more about the possibility these running fantasies provide: a way for Rebecca to grieve the loss of her ex and play out various scenarios of her "winning" their breakup. It turns out, though, that Rebecca's ex is not a cross-country athlete after all—he merely shares a name with a local 14-year-old runner. This realization shatters Rebecca's hopes of reuniting with her ex, and the running club and Rebecca's fantasies short-lived surrounding it ultimately come to represent the futility of trying to escape painful emotions through self-delusion.

edition of *Like a House on Fire* published in 2012.

## Cross-Country Quotes

☝☝ Peeled. That's how you feel, when it happens. Flayed. People who tell you to get out and move on, they're standing there in a thick layer of skin, cushioned and comfortable, brimming with their easy clichés like something off a desk calendar. *What doesn't kill you makes you stronger* [...] *You were too good for him anyway*. There's a queue of their text messages on my phone. *Call anytime, they say, if you need to talk*.

**Related Characters:** Rebecca (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 110

## Explanation and Analysis

Rebecca first starts talking about her breakup as if it were happening to someone else. Through the use of second-person narration (i.e., "that's how you feel"), Kennedy guides the reader to empathize with the protagonist, Rebecca. By phrasing her emotional distress in these terms, Rebecca also distances herself from the pain she's feeling after their breakup, as if it were happening to someone else. The pain is presented as something "you feel, when it happens," and so the reader immediately is forced to relate to how Rebecca must be feeling through this sensory description. The two words "peeled" and "flayed" contribute to a skin metaphor that likens the emotions after a breakup to the raw vulnerability of not having her skin covering her body. Continuing the metaphor, Kennedy portrays those who are happily in relationships as "cushioned and comfortable," unburdened by the pain of being left alone in a once shared apartment. Rebecca's cynical attitude toward her friends' cliché reassurances shows the disconnect between people's perception of breakups versus the actual grief involved. While Rebecca is devastated by the loss of her relationship, not dissimilar to how one feels after the death of a loved one, it's clear that those around her don't consider the post-breakup period to be one of genuine bereavement.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribe

●● Live in the world, and there'll be a trail you leave behind you, even if it's a trail of crumbs. That's what they call them, don't they? Cookies. No matter how vigilantly you try to cover your tracks, they'll be there. The recorded minutes of a meeting you attended, some team you've been; there's your name on the screen. Try it for yourself and see. Google your name, in one of these extended empty sessions of free time when the cursor's waiting like a foot tapping, and there's nothing else in the universe you can think of that you need to find out about. There you suddenly are, undertaking all the trivial pathetic things you think are hidden, so that anyone in the world can see you exposed.

**Related Characters:** Rebecca (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 111

### Explanation and Analysis

Rebecca ruminates over how a person's life can be tracked on the internet. While what she's saying might have some elements of the truth, her purpose here is to provide an explanation for cyberstalking her ex-partner. If the information is so readily available for anyone to find, then why shouldn't she look to see what he's been up to? This is another instance in "Cross-Country" in which the use of second-person narration is particularly effective—since most readers have likely engaged in the same sort of internet use as Rebecca, it forces the reader to recall the times they've "tr[ie]d it for [themselves]" and therefore makes them more sympathetic to Rebecca's desperate searching.

Claiming a person's life (as it is tracked online) is "exposed" for anyone to see eliminates her culpability in cyberstalking her ex, though digging for details of a person's life is ethically questionable as an invasion of privacy. If that information is out there for anyone to find, however, Rebecca easily convinces herself that it's okay to seek out her ex's "trail of crumbs" online. Since he has eliminated all reasons for her to contact him again, she has convinced herself that this is the only option she has to find out updated information about him. The simile "when the cursor's waiting like a foot tapping" creates a sense of urgency and anxiety in Rebecca's action, showing the extent to which her searching is also having a detrimental effect on her mental health.

●● It's not as if I'm going to go over there, drive past his house, lie on his lawn drunk and make a scene, harass him. It's just a few shreds of information I want. I supported him for a year, after all; surely I have a right to know whether he's finally submitted that thesis and where, incidentally, the graduation ceremony is going to be held. If he's joined a church group or a golf club, I need to paste that into my new identikit. I'll take any crumb, any trail, any vague lead.

**Related Characters:** Rebecca (speaker), Rebecca's ex-partner

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 112

### Explanation and Analysis

Kennedy uses Rebecca's description of what the protagonist believes to be a real crime to indicate to the reader that perhaps cyberstalking can be just as invasive and creepy as in-person stalking. Rebecca justifies her questionable online search into her ex's life as her "right," because she was his partner and financial supporter at one point. However, this brings up a significant question: after a breakup, how much information does a person have a right to know about their ex? In his absence, Rebecca has to adjust to life alone. Rather than accepting this difficult reality, Rebecca deludes herself by grasping onto "any vague lead" about how her ex is spending his time without her. "Identikit" refers to a picture of a person (often a suspect) composed from various witness descriptions. By framing her search efforts as similar to those the police undertake, Rebecca is able to justify her questionable actions by painting her ex as a kind of criminal who has wronged her, and herself as a sleuth rather than a desperate and invasive ex-girlfriend.

●● I don't know why they call it surfing. They should call it drowning.

Down through the layers of US family-tree pages and rambling travel blogs of dull strangers, I hit paydirt at last. My heart knocks in my chest. I find he's attended a conference but not presented a paper there. Thesis still unfinished, then. Too many emotional upheavals. His thoughts too scattered after a traumatic breakup, distracted by guilt and second thoughts. I'm settling into this train of thinking, hungry for its possibilities [...]

**Related Characters:** Rebecca (speaker), Rebecca's ex-partner

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 112

### Explanation and Analysis

Overwhelmed by the sheer number of irrelevant search results for her ex-partner's name, Rebecca finally finds something that seems applicable to him: his name on a list of conference attendees. This miniscule piece of information sends Rebecca spiraling. What could it possibly mean that he "attended a conference but not presented a paper there"? Rebecca reads too far into its potential meanings—which she does frequently throughout the story—in order to satisfy her need for information about her ex. She grieves the loss of him by ascribing the things she is feeling ("scattered" thoughts "after a traumatic breakup") to him instead. She assumed that because he didn't present a paper at this singular conference that it must mean he's given up on writing his thesis. This demonstrates just how distraught Rebecca is over her breakup, and how she is using the internet as a means of grasping for connections to a dead relationship and thereby distracting herself from her grief.

From this assumption, it's easy for Rebecca to make another: his "thesis [is] still unfinished" because he's consumed by regrets, unable to live with himself after dumping her. But amidst her wandering fantasies, Rebecca maintains an inkling of self-awareness, as she knows she's more "hungry for" the "possibilities" that these search results enable her to consider than she is "hungry for" the truth about how her ex-partner has been spending his time since he left her. This suggests that, on some level, Rebecca knows she's engaging in an unhealthy obsession and deluding herself into believing things about her ex with little to no evidence. However, it's clear by her continual searching that she is not ready to own up to her self-destructive behavior.

“It's ten past four. Jittery with caffeine and MSG, I snoop in the desk drawer Google has no qualms about throwing open for me. He's way down the ladder: coming thirty-fourth. That must be humbling. Thirty-fourth in a field of what—fifty or so? That would make anyone feel like a nameless nobody in a crowd, face blurry in the back of someone else's photo, reduced to nothing but pixels.

'See, you can reduce all this to just a system of binaries,' I remember him explaining [...] 'Just infinite combinations of zero and one.' I wonder if he understands that better now, struggling home in the middle of the pack. How it feels to be rendered, finally, to those low-resolution dots of shadow and light, a conglomeration made up of nothing and one.

**Related Characters:** Rebecca, Rebecca's ex-partner (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 114

### Explanation and Analysis

By comparing Rebecca's online stalking to "snoop[ing] in the desk drawer Google has no qualms about throwing open," Kennedy suggests that Rebecca's actions are just as invasive as a stranger going through the contents of another person's desk. It's interesting to note that in this metaphor, "Google" is the entity without "qualms" who "throw[s] open" Rebecca's window into juicy updates about her ex—Rebecca doesn't take responsibility for being the one to search for him online, clicking through pages of results. Instead, she rationalizes her behavior by blaming the search engine that readily provides her with said information. The memory of her ex-partner teaching her about binary code resurfaces after Rebecca considers how he must feel coming in "thirty-fourth in a field of [...] fifty or so," reveling in the pained mediocrity of her ex's life after her. She is using the very same device he once took the time to explain to her to search for any vague mention of him.

However, all the information Rebecca accesses about her ex-partner online will not change the fact that they are no longer a couple. She describes her ex-partner as reduced to that information that populates when she searches his name, as "a conglomeration made up of nothing and one." But that description is much more apt to describe the breakup itself—where there once was a unified couple, now exists "nothing" and "one." Rebecca is left alone in their previously shared apartment to mull over memories and indulge in fantasies that better explain their breakup, ultimately hurting herself emotionally rather than making efforts to cope with her pain and move on in a healthy

manner.

☛ See, this is the difference. Your partner dies, and everyone comes over with casseroles; they clean your house and hang out your washing. Your partner leaves, though, and you don't need nurturing apparently; you need avoiding. Your washing grows mouldy in the machine, your friends who told you that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger look at you uneasily, taking in your greasy hair and unwashed pyjamas, and leave you to go back to bed at 5p.m. Impossible to explain to them the humming, welcoming warmth of the screen later, the peaceful blue light, the endless possibility of an explanation that would make sense.

**Related Characters:** Rebecca (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 112

### Explanation and Analysis

Kennedy develops the theme of grief in this passage from "Cross-Country." Typically, when a person talks about grief, they are referencing the loss of a loved one through death. However, that definition is narrow and limiting, and Kennedy it through Rebecca's feelings about how her friends have treated her in the aftermath of her breakup. People going through a breakup or divorce experience the stages of grief much like those who are coping with a death. While that ex-partner might not be dead, their absence is still emotionally devastating and leaves a hole that is difficult to fill. As is the case in Rebecca's breakup, many relationships end with "no contact," indicating that neither partner will reach out to the other again. Therefore, Rebecca's ex-partner is, for all intents and purposes, "dead" to her. Perhaps her friends don't understand the severity of her loss, which illustrates why they haven't been comforting or present in her time of need.

☛ There's a short film looping in my head and, in it, I'm pounding easily along over a hilltop in an interclub event. I'm not even puffing as I overtake him, despite the spurt he puts on. He glances sideways; he sees it's me. I flash him a surprised-yet-calm smile of recognition, a flutter of the fingers, and pull away. Later, at the picnic, I'll turn when he approaches, and let that awkward moment stretch out. In some versions, I have a little trouble placing him so that there's the slightest hesitation before I say his name. Then I ask him how his thesis is going, and watch his face fall.

Any day now, I think as I lie heavy as a stone under the quilt, I'll go out and buy those shoes.

**Related Characters:** Rebecca (speaker), Rebecca's ex-partner

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 115

### Explanation and Analysis

After Rebecca finds her ex's name on an online cross-country running club roster, this is one of many cross-country running fantasies that plays like "a short film looping in [Rebecca's] head." Her fantasies have a cinematic quality, situating them as nothing but elaborate fiction. The reality is that Rebecca is sitting in "unwashed pyjamas" eating ramen out of Styrofoam cup, but her fantasy self is poised, committed to fitness. The disparity between these two versions of her demonstrates how absurd Rebecca's imagined scenarios have gotten. Her fantasies no longer serve the purpose of imagining what her ex is doing now that they're not together—rather, she crafts these imaginary scenarios to boost her own bruised ego.

The fantasies allow her to hurt his feelings in ways that she couldn't while they were together. For instance, she mentions in one version about "ask[ing] him how his thesis is going." The only purpose this could serve is to make Rebecca feel better by making her ex-partner feel worse about his professional failings. Her pride is wrapped up in these silly delusions, because it's only within them that she can hit him where it hurts most: his failed academic career. Rebecca can never actually address her ex about any of these things, so while it might be temporarily cathartic for her to indulge in self-delusion, ultimately it halts her progress in getting over her ex-partner. The last line of this quotation indicates that Rebecca knows she won't pursue cross-country running as a hobby—it is merely a passing fancy as she grieves her ex.

From the stack of discarded CDs, I pull out the country-and-western collection a girl group sold us one night at the pub. They were great, those girls. Big hair and pointy boots and, up close, plenty of in-your-face eyeliner and juicy-fruit lipstick as they laughed and signed my CD. He hadn't liked them. Didn't like the venue (too smoky), didn't like the audience (nobody there to converse with about Thesis), didn't even feel comfortable ordering a couple of beers at the bar. All twitchy about the two guys playing pool, the ones who might have even had a dance with me or at least found it in themselves to relax and enjoy some live music.

**Related Characters:** Rebecca (speaker), Rebecca's ex-partner

**Page Number:** 115

### Explanation and Analysis

Recalling a past date with her ex, Rebecca remembers qualities about him that she didn't like. While she found the country group (which he condescendingly referred to as "the Tammy Wynette Hormone Band") enjoyable, her ex-partner didn't enjoy anything about their night whatsoever. He complained the entire time and couldn't loosen up enough to order "a couple of beers at the bar." Kennedy repeats "didn't" without a clear, defined subject to start each clause describing Rebecca's ex. Although it's implied that Rebecca is remembering her ex, the lack of subject in these clauses detaches the opinion from the person who holds said opinion. Which version of her ex "didn't like" everything about that evening? Surely, it's not the version she's concocted through her cross-country running fantasies. This memory serves to remind Rebecca that maybe it's actually a good thing that they broke up. Upon reflection, Rebecca knows there were things about him that she couldn't stand, which will ultimately help her become more comfortable with his absence in her life going forward.

What do you do in a cross-country run? I have a hazy picture of splashing across streams and jumping fallen logs, slogging up muddy hillsides and crashing down the other side through rugged bush. [...] I wonder too if there's a back-up vehicle, some support staff who tail-gun the runners, just in case you fall into a puddle or a ditch and lie there overwhelmed with the pointlessness of it all, the ludicrous challenge you've imposed upon yourself; your foolish desperate need for purpose. I imagine being lifted from the first by kind hands, and given a bottle of Gatorade and a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. Oh, I would give in without even a pretence of fighting spirit if someone offered to drive me to the finish line. Who wouldn't?

**Related Characters:** Rebecca (speaker), Rebecca's ex-partner

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 117-118

### Explanation and Analysis

After countless fantasies about beating her ex-partner in a cross-country run, Rebecca comes to the realization that, in fact, she has no clue what happens in a cross-country race. As comforting as her fantasies might have been, in the end, they are futile. Rebecca's lack of understanding about cross-country running illustrates that it didn't matter what kind of information she found about her ex online, Rebecca was determined to imagine various scenarios about him. She wanted to play out scenarios in which she beat him at something—anything, really. Switching mid-paragraph back to second-person narration after first-person, Rebecca distances herself from the fantasies she's created. "You" become the person "impos[ing]" a "ludicrous challenge," rather than Rebecca. The reader thus becomes the one scrambling as Rebecca is distanced from her own desperate need for purpose, further demonstrating how deep in denial she is, and how eager to perpetuate her own self-delusion.

I wander into the study as he talks, my fingers absently, lovingly, grazing the keyboard of the computer. Double-click on the internet icon, go straight to the club site. Last week's results are posted, and there he is, placed forty-second now. A nagging cold, maybe. Slipping down the ladder into numb mediocrity, driving back to his new Ikea sofa and wonder bleakly whether he should open a couple of those cardboard boxes, pull out the old photos from where he's hidden them, and then, and then...swallow his pride to pick up the phone. He'll ring late, sheepish and sad, voice thick with tears. Ask me if I feel like some Thai takeaway, or just a bottle of wine. If we could talk. It seems so possible, so likely I feel my throat tighten in anticipation.

'Rebecca? Hello?' My boss is still on the line.

[...]

'I'll bring something in for morning tea,' I say.

So what I'm going to do, I'm thinking, since I have every right to, nothing to do with him, is ring the number and ask about joining. I'm looking for a phone number I can try, and I refresh the screen and start again.

**Related Characters:** Rebecca's boss, Rebecca (speaker),

Rebecca's ex-partner

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 118-119

### Explanation and Analysis

Rebecca's deterioration into all-out fantasy is halted by a phone call from her boss, who reminds her that she has used up all her sick leave and must return to work on Monday. She will have no more time devote to her fantasies when faced with the reality of work. Yet the pull of her imagination is so strong that she returns to yet another fantasy while still on the phone with her boss, showing the extent to which Rebecca is willing to neglect her professional life as well as her emotional wellbeing.

Although their relationship is over, Rebecca still wants to know the details of her ex-partner's life, yet details like whether or not he has a "nagging cold" that clearly aren't her business anymore. In this particular fantasy, Rebecca imagines them reconciling over "Thai takeaway" and "a bottle of wine." She has done such a thorough job of convincing herself that reconciliation is possible that she feels the physical affects of anticipation. It's clear that although Rebecca's boss has given her a reality-check, Rebecca is not ready to give up on her fantasies just yet, as she starts looking up the phone number for her ex's running club so she can join too.

☛☛ Just two small words again, going off in a blinding flash like a grenade. What they say is: *Under-fourteens*. I sit staring at them, dully open-mouthed. It's like being doused with a sheet of muddy water, like a final jarring stumble on wrenched ankles [...] Click the icon, close the screen. *Windows is shutting down*. I almost hear it, the decisive thud as it hits some imagined sill somewhere. I need a shower, and then I need a long cold drink of something at an outdoor table, but first I linger, watching the innocuous sky-blue screen. I'm waiting for the little melody it always plays before it sighs and switches itself off, that melancholy minor-key tune that tells you that whatever you've been watching, ready or not, it's time to roll the credits.

**Related Characters:** Rebecca (speaker), Rebecca's ex-partner

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 120

### Explanation and Analysis

The simile that begins this quotation compares reading "two small words" to seeing "blinding flash" from "a grenade." This clearly illustrates how jarring the next piece of information is for the protagonist, Rebecca. All the time that she has devoted to countless cross-country running fantasies has been for naught: the person whose name is on the running club roster isn't Rebecca's ex-partner—it is a child under age 14 who just happens to share a name with her ex. This realization emphasizes just how deeply Rebecca has been immersed in her delusional fantasies and self-destructive tendencies—although she knew her ex hated sports, she convinced herself otherwise just to give herself a conclusive answer about what her ex is up to now.

With another simile, Kennedy presents vivid imagery of Rebecca stumbling "on wrenched ankles" during a cross-country race. She is forced to stop daydreaming immediately, because the small seed of information from which her fantasies flourished doesn't exist. Her ex never joined a running club, she can never overtake him in a race, and she doesn't get to win. The internet gave her ample ambiguous information, which she twists to fit her desired outcome. "The decisive thud" she "almost hear[s]" as she clicks out of the internet browser indicates that Rebecca cannot grieve in this manner any longer and gives a sense of finality to her shattered fantasy. She has to face the facts: her ex is gone, and they aren't getting back together. While it might have been acceptable to grieve in her "unwashed pyjamas" for a while, the time has come "ready or not" for Rebecca to venture out into the world on her own, without the comfort of a partner or her fantasies to keep her company.



## 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.

## CROSS-COUNTRY

Rebecca considers potential meanings or purposes of the internet. She reflects that its language reels her in and provides with a “portal” or “doorway” when she’s “groping around in the dark” for one. When Rebecca feels that her life has fallen apart, internet links seem to provide her with the “linked hands, connections, [and] answers” she’s craving, at that the internet is like a “safety net.” Having “all the time in the world now,” she uses that time to “point and click” online.

Continuing with an abstract train of thought, Rebecca thinks that one feels “peeled” and “flayed” when “it happens.” She resents the people who have told her to “get out and move on,” as well as the text messages from friends with cliché words of encouragement like “You were too good for him anyway” that have accumulated on her phone. Rebecca’s friends have told her to “Call anytime [...] if you need to talk,” but she doesn’t want to talk—instead, she wants someone else to give her answers.

Rather than enduring empty sympathies about her breakup, Rebecca prefers the distraction offered by her computer screen. She mulls over the traces people leave behind on the internet. No matter the precautions a person takes, they might appear in the background of a photo, or their name might be listed on some team roster. There’s a treasure trove of search results available for anyone’s name, just waiting to be clicked on.

Sitting amongst “rejected CDs” and “the looted stack of cookbooks,” the Rebecca reflects on her ex-partner. He has moved out of their shared apartment. Expressing a “grim determination to sever all ties,” her ex-partner has even gone through the time-consuming process of forwarding his subscriptions and superannuation statements. He’s made certain she has no reason to contact him.

*From Rebecca’s search for seeks out “linked hands, connections, [and] answers” on the internet, the reader can infer that she is going through a challenging emotional time, and that her instability during this difficult period in her life leads her to using the internet as both a comfort and a distraction.*



*Judging by the text messages Rebecca’s friends have sent here, it’s clear that a breakup is what’s left Rebecca feeling vulnerable and alone. Her friends’ trite phrases only function to make her feel worse, as she is critical of that type of empty advice. She has no interest in turning to her friends for comfort because this would mean having to rehash the events leading up to the breakup. While Rebecca isn’t ready to talk about it, she is ready to see if there is a better explanation for why she and her ex broke up.*



*Like Hansel and Gretel leaving a trail of crumbs behind them, anyone who uses the internet leaves traces to find: browsing history, ill-timed photographs, and name mentions on social media and in publications. Rebecca posits this information as free reign in order to downplay the potential unease and sense of privacy invasion that might accompany Googling oneself or someone else.*



*By preemptively forwarding his mail to a new address, Rebecca’s ex-partner leaves her with no room for doubt about whether they will have contact post-breakup. He clearly has no intention of speaking to her again, let alone getting back together.*



Rebecca is “reduced” to Googling him anyway. Typing his name into the search engine, she feels many complicated post-breakup emotions. Bitter that he’s taken the good sheets and cookbooks with him, she asserts that cyberstalking isn’t as invasive as showing up at his house unannounced. To convince herself of this, she claims that her having financially supported him through graduate school gives her the right to know what he’s doing and if he’s finally completed his thesis.

Swaddled in the quilt her ex-partner left behind, Rebecca wishes there was a chat room in which she could hear his voice again. She misses the way he spoke to her during happier times in their relationship, before he concluded their relationship wasn’t salvageable: “I think it would be best to make a clean break.”

It’s the middle of the night before Rebecca really digs into the search results. Feeling more like she’s “drowning” than “surfing” the internet, Rebecca swims through results that have nothing to do with her ex-partner whatsoever. At last, she finds what she’s been looking for. Her ex went to a conference but didn’t present his thesis there. Hanging onto that tiny piece of information, she considers the possibilities. Perhaps he couldn’t handle the stress of academia after “a traumatic breakup,” probably because he’s been too “distracted by guilt and second thoughts.”

“Hungry” for the relief this train of thought brings, Rebecca eats ramen out of a Styrofoam cup. Her single-serving meal leaves a bad taste in her mouth as she dramatically considers the ramifications of this kind of “habitual loneliness.”

*Cyberstalking is depicted as something Rebecca is “reduced” to, demonstrating her feelings of helplessness amidst her grief. Rebecca’s ex has given her no excuse to contact him again, and she uses this to imply that she has no other choice but to search for him online. Rebecca furthers justifies this to herself by claiming that peeking into her ex’s online life isn’t as bad as in-person stalking.*



*Rebecca experiences conflicting memories about her ex, demonstrating the difficult emotions that one often feels in the midst of a breakup. She now has to conceive of her ex in terms of who he was during their relationship alongside the pain he’s caused her, and it’s difficult to hold such disparate versions of a person at one time. Rebecca simultaneously misses the sweet way he used to speak to her while remembering how he decisively dumped her—nostalgia for their relationship intermingles with the reality of his absence in her life.*



*Rather than deal with the pain of her ex-partner’s absence head-on, Rebecca sifts through search results for her ex’s name. By inserting herself into his life through her delusions of why he may have stepped back from academia (when it’s not even clear that he’s done so), Rebecca finds some comfort in believing, even if just for a minute, that he’s as shattered by their breakup and she is and that it’s impacting his life too. Given that Rebecca feels like she’s “drowning” as she does this, the reader can infer that cyber-stalking her ex in this manner is not only an invasion of his privacy, but is harmful to Rebecca as well, as it isolates her and prevents her from moving on with her life.*



*Rebecca’s meager dinner demonstrates her unwillingness to adjust to being single again. Instead of cooking a meal for one, she resorts to eating microwavable noodles from a cup. Unable to move forward yet, Rebecca relies on her fantasies to curb her fears of living as a spinster in “habitual loneliness.”*



Grief isn't always about dying, but it is always about ending. Rebecca critiques how people respond to and qualify others' grief. When a loved one dies, people will knock down the door with condolences and casseroles. But when a loved one actively chooses to leave (like through a breakup), people aren't neighborly in the slightest. What she really needs is for someone to come over and help her with laundry and leave her a hot meal. Instead, she gets avoided.

Avoiding interactions that would only make her feel worse, Rebecca turns to the internet for "the endless possibility of an explanation that would make sense." Seemingly dissatisfied with the explanation her ex-partner gave her for their breakup, she chooses to deny his reasons in hopes she'll find one with which she can live.

Rebecca sees her ex-partner's name listed on a roster for a sports team. Upon further inspection she sees that the roster is for a **cross-country running** club. Staring at the screen, Rebecca considers what this all could mean. She fantasizes that he's left his doctorate program, favoring a new social and more active lifestyle. Maybe he's punishing himself for something or running away from a past decision.

Absorbed in her absurd daydreams, Rebecca, unwashed hair and all, laments how humbling her ex's running results must be for him, coming in "thirty-fourth in a field of what—fifty or so." Her memory is jogged, remembering when her ex-partner explained how her computer operates with binary code. She ponders over "how it feels to be rendered," like a pixelated image or binary code, as "a conglomeration made up of nothing and one."

Julie from work calls, reminding Rebecca that life does indeed exist outside of the grief she's currently experiencing. She divulges to Julie her new plan to join a **cross-country running** club. Julie doesn't take Rebecca's new commitment to athleticism seriously, even when Rebecca proclaims, "I'm going out today to buy the shoes."

*Kennedy presents the disparity in the reception of different types of grief as unacceptable. Even though Rebecca's ex-partner is still alive, the loss of their relationship is a kind of death in itself, and the finality of their breakup makes her ex effectively "dead" to her since he cut off all contact. Therefore, she deserves to receive loving support from friends and family.*



*Rebecca wants to play out these potential explanations for her breakup, as they provide a distraction and play into her delusion that she can create more definitive closure than her ex gave her. The internet provides this "endless possibility" because the information it houses is ambiguous and potentially infinite, leaving Rebecca with a glut of results to sift through and plenty of room to fantasize.*



*Seeing her ex-partner's name on a sports roster plants the seed from which Rebecca's self-delusion grows. Though her fantasies about her ex's motivations have no basis in reality, Rebecca paints a picture for herself of what his life might look like without her, though it is questionable whether it's healthy or ethical for a person to have access to that information about an ex after a breakup.*



*Instead of feeling sorry for herself in her current disheveled state, Rebecca amusingly tries to empathize with how her ex-partner must feel about his lackluster running performance. She draws a parallel between binary code her ex once told her about and how it feels when a relationship ends: "a conglomeration made up of nothing and one." Where there once was a relationship is "nothing," and she now must adjust to being "one" on her own again.*



*Rebecca's real reason for wanting to join a running club is to have contact with her ex. However, she doesn't divulge this embarrassing truth. Committed to her fantasy, Rebecca tells Julie that she wants to join for a new challenge, yet she adds more obstacles to achieving her new goal by stating that she has to buy new shoes before she can hit the pavement. This suggests that although Rebecca thinks she wants to reconnect with her ex, following through with her fantasies would be too intimidating and painful.*



More than just fantasizing about what her ex-partner is up to, Rebecca casts herself in the starring role of various impressive **cross-country running** scenarios. She imagines overtaking her ex with ease and poise he has never seen before. In some versions, she asks him about his thesis and “watch[es] his face fall.”

Though Rebecca develops complex, far-fetched fantasies about running, they never get any closer to reality. Her intentions to join a **cross-country running** club are lackluster at best as she “lie[s] heavy as a stone under the quilt,” claiming that “any day now” she’ll “go out and buy those shoes.”

Going through some of the CDs her ex-partner left behind, Rebecca finds the CD of a band they once saw together. Recalling the country western band’s “juicy fruit lipstick” and “in-your-face eyeliner,” she feels like she’s right back in the smoky venue her ex couldn’t stop complaining about. He couldn’t loosen up to enjoy himself at all. When she played the CD afterward, he’d sarcastically refer to them as “that Tammy Wynette Hormone Band,” claiming they sounded like “three cats being strangled.”

Though her ex’s estimation of the “Tammy Wynette Hormone Band” is unfavorable, Rebecca really enjoys their music. Listening to their “high lonesome sound,” Rebecca thinks about the message they wrote her when they signed her CD and what the girls from the band might be doing now. She knows that despite their sorrowful music, they probably aren’t spending their evenings in sweatpants eating noodles from a cup.

Rebecca’s imagination shifts from the Tammy Wynette Hormone Band to yet another fantasy about beating her ex-partner in a race. She has more than just an improved physique to look forward to. That’s only an added bonus to her main purpose: “mak[ing] him eat [her] dust.” Once she musters up the energy to go buy the shoes, that is.

*In her fantasies of cross-country races, Rebecca has the confidence and skill to overtake her ex. Over-estimating her running aptitude, Rebecca relies on these delusions to help her come to grips with her ex leaving her. In her head, she even subtly insults her ex by mentioning his unpublished thesis, suggesting that she is perhaps motivated by revenge and spite rather than a genuine desire to rekindle a relationship with him.*



*This passage demonstrates that Rebecca is at least partially aware of how far-fetched her fantasies really are—she has no intention of actually buying running shoes to start this new exercise regime.*



*Rebecca’s memory of her ex complaining about the concert forces her to consider all the ways in which the breakup might be a good thing. Her ex-partner’s flaws are presented alongside Rebecca’s fantasies about him, indicating her struggle to integrate the facts about who her ex really is and the version of him that exists only in her delusions.*



*Rebecca finds some solace listening to the country group’s music, which gives her another topic to ruminate over besides her endless loop of cross-country running fantasies. She figures that these women, powerful with their “juicy fruit lip stick” and “in-your-face eyeliner,” aren’t spending 24 hours a day in pajamas, lamenting the loss of a past lover. Rebecca’s acknowledgement of this suggests that she is becoming increasingly aware of how self-destructive her recent behavior has been.*



*Rebecca’s thoughts shift easily from the women from the band back to her ex-partner—clearly, her memory of his poor attitude on the night of the concert isn’t enough to dissuade her from obsessing over him. However, in this particular iteration of her cross-country running fantasies, Rebecca’s improved physical prowess allows her to beat her ex in the race. By “mak[ing] him eat [her] dust in this race, Rebecca gets to play out how it would feel to be the one with power in their breakup, to finally beat him, however that may look.*



After yet another **cross-country running** fantasy plays like a movie in her head, Rebecca realizes that she actually has no clue what goes on during a cross-country race. Falling into a philosophical reverie about a person's "desperate need for purpose," Rebecca determines that given the option, she'd definitely let someone drive her to the finish line. This indulgent line of thinking is interrupted by a phone call from her boss, calling to remind her that her sick leave is up and she's due back to work on Monday.

*Rebecca doesn't know the first thing about cross-country running. After all that time spent refreshing her ex's running results online, she didn't bother herself with researching anything about the sport. This is what indicates that cross-country running functions symbolically in this story as an escape from grief—it doesn't matter what activity Rebecca ascribes to her ex as long as there is room for her to project her fantasies about him onto it. However, by calling to remind Rebecca about work on Monday, her boss serves as a reminder that she can't afford to devote any more time to these useless fantasies.*



Rebecca, returning easily to another detailed reconciliation fantasy about her ex-partner, assures her boss that she'll be back on Monday with "something for morning tea." She refreshes the **running** club's website. Looking at last week's results, she sees that her ex-partner's name is now ranked 42nd. She assumes that this "numb mediocrity" will send him immediately to the cardboard boxes in which he's stowed away photos and tokens of their relationship. Rebecca is so lost in these hopes that she can almost hear the phone ring. Though, in the end, she's entirely aware the unhealthy extent "to which we'll invent what we need."

*In her most unrealistic fantasy yet, Rebecca imagines her ex-partner reaching out to reconcile. Consumed by this revived hope for their relationship, she swears that she can hear her phone ring. While these fantasies might have provided some temporary comfort while she grieves her breakup, ultimately, it's clear that these imagined scenarios hinder her ability to move on.*



Then, Rebecca remembers a key piece of information: her ex-partner hates sports. Not only was her ex-partner not an athlete, but he also refused to "do anything he wasn't an expert at." Refreshing the **running** club results page again, Rebecca's eyes catch the words that title the roster: "Under-fourteens." Dumbfounded, she feels like she has been "doused with a sheet of muddy water" or has taken a "jarring stumble." She has the sensation of racing through a long expanse and finally "skid[ding] to a halt" and feeling a "merciful and unexpected breeze" on her face.

*The strength of her fantasies overpowers Rebecca's logical side—she has been following the running results not of her ex, but of a child who shares his name. She recalls that her ex hated playing any sports, so she should have concluded much earlier that he would never have joined a running club. Finding out that she's been following another person's running results jars Rebecca from her cycle of self-pity and self-delusion. Expressed through vivid descriptions of running, Rebecca's fantasies come to a shrieking halt and she is forced to face the facts: her relationship is over and there's nothing she can do to change it.*



Rebecca abruptly exits out of her internet browser and shuts down her computer. She reflects that, "I need a shower, and then I need a long cold drink of something at an outdoor table." But before this, she lingers at the computer, waiting for the "little melody" the machine plays before it turns off. Rebecca thinks to herself that this sound signifies the end of "whatever you've been watching"—"ready or not, it's time to roll the credits."

*Finally sick of her own self-indulgent fantasies, Rebecca shuts down her computer and heads out for a drink. Rebecca realizes that she can no longer justify entertaining her implausible, imagined scenarios, and that it's time to stop grieving the end of her relationship. Whether or not she's truly ready to do so is unclear, but pulling herself out of the harmful cycle of cyber-stalking and self-delusion is a crucial first step.*





## HOW TO CITE

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