Let the Great World Spin

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF COLUMN MCCANN

Colum McCann was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1965, the son of a newspaper editor. McCann himself became a journalist by the age of 17, quickly thereafter taking on his own newspaper column. When he was 21 he moved from Ireland to the United States, where he planned to write a novel. After an initial failed attempt to do so, however, he decided to ride his bicycle across the country in order to enliven his emotional capacities. Soon after, he found himself in Texas, where he worked as an outdoor leader on wilderness trips for at-risk youth. He went on to graduate from the University of Texas at Austin with degrees in English and history. In the early 1990s McCann moved to New York, where he currently lives with his wife and three children. He has penned six novels and three story collections, won numerous awards, and is known internationally for his literary work as well as for his involvement with charities and nonprofits. Perhaps most notably, he is a co-founder of the global nonprofit Narrative 4, a story-exchange program that seeks to transcend stereotypes and barriers through the use of storytelling and the idea of "radical empathy."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Let the Great World Spin makes use of a vast array of political and cultural events that took place in the 1970s. At the forefront of the book is Philippe Petit's tightrope walk between the Twin Towers on August 7, 1974. In the background of the novel is the political climate: notably Richard Nixon's involvement in the Watergate scandal—when the Democratic National Committee's Watergate office was broken into and subsequently covered up by the president's administration—which lead to his resignation on August 9, 1974. Meanwhile, the Vietnam War was dragging on despite the fact that America had withdrawn its troops, and thus still greatly occupied the country's public consciousness. Whether or not they blatantly reveal themselves, all of these political tensions and events are at play in the background of each story in *Let the Great World Spin*. And although the book does not explicitly address it, the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 is yet another relevant historical event, since the novel engages so closely with the Twin Towers and what they signified for Americans.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The novel's title is taken from "Locksley Hall," a poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. This poem includes the line, "Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change." McCann breaks this line into two parts in order to title two of the sections chronicling the tightrope walker's experience (one is called "Let the Great World Spin Forever Down" and the other is called "The Ringing Grooves of Change"). Similarly, Tennyson's poem itself draws from seven lengthy poems in Arabic written in the sixth century called the "Suspended Poems." Though the novel's title is taken directly from the Tennyson poem, *Let the Great World Spin* pulls thematic inspiration from a question articulated in the "Suspended Poems," namely: "Is there any hope that this desolation can bring me solace?" It is also worth noting that *Let the Great World Spin* is McCann's second novel about New York City; the first is called *This Side of Brightness* and takes place in the city beginning at the turn of the 20th century, when the first subway tunnels were dug. As such, the project of capturing the city—especially during its defining moments—emerges as a clear goal of McCann's work.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Let the Great World Spin
- **When Written:** In the years following September 11, 2001
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** June 23, 2009
- **Literary Period:** 21st Century literary fiction
- **Genre:** Realistic fiction, poetic realism, short story sequence
- **Setting:** New York City in the 1970s
- **Climax:** Because there are so many different stories in the novel, there is not simply one traditional climax. But there are two events in particular that are especially significant to the book's shape: the first is the tightrope walk and its eventual completion, and the second is the car accident that kills both Corrigan and Jazzlyn. Both of these moments greatly influence many of the book's storylines, either directly or indirectly, ultimately serving as plot points around which everything else is organized.
- **Antagonist:** The prejudices and stereotypes that wedge themselves between fellow humans and keep them from truly connecting with one another.
- **Point of View:** The point of view varies in each section, variously including first person and third person omniscient narration.

EXTRA CREDIT

An Author's Motivation. *Let the Great World Spin* is Colum McCann's attempt to respond to and perhaps reframe the personal, national, and global grief over the attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. When the Towers fell,

McCann's father-in-law, who worked on the fifty-ninth floor of the north tower, made it out of the building safely even as the other tower had already fallen. He walked to McCann's apartment on Seventy-First Street—far uptown—and immediately threw away his clothes, which smelled of smoke. However, he left his shoes by the door, and they remained there until, weeks later, McCann moved them to a cupboard in his writing office, where they remained as he composed *Let the Great World Spin*.

A Changed Ending. Colum McCann originally wanted to rewrite history with *Let the Great World Spin* by having the tightrope walker fall from the wire. It seemed, he thought, in keeping with the current political context of George W. Bush's administration. However, the more he researched the walk—and the more invested he became in the way it could function within the confines of a novel—the more he found himself swept away by the lives of the people on the ground who watched the walker. When Barack Obama was elected into office, McCann decided to infuse the book with a slight sense of hope and optimism, ultimately trying to steer it "toward a point of recovery."

PLOT SUMMARY

Let the Great World Spin is a polyphonic novel, which means that it is written from multiple different perspectives, ultimately following a large cast of characters. Unconcerned with forging a linear storyline, the book loosely centers itself around Philippe Petit's **tightrope walk** between the Twin Towers on August 7, 1974, though not all of the stories directly relate to this event. Rather, they often simply overlap with it, even if just for a moment, creating something of a mosaic held together by the unifying event. At the same time, some of the stories, however disparate, actually do link up with one another. This is often brought to bear through the use of several key characters whose stories frequently stand out and resurface in the many others. Corrigan, an Irishman who becomes a Catholic monk working in the Bronx, is an example of this. He occupies a great deal of the novel, whether directly or indirectly, and the majority of the stories engage with either his life working with and befriending prostitutes in the Bronx or with his eventual death in a car crash. The other narratives—the stories that have nothing to do with Corrigan—are held together by the tightrope walk. In this way, *Let the Great World Spin* is a deeply thematic novel that presents a wide range of characters and stories without forcing them into chronological or situational uniformity. As a result, the book mimics one of the beautiful facts of human existence, as stated by its epigraph: "All the lives we could live, all the people we will never know, never will be, they are everywhere. That is what the world is" (Aleksander Hemon, *The Lazarus Project*).

Ciaran and John Andrew Corrigan are brothers from Dublin, Ireland. Ciaran tells the story of their upbringing, detailing his brother's—whom everyone just calls "Corrigan"—early interest in religion. Raised by a single mother, the two boys share a room, where Ciaran hears his little brother reciting prayers every night until morning. The prayers are fervent and often improvised, and it becomes clear that Corrigan has established a meaningful and unique relationship with religion, one that is entirely his own despite its foundation in Catholicism. Before long, Corrigan begins offering charity to the various drunks and homeless people of Dublin. He gives away his own blankets and eventually begins visiting the dingy pubs in order to get drunk, though he is still only twelve. After a while—and after his mother catches him and makes him promise to stop—it becomes clear that Corrigan drinks for a very particular and unique reason; he is not interested so much in getting drunk, but rather preoccupied with the idea that in drinking he can suffer through the common alcoholic's pain, thereby taking on the burdens of the people around him. He sits in the pub and listens to the long difficult stories told by drunks and unfortunate souls thrown into poverty. Even as he slowly stops drinking with them, he continues frequenting the local spots, thinking himself helpful in a spiritual way. Later, when the boys' mother dies, their father appears in the hospital. Corrigan refuses to embrace him, angry that he abandoned the family. The night before their mother's funeral, Corrigan gives away a closet-full of his father's old suits to Dublin's homeless people.

After selling the house, Corrigan begins studying the teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi, a thirteenth-century Italian friar and preacher. As he ages he becomes more and more devoted to religion, and upon turning nineteen, Corrigan attends religious school at Emo College, where he pours himself into theological study. Before finishing, however, he moves to Brussels and joins a group of monks, referred to as the Order, and vows to live a life of chastity, poverty, and obedience. This eventually leads him to the Bronx in New York City, where the Order assigns him to live as something like a missionary.

Not long thereafter, Ciaran also decides to emigrate to America after the Northern Ireland Conflict moves south and violence enters Dublin. He moves into Corrigan's very small apartment in the heart of government housing projects in the Bronx, where prostitution, drug abuse, and violence is seemingly ever-present. Corrigan, he finds, has established close relationships with a number of prostitutes, especially a woman named Tillie and her teenage daughter Jazzlyn (a mother herself). The women stream in and out of his apartment in order to use the bathroom between clients; much to Ciaran's dismay, Corrigan leaves the door unlocked so that the women can easily access the facilities. This lenience has not made him popular with the community's pimps, and he is often beaten up or threatened. During the day Corrigan drives a van full of elderly people to and from their nursing home, allowing them some recreational

time outside the establishment. In doing so, he meets Adelita, a nurse at the home who, to his own horror, he falls in love with. They start a tentative but close romantic relationship as Corrigan struggles with his fidelity to God and his original vows of celibacy.

One day while the prostitutes are working underneath the expressway there is a large police sting in which the women are rounded up and taken to jail. Tillie and Jazzlyn, it turns out, have a separate outstanding warrant for theft and are thus held longer than normal. Incensed, Corrigan drives his van downtown to the courthouse to advocate for them. Eventually Jazzlyn is released, but on the drive home she and Corrigan are rear-ended on FDR, the parkway leading to the Bronx. Jazzlyn is killed when she is jettisoned through the windshield; Corrigan is rushed to the hospital, where he soon dies in the company of Adelita and Ciaran.

At this point, *Let the Great World Spin* pivots to focus on a group of women who meet frequently as a support group, as they are all mourning the loss of their sons to the Vietnam War. Claire, a wealthy woman living on the Upper East Side, hosts them in her extravagant apartment for the first time. She is worried about the impression her wealth will have on the rest of the group; one of the previous meetings was, after all, at a woman named Gloria's apartment in the Bronx, in the same government housing project where Corrigan lived. However, the women dwell on the markers of Claire's wealth as they usher themselves into her apartment because one of them, Marcia, is in the middle of telling a story about seeing the tightrope walker. On the ferry into Manhattan from Staten Island she spotted him, and now the conversation overtakes the meeting, distracting everyone from the immediate particulars of their surroundings. Eventually this bothers Claire because she isn't given the chance to tell the women about her son Joshua, which is one of the purposes of their visit. Soon enough the conversation turns toward Joshua, though, and Claire is able to show them his room.

Back on the FDR, we find ourselves inside Lara Liveman's head as she relives riding in the passenger seat of the car that hit Corrigan's van. She relates the crash: she and her husband, Blaine, are on their way out of the city after several days of intense partying. Smoking marijuana as he drives, Blaine clips the backside of Corrigan's van. They remain unharmed as the van spins out of control. They drive on for a moment before stopping up ahead to survey the crash from afar. Afraid of the consequences, they flee, although Lara has major misgivings and cannot seem to banish the image of Corrigan's facial expression during the crash from her head. Blaine, on the other hand, is confident that it was not his fault, and urges Lara to move on. This proves impossible, ultimately driving Lara back to the city several days later, where she goes to the hospital in search of information about the car crash. Thinking she is Corrigan's relative, a hospital worker gives her his possessions, including his license. She then finds herself at his apartment in the Bronx, claiming that she's come from the hospital to return Corrigan's belongings. She meets Ciaran as he is about to leave to attend Jazzlyn's funeral. She accompanies him and, afterward, Ciaran finds out that Lara was in the car that took his brother's life. Confused and grief-stricken, they go to a bar together.

In the wake of Jazzlyn's death, Tillie worries over her grandchildren who have been suddenly orphaned. Because she took complete blame for the robbery she and Jazzlyn committed—a plea that got Jazzlyn out of jail and, by chance, sent her on the path toward her death—Tillie is sentenced to eight months in prison. She desperately wants to know who is caring for her granddaughters, wanting them to come visit her. In self-defense she brutally injures another inmate, an action that adds eighteen months to her sentence. She stops eating, becomes increasingly depressed, and decides that she will hang herself from a pipe in the bathrooms. Some days before she does this, though, her grandchildren are brought in by their new caretaker to visit her. Tillie vaguely recognizes the caretaker as someone from the Bronx. Tillie is briefly happy, but when the visitation session comes to an abrupt end, she feels even more desperate than before. Reflecting on her wrongs and the great many injustices in her life, she says goodbye to the world, resolving once and for all to end her stay on earth.

Once again, *Let the Great World Spin* returns to the fateful day of August 7, 1974, the day that Corrigan and Jazzlyn died and Philippe Petit walked the tightrope between the Twin Towers. This time we are afforded the perspective of Claire's husband, Judge Soderberg, as he sentences Tillie and then immediately after hears Petit's case. This brings multiple narratives together, vicariously connecting Claire's story with Tillie's—and therefore Corrigan's and Jazzlyn's, too—and, of course, finally bringing these lives into close contact with Philippe Petit.

Beyond these principle events, the book is also pervaded by small set pieces in which Petit's walk—or his preparation for it—briefly takes center stage. McCann also weaves his way through various backstories and often doubles back on the same moment in order to provide a different perspective. In the book's last section, for example, Corrigan's lover, Adelita, reminisces about the morning after he first spent the night at her house. Another chapter in this section takes us through Gloria's upbringing in the South and what led her to New York City; we also return to Claire's apartment—this time from Gloria's perspective—to witness the tense moments in which Claire begs Gloria to stay with her after the other women leave, offering to pay her and thereby making an unfortunate implication about how she views their friendship in terms of race. In the end, Claire accompanies Gloria to the Bronx just as Tillie's grandchildren (Jazzlyn's children) are being taken away by social services; in a moment of clarity, Gloria declares that she will adopt the two little girls. The novel concludes by

moving forward in time to when Jaslyn—one of the two little girls adopted by Gloria—is an adult visiting New York. Gloria has passed away, and Jaslyn is visiting Claire—who became Gloria's lifelong friend—on her deathbed. She keeps a photograph of Petit on the high wire. She looks at it often, slipping it from the tissue paper it's wrapped in and thinking about the fact that such an act of beauty happened on the same day her mother died.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Tightrope Walker (Phillipe Petit) – A performance artist from France who, after years of training, sneaks to the top of the World Trade Center and walks across a tightrope strung between the north and south towers. Although this character remains unnamed in the novel, he is based on Philippe Petit, who did in fact walk between the Towers on August 7, 1974 (the same day that the event takes place in the book).

John Andrew Corrigan ("Corrigan") – A Catholic monk from Ireland who moves to the Bronx in order to serve in the government housing projects as a religious missionary. Known as "Corrigan," he has a complex conception of what it means to be religiously faithful. He is interested first and foremost in the struggle of everyday life, thinking that the purest kind of belief arises from the most difficult and seemingly godless moments. From a very young age he displays a compassion for those less fortunate than him, and this compassion often drives him to put himself within the same context as the people he hopes to help, ultimately thinking that he might be able to ease their burdens by struggling alongside them. As an adult in New York he becomes a loyal and dedicated friend to many of the Bronx's prostitutes, frequently bringing them water and allowing them to use his bathroom between their clients. His honor to his religious Order—and the various vows of celibacy and dedication he has taken—is ultimately challenged when he falls in love with Adelita shortly before dying as the victim of a hit-and-run car crash on the way back from trying to get two prostitutes, Jazzlyn and Tillie Henderson, out of jail.

Ciaran Corrigan – Corrigan's older brother. Less religiously-inclined than his younger sibling, he is often skeptical of Corrigan's unshakeable trust in drunks and prostitutes. When he moves to New York City to escape the violence of the Northern Ireland Conflict, he stays in Corrigan's small apartment and is initially appalled by the way prostitutes stream in and out of the room. After it becomes clear that he won't be able to convince his brother to move somewhere else—somewhere safer and cleaner—he begins to understand the humanity that Corrigan sees lurking at the heart of the Bronx. Ciaran slowly gets to know the prostitutes that Corrigan has befriended and finds himself capable of empathizing with them, finally able to view them as humans in a tough situation rather than as misguided and ill-intentioned criminals.

Tillie Henderson – A prostitute living in the same building as Corrigan (whom she has a crush on) in the Bronx. Originally from Cleveland, she is a career prostitute, having begun when she was fifteen. She is remarkably intelligent and does not tolerate disrespect. She takes the blame for a robbery she committed with her daughter, Jazzlyn, and is subsequently sentenced to eight months in prison, which later turns into eighteen months. Distraught over her daughter's death, she resolves to kill herself in prison.

Jazzlyn Henderson – Tillie's daughter, a beautiful young woman who seems to fascinate all who meet her. Like her mother, she becomes a prostitute at an early age. Jazzlyn also develops a serious heroin addiction, a habit that her mother dislikes but ultimately does not interfere with. Upon being released from jail after her mother takes the wrap for their joint robbery, Jazzlyn is killed as a passenger in Corrigan's van when they are hit on the FDR Parkway. A mother herself, she leaves behind two little girls, Jaslyn and Janice.

Adelita – A nurse at a nursing home where Corrigan picks up elderly patients to give them time outside. She has three young children and is from Guatemala, where her husband died and where she trained to be a doctor (when she moved to the United States to escape the Guatemalan Civil War, though, her university credentials didn't transfer). Seeing an assortment of bruises on Corrigan's arm one day, she diagnoses him with TTP, a blood disorder. In the time following this diagnosis, she massages Corrigan's arms to get the blood moving, and this is how the two establish their romantic connection. Adelita and Corrigan fall in love, though Corrigan's vows of celibacy make their relationship difficult until their time together is tragically cut short by Corrigan's death.

Claire Soderberg – A wealthy woman living on the Upper East Side of New York City. She belongs to an informal group of mothers who have lost sons in the Vietnam War. The group meets frequently in each other's apartments to talk about their boys. Claire is a rather lonely, nervous woman who sorely misses her son, Joshua. Although her relationship with her husband is strong and relatively fulfilling, she feels more or less alone with her grief and is desperate for someone she might share it with.

Gloria – A member of the support group for grieving mothers that Claire belongs to. She also lives in the same government housing project as Corrigan, Tillie, and Jazzlyn. Gloria grew up in the South, the daughter of modest working class parents. When she goes to Syracuse for college, she leaves her family and Southern life behind, eventually marrying, divorcing, and moving to New York City, where she marries once again and has three sons, all of whom die in the Vietnam War. When Gloria sees Jazzlyn's daughters, Janice and Jaslyn, being taken by child services, she decides to adopt them. Gloria raises them

and maintains a lifelong friendship with Claire.

Lara Liveman – A painter from a wealthy family who until recently enjoyed moderate success in New York's art scene. After several years of partying and experiencing the free love movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, she and her husband, Blaine, decide that their drug habits are destroying them, so they move outside the city to a small cabin. In isolation they work studiously on painting in the style of the 1920s, harkening back to the era and living their lives accordingly. Lara is one of the passengers of the car that hits Corrigan's van on the FDR Parkway. In a moment of panic, she tells Blaine to drive away from the scene of the accident despite her own misgivings. Afterward, she has an overwhelmingly guilty conscience and is left feeling that she must atone for her wrongs. She eventually ends up leaving Blaine for Ciaran, who she later marries and moves to Dublin with.

Blaine – Lara's husband and driver of the car that hits Corrigan's van. Having garnered attention and praise for his artwork, he is greatly motivated by recognition and praise. He is especially taken by drugs, despite the fact that he and Lara are supposedly trying to live a sober lifestyle. Unlike his wife, he fails to see the point of feeling remorseful about having fled the accident on the FDR.

Judge Solomon Soderberg – Claire's husband and a judge in downtown Manhattan. He is well-respected in the legal community and is a relatively good judge despite his rather jaded, discouraged approach. He believes deeply in order and greatly respects the law. These days, though, his primary concern seems to be getting through each day, efficiently hearing and sentencing one case after another. Unlike Claire, he does not wish to talk about his son's death.

Sam Peters ("The Kid") – An eighteen year-old computer hacker who works for a small company in California that builds file-sharing programs and that is also contracted by the United States Pentagon to perform various hacks. In order to settle a bet about whether or not the tightrope walker will fall, the group hacks telephone lines so that they can make calls to payphones within a close radius to the Towers and ask pedestrians to tell them what is happening. The Kid is quiet and shy and merely listens as the rest of the group talks to the people in New York. Eventually, though, he breaks his silence to speak to a woman on the other end of the payphone named Sable, to whom he finds himself attracted.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Joshua Soderberg – Claire and Solomon's son, who died in the Vietnam War, where he served as a computer operator tasked with tallying the names of dead soldiers.

Marcia – A woman who belongs to the same support group for grieving mothers as Claire. On her way to Claire's apartment on the Staten Island Ferry she sees the tightrope walker.

Janet – Another woman in Claire's support group for grieving mothers. She is hostile toward Jacqueline, one of the other women in the group.

Jacqueline – Yet another member of the support group for grieving mothers and the recipient of Janet's impatience.

Janice – One of Jazzlyn's daughters and Tillie's granddaughters. She is raised by Gloria and eventually joins the Army.

Jaslyn – One of Jazzlyn's daughters and Tillie's granddaughters. She is raised by Gloria, and as an adult she works for a nonprofit organization in Arkansas that helps people with tax preparation. She has a close relationship with Claire, visiting her on her deathbed long after the **tightrope walk**.

Pino – An Italian living in Arkansas who works for Doctors Without Borders. He meets Jaslyn on a plane ride to New York City and the two make a meaningful connection.

Tom – Claire's nephew who stays in her apartment while she is sick. He is primarily interested in selling her apartment after she dies, and is rather unwelcoming of Jaslyn.

Fernando Yunqué Marcano – A fourteen year-old obsessed with photographing graffiti tags, especially those inside New York City's subway system. He is credited as the photographer of a picture of the tightrope walker on the high wire included in the novel (though he is a fictional character).

Compton – A computer hacker working for the same company as The Kid. He does the majority of the talking when the group calls payphones around the World Trade Center.

Dennis – The owner of the company that The Kid works for.

Gareth – Another employee of the company that The Kid works for.

Sable Senatore – A twenty-nine year-old librarian living in New York City. She picks up one of the payphones near the Twin Towers that The Kid and the rest of the California hackers call during the tightrope walker's performance. She politely and gracefully indulges The Kid's obvious romantic interest in her.

José – A man who watches the tightrope walker and talks on the phone with the computer programmers.

Angie – One of the Bronx prostitutes who hangs out with Tillie and Jazzlyn.

Irwin – Fernando Yunqué Marcano's stepfather and boss at the barbershop.

TuKwik – Tillie's first pimp in New York City.

Jigsaw – Tillie's second pimp in New York City. His name is derived from the fact that he tapes razor blades in his handkerchief. In a fight he takes out the handkerchief and makes a puzzle of his opponent's face.

L.A. Rex – Tillie's third pimp in New York City.

Birdhouse – Tillie's final pimp in New York City.

Harry – The owner of Judge Soderberg's favorite restaurant.

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.

POLITICAL UNREST

Let the Great World spin tacitly addresses an array of political and cultural issues at play in the United States in the 1970s. When Philippe Petit walked a tightrope strung between New York's Twin Towers on August 7, 1974, the country was undergoing a particularly turbulent political period. Only two days later, on August 9th, President Richard Nixon would resign from office due to his involvement with the break-in and wiretapping of the Democratic National Convention's Watergate offices in Washington, D.C. What's more, American involvement in the Vietnam War had only just ended, the last troops coming home in August of 1973, though the wildly unpopular war didn't officially end until 1975. As such, the social and political climate was paranoid and agitated—Nixon's administration had set an example of institutional dishonesty while the messiness of the Vietnam War raged on without America, furthering the idea that the many years and lives spent in the endeavor had all been wasted.

Let the Great World Spin uses Petit's **tightrope walk** as a centerpiece, a story that brings together the many lives existing on its peripheries. In this way, the book frames the daring act as something to be witnessed and shared by all, despite the current moment's political turmoil. Though the walk does not explicitly champion a political viewpoint, there is an implied defiance of authority and dogmatic rules, a striking and refreshing attitude in a political moment in which presidents and other politicians run the country without obeying the laws themselves.

By organizing the stories around Petit's walk, McCann is able to make use of what the World Trade Center stood for in the public eye of the 1970s. The tallest buildings in the world, the Twin Towers had only been standing for a year when Petit walked between them, and their presence elicited a vast amount of criticism from New Yorkers and architects alike. Minoru Yamasaki, the Towers' architect, was accused of creating uselessly large buildings that were not only ugly, but also hindering to the city's day-to-day operation: some worried that they would inhibit television reception, while others complained that the buildings were a physical danger for migrating birds—and perhaps most importantly, the offices that the Towers offered were at the time largely unnecessary, since most businesses that needed office space were not located in Lower Manhattan. Overall, the buildings were very poorly received, a sentiment echoed in the chapter "Miró, Miró, on the Wall" when Claire calls them "monstrosities."

By the time McCann was writing *Let the Great World Spin*, though, the Twin Towers had already taken on a deep sense of national significance; in the post-9/11 political climate, the Towers became symbolic of American strength and unity, the two buildings firmly fixed within the country's historical consciousness. By organizing his characters' stories around an act of beauty that took place on the Towers, McCann is able to harness this sense of national unity long before the World Trade Center actually stood for such togetherness.

Political unrest in *Let the Great World Spin* also manifests itself in the presence of violence and war. In fact, war is in the background of many of the book's stories. For Ciaran, narrator of "All Respects to Heaven, I Like it Here," the violence of the Northern Ireland Conflict drives him to move to America, a country tangled up in its own war (albeit safely far from the violence). In "A Fear of Love," Blaine is well-known for his anti-Vietnam films. In "Roaring Seaward, and I Go," Jaslyn's sister is stationed in Baghdad, and when she visits Claire's apartment, a newspaper in the hallway bears news of the Iraq War. In this way, violence, strife, and conflict all serve as a backdrop for ordinary life. Even quiet domestic scenes—perhaps *especially* quiet domestic scenes—are unable to extricate themselves from the world's senseless calamities, even if these grand-scale tragedies don't act as a central focus. Life, it seems, goes on in spite of its turbulent political circumstances.

UNITY & HUMAN CONNECTION

Chance encounters, serendipitous moments, and relationships that defy racial and cultural boundaries run throughout *Let the Great World Spin*. Above all, the book is interested in the patchwork of human life and the mysterious convergences or departures that unite people either physically or philosophically. The epigraph, taken from Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project*, establishes this interest and sets the novel's tone: "All the lives we could live, all the people we will never know, never will be, they are everywhere. That is what the world is." *Let the Great World Spin* is not interested in *understanding* the mysterious way lives often overlap with one another. Rather, it is concerned with examining the beauty inherent in this enigmatic kind of unity. The book champions the idea that two (or more) very different life paths may cross and become intertwined with one another in a way that profoundly alters both trajectories; this is the idea that the people around us—strangers—could, in some way, meaningfully influence us.

Within this framework, the characters of *Let the Great World*

Spin frequently deal with questions of compassion. In some cases they lack a certain amount of empathy, as is the case with Ciaran when he first meets the prostitutes his brother has been helping in the Bronx. In other cases, though, characters display an impressive inclination toward empathy, perhaps best exemplified by Corrigan's immense selflessness in the rough environment of the government housing projects. Failure to exercise empathy seemingly closes characters off from the broader world, ultimately resulting in a grief of sorts: Blaine, for example, doesn't take responsibility for the tragedy he has inflicted upon Corrigan and Jazzlyn by crashing into the back of their van—he's only concerned with making a name for himself in the art world, and is blind to everything beyond his own self-motivated priorities. Eventually this costs him his marriage. Lara, on the other hand, is distraught by the fact that she was involved in Corrigan and Jazzlyn's simultaneous death and, motivated by empathy and compassion, seeks to make amends in any small way she can. This, of course, leads her to Ciaran, whom she eventually falls in love with and marries. Empathy and compassion, then, are held up as paragons of human connection and unity.

Characters also congregate in more tangible, obvious ways in *Let the Great World Spin*, as circumstance and shared emotions serve as unifying forces. The Bronx prostitutes, for example, have a network that is something like a family, and they manage to connect meaningfully with one another despite—or perhaps because of—their difficult conditions. Claire and the women in "Miró, Miró, on the Wall" organize themselves around their own grief, sharing stories of their deceased sons with one another in order to lighten the burden of solitary mourning. Similarly, the computer aficionados of "Etherwest" constitute a small community of individuals with a common interest in hacking. As such, McCann is concerned with creating a mosaic of humanity that is held together by the little connections made between people who might not otherwise have very much in common.

Unity comes into play in *Let the Great World Spin* in a structural sense, too: the narratives are all loosely related to one another by way of Petit's **tightrope walk**. The ripple effect of the event is felt throughout the book. While some characters—like Marcia in "Miró, Miró, on the Wall,"—directly witness the tightrope walk, others—like Jaslyn in "Roaring Seaward, and I Go"—have a more vicarious, removed relationship with the event. As a narrative device, the walk works to bring the multiple storylines together across space and time, ultimately illustrating how an event—current or historical—can connect people from different walks of life, even if that connection is not immediately observable.

PREJUDICE & STEREOTYPES

Cultural and economic divides are felt quite strongly in *Let the Great World Spin*, and these divisions often bring about an array of prejudices and stereotypes that the characters perpetuate and endure. For instance, characters from drastically different backgrounds are frequently paired with one another, a technique that ultimately emphasizes the rifts between them while simultaneously seeking to explore their prejudices in a more nuanced manner. As such, one of the novel's primary concerns is to deconstruct the beliefs that wedge themselves between human relationships.

Throughout the novel, characters often use bigotry—relying on prejudices and stereotypes—to justify their own shortcomings and frustrations. Other characters are subsequently forced to bear the brunt of this mistreatment. One way McCann creates this dynamic is by placing the Bronx at the heart of the book. In the 1970s the Bronx had crime and poverty rates that were notably higher than other New York City boroughs. The government housing facilities were deemed especially unsafe. Into this environment McCann places an array of characters from varying backgrounds, thus inviting confrontations and racial or socioeconomic tensions to rise to the surface. For a book interested in the concept of unity, prejudice and stereotyping can be seen as the antagonistic forces that work to drive people apart.

There are several instances in which, despite how desperately a character might want to step outside his or her own prejudices, it proves almost impossible to overcome various deep-seated, widespread paradigms. Claire's friendship with Gloria, for example, transcends racial and cultural divides, but even this relationship is alive with the racial tensions at large in American society in the 1970s. It is McCann's clear intention to explore how people might come together without fully freeing themselves of their most strongly held prejudices.

At the same time, McCann is also interested in subverting the stereotypes he establishes. For example, despite the assumption that she is unintelligent, Tillie—a lifelong prostitute, drug user, and petty criminal—quotes 13th century Persian poetry and has an above-average IQ. Even Judge Soderberg—who might be easily characterized as indifferent to the circumstances of those less fortunate than him—has moments in which he displays empathy. It becomes clear that this is a novel that wants to champion the human capacity to contain multitudes; the entire book's project serves as a testament to the fact that people are never simply who they appear to be at first glance.

Rather complicatedly, though, such subversions of stereotypes sometimes emphasize the moments in which characters *fail* to show empathy for one another. By revealing a character's capacity to step outside his or her own perspective, McCann

illustrates the fact that all humans—even the most criminally-inclined or hopelessly bigoted—are complex and unique. For example, when Judge Soderberg—who is chiefly concerned with getting through his day quickly and without hassle—sentences Tillie Henderson, he momentarily recognizes her as more than just another criminal to be done away with: "Her face seemed for a second almost beautiful, and then the hooker turned and shuffled and the door was closed behind her, and she vanished into her own namelessness." In this moment we, as readers, feel Soderberg's ability to transcend his own institutionalized racism, but then we watch as he immediately reverts back to apathy, letting Tillie disappear "into her own namelessness," swallowed by the court system. In *Let the Great World Spin*, even momentary instances of transcending bigotry—that split second in which a character sees somebody as a human rather than as a stereotype—serve as vitally important examples of our capacity to connect with one another despite the greater antagonistic forces working to drive us apart. When this realization is ignored, though, the presence of stereotypes and prejudices are felt even more strongly than before.

SIMULTANEITY & TIME

The idea of simultaneity is important to the construction of *Let the Great World Spin*. Once again, we can look to the novel's epigraph for guidance: "All the lives we could live, all the people we will never know, never will be, they are everywhere. That is what the world is." Within this is the idea that the world is made up of a great many lives existing all at once, and there is a sense of disappointment at the fact that "we will never know" all of these stories or people. This is the general view that informs *Let the Great World Spin*'s structure: even if they don't directly correlate to one another, the protagonists' stories all overlap, producing a kind of narrative harmony without necessarily fully connecting. What this novel then allows us to do as readers is to experience "all the lives we could live, all the people we will never know, never will be"; as onlookers to a book with many disparate narratives, we are the only ones afforded the privilege of fully experiencing the stories that happen one on top of the other at the same time.

Of course, not *all* of the stories in *Let the Great World Spin* happen at the exact same time, though. (Jaslyn's story as an adult, for example, takes place roughly thirty years after her mother has died.) As such, the actual passage of time takes on a certain importance. But even those stories that seem to exist outside of the book's primary slice of life are ultimately tied into the narrative by the **tightrope walk**, an event that epitomizes the idea of simultaneity because of the way the characters engage with it. To illustrate this we can take Jaslyn's relationship with the walk as an example. She is very connected to a picture of Petit on the tightrope because it links her to her mother: "The photo was taken on the same day her mother died—it was one of the reasons she was attracted to it in the first place: the sheer fact that such beauty had occurred at the same time." Although time has put her at a remove, Jaslyn remains vicariously connected to her mother through the tightrope walk.

The passage of time in *Let the Great World Spin* is imbued with the idea that "the city lived in a sort of everyday present." In this "everyday present" the characters' lives overlap, and it is the human layering—the convergence of relationships and experiences—that forge a history that they are able to draw upon. In short, what's held up as important is not the fact that life goes on—that time passes—but rather that relationships and experiences accumulate over time, creating a vast mosaic of humanity.

Furthermore, the passage of time is also notable in the emergence of technology in *Let the Great World Spin*. The 1960s and '70s saw the advent of the ARPANET—an early computer network used for digital communications—which ushered in a new era and method of correspondence. The military made use of such methods in Vietnam (as exemplified in "Miró, Miró, on the Wall" and Joshua's position in the war) while a computer subculture blossomed in America (exemplified by the group of hackers in "Etherwest"). Suddenly people found themselves able to communicate with one another using new technology, a fact that is in keeping with the book's preoccupation with human connection and its interest in marking the advancement of time.

Although it is not blatantly evident, *Let the Great World Spin* is also in many ways a response to the destruction of the Twin Towers on September 11th, 2001. Rather than examining the actual moment of catastrophe, though, McCann travels back to a different time, engaging with New York City's history in a way that reframes the present. The Towers undoubtedly loom large in the consciousness of Americans in the early 21st-century, and just as the tightrope walk in *Let the Great World Spin* factors into many characters' lives, the destruction of the Twin Towers directly or indirectly influences Americans who were alive on September 11th, 2001. This sentiment is very much present throughout the book, and the current absence of the towers is strongly felt; when reading *Let the Great World Spin* it seems unimaginably long ago that the Towers still stood.

DOUBT & FAITH

Doubt is a common theme in *Let the Great World Spin*, whether it is in regards to religion, relationships, or the self. Perhaps the most evident of these is the doubt experienced in relation to the existence of God, as exemplified by Corrigan; he wants a "fully believable God, one you could find in the grime of the everyday." God, he believes, ought to be doubted because the struggle for belief is

divine in and of itself. Other kinds of doubt surface throughout the novel in similar ways. Take, for example, the watchers of Petit's **tightrope walk**; what captivates them about the walk is a lack of faith that Petit will be able to safely pull it off. And although Petit himself remains confident throughout his training, the pages that profile him do in fact imply a certain kind of doubt: the harder he trains—the harder he dedicates himself to this crazy stunt—the more the book seems to acknowledge the catastrophic possibilities inherent in the act.

Every character in the novel experiences doubt in some form or another, though the gravity of this doubt varies. Nonetheless, the lives in *Let the Great World Spin* often take shape in ways that are informed by second-guessing or fear; in some cases a character's life changes for the better because he or she acts so as to confront his or her own doubt or fear. In other cases, a character is immobilized by strong misgivings that he or she finds himself unable to eradicate. Regardless, doubt is upheld as something that can strongly influence a person's life.

The fact that the book's most unifying event—the tightrope walk—has such a large margin for error strangely forges something close to the "fully believable God" that Corrigan yearns for; he believes that there is "no better faith than a wounded faith." Of course, the walk is not godlike in the literal sense, but it does draw upon belief (much like religion). The fact that the characters doubt Petit's ability to walk the tightrope unharmed gives rise—by negation—to a faith of sorts. To be sure, when Marcia tells Claire and the other women about seeing the tightrope walker, Gloria asks if the man was like an angel. Eventually Marcia says, "And all I could think of, was, Maybe that's my boy and he's come to say hello." In this way McCann places his characters into a discourse of faith by way of doubt, even if for some of the characters (like Jaslyn, for example) this is a purely secular kind of faith.

Faith is also involved in the various interpersonal relationships in *Let the Great World Spin*. The strongest bonds between characters seem to arise out of those relationships in which both parties trust one another. We see this in Corrigan and Adelita's relationship, in which Adelita must, after Corrigan's death, allow herself to have faith in the fact that he would have chosen her over his religion if he had lived. Faith is also present in the way Corrigan treats the prostitutes like Jazzlyn and Tillie: he is sure that they—like anybody else—deserve love and good treatment despite their occasional immoral actions. He has faith in them. Thus it seems that even secular kinds of faith can strengthen bonds, enlivening a person's empathetic faculties.

THE TIGHTROPE WALK

The image of the tightrope walker standing on the wire is indicative of the human ability to find beauty even in the most ordinary things, for the Twin Towers themselves are familiar, common structures. To this end, the walker doesn't need a reason to explain why he wanted to walk between the towers; "He didn't like the idea of why. The towers were there. That was good enough." This is, of course, similar to the way Corrigan approaches religion, wanting a God "you could find in the grime of the everyday." The image of the walker all the way up in the sky making something extraordinary out of two very ordinary structures resonates throughout the novel, urging readers and characters alike to strive for beauty within even the most banal contexts. For some—like Marcia, who decides to think that the walker is actually her deceased son coming to say hello—the walker takes on a deep personal significance where there would otherwise have been nothing but sadness. For others, he simply represents the baffling yet astonishing outer edge of the human will. Regardless of each character's individual interpretation, though, the beauty of the walk comes to stand for something larger: unity and connection. The walk brings the lives that run throughout *Let the Great World Spin* into concert with one another even if they don't all perfectly link up together. And the tightrope itself—strung between the two towers—symbolizes the book's interest in exploring connections that are forged despite seemingly insurmountable rifts, whether physical or social.

THE KEY RING

The key ring that Jazzlyn drops during the police raid is an item that becomes rather charged with meaning as *Let the Great World Spin* progresses. It changes hands multiple times—from Jazzlyn's to Corrigan's, from Corrigan's to Lara's, from Lara's to Ciaran's, and from Ciaran's to—finally—Tillie's. Not only does it represent the ways in which even the smallest things can connect humans through long, complicated inheritances, but it also stands for the danger that Jaslyn and Janice face as children of a young prostitute who is forced—either by law or by death—to abandon them. (And notably, the key ring even bears pictures of the two children). It becomes clear that, if Gloria hadn't shown up at the right place at the right time in order to adopt them, they too may have been passed from person to person just like the key ring that carries their images.

SYMBOLS

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

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Let the Great Wold Spin* published in 2009.

Those Who Saw Him Hushed Quotes

Those who saw him hushed. On Church Street. Liberty. Cortlandt. West Street. Fulton. Vesey. It was a silence that heard itself, awful and beautiful.

Related Characters: The Tightrope Walker (Phillipe Petit)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

These are *Let the Great World Spin*'s opening lines, which constitute an "en medias res" opening, meaning that readers are thrown into the middle of the action without very much in the way of preface or background information. The second sentence, though, catalogues the surrounding street names, thereby establishing the city's landscape and a sense of its sprawling geography. The idea of a busy and unfathomably large city immediately emphasizes the significance of the bystanders' collective silence. This silence is significant because it emphasizes the tightrope walker's ability to bring people together even in the midst of their hectic lives.

The notion of "a silence that heard itself" foregrounds the novel's interest in portraying the hypersensitive awareness that often comes with intense emotion, a sentiment that runs throughout the book to the very end, when Jaslyn experiences a peace so intense that she can feel the world spinning.

It was the dilemma of the watchers: they didn't want to wait around for nothing at all, some idiot standing on the precipice of the towers, but they didn't want to miss the moment either, if he slipped, or got arrested, or dove, arms stretched.

Related Characters: The Tightrope Walker (Phillipe Petit)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This passage emphasizes the doubt and uncertainty that ripples throughout the crowd as they peer up at the tightrope walker from the streets. It also reminds us that these people—these New Yorkers—lead busy lives and are unaccustomed to stopping their daily routines in the name of curiosity. As such, they approach the event with indecision, slightly resenting their own inquisitiveness. As New Yorkers, they have grown used to purposely ignoring anything out of the ordinary—perhaps a survival technique in a dangerous and eccentric city—but in this moment they find themselves unable to resist watching the tightrope walker.

Book 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

He still drank with them, but only on special days. Mostly he was sober. He had this idea that the men were really looking for some type of Eden and that when they drank they returned to it, but, on getting there, they weren't able to stay. He didn't try to convince them to stop. That wasn't his way.

Related Characters: Ciaran Corrigan (speaker), John Andrew Corrigan ("Corrigan")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17-8

Explanation and Analysis

Having been caught drinking by his mother, Corrigan has recently promised to stop getting drunk with the local alcoholics. Despite this promise, though, he is seemingly unable to stay away from the drunks. It is significant that he frames his time with these vagrants in terms of religion. Rather than approaching their addiction as a vice, he believes that these men are tragically searching for happiness—a happiness that might otherwise be accessed through religious practice and an aspiration to regain the divine paradise of Eden. And although Corrigan's religious outlook is developing quite strongly, he maintains the kindness and patience necessary to allow others to live differently than him, marking him as a gentle and accepting soul.

"It's like dust. You walk about and don't see it, don't notice it, but it's there and it's all coming down, covering everything. You're breathing it in. You touch it. You drink it. You eat it. But it's so fine you don't notice it. But you're covered in it. It's everywhere. What I mean is, we're afraid. Just stand still for an instant and there it is, this fear, covering our faces and tongues. If we stopped to take account of it, we'd just fall into despair. But we can't stop. We've got to keep going."

Related Characters: John Andrew Corrigan ("Corrigan") (speaker), Jazzlyn Henderson, Ciaran Corrigan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Corrigan explains to his brother that Jazzlyn and Tillie and the other prostitutes are not bad people, but rather individuals who have spent their entire lives in dire circumstances that are difficult to overcome. Corrigan outlines the trying aspects of life in the Bronx, ultimately attempting to show his brother that fear is an ever-present aspect of daily life, an inescapable and oppressive force that everybody chooses to deal with differently.

It is notable that Corrigan includes himself in his analysis of fear, tacitly admitting that he too is affected by it; he says that "*we* can't stop," that "*we* have to keep going." As such, it is evident that, unlike his brother, Corrigan does not seem himself as so different from the prostitutes, ultimately speaking to a universal human experience rather than maintaining the prejudiced assumption that only the poor or "criminal" undergo such hardships.

We seldom know what we're hearing when we hear something for the first time, but one thing is certain: we hear it as we will never hear it again. We return to the moment to experience it, I suppose, but we can never really find it, only its memory, the faintest imprint of what it really was, what it meant.

Related Characters: Ciaran Corrigan (speaker), Adelita, John Andrew Corrigan ("Corrigan")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Ciaran has just learned that Corrigan has fallen in love with Adelita, but he hasn't yet internalized the information. What he's hearing from his brother is a confession of sorts, since Corrigan's religion should keep him from falling in (romantic) love. The significance of this confession is somewhat stunning, and Ciaran reflects on the nature of memory, upholding that certain experiences—especially those that are unexpected and that carry great significance—are often fleeting. A reaction can't be crystallized and perfectly preserved, because our internal emotional lives are ever-changing and mutable. This is an important observation in a novel that seems to often purposefully evade presenting concrete meanings or interpretations; the idea that we can only really ever find "the faintest imprint" contributes to the novel's constantly evolving emotional tenor and its approach to time's mysterious influence on the past.

We have all heard of these things before. The love letter arriving as the teacup falls. The guitar striking up as the last breath sounds out. I don't attribute it to God or to sentiment. Perhaps it's chance. Or perhaps chance is just another way to try to convince ourselves that we are valuable.

Yet the plain fact of the matter is that it happened and there was nothing we could do to stop it…

Related Characters: Ciaran Corrigan (speaker), John Andrew Corrigan ("Corrigan")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

This rumination comes after Ciaran reveals that Corrigan has been in a car crash on the FDR, bringing to the forefront the notion of life's inscrutable simultaneity and the ways in which we are, as humans, often desperate to find meaning in even the most trivial serendipities. Ciaran, a nonreligious man, is left searching for significance in his brother's death. Without a god of any sort, though, he is overwhelmed by the tragedy and by the fact that it is possible to pass a pleasant and happy day while something horrific is unknowingly happening to a loved one. When he says rather begrudgingly that the "plain fact of the matter is that" the accident happened, he emphasizes the sad immutability of the situation—so much of life, it seems, is out of our hands, and this is what Ciaran hints at when he says that "perhaps chance is just another way to try to convince ourselves that

we are valuable." Even chance, it seems in this moment, romanticizes the idea that somebody might be able to find meaning in life's unforgiving cruelty and randomness. Ciaran's skepticism here indicates his unwillingness to view the world sentimentally and, in a way, religiously.

Book 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

Joshua liked the Beatles, used to listen to them in his room, you could hear the noise even through the big headphones he loved. *Let it be*. Silly song, really. You let it be, it returns. There's the truth. You let it be, it drags you to the ground. You let it be, it crawls up your walls.

Related Characters: Joshua Soderberg, Claire Soderberg

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

While reminiscing about Joshua, Claire's mind wanders to how much her son used to like The Beatles. She is able to recall the sound of their song "Let it Be" as it pattered out of his oversized headphones, and this leads her to once again consider her own emotional stability. That she can so vividly conjure such a small detail—the soft presence of her son's music through his headphones—indicates the extent to which she clings to the memory of Joshua. It also hints at her detail-oriented personality: here is a woman who easily gets caught up in the minutiae of days long since past. Through this brief insight into Claire's internal world, her nervousness begins to make a bit more sense, and we begin to understand how it might be that somebody could obsess so much over hosting friends for morning coffee. We see that Claire's concerns are ever-present, her grief over Joshua's death inescapable and impossible to ignore as it "drags [her] to the ground" and "crawls up [the] walls."

It was as if she could travel through the electricity to see him. She could look at any electronic thing—television, radio, Solomon's shaver—and could find herself there, journeying along the raw voltage. Most of all it was the fridge. She would wake in the middle of the night and wander through the apartment into the kitchen and lean against the freezer. She would open the door…and she could see him, all of a sudden she was in the same room, right beside him…

Related Characters: Joshua Soderberg, Claire Soderberg

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

As Claire continues to think about Joshua despite herself—for she should be focusing, it seems, on preparing to host her friends—her desperation and loneliness becomes the primary focus. Unable to talk to Solomon about her grief, she seeks out the spirit of her son in the thing that best represents him: electricity. Because he was involved in writing code, she feels his essence in the electrical currents thrumming through the refrigerator. Rather than exploring the conventional ways humans alleviate loneliness, McCann is clearly interested in dwelling in the strange moments that elude reason. Of course it isn't logical to see the refrigerator as a portal to the afterlife, but neither is grief and neither is desperation. Loneliness is abstract, and so are the ways in which the desperate find solace.

All of it like a slam in the chest. So immediate. At all of their coffee mornings, it had always been distant, belonging to another day, the talk, the memory, the recall, the stories, a distant land, but this was now and real, and the worst thing was that they didn't know the walker's fate, didn't know if he had jumped or had fallen or had got down safely, or if he was still up there on his little stroll, or if he was there at all, if it was just a story, or a projection, indeed, or if she had made it all up for effect—they had no idea—maybe the man wanted to kill himself, or maybe the helicopter had a hook around him to catch him if he fell, or maybe there was a clip around the wire to catch him, or maybe maybe maybe there was another maybe, maybe.

Related Characters: The Tightrope Walker (Phillipe Petit), Marcia, Claire Soderberg

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

This follows follows the end of Marcia's story, in which she tells the other women that she decided not to watch the tightrope walker anymore because she didn't want to know

if he fell. For the other women—like Claire—not knowing the end of the story seems to rankle their spirits, distracting them from their coffee morning and bringing them into the unbearable present rather than allowing them to dwell in the past, where they can reminisce about their sons. The possible outcome of the walker's stunt is rather dizzying for somebody like Claire, who naturally gravitates to the worst case scenario, given her son's death: "maybe the man wanted to kill himself." The passage's concluding repetition of the word "maybe" emphasizes not only the women's uncomfortable uncertainty, but also the sentiment felt throughout the book at various moments and by multiple characters—why did he do it, how did he do it, what was the point? This is, of course, a testament to the walk's quality as an artistic act, for each person seems to answer these questions differently.

❝ Maybe she should meet other women, more of her own. But more of her own what? Death, the greatest democracy of them all. The world's oldest complaint. Happens to us all. Rich and poor. Fat and thin. Fathers and daughters. Mothers and sons. She feels a pang, a return.

Related Characters: Claire Soderberg

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Claire is a bit hurt by her friends' behavior, as they have not only neglected to talk about Joshua, but also rudely abandoned her in the kitchen in order to try to see the tightrope walker from the apartment's rooftop. Offended, she doubts the validity of the group's bond. As a rich woman, she wonders if she should perhaps find other grieving mothers with money. This is, of course, an elitist sentiment, and we see once again how prejudice and stereotypes can often serve as scapegoats to relieve people of complicated or distressing emotions.

But Claire is more compassionate and levelheaded than that, at least in this moment. She shows a keen understanding of the human condition when she forces herself to consider death as "the greatest democracy of them all." And she is right: death is the only thing that will happen to every single person, no matter their race or economic standing or cultural background. This is an important thing to remember, especially in a city like New York, where so many people think of themselves as unshakably unique because of small—ultimately inconsequential—characteristics.

❝ So flagrant with his body. Making it cheap. The puppetry of it all. His little Charlie Chaplin walk, coming in like a hack on her morning. How dare he do that with his own body? Throwing his life in everyone's face? Making her own son's so cheap? Yes, he has intruded on her coffee morning like a hack on her code. With his hijinks above the city. Coffee and cookies and a man out there walking in the sky, munching away what should have been.

Related Characters: The Tightrope Walker (Phillipe Petit), Joshua Soderberg, Claire Soderberg

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Although she was previously unable to articulate what bothered her about the tightrope walker, now Claire's reaction edges toward anger. This progression illustrates the often unpredictable cycle of emotional unease, proving that nobody ever truly just feels *one* thing. Rather, feelings are made up of multiple emotions that all exist in concert with one another. And it is certainly the case that this moment of anger is perfectly justified, for there is no doubt that the tightrope walker's actions are "flagrant" and dangerous, a fact that would of course bother a woman whose son's body was blown to pieces in a café.

Book 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ The moment he turned to check the front of the car I recall thinking that we'd never survive it, not so much the crash, or even the death of the young girl—she was so obviously dead, in a bloodied heap on the road—or the man who was slapped against the steering wheel, almost certainly ruined, his chest jammed up against the dashboard, but the fact that Blaine went around to check on the damage that was done to our car, the smashed headlight, the crumpled fender, like our years together, something broken, while behind us we could hear the sirens already on their way, and he let out a little groan of despair, and I knew it was for the car, and our unsold canvases, and what would happen to us shortly, and I said to him: Come on, let's go, quick, get in, Blaine, quick, get a move on.

Related Characters: Lara Liveman (speaker), John Andrew Corrigan ("Corrigan"), Jazzlyn Henderson, Blaine

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Lara reveals that, immediately after hitting Corrigan's van, she knew her relationship with Blaine was doomed. Blaine's concern about the car—"the smashed headlight, the crumpled fender"—is indicative of his obsession with all that is superficial. He is unable empathize with others, unable to look beyond the things that directly affect him. Lara recognizes this after the crash, and it is clear that this is perhaps the first time she is able to articulate to herself that she and Blaine are ill-suited for one another, as they clearly have opposing values. It is strange, then, that she ushers him along by telling him to get back in the car in order to flee the scene of the accident. This ultimately speaks to her own fear and guilt, but also her empathetic capacity, for in this moment she finds herself sympathizing with Blaine's fear—his "little groan of despair" for "what would happen to [them] shortly"—while simultaneously disagreeing with him.

A few people were gathered outside the doorway, black women, mostly, in dark mourning clothes that looked as if they didn't belong to them, as if they'd hired the clothes for the day. Their makeup was the thing that betrayed them, loud and gaudy and one with silver sparkles around her eyes, which looked so tired and worn-down. The cops had said something about hookers: it struck me that maybe the young girl had just been a prostitute. I felt a momentary sigh of gratitude, and then the awareness stopped me cold, the walls pulsed in on me. How cheap was I?

Related Characters: Lara Liveman (speaker), Jazzlyn Henderson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

Lara thinks this to herself upon arriving in the Bronx to deliver Corrigan's belongings. Police officers outside the building had mentioned the presence of prostitutes in the government housing facilities, and Lara finds herself allowing this bit of information to frame her entire perception. This is a prejudiced impulse. Note the use of the word "just" in the sentence, "it struck me that maybe the young girl had just been a prostitute." Before we even learn that Lara allows herself "a momentary sigh of gratitude" upon having this thought, we discover her implicit bias in her offhanded dismissal of Jazzlyn (as evidenced by "just"); it's as if she believes she no longer has to feel bad about having played part in Jazzlyn's death because she—Jazzlyn—was a prostitute. But the fact that she catches herself in this line of thinking, saying that an "awareness stopped [her] cold," shows us that she is a self-reflexive person constantly working to transcend her own privileged perspective. Again, Lara emerges as an empathetic character even in the wake of her flaws.

He let the pieces of the napkin flutter to the floor and said something strange about words being good for saying what things are, but sometimes they don't function for what things aren't. He looked away. The neon in the window brightened as the light went down outside.

His hand brushed against mine. That old human flaw of desire.

Related Characters: Lara Liveman (speaker), Ciaran Corrigan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Lara narrates what happens at the bar with Ciaran after they leave Jazzlyn's funeral together. Ciaran's assertion that sometimes words "don't function for what things aren't" is cryptic, but it can at least be understood when applied to the immediate scenario: what Ciaran and Lara can't seem to find the words for is the strange and somewhat forbidden attraction running between them despite the awful circumstances. It's significant that he touches her hand after declaring the inefficacy of language, as if establishing a connection through the fraught absence of the right words. This is, of course, also relatable to Corrigan's approach to religion, the idea that one must fight for a connection with the divine and that sometimes it is this struggle that brings a person closest to God. It can be seen, then, that absence and lack weave themselves throughout the book: the absence of language, the absence of God, the absence of logic, the absence of certainty—these privations are, according to *Let the Great World Spin*, worth embracing.

Book 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

The core reason for it all was beauty. Walking was a divine delight. Everything was rewritten when he was up in the air. New things were possible with the human form. It went beyond equilibrium.

He felt for a moment uncreated. Another kind of awake.

Related Characters: The Tightrope Walker (Phillipe Petit)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is perhaps the only one in the book that states an explicit reason for the tightrope walker's walk: beauty. It is notable, though, that this reason does not *explain away* the act itself. It is not a prescriptive explanation of exactly why the walker attempted to do what he did, nor does it enumerate the precise effect of the walk. The concept of beauty is broad and subjective and invites multiple interpretations, just like the walk itself, which each character encounters in his or her own way with his or her own mindset. The idea that the walker feels "uncreated" for a moment speaks to this avoidance of definitive meaning, for something that is created ultimately presents itself concretely and is capable of being defined, whereas something that is uncreated eludes all definition, all sense of origin or placement.

Book 2, Chapter 7 Quotes

So I got clean. I got myself housing. I gave up the game. Those were good years. All it took to make me happy was finding a nickel in the bottom of my handbag. Things were going so good. It felt like I was standing at a window. I put Jazzlyn in school. I got a job putting stickers on supermarket cans. I came home, went to work, came home again. I stayed away from the stroll. Nothing was going to put me back there. And then one day, out of the blue, I don't even remember why, I walked down to the Deegan, stuck out my thumb, and looked for a trick.

Related Characters: Tillie Henderson (speaker), Jazzlyn Henderson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216-7

Explanation and Analysis

After her pimp L.A. Rex broke her arms, Tillie decided to stop working as a prostitute for the first time in her adult life. In this period, she found a simple form of happiness, the kind of almost trivial elation that comes from ordinary delights, like finding a nickel. It's interesting that she says that "things were going so good," since she so readily reverted back to her old lifestyle. Despite the fact that she was happy existing outside a life of prostitution, she gravitated back, and this is a sad illustration of the ways in which cycles—both those of an individual and those of society's hierarchal structures—are difficult to break. Since prostitution was essentially all Tillie ever knew, establishing a completely separate life most likely felt unnatural. Thus, the pull back to her old life enacted itself on her, and we see the extent to which crime engenders and perpetuates itself (an observation later made by Judge Soderberg in a somewhat more callous way).

Oh, but what I shoulda done—I shoulda swallowed a pair of handcuffs when Jazzlyn was in my belly. That's what I shoulda done. Gave her a heads-up about what was coming her way. Say, Here you is, already arrested, you're your mother and her mother before her, a long line of mothers stretching way back to Eve, french and nigger and dutch and whatever else came before me.

Oh, God, I shoulda swallowed handcuffs. I shoulda swallowed them whole.

Related Characters: Tillie Henderson (speaker), Jazzlyn Henderson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Tillie considers the ways in which she failed Jazzlyn as a mother by setting a negative example. This thought process again brings to the forefront the idea that crime (or at least imprisonment) is cyclical and even institutionalized, as symbolized by the image of handcuffs as an oppressive mechanism used, in this case, to tell a young black woman that no matter what she does, she will be punished by those more powerful than her. This is a complicated moment in which we see two things at once:

Tillie's scorn for the system of oppression enacting itself on her and her daughter, and her own guilt at playing into this life of crime she is expected to lead.

He said to me once that most of the time people use the word *love* as just another way to show off they're hungry. The way he said it went something like: *Glorify their appetites*.

Related Characters: Tillie Henderson (speaker), Ciaran Corrigan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

This memory arises when Tillie fondly remembers Corrigan. The passage builds upon Corrigan's already complex ideas about love by suggesting that he frames romance in terms of overindulgence. Love, it seems, is too often used to justify desire. This is, of course, a sentiment that Corrigan would obsess over, especially as he contemplated the validity of his relationship with Adelita. This philosophy—which tries to dismiss earthly, humanly yearnings—sounds like an attempt to talk himself out of his own natural "appetites," a headstrong effort to ground himself in what he believes rather than what he feels. And it's worth noting, too, that this idea most likely resonates strongly with Tillie because she has spent her life allowing others to indulge their desires but has perhaps never thought of this in terms of love.

Book 2, Chapter 8 Quotes

It was like some photograph his body had taken, and the album had been slid out again under his eyes, then yanked away. Sometimes it was the width of the city he saw, the alleyways of light, the harpsichord of the Brooklyn Bridge, the flat gray bowl of smoke over New Jersey, the quick interruption of a pigeon making flight look easy, the taxis below. He never saw himself in any danger or extremity, so he didn't return to the moment he lay down on the cable or when he hopped, or half ran across from the south to the north tower. Rather it was the ordinary steps that revisited him, the ones done without flash. They were the ones that seemed entirely true, that didn't flinch in his memory.

Related Characters: The Tightrope Walker (Phillipe Petit)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

This passage gives us a glimpse of the tightrope walker's retrospective thoughts about the walk, which seems to have left a permanent mark on his memory. Still, though, there is a fleeting quality to that permanence, as when the mental picture of the moment is "yanked away" suddenly. It seems he randomly relives little slivers of the walk, and it is significant that many of his recollections are visual panoramas of the city and its outskirts. In reading this passage, we once more remember that the other characters are below the walker in the city, moving about their lives. In this way, we are reminded of the walk's unifying qualities.

Book 3, Chapter 9 Quotes

His fellow judges and court officers and reporters and even the stenographers were already talking about it as if it were another of those things that just happened in the city. One of those out-of-the-ordinary days that made sense of the slew of ordinary days. New York had a way of doing that. Every now and then the city shook its soul out. It assailed you with an image, or a day, or a crime, or a terror, or a beauty so difficult to wrap your mind around that you had to shake your head in disbelief.

Related Characters: Judge Solomon Soderberg

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

As Judge Soderberg prepares for his day at the courthouse, talk about the tightrope walker swirls around him, prompting him to reflect on some of his theories about New York City life and the way it sometimes presents strange wonders, both beautiful and horrific. For a man so used to hearing the same kinds of court cases over and over, the walk excites him and presents him with a day that, because of its unpredictability, makes "sense of the slew of ordinary days."

This speaks to the way the walk interacts with the city's life, which, despite its chaos, falls into a pattern of its own, one that has the power to numb its inhabitants until, finally, it "[shakes] its soul out" and redefines what it means to live in such a place. This is an important thought process, for it shows that Soderberg is aware of the power that monotony—especially in terms of the justice system—can have on him, a dynamic that shows itself when he sentences Tillie and tries (however briefly) to see her not as a criminal caught up in the system, but as a human.

❝ Soderberg glanced at Tillie Henderson as she was escorted out the door to his right. She walked with her head low and yet there was a learned bounce in her gait. As if she were already out and doing the track… Her face looked odd and vulnerable, and yet still held a touch of the sensual. Her eyes were dark. Her eyebrows were plucked thin. There was a shine to her, a glisten. It was as if he were seeing her for the first time: upside down, the way the eye first sees, and then must correct. Something tender and carved about the face… Her face seemed for a second almost beautiful, and then the hooker turned and shuffled and the door was closed behind her, and she vanished into her own namelessness.

Related Characters: Tillie Henderson, Judge Solomon Soderberg

Related Themes:

Page Number: 274

Explanation and Analysis

As Soderberg looks at Tillie after sentencing her, he tries to truly see her as an individual, not as a career criminal. His attempt to do so reveals a sense of compassion within him, despite his otherwise steely approach to serving as a judge. When he really looks at her, he is disarmed by his own sudden acceptance of her humanity; "It was as if he were seeing her for the first time: upside down, the way the eye first sees, and then must correct." As a judge, it behooves him to avoid recognizing a criminal's humanity, for he is required to punish that person in some form or another. The word "correct" in the previous quotation is worth paying attention to, for it embodies Soderberg's attempt to protect himself from feeling compassion for his defendants. In order to more easily do his job, he *corrects* his view so that he sees a criminal first, a human second.

And just when he sees Tillie's true form—her humanity—she conveniently "vanishe[s] into her own namelessness," a namelessness Soderberg relies on in order to avoid the most difficult part of his job: empathizing with somebody who has committed a crime.

Book 3, Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ I know already that I will return to this day whenever I want to. I can bid it alive. Preserve it. There is a still point where the present, the now, winds around itself, and nothing is tangled. The river is not where it begins or ends, but right in the middle point, anchored by what has happened and what is to arrive. You can close your eyes and there will be a light snow falling in New York, and seconds later you are sunning upon a rock in Zacapa, and seconds later still you are surfing through the Bronx on the strength of your own desire. There is no way to find a word to fit around this feeling. Words resist it. Words give it a pattern it does not own. Words put it in time. They freeze what cannot be stopped.

Related Characters: Adelita (speaker), John Andrew Corrigan ("Corrigan")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 278-9

Explanation and Analysis

In the wake of Corrigan's death, Adelita finds herself returning time and again to the memory of the first night he spent at her house. The notion of a nonlinear timeline is very much alive in this passage, as Adelita eschews the notion that what has already happened is fully finished. Rather, she prefers to think of the present and the past as inextricably intertwined, and she places an emphasis on the mind's ability to freely roam, closing large gaps of time and enormous distances.

Adelita considers the way language interacts with memory, asserting that "they freeze what cannot be stopped." In order to remember Corrigan linguistically, she would need to think in the past tense, and this gives the memory "a pattern," a false imposition upon the actual experience. This is, of course, similar to Ciaran's idea that words so often fail to say what something is not: in this case, Adelita's experience of that slow morning with Corrigan is not over.

Book 3, Chapter 11 Quotes

My grandmother was a slave. Her mother too. My great-grandfather was a slave who ended up buying himself out from under Missouri. He carried a mind-whip with him just in case he forgot. I know a thing or two about what people want to buy, and how they think they can buy it. I know the marks that got left on women's ankles. I know the kneeling-down scars you get in the field... I've listened to the southern men in their crisp white shirts and ties. I've seen the fists pumping in the air. I joined in the songs. I was on the buses where they lifted their little children to snarl in the window. I know the smell of CS gas and it's not as sweet as some folks say.

If you start forgetting you're already lost.

Related Characters: Gloria (speaker), Claire Soderberg

Related Themes:

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

This directly follows the moment in which Claire offers Gloria money to stay in the apartment after the other women leave. As Gloria recalls a troubled history of racism that has plagued her and her family for generations, readers are brought into the idea that prejudice and hate is essentially unforgettable and ever-present for those who have experienced it. Gloria carries this history with her, and though racism may be the furthest thing from Claire's mind, the offensive request recalls that history. Unwittingly or not, Claire plays into a racial paradigm. When Gloria says, "I know a thing or two about what people want to buy, and how they think they can buy it," she is referencing both the story of her enslaved ancestors and Claire's reckless and racist assumption that she can buy a black woman's friendship.

Then again, I was thinking that I shouldn't be acting this way, maybe I was getting it all wrong, maybe the truth is that she was just a lonely white woman living up on Park Avenue, lost her boy the exact same way as I lost three of mine, treated me well, didn't ask for nothing, brought me in her house, kissed me on the cheek, made sure my teacup was full, and she just flat-out made a mistake by running her mouth off, one silly little statement I was allowing to ruin everything. I had liked her when she was fussing all over us, and she didn't mean harm, maybe she was just nervous. People are good or half good or a quarter good, and it changes it all the time—but even on the best day nobody's perfect.

Related Characters: Gloria (speaker), Claire Soderberg

Related Themes:

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gloria doubts whether or not her reaction to Claire's racist offer to pay her was too strong. By wondering if she was "allowing it to ruin everything" for no good reason, Gloria's indecision illustrates one of the many tense and unfortunate results of racism: self-doubt. Though it is perhaps true that Claire "just flat-out made a mistake by running her mouth off," it is also true that Gloria had every right to act the way she did, and it is Claire, not Gloria, who should feel badly.

Of course, *Let the Great World Spin* is a book interested in the difficult complexities inherent in human relationships, so this moment evolves into a study of forgiveness. Despite the fact Gloria is justified in her anger, she shows enormous magnanimity by giving Claire the benefit of the doubt. Gloria is able, it seems, to empathize with this woman despite the offense she caused; "People are good or half good or a quarter good, and it changes all the time—but even on the best day nobody's perfect." Gloria allows for the flexibility of human identity, acknowledging that people are complicated and changing "all the time." As such, she gives Claire the benefit of the doubt—a deeply empathetic kindness on her part.

Book 4, Chapter 12 Quotes

A man high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building. One small scrap of history meeting a larger one. As if the walking man were somehow anticipating what would come later. The intrusion of time and history. The collision point of stories. We wait for the explosion but it never occurs. The plane passes, the tightrope walker gets to the end of the wire. Things don't fall apart.

Related Characters: The Tightrope Walker (Phillipe Petit), Jazzlyn Henderson, Jaslyn

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 325

Explanation and Analysis

Jaslyn looks at a picture of the tightrope walker and knows that the walk took place on the same day her mother died. This is the only passage in the entire novel that addresses the destruction of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001 (though even here it is a rather subtle allusion). The reference is embedded in the attention on the plane as it seems to disappear into the edge of one of the towers. An acknowledgement of the disaster is also evident in the sentence, "We wait for the explosion but it never occurs." As Jaslyn studies the photograph of the man on the wire, we feel "one small scrap of history meeting a larger one," and we are once again thrown into a contemplation of chronology—"the intrusion of time and history." We also feel a convergence of multiple storylines: the tightrope walker's, Jazzlyn's, Jaslyn's, and—for those of us alive when the Towers fell—our own.

❝ We stumble on, thinks Jaslyn, bring a little noise into the silence, find in others the ongoing of ourselves. It is almost enough.

Quietly, Jaslyn perches on the edge of the bed and then extends her feet, moves her legs across slowly so as not to disturb the mattress. She fixes a pillow, leans, picks a hair out of Claire's mouth…

The world spins. We stumble on. It is enough.

Related Characters: Claire Soderberg, Jaslyn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 349

Explanation and Analysis

As Jaslyn watches Claire sleeping on her deathbed, she feels meaning and significance surround them in the room. In this moment, we witness Jaslyn bridging the novel's generational gap by interacting tenderly with Claire, who we now know became lifelong friends with Gloria. As such, there is a sense of conclusion, at least in terms of the way time flows throughout the book. And once again, we feel different storylines coming together, even if this is manifested abstractly in the spinning of the world or the idea that each person stumbles through his or her life. Just as Claire maintains that death is "the greatest democracy of them all," Jaslyn feels that the stumbling nature of humanity—the mistakes we make, the blindness we experience as we move through our lives—is a unifying force, a common struggle shared by everyone as we "find in others the ongoing of ourselves." Knowing this, it seems, should be enough to keep us going, for it is a faith of sorts—a faith in humanity.

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.

THOSE WHO SAW HIM HUSHED

Amidst a heavy and astonished silence, New York City pedestrians strain upward, looking above themselves at someone standing at the edge of one of the World Trade Center towers in Lower Manhattan. Confused and apprehensive, the people on the ground or in cabs or on the Staten Island Ferry halt their daily routines to peer up at the small figure, thinking that he is perhaps a window washer or a construction worker or, just maybe, a suicidal jumper.

The silence that settles over the city's morning chaos immediately builds tension in the story and incites a rare moment of connection between people living disparate lives. Strangers suddenly find themselves concentrating on the same strange sight, and this brings them together, even if only for a moment.

Because the man atop the tower cannot be viewed from all angles—with various buildings obstructing the line of sight—pedestrians search for vantage points from which they might be able to watch this strange display. They wait with baited breath—not wanting to stay, not wanting to leave—as they try to make sense of the long black line in front of the man, which stretches from one tower to the other.

In this moment, uncertainty creeps through the crowd. As busy New Yorkers, they're unused to standing still in large numbers, but they don't want to miss whatever is clearly about to happen. As such, they doubt their decision to stay while also doubting their impulse to leave.

A pigeon flies from the top floor of a nearby building. The watchers track its diving motion as it swoops near the man standing at the tower's edge. It is at this point that they notice other people watching from the windows of nearby office buildings.

Yet again, the onlookers find themselves paying more attention than normal to the people and things surrounding them. McCann's narration swoops around the city like the pigeon, touching on many disparate moments and people.

A passing weather helicopter hangs a clumsy turn, its rotor blades bleating a loud, heavy rhythm. Its window opens and a camera appears. Down below, police officers turn their sirens on. This excites the watching crowd, which starts to chatter about the many possibilities: they speculate that the man is a burglar trying to escape, that there are hostages inside the towers, that he is a terrorist, that he is advertising a product, that he's protesting something.

With the introduction of the police, readers—along with the pedestrians—are encouraged to consider the precise nature of what's going on, registering for perhaps the first time that the man on the tower must have somehow broken the law in order to gain access to the roof. The mention of terrorism in connection to the World Trade Center is a subtle nod to the tragedy that would befall the buildings decades later.

Rumors spread and the commotion picks up. Police officers run into the World Trade Center to start making their way to the top floor. Fire trucks arrive; so, too, does a flatbed truck with a cherry picker. The excitement and energy is punctuated as a man opens his office window, leans out, and yells, "Do it, asshole!" After a moment, the crowd erupts in laughter.

The callous attitude so often embodied by New Yorkers is evident in what this man yells. But rather than driving people apart—like such behavior often does in the city—it serves as a unifying act, the humor ultimately binding the crowd together amidst mounting tension.

Some of the onlookers agree: they want the man to get it over with already, to just go ahead and jump. Others disagree. Regardless, the crowd is charged with energy and anxiety as the man bends over as if to examine his shoes, and then suddenly his body seems to sail into the air. The crowd lets out an exasperated moan, and even the people who wanted him to jump are utterly shocked. Then, with relief, someone shouts that it is not the man's body but rather a shirt that is falling and twisting its way through the air.

The shirt that flies through the air seems to challenge the crowd, asking them if they truly want the man to jump. The fact that even those making jokes are ultimately silenced by regret and fear insinuates that their callousness is not genuine, but rather an affectation put on in order to survive an unforgiving city life.

A new silence settles over the audience as now the man on the tower straightens to a standing position again, this time holding a long a very long and thin bar in his hands. He fixes his eyes on the opposite tower, tests the weight of the long bar, and places a foot on the wire strung between the two buildings. Below, the watchers collectively hold their breath in silence. The man **walks** onto the wire.

The crowd's silence once again marks the extraordinary connection they've forged despite the city's hectic patterns that fight to keep them apart. This moment—based on Phillipe Petit's real-life tightrope walk between the Twin Towers—will serve as an ephemeral axis around which the rest of the book will rotate.

BOOK ONE, CHAPTER 1: ALL RESPECTS TO HEAVEN, I LIKE IT HERE

Ciaran provides a detailed account of his brother Corrigan's life, beginning with their shared childhood in Dublin, Ireland, where they are raised on the edge of Dublin Bay by their single mother. Their father abandons the family when the boys are very young, his only presence reduced to a weekly check addressed to their mother and a wardrobe full of his old suits.

Pulling abruptly away from the tightrope walker's first step on the high wire, this sudden transition to Corrigan's life leaves us, much like the pedestrians in the previous scene, holding our breath. As Corrigan's story takes center stage, we intuit his importance as a character.

At night Corrigan recites his prayers on the top bunk in the boys' shared room. These prayers are unlike anything Ciaran has ever heard: they are punctuated by laughter and sighs and are frantically rhythmic, like incantations. They are entirely unique. Ciaran, on the other hand, knows only the standard Catholic prayers and doesn't care much for religion; much to his chagrin, Corrigan often prays like this throughout the night, stopping only momentarily when Ciaran kicks the bed or tells him to shut up. Sometimes Ciaran wakes in the morning to find his brother in bed beside him, still reciting his prayers.

Corrigan is quickly established as eccentric and kind, and he seems to have an intense (and not always pleasant) relationship with God even from a young age. Although he ignores his brother's plea that he stop praying during the night, the tenderness between the two boys is evident. Despite Corrigan's kindness, though, it seems that he is categorically unwilling to compromise or sacrifice his faith and religion to appease the people he loves.

Corrigan is a charismatic, charming boy. People are naturally drawn to him. One night when Ciaran is eleven and Corrigan is nine, Ciaran wakes up to a cold rush of air. He moves to shut the window, but it is closed. In the middle of the room Corrigan is bent over, the smell of cold air and cigarette smoke rolling off his body. He tells Ciaran to go back to sleep and returns to his bed. In the morning, when Ciaran asks where he went, Corrigan tells him that he was "just along by the water." Despite Ciaran's insistence, he claims that he did not smoke.

Corrigan's magnetic personality bears with it traces of mystery. A wildness and strong sense of autonomy edge into his general disposition, and this seems to trouble Ciaran, as evidenced by his understandable eagerness to know his brother's nighttime whereabouts.

Later that morning, when their mother walks them to school, Ciaran notices his mother's eye catch something on the other side of the road. It is a man wrapped in a large red blanket. An obvious drunk or vagrant, the man raises his hand, and Corrigan waves back. Ciaran asks who it is, but his mother doesn't answer, saying that they'll sort it out after school. Ciaran doesn't receive an answer from Corrigan, either, who disappears into his classroom.

Ciaran's curiosity about his brother's private life increases in this moment, and one gets the sense that after this he becomes intensely attuned to Corrigan, becoming a silent observer of this peculiar and vivacious boy. It's suggested that Corrigan gave one of his blankets away to the homeless man.

When the boys return home from school that day, there is a brown paper package waiting for Corrigan on his bed. Inside it is another blanket. Corrigan unfolds it, looks up at his mother, and nods. She touches his face and says, "Never again, understand?" This is the last that is said about the event until two years later, when Corrigan gives the new blanket away to another homeless man on a frigid Dublin night. This, Ciaran says in retrospect, is the first inclination of what his brother will become when he's an adult helping "the whores, the hustlers, the hopeless" in New York.

Yet again we see that Corrigan is unwilling to compromise his values, even if they make his loved ones—like his mother—uncomfortable. It is notable that Ciaran mentions "the whores, the hustlers, the hopeless," ultimately revealing that Corrigan will move to New York. This foreshadowing is significant as we try to piece together how Corrigan's story relates to the tightrope walker's, which, of course, also takes place in New York City.

At around the age of twelve or thirteen Corrigan starts getting drunk after school on Fridays. He goes to the seedy parts of town with a bottle of wine and hands it around to the hardened drunks of Dublin. They laugh at him and use him for his money, sending him out for more alcohol or cigarettes. Sometimes he comes home sockless or shirtless, runs up the stairs, brushes his teeth, and comes back downstairs just sober enough to evade his mother's full suspicion. When asked where he was, he answers, "God's work."

Once again, Corrigan's faith rules his life while causing his loved ones to worry. In keeping with the strange and unconventional prayers he uttered as a young child, his idea of religion—of "God's work"—is quite unique and difficult to understand, as getting drunk with vagrants doesn't seem to have much in common with the normal tenets of religious life.

Soon enough Corrigan becomes a regular in the flophouses with the seasoned drunks. He listens to their long stories of hardship as if he is an apprentice trying to learn the ways of poverty, trying to take on some of the burden. And although Corrigan never mentions it, Ciaran can tell that some of this behavior also has to do with the absence of their father.

Ciaran thinks Corrigan is overcompensating in order to make up for the loss of their father. This viewpoint ultimately betrays Ciaran's skeptical approach to religion and, perhaps, a frustration that his brother won't let him in on his private, mysterious life.

On his fourteenth birthday Corrigan gets too drunk to hide it. His mother catches him and makes him promise not to drink again, imposing a new curfew on Fridays. But two weeks later he returns to his regular routine, though now he doesn't drink as much. Instead, he just spends time with the drunks, thinking that they need him there, as if he is "a mad, impossible angel."

In this phase of Corrigan's life, it is unclear whether his drinking is a vice—a growing addiction—or if it is truly what he says it is: "God's work." The fact that he continues spending time with the drunks even when sober, though, proves that his main concern is helping shoulder the vagrants' various hardships.

The boys' mother dies of cancer when Ciaran is nineteen and Corrigan is seventeen. As they stand over her dead body at the hospital, their father appears in the doorway. Corrigan refuses to embrace him, rushing by him out of the room. That night, Corrigan doesn't allow their father to sleep in the master bedroom, instead forcing him to spend the night on the couch. The night before their mother's funeral, Corrigan gives away all of their father's old suits to the city's homeless drunks, who appear on the front lawn the next morning.

Corrigan's refusal to embrace his father validates Ciaran's original theory that Corrigan has (at least partly) been trying to make up for the parental absence in his childhood. That Corrigan spites his father by showing kindness to others is in perfect alignment with his charitable ideals; even in moments of anger, he is looking for ways to help less fortunate souls.

As the boys grow older, Corrigan becomes more devoutly religious. When they sell the house, he gives away his share of the money and lives off of charity, all the while studying the teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi. Not long afterward, he goes to Emo College in County Laois to study with the Jesuits. Here he becomes even more ascetic and serious, attending early morning Mass and engaging in long hours of theological study.

No longer a boy with his own ideas about religion, Corrigan now takes serious steps toward theological maturity. Saint Francis of Assisi was a famous proponent of living a religious life in poverty, devoted to peace, humility, and kindness to others.

The religious institution at Emo College is not a good fit for Corrigan's unique faith, which requires room for doubt. As such, he leaves the school and moves to Brussels to join an Order of young Catholic monks. He takes vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience and continues studying religious poetry and liberation theology (a doctrine that emphasizes helping the poor and marginalized). He drives a fruit truck for a co-op and lives a simple life with minimal furniture. When the Order assigns him a posting in New York City in the early seventies, Corrigan begrudgingly packs his bags, for he thinks his time would be better spent somewhere in "the Third World." Nonetheless, he boards a plane headed for America.

Part of maturing as an adult includes discerning the complicated particulars of one's belief systems. This is what Corrigan undergoes when he decides to leave Emo College to study liberation theology, which allows him more room to remain self-directed in his faith. It is evident that, despite his studies, Corrigan maintains the same odd and feverish zeal that set his religious predilections apart as unique even when he was a child.

By this time Ciaran has dropped out of university, lived for a short time as a late-blooming hippie, and has taken an office job despite his desire for a wilder lifestyle. One day he goes to an outdoor market to buy a bag of marijuana and is caught in a bomb explosion. He loses the tip of his ear but is otherwise unharmed. Seeing that the violence of the Northern Ireland Conflict has finally made its way south to Dublin, he decides to join his brother in America.

Although Ireland had been embroiled in violent conflict for quite some time, Ciaran had been relatively unaffected until the market bombing. Although it makes sense that he should flee this violence, the fact that he decides to visit Corrigan in America is somewhat uninspired and arbitrary, ultimately insinuating a possible lack of direction or motivation.

Ciaran arrives at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City. Corrigan, who said he would meet him, is nowhere to be seen. Overwhelmed by the city, Ciaran makes his own way to his brother's address in the Bronx. On the subway he stares at a black woman, realizing that he has never seen a black person so close before. When Ciaran finally reaches the Bronx, he gets in a cab that is reluctant to drop him off at his brother's address in the government housing projects. The cab drives in circles and finally lets him off at a curb near Corrigan's building, speeding off immediately after Ciaran gets out.

Once again, New York City's chaos and squalor comes to the novel's foreground. Suddenly Ciaran encounters people and lifestyles of which he has never even fathomed. Because Ireland is less racially diverse than the United States, he is naïve and ignorant when he encounters people from different backgrounds and cultures, and his behavior shows this.

Prostitutes line the streets. One in particular holds a parasol and calls out to Ciaran, who immediately says, "I'm broke." She calls him an asshole and keeps moving. Perplexed, he watches her before moving toward the projects, stepping over heroin needles as he goes.

In this moment, Ciaran is still trying to come to grips with his new environment, but he is overwhelmed by its intimidating features.

Corrigan's apartment is on the fifth floor of a twenty-story building. Ciaran opens the door—which is unlocked—to find a room empty except for a ripped sofa, a table, and a wooden crucifix above a single bed. He collapses on the couch and sleeps until he is suddenly awoken by the prostitute who had been carrying the parasol on the street. She comes through the door and slinks out of her coat, suddenly naked except for her boots. She looks at herself in the mirror, goes to the bathroom, and comes out with freshly applied lipstick and perfume. She leaves, but over the course of the afternoon five or six other prostitutes come in and do similar things.

Corrigan's apartment does nothing to soothe Ciaran's worries or culture shock. Neither does the prostitute who comes inside to use the bathroom. In this way, the intimidating elements of the outside world invade the apartment, a space Ciaran may otherwise have viewed as a sanctuary of sorts. As such, it becomes clear that Corrigan has been living his life fully immersed in the most difficult elements of New York City's underserved areas—a fact that, in truth, should not surprise Ciaran in the least.

Later that night Corrigan finally comes home. He wakes up Ciaran to say hello. Corrigan is even thinner than he always has been and his hair is long. His face is cut and bruised and he looks older than he should. The two brothers reacquaint themselves, and Ciaran discovers that Corrigan leaves his door unlocked so that the prostitutes, whom he has befriended, can use his bathroom between clients. Ciaran asks about his brother's bruised face, and Corrigan tells him that the pimps sometimes beat him up as a way of showing him their power—they don't trust the way he helps the prostitutes and are suspicious of his intentions. Corrigan shrugs this off, insisting that it isn't a big deal to let them use his bathroom from time to time. He makes his brother tea and prays.

Once again, Ciaran is put in the position of trying to understand Corrigan's outlandish commitment to charity. The lengths he goes in order to help others, it seems, have grown considerably since he was a child; even physical violence can't keep him from helping the prostitutes.

Three prostitutes enter the room while Corrigan is praying. One of them is the woman with the parasol, whose name is Tillie. Another clearly younger woman is named Jazzlyn. The third is named Angie. They flirt and joke with Corrigan, clearly displaying their affection for him. When Jazzlyn starts preparing to shoot up heroin, Corrigan reaches across and puts his hand on her, saying, "Not here, you know you can't do that in here." When the women leave, Ciaran is astonished that his brother shows them such lenience and kindness, saying that they're all a "mess," a statement Corrigan refutes by arguing that they're good people simply racked by fear.

Corrigan's ability to see anybody as an equal—as worthy of his time—surfaces in this moment. Despite their vices, he shows the prostitutes his kindness. This transcends a racial divide and an implicit bias against impoverished young black women that his brother is, as of yet, unable to overcome. By calling the prostitutes a "mess," Ciaran seeks to dismiss them without considering their humanity, a sentiment Corrigan is at odds with.

Finally, when the conversation dies down, Ciaran brings up the fact that Corrigan didn't come to the funeral when their father died several months before. Corrigan asks what scriptures were read, and Ciaran can't remember. He asks Corrigan what he would have used, and this leads to a short but explosive standoff in which Corrigan yells, "I don't know! Okay? I don't fucking know!" The fact that his brother curses stuns Ciaran, and Corrigan is instantly ashamed. Ciaran delights for a moment in the fact that his brother has a flaw so major it simply cannot be contained. He determines that Corrigan wants to take on other people's pain but cannot deal with his own. Then he too feels shame for deriving pleasure from Corrigan's unhappiness. The two brothers tersely make up with one another, apologizing for what they said.

Ciaran's delight in Corrigan's momentary lack of composure may seem to indicate that he resents his brother, and this is certainly partly true, but it is also a moment in which the two brothers are more connected than they normally are; since Ciaran doesn't share Corrigan's strict religious values, it is reassuring to see his brother shift away from them, even if only for a moment. In Corrigan's outburst, Ciaran discovers an emotion he recognizes, a response he can relate to. In short, Corrigan is humanized by his short fall from grace and therefore seems less enigmatic to his own brother.

Days pass, and Ciaran slowly acclimates to life in the Bronx and the housing projects, though he remains uncomfortable about the prostitutes, especially the way they are always high on heroin and sauntering into the apartment. During the day Corrigan drives a van to a nursing home and takes elderly people for rides to the park, allowing them some outdoor time. Ciaran accompanies him. One day, after dropping the elderly off at the nursing home again, Corrigan tells Ciaran that he has another job to do—but he won't disclose what it is. Corrigan leaves Ciaran at the projects and then drives away. He doesn't return until late that night looking thin and exhausted.

Corrigan's mysterious private life once more emerges as something that ultimately keeps Ciaran from his brother. Whatever is going on behind the scenes seems to be taking its toll on Corrigan's health, as evidenced by his feeble appearance upon returning. And given his history of destructive behavior in the name of charity, Ciaran has reason to worry about how the Bronx might be affecting Corrigan.

Several days later another monk from the Order arrives in the projects. He is clearly taken aback by the tough environment and is robbed by gunpoint in the elevator on his second day. Afterward, he sits and prays in the apartment for two straight days. Corrigan finds him too serious, too simple-minded when it comes to God. "It's like he's got a toothache and he wants God to cure it," he says. One day Jazzlyn sits in the monk's lap and flirts with him, an event that sends him into immediate and fervent prayer followed by a torrent of tears. Corrigan asks around and is able to retrieve the monk's stolen passport, and he drives him to the airport to leave New York once and for all.

The presence of a fellow monk doesn't seem to please Corrigan very much, a testament to his autonomous religious lifestyle. This serves as yet another reminder that Corrigan has a very specific approach to believing in God, and this approach is perhaps why he is able to withstand the conditions of the Bronx, a feat that his fellow monk seems incapable of, as even a small amount of playful attention from Jazzlyn sends him into crisis. Much of Corrigan's resilience, then, has to do with his unconventional way of practicing religion.

Still struggling to accept the presence of the prostitutes in his brother's apartment, Ciaran begins locking the door. When Corrigan asks him to leave it unlocked, the two brothers have a tense conversation in which Ciaran finds out that Tillie is Jazzlyn's mother. This appalls him, and he finally breaks down and yells at his brother, roundly criticizing his life and values, saying that he is only "placating his conscience" by pretending to help these lost souls. Corrigan does not yell back. He merely replies, "Just leave the door open," before leaving the apartment.

The idea that Corrigan is just "placating his conscience" is a strong accusation because it undermines his values as a liberation theologian, a practice that uses Christian values to service oppressed populations. There is a hint of callous stereotyping in this accusation, as Ciaran clearly believes that Corrigan—a white man from the middle class—has no good reason to help impoverished black prostitutes.

Ciaran runs outside after his brother has left. He passes a man teaching a dog to bite, and without wanting to, he thinks, "*Nigger*." This thought is followed by the feeling that the Bronx will ruin him. He wonders how Corrigan can stand it.

Ciaran's implicit bias and racism finally surfaces explicitly. Instead of facing the ugliness of these bitter feelings, though, he projects his scorn onto the environment by blaming his surroundings for his own hateful thoughts.

When Corrigan comes home late that night, he is lethargic and his eyes lazily roll in their sockets. Ciaran's bags are packed and he is ready to leave, but Corrigan sets to work taking the locks off the door. Ciaran watches his brother work, and when Corrigan rolls up his sleeve, Ciaran sees markings on his arm—he suddenly feels that things have become clear to him, and assumes that Corrigan is now a heroin user.

Brotherly worry reenters this complicated relationship, somewhat diverting Ciaran's anger into a sober clarity regarding his brother's life in the Bronx.

For the most part, Ciaran is not surprised that his brother is using heroin. He figures that it is the same thing he did as a child when he used to drink with Dublin's alcoholics; "If he couldn't cure it, he took it on." The next day, without much thought to it, Ciaran decides to stay.

Rather than resenting Corrigan, now Ciaran worries about him, and this gives him a reason to stay in the Bronx as a caretaker of sorts. Whereas before he was kept out of Corrigan's private life, now he can view himself as essential to his brother's wellbeing and, therefore, part of his life.

Ciaran once again accompanies Corrigan as he drives the elderly around. In picking them up, he meets Adelita, a nurse at the home for whom Corrigan has an obvious affinity. Throughout the day Ciaran asks Corrigan questions about heroin, trying to gauge his brother's response. Finally, at the end of the day, he asks Corrigan if he's been using the drug. Astonished, Corrigan responds convincingly that he would never even go near the substance. What's really been occupying him, he explains, is the fact that he has fallen in love with Adelita.

As a monk, Corrigan has taken vows of celibacy, so it is significant that he has fallen in love. The fact that he admits to this is another reminder that he approaches his faith uniquely, as most monks—like the one who briefly lived with Corrigan in the Bronx—would deny their feelings, thinking they could make them vanish by praying.

It is evening when Corrigan parks the car and fills his brother in on the real story. It turns out that he has a rare blood condition known as TTP (Thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura), which Adelita diagnosed him with. Corrigan had been helping move furniture into the nursing home when Adelita noticed that his arms were severely bruised. He had ignored these blotches because he had recently been beaten up by a pimp and had chalked up his injuries to the violence. But Adelita pushed her finger into a bruise and said, "You've got TTP," a condition she knew about from studying to be a doctor at night. In Guatemala, her original home, she was a nurse and almost a doctor, but none of her credentials transferred when she moved to the United States. Corrigan takes her advice and has a doctor examine him and it turns out that she was right: he has TTP.

The fact that Ciaran assumed Corrigan's bruises were from heroin use and never even considered the possibility that his brother is sick indicates just how far Ciaran thinks Corrigan is willing to go in order to inherit and ease other peoples' pain. On another note, it is notable that Corrigan falls in love with Adelita, the woman who diagnoses him with this ailment. It is as if she represents imperfection, a notion Corrigan has been obsessed with even in regards to religion.

Corrigan explains that the idea of being sick doesn't bother him very much, though the initial experience threw him into a struggle with his faith. He felt as if he was losing God. In the nursing home one day Adelita started asking him about his treatment, and then she began rubbing the inside of his arm, saying how important it was to keep the blood flowing. Corrigan was overcome by her touch. He implored himself to rise above the pleasure, to act holy and to not succumb to romance's temptation. But he let it happen, unable to resist. When he left, he drove aimlessly for hours on end until he reached Montauk, where he looked out at the ocean, hoping for some sort of revelation, which never came. Upon returning to the Bronx, Corrigan closed himself into his room, locked the door, and ignored the prostitutes' knocks until, worrying that he had died, they summoned the police to break down his door.

In many ways, Corrigan's love for Adelita takes on the same kind of fervor that he has previously thrown into religion, and this is what sends him into a crisis. Until this point, he has always recognized beauty as something that comes from the divine: beauty in faith, beauty even in doubt. Now, though, he experiences the beauty of love and the secular joys of attraction. This, of course, poses a threat to his previously established beliefs, and this—in conjunction with his sickness—is why he feels like he is losing God.

Continuing his story, Corrigan tells Ciaran that Tillie, Jazzlyn, and Angie threw a "not-dead" party for him, which he decided to take "as a sign." But then, to his own dismay, he found himself returning to the nursing home and asking Adelita to rub his arm again. While she rubbed his arm, he kissed her. After that, he started going to her house to visit her and her two kids. He frequently made up excuses to go—telling himself that he was going over to help the kids with their homework—but they refrained from sleeping together, since, after all, he was still in the Order and had taken a vow of celibacy, which Adelita respected.

After failing to have a revelation on the Montauk beach, it is significant that Corrigan allows himself to continue visiting Adelita. Although he makes feeble justifications for seeing her, it is clear that he is, for the first time in his life, not prioritizing his faith.

Once Corrigan has unloaded this information about his love for Adelita, he feels somewhat freed. In the following days he goes to the nursing home as much as possible in order to visit her, and she starts coming to his apartment, where the two of them insist that Ciaran stay, as if his presence provides an appropriate separation between them so that they remain faithful to Corrigan's vows. Corrigan is at once overjoyed and distraught, feeling ultimately that he has fallen from grace. Still, he can't commit to either leaving the Order or leaving Adelita.

Suddenly Ciaran finds himself included in Corrigan's private life. In fact, he is a necessary component to Corrigan's ability to indulge his love for Adelita. This is a drastic change, as Ciaran is usually kept from his brother's affairs, always made to guess at what might be going on. For once in his life, Corrigan is ideologically torn, and he needs his brother.

Ciaran gets a job as a bartender in Queens. One night on his way home he sees Tillie underneath the expressway in the Bronx. She comes over to him, putting her arm through his and saying, "Whosoever brought me here is going to have to take me home," which Ciaran recognizes as a line from the thirteenth century Persian poet Rumi. She sees his surprise and explains that her husband studied Persian poetry. Ciaran looks at her, astounded. She tells him to get himself together, saying that the man was actually her ex-husband. Suddenly, Ciaran finds himself wanting to kiss her. Just then, Tillie's pimp pulls up in a car, and she tells him that Ciaran has already paid for her services. At this, they slink away and have sex.

In a strange, backward way, Ciaran's night with Tillie signifies that he is finally opening up to the people around him in the Bronx. Rather than harshly judging the prostitutes, he (momentarily) joins in their lifestyle. It is more complicated than this, though, because by sleeping with Tillie he simultaneously ceases to judge her and exploits her. It is notable, too, that he only opens up to her after she impresses him with her intelligence; in order to overcome his various biases, Tillie must subvert the stereotype of an inner city prostitute.

A police raid occurs early one morning, the cops rounding up the prostitutes in great numbers and arresting them. Corrigan is incensed. He demands to know where the women are being taken, but the police only make fun of him. Eventually they push him to the side and make him stand on the curb. On his way inside, Corrigan picks up a **key ring** that Jazzlyn dropped. It bears pictures of her two daughters. Ciaran tries to tell his brother that they will get the women later, but Corrigan shows him the key ring, saying that it is the reason they have to act now; Jazzlyn's children have been left alone.

Corrigan's characteristic concern for others is showcased in this scene, in which he goes to great lengths to help Jazzlyn and Tillie. The police officers' indifference is worth noting too, as it is emblematic of the divide between the state-installed structures of power and the people they are meant to serve. That the officers laugh at Corrigan's distress is evidence of their utter lack of empathy; they can't even fathom why a white man would care so much about these prostitutes.

Corrigan asks Ciaran to pick up the elderly patients from the nursing home while he goes downtown to the precinct where Jazzlyn and Tillie are being held because of an outstanding warrant for a robbery they committed together. Corrigan suggests that Ciaran take the elderly patients to the beach. Ciaran agrees and Corrigan leaves. It is then that Ciaran realizes that Corrigan took the van; he rents a different van and goes to pick up the residents.

In leaving Ciaran without the van, Corrigan seems to have tunnel vision in regards to helping Jazzlyn and Tillie, a fact that is in keeping with how he normally lives his life: when something is important to him, he chases it while ignoring all other concerns, whether practical or impractical.

Adelita, who has her children with her, helps Ciaran take the elderly residents to the beach. Once they get there, Ciaran starts asking Adelita questions in an attempt to discern whether or not she cares as much about Corrigan as he cares about her. Offended by his questioning, she eventually reassures him that her love for his brother is genuine and that she respects him, making it clear that she would never force him to leave the Order and then subsequently leave him.

This is a strange moment in which Ciaran appears to be protecting Corrigan's faith, something about which he is normally skeptical. By interrogating Adelita about her intentions, he proves that what he cares most about is his brother's welfare rather than the specific way he leads his life.

Tillie takes the blame for the robbery, and Jazzlyn is released. Corrigan is there to take her home. On the ride back to the Bronx, however, they get into a car crash on the FDR Drive. A car rear-ends Corrigan's van, sending it out of control. Jazzlyn flies through the windshield and is flung into the air, landing far from the van in a crumpled heap, instantly dead. Corrigan ends up smashed down under the steering wheel, his body pressing against the accelerator and the brake pedals at the same time. He is still breathing. The only belongings left behind—other than the van itself—are one of Jazzlyn's yellow stilettos and a Bible that fell overtop it from the glove compartment. At first, the paramedics think Corrigan is dead and load him into a truck with Jazzlyn, but then he coughs a small bubble of blood and he is rushed to the hospital.

The image of Jazzlyn's stiletto and Corrigan's Bible represents the ways in which disparate lives—lives that might otherwise have nothing to do with one another—can crash fatefully together. The image is a juxtaposition of two value systems, two very different lives, and this discrepancy speaks to the fact that, in the end, everybody is headed in the same direction: death. And just as Corrigan and Jazzlyn's lives end while their loved ones live on unknowingly, the van's brake pedal depresses even as the accelerator continues to whine on and on.

Unaware of the accident Corrigan and Jazzlyn have been in, Ciaran and Adelita finish their day at the beach. Ciaran drops everyone off and drives back to the projects. At two in the morning a knock sounds on the door, and a woman comes into the room with the news that Jazzlyn has been in a crash. Ciaran bounds out of the apartment and gets in the van, driving directly to Adelita's, who brings her children along to the hospital.

Although Ciaran was suspicious of Adelita earlier in the day, now tragedy brings them together as they rush to the hospital. This is yet another moment in which two unsuspecting people are brought together, this time in the name of mutual love.

At the hospital Ciaran and Adelita find Corrigan while Adelita's children sit in the waiting room. Frantic, they pull their chairs close to Corrigan. He is trying to speak. He whispers that he's seen something beautiful. Adelita leans down to him and Corrigan continues whispering to her. Ciaran asks what he's saying, and she replies that it is nonsense. Blood bubbles at his mouth. Adelita says he's hallucinating, says that he claims to have seen something beautiful. Ciaran asks if his brother wants a priest. Corrigan tries to lift his head. Weeping gently, Adelita touches him; "Oh," she says, "his forehead's cold. His forehead's very cold."

In the last moments of his brother's life, Ciaran is once more left to guess what Corrigan is feeling and thinking. Nonetheless, he knows at least that his brother claims to have seen something beautiful, and although this statement is vague, it seems an appropriate summation of Corrigan's life, a life that was devoted to finding beauty in even the most unexpected places and times.

BOOK ONE, CHAPTER 2: MIRÓ, MIRÓ, ON THE WALL

One morning on Park Avenue on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, Claire Soderberg prepares to host a group of women. Her husband Solomon, after bringing her breakfast in bed, has already left for work. From the window she watches him hail a taxi. She considers the fact that he doesn't know about the visitors she is about to have, thinking that perhaps she will tell him over dinner when he returns home that evening. "Guess what, Sol," she imagines saying to him, and then she imagines his response: "Just tell me, Claire, honey—I've had a long day."

For the second time in Let the Great World Spin, *we are taken without warning into a new story, a technique that emphasizes the feeling that New York City contains a great many lives existing simultaneously. In the opening phrases of this chapter, it quickly becomes clear that, though Claire loves her husband, there is a certain strain on their relationship that perhaps hinders open communication.*

Claire nervously readies herself and the house. She considers the streak of grey in her hair, which she has grown to like. She applies her makeup and chooses a dress. Again, she thinks about her husband Solomon. She thinks about when she first met him at Yale, when he had a full head of hair. When he was a junior counsel in Hartford he used to go on walks with the poet Wallace Stevens. He would then come home and make love to Claire. She reminisces about the days when she used to accompany him to court, watching him act as a judge. Now she dislikes doing so because she doesn't want to hear the people making remarks about him. She considers the fact that on his desk at work there is a picture of her with their son Joshua. At the thought of her son, her breath is momentarily taken away.

It is immediately clear that Claire and Solomon are, in contrast to the characters of the previous chapter, quite wealthy. It also becomes clear, though, that this wealth does not spare them from various emotional stressors. Claire appears stuck in the past, wishing to relive her long gone halcyon days. Her strong reaction to the thought of her son speaks to this desire to rewind time, for it seems there is something in her past about her son that Claire wishes she could change.

The women who are about to visit Claire are part of a group of mothers who have lost sons in the Vietnam War. Claire has been to each of their houses, all of which were simple, ordinary homes. The last meeting took place at a woman named Gloria's apartment in the government housing projects of the Bronx. Claire was horrified by the building and atmosphere of the projects, but when she entered the actual apartment, she found that Gloria kept it simple and clean. When it came time for the group to discuss their next meeting, Claire was embarrassed to tell them her address. Uncomfortable, she started rambling and trying to make it seem like she wasn't rubbing her wealth in their faces until Gloria interjected—much to Claire's delight—to diffuse the tension, saying, "Hell's bells, Park Avenue, I've only ever been there for Monopoly!"

The mention of Gloria's apartment in the Bronx, however tangential, connects Claire's story to Corrigan's. Claire's embarrassment about telling the other women her address reveals that she is very conscious of social and economic class, and the fact that it is Gloria—a black woman living the Bronx's government housing projects—who saves her from total humiliation by cutting her off brings to the forefront the uncomfortable idea that it is the poor or underserved people—not the wealthy ones—who are often expected to alleviate the guilt of their more fortunate friends.

Upon leaving Gloria's apartment at the last meeting, the four white women walked to the subway while fearfully grasping their purses. Claire looked up and saw Gloria waving from her eleventh-floor apartment; she wanted to run up and take Gloria with her, saving her from the housing projects. The women took the subway together—it was only Claire's second time doing so—and then parted ways. As she walked from the train to her apartment, she wondered why she ever decided to meet with all these women who are so different than her, but then she reminded herself that she likes them and that she has nothing against anyone. This reminded her of a racist phrase her father uttered when she was a teenager; when she expressed her anger toward this sort of language, he hugged her and called her modern.

The divide between rich and poor—and between white and black—is strongly felt in this passage. What the women feel in relation to Gloria's apartment—guiltily wealthier—is what Claire feels in relation to the rest of the women's societal positions. As such, Claire internally alienates herself from the group, despite the fact that she likes them and wants their acceptance. She is devoted, it seems, to transcending the expected boundaries that inherently accompany her wealth, and she has been committed to doing so since she was a teenager railing against her father's racism.

As she waits for the women to arrive at her house, Claire reminds herself that she needn't worry so much about what the other women will think of her home. After all, it's only an apartment. But then she remembers that they will encounter the doorman downstairs. She worries that he will mistake her friends for maids and direct them to the service elevator. Rushing to the phone, she calls down to the doorman and tells him to make sure her friends get in the correct elevator.

Much of Claire's self-consciousness regarding her wealth has to do with how she thinks other people will perceive her. In this moment, she clearly thinks her friends will dislike her when they find out how extravagantly she lives. Although she tries so hard to not be classist, though, she ironically undervalues and underestimates the doorman's competency by doubting his ability to correctly do his job.

Claire continues to nervously fuss over preparing the apartment. For a moment she thinks again about Gloria, wondering half-heartedly if she could perhaps hire her friend to do odd jobs so that they could sit together at the table making gin and tonics and relaxing, keeping each other company.

Claire finds herself unwittingly playing into the stereotype that the only way for a black woman from the Bronx to spend time on Park Avenue is if she is a cleaner. This shows that, despite her best intentions, Claire is naïve—even offensively so—when it comes to bridging cultural gaps.

As she prepares the tea, Claire thinks about Joshua, who was in Vietnam as a computer programmer tasked with counting the number of men who died in the war. She tells herself that she "can't indulge this heartsickness," and just then, as she's preparing the coffee and tea, the buzzer rings, yanking her from her sad reminiscing.

The way Claire sadly reminisces about her dead son indicates her penchant for daydreaming, showing that her mind is quite active and often pulled in multiple directions.

The women enter the apartment in a rush, all paying attention to Marcia, who is clearly troubled by something. Sitting in the living room, they all ask her what the matter is. "Man in the air!" she exclaims. "A man in the air, walking."

For the first time, the novel explicitly circles back to the tightrope walker. In doing so, we begin to feel that perhaps this event is what might relate the otherwise tangential elements of the book.

It turns out that, on her way to Manhattan on the Staten Island Ferry, Marcia saw the tightrope walker as he **walked** between the buildings on the wire. She is deeply upset, and the women try to console her while also asking questions. While Marcia tells the story in overwhelmed gasps, two of the women—Janet and Jacqueline—bicker back and forth, periodically telling one another to shush. This puts a strain on Claire as a hostess, who is otherwise relieved that the situation has ushered her guests into the living room so smoothly, ultimately avoiding their embarrassing comments about the lavish apartment. Still, Marcia continues, saying that all she could think about was the idea that perhaps the man she was looking at—the tightrope walker—was actually her son coming to say hello.

It's not surprising that, even amid the chaos, Claire thinks about how she is coming off as a hostess. Her insecurities are quite strong, capable even of pervading her thoughts in moments of intense distraction. With Marcia's comment about her son, it becomes clear that the tightrope walker is a highly symbolic figure for these women, who are perhaps desperately searching to find reason in their sons' untimely deaths. Because the Vietnam War was so controversial, it is natural that these mothers might feel they lost their sons for no good reason, and so they are eager to find meaning elsewhere.

Marcia explains that when the ferry docked, she dashed onto land, running frantically down various side streets to try to see the tightrope walker. Unable to find a good vantage point, she suddenly stopped running, halting in the middle of the street. She stopped, she explains, because she didn't want to know if the "boy" fell.

Marcia's story proposes an important line of inquiry: sometimes uncertainty is more emotionally helpful—more beautiful—than reality. Without knowing the real story, she is free to imagine whatever ending might best help her cope with her son's death.

As the conversation lulls, Claire goes to put flowers (which Gloria brought) in water. She finds herself vaguely unsettled by the thought of the tightrope walker, though she doesn't fully understand why. When she returns to the living room, the women are gone. At first she is bewildered by their disappearance, but then she realizes that she left the door open to the roof and that the women have climbed the stairs and congregated atop the building. They are trying to see the tightrope walker, but the Twin Towers are too far away, too obscured by other structures.

For a moment, Claire's insecurities as a hostess manifest themselves, and she is physically isolated from the rest of the group. Even though the women didn't actually leave, it remains the case that they left her behind, a fact that surely contributes to her feeling of being an outsider even within her own group of friends.

Back in the living room, Janet asks them if they think the tightrope walker fell. They rebuke her for her morbidity, but the question hangs in the air. Claire wishes momentarily to be somewhere else, someplace where she could be close to Solomon and Joshua. She realizes that, though Marcia's flustered state ushered the women smoothly into the apartment, it also distracted them from the point of their visit: to talk about Joshua. Claire starts to daydream, and when the other women call her back to attention, she tells them that she was thinking about the man who came to tell her that Joshua had died. Suddenly everything reorients itself, and the conversation flows naturally toward the topic of Joshua and about Claire's experience as a grieving mother.

Though they scold her for saying it, Janet speaks the question that is clearly on everybody else's mind, and this is why the other women react so strongly to her question: it is an articulation of their own fears and an acknowledgement of the fact that, in the same way that all of their sons died, things in life often end terribly. In addition, Claire once again considers her role as a hostess, but this time she does so with more self-interest, and she finally puts her scattered thoughts to use by voicing what she really wants to talk about: her son. This is the first time that she acts truly on her own behalf, rather than considering what the others think of her.

As she tells the women about Joshua and about Solomon and about how hard it was to hear about her son's death, Claire realizes what it is that bothers her about the tightrope walker's **walk**: there are so many ways to die, especially in war, and yet here is this man being so reckless with his body. His carelessness seems, Claire thinks, to make her own son's life cheap. She looks up at her friends and feels a new affinity with them. Standing, she tells them to come with her. "Let's go see Joshua's room," Claire says.

Although the tightrope walker may have faith in himself, Claire and the other grieving mothers only have reason to doubt the crazy endeavor, because experience has shown them that life is precious and that the unspeakable can, in fact, happen to anyone. It is in realizing this that Claire begins to understand that her friends, rather than judging her, understand her pain.

BOOK ONE, CHAPTER 3: A FEAR OF LOVE

Lara Liveman and her husband Blaine are driving out of New York City on the FDR Drive. Blaine, who is driving, has just lit a joint, and they are both coming down from a night of intense partying in the city. With their antique 1920s-era car, they rear-end a van in front of them, which is sent careening across the lanes.

Unlike the previous two sections, it is immediately clear that Lara and Blaine's story directly relates to Corrigan's, since they are plainly the ones who hit his van. We are suddenly forced to hear the other side of this tragic story (which was, notably, only briefly described in the earlier section).

As cocaine still moves through her bloodstream from the night before, Lara watches the van spin out of control, noting the driver's bewildered face as the steering wheel spins through his hands. She wonders what he thinks when he looks at her and sees that she is dressed in flapper-era clothes. She then notices bare feet propped on the van's dashboard—the insteps white and vulnerable—and then the woman's face to whom they belong; she is in the passenger seat, and her face is young and calm. Lara thinks that this woman's eyes travel across her own, "as if asking, What are you doing, you tan blond bitch in your billowy blouse and your fancy Cotton Club Car?"

Like Claire, Lara experiences a certain kind of guilt about her status, though in this case it is more directly related to the fact that she done something to harm another person, and she is projecting ideas of racial scorn. Despite this, though, Lara emerges as a generally sympathetic character, for she exhibits the ability to empathize as she studies Corrigan's petrified face and Jazzlyn's vulnerable feet—it is clear she understands the tragedy of ending a human life, no matter how it came about.

The van spins out and hits a newspaper truck, but Lara and Blaine's car moves steadily forward without harm. Looking over his shoulder for an instant, Blaine presses the accelerator and speeds away until Lara pleads with him to stop. He pulls over on the side of the road, where the two of them step out of the car and survey the crash from afar.

Blaine's initial gut reaction—to speed away from the accident—is telling, ultimately displaying a fundamental selfishness and lack of empathy. It seems in this moment that Lara and Blaine are perhaps incompatible, for their instinctual values clearly differ greatly.

Lara has the clear thought that this crash will destroy her relationship with Blaine, perhaps most of all because of the fact that he seems more concerned with the damage done to their car than with the terrible tragedy they have just inflicted upon strangers. Although she feels terrible for what has happened, she looks at Blaine and tells him to get back in the car, saying that they should quickly leave the scene.

Blaine's priorities are evident when he inspects the car: he is chiefly concerned with that which immediately affects him. And although Lara intuits the impending dissolution of their relationship, in this moment she seems to want to salvage their marriage, acquiescing to his way of thinking (and perhaps her own fear and guilt) by telling him that they should flee the scene.

At this point we learn that Lara and Blaine have for the past year been living outside the city in a small cabin on a lake. They removed themselves from city life to escape a pattern of drug use and partying that had worn them down over the years. They are both artists and have taken up painting in the style of the 1920s, deciding to live off the grid to focus on their craft while also giving up drugs and alcohol. This trip was their first return to the city, where they hoped to sell some of their paintings. Despite their ambitions, though, nobody was interested in their work, and they ended up spending most of the visit binging on drugs once again.

What becomes most apparent about Lara and Blaine's lifestyle is that, though they strive to be original and genuine, they ultimately indulge the most superficial aspects of artistic life: drugs, partying, and public image. Their relationship is built, then, on feeble values rather than on deep and creative artistic grounds (as they would like to think it is).

Upon returning to the cabin, Blaine puts the car in a shed and sweeps the tracks out of the dirt. Then he and Lara sit on the dock and snort the dwindling amount of cocaine left over from their visit to the city. Lara is distraught by what happened on the FDR, but Blaine is adamant that it was not their fault. He urges her to drop the matter, pointing out that she was, after all, the one who told him to flee the scene of the accident. At this remark, Lara slaps him across the face and goes inside. Blaine eventually follows her and finds her facedown on the bed. He lifts back the bed sheets and sprinkles cocaine onto Lara's back; he snorts it off of her bare skin, and then they have sex.

Already, the accident begins drawing fault lines in Blaine and Lara's marriage. Still, though, personal histories run deep and often obscure or overcome immediate problems and stressors, something that is surely the case when Lara yet again acquiesces to Blaine as she allows him to have sex with her in a rather objectifying manner, a style of lovemaking that all but ignores her feelings and agency.

Lara awakes early the next day and steps outside without waking Blaine. She sees that they forgot to take the paintings inside the night before, and now they are sitting propped against the shed, ruined by rain. She does not tell Blaine what has happened, avoiding him throughout the day as he fervently licks the plastic bag for any remnants of cocaine that might be left.

Lara's reaction to the ruined paintings is somewhat mild, intimating that she is perhaps not so invested in the work. The fact that she doesn't tell Blaine about the destruction emphasizes the rift growing between them, as well as her reluctance to upset him. This is yet another indication that, much like her feelings about the paintings, Lara isn't wholly invested in her relationship with Blaine.

The following morning, Lara walks into town and enters a diner. She feels out of place and senses an energy of sorts coming from the men sitting on stools at the other end of the room. She wonders whether or not Blaine has found the paintings yet and thinks about what he might do when he does. Across the room, a man unfolds his newspaper and Lara sees President Richard Nixon's face on the front page. The waitress comes to take her order and tells her that Nixon has resigned.

The political climate of the 1970s comes careening into this moment, creating a backdrop of tension that exists in conjunction with Lara's own disillusionment and regret. In this way, Lara has something in common with the men in the diner, men who are otherwise very different than her. Together they exist as Americans living in a very turbulent political time.

The thought of Nixon brings something else to Lara's mind: she remembers a boy she'd been in love with before Blaine. He went to Vietnam and came back in a wheelchair. To her surprise, though, he then campaigned for Nixon in 1968. Lara wonders now what would have happened if she had stayed with him. She remembers that the boy once wrote her a letter after watching one of Blaine's antiwar art films. The letter said that the film had made him laugh so hard that he fell out of his wheel chair and now he couldn't get up. It ended with the line, "*Fuck you, you heartless bitch, you rolled up my heart and squeezed it dry.*"

The intense political stratification of the 1960s and '70s comes to Lara's mind and reminds us again of the many forces that keep people apart. Lara, it seems, is capable of loving people despite their beliefs, though perhaps this tendency is what gets her into the kind of situation she's in, one in which her husband devalues her opinions and thinks only of himself.

Lara finds a newspaper on the floor. It is open to an article about the tightrope walker. She flips through the pages, looking for anything about a car crash on the FDR Drive, but there is nothing of the sort. Still, though, Lara can't shake the image of the woman in the passenger seat who stared at her as the van skidded toward destruction.

The presence of the tightrope walker in this scene is in keeping with the sense that, despite the difficult thoughts running through Lara's head, the outside world is busy going on with its own excitements and complications.

Outside the diner, Blaine pulls up in the car. He joins Lara at her table and tells her that he found the paintings. He's excited and full of smiles. Lara tells him that Nixon has resigned, but he doesn't pay much attention to what she says. She apologizes that the paintings got left in the rain, but Blaine says they're even better now. He says the rain changed the paintings, giving them different endings. Lara is unable to care; "That girl was killed," she says. They have yet another argument about the accident, with Blaine urging her to forget the entire ordeal. He tells her that they need to focus on the paintings, and that they should document their new artistic process. After arguing some more, they leave the diner.

Yet again, Blaine is uninterested in anything that doesn't immediately influence him. This time this not only includes Jazzlyn's and Corrigan's deaths, but also Nixon's resignation. Furthermore, the fact that he is so excited about the ruined paintings demonstrates again his superficial approach to art, his tendency to value an idea not for its originality or actual merit, but for its edginess and shock value. This is a disposition that Lara seems to be moving away from as the crash continues to bother her.

Later—perhaps the next day—Lara drives alone back to the city. She goes to a hospital and asks if there was a man and woman that came in on the previous Wednesday after a car crash. Thinking she's a relative, a hospital worker gives Lara the left-behind belongings: a pair of black pants, a black shirt, an undershirt, underwear, socks, a religious medal, sneakers, a ticket for illegal parking in Lower Manhattan at 7:44 AM on August 7th, a bag of tobacco, cigarette papers, some money, a lighter, a **key ring** with the picture of two black girls, and the driver's license of John A. Corrigan.

For the first time, Lara is acting so as to remedy her misgivings, a seeming liberation from Blaine's oppressive indifference. In addition, it's noteworthy that amongst Corrigan's belongings is a parking ticket from Lower Manhattan, issued around the time that the tightrope walker would have been between the towers; it seems Corrigan may have been present to witness the walk, which was perhaps the "something beautiful" he mentioned before dying.

Lara learns that the girl she'd seen in the passenger's seat died before reaching the hospital and that Corrigan died shortly after arriving. Lara drives away from the hospital in tears. Her original reason for coming to the city had been to buy a video camera to document Blaine's new painting series, but now she finds herself driving toward the Bronx. When she arrives, several police officers—after warning her that she is in a rough neighborhood—direct her to Corrigan's apartment, where she meets Ciaran and Adelita.

Couched within the police officers' warning is a racial assumption that Lara—a well-off white woman—has no business visiting the Bronx housing projects. And though Lara must clearly feel out of place, she continues on nonetheless, a clear testament to how much she wants to do whatever she can to right her wrongs.

Lara lies and says that she works for the hospital and that she is returning Corrigan's belongings. When she finds out that Ciaran is about to leave for Jazzlyn's funeral, she asks if she can accompany him. He shrugs, clearly confused, but does not object.

It seems that Lara is willing to overstep what's considered polite in order to involve herself in the lives of those related to Corrigan and Jazzlyn. Her attention to the situation begins to seem more self-interested than altruistic, however, as if she needs to involve herself for her own peace of mind.

When she arrives at the cemetery, Lara parks the car out of sight. At the ceremony she stands next to Ciaran while the preacher speaks. Looking through the crowd, she identifies Tillie as Jazzlyn's mother; she is handcuffed and weeping. Lara also notices a mean-looking man standing at the back of the crowd, and the implication is that he is a pimp. Halfway through the service, Tillie yells at him, saying, "Get the fuck out, Birdhouse." When he finally leaves, the entire funeral procession cheers.

In this moment, the entire community comes together to condemn Jazzlyn's pimp, who represents one of the groups who exploits and oppresses young impoverished women in the city. Another source of oppression is present in the form of two police officers guarding Tillie, but they are, of course, not banished. Even in moments of mourning and death there is no escape from the structures of injustice.

At one point during the funeral, Tillie gets up to speak. She tells a story about how when Jazzlyn was ten she used to collect pictures of castles from magazines. One day, years later, Jazzlyn told Corrigan about her fantasy of living in a castle, and he said that he used to know castles like the ones she admired; he had seen them in Ireland. After that, he would come out every day and bring her coffee and tell her that he was getting her castle ready. This story eventually devolves into sadness as Tillie breaks down, saying that she was a bad mother, that she let Jazzlyn shoot up heroin. She then asks the crowd where her grandchildren are, and they tell her that the girls are being cared for.

Corrigan's devotion to bettering the lives of others becomes tangible in this moment, as Tillie describes specifically how he improved Jazzlyn's day-to-day existence. Tillie's confession that she let Jazzlyn use heroin hints at the difficulty of raising a child while surrounded by crime and drugs, and we are reminded by her mention of Jazzlyn's children that this sort of thing—the perpetual worry of protecting children in difficult environments—is dangerously cyclical. We are left to wonder who exactly is caring for the grandchildren, an unnerving question altogether.

Tillie approaches Ciaran and asks him if he remembers what they did together. Then the other women—the other prostitutes in the procession who were close to Corrigan—come to him and hug him. Ciaran reaches into his pocket and produces the **key ring** with the pictures of Tillie's grandchildren. He gives it to Tillie and she studies it for a moment before slapping Ciaran across the face. Lara notes that it seems as if he is grateful for this slap. She wonders what kind of complicated situation she has placed herself in the middle of.

What Tillie says to Ciaran serves as a reminder that he is not, in fact, so different than her, and this reminder clearly makes him feel guilty for perhaps acting like he is superior. Perhaps it's because of this that he is grateful when she slaps him, for it strips any semblance of power from him and puts it in her hands, thereby relieving him of his guilty position.

When the funeral ends, Lara offers Ciaran a ride home. He accepts, and when he sees the car's smashed frontend, he knows that it is the car that sent his brother to his death. He asks if she was the one driving, and she says yes, though it is a lie. By this point they are sitting in the car together. He asks why she didn't stop, and as she thinks of an answer, another car pulls into the lot and starts trying to parallel park behind them, eventually tapping Lara's car with its back bumper. The driver comes out ready to defend his actions, but Lara waves him away, and he hesitantly rushes off, looking back now and again as he goes.

In the same way that Ciaran feels he deserves Tillie's slap, Lara seems to feel she deserves Ciaran's anger, self-destructively showing him the car and saying that she was the driver. By doing so, she invites him to shame her. But the man who accidentally taps Lara's car while parking reminds Ciaran that accidents happen sometimes, and Lara's easy dismissal of the man invites Ciaran to assume a similar stance of forgiveness.

Finally answering Ciaran's question, Lara says she doesn't know why she didn't stop after hitting Corrigan's van. She tells him that there is no explanation. He thinks this over, then tells her he needs to get away from the cemetery and asks her to drop him off. When she asks him where he wants to be taken, he asks if she wants to get a drink somewhere. It is clear to both of them that there is something very complicated between them. She accepts his invitation, and they go to a bar.

Ciaran seems to have been humbled by his brother's death and by his experience with Tillie at the funeral. In conjunction with witnessing Lara's immediate forgiveness of the man parking his car, Ciaran appears too tired and lonely to dismiss Lara as a terrible person, perhaps seeing in her some of Corrigan's kindness or a capacity for compassion he now aspires to have himself.

When Lara arrives home later that night, she goes swimming in the lake while Blaine waits for her on the dock. Back in the cabin, he tries to get her to come to bed with him, but she refuses. It seems that his painting experiment is off to a bad start. Lara, on the other hand, is slightly renewed, and as Blaine sleeps, she stays up sketching at the kitchen table. She realizes in that moment that she wants to leave him.

Going to Jazzlyn's funeral and talking with Ciaran provided Lara with closure, which ultimately allows her to more self-assuredly deflect Blaine's advances and, more importantly, decide that he is not somebody she wants in her life—she now has the faith in herself required to leave him.

Lara narrates in greater detail the specifics of her time with Ciaran. They drove to a bar, avoiding the FDR. Ciaran told her about his childhood, about how his mother used to play piano for them. As she drove to the bar, Lara saw a kid spray-painting a bridge, and this made her think of Blaine's work. At the bar they talked about Corrigan, and at one point Lara confessed that she hadn't been the one driving the car that killed him. Ciaran leaned across the table, kissed her, and said that he had sensed this all along. When Lara decided to leave, she looked back through the window at Ciaran, who was drinking the remaining two drinks. He looked up and she turned away quickly. The chapter concludes with her assertion: "There is, I think, a fear of love. There is a fear of love."

With love comes the responsibility of deeply caring for somebody. After seeing how fragile life really is, Lara is hesitant to commit herself to love, for it means investing wholeheartedly in somebody's life, a life that could end at any moment on, say, the FDR on a fine summer morning.

BOOK ONE, CHAPTER 4: LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN FOREVER DOWN

The tightrope walker trains for his performance in a meadow with high winds. This is only one of many locations he has trained in over the last six years. He has tried any number of exercises to prepare him for the wind and unruly conditions he will surely meet when he walks between the towers: he has walked a tightrope in the meadow during a thunderstorm, he has had friends jump on the wire while he stands in the middle, he has run the length of the rope as fast as possible without holding a balancing pole.

This section circles back to the tightrope walker's story, but it begins further back, before the walk takes place. As such, he develops as a character, and we see that he emerges as a unique, daring individual. Now that we understand—at least vaguely—how his story relates to the others we've seen, there is a sense of anticipation as we wait for the culminating event, hoping that it will tie together the disparate narratives.

The tightrope walker stays in an abandoned wood cabin whenever he visits the meadow to train. It is bare and elemental, but he doesn't mind. Even the scurrying rats don't bother him. He develops a strange habit of exiting through the window instead of the door.

It becomes clear that the tightrope walker is unique and determined—a true artist who has faith in his talent is devoted to his task.

The tightrope walker visits the cabin one winter with the intention of relaxing and reviewing his plans. He sees a coyote playing in the snow underneath his high wire, but when he looks back, the coyote is gone. He goes out to the wire where he sees the footprints in the snow. He walks the wire and looks out over the beautiful snow and decides to jump straight into it. It is not until he has already leapt that he realizes it is so deep that he won't be able to extract himself. He sinks in, the snow rising to his chest. For a long time he struggles to get out, watching the sun steadily sink on the horizon. Eventually he is able to throw his scarf over the wire and hoist himself up again. After this incident, he never walks the tightrope in the snow again. The next night, he sees the coyote sniffing the snow where his body had been trapped.

The walker's jump into the snow is an act of pure exuberance, but it lacks foresight. This serves as a lesson that, though he may love the feeling of being on a tightrope and all the related pleasures, what he's doing is deathly serious. The coyote represents a wild disposition that clearly resonates with the walker, an elemental and natural elegance. Still, though, he must remember that he is a human and that in order to indulge his wild dream, he must use his intellect, too, calculating at all times the consequences of his actions.

During his training, the tightrope walker has fallen just one time. He views this as a good thing: "A single flaw was necessary anyway. In any work of beauty there had to be one small thread left hanging." He continues practicing, sometimes walking naked in order to fully understand the way his body moves. In the cabin hangs a sign that reads "NOBODY FALLS HALFWAY."

It is significant that the tightrope walker views the walk as "a work of beauty." Rather than framing his task as a stunt, he approaches it as a work of art, albeit a work of art that could have fatal consequences.

The tightrope walker goes to New York City to plan the **walk**. He sneaks into the World Trade Center and goes to the top of the south tower. He goes to the edge of the roof, which is still under construction. He imagines his own reflection glinting off the windows of the opposite building. He puts his foot out into the air, and then, at the roof's very edge, he does a handstand.

We are reminded in this moment that the tightrope walker's goal is illegal and that, in order to pull it off, he will have to evade the authorities. We also glimpse his bravery and recklessness when he does an unplanned handstand at the edge of one of the towers.

The tightrope walker continues planning for the **walk**. One day, while examining the perimeter of the buildings, he sees a woman bend down to pick up a dead bird. He then notices that there are dead birds scattered all over the ground. He knows that they become overwhelmed by the building's lights at night and that they subsequently slam into the glass windows and fall to their death. The woman, who is putting the birds into plastic bags, gives him a feather, which he takes back to the meadow and puts on the cabin wall as yet another reminder of what could happen.

The dead birds symbolize once again the grave possibilities inherent in the walker's endeavor. Unlike the coyote, which encouraged him to brazenly and unadvisedly give himself over to nature, the birds remind him that nature—represented by the wind and migration patterns—may very well work against him, and that he must be weary of such forces, constantly keeping a clear, level head.

On the night before the **walk**, the tightrope walker unravels the wire. It is as long as a city block. This wire, he knows, is the most important part of the entire endeavor. The buildings have been designed to move up to three feet in extreme weather—if this happens while he is walking, the wire will violently bounce and he will have to gracefully ride the fluctuations or else be thrown into the air. It is vital that the wire be perfectly installed; if its tension is wrong, it could snap or grease could seep out of it. As he scrubs it clean on the sidewalk, he looks for splinters that might catch his foot.

The danger of the tightrope walk is easily discernable, especially when we learn that the wire itself is as long as a city block. It also shocking to think that the wire—the very thing supposed to keep him from falling and hurting himself—could, if improperly installed, rebel against him by cutting his foot with a splinter or snapping altogether. Every last element of this operation, it seems, has to go completely according to plan—an overwhelming thought.

It takes the tightrope walker and his friends ten hours to sneak into the World Trade Center and string the wire between the two towers. By the time morning comes, the walker is exhausted and dehydrated. But when a call comes on his radio that everything is ready, he is suddenly refreshed and concentrated. He watches the morning sunlight slowly grace the buildings and docks and rivers below. Without fear, he **walks** onto the rope, and in no time at all he feels a purity running through his body. He doesn't even consider failure. Time seems to stop, and he feels a new kind of possibility take shape.

The fact that the tightrope walker doesn't even consider failure after taking his first several steps is a testament to just how much this walk is able to entrance and intoxicate him. What's more, it's difficult not think of the other characters—Corrigan and Ciaran and Claire and Lara—all slinking throughout the city as the walker surveys the newly-sunlit buildings from his perch high above.

BOOK TWO, CHAPTER 5: TAG

Fernando Yunqué Marcano rides a subway train with a camera. He is trying to take pictures of the graffiti tags he sees scrawled on the dark tunnel walls. He got on the train in the Bronx and is currently riding between two train cars, standing on the metal platform that moves this way and that as the train thunders around corners. He is technically on his way to work at his stepfather's barbershop downtown, but what he's really interested in is seeing who has been in the tunnels during the night. He wants to know who might have come and spray-painted their initials or their nickname or their gang name.

Right from the start, Fernando's story seems wildly tangential, and it is difficult to discern how it fits into the larger narrative. Still, though, he provides yet another alternative look at the city, this time focusing on New York's actively thrumming underground life. Narratively, we are taken from the very crest of the city to its lowest point, a reminder of the vast spectrum of life moving through all levels of New York.

Fernando's interest in graffiti stems from wanting to be included by the other Puerto Rican kids he goes to school with, the ones who do the actual spray-painting. When he tried to hang out with them, though, they told him to get lost, so he went and got his camera and came back. He told them that he could take pictures of their work and make them famous. They only laughed at him, and one of the younger kids slapped him across the face.

Anybody can be lonely and isolated, even somebody like Fernando who lives in a city surrounded by millions of people every day. Fernando's eagerness to join people from similar backgrounds doesn't garner any approval, despite his own kindness.

Fernando was discouraged by the fact that he was excluded, but then one morning on his way to work he stepped between two subway cars and saw a magnificent tag, though it flashed by only briefly and then it was gone. On his way home that evening to the government housing projects in the Bronx, he rode between the cars and saw the tag more clearly, and he was amazed that whoever had spray-painted it had come this far into the tunnel to make something so intricate and time-consuming.

In contrast to the tightrope walker's display of beauty, which is lifted up high for all to see, Fernando appreciates the work that is put into making something that so few people will be able to admire. This goes to show that, much like the varied lives running through the city, there are also myriad forms of art, many different ways to express beauty.

If he were ever to do a tag of his own, Fernando figures he would do something extraordinary with his color choice, something that would shock anybody who saw it. It makes him think of an idea he once had to project his father's face onto the walls of his house so that his mother would be forced to confront the face of the man she kicked out and replaced with Fernando's stepfather, Irwin, who Fernando dislikes.

Artistic expression is upheld as a natural impulse in this novel, especially when that expression takes unexpected and underappreciated forms. Fernando is an example of someone with the same kind of aspiration and drive that leads the tightrope walker to stage his wild attempt.

Fernando once tried to get one of his photographs published in *The New York Times*. It was a picture of a graffiti artist spray-painting the Van Wyck overpass. When he went to the offices to deliver it, though, the security guard told him to leave it at the front desk. Fernando pleaded with him to let him stay until the photo editor came down into the lobby. The security guard consented, and when the editor emerged, Fernando gave him the photograph. Unfortunately, he never heard from the editor again. After that, he submitted it to a much smaller publication in the Bronx, but they declined it.

Unlike the tightrope walker and graffiti artists, who simply do whatever they want in order to express beauty, Fernando finds himself held back by artistic and editorial gatekeepers. This ultimately emphasizes—by way of contrast—what is most impressive about what the tightrope walker does: not only is his task physically daunting, but he also must break the law in order to execute it. Against all odds, he makes art on his own terms.

Still between subway cars, Fernando makes his way into downtown Manhattan, where there is generally not very much graffiti in the tunnels. But then he spies something new, an unfamiliar looking tag. It is red and silver and large. Excitement shoots through him. He wants to move to the back of the train so that he can keep looking, but suddenly they are in the station at Wall Street. He hears police radios, and sees officers rushing up the platform. He thinks they've seen him and that they're going to ticket him for riding between the cars, but then he sees them rush through the turnstiles, off to attend some other disaster. Invigorated by the commotion and by the new tag, Fernando steps out of the train, deciding that he will not go straight to work. He moves in the direction of the police officers, clutching his camera as he goes.

The Wall Street subway station is near the World Trade Center, so it is reasonable to assume that the crowd of police officers is rushing out of the station in order to respond to calls about the tightrope walker. Although Fernando is initially held back by his obligation to go to work, he finally decides to follow his artistic impulse by tailing the cops, camera in hand. Just like the tightrope walker and the graffiti artists he so admires, he no longer needs permission to do his art.

BOOK TWO, CHAPTER 6: ETHERWEST

It is before dawn in California, where four computer programmers are hacking the public telephone network in New York. Sam Peters, otherwise known as "The Kid," explains that Compton—another programmer—got a message on the ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, an early precursor to the Internet) about a man **walking a tightrope** between the Twin Towers. The programmers—The Kid, Compton, Dennis, and Gareth—have placed bets on whether or not the tightrope walker will fall, and now they are calling payphones in the vicinity and trying to convince strangers to narrate the event in order to settle the bet.

The Kid and his colleagues are at the forefront of communication, and yet they are using their technology to gather information about an essentially artistic event. The notion of uncertainty—of not knowing what will happen—spurs them forward in their quest to understand what's going on in New York, a curiosity similar to their interest in technology and how it might change the world.

The programmers speak to four people in New York before finally reaching someone who doesn't hang up on them. Compton speaks to the man through a microphone, asking him questions about the tightrope walker. The conversation is full of stops and starts and misunderstandings as the man—whose name is José—tries to understand who he is talking to and why they are calling. He tells them only basic information, and the group becomes frustrated with his unobservant manner. Nonetheless, José tells them small details about the **walk**, narrating as the tightrope walker hops from foot to foot and lies down on the wire.

It is somewhat ironic that what initially fails the programmers is not their technology—designed to aid long distance communication—but rather the human they speak to: the breakdown in communication is not due to faulty equipment, but an inability to effectively converse. The subtle message here is that, regardless of how advanced the human race may become, the fundamentals of human connection remain vital to progress.

Frustrated with José, Compton asks him to hand the phone to somebody else. Now somebody with a deep voice comes onto the line and tells the programmers that the tightrope walker has fallen. "He splattered all over the place," he says. Compton begins to suspect that José is tricking them by using a false voice. He accuses him of this, and soon the line goes dead. Compton, who bet that the tightrope walker would survive, declares that he is not paying his debt until they hear from another source. Dennis, who is the owner of the programming company for which the others work, says that they should get back to work—they are working on a project for the United States Pentagon.

The importance of effective communication is emphasized yet again when the programmers receive false information from José. As a result, doubt and misinformation abounds. The fragile connection between people on opposite sides of the country reflects McCann's structuring of the book, in a way.

Ignoring Dennis's idea to keep working, the programmers call the New York payphones again. Each of them tries to find an open line. The Kid is the first to get one, and a woman's voice answers. She proves much better at explaining the scene than José. She tells them that the tightrope walker has **walked** back and forth six or seven times. She says that there are helicopters and that they're getting extremely close to him—she worries they'll blow him off the wire. Then she explains that the walker is waving to the crowd, his balancing pole resting on his lifted knee.

Better able to communicate with this new person on the other end of the line, the programmers receive a much clearer account of what the tightrope walker is doing. Once again, the importance of fundamental human connection emerges as a paramount concern when it comes to making progress, even if that progress is chiefly computer-oriented.

The Kid, who is known for almost never speaking, is intrigued by this woman and begins asking her questions. She tells him that her name is Sable Senatore and that she works in a research library near the World Trade Center. Meanwhile, the other programmers silently mock The Kid for having an obvious crush on this strange faraway woman. In the middle of their conversation, Sable explains that the tightrope walker has finished, that he has **walked** off onto the other side, greeted by a swarm of police officers.

By rendering the tightrope walker's finale through a third party—through Sable—there is a certain sense of a collective consciousness, as if all eyes are pointed in the same direction, thinking the same thing.

Before she hangs up, The Kid asks if Sable is married. She laughs, tells him she has to go, and hangs up. The Kid sits in disappointment as his coworkers berate him, making fun of his eagerness. Then Dennis tries to get everyone back on track, suggesting they start working again, but nobody wants to stay. They've been up all night, and Compton says he's going home. Nonetheless, The Kid opens the program he was working on and looks over at Dennis, who is already at his own console. The program hums and clicks, and The Kid immerses himself in writing code, feeling high off the idea that he can forget everything, that there are no limits to where he can go on the computer.

It seems that The Kid is perhaps compensating for his failed communication with Sable by taking delight in writing code. He feels that there are no limits to the world of writing code, and this might be another way of articulating the fact that there are no social conventions or challenges that he can be tripped up by when he's dealing with computers. Hungry for attention and connection in the real world, he throws himself into finding alternative avenues of communication.

BOOK TWO, CHAPTER 7: THIS IS THE HOUSE THAT HORSE BUILT

From prison, Tillie Henderson narrates that she wasn't allowed to go to Corrigan's funeral. She gives a survey of her criminal record, which has fifty-four entries on it. She remembers being arrested for the last time during the police raid. Bob Marley was singing "*Get up, stand up, stand up for your rights*" on the radio as the officers rounded up the prostitutes, and Jazzlyn yelled, "Who's gonna look after my babies?"

From the beginning of her section, Tillie is presented as somebody who has been caught up in the penal system time and again, a woman who is well-acquainted with the cyclical nature of crime. She is also presented as somebody who has been relatively cut off from the outside world, her personal relationships abruptly shorn.

Tillie gives a review of her history as a prostitute, saying, "Hooking was born in me." The first time she slept with a client was when she was fifteen. She remembers her first pimp, who used to beat her with a tire iron and then treat her with kindness two days later. She says that she will never forget him.

Again, Tillie addresses the idea that a life of crime is difficult to escape by asserting that "hooking was born in [her]." When she says that she will never forget her emotionally unpredictable pimp, there is a strange mixture of scorn and nostalgia, a combination that speaks to the idea that certain experiences—even horrific ones—are hard to completely leave completely behind.

When Tillie gave birth to Jazzlyn, she left her with her mother so that she could go work as a prostitute. Tillie would come home after work and take Jazzlyn in her arms. She promised herself that she would never let her daughter become a prostitute. This, she explains, is the first thing a prostitute says to herself when she has a baby: "She's never gonna work the stroll."

The promise that Tillie made to herself when Jazzlyn was born indicates a desire to break out of the culture of prostitution, ultimately complicating the notion that this sort of lifestyle naturally perpetuates itself. Though Tillie was aware of how a life of crime sets a precedent and pattern for generations to come, she was still unable to break away, a tragic but—given the circumstances—ultimately understandable fact.

Tillie remembers her first days in New York, when Jazzlyn was still living with her mother in Cleveland. Tillie remembers going straight to the seediest motels she could find in order to start prostituting herself. She quickly found a pimp named TuKwik and started working on the East Side, where the other prostitutes were predominantly white. As she worked, she told herself that she was going to make enough money to return to Cleveland and buy a large house to live in with Jazzlyn.

This is the cyclical, self-perpetuating life of crime in which Tillie existed even as she tried to break from it—in order to make a better life for her daughter, she threw herself more wholeheartedly into prostitution. In other words, prostitution was a means to an end, and that end was keeping her daughter from prostitution.

In prison Tillie has a cell mate who keeps a mouse in a shoebox as a pet. This woman is in prison for eight months because she stabbed somebody. She won't speak a word to Tillie.

In addition to having been cut off from her loved ones—like Jazzlyn, who is dead, or her grandchildren, whose whereabouts are kept from her—Tillie is isolated from even her cell mate.

Tillie quickly rose in the ranks under TuKwik. But being his favorite prostitute came with consequences: the more he liked her, the more he beat her. And the other prostitutes were jealous of her, so they would often fight with one another on slow days. Eventually TuKwik was killed, and Tillie worked without a pimp for two weeks before finding a new one named Jigsaw, who was incredibly rich but met the same fate as TuKwik before long—he was shot three times.

The turnover rate of Tillie's pimps speaks to the danger inherent in this life of crime and prostitution. Violence was seemingly ever-present.

Tillie remembers one client in particular that stands out amidst all the others. He rented a room at the Sherry-Netherlands hotel and she stayed with him for an entire week. He never wanted to have sex—he only wanted her to read to him in the nude. She would recline naked on the bed and read him Persian poetry while he sat in ecstasy. At the end of the week he gave her eight hundred dollars and a book of Rumi's poetry. Tillie remembers this fondly, saying that if she could repeat only one week of her life, she would choose that one.

In this recollection of Tillie's, we meet the man who introduced her to Rumi. This is how she was able to impress and disarm Ciaran so staggeringly by quoting from the Persian poet. The fact that this man from the Sherry-Netherlands made such an impression on Tillie reveals a gentle, sentimental aspect of her personality—it becomes easy, in a way, to imagine her leading a wholly different life full of literature and slow, lounging days.

Despite her great desire to see Jazzlyn's children—her grandchildren—Tillie begins considering hanging herself in prison. "Any excuse is a good excuse," she says. She stops eating and spends her time playing with the **key ring** that bears photos of her granddaughters.

The effect of prison (the isolation, the barrage of unrelenting memories), in conjunction with a hard life in which many loved ones have died, is made quite clear by Tillie's decision to commit suicide.

Usually Tillie and Jazzlyn didn't rob their clients, she explains, but one time a man took them far away—from the Bronx all the way to Hell's Kitchen—promising them large amounts of money. He was, of course, lying, and when they found out that he had no intention of paying what he had promised, they robbed him. This was the reason there was an outstanding warrant for their arrest at the time of the police raid. Because Jazzlyn needed to get back to her daughters, Tillie took the blame, the detective assuring her that she would receive no more than six months of prison time.

The dizzying notion of chance comes forth in this explanation of how Jazzlyn was released from prison on the fateful day of her death. It is morbidly ironic that, in trying to be a good mother by taking the blame for the robbery, Tillie inadvertently set the wheels in motion that led to her daughter's death.

Tillie plans her suicide, deciding that the pipes in the prison shower stalls will be strong enough to hang herself from. She takes to banging her head against the wall repeatedly. She continues to worry about her grandchildren.

Tillie's behavior here begins to reflect her inner turmoil, and we see a person slowly unhinging in an environment where she has no one supporting her.

Tillie goes on narrating the history of her New York life. She explains that in the mid-sixties she returned to Cleveland to pick up Jazzlyn, who was eight or nine years old, and she brought her back to New York. At this point, Tillie was with a new pimp named L.A. Rex, who sent her to work in the Bronx because that was where the older prostitutes worked. He told her not to come back to Lexington Avenue—where she had been working—or else he'd break her arms. She went anyway, and sure enough, he broke her arms.

This passage gives a glimpse of the harsh world of a prostitute who is past what her pimp considers her prime.

After this injury, Tillie decided to clean up her life. She stopped working as a prostitute, put Jazzlyn in school, and got a job at a supermarket. She was, by her own account, happy. But then one day on her way home from work she found herself under the expressway in the Bronx holding out her thumb for a passing car, looking for a client. She couldn't understand why she did it, but she did, and a new pimp, Birdhouse, took her on.

Just as the cycle seems to break, when Tillie gives up prostitution, she once again enters the same life she had left. This illustrates the magnetic pull that even a difficult existence can have, emphasizing how deep certain patterns run. Within this also lurks the uncomfortable idea that somebody could, on some level, enjoy aspects of something they logically ultimately abhor.

Soon enough, Jazzlyn started working as a prostitute alongside her mother in the Bronx. At the age of fourteen she started using heroin and hanging out with a gang called the Immortals. Unsure of what to do, Tillie tried to keep her safe by staying with her on the streets. At least, that was how she justified it to herself. Not long afterward, though, Jazzlyn started taking heroin in front of Tillie, and sometimes Tillie would even help wrap the elastic around her daughter's arm so that the needle could more easily find the vein. "I was keeping her safe," she says. "That's all I was trying to do." Eventually, Jazzlyn got pregnant and had a child—and not long after the first, she gave birth to a second.

Once again, we are reminded of the way prostitution has the ability to perpetuate itself throughout generations. For somebody like Tillie, who has only ever known a crime-filled life, it is very difficult to protect a daughter. Her only resources to help her daughter are the very things she is trying to protect her from.

In prison, Tillie gets a visitor. She excitedly fixes her hair and puts on lipstick, readying herself to see her grandchildren. She bounds down the stairs to the visiting room. There, waiting for her behind the separation glass, is Lara. Tillie doesn't understand—she feels like she might recognize Lara, but doesn't know why. She asks her if she is the one taking care of Jazzlyn's children, and Lara replies that she is not. Confused and angry, Tillie asks who she is. Lara explains that she is Ciaran's friend. She promises to try to get Tillie's grandchildren to visit. When she asks if there's anything else Tillie needs, Tillie replies: "Bring Jazzlyn back too." Before leaving, Lara slips several books by Rumi beneath the glass. It isn't until after Lara has left that Tillie remembers that she had once slept with Ciaran and quoted Rumi to him.

Lara's appearance again seems possibly self-interested, as if carried out only to alleviate her guilt. But at the same time, the kindness she shows Tillie still counts for something, since Tillie has heretofore received no other support in prison. Whatever spurs along Lara's kindness doesn't ultimately matter (from this perspective), because Tillie is in desperate need of human connection.

Tillie remembers Corrigan fondly. She explains that the first time she and the other prostitutes saw him, they assumed he was an undercover cop. Still, he brought them coffee while they worked despite the fact that their pimps beat him up when he did so. After a while, when it became clear that he wasn't going to let the beatings keep him from coming down to visit the prostitutes, the pimps started respecting him, or at least this what Tillie suspects. She asserts that he was the only white man she would have liked to have slept with. She says that she would have married him if she could have, even if just to hear his accent her whole life.

We are reminded of Corrigan's influence in the Bronx, a reminder that stings with the knowledge of his passing. At this point in the book, we as readers—similar to how the characters feel—may come to miss this vivacious man, and deeply feel the lack of his presence as the characters deal with his tragic death.

In prison the boss matron develops a crush on Tillie. She invites her into her office and tells her to open her jumpsuit. Tillie does so, and after a minute of looking at her breasts, the boss matron tells her to leave again.

This moment touches upon the fraught and incredibly distorted power dynamics typical between prison matrons and inmates. Just like in her outside life amongst pimps and criminals, Tillie is abused and objectified in prison—her agency has been violated throughout her entire life.

Tillie waits and waits for her grandchildren to arrive. In the meantime, another inmate attacks her with a lead pipe. Tillie defends herself, sending the other woman to the infirmary. As a result, the boss matron tells her that she's going to be sent upstate, to a more severe prison, for the last several months of her sentence.

It seems that everything that can go wrong for Tillie will, indeed, go wrong. It is not often that Tillie stands up for herself with violence—as she is often mistreated—and this time that she does, she is severely punished.

Tillie offers to take her clothes off for the matron if only she can stay. The matron refuses, but Tillie comes around to the other side of the desk anyway, with the intention of unzipping her jumpsuit. The matron hits the panic button and guards rush in. As they try to take Tillie away, she kicks the matron in the face and knocks out her front tooth. Tillie is arraigned, found guilty of assault, and her prison sentence is extended by eighteen months.

Tillie's life has taught her that her body is often the only advantage available to her. In using it this time, however, she finds herself in the middle of a serious misunderstanding. Once again Tillie shows her quick temper and easy shift to violence—the products of living in a world that has consistently abused her.

On her way out of court, Tillie tries to scratch the guards' eyes out. She is restrained, put in the hospital wing, and then put on a bus to Connecticut. When she arrives, she meets with a therapist, to whom she reveals her plans to commit suicide. As a result, the prison puts her on medication, but she maintains her desire to end her life.

The institutionalized help sent Tillie's way—a court-ordered therapist—proves wildly unsuccessful, most likely because the therapist doesn't truly know or care about Tillie, thus once again failing to save her from isolation and mistreatment.

Finally, Tillie's granddaughters are brought to visit her. She runs over to where they sit behind the glass and sticks her hands through the opening at the bottom, but they don't appear to recognize her. She is deeply hurt and disappointed. The woman caring for them explains that she was conflicted about whether or not to bring them to see her. Tillie recognizes this woman from the housing projects in the Bronx. The woman says that she is living in Poughkeepsie now with the two little girls. After only a short while, the visiting session ends. The woman leans the girls toward Tillie, who smells them through the slots in the glass. She puts her finger through the hole and one of the girls, Janice, touches it. Heartbroken, Tillie walks back to her cell and cries all night.

Tillie's grandchildren are essentially her only connection to her previous life; they are the only things left to remind her of Jazzlyn. This is why it is so difficult for her when they don't seem to recognize her and are afraid of her. The fact that their caretaker lives in Poughkeepsie—far away from the Bronx—may feel somewhat like an insult to Tillie, as if it is an acknowledgement that no good mother would ever try to raise a child in the Bronx. In this moment, Tillie is made to feel everything she has lost and everything she did not do as a mother.

Tillie goes to a church service and talks to the chaplain about Rumi. He tells her that Rumi's work isn't spiritual, and Tillie decides that God is due an ass-kicking.

Once again, Tillie's last vestiges of hope—the very few things she holds dear and that comfort her—are dashed.

Tillie thinks about the last time she saw Jazzlyn and Corrigan in the Bronx. She thinks about how there is probably no Sherry-Netherlands hotel in heaven. She painfully recalls the way she mothered Jazzlyn, realizing that she was a junkie and a bad guardian. With nobody to say goodbye to, Tillie thinks about her daughter, saying, "Here I come, Jazzlyn, it's me."

Utterly alone and isolated, Tillie resolves to die. The prevailing sentiment in this moment is not that she lived a wretched life that lead her to this sad death, but rather that the world—its institutions and laws and ideas about who deserves love and support—failed her miserably.

BOOK TWO, CHAPTER 8: THE RINGING GROOVES OF CHANGE

Before the **walk**, the tightrope walker used to stage smaller acts of performance art. He would go to Washington Square Park in New York's West Village and walk on a wire strung between light poles. Knowing that the drug dealers who watched him would mug him for his tips after he finished performing, he picked up the hat full of money, rode a unicycle across the tightrope, jumped off, and rode away. He came back the next day for the tightrope, and from then on the dealers let him stay.

This insight into the tightrope walker's past shows his mischievous charm, a personality trait that is seemingly essential to his task. This defiant disposition points to the idea that the walk itself is something of an artistic protest against the imposing and authoritarian power structures in America.

The tightrope walker rented a cheap apartment in the East Village, where he was robbed one night while visiting his neighbor (he had walked a rope strung between their two fire escapes). The city, he found out, was vicious, and he couldn't trust anyone (even his neighbor, who never invited him back).

Much like Tillie's eventual realization that she is alone with her suffering, the tightrope walker seems to have learned early on that he would have to be careful with who he trusted in New York, a city that can, on a bad day, carelessly abuse an innocent dreamer, forcing him to doubt himself.

From time to time the tightrope walker would perform at parties because he needed the money. Although he was hired as a musician, he would tell the hosts beforehand that he could not promise that he would perform any tricks; he might simply stand there the entire evening, and they would still have to pay him. The mystery of this proposition was appealing, and he became a popular party entertainer in wealthy circles.

Again, the tightrope walker's charming and mischievous disposition is apparent. This anecdote also serves to paint the walker as an infectiously likable man, a quality that is important to keep in mind as he breaks the law and performs a stunt that could—if botched—hurt innocent onlookers.

The tightrope walker's arrogance is a virtue on the wire. He tunes out everything when he's on the tightrope. When a police helicopter swings into his vision as he **walks** between the Twin Towers, it doesn't bother him, nor do the hordes of officers on both buildings, all screaming at him to get off. He wants to stay there for a while, knowing that he might never have the chance to experience this feeling again. He allows the shouts and the helicopter engines to fade to the background of his thoughts as he stands in the exact middle of the wire with his eyes closed, filling his lungs with the city air.

The walker's ability to tune out the helicopters and policemen is similar to the kind of tunnel-vision devotion Corrigan often experienced when pursuing his faith. It could be argued that the art of calculated danger and its inherent beauty is spiritual for the tightrope walker; he has faith in himself and his project, and this allows him to lend it his undivided focus.

Realizing that he only ever thought about the first step on the wire, the tightrope walker decides that he needs to figure out how he will finish the **walk**—he wants to end with some sort of flourish. Making like he is finally acquiescing to the police officers' pleas that he get off the wire, he starts walking toward one of the buildings, but he splays his feet to the sides; it's a trick, the duck walk. Suddenly he is running like this along the tightrope. When he reaches the end, he bounds into the waiting officer's arms, and the cop calls him a "motherfucker" while smiling.

We have already somewhat experienced this moment—the moment in which the walker gets off the tightrope—through Sable's narration to The Kid, but now we are afforded a more in-depth look at its execution. Still, the repetition reminds us of the idea that many of the characters we've met in the previous pages of Let the Great World Spin *are indeed watching this moment, essentially creating a convergence of perspectives and experiences.*

For years and years the tightrope walker returns to the moments he spent on the wire. The memory comes to him randomly and without warning. Suddenly he will be thousands of feet above the city again, the adrenaline still rushing through his body.

Just as the novel itself returns periodically to the walk, the tightrope walker himself constantly revisits the memory. In this way, the event is presented as a moment that has the ability to lend meaning to even the most unrelated and trivial aspects of everyday life.

Upon coming off the wire, the tightrope walker is exhausted and thirsty, but he can't relax until he sees that somebody is taking down the wire, which could break and gravely injure someone. When he sees a man going to loosen it, though, he falls into relief and fatigue.

The tightrope walker's worry importantly proves that, though he is mischievous, he is committed only to beauty, not malice or destruction. This moment humanizes him and rounds out his personality as a compassionate man.

Handcuffed, the tightrope walker is brought through the crowds at the bottom of the towers. With a paper clip he stole on the way, he picks the lock and raises his hands to the chanting crowd. Before the police officer turns around, though, he puts the handcuffs back on. As reporters and spectators congregate around him, a journalist asks him why he did this **walk** in the first place. But he doesn't like this question because he believes that the mere fact that the towers are *there* is reason enough. As the officer guides him into the police car, photographers take pictures in a frenzy. The driver turns on the sirens and takes him away.

From this passage arises the idea that beauty requires no justification—it is intrinsically worthwhile. This is a sentiment that resonates throughout the book, evident in Corrigan's vague appreciation of beauty and religion, in Fernando's admiration of graffiti that few will ever see, in Tillie's fond memory of the simple beauty that was the week she spent in the Sherry-Netherlands, and so on. In short, the appreciation of beauty as a goodness in and of itself is something that unites characters throughout the novel.

BOOK THREE, CHAPTER 9: A PART OF THE PARTS

Everybody at the courthouse—the judges and the officers and the reporters and the stenographers—speak excitedly about the tightrope walker. Judge Soderberg considers to himself the way that New York has a way of presenting extraordinary events that help make sense of the otherwise straightforward drudgery of life. His theory is that New York is a city so uninterested in history that it lives in "a sort of everyday present," and this makes it possible to still be surprised about the occurrence of some wild event. Soderberg believes that, since New York is so unconcerned with the past, there are very few meaningful monuments throughout the city, which is why he comes to respect the **tightrope walker's performance**: the walker, he believes, has made a monument of himself in a perfectly New York manner, one that is temporary and brash.

Soderberg's theory that the tightrope walker has made the perfect New York monument of himself shows his own complicated perception of the city—he simultaneously craves some sort of order within the city while also appreciating New York's squalor and ephemerality. To him, the tightrope walker represents a mix of these things, for it is a recognition of the city's greatness by way of a brazen insanity.

Judge Soderberg does not witness the **walk**, which upsets him greatly. He misses it by the smallest margin, noticing people leaning out of their windows but paying them no attention, figuring that they are looking at a car crash or a fight. Shrugging it off, he goes inside. As he settles in at his desk, the door opens and a fellow judge starts talking about the tightrope walker. Soderberg rushes to the window but can only see the north tower, and his friend informs him that he missed the show.

Because Soderberg missed the actual walk, the event must remain for him entirely theoretical, which is perhaps why he intellectualizes it so much by considering its message. Rather than being able to experience it, he is left to piece it together in his mind.

The two judges start discussing the possible charges and sentences that could be leveled against the tightrope walker, who has been arrested and will be tried in their precinct. Much to his delight, Soderberg is on duty for the day, and it is possible he will receive the walker.

Despite his appreciation for what the tightrope walker has done, it appears that Soderberg may very well be put in the difficult position of having to sentence him—he is, after all, a judge. That he hopes he will have the chance to do so suggests that he craves a certain amount of excitement.

For the most part, Judge Soderberg's days are dreary and discouraging. He feels beaten down by the constant flow of criminals unable to learn their lessons. Despite the respect the job has earned him, being a judge feels altogether unglamorous. When Soderberg was a young man at Yale, he was sure that he would have a profound impact on the world, but now he has resigned himself to the simple pleasures of life: going home to his wife, smoking cigars after a long day of work, occasionally making love in his fine sheets. Sometimes in the middle of the night he wakes up desperately grieving the loss of his son Joshua, and he goes to the kitchen to make a cheese sandwich. Reasoning through the pain, he tells himself that things could be worse: at least he's eating a cheese sandwich on Park Avenue.

Soderberg's method of coping with his son's death seems to be one borne of general evasion: rather than allowing himself to feel the import of his own sadness, he bargains with himself, saying that, rather than despairing, he should count himself lucky on the whole. This paints a picture of a man unwilling to let himself truly experience his own emotions, a man who has invested so much into his status and career that he uses them as an excuse to avoid the process of grieving. It seems he approaches his marriage with a similar withdrawn attitude, not allowing himself to fully open up to Claire other than in bouts of occasional lovemaking.

Judge Soderberg considers how he used to think he would be a "paragon of virtue" in the court system. But he slowly learned he was just another part of a backed-up, ineffective system, and now he knows that it is all he can do to stay afloat, to keep up with the constant flow of criminal behavior and never-ending charges.

There is certainly an element of disillusionment active in Soderberg's general outlook on life. The fact that he contemplates the determination of his earlier years indicates that he may feel a sense of disappointment, as if his current life doesn't quite measure up to the one he had in mind for himself.

Judge Soderberg is sure he will get the tightrope walker, but he calls the D.A.'s office to try to ensure that he will—he figures he can call in a favor, but nobody picks up the phone. Soderberg hangs up and makes his way to the courtroom, where he begins hearing cases one after another. After hearing twenty-nine cases, it is still only late morning, and he asks his court officer if there is news about the tightrope walker. He learns that the walker will most likely appear in the late afternoon; if Soderberg is able to get through enough cases, it is likely that he'll get the walker. He calls a break for lunch.

The fact that Soderberg tries to call in a favor is an insight into how the inner world of the court system works. Soderberg, it seems, is used to a certain amount of respect, and there is a natural complacency or entitlement that comes with this kind of thinking. Here is a man with power who knows he has power—in this way, we see the difference between someone like Soderberg (a white man who takes his power for granted) and someone like Tillie (a black woman who has to fight nail and tooth for respect).

Judge Soderberg goes to Harry's, his favorite restaurant, where he orders wine and talks to Harry, the owner. The two men talk about the tightrope walker. As he drinks wine, Soderberg thinks about the balance between recklessness and freedom that the walker so beautifully achieved. He considers the fact that he himself constantly strives for this balance as a judge, and this line of thought mysteriously leads to his son. Soderberg doesn't often like to think about Joshua; he usually hides his grief, sometimes weeping in the bathtub while the water runs, the constant splash of its fall drowning out his sobs. He frets over whether or not he somehow taught his son to gravitate toward the military by giving him toy soldiers as a child or by insisting that he learn to play "The Star Spangled Banner" on the piano.

In this moment we witness a striking bit of introspection as Soderberg tries to rather circuitously blame himself for his son's death. As such, he becomes a somewhat more sympathetic character, a character capable of emotion. It is tragic, in fact, that he is able to feel such difficult emotions and yet remains incapable of expressing them. The fact that he hides his sobbing from Claire further humanizes him and makes their situation more tragic, for we know that Claire is also deeply in need of an emotional outlet. Although their marriage is functionally adequate, it seems they are trapped in a pattern of silence that is eating away at both of them individually.

At the same time, however, Judge Soderberg believes in the Vietnam War, maintaining that it was started in order to protect the very tenets of freedom that he himself works so hard to uphold in his courtroom. Soderberg knows that Claire disapproves of war and violence of all kinds, and he finds himself often agreeing with this outlook despite himself. But he does not express these feelings to her because he thinks that he must be strong. Soderberg feels himself, in this moment, wanting to talk to Harry about Joshua, but he doesn't let himself. He starts to think that perhaps he doesn't want the tightrope walker to come into his court after all.

Yet again, Soderberg stifles his emotions and refuses to confide in his wife. Even more complicated is his belief that, as a judge, he cannot criticize a war that stands for order and justice. It is apparent that—despite his original aspirations to be a "paragon of virtue"—he doubts the goodness of the Vietnam War, a sentiment that is perhaps reflected by his delight in the tightrope walker's exciting form of dissent.

When Soderberg returns to the court, a line of defendants walk through the door. Among them is the tightrope walker. He is smaller than Soderberg imagined, but he emits a confidence that the judge finds appealing. He looks, Soderberg thinks, like a smaller version of Joshua. Soderberg accidentally makes eye contact with the walker, breaking one of his general rules to never look a defendant directly in the eye. Soderberg grows nervous, wondering what he can possibly sentence the man for; he doesn't want to be too harsh on the man, but he also doesn't want to let him off without anything—the public, he knows, is watching with anticipation, and there is pressure to make sure the court system receives good press.

It is significant that Soderberg feels there are certain expectations placed on him regarding how he will sentence the walker. In a way, these expectations represent an internal dialogue that he already indulges, a hidden argument between what he feels he is supposed to believe as a judge and what he actually feels and believes as a childless father. Just as the press and the court system watch him and expect him to act a certain way, he watches himself, holding himself to a certain standard and not allowing his true emotions to dictate how he acts.

The first defendants on Judge Soderberg's list are Jazzlyn and Tillie Henderson. He observes the two prostitutes as they come to the front of the room, finding Jazzlyn's swimsuit outfit ridiculous. Tillie looks over her shoulder and blows a kiss at a white man sitting in the audience; he blushes and bows his head. When Soderberg scolds her, telling her that his courtroom is not a nightclub, she responds by saying, "Sorry, Your Honor—I'd blow you one too 'cept I'm all blowed out." Laughter goes through the room and Soderberg calls for order. He thinks he hears Tillie call him an asshole and wonders to himself why people like her always make it so much harder for themselves by acting disrespectfully in court. Looking at their rap sheets, he sees the number of charges each woman has. He knows Jazzlyn will continue to wrack up offenses as she grows older.

As Tillie acts out in the courtroom, Soderberg views her not as an individual, but as a representative of all lower class criminals. To him, she is an amalgamation of all the people he sees come through the courtroom, an outlook that effectively strips her of her individual humanity and plays on prejudiced stereotypes. Unfortunately, Tillie only plays into this embittered perception by aggravating Soderberg further.

Judge Soderberg begins reviewing the case, proud of his sharp efficiency. He hopes that the reporters in the courtroom—who are there to watch the tightrope walker's case—are taking note of his prowess as a judge. As he proceeds, however, Tillie and he get into several light arguments, resulting in him asking her to refrain from speaking. He realizes with surprise that Jazzlyn is Tillie's daughter.

Soderberg's double consciousness surges in this moment, especially as Tillie challenges him, an obstacle he must overcome in order to satisfy both himself and the observant reporters.

Because Tillie has decided to take full responsibility for the robbery that she and Jazzlyn committed, Judge Soderberg dismisses Jazzlyn's case, and she is free to go. She kisses her mother on the eyebrow, and Tillie touches the side of her face in return. Although he is depressed by the twisted mechanisms that might create a mother-daughter crime duo like this, Solomon can't help but feel touched by the love between them. He watches as Jazzlyn whispers in her mother's ear; Tillie laughs and waves over her shoulder at the man sitting in the audience. On her way out, Jazzlyn takes off the black shirt she had been wearing, so that now she is in only her neon swimsuit.

Finally, Soderberg's human capacity to feel empathy surfaces when he recognizes the power of the tragic but touching relationship Tillie and Jazzlyn have. This moment of fellow-feeling keeps us from forgetting that he does, in fact, possess the ability to feel an emotional response that is unrelated to his self-interested aims.

Judge Soderberg orders Jazzlyn to put the shirt back on. She refuses, and then Soderberg asks the white man she's with whether or not he's related to her. Corrigan responds in his Irish accent that he is her friend, and Soderberg thinks he is a strange kind of pimp.

In this moment, Soderberg makes the prejudiced assumption that the only reason a white man would care about a black prostitute is because he is her pimp. Of course, this counterbalances his previous moment of empathetic thinking, in which he was touched by Jazzlyn's relationship with her mother.

As the hearing continues, Judge Soderberg turns his attention to Tillie, the remaining defendant. She mouths off to him, calling him "babe," and this makes him uncomfortable. After all, the reporters are watching. He wonders if he should pretend that he didn't hear her or if he should call her up in contempt. He decides to move past it. As they continue talking, she again refers to him informally by calling him "pops." Soderberg stares at her and for a brief moment, as he looks into Tillie's eyes, he understands how she might be attractive. Before sentencing her, he asks if she has anything else to say. She states that she would like to be put in prison at Rikers Island in order to be near her grandchildren. He agrees to do what he can, and then he sentences her to eight months.

When Soderberg understands—however briefly—how somebody might find Tillie attractive, he indulges two lines of thinking at the same time: the first is empathetic, for he is appreciating her and considering her outside the context of the courtroom; the second is more complicated and potentially problematic, for he experiences the same thing that Ciaran felt when he decided to pay her for sex. Inherent in his thought process is both an acceptance of her and a sexualized judgment of her appearance.

Tillie is upset and surprised by the fact that she is sentenced to eight months in prison rather than six (the length of time her lawyer had estimated she would receive). She speaks up but Judge Soderberg threatens to increase the sentence to twelve months. Meanwhile, Corrigan tries to make his way to the front of the courtroom, but an officer stops him. Corrigan asks if he can say something and Soderberg says no. Corrigan yells to Tillie that he will be back later.

In a way, this scene allows Corrigan to live beyond death, since we thought we had seen the last of him when he died in the car crash. This is a satisfying resurrection of his character, as he is in top form, once more lobbying for the unfortunate despite everything telling him to leave the matter alone. Knowing that this is his death day, though, it is rather tragic when we witness him yelling to Tillie that he will be back later.

Judge Soderberg waves the court officer over to him and whispers about getting the tightrope walker up next. As Tillie is being led out of the room, Soderberg watches her and feels as if he is seeing her for the first time. He detects something "tender and carved" about her face. For a moment, he finds her beautiful, and then she moves forward through the door and is lost to him forever, "vanished into her own namelessness." Soderberg then leans over to the court officer and says it again: "Get the tightrope walker up. Now."

Finally, Soderberg completely sees beyond his own prejudices when he sees the beauty and individuality of Tillie's face. This moment of clarity, however, is quickly lost to the court system's unrelenting pace and schedule, and Tillie becomes yet another unfortunate "nameless" soul passing through the slog that is Soderberg's day job.

BOOK THREE, CHAPTER 10: CENTAVOS

Adelita narrates a memory of a slow Thursday morning spent with Corrigan in her clapboard house in the Bronx. She wakes up and rolls toward him; it is the first time he has spent the night. She examines him and his morning beard, his shirt with wooden buttons, his religious chain and the tan line it has left along his chest. He awakes and they begin talking about the night before, how they drank too much wine. They hear the footsteps of the upstairs neighbors and the sound of Adelita's children watching *Sesame Street*. She tells him that she woke early in the morning and diagnosed "a very early case of happiness," and Corrigan jokes that he has never heard of it. They kiss and Adelita can sense happiness and guilt working through him simultaneously.

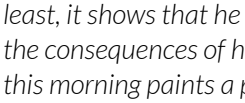
This is a crucial moment in the development of Corrigan's life, one that provides further insight into his devotion to Adelita as a lover. The fact that he spent the night at her house is quite significant, since in the earlier stages of their relationship they required Ciaran to be with them at all times as a boundary of sorts. Now, it seems, they have ventured into murky new waters. Adelita lives inside this memory as if it is the current moment, a useful way of approaching time throughout the entire book: memories—especially emotionally significant ones—are not necessarily linear or chronological, much like the way multiple narratives and lives weave together without necessarily tracking one another.

The night before, Adelita and Corrigan made love. It was Corrigan's very first time. He then wept over having broken his vows. Adelita told him that she loved him and that she "Felt like a child who throws a centavo into a fountain and then she has to tell someone her most extraordinary wish even though she knows that the wish should be kept secret and that, in telling it, she is quite probably losing it." Corrigan tells her not to worry, assuring her that the penny will emerge from the fountain time and again. He told her that he wanted to try making love again, and they did.

In breaking his vow of celibacy, Corrigan progresses even further down the road that will potentially lead him away from his religion, which has heretofore been the defining element of his existence. For the moment, though, he isn't focused on such concerns. Rather, he devotes his attention to this slow morning with Adelita.

In the morning—which Adelita will never forget—they start to have sex for a third time after locking the bedroom door and covering the peephole with Corrigan's black shirt. Adelita already knows that she will forever come back to the memory of this morning, turning it over in her mind, knowing that the feeling cannot be adequately articulated using words. There is a pounding at the door and her children are waiting for her to appear. She makes them breakfast and Corrigan showers.

The fact that Corrigan wants to have sex again in the morning indicates that he doesn't regret breaking his vows—or, at the very least, it shows that he allows himself to put off having to consider the consequences of his actions. Either way, Adelita's memory of this morning paints a picture of a man happily swept up in new love.



A week after this morning, Adelita comes home from the hospital and takes a number of stray hairs from her sink—they are Corrigan's, and she meticulously arranges them, already missing him sorely. By then she has seen the X-rays that depict the intense trauma his heart sustained in the accident. She has watched the doctor put a needle in his chest while Ciaran prayed repeatedly in the room.

This jump in time to the day after Corrigan's death lends a sense of urgency and finality to Adelita's memory. It adds gravity and meaning to that happy morning by emphasizing its impermanence and temporality.

But right now Adelita dwells in the memory of that Thursday morning, when her children greet Corrigan and he sits at her kitchen table. In this memory, she wishes she had a garden that she and Corrigan could sit in while the children watch television, something like a grove she remembers loving as a child living in Guatemala. Corrigan calls her back from her fantasy and they casually flirt. He goes over to her children and sits between them on the couch, one arm around each little body, and this is where Adelita wants him to remain fixed her mind, poised happily on the couch with her children.

The image of Corrigan sitting between Adelita's children is a projection of what may have been, had the accident not happened. It is an indication of what the best case scenario could have been for their relationship, a possibility that is incredibly important to Adelita as she remembers this morning in an effort to cope with Corrigan's death.

Later, after the accident, Adelita wonders what it was that Corrigan had seen when he told her that he had encountered a beauty he would never forget; he mentioned something about a man and a building, but Adelita couldn't understand what he was saying. She wonders if he had perhaps finally decided to leave the Order, or if the moment of beauty was something simpler than that, like a conversation he'd had with Tillie or Jazzlyn. Maybe, she thinks, he had decided that he didn't need her, that he would stay in the Order and give up their love.

Death is often accompanied by an onslaught of unanswered questions, and this is certainly true for Adelita when Corrigan dies. Not only does she yearn to know what he would have decided about their relationship if he had lived on, she also is left trying to guess what his final words meant. Right to the end, it seems, Corrigan maintained an element of mystery.

Of course, Adelita heard about the tightrope walker. She knows that Corrigan spent the night in his van near the courthouse in Lower Manhattan that Tillie and Jazzlyn had been sent to. She thinks it is possible that he awoke in time to see the man **walking** in the sky, "challenging God, a man above the cross rather than below."

It is apt that Adelita frames the tightrope walker's stunt in terms of religion, for this is surely what Corrigan would have done. This is especially the case because Corrigan was constantly challenging God himself, believing that true faith emerged not from comfortable beliefs but from difficult battles with uncertainty.

Adelita admits that she has moments in which she loses hope and thinks that Corrigan must have been speeding home in his van in order to tell her that he could not be with her any longer. But she also reveals that in her stronger moments, when she is hopeful, she believes that he would have appeared at her house ready to embrace her, ready to stay with her. Regardless though, she tries mostly to remember him as he was on that slow Thursday morning. She imagines him still sitting on her couch, thinking that nothing will ever be able to take him elsewhere.

By imagining Corrigan on her couch between her two children, Adelita fixes her lover in a moment that seemed to allude to a continuation of their relationship. Of course, this is speculation, but it is significant that a character in a book full of many different stories and narratives is able to (however tenuously) choose her own ending.

BOOK THREE, CHAPTER 11: ALL HAIL AND HALLELUJAH

Gloria opens her section by stating that she knew immediately that the two little girls she saw years ago needed to be cared for. She then switches track to describe her own upbringing in southern Missouri, where she grew up during the Great Depression with five brothers. Her father worked as a painter who was employed mainly in the predominantly African American part of town, while her mother stayed home with the children. When Gloria was seven, her father came in from work and had a stroke. Afterwards, her mother was extremely cautious, monitoring everything he did. Gloria witnessed her parents' strong connection, recognizing it as one of the purest forms of love possible.

After opening rather cryptically, Gloria's section quickly pulls us back in time to track her history. Still, we are left to wonder if the two little girls she decided needed care are the same two little girls we know Jazzlyn and Tillie have left behind.

When Gloria left Missouri to go to college in Syracuse, New York, her father painted her a sign that read "COME HOME SOON, GLORIA." By this point the family had already lost two boys to the Second World War, and Gloria was the only one to attend college. Once she left home, she didn't return for a long time. Instead, she invested herself in her studies and then quickly married after graduation.

From an early age, Gloria is affected by war and becomes accustomed to the feeling of losing loved ones. Perhaps this is what cultivates the independence she displays when deciding to leave home for college in the North.

Gloria explains that now, as an adult, people tend to see her as "churchy" despite the fact that she is not particularly religious. She mentions that she thinks Claire probably thought of her in this way for the first part of their friendship. Gloria then transitions into describing the morning of the **tightrope walk**, when she and the other women are at Claire's apartment. While Claire is in the kitchen, the women inspect the various objects placed nearby, looking for impressive markings that might indicate their value. They examine a portrait of Solomon, making fun of it; Janet moves her hand up and down along Soderberg's thigh as the other white women giggle. Then Claire enters the room and Janet steps away from the portrait. The tension is palpable. Gloria wonders to herself what would have happened if she had been the one moving her hand over the painting.

It is clear that Gloria is an empathetic person, as evidenced by the guilt she feels about her friends' callous jokes made at Claire's expense. It seems Claire's original concern—regarding how the other women might judge her for living in such a lavish apartment—was, in fact, accurate and justified. When Gloria wonders how the situation might be different if Claire had walked in on her mocking Solomon's portrait (instead of the white women), she is picking up on an unspoken racial assumption that a black woman has no right to poke fun at a white woman or her husband.

Claire awkwardly holds out a plate of doughnuts to Gloria, who tells her that if she has another, she might "spill out into the street." This breaks the tension, and the group is able to settle back into the morning without discomfort. Claire leads them to Joshua's room, where they sit and listen to her talk about her son in great detail. As she speaks, the women become progressively hotter in the small room. They begin fidgeting and obviously tuning Claire out. At one point, Marcia lets out a large yawn, which derails Claire. When she asks the group to remind her what she was saying, they are unable to answer. Before long, though, Claire continues, instantly boring the group once more.

At this point, we begin to witness the second half of Claire's story, though now our narrator is Gloria, who is able to be a bit more honest in her representation of Claire. And although the group is supposed show support to the featured mother, it is clear that Claire is so wrapped up in her own story—so relieved to finally have found a willing audience and an emotional outlet—that she is unaware of their growing impatience.

Again, Marcia tactlessly interrupts Claire, this time asking if anyone has the timetable for the Staten Island Ferry. Gloria notices Claire blushing and trying to smile, pretending like her feelings haven't been hurt. Awkwardly, the women start saying their goodbyes and moving toward the door, where they hover, none of them brave enough to be the one to initiate the departure.

Gloria seems to be the only person in the room looking at the situation from both Claire's perspective and the other women's perspective, once again displaying her ability to relate to others sympathetically and with graciousness.

As Gloria checks herself in the hallway mirror, Claire grabs her elbow, ushering her slightly away from the group of women. Claire loudly asks her if she'd like to take some of the leftover bagels, but then under her breath she whispers, "Just stay here a little while." Her eyes are wet with the shine of held-back tears. Gloria tries to return to the door, where the other women are standing, but Claire keeps a firm grip on her elbow, asking again for her to stay.

Claire's desperate attempt to convince Gloria to stay seems to be the result of Gloria's general kindness. It is telling that even the small amount of attention Gloria lent Claire is enough to make Claire obsessively pursue her as a friend—this is, of course, an indication of the extent to which Claire is in need of a friend and confidante.

Although Gloria likes Claire—and although she could imagine staying after the others left—she decides not to stick around to help Claire clean up the mess; she figures that "she didn't go freedom-riding years ago to clean apartments on Park Avenue, no matter how nice" Claire might be. From the door, Jacqueline clears her throat and Marcia speaks up, urging Gloria to hurry along. In order to avoid making it seem like she favors Claire, Gloria makes a final decision to leave, lying that she has a church choir practice that afternoon even though she is not at all involved in the church.

This is a complex moment, one in which Gloria rejects racial stereotypes (by deciding not to stay to help Claire clean the apartment) while simultaneously falsely reinforcing similar stereotypes (by lying that she has to attend church choir). This complicated moment speaks to the many difficulties that can arise in the face of racial expectations, and Gloria is put in a position where she is torn between multiple iterations of such expectations.

Out in the hall, Gloria is just about to step into the elevator when Claire once again pulls her by the elbow. With a sad look on her face, she whispers: "You know, I'd be happy to pay you, Gloria."

It seems even Claire is aware of the unfortunate way she is reinforcing an ugly racial paradigm. Unfortunately, her regret doesn't stop her from going forth with her desperate plan to keep Gloria by her side.

In her narration, Gloria takes a moment to explain to readers that her great-grandmother and grandmother were both slaves, along with her great-grandfather, who bought his own freedom and carried around a whip in order to remind him of what he'd overcome. She herself knows what it means to fight oppression, having protested segregation in the South (as part of the "Freedom Riders") and having experienced tear gas.

This passage reminds us that, for a black woman in the 1970s spending time with a group of wealthier white women, it is impossible to forget about racism and oppression. Rather than trying to forget racism's ugliness, Gloria lives with it everyday, and this moment at Claire's house is no exception.


Gloria steps into the elevator as Claire immediately regrets what she said. Downstairs, the doorman tells the group of women that Claire has called down and that she wants to see them for a moment. The white women roll their eyes and crack jokes, but Gloria says that she needs to go and steps outside, walking away to the sound of the others calling her name. She decides that she will walk all the way from the Upper East Side to the Bronx.

Unlike Gloria, the white women aren't forced to confront racism during a casual morning of tea and pastries. As such, they can't fathom why Gloria is so upset—this, of course, shows them to be narrow-minded, complacent, and complicity racist themselves.

As she walks, Gloria contemplates whether or not she acted rightly. She considers the possibility that she read too much into the situation, that maybe Claire was simply lonely and wanted her company. Gloria wonders if she is letting something small and ridiculous ruin a good friendship. She admits to herself that people aren't always completely good, and that the idea of perfection is unattainable. Nonetheless, she decides that she's gone too far to turn back—despite the stitch already developing in her stomach.

Even after a friend has capitalized on an unfortunate racial power dynamic, Gloria finds herself empathizing, testing the situation out from multiple perspectives. When she allows herself to accept that not everybody is perfect, she proves that she has an almost saint-like sense of forgiveness and generosity.

Gloria continues narrating her life's history, explaining that in college she was often invited to fancy parties where she was asked to share her opinions about W.E.B. Du Bois, the Second World War, and other often racially-charged matters. She used to write letters to her parents, only reporting good news and never mentioning any grievances.

As Gloria reveals more about her past, it becomes clear that this is not the first time she has been treated as a representative of her entire race; in college, it seems, she was tokenized as a well-educated black woman in much the same way that she is treated in the group of mothers.

When she graduated, Gloria's parents traveled to Syracuse. They were proud of her, and her mother talked about how far African Americans had come. This embarrassed Gloria. Her parents had packed a car, leaving enough room to take her home, but Gloria told them that she intended to stay in New York for a little while.

Gloria's refusal to rejoin her family in the South symbolizes her move toward individuality, a trait that follows her throughout her life.

The next time Gloria saw her parents was at her first wedding, which was to a man who was a respected debater. They had a fast courtship, marrying after only six weeks. On the night of their wedding, they both immediately knew they had made a mistake. They divorced after eleven months, at which point Gloria avoided returning to Missouri. She didn't tell her parents about the divorce, instead deciding to move to New York City, where she found her second husband and the eventual father of her three boys, all of whom died in Vietnam.

It is evident that Gloria's individualism was reinforced when she moved through her marriages without asking for her parents' help or even telling them about what was truly happening in her life.

Continuing her journey toward the Bronx from Claire's apartment, Gloria's feet begin to blister. She isn't paying attention to her surroundings, so she doesn't anticipate the young girl who emerges from a vestibule on the side of the street holding a knife. The girl takes Gloria's purse and cuts out her pockets, which hold, among other valuables, pictures of her sons. As the girl leaves, she calls Gloria a fat bitch.

New York yet again shows its capacity for violence and danger; just as it can be a city full of beauty and wonder—full of artists who walk between skyscrapers or spray paint otherwise ugly walls—it can also be a city of destruction and malice, a city divided by angry strangers unable or unwilling to empathize with one another.

Gloria hails a cab and directs it—for reasons she can't explain—to Claire's apartment. When she arrives, Claire pays the taxi fare and ushers her into the building. Inside the apartment the curtains are shut and it smells strongly of cigarettes and perfume. Claire runs Gloria a bath for her blistered, bleeding feet.

In this moment, Claire is put in the position of waiting on Gloria, a nice reversal of what racial and social stereotypes might normally dictate.

Once Claire helps Gloria get cleaned up, the two women sit in the living room drinking gin and tonics. They talk vaguely about their previous exchange; Claire apologizes but Gloria tells her that she acted fine, that she didn't make a fool of herself. Eventually they are able to joke about the matter, and Gloria says that she came back to collect her pay.

Despite the tensions running beneath the surface of their last interaction, Gloria and Claire are apparently able to allow themselves a moment of simple friendship unencumbered by outside expectations—a much-need relief for both women.

Gloria asks if Claire can put on some music. Together they sit relaxed in the living room with their gin and tonics, taking in the loud classical music. Claire decides to smoke inside the apartment despite the fact that her husband hates it when she does so.

Here we witness Claire letting loose and ignoring her worry that she might upset Solomon, a sentiment that seems healthy given the fact that they are, as husband and wife, so overly careful around one another.

Later that night, Solomon comes through the front door. He has been out celebrating a triumphant court case at his favorite restaurant. He comes in and shakes Gloria's hand, but it is obvious that he wishes she would leave. He too seems a bit tipsy, and he declares that he is going to take a shower. He starts unbuttoning his shirt and telling them about the tightrope walker, bragging about the sentence he came up with: he explains that he found the walker guilty and charged him a penny for every floor of the World Trade Center, or $1.10. Pouring himself a glass of whiskey, Solomon adds that he also sentenced him to do another performance for the public, this time somewhere safe. He is clearly happy with himself, but Claire doesn't seem to care. From the hallway, Solomon calls goodnight to Gloria—and she knows he means that she should leave.

Solomon's entrance essentially ruins the sense of equality Claire and Gloria were able to establish between themselves. In treating Gloria so dismissively, he reintroduces the idea of unconscious and unexamined racism. Ultimately, he displays his most unattractive qualities, boasting about his creative success in court and ignoring his wife's obvious discomfort regarding his behavior. This is not the Judge Soderberg who caught a glimpse of Tillie's humanity, but rather the Judge Soderberg who, when he looked at Jazzlyn, saw only a long rap sheet stretching into the future.

Claire follows Solomon down the hall. He returns after a moment and apologizes to Gloria for being terse. He also says that he is sorry to hear about her three sons. Pausing before disappearing into the hall, he adds, "I miss my boy too sometimes."

Although we don't see it firsthand, this is perhaps the first time in quite a while that Claire and Solomon speak honestly with one another, as Claire clearly expresses her disappointment in him when they are in the hallway. In return, he admits to her and to Gloria that he misses Joshua, a sizable confession for such an emotionally reserved man.

When Gloria leaves, Claire insists upon escorting her to the Bronx in a car service. When they arrive at the projects, there is a great fuss; two little girls are being taken out of the building by social workers. Gloria gets out of the car and runs over to the children. A police officer asks if she knows them, and she says yes; "That's what I finally said, as good a lie as any: 'Yes.'"

Any previous suspicion that these two little girls are Tillie's grandchildren is confirmed by the fact that they are being taken out of the Bronx housing projects on the same night that Jazzlyn died and Tillie was jailed.

BOOK FOUR, CHAPTER 12: ROARING SEAWARD, AND I GO

It is 2006 and Jaslyn studies a photograph of the tightrope walker. It was taken, she knows, on the exact same day that her mother, Jazzlyn, died. It makes her think about life's simultaneity, the strange wonder that something so beautiful could possibly have happened at the same time as something so disastrous and ugly. She carries the picture with her as she travels, along with a lock of her sister's hair.

Jaslyn is quite conscious of the idea of time: not only the passing of it—as she looks back from a 34-year vantage point—but also the notion of significant events happening in concert with one another. In a sense, this outlook is perfectly suited for the culminating chapter of a book concerned with the myriad incongruent stories of New York City.

Jaslyn is flying from Little Rock, Arkansas to New York. On the plane she meets Pino, an Italian man who works for Doctors Without Borders and who also lives in Arkansas. Although it is unlike her to flirt with a stranger, the two of them hit it off while the plane ushers them toward New York. When they land, they split a cab into the city, clearly knowing they've made a sudden and strong connection.

It is clear right away that Jaslyn leads a very different life than her mother and grandmother did. Not only does she not live in New York, but she also appears to be guarded when it comes to men, a trait that couldn't be used to describe Jazzlyn or Tillie.

The taxi drops Jaslyn off in the Upper East Side. She slips her card into Pino's front pocket. Normally she doesn't act this way; she is viewed as uptight at the tax preparation nonprofit where she works. In general, she is painfully aware of her family history—she is embarrassed by the fact that she comes from a long line of prostitutes. However, in this moment she allows Pino to kiss her on the lips. She wishes her coworkers could be there to see her.

As a character, Jaslyn continues to emerge as her mother and grandmother's opposite, as evidenced by her innocent excitement when Pino kisses her on the lips.

When Jaslyn enters the building, the doorman recognizes her and sends her up to the Soderberg residence. There, she is greeted at the door by a hired nurse. Jaslyn explains to him that she is Claire's niece, immediately revising this statement by saying that she isn't *really* her niece but that Claire calls her by that name. Jaslyn asks how the old woman is doing, and the nurse hesitates ominously before saying that Claire is not doing well at all. Jaslyn steps into the apartment and remembers how she and her sister, Janice, used to be intimidated when Gloria—who raised them—used to bring them into the city to visit Claire.

In this scene it becomes clear that Claire and Gloria solidified a strong bond after the night they spent listening to classical music in Claire's apartment. The fact that the doorman recognizes Jaslyn points to how close the two women must have gotten to one another.

When she fully enters the apartment, Jaslyn is surprised to see a group of six people drinking cocktails. She introduces herself, and a tall, clearly wealthy man her age steps forward to shake her hand, introducing himself as Tom—Claire's nephew—and saying that it's nice to finally meet her. The word "finally" hangs in the air, seeming somehow more malicious than gracious.

In her interaction with Tom, Jaslyn senses resentment, as if Claire has talked ceaselessly about her in a way that has caused her relatives to distrust or at least dislike what she represents. There seems to be a racial tension at play here in conjunction with a worry that Jaslyn will inherit money that should go to family members.


It becomes clear to Jaslyn that she will not be able to stay in the apartment's guestroom as she had intended. She had wanted to spend several days with Claire to "accompany her dying" in the same way that she accompanied Gloria in death six years previous—she and Janice drove Gloria to Missouri, where they buried her near her childhood home.

With the news that Claire is on her deathbed, we also learn that Gloria has already died. As such, we feel time working on the novel, perhaps also realizing that many of the other characters we came to know have possibly died, too.

Aware that she won't be able to spend the time she had wanted with Claire, Jaslyn asks Tom if she can go see the old woman. Tom says that she's sleeping and offers Jaslyn a drink instead, pretending to forget her name at the end of his sentence. Jaslyn declines by saying that she doesn't need a drink, because she has a room at the Regis, the fanciest hotel name she can remember. She promptly leaves, resisting Tom's offer to show her to the lobby. As he leans forward to kiss her cheek, she lets her shoulder bump his chin. She then gets a room at the Regis, despite its exorbitant cost.

Tom's refusal to allow Jaslyn into Claire's room is less protective than it is territorial. It is obvious that he wants to make Jaslyn feel unwelcome and uncomfortable, a fact made even clearer when he intentionally forgets her name. He seems to think he's putting her in her place. It's not hard to believe that Gloria would be proud of the way Jaslyn allows her shoulder to hit Tom's chin.

Not long after the United States first attacked Afghanistan, Jaslyn visited Ireland, where her sister had been stationed by the Army. Unlike Janice, Jaslyn wanted to learn about their mother, so she drove alone from Galway to Dublin to meet Ciaran. He was the CEO of a company and worked in a fancy building in the city. Ciaran told her about Corrigan and took her to a pub. When Jaslyn started crying, Ciaran went to call his wife. Coming back inside after the phone conversation, he invited Jaslyn to dinner.

Jaslyn's curiosity regarding her mother's past indicates what it must have been like to grow up knowing that Jazzlyn was a prostitute killed at such a young age. As readers, the idea that Ciaran might be able to help Jaslyn better understand her mother's life is wildly unrealistic, and we regretfully watch as she tries in vain to get information out of this kind but ineffectual man.


Jaslyn, Ciaran, and Ciaran's wife, Lara, spent a slow evening in the garden behind Ciaran and Lara's house, which had walls cluttered by art. Lara drew Jaslyn into a hug and held her there for a long time. The next day, Jaslyn went to Limerick and met up again with her sister, who had just met a man who was also in the army. Not long afterward, Janice was sent to the U.S. embassy in Baghdad.

In this scene, we learn that Lara and Ciaran did, in fact, end up together—a happy ending if not for the tragic event that drove them together in the first place. It remains unclear if Jaslyn is aware that Lara was in the car that killed her mother, but it appears that she's not.

In New York the next morning, Jaslyn walks around the West Village. She finds Pino in a coffee shop. The two get to talking, and Jaslyn can tell right away that they will spend the day together like this, talking and eating before going back to his hotel and making love.

There is a sense of serendipity at play in Jaslyn and Pino's blossoming relationship, a natural coming together of two previous strangers that reminds us of the novel's interest in uniting people in unexpected ways.

Ten years ago, Jaslyn went to the Bronx to visit the spot under the expressway where her mother and grandmother used to work. On her way, though, she got snarled in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Sitting perfectly still in the road, she noticed a strange movement ahead: a man's head coming up through the sunroof of a limousine. Then she noticed that other drivers had gotten out of their cars and were all looking at something. Finally she saw it: a coyote weaving its way through the cars, far from the woods. It passed her and she watched it in the rearview, thinking how strange it was that the animal was headed into—not out of—the city. Soon she saw Animal Control advancing and heard the crack of a rifle.

As Jaslyn tries to retrace and understand her mother's brief life, she is met with an element of the extraordinary. The fact that the coyote is walking toward—rather than away from—the city seems to suggest the magnetic pull New York is capable of, and this magnetic pull reflects Jaslyn's own inability to stay away from the place that defined her mother's life. It is telling that when she hears the rifle, she does not see the coyote fall, much like how Marcia doesn't see the culmination of the tightrope walker's journey. This way, she can perhaps imagine a different ending.

Sure enough, Jaslyn and Pino return to his hotel room and make passionate but tentative love. Afterward, they lie motionless in a meaningful silence.

In addition to the serendipity inherent in their relationship, Pino and Jaslyn's convergence takes on a clear inevitability as they fulfill their desires.

Jaslyn returns to Claire's apartment. On the floor outside the door there is a newspaper bearing images of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The headline announces eighteen dead soldiers.

This apartment has been the setting for much war-related grief, and now, over three decades after Joshua died in Vietnam, more of Claire's loved ones are involved in a new war that, much like the Vietnam War, is messy and complicated and highly controversial.

Inside, the nurse tells Jaslyn that Tom is sleeping and that he has been having little parties while staying at Claire's. Apparently, he has also been showing the apartment to real estate agents.

This information about Tom confirms his ulterior motives to sell Claire's apartment for a personal profit. It is clear that he is using his aunt for her wealth, assuming that she is a stereotypical senile woman unaware of her financial situation.

Jaslyn enters Claire's room and watches the old woman's body rise and fall with each breath. Claire opens her eyes and says nothing, but she moves her left hand as if she is playing the piano. It is dark in the room, though a sliver of light falls through a break in the curtains. Jaslyn gently climbs onto the mattress and lies beside Claire. She hears a clock ticking and a fan whirring, feels the soft suggestion of a breeze coming through the window. She remains motionless next to Claire. And she feels, she thinks, the world spinning.

The novel ends during this tender moment, which ultimately highlights the great aliveness of the world: the ticking clocks, the purring fan, the gentle breeze. In this way, we feel intimations of all the lives unfurling simultaneously across the globe, in addition to the phantom presence of each character as he or she moves throughout and beyond the pages of Let the Great World Spin.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Let the Great World Spin*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Apr 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Let the Great World Spin*." LitCharts LLC, April 7, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/let-the-great-world-spin.

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MLA

McCann, Column. Let the Great World Spin. Random House. 2009.

CHICAGO MANUAL

McCann, Column. Let the Great World Spin. New York: Random House. 2009.