The Golden Age

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOAN LONDON

Born just after World War II in Perth (the same city in which *The Golden Age* is set), Joan London attended the University of Western Australia, where she studied English and French. Before branching into novels, London wrote several short story collections. Her work has garnered many accolades, including the prestigious Australian Patrick White Award (2015). London currently lives in Fremantle, also located in Western Australia, where she is a bookseller.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Poliomyelitis has existed for thousands of years, but during the 19th and early 20th century it became an increasing problem around the world, especially in cities. During and after World War II, epidemics affected more and more people each year—so many that "apart from the atom bomb, America's greatest fear was polio," a 2009 PBS documentary notes. Polio was an extremely frightening disease due to its swift onset, the significant probability of death, and the certainty of lifelong disability. Because it is spread through feces, it was also highly stigmatized; people erroneously linked contracting polio to being dirty or poor, although it was usually the result of poor sanitation in urban areas. American president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who contracted polio as an adult, had to conceal his paralysis during several campaigns. In 1955, American scientist Jonah Salk developed the first polio vaccine, and massive public vaccination campaigns effectively eradicated one of the great health crises of the last century. However, in societies without access to vaccinations, polio cases continue to occur.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Stylistically, London bears some resemblance to Canadian writer Alice Munro. Like *The Golden Age*, Munro's short stories—including those in her 2012 collection *Dear Life*—look back on the postwar era, often featuring many points of view that span long periods of time. Both writers illuminate the hidden drama that lies within seemingly quotidian lives. *The Golden Age* also shares its setting and some characteristics with the well-known Australian novel *Cloudstreet* (Tim Winton, 1991), which details the lives of two rural families sharing a house in Perth during and after World War II. Like *The Golden Age*, *Cloudstreet* is concerned with the lives of people displaced by contingency, as well as the consequences of living with unfamiliar people in close quarters. Both London and Winton won the Australian Miles Franklin Award for their respective novels.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Golden Age*
- **When Written:** 2010s
- **Where Written:** Australia
- **When Published:** 2014
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realistic fiction
- **Setting:** A children's hospital in Perth, Australia
- **Climax:** Ida's piano recital at the hospital
- **Antagonist:** Polio
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Real Life. While *The Golden Age* is entirely fictional, it derives its title from the name of a real polio hospital that existed in Australia during the 1950s.

PLOT SUMMARY

It's 1953 in Perth, Australia and thirteen-year-old Frank Gold is awake during nap time at the **Golden Age**, a children's polio hospital. Rolling through the halls in his wheelchair, he checks on his friend Elsa, but does not see her, then goes outside with a cigarette purloined from his mother.

The Golden Age was once a pub, but the government has converted it into a convalescent home due to the increasing number of polio cases. Its residents are children who have survived the onset of polio but whose parents work too much to supervise their recovery, or who live too far away to receive outpatient care. Frank has arrived here after a stint at a hospital for adults (the IDB). The hospital feels isolated from normal life, but it's a "cheerful place" that gives "fair shelter and homely comfort" to the children.

Meanwhile, Elsa has been comforting a crying baby named Rayma. Because she's always looked after her younger sisters, Elsa is an adept caregiver and knows instinctively that Rayma is crying for her mother. As she encourages the baby to look out the window at the sky, she thinks of her own mother. Since the onset of polio, Elsa has felt distant from her parents and everyone else around her, and she reflects that Rayma too has to "learn to be alone."

While the children eat their dinner at the Golden Age, Frank's parents, Ida and Meyer Gold, are just getting home from work.

Hungarian Jewish refugees after World War II, the Golds had hoped to go to America and have never felt at home in Australia. Before the war, Ida was a brilliant pianist, and now Meyer asks her to play for him. Ida refuses; she hasn't played since Frank got sick.

After dinner at the Golden Age, Frank sneaks outside to write poetry. Frank became a poet in the IDB after meeting an older boy named Sullivan Backhouse, who was confined in an iron lung because his entire body was paralyzed. In the IDB Sullivan told Frank about the autobiographical poetry he composed in his head, and Frank was attracted by Sullivan's humble approach to art. Sullivan was the son of a prosperous Australian bureaucrat, and prior to polio he was a prefect at a boarding school with brilliant prospects. Though Sullivan briefly seemed to be getting better, one night he suddenly got a fever and died.

After thinking of Sullivan, Frank's thoughts drift to Budapest during the war. For a long time he and Ida lived in a cramped apartment in the Jewish ghetto, but after a particularly large roundup by the fascist party that controlled the city, Ida hid Frank with her piano teacher, Julia Marai. Although Julia and her companion, Hedwiga, were kind, Frank felt "exposed" without his mother, from whom he'd never been separated. Ida missed Frank but felt things were "simpler now, alone" and she smuggled food parcels to Meyer, who was working in a labor camp in the Ukraine. One day at Julia's house, Frank had to hide in the attic while Julia gave a piano lesson, and Frank was so frightened by the experience that he didn't talk for several days.

After the Russians conquered Budapest in February of 1945, Ida retrieved Frank from Julia's house. The apartment building had been bombed but they'd been living in the cellar. Meyer also survived the war, and often says now that they are "a lucky family." However, apart from two of Meyer's brothers, everyone in their entire extended family was killed during the war.

Frank recalls his parents' visit on his first Sunday at the Golden Age. Ida felt tense and anxious because she sensed Frank's unhappiness, and Frank was thankful when she left. After visiting hours all the children were emotionally drained because seeing their families reminds them "how much [they] had grown apart." Frank reflected that for most of his life he and his parents had lived in close quarters with strangers, and that the Golden Age was too small to allow him any real solitude. While wheeling restlessly through the halls, he caught a glimpse of Elsa, who seemed graceful despite her disability. Tears came to Frank's eyes, and afterwards he thought of the title for a new poem. Frank and Elsa quickly became friends. Now he values the peace and tranquility she seems to emit, and she is attracted by his confidence and cultural knowledge.

Sister Olive Penny, head of the hospital, is getting ready for bed when her lover, one of the new constables, taps on her window. Sister Penny enjoys the sex but gets dressed briskly afterwards; she has many lovers and doesn't let them intrude on her life or work. Her husband, Alan Penny, died in the first days of the war, forcing Sister Penny and their daughter, Elizabeth Ann, to move in with her mother-in-law, Enid. Sister Penny began to have trysts, and in revenge, Enid bequeathed her house to a distant relative when she died. Sister Penny moved to the Golden Age while Elizabeth Ann went to live with a friend and attend college. Since then, Sister Penny has felt distant from her daughter; it's nursing, a career she originally intended to give up after marriage, that is now central to her life.

Precocious and intelligent, Frank is bored during lessons and passes time contradicting the teacher and watching Elsa. When he looks at her, he stops feeling ashamed of himself as a cripple. He sneaks out of class to visit Elsa in the therapy bath, but is unceremoniously ejected when Lidja, the therapist, catches him. Frank knows he has a penchant for getting in trouble and feels his days in the hospital are numbered.

In the evening Meyer decides to walk to the Golden Age. Though he's resolved not to feel nostalgic for Hungary, he's depressed by the arid Australian landscape and feels he'll never be at home again. When he arrives, he notices how much Frank looks like Ida. However, Frank gets along with Meyer much better than he does with his fractious mother. As he's leaving, Meyer runs into Sister Penny, whom he finds attractive and intriguing. They share a certain connection but part without much conversation.

On the same night, Elsa's flustered mother, Margaret, arrives, having spent all day scheming and hitchhiking to get to the hospital. Margaret adores her eldest daughter and the two are very close. Still, Elsa feels "a sense of invasion" at the unexpected visit, while Margaret thinks sadly that her daughter is quickly leaving childhood behind. As Margaret leaves, she reflects that Elsa is "the compensation for everything," from the drudgery of housework to her bad-tempered husband, Jack.

Frank's parents serve Christmas lunch at the Golden Age so the nurses can be with their families. Ida plays carols on the piano. Sister Penny returns early from dinner with Elizabeth Ann and her friend's family, a stifling affair during which Sister Penny notices her daughter's infatuation with the family's eldest son. She feels relieved to see Meyer, while Meyer watches Ida play and feels sorrow for her lost career. Seeing that Ida is a professional, Sister Penny resolves that she must play a benefit concert for the hospital.

The children who have gone home for Christmas return exhausted and cranky after stressful days with their families, who treat them like invalids or expect them to recover more quickly. After bedtime Frank sneaks over to lie next to Elsa, who tells him her "onset story." One day, Elsa felt sick during her tennis lesson and collapsed in the driveway after returning home. Jealous of her older sister's lessons, Elsa's younger sister Sally shouted at and kicked her until a neighbor intervened. After hearing the story, Frank kisses Elsa.

The nurses take the children to the ocean for an outing. Everyone enjoys it except Elsa, who has always lived near the ocean and is now reminded of things she'll never be able to do again. Frank spends the day thinking of poetry and realizes that all his inspiration now comes from Elsa. Not knowing the children are away, Meyer drops by the hospital with a crate of soft drinks as a treat. Sharing a soda with Sister Penny, he admires her beauty and aloofness, while she senses the tragedy that lies behind his calm demeanor.

Lidja, the therapist, drowns in a sudden boat accident. All the children are devastated, because her death reminds them that "they [are] alone" in overcoming polio. Soon afterward, the Queen of England visits Perth, although she can't accept gifts or eat food due to the city's rising number of polio cases. Everyone—including Frank—is captivated the hubbub of her arrival. The Queen leaves the city uninfected, while newspapers report on Jonah Salk, a Jewish doctor developing a vaccine for polio.

Meanwhile, Ida, who hasn't played formally in years, prepares furiously to give a concert at the Golden Age. The day of the event the emerges on the stage haughty and impressive in a new dress, slightly scornful of the humble venue but also anxious to give the best possible performance. The patients and parents are immediately captivated. Frank feels an unexpected closeness to and respect for his mother. Meyer is proud of both Ida and Frank, but as he sees other patients surrounded by large families he remembers his siblings and parents who didn't survive the war.

After the concert, a very young boy runs away from the hospital while another girl's father arrives suddenly to take her home. These departures create a sense of disorder and instability among the children and the nurses. Unsettled, Sister Penny goes to visit one of her lovers for the day. When she returns, she finds that a nurse has discovered Frank and Elsa kissing in bed and alerted the hospital board. The board expels both Frank and Elsa. The trustees question Elsa, seeking to blame Frank exclusively for the incident, but she refuses to incriminate him. Sister Penny knows that, after two mishaps in quick succession, she needs to start looking for another job.

Bored and lonely at home, Frank goes to the library every day. He's returned to the setting of his childhood but feels estranged from that part of his life, as well as from his parents. Moreover, he feels intensely conscious of his disability among so many able people, and worried about the prospect of going to normal school.

On a "hunch," Meyer drops by the beach and runs into Sister Penny, who is swimming. She's moving to a hospital in another city, while Elizabeth Ann is getting married. Meyer tells Sister Penny that she taught him "how to live here." Despite their mutual feelings of closeness and respect, they quickly depart in their own cars.

Ida happens upon Frank listening to birds in the backyard, and he tells her their song sounds like "You're-just-in-the-way." Alarmed at this obvious evidence of depression, Ida phones Margaret Briggs and arranges for the Golds to visit for tea. Like Frank, Elsa feels lonely and displaced at home and worries that people think of her as a "cripple." Still, she enjoys being near her mother and tentatively reconciles with Sally.

Despite the awkwardness of the arranged reunion, Frank and Elsa are relieved to see each other again. Suddenly, it begins to rain and the adults run outside to help Margaret bring in the laundry. Taking advantage of their parents' distraction, Frank and Elsa rush into a secret bower of trees and embrace. Both take comfort in being together, even though they know they'll spend their lives apart.

Years later, Elsa's son Jack visits Frank, now an elderly poet living in New York. Jack says that his mother is now retired after a long career as a doctor. Until the past year, she's been able to walk and swim. She also enjoys Frank's books. Jack himself is the editor of an online Australian literary journal, as well as a fervent admirer of Frank's poetry. He interviews Frank about his new collection, entitled *The Golden Age*. Frank says that he thinks of this collection as both the "sequel" to his most famous poem "The Trains" (which shares its name with the chapter that describes Frank's childhood in Hungary). After Jack leaves, Frank walks to the window and watches him disappear into the crowd on the street.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Frank Gold – The novel's protagonist, Frank is a thirteen-year-old Jewish boy who is struck by polio after immigrating with his parents, Ida and Meyer, to Australia as Holocaust refugees. Frank is preternaturally intelligent and mature, possibly as a result of experiencing and surviving the Holocaust at a very young age. He's much more cultured and knowledgeable than his fellow patients at the **Golden Age**, and he interacts with and understands adults more easily than children. Frank chafes at his close relationship to his parents and feels burdened by the knowledge that, after the horror of the Holocaust, he's the only thing making life worthwhile for them; he vacillates between distancing himself from them as a mature adolescent and clinging to the dependence upon and trust in them he had as a child. During his stay at the Golden Age, Frank is motivated by his desire to write poetry, for which he's felt a vocation since the onset of polio, and by his devoted love for Elsa. In the novel's end, Frank appears as an elderly and successful poet; through his art he's managed to confront and move past the two traumas of his youth.

Elsa Briggs – The oldest girl at the **Golden Age**, Elsa is Frank's best friend and love interest. Like Frank, Elsa is mature for her

age, which manifests in her gravity and judicious reserve. Elsa is a beacon of calm for all the children on the ward—especially Frank, who sees Elsa as a rare repository of beauty and tranquility in a tumultuous and frightening world. Frank is devoted to Elsa from the first day he glimpses her; while Elsa is less forthcoming, she eventually decides that she "lives for Frank," relying on him to parse the emotions she feels but cannot express. Before polio, Elsa was extremely close to her mother, Margaret; one of her main concerns now is the distance she feels creeping between them while she's away from her family at the Golden Age, fighting a disease against which her mother can't protect her. Although she's tractable and demure as a child, in adulthood Elsa emerges as staunch and independent. Despite her disability and the fact that she has three children, Elsa has a long career in medicine. Her sons also call her "E.B.," the initials of her maiden name, suggesting that she's maintained her autonomy after marriage; even though she has trouble walking on the beach or climbing hills, she prefers to complete these tasks alone, rather than rely on her family for help. Elsa's independence and her respected position at the center of her family show that as a woman she comes to resemble Ida Gold much more than her own subservient and subjugated mother.

Ida Gold – Frank's mother and Meyer's wife. The daughter of an affluent Hungarian Jewish family, Ida was once a lauded and diligent pianist looking forward to a brilliant career. The onset of the Holocaust, however, annihilated her family and put an end to her life as an urbane young mother and musician. While Ida often appears as a flustered and anxious mother—for example, chain-smoking and finding fault with the hospital staff—it's her ingenuity and persistence that safeguarded Frank throughout the Holocaust and scraped together the food packages that kept Meyer from starving in his forced labor camp. Ida loves Frank fiercely and, her general faith in humanity having been destroyed by the war, lives mostly for him. However, she also feels more herself when she's alone. Although neither of them realizes it, Ida's feelings are quite similar to Frank's simultaneous desire for intimacy and distance from his mother. Ida also vacillates between snobbery (she calls their Italian neighbors "Tuscan peasants" and turns up her nose at Perth's provincial conventionality) and humility (as a poor immigrant, she works uncomplainingly as a milliner's assistant to build a new life in Australia). Ida's recital at the **Golden Age** shows that both these attributes stem from the same source: her pride in her talent as a pianist and her reverence for music as a discipline. Despite the simple venue and amateur audience, Ida's grave and unstinting performance at the Golden Age exonerates her from any hints of pretension while highlighting the strong sense of self, derived from her craft, that has enabled her to face nearly insurmountable challenges.

Meyer Gold – Frank's father and Ida's husband, Meyer is a former businessman from Hungary who now works in a factory and as a soft-drinks deliveryman. Meyer is much more relaxed and personable than his wife; even Frank would rather his soft-spoken father visit than his frenetic mother. However, Meyer himself sees his purpose in life as standing between the world and Ida, whom he respects as a musical genius. This is an unusual perspective for a man in the patriarchal 1950s, and establishes him as a touching contrast to Jack Briggs, the notably self-centered husband of Margaret. While both of the Golds are hardworking, Meyer adjusts more easily than his wife to his new life as a working-class laborer; he feels at home in work clothes, quickly gets a tan, and wears his hat like a cowboy. Having lost most of his siblings in the Holocaust, Meyer is frequently troubled by flashbacks to their deaths, as well as by an inability to feel at home after being so violently expelled from the society he once thought of as his own. It's his connection and (unconsummated) attraction to Sister Penny, and the contented solitude she embodies, that teachers Meyer it's possible to be alone without feeling isolated.

Sister Penny – The director of the **Golden Age**, Sister Penny is a firm and competent nurse, managing not only the physical but also the social and emotional needs of the children in her care. It's largely due to her influence that the children see the hospital as a cheerful "watering hole." Sister Penny is at once ascetic–she lives in an austere room in the hospital and has very few material desires–and very sensual; she routinely takes lovers, an unconventional practice for a woman in the 1950s. Sister Penny's lovers show her desire for human connection, but her refusal to marry any of them indicates the value she places on solitude and freedom. Ultimately, Sister Penny is most fulfilled by her work, which she views as a calling and an art, comparable to Ida's vocation as a pianist. Although she has a comfortable relationship with her daughter, Elizabeth Ann, nursing feels more natural to Sister Penny than motherhood; this is an interesting sentiment in a novel that largely lionizes relationships between mothers and children, and shows that while motherhood is often the most fulfilling aspect of a character's life, it by no means has to be.

Sullivan Backhouse – Frank's close friend in the IDB, Sullivan is completely paralyzed and lives in an iron lung. While Sullivan is the son of an affluent and powerful Australian family and Frank is a poor refugee, the two boys are immediately drawn to each other. Sullivan is remarkably cheerful despite his situation and retains his passion for reading and composing poetry. It's Sullivan who awakens Frank's love for poetry and makes him realize he wants to be a poet. Sullivan's death from fever is a big blow to Frank; as an adult, he publishes a memoir about his friend and some poetry fragments he had transcribed, showing Sullivan's lasting influence on Frank's character and art.

Margaret Briggs – Elsa's mother, characterized by a fierce love and strong instinctual connection with her daughter. A dowdy and scatterbrained woman who wears too-big shoes and always concedes to her overbearing husband, Jack, Margaret

isn't as outwardly imposing as other female characters like Ida or Sister Penny. However, her constancy and protectiveness toward Elsa belie her appearance. At the end of the novel, likely against her husband's wishes, Margaret facilitates Elsa's reunion with Frank and decisively tells her overbearing sister-in-law Nance Briggs that polio won't limit Elsa's prospects. These incidents show that her daughter's illness hasn't defeated Margaret; in fact, it's strengthened her character.

Jack Briggs – Elsa's father and Margaret's husband, Jack is a gruff and bad-tempered man. He's unable to comfort his wife and unsympathetic to her requests that he take her to see Elsa more frequently. However, Elsa names her son after him, suggesting that during her adulthood they've arrived at a more comfortable relationship.

Nance Briggs – Jack Briggs's sister. Because she's overbearing and slightly wealthier than the rest of the family, he's attentive and obedient to her, often against Margaret's wishes. While Nance demeans Margaret throughout the novel, she finally goes too far by declaring that because of her polio, Elsa has to go to secretarial school instead of studying medicine. It is at this moment that Margaret decisively rebukes her. Nance represents the world at large, which is eager to dismiss and stigmatize polio patients.

Sally Briggs – Elsa's younger sister. Less innately beautiful and charming than Elsa, Sally has always been resentful of her sister's connection with their mother, Margaret, as well as her privileges as the eldest daughter. Her tense relationship with Elsa comes to a head when the latter collapses in the driveway with the first onset of polio and Sally, enraged and not understanding the seriousness of the situation, kicks her fiercely. Although Sally never apologizes for this, by the end of the novel her behavior towards Elsa softens and they reconcile.

Julia Marai – Ida's piano teacher in Hungary, who hides Frank during the last months of the Holocaust in Budapest. Although she's enigmatic and not particularly affectionate, Julia's willingness to shelter a Jewish child during an extremely dangerous time reveals her selflessness and quiet bravery. For Ida, the strict and disciplined piano teacher is the source of the fierce tenacity that enables her not only to become a great pianist, but also to survive the war and protect her son.

Elizabeth Ann – Elizabeth Ann is Sister Penny's daughter from her brief marriage to Alan Penny. The two women have lived apart for several years, with Elizabeth Ann attending teacher's college and boarding at the house of a friend. Their relationship is cordial but distant; Elizabeth Ann is attracted to the conventional and stable atmosphere at her friend's house, a lifestyle her unmarried and independent mother neither wants nor is able to provide. By becoming engaged to her friend's older brother at the end of the novel, Elizabeth Ann seems to attain the life she's always desired. However, in doing so she distances herself from her mother even more.

Enid – Sister Penny's judgmental mother-in-law, with whom she and Elizabeth Ann live after Alan Penny dies. In revenge for Sister Penny's habit of taking lovers instead of getting remarried, on her deathbed Enid bequeaths her house to a distant relative. It's Enid's caprice that drives Sister Penny to take a job at the **Golden Age**, which gives her a place to live.

Warren Barret – One of the patients at the Golden Age. Just a little younger than Frank, Warren is obtuse and tactless, especially compared with the other, generally sensitive children. Warren is a frequent source of annoyance for Frank; his mockery of Frank's lack of cricket knowledge, and his incredulity at the idea that the **Gold**'s don't celebrate Christmas, make Frank feel an unpleasant sense of foreignness.

Malcolm Poole – One of the patients at the **Golden Age**. He has a tense relationship with his father, Mr. Poole, who's unsympathetic to his son's disability and criticizes him in front of the whole ward for being too exhausted to walk. While most of the children have touching relationships with their parents, Malcolm's shows the toll that polio can take on family life.

Mr. Arpad – A man to whom Julia Marai gives weekly piano lessons for desperately needed money. He's likely a Nazi, because he has money when almost everyone else is destitute and because Frank has to hide in the attic when he comes. Because Frank is too terrified to return to the attic, Julia stops giving Mr. Arpad lessons.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hedwiga – Described nebulously as Julia's "companion," Hedwiga is either Julia's friend or partner, with whom she's shared several decades of her life. It's Hedwiga's resourcefulness and ability to scavenge that puts food on the table for Frank during his months in hiding.

Fabio – A chubby and smiling baby, one of the youngest patients at the **Golden Age**. Like Ida and Meyer, his parents are immigrants; the two families get along well, even though the urbane and cultured **Golds** are often scornful of less educated and sophisticated immigrants.

Ann Lee – One of the patients at the **Golden Age**. Because her family misses her and is eager to take her home, she leaves the hospital without all the necessary therapy—meaning it's unlikely she'll ever fully regain the ability to walk.

Susan Bennet – One of the patients at the **Golden Age**. Elsa resents her for being ostentatiously good and helpful. However, Susan's strained behavior may be the result of her desire to please her parents, frivolous social climbers who are obviously embarrassed by their daughter's disease.

Lucy Boyer – A baby, one of the younger patients at the **Golden Age**.

Julia Snow – One of the patients at the **Golden Age**.

Rayma Colley – One of the youngest patients at the **Golden**

Age.

Albert Sutton – A young patient at the **Golden Age**, who in a fit of homesickness unsuccessfully tries to run away.

Hadley Dent – One of the nurses at the **Golden Age**. Hadley is kind but generally uptight, with an overzealous respect for authority. It's she who catches Frank and Elsa in bed and alerts the governors of the hospital, causing their expulsion.

Ngaire – A nurse at the **Golden Age**, originally from New Zealand.

Nella – The cook at the **Golden Age**.

Mr. Poole – Mr. Poole is the father of **Malcolm Poole**.

Fat Jane – Elsa's baby sister, the youngest Briggs child.

Jack Briggs Jr. – Elsa's son, the editor of an Australian literary journal who tracks down and interviews Frank as an old man.

Norm Whitehouse –A gruff but gentle man, Norm is the gardener at the **Golden Age.**

Sister Palmer – Sister Palmer is the nurse who cares for Sullivan and Frank when they're in the hospital of Perth. Sullivan sees her as a model of duty and altruism but wonders what her thoughts are like when she's alone.

Gyuri Gold – Meyer's brother, and one of his few family members to survive the war.

Roszi Gold – Meyer's younger sister. After surviving the war in hiding with their father, Suszi is raped to death by Russian soldiers invading Hungary. Even in tranquil or happy moments, Meyer often thinks of the meaningless cruelty of her death.

Janos Gold – One of Meyer's brothers, who does not survive the war.

Alan Penny – Sister Penny's husband, who dies in the first days of World War II.

Suszi – Janos Gold's Christian girlfriend, who gets fake papers for Ida during the war.

Terezia Bala – Ida's Christian alias under her fake papers.

Constable Ryan – A night policeman who visits the **Golden Age** and becomes Sister Penny's lover.

Mervyn – An American sailor, one of Sister Penny's lovers during the war.

Harald – An older man, one of Sister Penny's lovers.

Mrs. Simmons – The brisk schoolteacher at the **Golden Age**.

Gillian Budd – Elizabeth Ann's best friend, with whose family she boards during college.

Tim Budd – Gillian Budd's older brother, eventually Elizabeth Ann's fiancé.

Lidja – The beloved physical therapist at the **Golden Age**, who drowns in a sudden boating accident.

Raymond Hoffman – The Briggs' neighbor, who gives Margaret a lift to the **Golden Age**.

Ada Hoffman – The Briggs' neighbor and mother of Raymond. When Elsa first collapses with polio it's she who recognizes the signs and calls the ambulance.

Mr. Lee – Ann Lee's father.

Rodney and Tikka Bennett – Susan Bennett's glamorous but flaky parents.

Moira – The physical therapist who replaces Lidja at the Golden Age.

The Queen – Queen Elizabeth II of England, who visits Perth briefly during the summer.

Tucker – One of Sister Penny's longstanding lovers.

Hal – The owner of a bookstore Frank frequents.

Edie – A young girl Frank looks after for several months as an adult, while her mother is hospitalized.

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.

SURVIVAL

The Golden Age, Joan London's novel set in a hospital for children recovering from polio in 1950s Australia, focuses primarily on the Gold family—Ida, Meyer, and their thirteen-year-old son Frank. Immigrants who fled Hungary after World War II, the Golds live through two major traumas: the Holocaust and the childhood scourge of polio, twin struggles for survival that come to mirror and complement each other throughout the novel. Ida and Meyer lost their entire families in the Holocaust and thought they'd finally found safety in Australia; with Frank's illness, however, their struggle for family survival begins again. While polio presents a frightening parallel to the Holocaust and the threats it posed to the family, Frank eventually conquers his disease and emerges confident in his and his family's resilience. Ultimately, the family's experience battling polio, which proves a manageable trauma, helps them process and move past the larger, irreparable griefs they suffered during the war.

Although he was too young to understand or fully remember it, during the war Frank lived in hiding, was separated from his parents, and faced the threat of death many times; at the **Golden Age**, the children's hospital where the novel takes place, he again lives among strangers, watching those around him risk death and debilitation while also facing the uncertainty of his own future. The similarities between these events cause

Frank to relive and reflect on his experiences as a very young child surviving the Holocaust in Hungary. One of Frank's strongest memories, for example, is of hiding in the attic of his mother's piano teacher, Julia; "the effort of lying still in that space, alone, never left him." This image of enforced and terrified stillness is very similar to Frank's paralysis after the onset of polio and the difficulty with which all the children on the ward move, creating a parallel between the physical sensations of both experiences.

The connection between immobility imposed by hiding and by polio is especially relevant given Frank's fascinated friendship with Sullivan, an older boy who lives in an iron lung, having been completely paralyzed by the disease. Later, as Frank watches Warren, a boy he despises, loudly chew candy in the bed next to him, he reflects that "over and over…he and Meyer and Ida had been forced to live within breathing distance of strangers, like animals in a burrow." Here, he explicitly connects his life as a polio patient with his memories of living in the Jewish ghettos and later in crowded immigrant hostels, making clear that the two experiences are linked in his mind. No longer a young child, however, Frank's awareness of the world around him has grown since the war, When Sullivan dies from a fever, for example, Frank's internal horror and distress shows that, although most of his family died during the Holocaust, this is the first time he's confronting the inability to survive as a more conscious person. Nevertheless, his outward stoicism and maturity are a reminder that his earlier experiences inform who he is now.

The novel's action takes place while the children are convalescing, having survived the disease's onset and most dangerous phase. At one point, Elsa, reflecting on the terrifying first days in the **Isolation Ward**, notes that "after it was over, like a terrible dream, you couldn't remember much about it. But you were not the same." Her comment could just as well describe Frank's memories of his childhood traumas. Like Frank, all the children at the Golden Age have survived something awful without quite understanding it, and like him, their daily efforts to learn to walk and resume normal life are connected to a more primal and basic struggle to survive.

Ida and Meyer thought their arrival in Australia would mark an end to their own grueling struggle to survive. Frank's illness is devastating because it threatens the destruction of their family yet again and forces them to battle for survival much as they did during the war. Ida and Meyer are the sole members of their families to live through the Holocaust. While they are devastated by their losses, they view Frank's survival during the war as a miracle. As immigrants in unfamiliar Australian society, they've established a tenuous sense of security and peace of mind. Both parents experience Frank's polio as a renewal of the fear and the constant battle for survival they thought they'd left behind in Europe. Ida especially conflates the two issues; her fears for Frank as a polio patient recall her fears for him during the war. After the onset of the disease, Ida tells Frank fiercely that he must learn to walk again, drawing on the tenacity she developed during the war but also reminding him that "they take the weak ones first," showing she's still preoccupied with the dangers they faced during the Holocaust. Later, Ida witness Frank's depression after his expulsion from the Golden Age. When Frank tells her bleakly that he thinks the birds are telling him "you're just in the way," Ida compares her distress to "the time when the tanks rolled in, and you thought, this can't be happening," creating another parallel between the threats posed by Frank's polio and the war.

Ultimately, while polio forces both Frank and his parents to revisit painful memories, because Frank eventually overcomes the disease it becomes a useful mechanism to confront and move past the trauma of the Holocaust. While Ida compares her worries over Frank's recovery to her feelings at the onset of the war, she springs into action in a way she couldn't when the tanks rolled in, reuniting Frank with Elsa and shepherding him through his illness.

Speaking in the epilogue as an adult poet, Frank references his two major poems: "The Golden Age," which is about his time in the polio hospital, and "The Trains," which shares its name with the chapter in which he recounts his experiences in hiding during the war. He says "The Golden Age" is "the answer to ["The Trains"], the counter to it," implying that his survival of polio has helped him put to rest the more complicated struggle to survive the Holocaust.

Unlike polio, however, which for Frank proves a conquerable challenge, the scars of the Holocaust will never completely fade. During the concert Ida gives at the hospital, Meyer is proud and happy to watch his wife performing and his son thriving among the other children; to him, it seems as though his family has successfully survived another life-threatening challenge. Still, in the midst of this, Meyer suddenly remembers his younger sister, who was raped and killed by Russian soldiers. A lesser struggle, polio helps the Golds process their experiences during the Holocaust and build fulfilling lives, but it can never give meaning to or erase the traumas of war.

At first it appears that London, by linking Frank's battle with polio to his experiences during the Holocaust, is trying to illuminate the essential fragility of life and the many cruel challenges humans face in life. However, Frank's successful recuperation from polio shows his and his family's exceptional resilience and sends a hopeful message about the immensity of humanity's will and ability to survive.

PARENTHOOD AND GROWING UP

As pre-adolescent children, Frank and his fellow patients at the **Golden Age** are materially and emotionally dependent on their parents. Although familial relationships are often fraught throughout the novel,

London emphasizes the fierce, unconditional love and devotion that exist between children and their parents. However, all the children at the Golden Age are separated from their families and grappling with a disease their parents can't fully understand and against which they are powerless. As a result, many of the children, especially Frank and Elsa, develop a premature emotional estrangement from their families. One of the novel's great preoccupations is the tension that arises when children both long for and chafe against a traditionally childlike relationship with their parents. While this tension shows the ability of traumatic experiences like polio to undermine family structures, the book's main characters, Frank and Elsa, eventually develop satisfying relationships with their parents, in which both parties feel and express love for each other while also maintaining a certain distance. The novel's endorsement of these relationships argues that while it's bittersweet for parents to relinquish intimacy with their children, doing so is necessary to accommodate the children's growing maturity, especially when they are facing exceptional challenges at a young age.

London frequently and touchingly depicts the tender relationships between the young patients of the Golden Age and their worried parents. In her first appearance, Elsa comforts one of the babies, Rayma, instinctively understanding that she's longing for her mother. Elsa notes that the children spend much of their days missing their parents, and that they can all "identify their mother's footsteps." This initial scene highlights the instinctual bond between parents and children.

One of the novel's most compelling vignettes describes the arrival of Ann Lee's father, who lives too far away to visit often. London lingers over the "look of complete satisfaction" on Ann Lee's face when her father picks her up, and the way her father squints "in the pained way that a man did when he was trying not to cry" after seeing her walk. Similarly, Frank greatly respects his friend Sullivan Backhouse's father, a powerful and prosperous man who nevertheless "had eyes for no one" but his son on his frequent visits to the ward. When Frank encounters Mr. Backhouse after Sullivan's sudden death, London describes the older man's dignified grief in elegiac, almost heroic, terms.

Elsa and her mother, Margaret, also share an instinctive understanding and sympathy, which is especially notable given Margaret's strained relationship with her insensitive husband, Jack. In the **Isolation Ward**, Elsa reminds herself that she has to survive because otherwise "her mother would also die." Both Elsa and Margaret feel deeply nostalgic for the pre-polio days when they shared in housework and childcare, clearly viewing their relationship as the most important in the family, even stronger than Margaret's with her husband. Brash and impatient, Ida Gold isn't a demure and appealing mother like Margaret; her ceaseless advocacy on Frank's behalf makes her disliked by some (the nurses refer to her as "Princess Ida"). However, London lionizes her steadfastness, making it clear that however unconventional or unsightly her devotion might be, it's no less valuable.

However, separated from their families and fighting an often-incurable disease, the children realize both how responsible they are for their parents' happiness and how fundamentally powerless their parents are to protect them. In order to cope with these frightening realizations, many of the children—especially Frank and Elsa—are often frustrated with their parents and desire greater independence. While all the children wait eagerly for their families to visit the ward, Sister Penny remarks that they're usually agitated or unhappy after visiting with parents who are increasingly distant from their daily lives. In one episode, Margaret spontaneously hitchhikes all day to visit Elsa. When she arrives, both mother and daughter feel disconnected from each other, Margaret worrying that "her daughter would outgrow her" because of their separation and Elsa feeling that Margaret's fretting "would only hold her back" from recovery. Whenever she sees Margaret, Elsa feels that "there was another mother waiting for her, blurred…with an angel's perfect understanding." In this poignant rumination, she expresses her growing independence from her actual mother and her wish to be protected and understood as a child, if only by an imaginary parent.

Frank similarly both looks forward to and dreads his mother's visits; he says he's always happy when she leaves. Watching the older Sullivan put on a brave face to comfort his own father, Frank notices his friend's dutiful acceptance of the "huge responsibility" of comforting his father. Although younger than Sullivan, Frank is determined not to be his parents' "only light," and instead wants to be his "own reason for living."

All the children are intensely aware that, unlike childhood challenges they faced before their disease, "their success and failure in overcoming polio was up to them." Because of this consciousness, the children can't feel happy within the traditional relationships their parents try to perpetuate, no matter how nostalgic they are for the less complicated days of their pre-polio childhood. While the children's forced independence from their parents is sad and frightening, many of them, namely Frank and Elsa, resolve this tension by building new relationships that respect their maturity while allowing both parties to support each other emotionally.

While Margaret spends most of the novel wishing for a return to her close relationship with Elsa, she eventually embraces her daughter's newfound independence and fights to preserve it. When her imperious sister-in-law, Nance, decrees that Elsa should plan to live at home and go to secretarial school, Margaret summons the courage to announce that Elsa can and will become a doctor, even though she knows such a career will propel her daughter away from home and from her mother, a provincial housewife. Meanwhile, faced with Frank's depression after his expulsion from the Golden Age, Ida realizes that she alone cannot heal him, and astutely reunites

him with Elsa. Ida acknowledges and accepts that the parent-child relationship is no longer entirely central to Frank's life, and that he has other relationships that she doesn't try—or desire—to fully understand.

Of course, not all families arrive at this healthy balance. Despite Ann Lee's evident closeness with her father, Sister Penny is devastated when he takes her away from the hospital because she'll never learn to walk properly at home; her parents choose to maintain their previous closeness to their child over facilitating her full recovery. On the other hand, Sister Penny is proud that her own daughter, Elizabeth Ann, is competent and independent, but she remarks ruefully that she feels more like "a friendly aunt" than a mother. When Elizabeth Ann marries into an aggressively conventional family, Sister Penny feels the sting of disownment.

The necessity of growing apart from one's parents as one grows up, and the simultaneous desire to preserve an intimate familial bond, is a nearly universal dilemma. While most people experience this conflict during adolescence and adulthood, the novel explores this tension among children whose maturation has been accelerated by a terrible disease. London uses these extenuating circumstances to render this issue in especially poignant and striking terms; in doing so, she directs the reader to reconsider a fairly commonplace aspect of growing up.

VOCATION

The Golden Age is permeated by a respect for work, as well as for those who perform it diligently and well. Even in the midst of crisis and trauma, many characters are defined and motivated by their vocation (that is, the strong feeling that they are suited to a particular career)—whether it be Frank's incipient conviction that he is a poet, Ida's devotion to the piano, or Sister Penny's almost preternatural facility as a nurse. Besides giving these characters a sense of individual purpose, these vocations—or "callings"—allow them to live comfortably within norms of a society in which they don't always feel at home. Similarly, this sense of vocation gives characters a degree of distance and liberty from those around them, while also facilitating and improving their closest relationships. Ultimately, *The Golden Age* shows that identifying and embracing one's vocation is the best way to foster contentment and purpose among the vagaries and uncertainties of life.

Many characters, especially Frank, Ida, and Sister Penny, have a strong feeling of being called to a particular discipline. While Frank's interest in poetry is originally subsidiary to his admiration and love for Sullivan, after his friend's death he begins writing his own poems and recognizes that Sullivan has alerted him to his own instinctive identity as a poet. One of Frank's major worries is how he will break the news of his vocation to Ida and Meyer. This seems like a misplaced fear, given his sophisticated parents' intense respect for art of all kinds, but it demonstrates, humorously and touchingly, how central to his identity Frank views his new vocation.

In this way Frank is very similar to his mother. A highly trained concert pianist, Ida was just beginning to achieve professional success before the Holocaust ended her career. As a working-class immigrant in a small Australian city, she'll never return full-time to the piano, but she still considers her vocation central to her identity. Ida believes her qualities as a pianist are intimately linked to her core emotions and strengths, namely the persistence and ingenuity that kept her and Frank alive throughout the war. When she hides Frank with her piano teacher, Julia, she briefly compares piano, the vocation to which she thought she'd devote her life, to the new task of survival, saying of both that "you must have a certain ruthlessness to win, as if by right." It's important that Ida sees her vocation and her ability to survive as things that are cultivated not simply by training, but which already exist within her on a more fundamental level.

While Sister Penny's work takes place on a technical, rather than artistic, plane, she views nursing as a vocation and is spectacularly good at her job. She can identify and manage not only the physical but the emotional needs of the children in her care, as well as their parents' anxieties. Her unattached and ascetic life within the hospital contributes to the impression that she derives purpose from her work rather than personal relationships. Notably, Sister Penny explicitly connects Ida's skill at the piano to her own expertise, saying that Ida reminds her of "the skills that were her personal exultation, of a good surgeon at work, or nurses laying out a body." Her use of the word "exultation" highlights both the sacredness and the sense of personal pride that both women see as central to their work.

For all three of these characters, a sense of vocation allows them to defy certain societal mores while also living comfortably within them. As an invalid, Frank experiences frightening lack of volition. Moreover, he knows that the rest of his life will be influenced by the social stigma of disability, and that he'll never be able to control how other people perceive or treat him. As a poet and creator, he's able to articulate his feelings in a way he normally can't, defining his own narrative and reclaiming a certain amount of power, if only over his personal life.

Once a concert pianist from an affluent and urbane family, Ida is now a milliner's assistant; she sees her new society as provincial prudish, but she knows others perceive her as a needy refugee and second-class citizen. Despite her reservations and even haughtiness at the prospect of playing at the **Golden Age**, when she performs a benefit concert for the hospital she finally recaptures the dignity and pride she, and her family, have been missing. Frank says that Ida's playing "justified everything, their foreignness, their victimhood in the other country. It brought them honor."

A single and work-focused mother in a conservative society,

Sister Penny even feels alienated from her own daughter, who is steadily gravitating toward marriage and a more conventional life. She knows that, rather than seeking purpose within a family as most women do, she would "nurse to the end." In her work, Sister Penny has an occupation which her society values and rewards. However, she uses her occupation to liberate herself from society's general expectation that women marry and sublimate themselves to the lives of their husbands and children.

Moreover, in a novel in which characters toggle between closeness and distance to those they love most, vocations allow them to achieve balanced relationships with other people while retaining an independent life of the mind. Sharp and mature, Frank finds it hard to fit in among other children. Poetry facilitates his important relationships, first with Sullivan and then Elsa, who is captivated by his ability to parse and articulate their experiences.

Sister Penny, never satisfied by conventional womanhood, takes many lovers but is never inordinately affected or destabilized by them, because she views them as subsidiary to her work as a nurse. Her security in her vocation allows her to satisfy her sexual and emotional needs while retaining the aloofness and independence she fundamentally craves.

Ida's renewed dedication to the piano rehabilitates and soothes her tense relationship with her son. Frank frequently finds his mother overbearing and seeks to extricate himself from her influence; he even says that her "reverence for music and literature was theatrical and deliberate," and defines his austere approach to art against hers. Still, when he sees her play, Frank notices "her strength, her vast determination," and is moved in spite of himself. Watching her, he feels it's a "relief" to be distant from and unobserved by his mother, but he's also reminded of their fundamental closeness, remembering that as a child "he used to climb up on her knee" while she played. The concert at the Golden Age, which marks Ida's embrace of her vocation, also achieves a balance between Frank's childlike love for his mother and his adult appreciation of her gifts.

It's worth noting that London doesn't portray the strong sense of vocation as something reserved for the elite or highly educated. Sister Penny's technical vocation is as important as Ida's artistic one, and many of the novel's primarily working-class characters share their pride and humility in work well done. For example, Meyer feels that his calling is to protect Ida and her gifts and is happy to achieve this by driving a soft-drinks truck. Ultimately, the novel's reverence for its characters' work ethic and sense of purpose imbues all work, whether prosaic or exotic, with respect and dignity.

ISOLATION VS. SOLITUDE

Many of the novel's characters experience feelings of crippling isolation. Suffering from a socially stigmatized disease, the children at the **Golden Age** are cut off from their family and friends. Meanwhile, adults such as Meyer and Ida Gold feel bewildered and out of place in the unfamiliar society to which they've been forced to immigrate. At the same time, many of the novel's characters crave and value solitude. Frank constantly seeks out his own space in the crowded hospital, while his father is only able to reflect deeply when alone. Sister Penny rejects traditional familial arrangements altogether in favor of a solitary life. The novel establishes a tension between unwelcome isolation, which is forced upon many characters, and peaceful solitude, which many characters value and seek out; at many points it seems that solitude will prove elusive and isolation inescapable. However, the end of the novel embraces a positive concept of solitude, arguing that it's possible to be alone while feeling genuinely comfortable and at home.

Many characters feel deeply alienated, not only by those around them but by the very society in which they live. All the children at the Golden Age have recently emerged from the terrifying **Isolation Ward**, in which they overcame the onset of polio. The Isolation Ward is an extremely painful and frightening experience, during which parents and doctors can provide little help. For the recuperating children, the Isolation Ward is a kind of bogeyman, a shared trauma which no one can forget but no one wants to talk about. The children are also isolated from their families, both physically and emotionally. In the new and challenging environment, most mature rapidly, a direct result of feeling alienated from their families. Reunions on visiting days only "reminded you how much you had grown apart." Even in its physical setting, the Golden Age is characterized by its isolation. In her initial description of the hospital, London notes that it is "bounded by four flat roads, like an island," which shows "its apartness, a natural quarantine." The neighboring children never talk to the patients, because they're frightened and disgusted by their disease.

Meyer and Ida Gold feel deeply isolated as well, not just because they're trying to adapt to a new and unfamiliar society but also because they were expelled so violently from the society they considered their own. The disillusionment of the Holocaust makes it harder to feel secure in Australia; even when recalling their happy childhoods, the Golds are conscious that "they'd been guests, after all, in that country. As they were guests in this one." Meyer doubts he will ever fully assimilate to his new home. When he looks at the flat and arid Australian terrain and compares it to the lush fields and forests of his youth, he "had a suspicion that never again would he feel at home as he once had." He's experiencing not just nostalgia for Hungary, but deep cynicism about the possibility of ever overcoming isolation. After his experiences in the Holocaust, he feels that "to love a place, to imagine yourself belonging to it, was a lie…especially for a Jew."

However, the very characters who fear isolation are often

those who intensely desire solitude. Frank views solitude as the luxury of a secure life. Living in ghettos, camps, and hospitals, he and his parents have spent much of their lives in suffocating closeness to other people, which Frank describes as living "like animals in a burrow." In contrast, he loves the "clean [and] wise" lifestyle of his family when they have some space to themselves. Meyer feels similarly, saying that "only solitude was natural to him now." He's attracted to Sister Penny because to him she seems fundamentally "solitary" and "unburdened by domesticity." In Meyer's eyes, and in Sister Penny's own conception of herself, solitude is a form of liberation.

At the end of the novel, Frank says that he "fell in love with many people, but always lived alone." In his adult life, Frank has maintained a healthy degree of solitude while also pursuing rich relationships with other people. When Elsa's son Jack visits him, he describes similar traits in his mother, who always insisted on independence despite her disability. Jack remembers covertly watching his mother struggle up a sand dune, for example, wanting to rush to her assistance but knowing she would prefer him to respect her solitude.

As many of the novel's final encounters demonstrate, characters overcome feelings of isolation while simultaneous achieving contentment through solitude. Meyer spends most of the novel feeling alienated by the Australian landscape, but during a thunderstorm at the end he suddenly envisions "a tiny farm" on which he could "grow fruit trees and vegetables, feed his family from the land," just as his own father once did. Finally, Meyer is achieving a sense of rootedness and continuity which he thought would never return after the Holocaust.

Similarly, throughout the novel Meyer and Sister Penny are attracted to each other in large part due to each one's appreciation of the other's desire to be alone. Their connection shows the ironic possibility of solitude to bring people together. After Frank's expulsion from the Golden Age they have a chance encounter on the beach, in which both parties recognize the opportunity for an affair but part without pursuing it. In this final episode, they achieve a shared understanding while preserving their solitude and distance from each other.

Separated from Elsa after their expulsion from the hospital, Frank is so isolated and depressed that his mother orchestrates their reunion. In the chaos of a thunderstorm during the Golds' visit, Frank and Elsa escape into the bushes to embrace, describing these stolen moments as a form of solitude. Importantly, they appreciate their togetherness even while they know that separation is imminent; this demonstrates that relief from isolation doesn't preclude the embrace of solitude. In the epilogue, Frank welcomes a visit from Elsa's son Jack, which brings him closer to the woman from whom he's been separated for most of his life. While both men like and respect each other, they maintain reserve and distance during the interview. Their behavior shows their mutual value of solitude, even during a moment of reunion.

For much of the novel, isolation and solitude stand in conflict with one another. Most of the characters are frightened by the experience or prospect of isolation, but they also feel oppressed and suffocated by constant proximity to others, driving them to seek solitude. Poignant but hopeful, the novel's final moments depict characters overcoming isolation while preserving beneficial solitude; though these episodes, the novel argues that it's fundamentally important and achievable to find such a balance.

STRENGTH, PHYSICALITY, AND FEMININITY

The novel devotes much attention to bodies both weak and strong. Polio has transformed the bodies of the children at the **Golden Age**, limiting their motility for the rest of their lives and rendering them "deformed" and "incapable" in the eyes of their community. However, in order to fight the disease and to build new lives during their recovery, the children develop a mental and emotional maturity that notably contrasts with the frailty of their bodies and the social expectations for children and polio victims. At the same time, the novel often dwells on the bodies of its adult female characters, namely Ida, Margaret, and Sister Penny. While rarely praising conventional feminine attributes like beauty, the novel repeatedly points out their physical strength and competence. In this case, the women's bodies express their exceptional agency, tenacity, and ability to overcome obstacles–all attributes that are, at least stereotypically, the province of men. Highlighting the children's mental acuity and the women's unconventional toughness, London uses the human body to celebrate the existence of physical and mental strength in unexpected places.

Intensely aware of their own frailty, the children at the Golden Age are fighting both to regain some of their previous strength and to get used to the prospect of living lives that will be defined by physical disability. After leaving the Golden Age, Frank becomes horribly conscious of the ways his body is different from other children's. Anxious about the prospect of returning to school, he criticizes himself as "small, pale, with pathetic spindly legs and the shoes of an old man." Similarly, when Elsa looks in the mirror she notes that "the once fluid lines of her body" are "now distorted," and worries that people who used to remark on her beauty will now refer to her as "the crippled girl."

However, the hospital nurses charged with the children's recovery know it's just as important to cultivate mental strength as it is to facilitate physical recovery. Lidja, the physical therapist, exhorts the children to "*think* those muscles in your foot!" and gives them lectures on character, although she's supposedly only concerned with their physical health. One of

the novel's most poignant episodes comes when Malcolm Poole's father exhorts him harshly to start walking again, telling him he needs "a little more grit." Mr. Poole views his son's disability as evidence of mental weakness, but it's obvious that all the children are more mentally mature and sensitive than they were before polio. Sister Penny chides Mr. Poole for this outburst, understanding that a unilateral concern with physical recovery is unhealthy and unproductive.

Sister Penny further reveals her nuanced conception of strength after Frank and Elsa are caught in bed together. While the prudish hospital governors are horrified, Sister Penny, who knows the children well, says their romance is a result of how "mature–emotionally–they really are" as a result of fighting polio together. With some exceptions, most of the children–especially Frank and Elsa–are acutely sensitive and self-aware, much more so than they might have been without the challenge of polio. In this sense, their physical disabilities serve to highlight their exceptional mental strength.

While contrasting the children's physical frailty with their mental fortitude, the novel also links the ferocity and toughness of its female characters to their mental strength. Most of the novel's adults are women, all of whom display exceptional and unconventional strength on a physical and mental level.

Ferocious as both a mother and a pianist, Ida's strength as a parent is matched by her severe features and stolid body. While performers are often shown as graceful or ethereal, London emphasizes Ida's intense and rigid strength during her concert at the hospital, describing her as "bare-armed like a workman" and later remarking on her "strong white arms." Sister Penny, competent and wise, is also defined by her capable body. Seeing her in a swimsuit at the beach, Meyer appreciates her strength, likening her to "a big, strong, sports-playing girl." Even Margaret, a nervous and sometimes comical figure with too-large shoes and blouses that seem about to fall apart, is characterized by her ability to cope with the physical strain of running a rural household while caring for her invalid daughter.

While the children's external frailty highlights their internal strength and maturity, the women's mental strengths are augmented by their physical ability. However, this too is an important juxtaposition, setting their manifold capabilities against the 1950s expectations (especially prevalent in a provincial and conservative city like Perth) that women be demure, subservient, and largely helpless.

For the children at the Golden Age, the frailty of the body belies the strength of the mind. For their mothers and nurses, physical strength underlines mental fortitude. In both cases, London uses attributes of the tangible body to explore the more ambiguous territory of the mind. Moreover, she celebrates the human body in its various incarnations, even those not considered conventionally attractive or desirable, and meditates on the ability of those bodies to contribute positively to the development of mental strength.

SYMBOLS

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

GOLD

Gold recurs in various contexts throughout the novel as a symbol of virtue and resilience. Of course, Frank's last name is Gold. Upon first meeting Frank, Sullivan remarks that his first and last names are "apposite," or fitting. He's likely referring to the fact that "frank," as an adjective, denotes truth and directness, while the substance gold is often used as a pure standard by which to measure other metals or to value currency. Through Frank's name, Sullivan identifies an honesty and stolidity that Frank really does possess. It's also worth noting that common Jewish surnames like Gold originated in the Middle Ages, when Christian communities forced Jews to work as moneylenders; the association between Jews and money created stereotypes of Jews as greedy and avaricious, prejudices that persisted centuries and fed into the anti-Semitic hatred of the Holocaust. By aligning his name with positive attributes, Sullivan helps Frank disentangle his character and his heritage from the intense persecution he experienced as a child. Elsa is also associated with gold; London describes her hair as golden-brown several times and notes how it catches the sun's golden light. Frank, who frequently notices Elsa's hair, associates her with a sense of gentleness and tranquility. Although it represents different characteristics, gold symbolizes the inherent virtues that both Frank and Elsa possess.

Perhaps the most meaningful incidence of gold comes in the hospital's name, the Golden Age. On the surface the name is a fluke, inherited from the pub once housed in the same building. The phrase "golden age" is also used to describe various stages in human life, including the period of late childhood just before adolescence—exactly the age of Frank, Elsa, and many of the other patients. In this sense, the name is a mockery, because rather than enjoying the typical experiences and carefree happiness of others their age, the children are fighting to survive and face a life characterized by disability. Under Sister Penny's reign, however, the hospital is characterized largely by cheerfulness and optimism rather than suffering and unhappiness, and the children are encouraged to consider possibilities instead of limitations. Just as the word gold is associated with Frank and Elsa's strength of character, the hospital's seemingly inappropriate name comes to symbolize the children's courage and resilience, their ability to create a golden age for themselves regardless of their trying circumstances.

THE ISOLATION WARD

When Frank, Elsa, or any of the children at the **Golden Age** experience the onset of polio, they're sent to the Isolation Ward—a terrifying experience that at once mirrors Frank's experience during the Holocaust and represents the fear, loneliness, and helplessness that accompany a potentially deadly disease. There, the children are confused and in terrible pain, and, since there's no treatment for polio, their parents aren't allowed inside. Even the nurses wear masks and gloves in case of contagion. Elsa says of the Isolation Ward that "after it was over, like a terrible dream, you couldn't remember much about it. But you were not the same." The Isolation Ward is an experience so scarring that none of the children can forget it or bring themselves to speak of it; in other words, it produces a similar effect to that of the Holocaust on Frank and his parents. In fact, the children's feelings in the Isolation Ward almost exactly mirror Frank's paralysis and helplessness while hiding in Julia's attic. The Isolation Ward epitomizes the similarities between the two traumas Frank and his parents face and underlines the similar threats such hardships pose to the family's survival.

The Isolation Ward is also a notable foil to the Golden Age. Both are institutional facilities connected to polio. However, while the Golden Age represents optimism and community, the Isolation Ward symbolizes polio's capacity to harm the body and the mind. Moreover, when children at the Golden Age experience loneliness, they often connect it to the overwhelming and frightening isolation they experienced in the aptly named Isolation Ward. At the beginning of the novel, the terror and isolation inspired by the ward seem inescapable to the children. By the end, their memories of the Isolation Ward are slowly fading away—a signal that they are beginning to recover.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Europa edition of *The Golden Age* published in 2014.

2. The Golden Age Quotes

The Golden Age [...] stood alone, bounded by four flat roads, like an island, which in its present incarnation seemed to symbolize its apartness, a natural quarantine.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this first description, the Golden Age, a children's polio hospital, is notable for its separation from the rest of Perth. The hospital's physical characteristics correspond to the many forms of isolation its patients experience. At a very young age, they've left their families and childhood routines to live among strangers for the first time; they know that even when they leave the hospital, they'll face social isolation as disabled children and victims of a feared and stigmatized disease. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that separation from ordinary life provides solitude and independence, which allows the children to mature, form life-altering friendships, and, in Frank's case, discover a vocation. By the end of the novel, the hospital's physical isolation comes to represent not only the psychological cruelties the disease imposes on its victims but the psychological benefits of solitude.

The name, inherited, could be considered tactless by some, even cruelly ironic. These children were impaired as no one would ever wish a child to be. But perhaps because of its former role, its solid and generous air, it was a cheerful place.

Related Characters: Frank Gold

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

The superficial unsuitability of the Golden Age's name highlights the contradictions in its role and character. As a children's polio hospital, the Golden Age is the object of fear and pity. Frank is particularly unhappy to end up there, as he is unhappy to be among other children and feels that he's been exiled from the adult hospital in Perth. However much he chafes at the Golden Age initially, by the end of the novel, it's a place of refuge for him. When Frank is finally expelled, the ordinary world feels like a place of exile for him. In this sense, his time at the hospital really does mark a "golden" period in his life, a time not of unqualified happiness but of development, friendship, and security that he won't experience for a long time afterward. By the end of the novel, the hospital's name emerges not as a misnomer but an indicator of its role as the location of a uniquely

influential time in Frank and the other patients' lives.

3. Elsa Quotes

"When at last she'd left the Isolation Ward and her parents were allowed to sit by her bed, they looked smaller to her, aged by the terror they had suffered, old, shrunken, ill-at-ease. Something had happened to her which she didn't yet understand. As if she'd gone away and come back distant from everybody.

Related Characters: Elsa Briggs (speaker), Jack Briggs , Margaret Briggs

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

In a flashback, Elsa is remembering the onset of polio and her initial days in the Isolation Ward. Her departure from the Isolation Ward means she's survived the most dangerous part of the disease; but her first reunion with her family shows the mental toll it has and will take. Polio has forever altered Elsa's parents, in her own eyes and theirs. No longer can they shield her from childhood's dangers, so their traditional relationship between protective parent and protected child is ruptured. Their defeated demeanor and Elsa's acute observation of it shows that this new powerlessness is evident to all of them. Moreover, having spent days terrified and sick yet completely alone in a quarantine zone, Elsa is both scarred by the new experience of isolation and intensely conscious of the new independence she's had to assume. For the rest of the novel she'll vacillate between fear of renewed isolation and desire to cultivate her independence, and this will draw her further away from the conventional relationship with her parents that was so satisfying before polio. Right now, Elsa has survived the disease's biggest physical test, but the process of mental survival and emotional rehabilitation has just begun.

"Sometimes even now in the Golden Age, after her mother visited, Elsa had the funny feeling that there was another mother waiting for her, blurred, gentle, beautiful as an angel, with an angel's perfect understanding.

Related Characters: Elsa Briggs (speaker), Margaret Briggs

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Before Elsa contracted polio, she was so close to her mother that they didn't even need to talk to understand each other's thoughts. Now, intensely cognizant that her mother can do little to help her overcome the disease, Elsa often feels uncomfortable around her. Elsa's implied statement that her real mother isn't "perfect" or "angelic" like the one she imagines reflects an inevitable adolescent realization of even a beloved parent's failings, as well as a desire to disentangle herself from her previous closeness to her mother. At the same time, Elsa's feeling that there's "another mother waiting for her" shows a childlike fear at relinquishing that closeness. Ultimately, this episode is a poignant illustration of Elsa's mental state as she hovers on the brink of adolescence, with its alluring yet frightening consequences for her self-conception and her relationship with her mother.

6. The Poet Quotes

"He felt her reverence for music and literature was theatrical, deliberate, and set them even more apart from everyone else.

Related Characters: Frank Gold (speaker), Ida Gold, Sullivan Backhouse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

When he meets Sullivan Backhouse, Frank becomes truly interested in art, namely poetry, for the first time. He's especially attracted by Sullivan's declaration that poetry doesn't have to be heroic but can address "ordinary" experiences, like being in the hospital. Sullivan's approach to art makes it more accessible to Frank, and distinguishes it from his mother's work, which to Frank is a frustrating reminder of his family's European origins and their inability to assimilate to Australia. However, while Frank initially sees his vocation as a way to differentiate himself from his mother, it actually brings them closer together. Both have inherently artistic temperaments (Frank might find his

mother "theatrical," but at one point he weeps during a violin concerto on the radio), which is a constant reminder of their similar characters.

As Frank starts writing his own poetry, his devotion to his work both distracts him from and helps him overcome polio's many challenges; in using his vocation as a coping strategy, he's similar to Ida, who's frantic practicing and concert performance at the Golden Age allow her to both feel proud of her foreignness and valuable as an Australian. As Frank discovers his vocation over the course of the novel, and Ida returns to hers, work emerges as the primary link between mother and son, allowing them to appreciate each other even while they're often frustrated by their similarities.

❝ *Why do I refuse it?* he thought, wheeling off. His parents, he knew, regarded his lost legs as one more tragedy they had to bear. *I refuse to be their only light. I want to be my own reason for living.*

Related Characters: Frank Gold (speaker), Meyer Gold, Ida Gold, Sullivan Backhouse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

When Frank meets Mr. Backhouse, for the first time, he notices that Sullivan is always cheerful and brave during his visits, understanding how devastating his illness is for his father and trying to alleviate his burden. Frank is also intensely conscious of his parents' fear and worry, but he stubbornly refuses to comfort them, often complaining or mouthing off when they visit. Frank's impatience with his parents reflects his wish, on the brink of adolescence, for a greater degree of independence; but it also shows he lacks Sullivan's maturity and doesn't understand that growing up means starting to take care of one's parents, rather than being taken care of oneself. On another level, Frank's relationship with his parents is more complex than Sullivan's, compounded by the additional trials they've survived; Meyer and Ida have lost their entire families and suffered massive disillusionment with their native countries, and now they're marooned in an unfamiliar society, so Frank really is their only source of happiness. This passage shows how the Golds' experience in the Holocaust adds additional intensity to their current challenges and differentiates Frank's experience from those of the other children.

7. The Trains Quotes

❝ Talent was not enough, Julia used to say, you must find the grip, the hunger, the small, determined child inside you. You must have a certain ruthlessness to win, as if by right. In the hierarchy of talent, you are a born aristocrat [...]

Related Characters: Ida Gold (speaker), Frank Gold, Julia Marai

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

After she leaves Frank with Julia and hurries back into Budapest to take a new job under her fake papers, Ida reflects on her teacher's earlier lectures. When she was a young woman, Julia's insistence on ruthless determination and confidence in one's inherent capabilities helped her succeed as a pianist. Now she's following the same advice, but this time it's in order to ensure her family's survival under circumstances she never could have foreseen. This moment highlights the remarkable tenacity that saves her now and will sustain her during Frank's illness. It also shows that Ida's vocation – if not her skill at the piano, the character she develops through it – is closely linked to her ability to survive. For Ida, art isn't something effete or removed from the real world. Rather, it's a source of strength that can be applied to many situations. Through moments like this, the novel elevates vocation and hard work not just as source of psychological fulfillment but as a means of survival.

❝ It was the beginning of himself. Up until then he hadn't really felt sad or frightened, his mother had done that for him. As long as she was there, he didn't have to fear. He was part of her, and like a mother cat she had attended to every part of him.

Related Characters: Frank Gold (speaker), Ida Gold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

When Frank goes to hide with Julia Marai, he's separated from his mother for the first time in his life. On one hand, this is terrifying; although Julia and Hedwiga take good care

of him, Frank can't depend on them to protect him as much as his mother (who's described here as a "mother cat," much as Elsa describes her mother), and he's not emotionally connected to them like he is to Ida. On the other hand, in her summary of the situation, London takes a incongruously optimistic tone, saying "It was the beginning of himself" and phrasing it as a milestone for Frank rather than a challenge. Just as polio will, the war introduces a new and frightening degree of separation from his parents; however, it also catalyzes his development as a conscious person. With her oblique wording, London emphasizes that the two threats to survival Frank faces, and the repeated familial separations they entail, are both challenges that shouldn't be underestimated, and factors contributing Frank's unusually mature and astute character.

He'd learnt, like all children in those times, to do as he was told. To stay quiet could be a matter of life or death. But the effort of lying still in that space, alone, never left him.

Related Characters: Frank Gold (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

The worst ordeal Frank endures while living with Julia is hiding in her attic while she gives piano lessons to her neighbor, Mr. Arpad. Even though it's only for an hour, Frank is terrified by the complete darkness and his helplessness; at the mercy of two women he barely knows, he feels trapped and alone. His ability to withstand this situation quietly shows how growing up during the Holocaust has made him painfully mature for a boy of seven.

More importantly, the experience of being confined and immobile, which is Frank's most powerful memory of the war, is remarkably similar to his experience as a polio patient, when he's suddenly rendered unable to move and utterly dependent on those around him. The physical sensations these experiences share underlines their many similarities. Even though the situations are radically different, as unforeseen threats to Frank's survival, they have similar effects on the way he grows up and the character he develops.

Sometimes his parents forgot themselves over drinks with Hungarian friends and spoke of the country they once knew [...] then they fell silent. They'd been guests, after all, in that country. As they were guests in this one.

Related Characters: Frank Gold (speaker), Meyer Gold, Ida Gold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Meyer and Ida often feel isolated and out of place in Australia, where they are poor refugees with little standing and no roots in the society. It's easy to long for Hungary, where they were ensconced in urbane, affluent families and had satisfying careers and wide networks of friends. However, not only do they know that world no longer exists, they're burdened by the memory of being betrayed and targeted by the society they considered their own. The Golds' isolation in Australia is therefore compounded by their disillusionment with Hungary. This doubled sense of displacement is similar to Frank's feeling as a polio patient; hospital life is often unpleasant for him, and he longs to return home, at the same time longing that the life and childhood he left behind are forever gone. Moments like this are a reminder that Frank and his parents, at very different points in their lives, are undergoing the same psychological challenges.

8. The First Time Frank Saw Elsa Quotes

It seemed sadder somehow. He knew [the babies] cried because they were alone. But visitors reminded you of how much you had grown apart from them. It was almost a relief when they went home.

Related Characters: Frank Gold (speaker), Elsa Briggs

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

After visitors leave on Sunday afternoons, the hospital is filled with the sound of crying babies; even though they were happy to see their parents, they're upset when they leave. The babies reflect the unease of all the patients after the ostensible highlight of the week. While the children spend much of their time longing for their parents (Elsa says

they can all identify their mothers' footsteps), visits inevitably entail disruption of routines that have become satisfying, dissatisfaction at the pace of recovery, or jarring reminders that while the children live in seclusion, ordinary life moves on inexorably. What the children long for, as much as the physical presence of their mothers, are the simple lives they've left behind; paradoxically, when their mothers do come, they demonstrate how inaccessible those lives now are. Although separation from their families leaves the children feeling isolated, this seclusion is often more comfortable than the confusion between their old and new lives they experience on visiting day.

❝ Over and over again, Frank thought, he, Meyer and Ida had been forced to live within breathing distance of strangers, like animals in a burrow. Knowing about their underclothes, the smells and habits of their bodies. The little meannesses, the same old jokes, the sulks and temper flurries [...]

Related Characters: Frank Gold (speaker), Ida Gold, Meyer Gold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Frank makes this frustrating remark to himself while watching Warren Barrett loudly chew candy in the neighboring bed. Visiting day is over, and after an afternoon with his parents, he's painfully conscious that he's once again living with people he doesn't know for the foreseeable future. Just as Frank's experience confined in the attic mirrors his immobility as a polio patient, the early childhood he spent in crowded ghettos and refugee camps seems to replay itself now. While his circumstances are vastly different from those of his childhood, moments like this show that he's surviving some of the same challenges for a second time. This is a depressing reality for Frank to face, but it's also a reminder that the tough character he developed as a child will help him surmount these challenges now. Ultimately, Frank will find a peace and security in hospital life that's obviously non-existent in a refugee camp, showing that polio allows Frank to revisit the traumas of the war while creating a happier outcome.

9. The Dark Night Quotes

❝ After it was over, like a terrible dream, you couldn't remember much about it. But you were not the same.

Related Characters: Elsa Briggs (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Elsa is lying awake during one of her first nights at the Golden Age, enjoying the rare solitude. She's made friends with many of the other girls on the ward, and is reflecting that while they all share their onset stories, no one likes to talk about the time they spent in the Isolation Ward. For Elsa and all the children, the Isolation Ward is all the more terrifying because they can't completely remember or understand exactly happened there. Their experience in the Isolation Ward is remarkably similar to Frank's childhood in the war; he knows it was a frightening time and that most of his family died, but was too young to process what was happening around him. This parallel further emphasizes the similarities between fighting polio and living through the war; moreover, it suggests that observations about one trauma are applicable to the other. When Elsa reflects on the Isolation Ward, she sheds light on Frank's early childhood; when Frank struggles to overcome the terror of a war he can't understand or rationalize, he highlights the plight of his fellow patients at the Golden Age.

13. Meyer Walks Home Quotes

❝ He had a suspicion that never again would he feel at home as he once had. Never again on this earth. And another suspicion: that to love a place, to imagine yourself belonging to it, was a lie, a fiction. It was a vanity. Especially for a Jew.

Related Characters: Meyer Gold (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Meyer has just finished his shift at the factory, and spontaneously decided to visit Frank at the Golden Age. Looking at the austere Australian landscape, which contrasts so painfully with the lost Hungarian forests of his childhood, Meyer experiences a moment of profound despair. Not only does he feel it's impossible to feel "at home" in Australia, it seems useless to try; Meyer's already

been ejected from one society in which he felt fully integrated, so he's too disillusioned to try again. This is the culmination of Meyer's isolation and conception of himself as an outsider. It's important that he'll soon have his first encounter with Sister Penny, who ultimately alleviates those feelings and helps him imagine a place for himself within Australia.

❝ She was vibrant with life and yet she was solitary. Unburdened by domesticity. She was brave, even audacious. Kept her disappointments in their place. How had a woman like that come to live alone?

Related Characters: Meyer Gold (speaker), Sister Penny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Arriving at the hospital to visit Frank, Meyer encounters Sister Penny leaving for a concert. Although they exchange a few superficial words, they share a mutual understanding and attraction to each other. Like Meyer, Sister Penny is aloof and a little unconventional, but she emanates an aura of pleasant solitude, rather than the isolation Meyer feels so keenly. Because of this, she's the first Australian with whom he feels any kinship and whom he wants to emulate. This moment marks the beginning of Meyer's fascination with Sister Penny and his conception of her as a blueprint for a tolerable life in Australia. It also shows how living a fairly solitary life can help individuals who don't quite fit into their communities – like the un-domestic Sister Penny – live peacefully within them.

14. Margaret in Her Garden Quotes

❝ Margaret grieved that her daughter had to carry this burden. Elsa, each time she saw her, had become more adult. She had lost her childhood. If she didn't see Elsa more often, didn't pay her close attention, Margaret wouldn't keep up with her. Her daughter would outgrow her.

Related Characters: Margaret Briggs (speaker), Elsa Briggs

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

After her husband refuses to take her to visiting hours on Sunday, Margaret hitchhikes into the city, desperate to see Elsa. However, when she arrives, Elsa's more frustrated at the interruption to her solitude than happy to see her mother. Elsa is intensely conscious that overcoming polio is something she has to accomplish by herself, and she knows that worrying too much about Margaret and her family will only hold her back. To Elsa, this is an inevitable but not necessarily unpleasant prospect, since it allows her to develop new independence. However, for Margaret, it's a tragedy. While Elsa's independence, due to her polio, is premature, she's experiencing a process of distancing herself from her parents that's normal and healthy for adolescents. Margaret's unease stems partly from the fact that this is happening too soon, but it also shows how even the normal processes of growing up can be painful for parents to experience.

15. Christmas Quotes

❝ Frank felt it as a relief. When his mother was at the piano she was distant from him. For once she took her eyes off him […] Somehow he knew that what she did was very good. In this role he had respect for her, and gratitude. It seemed to justify everything, their foreignness, their victimhood in the other country. It brought honor to them.

Related Characters: Frank Gold (speaker), Ida Gold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

When Frank discovers his vocation, he contrasts his approach to poetry with his mother's "theatrical" obsession with music. However, watching her during her recital at the Golden Age, he's struck by all the things he appreciates both about his mother and her vocation. Watching his mother's play allows Frank to interact with his mother outside their normal relationship, which often feels stifling. The play provides the emotional distance both mother and son need in order to appreciate the other but which, both intense characters, they can rarely provide. Moreover, while Frank normally feels that his parents can't help or protect him at all as he battles polio, his mother's musicianship helps him at least rationalize the things that have happened to them, if not change the course of events.

Finally, while he often resents Ida and Meyer for failing to act as "Australian" as he thinks they should, he understands

now that his parents can live with "honor" in Australian society without giving up the things that make them different. Ultimately, art and the hard work it entails help ease many of the novel's tensions, especially between Ida and Frank.

She was startled by Ida's ease and precision. Her concentration, her accuracy, reminded Olive of the skills that were her personal exultation, of a good surgeon at work, or nurses laying out a body. Her own deftness and judgment.

Related Characters: Sister Penny (speaker), Ida Gold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Even though she rarely has time listen to music and doesn't consider herself a culturally informed person, Sister Penny is profoundly moved when she hears Ida play during Christmas dinner at the Golden Age. The music's ability to affect amateur listeners is an argument for the universality of art, as is Ida's respect for her audience, even though she's often scornful of people who are less sophisticated than she is. Moreover, by comparing Ida's musicianship to her own work, Sister Penny makes an explicit connection between vocations of all kinds, exotic or prosaic. For both Sister Penny and Ida, art of any kind entails hard work, and hard work carries with it a certain artistic glory (evident in the uncharacteristically strong language like "exultation," which Sister Penny uses to describe her own work). Through moments like these, London imbues art with the dignity of hard work and hard work with the beauty of art.

19. Lidja Quotes

Over and over, it seemed, they were reminded that they were alone, that in the end, their success or failure in overcoming polio was up to them.

Related Characters: Frank Gold (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

After Christmas, the children learn to their dismay that Lidja has drowned in a sudden boating accident while on vacation. This is disturbing not only because they loved Lidja, but because as a therapist she was able to truly help them in their recovery. Earlier, London contrasts Lidja's knowledge and capability to the helplessness of the children's parents, who aren't trained to fight the disease. In fact, saying that they "longed for her like a mother," London establishes her as a surrogate mother through her greater abilities. Therefore, for the children, Lidja's death echoes their parents' failure to protect them from polio. While the independence conferred by their separation is sometimes exciting, it often makes them feel isolated and even betrayed by their families.

22. The Concert Quotes

She played very fast, bare-armed like a workman, with the conviction of one who must finish a job. The dress enthralled them, its blue-black shining folds, and Ida's strong white arms, her black hair in a roll, her faintly slanted Hungarian eyes were inexpressibly exotic. They knew that wherever she came from, she must have been famous there.

Related Characters: Ida Gold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

In the days leading up to the concert, Ida has been frantically anxious, but now many of her fears are proving unfounded. Ida was worried that with her fancy dress and formal demeanor she was foolishly trying to introduce her native customs into a society that wouldn't appreciate him; in the concert, the dress and even her appearance do mark her as out of place, but in a way that elicits awe and respect, rather than disdain. For the first time, Ida's foreignness emerges as a good thing, something that increases her family's status rather than lowering it. It's also notable that London describes Ida as performing "like a workman." By comparing Ida's musicianship to manual labor, she makes clear that true art isn't effete or inaccessible, but rather something which any one with respect for hard work can appreciate.

Watching her play, Frank was moved. He saw her strength, her vast determination. He remembered her fury when he was in the hospital. "You are going to get strong! You are going to walk [...] you want to know why? They take the weak ones first."

Related Characters: Frank Gold (speaker), Ida Gold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

As always when he sees his mother perform, Frank feels softened and more sympathetic towards her usual. Normally he describes Ida's outbursts of "fury" as hysterical and frustrating, hindering him from recovering rather than helping. However, now he recognizes her intensity of character (which in fact saved his life as a child) as something deeply sustaining. If Ida can't protect him materially from polio, she can do so psychologically.

His flashback to the hospital also illustrates poignantly Ida's habit of conflating present crises with the old trauma of the war. Here, she actually believes for a moment that they're still being pursued in Hungary. This moment shows that Frank's polio is a constant reminder of the things she endured during the Holocaust.

28. The Hunch Quotes

He had an image suddenly of sitting with her at a table in one of the little cafes overlooking Lake Balaton [...] around it, brothers, their girlfriends, guests from Budapest. The peace of couples who have been swimming and then taken a siesta together in the afternoon [...] such a capacity she had for living. A purity about her, as engrossed in life as an insect going about its tasks, embedded in all that is natural.

Related Characters: Meyer Gold (speaker), Sister Penny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

Driven by inexplicable intuition, Meyer makes a detour on his normal delivery route and finds Sister Penny at the beach, toweling off after a solitary swim. As always, he's struck by the calm and tranquility she emanates, which in turn reminds him of the tranquility of his pre-war life. While Meyer's nostalgia usually leads him to isolation and despair, now it leads him to admire Sister Penny's life in Australia, with its "purity" and focus on the "natural." Since Meyer considers himself much like Sister Penny, her contentment shows him his own way forward toward a good life in Australia. Although they share only sporadic and brief encounters, by the time they part today, it's clear that Sister Penny's friendship has allowed Meyer to overcome isolation and find a place for himself in Australia, if not to forget the traumatic memories of the past.

29. The Call Quotes

Ida stood still. It felt like the time when the tanks rolled in, and you thought, This can't be happening. Everything becomes provisional. She walked straight out of the house to the phone box on the corner and rang Margaret Briggs.

Related Characters: Ida Gold (speaker), Frank Gold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

One morning after Frank's expulsion from the Golden Age, Ida sees him watching birds on the porch and asks what he thinks the song means; Frank responds that it sounds like they're saying, "you're just in the way." This is obvious evidence of Frank's depression at his exile from the hospital and separation from Elsa, which Ida takes as seriously as his physical illness. As she does with all the crises of polio, Ida compares the situation to her feelings during the war, showing how entwined these two experiences are for her, and how doubly painful it is to see Frank fighting for survival a second time. However, while she couldn't do anything to stop the German invasion, in this moment Ida knows exactly what to do and promptly facilitates Frank's reunion with Elsa. In this way, polio allows her an opportunity to reclaim some of the parental agency she lost in the horrors of the war.

30. The Separation Quotes

Her parents never said a word about her expulsion from the Golden Age. Nothing could affect their shining gaze on Elsa. But they hadn't tried to stick up for her, they hadn't saved her. She saw them differently. They had no power. They cared what other people thought.

Related Characters: Frank Gold (speaker), Elsa Briggs

Related Themes:

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

Like Frank, Elsa finds it hard to adjust to life at home after her expulsion from the Golden Age. In one sense, she's happy to be living with Margaret, and her description of their "shining gaze" shows she's still secure in her family's love and devotion. However, she's also reminded afresh of their powerlessness. After the Isolation Ward, she realized that Jack and Margaret couldn't protect her from polio; now, she knows they can't even help navigate social situations, or shield her from social censure. Learning her parents' limitations is difficult, but it's important to note that Elsa can stop worshipping Jack and Margaret while still loving and respecting them.

31. The Visit Quotes

"The vision seemed to come to him out of the sky, unfolding like a cloud or flock of tiny birds, the outline spreading and contracting. A smallholding, a tiny farm. With ploughing, fertilizing, watering, he could pasture a goat on a block like this, grow fruit trees and vegetables, feed his family from the land. It was what his father had done.

Related Characters: Meyer Gold (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

While the Golds are visiting the Briggs' for afternoon tea, a sudden thunderstorm descends, and everyone rushes into the yard to help Margaret take her laundry off the line. In the melee, Meyer stands back and watches the approaching clouds. For most of the novel, he's been demoralized by the Australian landscape, comparing it to his native Hungary and despairing of ever coming to like it; his preoccupation with the land, of course, represents his inability to see himself fitting into Australian society in general. In this moment of epiphany, he sees himself working a small Australian farm and following in his father's footsteps. This is a vision of continuity without succumbing to painful nostalgia by attempting to exactly recreate his Hungarian life. Ultimately, this moment shows Meyer beginning to move forward into his Australian life without giving up his most treasured memories of Hungary – thus resolving the feelings of isolation that have plagued him since his arrival in the new country.

32. New York Quotes

"The Golden Age" is the sequel to his most famous poem, "The Trains," he says. It's the answer to it, the counter to it.

Related Characters: Frank Gold (speaker), Jack Briggs Jr.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

As an elderly and successful poet, Frank is surprised to receive a visit from Elsa's son, Jack, the young editor of an Australian literary journal and an admirer of his poetry. Their discussion of Frank's most important poems illustrates how the events of his childhood have influenced his adult work. Jack asks why his collection about his time in the polio hospital is named "The Golden Age," revisiting the question posed at the novel's outset. Describing it as a "counter," Frank says that this collection resolves the questions posed in his earlier poem "The Trains," which must address his experience in the Holocaust, since it shares its name with that chapter in the book. From Frank's description of his work, it's clear that, even after decades, he considers these two fights for survival very much linked. Moreover, he states fairly explicitly what the novel has been suggesting for a long time: the experience of fighting and successfully overcoming polio allowed him to confront and, to some extent, resolve the lingering trauma of growing up in the Holocaust. Finally, it's Frank's vocation that has allowed him to grapple with his past; in its final chapter, the novel continues to emphasize the importance of meaningful work to addressing psychological issues and living a fulfilling life.

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.

1. LIGHT

It's nap time in a children's hospital, but Frank Gold, the new boy, sneaks out of bed and into his wheelchair, knowing that the nurses will be dozing in the afternoon heat. He peeks into the girls' ward, hoping to cat a glimpse of his friend Elsa, whose **golden** hair is usually visible through the crack in the door. Today, she's not there.

Right away, it's clear that Frank seeks out opportunities to be alone, even if he's breaking the rules. This suggests he's alienated from the other people at the hospital, but also that he values solitude.

Unobserved by any adults, Frank rolls outside and produces a cigarette that he stole from his mother, Ida, the last time she visited. For a moment he feels bad, thinking of his mother searching for her cigarettes after a stressful afternoon at the hospital. But he also takes pride in his sneakiness; to him, it's an act of privacy and even maturity, a "resistance" to a place where he's treated like a baby and has no personal space.

It seems like Frank is close to his mother; he's even attuned to her small gestures and smoking patterns. However, he's actively striving against that closeness by doing things he knows she won't like. To Frank, becoming mature means subverting outside control, whether by stealing from his mother or violating the hospital's babyish rules.

Frank briefly recalls his arrival at the hospital. Even though Sister Penny was friendly and almost naively cheerful to him, he knew it was impossible to test or rile her. Compared to the other, mostly younger children, he felt like a "pirate" surrounded by "little maimed animals."

Even though Frank is sick and uses a wheelchair, he sees himself as stronger and more vital than the other children around him. His metaphor shows his tendency to set himself apart from others, as well as his fundamental confidence in his own strength and capabilities.


Frank finally stops by the clothes line, where he can hear the noise from a nearby factory. He's happy to be outside in the strong light; ever since he caught polio, light has seemed "less bright to him, older, sadder." However, he can't light the match properly and becomes frustrated. The hospital gardener, Norm Whitehouse, suddenly sees him, but rather than confiscating his cigarettes, he offers him a light and walks away without questioning him.

Frank's reflection on the light shows how much polio has changed not only his body but his inner life, propelling him abruptly into a more sensitive but sadder maturity. The novel's first chapter makes clear that polio has significantly accelerated the process of growing up for it's young victims.

After one pull on the cigarette, Frank has to toss it away and lean against the fence, nauseous. He's not used to smoking and his body, while older than those of the other patients, is still weak from polio. Frank feels satisfied at having accomplished something private and forbidden, and grateful for Norm's complicity. Still, he wonders where Elsa is.

Frank often forgets, only to be harshly reminded, that his fraily body cannot keep up with his mental acuity. Norm's unquestioning offer of the light is an odd gesture from an authority figure; it shows that the hospital's atmosphere is unconventional, and perhaps not as infantilizing as Frank likes to think.


2. THE GOLDEN AGE

Frank is technically too old to be a patient at the **Golden Age** but has been admitted because he's "small and underdeveloped," and because everyone at the IDB (the main hospital at Perth) agreed that it wasn't appropriate for him to live among adult patients. Moreover, his parents are New Australians (immigrants) and he has no other family to help take care of him, so the structure and supervision of the children's hospital will be useful. At twelve and a half, Elsa Briggs is also older than most of the patients, but she has two younger sisters and her mother can't look after her properly.

Frank and Elsa are both slightly older than patients at the Golden Age should be. This logistical detail emphasizes the fact that both children occupy a liminal space between childhood and adolescence. One of the novel's key concerns will be the tension between the desire to linger in a comfortable childhood and the inevitability of growing up and becoming mature.

The hospital was originally built as a pub. Situated outside the city center, it has few neighbors and is bordered by roads on all sides, which contributes to its "apartness" and "natural quarantine." Along one of the roads is the Netting Factory, whose constant rumbling noises sooth the children. In 1949, due to the growing polio epidemic, the government bought the pub and turned it into the **Golden Age** Children's Polio Convalescent home.

The hospital's geographic isolation corresponds to the physical isolation of its patients, who are living away from their families and among strangers for the first time. It also hints at the social isolation of polio patients; since the disease is so terrifying, society seeks to comfort itself by housing its victims far away from the city and pretending they don't exist.

Many people thought the name, inherited from the pub, was "cruelly ironic" given that its current inmates are struggling invalids. However, the hospital is a generally cheerful place, and its patients are no longer ill but learning to function again in the world. The parents (even Ida **Gold**, who's very picky and known to the staff as Princess Ida) are happy with the facility, and the children enjoy the clinical attention of the nurses, who know how to help them, rather than the anxious fretting of their parents.

The hospital's ambivalent name is a frequent reminder that recovering from polio isn't an unremittingly bad experience; rather, it suggests that this is a memorable and even poignant part of the children's lives. It also suggests that the hospital staff eschews pessimism and instead focuses on the children's capacity for survival and recuperation.

Arriving here, Frank once again found himself in a new and unfamiliar place. He's now determined to behave well so as to avoid "another expulsion." He likes the hospital because he can hear the distant trains when he's in bed at night. Most importantly, he wants to be near Elsa. As he makes his way back to the ward, he starts to compose a poem for her. Polio has destroyed his ability to walk, Frank thinks, but it's also made him into a poet.

Frank intensely desires to avoid isolation and fit in, even while he does things (like smoking) to set himself apart. The prospect of being alone is both frightening and alluring to him. Frank also announces his vocation here, with little fanfare but plenty of confidence. He doesn't have to make a big deal over his calling because he's so instinctively sure of it.

3. ELSA

Instead of napping, Elsa is in the Babies' Room. She's cuddling Rayma Colley, whose whimpering she heard from down the hall. With two younger sisters of her own, Elsa isn't sentimental towards babies but is very competent in taking care of them and soon stops Rayma from crying by coaxing her to look at the sky. In the time she spent in the hospital, largely immobile, Elsa has spent hours examining the sky, and is amazed she never paid such close attention to it before.

Even though Elsa is only twelve, her status in her family as the eldest daughter has made her mature, able to act like a parent herself. In her first appearance, Elsa is quietly compassionate, with a strong sense of intuition. Her newfound reverence towards the sky shows that polio has changed her mindset, just as it has Frank's.

Elsa assures Rayma that her mother misses her and thinks of her. Elsa knows Rayma crying for her mother because all the children miss their mothers intensely and spend most of their time waiting for them to come visit. Elsa remembers listening for her own mother's footsteps all day in the **Isolation Ward**. To Elsa, the sky and her mother have become "entwined," since both are so important to her and absorb so much of her attention.

Rayma's longing for her mother and Elsa's recognition of it show that the children at the Golden Age are young enough to be instinctively connected to their parents though a deep, almost primal bond. This is especially true of Elsa and her mother; the intensity of her language here highlights her close relationship with her mother.

Despite this comparison, Elsa remembers that when she left the **Isolation Ward** and her parents were allowed to sit by her, they looked "smaller" and "shrunken" by the terror they'd endured. For her part, she felt distant from them and alone in the effort of fighting polio. Elsa knows that, just as she did, Rayma has to learn to be without her mother and think for herself.

Despite the bond between parents and children at the Golden Age, polio has also caused an abrupt rupture in the closeness of these relationships, especially for Elsa. Elsa still loves her mother, but the disease has shown her that her mother can't take care of her forever, and that she needs to develop independence.

Elsa reflects that when her mother leaves after a visit, she sometimes imagines that her *real* mother is waiting for her somewhere else; unlike the mother who visits her, this hidden mother is "beautiful as an angel, with an angel's perfect understanding."

Although it seems to voice disappointment, Elsa's fantasy shows both discomfort with her estrangement from her mother and an intense desire to return to her childhood conception of her mother as invincible and angelic.

4. COCKATOOS

As the children are eating dinner, cockatoos fly over the hospital; the children know they're signaling rain. Frank's parents, Ida and Meyer **Gold**, also hear the birds from their house in North Perth. Meyer is watering his vegetable patch and Ida is smoking and thinking that the bird calls are "melancholy [and] harsh" and therefore a particularly "Australian sound."

While the cockatoos are a good omen for Australians who know how to interpret their calls, they seem hostile to Ida, an immigrant. Her pessimistic reaction shows her discontent with Australia as well as her isolation from her new society and its customs.

After the war, the **Golds** had hoped to go to America, but they received a sponsorship from Western Australia instead. Ida can't stop thinking of their immigration as ill-fated and views everything as evidence for this theory, from a missed bus to Frank's polio. Ida remembers that even during the terror and treachery of the war, she was strong and resourceful. Now, finally settled in a safe country, she feels "gutted, feeble, shell-shocked."

Though the war is over and her family is out of danger, Ida is still suffering its psychological effects—from personal feelings of weakness to an inability to adapt to her new surroundings. This shows that the process of surviving and overcoming a specific trauma continues long after that trauma has technically ended.

Meyer encourages Ida to play the piano; they in fact chose their current house because the previous owner left a piano in the living room. However, Ida hasn't played since Frank got sick. Although the **Golds** are atheists, Meyer knows that Ida considers her talent for piano as supernaturally inspired and suspects she has made a superstitious promise to give it up in exchange for their son's health. Her determination and respect for her craft are what he's always admired most about her.

Like Frank, Ida has a strong sense of vocation; playing piano is central to her sense of self. However, while Frank believes that the challenges of his life, namely polio, have made him into a poet, the challenges that Ida faces have taken away or forced her to renounce her calling.

Since she won't play, Meyer says she should go to bed, but Ida knows that when she's tired her nightmares are worse, so she pours herself another glass of brandy.

While the Golds have survived the war and are safely established in Australia, it's clear that they haven't put the war behind them yet.

5. FRANK'S VOCATION

Frank has always suspected he had a vocation, although he inherited neither Ida's musical ability nor Meyer's handiness. Now he knows he's a poet, and this conviction makes him feel like an adult, able to "overcome any hardship." However, as with his childhood in Hungary, he doesn't discuss it with anyone.

Unlike his mother, who abnegates her vocation in times of trouble, Frank embraces his in order to survive. It's interesting that he likens his vocation to his early childhood; one is a positive force, while the other was presumably a very traumatic experience.

Between dinner and lights out, the children have free time. Most of the boys read or play board games, but Frank always goes outside. It's a habit he inhereted from his parents, who always share an aperitif on the porch before dinner. Usually they stand quietly and look at the front yard, just as they stood at the rail of the ship when they arrived at Australia. Frank describes their posture not as defeated, but not hopeful either.

Even though he wants to be grown up and independent, Frank still takes his behavioral cues from his parents. This shows how much he respects and cherishes his memories of them, even if those memories evoke painful feelings (like facing an uncertain future in Australia).

Frank wheels outside again, thinking over the poem that came to him during the afternoon. He writes it down in a prescription pad he swiped from the IDB in Perth. As he writes down the words, he realizes that the poem could be about Elsa or Sullivan, who taught him about poetry at IDB. All of Frank's poems are in some way about Sullivan. Sullivan always told Frank that great poets must understand death, and that they have "an early advantage" in this respect.

This is Sullivan's first appearance. Since Frank met this friend at IDB, his reflection that all of his poems are about Sullivan means that they are all influenced by polio. This shows how much the disease and its challenges have catalyzed Frank's vocation and his mature consciousness.

6. THE POET

In a flashback Frank recalls his time at the IDB; it's a big hospital in the middle of Perth, much larger than **the Golden Age**. Most of the patients are young adults with a penchant for dark humor; young and precocious, Frank quickly becomes a favorite and roams the wards in his wheelchair, carrying messages and helping set up pranks on the nurses. He's unsupervised and no one makes him go to school; in this sense, the hospital reminds him of the refugee hostel where he and his parents stayed in Vienna, where they were "saved, but not yet back into real life."

Frank's ability to thrive in an adult hospital shows how much more precocious (if not truly more mature) he is than most children. His comparison of the hospital to the refugee camp shows the extent to which the two major traumas in his life are linked; his surprising contentedness in both situations shows that he's used to facing challenges to his survival.

Exploring the hospital one day, Frank stumbles on a room filled with "iron lungs," breathing machines that keep completely paralyzed polio patients alive. Remembering his own experiences in confinement, he flees, but returns the next day and sees that one of the patients is a teenage boy. The boy tells Frank he's composing a poem about the ceiling, called "The Snowfield," and a recites a couple lines. He introduces himself as Sullivan Backhouse and approves of Frank's name, which he says is "apposite." Frank doesn't understand what this means.

Frank's very uneasy at the thought of being immobile; this reflects his experiences during the war, which he'll describe later, and it makes his confinement to a wheelchair even more poignant. However, it's important that Frank's introduction to his vocation, which will free and expand his mind, takes place in a location defined by physical confinement and disability.

Frank returns to the ward every day, disregarding formal visiting hours, and the two boys discuss poetry. Sullivan informs him that poetry doesn't have to rhyme or be about heroes. He especially admires the First World War poets, who didn't glorify the war but wrote about everyday experiences, even about being in the hospital. Frank likes this approach to art because it's different from Ida's "theatrical [and] deliberate" reverence for music, which he feels sets his family apart from other Australians.

Even though Frank's strong sense of artistic vocation ties him to his mother, he also uses it to set himself apart from her and the European culture he's inherited but no longer cares for. For Frank, fitting into his new society seems more important, and is often in conflict with, embracing his parents' values.

Before polio, Sullivan was a popular prefect and captain of the rowing team at a boy's college. He has many siblings and a big house by the river. Frank associates Sullivan with a grand house he once saw, and with the wholesomeness and serenity of old paintings.

Sullivan's affluent background marks him as different from Frank, but their shared status as polio patients makes clear that no matter how secure or established one feels, threats to survival can present themselves at any time.

A dignified man with an important government job, Sullivan's father, Mr. Backhouse, often visits. He's kind to Frank and asks him how he likes Australia, but Frank sees it's an effort for him to concentrate on anything but Sullivan. It's also hard for him to see mobile children in wheelchairs while his son is completely paralyzed.

Mr. Backhouses's intense focus on his son is one of many examples of intense parental devotion to their children. It's notable that Frank picks up on this and is able to infer his jealousy of Frank's comparative good health; here, Frank seems very astute at reading the thoughts and feelings of adults.

Frank notices that Sullivan always has a joke or story ready for these visits; he's cheerfully taken on the responsibility of keeping up his father's spirits. On the other hand, Frank deeply resents the responsibility of making his parents happy. He knows how upset they are at having to bear another tragedy after escaping from Hungary, but he doesn't want to be "their only light."

Frank distances himself from his parents partly in order to forget the traumas they've endured together, and partly to protect himself from their current fear and anxiety. For Frank, the best way to get over the war is to pretend it didn't happen. He also rejects the pressure of being responsible for the happiness of adults who are supposed to care for him.

Another day, Sullivan muses to Frank that real life only happens when one is alone. He references a woman named Sister Addie, a nurse at the Golden Age, commenting that "all her thoughts are for others," but that he wonders what her thoughts are like when she's in her own room, without her uniform. Most of the time, Sullivan is cheerful when Frank visits, but sometimes he sits in silence while he's composing a poem or after he's had a bad night. Frank often transcribes Sullivan's poetry for him.

Like Frank, Sullivan has a fascinated respect for solitude; he takes advantage of his lonely room to write poetry and analyzes its role in the lives of others like Sister Addie. However, sometimes he's understandably overwhelmed by the isolation of life in the iron lung. His vacillation is an early illustration of the novel's tension between positive solitude and negative isolation.

Eventually, Sullivan gets to spend some time each day out of the lung. He and Frank sit on the verandah strapped to recliners. Sullivan tells Frank his onset story. He was in an important rowing race but felt so hot and sick he dived into the river and suddenly realized he couldn't move his legs. His teammates had to drag him out of the water. Even though it was terrifying, Sullivan looks back on the day with a sort of fondness, since he loved school and was very close to his friends. While they ferried him to shore, the beginning of a long poem called "On My Last Day on Earth" occurred to him. Everything he writes now is part of that poem.

Onset stories are important for all the children, since they mark the abrupt end of conventional childhood and the beginning of a host of physical and mental challenges. With its lyrical and aesthetic appeal, Sullivan's story can be read as more compelling than others. The novel will make clear, however, that no matter how prosaic, all the children's stories are equally valuable, and have equal potential to translate into poetry.

Sullivan's dramatic story makes Frank ashamed of his own onset, which he feels emblematizes the "loud, raw, over-intimate tragicomedy" of his own family. He refused to go to school because of a terrible headache, then fought with Ida who said she would lose her new job if she stayed home to take care of him. When Ida finally realized how feverish Frank was, she ran down the street to the phone box yelling and cursing. Meyer had to carry him out of the house while the neighbors watched. In the midst of all this, Frank thought savagely that this would teach his parents not to depend on him for happiness.

When Sullivan says that modern poetry doesn't have to be heroic, and that his favorite poets write about prosaic experiences like being in the hospital, Frank is entranced. Still, he wishes his family background and even his onset story were a little more heroic, more like Sullivan's. Frank hasn't learned to apply his new views on art to his own life yet.

One night during his stay in IDB, Frank wakes up to thunder and lightning. He realizes the power is out and worries about the iron lungs, which run on electricity. He wheels to the door and sits anxiously in the rain; suddenly, he sees the nurses running in pajamas to the iron lung ward and knows everything will be alright. The next morning, he finds out they hand-pumped the lungs for hours.

Even as Frank believes his own life lacks in heroics, he's surrounded by nurses who devote their lives to keeping polio patients alive. In the midst of Frank's discovery of his artistic vocation, this vignette shows that the novel valorizes all work that's done well, from poetry to caregiving.

Sullivan says Mr. Backhouse wants to publish the rhyming poems that he wrote before polio. Sullivan wants to call the collection "On My Last Day on Earth," but his father disapproves of this title. He tells Frank he's working on a new poem, one line of which is "in the end, we are all orphans."

While Sullivan's poetry is growing more complex as a result of his experience with polio, his well-meaning father wants to sanitize his work for the benefit of his family and friends. There's a tension between Sullivan's desire to be recognized as a mature young man and his father's wish that he remain a child.

The next day, Sister Addie tells Frank that Sullivan spiked a fever during the night and died suddenly. His iron lung is already missing, taken away for cleaning. Frank encounters the devastated Mr. Backhouse and is impressed by his dignified, understated grief. Even though most of Frank's family were murdered during the war, this is the first loss he's experienced more personally.

For the first time, Frank experiences the grief and loss he was too young to feel during the war. Throughout the novel, the challenges Frank faces as a polio patient will help him confront his early childhood in the war, which he's never been able to fully process.

Frank looks at Sullivan's poetry, which he's transcribed on a prescription pad. He knows it's up to him to finish "On My Last Day on Earth." He calls Meyer and tries to tell him this but can't communicate his thoughts well. After hanging up, he lies down in bed, looking up at the ceiling as if he is dead as well.

The title of the poem is important. Sullivan was far from a pessimist, despite his dire condition; he didn't mean that he already considered himself dead, but rather emphasized how radically polio transforms its victims. Unlike Mr. Backhouse, Frank understands what Sullivan was trying to say but hasn't lived with the disease long enough to truly articulate his feelings about it.

7. THE TRAINS

Frank flashes back to his childhood in Budapest during the war. His tone is straightforward as he remembers hurrying through the streets with Ida at dusk. The night before, thirty people in the apartment below theirs, including children he'd played with, were seized and taken to be murdered at the river. Frank hasn't been outside for a long time and the streets look strange to him, especially since most of the stores are shuttered, the sidewalks are filled with debris, and the streetlights are broken. Besides being very cold, he's mortified and angry with his mother, who has dressed him in a skirt.

Frank's tone reveals that even as a young child he was accustomed to seeing horrifying events unfold around him; however, his concern with the minor indignity of the skirt is a reminder that he was still a child who didn't completely understand what was going on. In the first description of the Golds' life during the war, it's clear that they've lived through trauma far more extreme than Frank's polio.

Ida is taking Frank to her piano teacher, Julia Marai, and has dressed him as a girl so soldiers won't check to see if he's circumcised. She's told him again and again that they can't stop, not even to pet a dog. Ida is wearing old shoes and a hat. All winter she's gone bareheaded in solidarity with Meyer, who's in a freezing Ukrainian labor camp without a hat. Now, she has fake papers and a new job, and has to dress inconspicuously. Frank can't keep up, so Ida picks him up and he quickly falls asleep in her arms.

Ida immediately emerges as tough, resourceful, and fiercely loyal to her family. Here she seems much different from her first appearance in the novel, anxiously chain-smoking on the porch in Australia. Ida's remarkable tenacity in times of crisis ensures her family's survival through the war; it's also a strong link between her and Frank, who inherits this characteristic even though he often despises his mother's intensity.

Julia lives with her companion, Hedwiga, in a small apartment on the other side of the river. Ida even carries Frank up the stairs, and he feels uneasy because she's being too considerate. Frank draws back from the strange apartment, as he always does from the "smell of other people in crowded rooms," even though he's used to this by now. However, he also smells milk, which he hasn't tasted in a long time, and he sees a cat, which excites him.

Frank's worry over his mother's care shows that he's very perceptive, even as a little boy. It also shows that while Ida is a very protective mother, she's not a conventionally doting one. Importantly, living in close proximity to strangers is something Frank strongly associates with both the war and polio. The unpleasant experience of being at once isolated and unable to attain solitude links the two major traumas Frank has to survive.

Julia is an imposing old woman with a formal voice, but she assures Frank he can have his pants back. Ida kisses Frank and tells him to behave well, then quickly leaves. Frank understands that she is afraid. Frank cries a little when she's gone, but Hedwiga gives him dinner and he's full for the first time in months. During the day he must be very quiet and not put his face too close to the window.

Although he misses his mother, Frank gets along with the two women because they treat him with dignity and don't coddle him; Frank will always cleave to adults who treat him this way, rather than as a child.

Ida had asked Julia to hide Frank weeks before, though she worried that she was demanding too much of her teacher. Hedwiga and Julia prove happy to play some part in the resistance, however, even though they'd grown used to living in solitude and don't particularly like children. Ida is overwhelmed by their kindness, when she's grown to expect contempt from everyone. Still, she knows that it's only because she's Julia's best student and "heir" that she's permitted such a large favor.

Even though Ida's career as a pianist has evaporated in the war, her relationship with Julia—the product of Ida's vocation—is central to her survival. Her teacher's selflessness is a relief from the cruel isolation Ida experiences as a Jew during the Holocaust. Moreover, it seems to her that by being talented and diligent, she's somehow earned a place for Frank to hide safely.

Having left Frank, Ida hurries back across the river, searching for the "fighting core of survival, of self-love" which she needs to draw on to save her family. She's worried about being without Frank, but she feels things are simpler now that she's alone. She knows that, living with two largely immobile women, there's a chance that Frank might die in the bombing raids that will soon be directed at the city, but she feels it's better for him to die like that than to be shot and thrown into the Danube. She can't believe she's been reduced to making such grim choices for her son and worries that Meyer would have wanted her to keep Frank by her side.

It's important to note that while Ida feels bogged down by Frank, it's primarily because she can't act as efficiently with him as she can on her own. Unlike a conventionally feminine mother, Ida is belligerent and almost coldly pragmatic, but the novel valorizes these characteristics by linking them firmly to her family's survival. Even Ida's use of the word "self-love" underlines her inherent generosity; since she's using the word to describe her family, it demonstrates her intense devotion to them.

Julia always gives Ida strength. As a teacher, Julia always insisted that beyond her talent Ida had to cultivate "a certain ruthlessness" to succeed. For Ida, this tactic succeeded: she won an important contest as a young woman, and on a celebratory trip with her family met Meyer. In the following years, new laws prevented Ida from studying or performing, but she was getting married and pregnant with Frank. She practiced diligently and tried to ignore "the mounting force for which they had no name."

While artistic, Ida's vocation isn't characterized by its beauty or aesthetics; rather, it's a method of fighting, a strong expression of self-will in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Though playing piano is ostensibly irrelevant to surviving the Holocaust, the skills Ida cultivated during her career have prepared her for this part of her life.

Ida hoped to have a child who looked like Meyer, but Frank turned out to be disappointingly like her, both in looks and personality. Now, she misses Meyer constantly, and feels that longing for him contributes to her physical decay.

Just as Ida wishes her son were more like Meyer, Frank will grow to resent his resemblance to his mother. The similarity in their characters draws mother and son together, but it will also prevent them from really appreciating each other.

On her way home, Ida passes the Gellért hotel, where she used to play piano in the early years of the war. One day, in the middle of her shift, a waiter had handed her a note informing her that the police were going to arrest her. She tucked it into her dress like a love note, played one more waltz, and slipped out the back door. Now she's acquired fake papers and is going to work as a housekeeper; she needs to scrape some money together in order to buy food and get it to Meyer in the labor camp where he's imprisoned.

Though perpetually apprehensive as an Australian mother, Ida proves cool and collected in times of crisis. She doesn't experience the mental toll of these traumas until after the war is over, which demonstrates that, for her, the process of surviving long outlasts the actual war.

Ida is still astonished that a city she's loved her whole life, and always felt to be her own, could turn so quickly into "a hunting ground," with danger at every corner.

Ida's sense of circumstances changing abruptly mirrors the children's onset stories, when polio descends without warning. Linking these two experiences together, the novel suggests that threats to survival are always lurking, even if they can't be foreseen.

Frank isn't actually sure if he remembers the walk to Julia's apartment, or if he only knows it from Ida's stories. But he does remember his life in hiding. His first separation from Ida marks "the beginning of himself," the first time he's in charge of putting on his own clothes and deciding for himself whether to feel sad or happy. The best thing about Julia's apartment is that there's always food, since Hedwiga is good at scavenging and bartering and can even obtain milk. Both Frank and Julia, who can't walk by herself, depend on Hedwiga completely for survival.

Importantly, Frank's first separation is a milestone in his life and not an entirely bad experience, since it helps to develop his independent consciousness. This separation is similar to his separation from his parents during his stay at the Golden Age. Both experiences show that while distance from his parents is frightening, it's a necessary part of growing up and learning to think for himself.


Even though he's bored, Frank tries to behave well and be quiet. He spends a lot of time watching for Ida at the window and finds he can't remember what her face looks like. He also listens to trains coming and going from the nearby railway station.

The noise from the trains corresponds to the constant factory noise the children hear at the Golden Age. Just as he will be in the hospital, in Julia's apartment Frank is confined to a small location with his survival uncertain. These similarities strengthen the links between the two traumas Frank experiences in his short life.

On Thursdays, Julia gives piano lessons to a man named Mr. Arpad; they rely on this income for food. During the lesson, Frank has to hide in the attic and be completely still. The attic is dusty and pitch black. Frank knows from experience that doing what he's told is a matter of life and death, but it's difficult to stay still in such a frightening place. He passes out for a while, and when he wakes is calmed by the noise of the trains, which he listens to until the lesson is over. For the next several days, he can't speak. The following Thursday, Frank struggles mutely while Hedwiga tries to lift him into the attic, and Julia stops giving lessons.

Frank's stint in the attic explains his fear of confinement and immobility, which, importantly, are two major consequences of polio. It shows why the normally precocious boy was so scared by the iron lungs and impressed by Sullivan's endurance. The similarities between Frank's physical experiences in the Holocaust and as a polio patient contributes to a sense of similarity between the two challenges to his survival.

In December 1944, the Red Army lays siege to Budapest and the German troops trapped inside, destroying the city. Ida, who has survived bombing, starvation, and the Arrow Cross's ceaseless hunting for Jews, hurries to Julia's apartment building; she sees that it has been completely bombed out and feels certain that Frank has been killed. In the next moment, however, she sees Frank running to embrace her. In fact, Hedwiga and Julia did make it out of the building, and all three have been living in the cellar on food Hedwiga scavenges.

While most of Ida and Frank's interactions show how circumstances have prevented them from having an ordinary parent-child relationship, the image of a child running to his mother is universal. It's clear that even though Frank spent a long time away from his mother and even stopped remembering her, their bond is much stronger than the distance they've endured.

In Australia in the present, Ida and Meyer and their Hungarian friends sometimes reminisce about the country they once loved and all its delights–from hunting and sailing to concerts and cafés–that Australia doesn't have to offer. However, these recollections always end in uneasy silence, when they realize that despite their fond memories "they'd been guests…in that country," soon to be expelled violently during the Holocaust. The **Golds** think of themselves as a lucky family because all three have survived and now live in a democracy. Besides two of Meyer's brothers, he and Ida have lost all of their relatives.

After the Holocaust, Ida and Meyer suffer strong feelings of isolation. On one hand, they're outsiders in Australia and unsure if they even want to adapt to this provincial society. However, even as they cling to their European customs they're always reminded of their violent expulsion from Hungary and know that they don't belong there either. Even though the Golds have survived the war, the grief and trauma it caused still dominate their lives.

Even after they move to Australia, Frank knows he'll always remember the terror of hiding in the ceiling. His fear of the dark and confinement keeps him from going to the cinema or playing hide and seek. He feels this weakness is the "gap" that made him vulnerable to polio.

Even though Frank's lingering anxieties are completely understandable, he's embarrassed of them and feels he's responsible for contracting polio. In order to move past these childhood traumas, he'll have to learn that they aren't signs of weakness or reasons to be ashamed.

When Frank wakes up in the hospital on the day of Sullivan's death, Meyer is there. He says that the hospital has arranged for Frank to move to the **Golden Age**, where he can be with other children and go to school. The IDB nurse has told Meyer that Frank is "precocious but emotionally immature," and Meyer has the feeling that his son has been kicked out.

Everyone, from Frank to the nurses to Meyer, feels that doesn't belong at IDB. His outsider status mirrors his parents' feelings of isolation as New Australians. Similarly, Frank's determination to do well at the Golden Age will correspond to his parents quest to become content in their new society.

8. THE FIRST TIME FRANK SAW ELSA

On Frank's first Sunday at the **Golden Age**, Ida and Meyer come to visit. They befriend the parents of Fabio, one of the babies, who are Italian immigrants. While Ida says they are probably "ignorant Tuscan peasants" like the Golds' Italian neighbors, she likes talking to other people who dress like her and share her cultural expectations. Trying to be agreeable, Ida raves about Italian licorice and laughs too much; Frank thinks she is being hysterical. Frank complains to his parents that the hospital is for babies, and Ida agrees that the artwork on the walls is kitsch and tacky. Meyer says that he has to give it time, since there's nowhere else for him to go.

Ida is undeniably snobby, but becomes is an endearing characteristic since it usually corresponds to her determination that Frank be well cared for and protected. It's interesting that while she's completely composed in times of crisis, Ida is often ill at ease in ordinary social situations. To some extent, life-and-death situations have become more normal and easier to handle than conventional civilian life. Her unease shows that mentally, she's still entrenched in her desperate fight for survival.

After visiting hours, the children are exhausted and "displaced," unsure if they belong with their parents or with other invalids like themselves. Having visitors reminds them how much they've grown apart from their families since contracting polio.

Just as Meyer and Ida feel isolated by Europe and Australia, because of polio the children can't feel at home with their parents or in the hospital. Although he's facing a different challenge, Frank is having many of the same emotional experiences as his parents.

In the bed next to Frank is the boy he likes least, Warren Barrett. A year younger than Frank, he's much bigger and makes fun of Frank for his lack of cricket knowledge. Frank hates being exposed as "un-Australian." Watching Warren suck loudly on candies, Frank reflects that he and his parents have been forced so many times to live uncomfortably close to strangers. He hates the proximity to other people's "underclothes" and their "little meannesses," and feels nostalgic for his parents' calm lifestyle.

For Frank, living in the hospital is demoralizing in much the same way as was living in a ghetto or refugee camp. As a polio patient, he's reliving the material and emotional challenges of the war. However, this time around he's old enough to fully grasp what's happening. In many ways, his increased maturity makes these experiences even more complex and unpleasant than they were when he was a little boy.

Frank misses IDB, where he could always escape and be alone, even though he tries not to think about IDB because it reminds him of Sullivan's death. He feels unable to write poetry or complete Sullivan's work at the **Golden Age**.

For Frank, the constant presence of other people isn't just an inconvenience; it's a hallmark of the various traumas he's endured. Solitude, which Frank associates with safety, is necessary for him to develop his vocation.

Wheeling down the corridor, Frank peeks into the girls' ward and notices a new girl sleeping in her wheelchair, the sun outlining her face. Even though there are other girls in the room, she seems to be alone. She's very tall and seems graceful despite her crippled legs. Frank realizes that this must be Elsa, a name he's heard people say in the last few days. Looking at her, he feels like crying. Suddenly, a title comes into his head, "The Third Country," and he feels like he can write again.

Frank's intense reaction foreshadows the extent to which Elsa will become not just his friend, but his muse and talisman. Elsa also helps him recapture a sense of the things he's lost to polio. While Frank was feeling crowded by others, she gives off a sense of pleasant solitude; while Frank often feels ashamed of his physical weakness, she's a reminder that polio patients can be graceful and beautiful.

That night, Frank dreams about Sullivan. His old friend is standing waist-deep in a lake; his muscles are strong and capable, and his hair is no longer matted from lying in the iron lung.

Frank feels better just by seeing Elsa; his sudden ability to imagine his old friend healthy and unaffected by polio foreshadows the restorative qualities of the friendship on which he's about to embark.

9. THE DARK NIGHT

Elsa wakes up in the middle of the night, having been dreaming that she was riding on the back of her father's bike. They were going up a hill, with her father cursing and sweating, but Elsa knew he'd never ask her to get off the bike. Elsa is used to waking up in the night; it's the only time when she feels alone and peaceful. She likes looking at the lights of the Netting Factory; growing up during the war, she's always been told not to waste electricity, and it's extravagant to see a building lit up all night long.

Like Frank, Elsa values solitude, even if it only comes in stolen moments in the middle of the night. Emphasizing her father's perseverance, Elsa's dream shows her confidence in and reliance on her family's protection, even though she's previously said that she feels independent and distant from them.


Elsa feels relieved to be at the **Golden Age**. The terrifying and painful nights in the **Isolation Ward** still feel very close to her. All the girls on the ward share their onset stories, but no one ever speaks about the Isolation Ward, which is like a "terrible dream." Elsa can't remember exactly what happened there, but she feels it's changed her permanently.

Elsa's recollections of the Isolation Ward–a disturbing but difficult to remember time–are similar to Frank's haunting memories of hiding in Budapest as a child, showing how these two traumas leave similar mental scars in the children they affect.

In a flashback, Elsa recalls her time in the **Isolation Ward**. Although she prayed, God didn't answer her. One night she wakes up in terrible pain and believes she sees a small man sitting on her bed and yelling at her to give up. She can also see her mother, Margaret, standing at the observation window and crying; looking at her, Elsa knows that if she dies, her mother will too. At that moment, she feels that "another person inside her," whom she calls "the captain," takes charge of the situation. The captain tells her not to worry about Margaret and only to concentrate on holding on.

In the Isolation Ward, the conventional religion with which Elsa has been raised completely fails her. Rather than receiving supernatural help, the sight of her distressed mother spurs her to find her own internal resources (a sort of inner strength she externalizes as "the captain") and save herself. Here, personal determination and filial devotion emerge as the most potent weapons against polio.


One day, Elsa wakes up, no longer in pain. The Irish girl in the bed next to her is gone, and Elsa knows she has died. She decides that the small man was the Devil, and wonders if the captain was God. Elsa wonders why she lived and not the Irish girl. Even though polio has taken away her legs, she feels it's made her more "herself."

Even though Elsa still believes in God, she's beginning to understand that conventional religion will never rationalize her suffering or explain why polio claimed the Irish girl and not her. Nevertheless, the experience of trauma has made her more self-aware and mature.

Frank likes to imitate Sister Penny but Elsa, who adores her, protests. Sister Penny touches the children without hesitation, while the nurses in the Isolation Ward all wore masks and gloves. A large woman, Sister Penny looks healthy and strong.

Elsa highlights Sister Penny's physical strength, which she links to her comforting aura and her skill as a nurse. Sister Penny is also clearly devoted to, and excellent at, her vocation,

Meanwhile, Frank speaks only to Elsa and criticizes the other children frequently. She tells him he lacks Christian charity, and he retorts that he's not a Christian. Frank follows Elsa everywhere she goes, acting as if they've always known each other. Elsa likes him because he's very clever and knows about lots of things she doesn't, like classical music. She thinks he's spent too much time thinking alone.

It's clear that Frank and Elsa are different in many ways–Frank is sharp and precocious, while Elsa's charm lies in her reserve and quiet compassion. However, their mutual admiration of each other's qualities allows them to form a friendship that mirrors the familial devotion they're both missing.

In the hall, Elsa hears the night policemen checking to make sure that all is well at the hospital. She knows they'll share a cup of tea with Sister Penny, the only one home since all the nurses have gone to a dance. Elsa feels that the hospital is like a play; she stays still and the different characters come in, "say their piece, and leave." She falls back to sleep.

Like a theater spectator, Elsa feels immobile, captive while other people act around her. However, this sense of confinement is no longer terrifying to her, revealing that she's learning to live with polio and the challenges it sets before her.

10. THE LOVING BODY

Sister Penny is lying on the couch in her office. All the nurses are back from the dance and she can finally rest, but she can't stop thinking about Constable Ryan, one of the new policemen who stopped by earlier. She feels that something will inevitably happen with him. Suddenly, there's a tap at her window, and she sees him there. Sister Penny opens the door; without speaking, but in perfect understanding, he comes in and they make love. Afterwards, Sister Penny quickly gets dressed and Constable Ryan leaves. Neither of them cling to the other.

As a nurse and a caretaker, Sister Penny has appeared up to now impersonal and self-abnegating, although notable for her strong and pleasant appearance. Now, Sister Penny's own intimate desires come to the fore. Especially in her conservative society, it's notable that Sister Penny seems completely at ease with her sexuality, fulfilling her sexual needs without making too much of them.

Sister Penny has had many lovers. She feels that they've all understood her, knowing that she has no desire for marriage or even a long-term affair, and that her main concerns are her work and her daughter, Elizabeth Ann. Because of this, she feels they meet on equal terms, with a mutual desire for pleasure and joy. After she's fully dressed, she goes to check on the babies.

Sister Penny's vocation is much more important to her than achieving a conventional marriage or family. However, she understands that maintaining some romantic life and paying attention to her sexual needs feeds into her vocation, rather than distracting from it.


Sister Penny briefly had a husband, Alan Penny. However, he was killed at the beginning of the war in 1939, when Elizabeth Ann was four. Without the money to keep their own house, Sister Penny and her daughter moved in with Enid, Alan's mother, an arrangement that lasted long after the war's end.

Sister Penny's did once have a conventionally feminine life, which suggests she must have repudiated it for some deliberate reason.

Sister Penny began taking lovers among her patients, many of whom suffered debilitating injuries and had lost faith in society, God, and even their families. She felt they needed her kindness. Later, she became involved with Mervyn, an American soldier. She even considered moving to America to marry him, but he went missing in the Pacific. Later, she had an older lover named Harald, but his death put an end to their liaison.

Sister Penny's emotional attachment to her first lovers shows her initial ambivalence at pursuing a life outside conventional guidelines for women. However, her ultimate diffidence when these affairs end show that she's not looking to repeat her first marriage and values her solitude.

Although Sister Penny was discreet, Enid knew about the lovers. In revenge, on her deathbed she bequeathed her house to another relative, even though Sister Penny protested that she and Elizabeth Ann wouldn't have anywhere to live. By now headed to teachers' college, Elizabeth Ann boarded with her best friend's family, and Sister Penny moved to the **Golden Age**. Mother and daughter now meet every other Saturday and speak on the phone on Wednesday nights.

The bitter breakdown of her relationship with her mother underlines Sister Penny's inability to fulfill the restrictive role of wife and widow. She's also not quite at ease in her role as a mother; though she and Elizabeth Ann have parted without qualms on either side, their relationship seems formal and distant.

Although Sister Penny only has a small room now, she's very content. As a young woman she though she'd quit nursing once she got married, but now she finds her work sustains her more than her brief married life or even her relationship with her daughter. She thinks of herself as a "nomad," carrying only her few possessions and her professional skills. She feels nursing is an instinct within her; often, she doesn't even have to think before she makes decisions.

While Enid thought she was punishing her daughter-in-law, she in fact pushed Sister Penny to carve out a modest degree of independence and solitude. Finally leaving her marriage behind, she's been able to embrace both her vocation and her unconventional romantic life without guilt or apprehension.

11. BELLBIRDS

After Sundays with their families, the children enjoy returning to orderly lessons on Mondays. Mrs. Simmons begins the day with cheerful folk songs that even Frank likes to sing. Afterwards, Frank has to study English history and memorize a poem; as a New Australian, he doesn't know much about the British Empire or its literature. Frank protests that he's not even from the British Empire, but Mrs. Simmons insists that he lives here now, that the Queen belongs to Australia too, and that the British rule the world.

Precocious and irreverent, Frank's so eager to avoid schoolwork that he points out what he normally hides–his un-Australian roots. However, Mrs. Simmons' firmness and quick rebuttals are comforting because they make him feel like an ordinary child again, as well as reminding him that he belongs in Australia now.

Day patients also come to have lessons at the hospital. Frank is disgusted by them, because they remind him how deformed he will look once he's back in the real world. However, looking at Elsa, he stops feeling ashamed of their shared condition. He thinks that Elsa is like a savior; with her, he always feels safe and even superior to those around him.

Although Frank often feels crowded and annoyed at the Golden Age, he's also anxious about the isolation he'll face when he leaves. It's notable that besides providing an atmosphere of calm solitude, Elsa is also the antidote to this isolation.

Elsa leaves lessons to go to therapy, and Frank applies himself to memorizing the poem "Bellbirds." He doesn't like the forced rhyme scheme, and the words seem "false" to him, not like the poetry Sullivan wrote. He informs Mrs. Simmons that "poems don't have to rhyme anymore" and is frustrated with her for making him write a composition about the poem. He wheels away to find Elsa.

Frank is looking for a replacement mentor, someone to understand and inform his vocation just like Sullivan did. However, it's increasingly clear that such a mentor will probably not appear, and Frank must develop his skills on his own.

12. ANGEL WINGS

Sensing he's up to something, Lidja, the therapist, reluctantly lets Frank practice on the exercise bars. All the children love Lidja because she's so attuned to their bodies and so confident about their prospects for recovery. Frank is especially proud of Lidja because she's a New Australian like him. Frank knows that Lidja thinks he's too "shrewd" for the children's hospital, and sometimes he thinks so as well.

Lidja recognizes that Frank is a little too old to be treated like a child or to follow children's rules unquestioningly. While Frank certainly isn't as mature as he thinks he is, this is a reminder that his days as a child are coming inevitably to an end.

Frank finds Elsa in the therapy bath, where she's drifting in an ugly bathing suit inherited from her cousin. Wearing it, she remembers her aunt Nance's barely disguised disgust when she visited the last week, and feels ashamed both of the second-hand swimsuit and her crippled legs. She feels she's brought shame on her family by catching polio. When she opens her eyes, she sees Frank.

Just as her mother's worry motivated her to recover, Elsa again considers her own recovery from the point of view of her family's reaction. It's clear that Elsa feels very rooted in her family, but also that she spends more time worrying about them than her own health or happiness.

Examining her body, Frank tells Elsa that the bath looks like a pair of angel wings, and Elsa looks back at him quietly. However, Lidja catches them talking and brusquely ejects Frank, displeased. Frank feels his time at the **Golden Age** is limited.

Even though Frank wants to grow up, and to interact with Elsa as a teenager rather than a child, he knows that to do so hastens the end of his childhood, represented by his possible ejection from the Golden Age.

13. MEYER WALKS HOME

Meyer leaves the factory after his shift and feels invigorated by the unusually mild weather, which reminds him of Lake Balaton, where he spent his childhood. He decides to walk home. Even though he's grateful to be safe in Australia, he still longs for the city in which he grew up. Despite his nostalgia for Budapest, he thinks he'll never again "feel at home as he once had," anywhere in the world. Moreover, he feels that to love any place too much is "a vanity," especially since he's a Jew.

There's an acute tension between Meyer's longing for the country of his birth, and his bitter understanding that his country has cruelly turned on him. Not only does this betrayal make it impossible to live in Hungary, it makes it hard to trust any society enough to feel secure or at home, making him feel fundamentally isolated.

Even though he thinks of Perth as an "innocent" city, Meyer can imagine the streets bombed and bodies littering the steps of public buildings. Caught up in his imaginings, for a minute he sees his brother Janos lying dead in a heap of bodies.

Meyer's experiences in the war have disillusioned him with the possibilities for social order of any kind. This only increases his isolation, since it prevents him from committing to any new community.

Meyer shakes his head to dispel the memory. When he remembers his dead family now, it seems as if he always knew something bad would happen, that they were "marked out" to die. Suddenly, he wants to see Frank, and he starts walking to the **Golden Age**. He doesn't care that parents aren't allowed to visit during the week.

For Meyer, the only antidote to isolation or longing for his murdered family is the one son who miraculously survived the war. Meyer's quiet and unstinting devotion is touching, but his lack of other sources of happiness explains why Frank often feels oppressed by his parents' intense love.

Meyer walks past the prestigious Perth Modern School. Even though Frank spoke no English when they arrived in Australia, six years later he won a scholarship to that high school. His parents were overjoyed, celebrating with the neighbors and sending Frank to buy fish and chips. Later, they wondered if he caught polio in the crowded store.

Just as the Holocaust destroyed the Golds' security in Hungarian society, polio threatens Frank's assimilation into Australian society by hindering his education.

Arriving at the **Golden Age**, Meyer finds Frank reading *One Thousand and One nights*. Frank is delighted to see his father, and Meyer feels humbled by such a loving reception. Even though Meyer missed much of Frank's early life, father and son get along very well. Frank tells his father he's started to walk by himself, although Meyer suspects this is a lie.

Frank's obvious love for his father, despite the fact that they haven't spent much time together, is a testament to the strength of filial bonds, which can withstand and even thrive on separation and hardship.

Meyer has endured many things, but Frank's polio has been the hardest for him, since it emphasizes his inability to protect his son. He's glad that his own father died before the war and never knew what happened to his own sons. Soon, Meyer rises to leave; Frank knows that he can't whine for his father to stay, as the other children do. After Meyer leaves, Frank remembers he wanted to tell his father that he's a poet.

Both Meyer and Frank are conscious that their relationship is unusual. Unlike other fathers, even before the onset of polio Meyer was bitterly aware of his limited ability to take care of Frank. Similarly, Frank knows that because of the hardships they've shared his father requires more maturity from him than most parents would.

As Meyer is leaving he runs into Sister Penny, who's dressed up for a play at her daughter's college. Meyer's always been drawn to Sister Penny, but he finds her more attractive in her competent uniform than dressed in street clothes. He struggles to make conversation with her, but by talking about Frank she makes him feel at ease. Meyer sees a messy woman running into the hospital, who reminds him momentarily of his sister, Roszi. It's Elsa's mother, Margaret, who begs to be allowed to see her daughter.

Meyer is attracted to Sister Penny as a woman, but his preference for her uniform suggests that a large part of this attraction lies in her skill and competence in her work. Notably, these are also the qualities he respects most in his wife. Although they're very different women, the seriousness with which Ida and Sister Penny approach their vocations establishes a sense of similarity between them.

As he walks home, Meyer feels different, more kindly disposed to the city and landscape he normally considers harsh and unwelcoming. He attributes the change to his interaction with Sister Penny, whom he considers fundamentally like himself, "vibrant with life" but at the same time "solitary." He feels that they've both understood each other, although they chose not to draw any closer.

On his way to this hospital, Meyer was convinced of the inescapability of isolation; however, Sister Penny has reminded him that people who don't feel at home in conventional society can build lives of contented solitude. As it will be throughout the book, Meyer's new optimism is reflected by a more sympathetic eye toward the landscape around him.

As the train pulls into the station, Meyer remembers walking on the beach with Ida and Frank shortly after their arrival in Australia. Ida and Frank ran in the waves while he lay down in the sand, exhausted. He felt peaceful and lonely at the same time. He thinks about the phrase "lie down with me," and then wonders where it came from.

Even within his own family Meyer struggles with feelings of isolation. The phrase "lie down with me" suggests he craves increased closeness to the wife and son from whom he was separated for so long, but his inability to articulate his feelings any further shows how hard this is to achieve, even within a loving family.

14. MARGARET IN HER GARDEN

Margaret spends the morning before her visit to the hospital doing chores in the stiflingly hot house. As an excuse to go outside, she waters the lawn. The task reminds her of a job she used to have at a post-office in the desert south of Perth. When she walked outside her office, she felt the overwhelming solitude of her position, but she "did not feel alone." While Elsa was in the **Isolation Ward**, Margaret spent the nights pacing the grass and feeling like "she was lying on the heart of a great animal." Being among the vast workings of nature comforts her.

For Margaret, being in nature allows her to enjoy solitude without feeling alone. Even in times of crisis, like the onset of Elsa's polio, this solitude has comforted her more than being among her own family. Her craving for solitude likens her to Meyer, who's ill at ease in his new society; however, it also contrasts with his anxieties about becoming too isolated.

Margaret sees her neighbor Raymond's truck in the next driveway, which reminds her that he's delivering his produce to the markets in Perth, not far from the **Golden Age**. Bravely, she walks over and asks for a lift to the hospital. She's desperate to see Elsa because Jack, her husband, has just told her he can't drive her to the hospital that Sunday. Instead, he has to fix Nance's fence.

Although Margaret is normally shy and deferential, Elsa's polio has made her bold in ways she could never have imagined before. Just as the disease forces Elsa to develop new wisdom and fortitude, it makes her mother into a more daring and independent woman.

On the ride into Perth, Margaret feels shy being alone in the car with Raymond. Before Elsa got polio, she wasn't so bold and wouldn't have asked for a lift. Now, she's learned to demand what she needs and to shoulder past the fear and contempt that polio inspires in the community. Margaret remembers that, when Elsa was in the **Isolation Ward**, their pastor refused to come to the hospital to bless her. She's proud of Elsa for getting better without his help.

Margaret credits Elsa's recovery to her daughter's inner strength, while Elsa believes she pulled through out of worry for her mother. Mother and daughter have both lost some of their religious conviction during Elsa's stint in the Isolation Ward, but they've become more confident in their own strength and capacities.

Reading in bed, Elsa recognizes Margaret's footsteps before she sees her mother. Although she knows she should be happy to see her, surprise makes her unsettled and she questions her mother about how she got there, who is taking care of the baby, and what Jack will say. Elsa feels as though she's looking at her over-eager mother from a long distance, and she's a little peeved that her mother has interrupted her favorite part of the day, when she's used to being alone in the ward and reading.

Just like her mother, Elsa looks forward to parts of the day when she can be solitary and at peace. Although this is a habit they share, it ironically makes Elsa feel more distant from her mother. This is especially true since Elsa has been separated from her family for a long time; as a result of polio, she's become more accustomed to some solitude and independence, and it's frustrating to return abruptly to her old role as a daughter.

Margaret stops talking and Elsa relaxes a little. Her connection to her mother doesn't rest on language; Margaret is like a "mother animal" and always knows what's wrong and what to do without talking about it. Meanwhile, Margaret feels that Elsa is maturing rapidly in the hospital and growing away from her. She's sad that she can't do anything to help her daughter recuperate.

By comparing Elsa and Margaret's bond to that of two animals, the novel emphasizes its primal, incontrovertible strength. However, such a bond has its limits; while Margaret recognizes immediately that Elsa is growing mature and independent as a result of polio, her parental intuition doesn't give her the tools to close the distance she sees growing between her and her daughter.

As the nurses return to the ward from their tea, Margaret collects her things quickly, afraid of getting in trouble despite Elsa's brusque assurances that they won't mind. As she leaves, Elsa reflects that her mother has to get used to the hard truth that only she, Elsa, can "deal with what had happened to her." Still, she remembers that when she woke up in the **Isolation Ward**, her first thought was that her worry for her mother had kept her alive.

Elsa is torn between her intense love for her mother and her growing understanding that battling polio is an independent, solitary task. This tension manifests itself in a certain tactlessness towards Margaret and her anxious habits, although normally Elsa is very tender with her mother.

As she walks to the train station, Margaret worries about facing Jack. She knows he'll be deaf to her excuses and call her crazy, an accusation that always makes her cry.

Polio has strained Margaret's bond with Elsa, but this bond still much more intimate than her marital relationship. Even though it frustrates her, Elsa understands and respects Margaret's devotion and capacity as a mother; Jack views these qualities as evidence of instability.

Margaret loves all her children equally, but she has a special connection to Elsa; they have "grown up together," Elsa as a child and Margaret as a parent. Margaret remembers visiting her father in a nursing home to announce her marriage to Jack. Her father had said he hoped her husband wasn't bad tempered; even though she knew that's exactly what Jack was, and even though her father had always been bad-tempered himself, Margaret was pregnant with Elsa and too "deliriously cheerful" to be angry or worried. Elsa's birth made everything right in Margaret's life. Now, her sudden illness feels like a curse in a fairy tale.

Margaret's fulfillment as a mother is much greater than that which she's derived from relationships with the men in her life. While London imbues Margaret with almost preternatural abilities as a mother, it's important to note that she's not endorsing a conservative view of femininity. On the contrary, she identifies motherhood as a source of strength that allows women to defy men.

At the **Golden Age**, Frank sneaks out and whispers to Elsa through the door of the girls' ward. He remarks that Elsa looks nothing like her mother, but Elsa doesn't want to talk about Margaret. Still, Frank is delighted that Elsa casually says she'll see him the next day. To him, this is proof that "they belonged to no one but themselves."

Elsa's friendship helps Frank achieve the balance between isolation and solitude that so many characters struggle to find. Elsa makes him forget about the other people by whom they're constantly surrounded; on the other hand, her presence keeps him from feeling lonely.

15. CHRISTMAS

Most of the children go home for Christmas, but Meyer and Ida volunteer to serve lunch to those staying at the **Golden Age** so the nurses can have the day off. Frank is worried that his parents will embarrass him by acting foreign or criticizing Australia. He wishes Elsa could stay, but her father picks her up in the morning. Frank watches Jack hovering over her and knows that she must be frustrated by his pity.

Perhaps because the Golds have survived so many challenges before, Frank's parents don't coddle or pity him the way many others, including Elsa's parents, do their children. Although Frank is frustrated by his parents' inability to conform to Australian society, Elsa's awkward interaction with her father serves to highlight the mutual understanding that exists among the Golds.

Even though Warren Barrett finds it hard to understand why the **Golds** don't celebrate Christmas, the lunch goes off well. Meyer entertains everyone by exaggerating his own accent and Ida plays Christmas carols on the piano. Meyer finds this new and unusual celebration strange, but not unpleasant.

Even though the Golds do "act foreign," as Frank feared, they're immediately popular at the Golden Age, showing that, contrary to Frank's convictions, they can (at least sometimes) belong in Australian society without giving up their European personalities.

Sister Penny has Christmas lunch with Elizabeth Ann at the house of her friend, Gillian. Sister Penny has never seen her daughter so happy and confident, but she feels left out by the family jokes she doesn't understand and the general indifference to her presence. Sister Penny immediately recognizes that Elizabeth Ann is in love with Gillian's older brother, Tim. Saying she's needed at the hospital, Sister Penny leaves early.

While Frank is feeling unexpectedly close to and pleased with his parents, Sister Penny feels a new distance from her daughter as Elizabeth Ann seeks out the conventional family life Sister Penny has so determinedly eschewed. While Sister Penny seems consummately at home in the hospital, her unease here demonstrates that she too experiences feelings of isolation.

Returning to the **Golden Age**, Sister Penny is inexplicably pleased to see Meyer. She feels that he's much like here and that "nothing escapes him." Ida plays Mozart before bed to general delight. Frank is relieved to see his mother on the piano, because for once she's relaxed, in command, and not paying attention to him. When she plays piano it doesn't seem to matter that they are a family of refugees in a foreign country.

Sister Penny and Meyer's mutual attraction underscores the similarities in their character; both often seek out solitude, but (most recently Sister Penny) worry about feeling isolated in situations that should make them happy. It's important to note that what Frank respects most about his mother is her vocation, both because he's beginning to share her passion for art and because when she's at the piano he can appreciate her without feeling stifled by her.

Sister Penny, who rarely rests or listens to music, is struck by Ida's excellence, which reminds her of her own instinctive skills as a nurse. She immediately decides that Ida must be persuaded to do a benefit concert for the hospital.

Sister Penny's observation is a reminder that the novel doesn't just value artistic vocations, but rather uses the glamour and aesthetic beauty of art to imbue all work with value and dignity.

Like most of the children returning in the evening, Elsa is exhausted and incommunicative. When the children go home they're reminded that family life has gone on without them, that their siblings are playing with their toys or sleeping in their rooms. Some are frustrated by their parents' unconcealed pity, while Malcolm Poole is overwhelmed by his father's insistence that he should be walking by now. Only Albert Sutton, the coddled youngest of six children, is reluctant to leave his family. When he cries, his oldest sister picks him up and dances him around the ward until he calms down.

While they're at the hospital, the children spend their time waiting for their mothers to visit and pining for home. The holiday reminds them, however, that the family life they're returning to is much different from the one they left behind. This phenomenon, and the feelings of isolation it causes, are very similar to Ida and Meyer's feelings about their expulsion from Hungary—forming another link between the two main challenges the characters have to survive.

At night, Frank goes to visit Elsa. By now he's unused to spending a day without her; he has no one else with whom to share his feelings, or with whom he feels truly at home. Frank sits on Elsa's bed and she tells him that he's lucky not to have siblings. When he asks why, Elsa tells her onset story.

Frank thought he'd never feel at home in the Golden Age, but now he doesn't like when its routines are interrupted for a day. However, no matter how happy he's become to linger in the environs of childhood, the fact that his happiness rests on Elsa is a reminder that he's no longer quite a child.

Before polio, Elsa had tennis lessons; her sister Sally was annoyed by this, because she wanted to play tennis too but instead had to watch baby Jane. During one lesson, Elsa felt sick and trudged home; when she reached the driveway, she collapsed on top of her bike. Sally came over and shouted that Elsa was late and that it was her turn to watch Jane. Enraged that Elsa didn't respond, Sally kicked her over and over, until the neighbor, Mrs. Hoffman, pulled her away and saw that something was seriously wrong.

Elsa's strained relationship with her sister makes her closeness to Margaret even more notable. It's also a reminder to Frank, who's been comparing himself to Sullivan's seemingly perfect life, that even the native Australians he tries to emulate have as many familial issues as he does.

After Elsa tells her story, she and Frank sit in silence. Suddenly, Frank kisses her. Then, he returns to the Boys ward and starts writing in his prescription pad. Even though he's devoted to Elsa, he feels some sympathy for Sally, whom he sees as "the unfavorite," just like he often is.

Frank is most overcome by Elsa when he's most aware of how different she is from him–for example, when he likens himself to the antagonistic Sally. This is a notable contrast to Frank's frequent frustration with his mother, despite the fact that they're very similar; it suggests that Frank is struggling to respect and embrace his own character.

When Meyer and Ida return home, Ida asks what he thinks of Sister Penny. Meyer equivocates, not wanting to admit that he feels drawn to her. Even though he loves and is faithful to Ida, he's fundamentally private about his feelings and feels its within his purview to be attracted to other women. Ida is depressed that they celebrated Christmas in a polio hospital, but Meyer insists it was a good day.

It's notable that Meyer maintains an emotional distance from everyone in his life, even his wife. In this respect, he's very similar to his son, even though they have largely divergent personalities.

16. THE VERANDAH

After Christmas, a heat wave strikes the entire state. The children stay inside the ward, trying to stay cool and throwing spitballs at each other. After tea, they're allowed to sit on the verandah, and the boys race each other in their wheelchairs. The families living in houses across the road watch them, and the patients feel jealous of the healthy children playing noisily in the street. By comparison, they feel strange and deformed; they know they'll feel this way constantly once they leave the hospital for good.

The verandah is a liminal space between sickness and health, between life within the hospital and life at home. The children are unusually boisterous here, as they must have been before contracting polio, and by watching the neighbors they remember their former childhoods. However, the healthy children, and the proximity to ordinary families, also reminds them that their lives have changed forever, and that they're now more comfortable in the hospital than they would be at home.

Frank sits by himself. After so many years of living with strangers, he's learned how to be around other people while preserving his own solitude. He watches Elsa, who's sitting with a younger girl named Ann Lee. Ann Lee lives in the mining town of Wiluna, hundreds of miles away. She tells Elsa about the wild horses, called brumbies, that come to town searching for water on dry nights like this. When Ann Lee was living at home with polio, she saw a troop of brumbies come to her front door, but she couldn't get up to fill a trough with water. After this incident she knew she had to get therapy, so as not to be so helpless again.

While Frank often feels too crowded or too alone, on the verandah he achieves a contended balance, comforted by the others' presence without being part of their group. It's notable that Ann Lee explicitly references independence as her goal in therapy. All the children are adjusting to new lives of limited physical independence, but, paradoxically, they're also developing a mental independence and strength they didn't possess before.

17. THE SEA

To cheer the children up after the heat wave, all the nurses except Sister Penny take them on an excursion to the shore. They set up camp in an old farmhouse on the beach, where the children can keep their crutches and rest when they're tired. Even though they can't stand in the water by themselves, all the children are invigorated by their proximity to the ocean and the excitement of eating outside. Only Elsa is sad, because she's always lived by the sea and visiting now reminds her of all the things she'll never be able to do again. She thinks about Sally riding the bike that was her pride and joy before polio.

Elsa's sadness is a reminder that even though she's survived polio, its mental consequences linger. This episode mirrors Meyer's recollection of walking by the sea with Ida and Frank; although the family has survived the war and is finally safe in Australia, he feels uneasy and sad thinking about the life they've left behind.

Sitting by the farmhouse, Frank feels that he wants to write a poem. The shabby farmhouse reminds him of the migrant camp where the **Golds** stayed when they arrived in Australia. From his parents' stories, he knows they used to vacation on an enormous lake in Hungary surrounded by large summer houses and forests, but he can't remember any of this. He can't even remember how to speak Hungarian anymore, but he doesn't care because he's excited to learn and write in English.

It's notable that Frank knows the house "should" remind him of his family's old estate, but it actually brings to mind a migrant camp. All the Golds are struggling to adapt to Australian society, but because Frank completely lacks his parents' rich memories of Hungary, it's easier for him to commit to assimilating and shed the remnants of their old life, like his native language.

After dinner, the children watch the sunset. Knowing that Elsa is sad, Frank seeks her out, and when he finally sees her, the poem he's been searching for occurs to him. He marvels that Elsa inspires all of his poems now. He still can't finish "On My Last Day on Earth," but now he wants to write a new collection about Elsa, called "On My First Day on Earth."

Frank's vocation is now oriented around Elsa, rather than Sullivan. His new title shows that while he's still influenced by his old friend, he's more interested in exploring his new life than in elegizing his old one.

Frank tells Elsa that if they were animals she would be a **golden** palomino, and he'd be a fox following her. This makes Elsa laugh, although he's being serious. Elsa thinks that there's something "hungry" about Frank; he's always seizing what he wants, as if otherwise someone will take it away. She wonders if this was because he lived through the war. She wonders if the things he writes can really be poetry, because they don't rhyme. Elsa's less certain about her feelings than Frank is, but she misses him when he's not there, and she always listens for his voice when she wakes up. As they walk back to the group, they surreptitiously hold hands.

Although Frank is supposedly the cleverer one, and Elsa has only a vague idea of what his childhood was like, she has an acute intuition for his impulses. It's notable that the instincts Frank developed to survive during the war still dominate his character and his approach to relationships, explaining his brash and insistent attitude towards his developing friendship with Elsa.

18. A LONG COOL DRINK

Sister Penny always leaves the door of the **Golden Age** open. While the children are at the sea, she comes into the unlocked entry to see Meyer standing there with a crate of soft drinks which he had brought over as a treat. He brings them down to the kitchen and opens a bottle to share with Sister Penny, telling her that he's changed jobs, and is now a driver for a friend's company, Bickford's Cool Drinks. He loves the new job because he gets to work alone and explore the city.

Sister Penny and Meyer often run into each other when they're expecting to be alone, but they're always happy about these encounters. Their similar personalities allow them to feel contentedly solitary even while being together.

Meyer tells Sister Penny that he's beginning to understand Perth, meanwhile admiring her "incongruous" beauty–he's surprised to find someone so beautiful in a country he's come to think of as provincial and ugly, and especially in a polio hospital. He likes her solid body and the aura of health she gives off. She reminds him of people who had helped him during the war, like his brother's Christian girlfriend, Suszi. In light of the things he's witnessed, such goodness seems "extraordinary" to him.

For Meyer, Sister Penny both embodies Australia and, through her strange beauty, helps him see it in a better light. While many things remind him of the losses he endured during the war, it's notable that Sister Penny brings to mind rare instances of kindness that allowed his family to survive.

Looking at Meyer, Sister Penny is struck by the sense that he's lost a lot. She's reminded of Ida, whose face is "sharpened" by grief and fear.

Just as polio leaves its marks on the children's bodies, Sister Penny senses that even Meyer and Ida's faces have been indelibly altered by the effort of surviving the Holocaust.

Meyer asks Sister Penny if she has a home of her own, and she tells him that she lives in the hospital. To be alone, she says, she goes to the ocean and swims or walks along the sand. The phrase that occurred to Meyer when he thought of his own family at the beach, "lie down with me," returns to him. Sister Penny hears Fabio crying and leaves the kitchen briskly.

While Meyer felt uneasy and alone while walking with his family on the beach, when Sister Penny mentions the same activity he's able to see it—and even the strange refrain that has occurred to him—in the happier light of intentional solitude.

Meyer drives away from the **Golden Age** still thinking about Sister Penny. He doesn't feel like he's doing anything wrong; the "meaninglessness" he experienced during the war has liberated him from "conventional virtue." He's no longer bothered by the heat, or by the long flat road stretching in front of him. Briefly, he wonders if "there's a poet growing up here somewhere."

The abrupt collapse of order and morals Meyer experienced during the war means he can never feel at home in a society, like Perth, that's completely oriented around conventional morals. It's ironic that he wonders about a poet, since in fact the poet is his young son, inspired by the very landscape which Meyer finds so unlovely.

19. LIDJA

Lidja, who has been on holiday with her husband, is still away a week past the appointed date for her return. One evening, Sister Penny announces sadly that Lidja has drowned in a freak sailing accident. She doesn't pray or tell the children Lidja is in Heaven, because she doesn't want to preach about things in which she doesn't believe.

In its sudden senselessness, Lidja's drowning is much like the onset of polio or the war in Europe. It's a reminder to the children that although they've made it through one crisis, challenges to survival are manifold and can crop up at any time.

Elsa and Frank stay on the verandah later than the others, holding hands. While they're brushing their teeth together, Frank asks if a shark might eat Lidja's body, and Elsa says it's possible.

It's interesting that Frank wonders about the fate of Lidja's physical body; perhaps he does so because she was so dedicated to facilitating the children's own physical recuperation.

Moira, the new therapist arrives. She's good-tempered and kind, but everyone misses Lidja's ferocity and her constant injunctions to "think" their muscles back into action. Her death serves as a reminder that no matter how many people want to help them, the children are ultimately alone in defeating or succumbing to polio.

When Lidja was alive, the children noticed that she was more helpful to them than their own mothers, untrained in nursing, were. Now that two sources of protection have been abruptly stripped away, the children are again reminded of how isolating polio can be.

20. THE QUEEN

The Queen is scheduled to visit Perth in March, but her visit might be cancelled because of the rising number of polio cases. The children at the **Golden Age** feel vaguely guilty, as if they're responsible for the trouble. Eventually, the visit isn't cancelled after all, but the Queen and Duke aren't allowed to touch or eat anything in the city and will sleep on their ship.

Even though they're necessary, the precautions make the children feel like pariahs. It's a reminder of how understandably terrified of polio the community is; it's also a reminder of how hard it will be for those stricken by the disease to reintegrate into the community.

The children take a field trip to see the city decorated and transformed in the Queen's honor. Everyone starts to pay more attention to the large photograph of the Queen and Duke that hangs in the hospital. She's familiar to them because her face is everywhere, but at the same time she's too beautiful and glamorous to seem real.

The Queen's mingled familiarity and glamour is reminiscent of Elsa's earlier sense that her real mother is accompanied by flawlessly angelic one. However, it's the flawed, corporeal mother who cares for and protects Elsa; in this sense the analogy is a reminder that no matter how much they glorify her, the Queen has no real effect on the children's lives.

Everyone starts to improve themselves, as if in the Queen's honor. Fabio stops wetting the bed, and Frank and Elsa walk everywhere instead of using their wheelchairs. Meanwhile, Meyer is skeptical of the obsession with the royals, especially coming from citizens of a peripheral colony. He's permanently disillusioned with monarchism.

It's understandable that the visit, and all the pomp and tradition it entails, seems ridiculous to Meyer. He's just witnessed firsthand how inadequate these old rituals are to prevent war and barbarity.

Susan Bennett keeps a scrapbook of the royal visit. She's especially excited because her parents, high-ranking public servants, are going to a garden party with the Queen. When they come to visit, Susan's parents, Rodney and Tikka, are glamorous and well-groomed, although Elsa notes that Susan's bathing suit is even shabbier than her own. Rodney and Tikka are very excited about the upcoming party and tell Susan loudly that they thought they wouldn't be invited, having a daughter with polio. They tell her they'll drop by after the party and Susan waits up past her bedtime, but they don't come until later in the week. Susan is disappointed with them.

Elsa's quiet observation says a lot about the Bennetts' parenting style, as well as the values of those who are too obsessed with the royal visit. Frank wants his parents to become more Australian so he can feel more at home, but the behavior of Susan's parents—integrated and successful within Australian society, and obviously ashamed of their daughter's condition—shows that such a single-minded focus on fitting in is good for no one, especially not children.

The children go into the city to watch the Queen's parade through the city; all they see is her gloved arm waving mechanically, and the Duke's white smile. Even Frank is excited by the pageantry.

Frank's childish delight shows how different he is from his parents, able to enjoy the excitement of European royalty without being reminded of its failure during the war.

Meanwhile, Ida is practicing frantically for the concert she's agreed to give at the **Golden Age**, as well as having a new dress made by an immigrant friend. Meyer is happy to hear her playing again, and reports to Frank that she's very nervous, not having performed since they were living in a refugee camp in Vienna. Since his new job is flexible, Meyer visits Frank all the time now. Tanned and healthy, he looks increasingly Australian and nothing like his son. Frank thinks he looks different, and Meyer says the past seems farther away. He's finally settling into Australian life, rather than seeing it as a temporary arrangement.

Both Ida and Meyer are a little happier and more active than they were at the beginning of the novel. However, it's notable that Ida achieves this by retrieving (to some extent) the art and diligence that defined her pre-war life. On the other hand, Meyer completely sheds his urbane businessman persona. He's taking on Australian attributes and beginning to superficially fit in, even though he doesn't quite feel emotionally at home.

To everyone's excitement, one of the bouquets presented to the Queen is sent, second-hand, to the **Golden Age**. The Queen returns to England uninfected, although a number of Perth residents contract polio in the next weeks, possibly from standing in crowds to see her. Meanwhile, the Jewish scientist Jonah Salk is gaining attention for the polio vaccination he's developing. A year later, the vaccination will be ready for use, and summer polio epidemics will be eradicated.

The novel usually focuses on specific events, but for a moment it zooms out to consider the polio epidemic as a whole. While it's obviously good that a vaccine is in the works, it makes all the children's suffering seem meaningless and avoidable, a fluke of history. The inability to rationalize the disease is similar to Meyer and Ida's inability to find sense in their ordeal during the Holocaust.

21. IDA AND MEYER

Meyer comes home on the afternoon of the concert to hear Ida practicing. He's sweating in his work clothes, but the music arrests him immediately. After a few weeks of intense practice, Ida has recovered some of the agility she'd had as a pianist in Hungary. Ida claims that her career is over and she can never be a professional in Australia, but Meyer thinks this pessimism is her "revenge" on Fate for the tragedies of their life. Meyer thinks that for her, this performance is a show of gratitude to Fate for sparing Frank's life. Like many performers, Ida is superstitious, especially about her work.

The contrast between Meyer's manual labor and Ida's frantic practicing is a reminder that hard work of any kind shares common value and dignity. Meyer's respect for his wife's gift and his understanding of her inner motivations is touching; it's also notable given the obtuse and self-centered attitudes of many of the novel's husbands, such as Jack Briggs.

Meyer enters the living room to see a sweaty Ida playing in only her slip, her hair messy and untied. She tells Meyer that she's out of shape and her playing would never be accepted in Hungary, and Meyer reminds her that her audience won't know enough about classical music to judge. Ida retorts that even ignorant people "respond to excellence" and that therefore it's "a sin" to perform if one can't perform well. Meyer loves the haughty but unstinting pride Ida takes in her work. He turns on the heater for her bath.

Even though Ida's frequent and unfavorable comparisons of Australia to Hungary seem snobby, she's actually driven by the very egalitarian sentiment that anyone can and should appreciate great music. Her determination to measure up to Hungarian standards is therefore endearing, a sign of respect towards the Australians she often claims to disdain.

22. THE CONCERT

When she arrives at the **Golden Age**, Ida can see that they've tried hard to create a concert venue, setting up a spotlight, renting folding chairs, and printing programs. Still, she's a little scornful and embarrassed at performing so informally, and she worries about humiliating herself. When the parents met to discuss the concert, some suggested it should be turned into a kind of talent show with other parents singing or telling jokes, but Ida was so frosty that the suggestion was dropped.

For Ida, the concert is a test of her ability to transfer her old gifts into a new and unfamiliar society. So far, she's held back from assimilating in seeming haughtiness. Her anxiety now shows there was much more fear than scorn in her earlier ambivalence towards returning to the piano.

The audience trickles in and nurses help the children to their seats. Families of patients and staff have come. Meyer is setting out soft drinks donated by Bickford's. Ida is comforted and unsettled to know that only Frank and Meyer know enough about music to judge or appreciate her work, but she's still determined to do her best. Her new blue gown now seems ridiculous, an attempt to preserve the rituals of her career in Budapest in an obscure Australian city. She feels intensely foreign.

The concert is a reminder of everything the Golds share in common, no matter how much time they've spent apart. At the same time that it solidifies her feelings about her family, it makes Ida feel even less Australian than usual, which induces anxiety.

Ida sees Frank sitting in the front row next to Elsa. He's talking rapidly and Ida can see that he's completely in love with the girl next to him.

While other adults (like Lidja) are uncomfortable with the intensity of Frank and Elsa's relationship, it doesn't seem to bother Ida, who's unburdened by stereotypes about how children should and shouldn't act.

Sister Penny watches Meyer, noting how it always seems like he's watching events from a distance. She's invited Elizabeth Ann to the concert but her daughter isn't coming, probably because Tim Budd, her boyfriend, doesn't like classical music.

Meyer's aloofness from events reminds Sister Penny of her own remove, especially regarding her daughter's life. While she's ambivalent about the new distance between her and Elizabeth Ann, it doesn't seem so bad to be like the calm and thoughtful Meyer.

Sister Penny introduces Ida, mispronouncing the names of all her awards but saying sincerely how honored she feels that Ida is playing at the **Golden Age**. Looking at Ida, she feels the Golds have altered her life with their "sharp attentiveness" and "frankness."

Even though Sister Penny doesn't understand much about the Golds' previous life, she does her best to honor it, showing rare understanding and hospitality. Noting their "frankness," she, like Sullivan, picks up on the way Frank's name reflects his actual personality and that of his family.

Ida lowers her fingers onto the keyboard, reminding Sister Penny of a surgeon beginning his work. During her three pieces, which she plays "bare-armed like a workman," the entire audience is still. They're transfixed by her dress and exotic appearance, which convince them she must have been famous in Hungary, and by the beauty of the music, which they've never experienced before. Even the babies are quiet.

Describing Ida's arms, the novel again makes clear that art isn't effete or inaccessible, but a kind of hard work and devotion that anyone can appreciate. Moreover, although Ida's excellence does underline her foreignness in the eyes of her audience, it makes them value her differences rather than looking down on her as a refugee.

When Ida finishes, the audience is silent and then applauds wholeheartedly. She looks at Frank and they smile at each other, feeling unusually close for a moment. When he watches her play, Frank forgets all his quarrels and appreciates her "strength, her vast determination." It reminds him of her fierce confidence that he'll learn to walk again. Ida feels that the concert was worth it, no matter who the audience was.

Frank understands that Ida's tenacity and perseverance in her vocation is directly linked to her determination that her family survive and thrive. Even though these attributes often manifest in the intensity that annoys him, by viewing Ida through the lens of her vocation Frank is able to truly value his mother.

Meyer watches Sister Penny usher the audience towards the drinks. In the midst of the crowd, it seems like they've never had any connection at all. He sees one of the patients Albert, with his five older siblings and is reminded of his own siblings, now mostly dead, and a recent nightmare of his time in the labor camp. He's reminded that he no longer believes in the innate goodness of people or countries.

While Ida and even Frank are flushed with the success of the concert, hearing his wife play as she used to in Hungary reminds Meyer of the end of their Hungarian life. Even as Ida seems to find a balance between foreignness and belonging, Meyer remains skeptical of assimilating into any society, since they could all collapse at any time.

Rodney Bennet blusteringly informs Ida that her performance was "first-class" and wonders if she would play for a cocktail party at her house. Haughtily, Ida declines. Nance Briggs asks if she can give Ida's name to an old colleague who works in radio broadcasting. Meanwhile, Ida thinks about her poor technique and imagines Julia shaking her head. She feels she's cheated the audience out of a good concert, but also knows she has to accustom herself to working in this new country and performing for these new audiences.

Even though Rodney is condescending, he gives Ida the chance to affirm her own confidence in herself by rebuffing him. It's notable that even the most close-minded of the audience, like the annoying Nance Briggs, are overwhelmed by Ida's performance. However, general acceptance isn't enough to make Ida feel at ease with herself, showing she won't become immediately accustomed to playing in this new environment.

Frank and Elsa escape onto the verandah, wanting to be alone. They feel more at ease with each other than with their families. Elsa says she liked the Mozart the best, because it reminded her of "Twinkle, Twinkle," and Frank resolves to start teaching her piano.

Even when Frank and Elsa crave alone time, they still want to be together. Their quiet companionship shows that for them, solitude is more a reflective state of mind than the fact of being alone.

23. ALBERT

When the children are in bed after the concert, Albert decides to run away. Having just seen his family, he's unbearably homesick and can't stand the thought of being away from them. He gets dressed and wheels out of the hospital towards the railway station. The road climbs steeply uphill, and Albert isn't strong enough to get the wheelchair all the way up. Tired, he rolls into the grass and falls asleep.

Albert is the only child who feels unequivocally more at home with his family than at the Golden Age. As a very young boy, it's easy for him to feel not only that he's physically able to get himself home, but that he'll have no trouble returning to the life he left behind.

When he wakes up, Albert tries again and gets almost to the top, but pauses for breath without putting the breaks on. He rolls backward, swerves into the grass and topples over, crushed by the chair. He decides to rest for a minute and try again.

Despite Albert's childish confidence, his wheelchair accident is a visceral reminder of the barriers between all the children and their pre-polio childhoods.

24. ANN LEE

As it turns out, Albert breaks his leg and has to go to the hospital in Perth. Scolded by the hospital governors, Sister Penny locks the doors at night, the nurses check the beds carefully, and all the children seem chastened and quiet.

As a result of the accident, the Golden Age has to surrender some of its unconventional ease, which is what made it such a good place for the children to recuperate. The concerns and conventions of the outside world are finally encroaching on what had been a remarkably secluded shelter.

One afternoon while Sister Penny is out, a strange man arrives at the **Golden Age**. It turns out to be Ann Lee's father. To her mute delight, he picks her up and swings her around in the air. Gathering up her few possessions, he informs her happily that he's taking her home.

Mr. Lee's arrival is one of the novel's many touching descriptions of the devotion between parents and child—a bond that, regardless of families' individual flaws, is universal and helps them transcend the challenge of polio.

Sister Penny tries to persuade Mr. Lee that Ann Lee needs to stay at the hospital to truly recover her ability to walk, but Mr. Lee says he and his wife felt a "call" to take her home. Wearily, Sister Penny concedes; she's upset because she knows Ann Lee will limp for the rest of her life. For the first time, she's not optimistic about her patients.

Despite the beauty of their bond, it's important that Mr. Lee's love for Ann Lee ultimately prevents her from getting the therapy she needs. While she's happy to be with her parents, she'll never achieve the independence for which she first came to the hospital.

25. BLUE AIR

Restless, Sister Penny takes the afternoon off and visits one of her longstanding lovers, Tucker. He's a polio patient whom she nursed in IDB during one of the first epidemics. Now he lives in an old farmhouse built by his grandfather.

Because she knows that Ann Lee will never walk again, Sister Penny appears for the first time frustrated with her vocation. While she's usually a beacon of calmness, she now appears more like Ida–both intensely devoted to her work and unsure if she can succeed.

Tucker always seems perfectly at home in his house and in the grassland surrounding it, and because of this Sister Penny feels at peace when she sees him. While she sleeps, she wonders about the cause of her malaise. She remembers looking at Meyer's face during the concert; observing his complete detachment, she felt the connection between them was somehow severed. Now it seems nothing has been completely right since.

It's notable that when Sister Penny is upset she seeks out someone who both understands her need for solitude and can relieve her isolation. She shares this impulse with Meyer, who in fact turns to her to provide this sense of peace.

In the morning, Sister Penny has a feeling that something is wrong and desperately wants to call the **Golden Age**, but Tucker doesn't have a phone. When she finds a pay phone, Hadley, a nurse, informs her that she's found Frank in Elsa's bed and called the hospital governors. Sister Penny scolds her for taking such drastic action, knowing this will have consequences for everyone.

Frank and Elsa have been hovering between childhood friendship and teenage romance for most of the novel; what they've done now might not alter their relationship in their own eyes, but in the view of the adults around them they've effectively ended their childhood.

26. THE THIRD COUNTRY

Elsa feels a change is coming over her, mostly in regard to her feelings for Frank. He's become so familiar that his face is like a "mirror," and she's always longing to be with him. Frank says that this is love; to Elsa's surprise, he's not shy about love but wants to talk about it all the time. Elsa and Frank do their rehabilitation exercises together and seem to be progressing more rapidly than before.

Being with Frank introduces Elsa to an emotiveness which, in her reserved and often terse family, she's never experienced. It's notable that their wonder and happiness contributes to their recovery, suggesting that, to some extent, physical strength depends on mental strength.

Frank tells Elsa about hiding in the ceiling and living in refugee camps, even though Elsa can't quite appreciate the magnitude of the disasters he's lived through. In turn, Elsa recounts all Margaret's stories about her childhood, and tells Frank about growing up in her rural neighborhood. Frank thinks of a new poem to articulate all these feelings; he'll call it "The Third Country," and it will be a collection addressing both the war and polio, and how these "two devils" brought him to Elsa.

While the novel abounds with subtle comparisons, here Frank makes an explicit connection between the two traumas through which he's lived. Unlike his mother, who's at times overwhelmed by the compounded tragedies in their lives, through his poetic vocation and love for Elsa Frank is able to confront, and to some extent move past, these challenges.

In the darkness after lights out, Frank scribbles the first lines to the new poem. Then, knowing Sister Penny isn't there, he sneaks out to visit Elsa. This is the night he's discovered in her bed.

This night, which marks Frank's progress towards mental recovery, will also change him from a child to a teenager in the eyes of those around him. It's a reminder that even milestones of progress can have bittersweet consequences.

After this incident, the hospital governors expel Frank and Elsa from the **Golden Age**. First, they question Elsa intensely, implying that Frank had forced his attentions on her and trying to put all the blame on him. Elsa refuses to exculpate herself and feels deeply insulted by the men's insinuations.

Elsa's indignation highlights both the purity of her relationship with Frank and its ambiguity–the inability to fit it into categories like friendship or romance. In contrast, the governors are able to label the relationship and to impute bad motives on its participants, especially Frank. Unburdened by convention, Elsa has a much more acute emotional understanding of her relationship than do her elders.

In turn, Sister Penny has to explain herself to the governors and account for the lax rules that allowed a boy to sneak into the Girls' ward. She tries to explain the unique nature of Frank and Elsa's bond, but is aware she's making the situation even worse. She knows she should start looking for another job.

It's notable that Sister Penny–who herself maintains an unorthodox love life–is the only one who understands Frank and Elsa. Through her, the novel argues that conventional ideas about what kind of love is acceptable do more to degrade people than protect them.

27. POETRY

In his first weeks at home, Frank spends every day at the city library, working methodically through the poetry section. Taking the tram is difficult, and he's always worried about seeing someone he knows. A kind librarian befriends him, even showing him special editions; normally, Frank would be interested and charming with her, but he's too depressed to take interest in others right now.

Bereft of Elsa, Frank loses even the precocity that got him through his initial hospitalization at the IDB. The only thing that sustains him is his vocation; through his long hours at the library, the novel argues for the psychological benefits of devotion to hard work.

Even though he's returning to the familiarity of home life, Frank feels deeply alone without the noise and routine of the **Golden Age**. None of his old clothes fit, and he feels stifled by his parents' attention. When he looks in the mirror he sees how lopsided and gawky he is; being surrounded by other polio patients, and particularly by Elsa, had shielded him from shame about his looks.

Frank's feelings contrast with his initial reaction to the Golden Age, when he saw the institution as babyish and the other children as weaker than him. Now he realizes that living among other patients gave him a modicum of independence and insulated him from the social stigma of disability.

Meyer and Ida aren't angry with Frank; they're amused by his expulsion, which they see as an example of colonial Anglo-Saxon prudery. To them, it's natural that two sweethearts would want to be together at night. However, as immigrants they know they don't have enough standing to argue against it, and they know they have to learn to live according to the mores of their new society.

Just like when Frank first caught polio, Ida and Meyer are revealed as powerless to protect him from larger forces influencing his life. It's another reminder that no matter how much Frank loves his parents, he can't depend on them for all things, as he did when he was younger.

Frank feels that the **Golden Age** staff displayed a "lack of faith" in him, refusing to help him when he needed it most. Even Sister Penny didn't argue fiercely enough to keep him and Elsa together. He knows that the governors wanted to expel him and not Elsa, and he's touched that she sacrificed herself for him. It's only when he reads poetry that Frank stops feeling "discarded."

Frank doesn't understand that Sister Penny did what she could for him, and this shows poignantly that in many senses he is still a child, and does still expect adults to protect him, regardless of repeated evidence that they can't always do so.

In the fall, Frank has to start Modern School, to which he still has a scholarship. The prospect, once exciting, is now unnerving given his disability. Even though he's carefully adopted an Australian accent and Australian clothes, Frank knows he'll never fit in among the other kids. He feels that he's been "marked out from the start."

Frank's sense of fatalism is similar to Meyer's declaration that he now remembers his murdered siblings as "marked" by death. Even as Frank surmounts the obstacles he faces, he's uncertain about his ability to keep going and, just as importantly, to be happy despite the things he's survived.

The librarian directs Frank to a bookshop, O'Harrell's, across the city; with planning and some difficulty, Frank negotiates the long walk. He immediately likes Hal, the homely, chain-smoking owner who takes out various novels to show Frank. Frank covets a collection by Hart Crane, but he doesn't have enough money to pay for it. Curiously, Hal asks if Frank himself writes poetry, and Frank eagerly says he does. Excited by the rare opportunity to be taken seriously, the only lines he can think of are Sullivan's. After reciting them, he feels instantly guilty and confesses. Hal, unperturbed, says that if the Hart Crane book doesn't sell soon he'll give it to Frank and let him pay it off when he can.

Frank hasn't even told his parents about his vocation yet, so his visit to Hal's is his first chance to be taken seriously. His slip-up with Sullivan's poetry shows how much his work is still entwined with his adoration of his mentor; but it's also clear from his rigorous exploration of poetry that he's determined to broaden his knowledge and carve out a niche for himself.

At home, Frank lies in bed with his prescription pad. Since he's been separated from Elsa, no poetry comes to him. He wants to talk to his parents about poetry, but he's afraid they won't like his work or understand his confidence in his vocation. Ida especially, having lost her career as an artist, wants Frank to study something practical, like law.

Frank's writer's block shows that a vocation depends on more than pure talent. For both Frank and Ida, work facilitates the artist's relationships with those around him, but it also depends on those relationships to survive.

Frank tries to contact the Backhouse family to return Sullivan's poetry, but is informed that they've moved abroad and left no forwarding address.

Here, Frank realizes exactly how cut-off he is from his former mentor. Now, he has to develop his work on his own.

At night, Ida and Meyer worry over Frank. Ida says she hears him talking to himself in the bathroom. She wants to sign him up for a bar mitzvah class, but Meyer thinks they should give him time to adjust.

As usual, Ida's more anxious than Meyer. Her instinct (often a correct one) is to take decisive action to protect her son, while Meyer prefers to provide the distance he senses Frank needs.

One morning, Frank wakes up to a poignant violin concerto playing on the radio. He weeps in bed, and then goes onto the porch to see Meyer. Meyer jokes that their house now is better than the conditions in his Ukrainian labor camp; jokes about the camps used to amuse Frank endlessly, but now he doesn't even smile. Meyer is disturbed.

Despite his calm attitude, Meyer is perturbed when the old routines of family life don't work as well as they used to. Here, he finally sees that Frank can't resume his life as a child without any changes.

28. THE HUNCH

On a hunch, Meyer drives out to the beach after making a delivery nearby. He feels like he's driving into a story that's already been written and wants to know what will happen. True to his intuition, he sees Sister Penny's car parked across the road from the ocean. She's standing on the curb in a bathing suit, toweling off.

It's important that Meyer meets Sister Penny by the sea. The ocean was the site of Meyer's experience of profound isolation when he first arrived in Australia; but when Sister Penny described it to him later, he redefined it as a place of peaceful reflection.

Meyer and Sister Penny smile at each other without saying anything. To Meyer, she looks like a "big, strong sports-playing girl" even though he notices the slight signs of aging in her wide feet and the veins in her legs. He can easily imagine sitting with her in a café on Lake Balaton, surrounded by his brothers and their girlfriends, everyone peaceful and sensual.

Here, Sister Penny emerges not as conventionally beautiful but wonderfully healthy and strong. Her physical attributes reflect her manifest capability and the tranquility she imbues in those around her, especially Meyer.

Sister Penny informs Meyer that she's moving to Darwin to accept a new position. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Ann is engaged to be married. Even though Sister Penny knows her daughter has always wanted to be part of a "big, respectable family," she's apprehensive because she suspects Elizabeth Ann is pregnant.

With Elizabeth Ann's final absorption into the kind of family her mother never provided, it's clear that Sister Penny's life will be centered around her vocation rather than her daughter. While most of the novel's mothers are completely oriented around their children, London signals through Sister Penny that this isn't the only acceptable brand of motherhood.

Meyer says that he's worried about Frank, who is too quiet and seems to have lost some of his confidence. Sister Penny attributes this to his longing for Elsa, saying they shouldn't be kept apart.

Their disregard for the conventional morality that demanded the children's separation highlights Meyer and Sister Penny's remove from society and further draws them together.

Meyer knows that they will soon part and probably never see each other again. He wants to tell Sister Penny how much she's meant to him. He says that she has taught him "how to live here."

For Meyer, this episode is the culmination of a long effort to come to terms with his new society. While he's not at home in Australia yet, but Sister Penny, a woman with whom he has much in common, is. To Meyer, this is an indicator that one day he will be as well.

Meyer and Sister Penny get into their respective cars and drive away. Sister Penny feels light and relieved in a way she hasn't since the confrontation with the hospital governors. She feels that Meyer, with his instinctive understanding of her, is "a little magical."

Just as Meyer feels heartened, Sister Penny feels a renewed confidence in her work, which was threatened by her repeated interactions with the governors. While both characters maintain a certain distance and certainly never confess their mutual attraction, each gives the other courage to move into the next phase of their lives.

29. THE CALL

One day, Ida comes home to find Frank in the backyard reading *The Waste Land*. He says he's been listening to the birds and trying to understand what their song is saying. When Ida asks what he's decided, he says they're singing, "You're just in the way."

While Frank has been relatively staunch through the many disasters he's suffered, without Elsa he's slipped into depression for the first time. This is evidence both of the ferocity of his love for her and the fact that the effort of mental survival persists long after tangible challenges have ceased.

Ida is floored by this obvious display of depression. She feels the same horror and unreality she experienced when she watched the German tanks roll into Budapest. Right away, she goes inside and telephones Margaret.

For Ida, everything about Frank's illness corresponds terrifyingly to her experiences during the war. But while she was helpless during the German invasion, now she knows exactly what to do; in this way, polio lets her recover some of the parental agency she lost during the war.

30. THE SEPARATION

Meanwhile, Margaret has been briskly caring for Elsa at home, diligently massaging her muscles every afternoon. Her neighbors congratulate her on Elsa's return home, but she still resents them for shunning her family when Elsa first contracted the disease. Nowadays, Margaret no longer trusts her neighbors or hospitals or even God. The one thing on which she relies is her love for Elsa.

Elsa and Margaret have had their spats, but their relationship has survived polio and emerged even stronger. While polio is a terrible test for many of the novel's parents, it also helps them grow and reaffirm their devotion to their children.

This is what has finally given Margaret the strength to stand up to Nance. Nance has decided that since Elsa is disabled and furthermore not to be trusted around boys, she must go to a girls' secretarial school. She says loudly that Elsa isn't likely to ever get married. This is the last straw for Margaret, who announces that Elsa *will* go to university and become a doctor, just as she's always wanted.

Before Elsa got, sick Margaret would never have confronted her sister-in-law. As such, this episode shows that Margaret, too, has grown as a result of polio. She also shows a touching confidence in Elsa's ability to pursue a career that will be demanding not just for a disabled person but for any woman of her era.

Returning to her messy home from the neat and organized **Golden Age**, Elsa is overwhelmed. Her family's constant talking and complaining, and Margaret's anxiety to please everyone, make her exhausted. Jack has converted the back verandah into a room so Elsa can have space to herself, and she frequently retreats there for privacy. She feels her life is like "a tiny ship on a great ocean."

At the beginning of the novel, Frank scornfully compared the Golden Age to a tiny island. Now, both he and Elsa are discovering that the sheltered life on the "island" is in many ways more manageable than on the "great ocean" of the real world, where they feel both crowded by their families and isolated from each other.

Meanwhile, Sally is unhappy because she has to share her room with Jane. She contrives never to be home, riding Elsa's bike around the neighborhood or playing tennis loudly in the driveway.

Sally's behavior poignantly contrasts her physical strength with her sister's immobility. By showing her tactlessness, it also highlights the thoughtfulness and sensitivity Elsa has developed during her time at the Golden Age.

Like the Golds, Elsa's parents aren't angry about her expulsion; they love her too much. However, they didn't fight the decision either, and Elsa realizes how much "they cared what other people thought." She misses Frank, because he's the only person in her life who ever speaks openly about feelings. At night, she recounts the events of her day as if she's talking to him.

Like Frank, Elsa realizes that her parents are powerless to protect her not only from the physical ravages of polio, but from social expectations. While Frank can't do this either, he's the only person in her life who openly flouts such conventions; by being with him, she's developed a broader mode of thinking too.

One day, Elsa surveys herself in her parents' big mirror. She's too thin and her entire body is lopsided. Once, people used to comment on how pretty she was, but now she knows they'll always whisper about her disability.

Even while Frank draws confidence from Elsa's beauty, she can't help comparing herself to the girl she once was.

Elsa dreams that she's on the verandah looking at the street. A long line of children hurries down the street, following each other, and a little boy runs anxiously alongside the procession. Elsa knows the little boy represents Sally, and that Sally now feels the responsibility for the family that used to be Elsa's.

Even though Sally might not have realized it, Elsa knows she is growing into the caretaker role that Elsa occupied before her illness. Meanwhile, polio has somewhat liberated Elsa from her family, forcing her to focus on her own development rather than their happiness.

Shortly afterwards, Elsa is sitting on the verandah when Sally returns home from an errand. The two sisters look at each other for a minute; they haven't spoken directly in a year. Both feel they might cry. Then Sally goes inside.

It's important that the sisters don't have to speak to reconcile. This episode shows how the intimacy that exists between family members persists through even grave ruptures. It also demonstrates the more reserved approach to familial relationships that Elsa is developing as a result of polio.

One day the telephone rings. When Margaret picks up, Ida Gold is on the other end. After a quick conversation, she hangs up and informs Elsa confusedly that the **Golds** are coming for tea the next day, even though she knows her husband might disapprove. Elsa kisses her mother for the first time since her arrival home.

Just as Ida is acting decisively on Frank's behalf, Margaret is taking bold steps for Elsa. The impending visit isn't just a reunion for the children, but a moment of empowerment for their mothers.

31. THE VISIT

Sally watches for the **Golds** and announces their arrival exuberantly. The Briggs' rarely have visitors, and it's exciting to have Europeans and a boyfriend come by all in one afternoon.

As a result of the visit, even Sally is kindly disposed towards Elsa; she too is showing increased maturity.

Frank and Elsa have a moment alone in the hallway. Elsa says he's taller, and Frank blurts that he can't write anymore. He's also taking stock of the house and its contents, all of which he's heard about many times but never seen. Elsa is delighted that he remembers all the things she told him.

It's a little awkward to reunite so suddenly and under such different circumstances, but Frank's sharp eye is a reminder of the complete intimacy he and Elsa used to share.

In the living room, everyone is awkward. Frank sees that Elsa feels at home here and "his stomach clench[es] suddenly at their distance." Ida feels uncomfortable in the cluttered house and smiles formally; coupled with the fact that she's put on makeup and curled her hair, this makes her very intimidating to the Briggs family.

Here, Frank and Ida are alike in their mutual unease. Both mother and son are better at handling drastic situations–declaring love, performing concerts, or scrambling for survival–than at navigating ordinary social procedures.

Margaret nervously pours tea. Her clothes are all disarranged. Jack feels embarrassed for his wife, whom he sees as "a sort of animal." To him, Elsa's stillness and grace is preferable.

Jack's language is similar to Elsa's earlier description of Margaret as a "mother animal." But while Jack is harsh and unsympathetic, Elsa (despite the conventional beauty she possesses) is deeply attuned to her mother's capabilities.

Meyer realizes that Margaret reminds him of his buxom younger sister, Roszi. During the war she remained in Balaton with their father, hiding in the forests. When the Russians arrived, they shot the old man and raped Roszi to death.

For Meyer, this is both a rare moment of identification with another Australian and a disturbing reminder of his sister's fate. No matter how much he assimilates to life in Australia, he'll always be hindered by the memory of what he endured during the war.

Ida thinks it's strange that Margaret serves scones, which she thinks of as breakfast food, and that they were all asked to put their coats down in the master bedroom. She catches Jane looking at her and halfheartedly claps for the baby's amusement; Jane cries and Margaret takes her away. Ida decides that the entire family is "highly strung."

Ida deflects her general unease onto irrelevant household details. Her thinking is very different from Meyer's abstracted reveries, but their mutual discomfort draws them together.

The **Golds** have brought a decadent cake from a Jewish baker in Perth, the kind of food they're accustomed to from Europe. Jack Briggs notes that the cake must be expensive, but it's a good offering and everyone relaxes a little.

Even though the cake is evidence of the Golds' foreignness, it proves successful, showing that Meyer and Ida don't have to pretend to be Australian in order to fit in.

Suddenly, it starts to thunder. Margaret needs to bring the washing in before it rains, so that Jane will have dry nappies. Everyone rushes to help her. The backyard, full of greenery, is beautiful before the storm. Marveling at it, Meyer imagines owning a tiny farm and cultivating vegetables just as his father had once done in Hungary. The sudden epiphany is a departure form his usual distant habit of hovering "over the surface of the earth like wind over a desert."

For once, Meyer looks at the Australian landscape and is inspired rather than repelled. Since his memories of Hungary are so centered around his love of the land, this is an important milestone of adaptation to his new country. Finally, Meyer's able to imagine himself as rooted in Australia, while still maintaining the traditions he inherited from his Hungarian father.

Elsa wants to be alone with Frank. She leads him into an old hiding place by the fence where hanging branches make a tiny room. Meyer notices them leaving but says nothing; Jack also notices and thinks to himself that "you can't just switch a feeling off." In the hiding place, Elsa and Frank embrace tightly, and Frank begins to shake. He's at once overwhelmed by proximity to Elsa and very conscious that this moment will end, and he'll return to solitude. In a little while, Elsa releases him and they return to their families, holding hands.

This is a cathartic moment of intimacy for Frank and Elsa; at the same time, they're very conscious of its finite nature and the limits of their friendship. Being together, even for a moment, gives them the strength to calmly return to lives that are in large part defined by solitude.

32. NEW YORK

Many years later, Elsa's son Jack II visits Frank in New York. He's always known about Frank; his mother talked about him frequently and showed old pictures of them together on the verandah of the **Golden Age**. He looks very different as an old man, much larger and more confident. He's wearing elegant and bohemian clothes. He has a neat apartment which, to Jack, speaks of "work and solitude."

As an adult, Frank's life is defined by the attributes he was beginning to develop as a child: his devotion to poetry and his desire for solitude. His New York apartment and sense of ease shows that he's been able to integrate these unusual and potentially isolating characteristics into a rich and satisfying life.

As he notes that Jack II's hair is the same color as Elsa's, Frank is surprised to learn she's named her son after her father. Jack tells him that Elsa has recently retired from medicine. He's the youngest son and they've always been close, especially since they both love to read. The family lives by the beach, close to where Elsa grew up. Even though she can no longer walk or swim as she used to, Elsa is determined not to be carried or helped. She spends much of her time watching the ocean from a small tower her husband built for her. She's very tough, and her sons call her E.B., the initials of her maiden name.

Elsa was sad during the field trip to the sea because she thought she'd never be able to enjoy it as she used to. Contrary to expectations, she did, at least temporarily, recover the physical strength she longed for. Moreover, she maintained the mental fortitude she developed during childhood. Her nickname suggests that unlike her mother, she's not subsumed in her marriage and has carved out an independent life for herself.

Jack II tells Frank that once he was running on the beach when he saw Elsa struggling up the dunes. He knew that he couldn't help her or even acknowledge that he saw her, but by the time she reached the top, exhausted, he was near tears.

This moment mirrors Margaret's experience watching Elsa helplessly through the window of the Isolation Ward. In both episodes, intense familial devotion is balanced against respect for the independence Elsa both needs and craves.

Frank has just published his latest book and was flattered to receive an interview request from an online Australian literary journal. As it turns out, the journal was founded by Jack II, who is also an admirer of Frank's poetry. Frank has always sent copies of each collection to Elsa, although she rarely writes him.

Although Frank and Elsa have lived lives very distant from each other, it's interesting that Frank shares his passions with her son. Elsa and Jack's devotion to reading indicates the influence that this friendship has had over her adult life.

Jack II asks what happened between Frank and Elsa. Frank says that he trained as a teacher and worked for a while in a remote part of Australia before moving to New York. Meanwhile, Elsa studied medicine in Adelaide and got married. Shortly after Frank moved to New York, both his parents died in quick succession, and were buried in Australia.

Frank doesn't really answer the question, instead providing some fairly superficial details about his life. While very hospitable to Elsa's son, he insists on the emotional distance he's always cultivated in his close relationships.

Next, Jack II asks about the title of Frank's most recent collection, "**The Golden Age**." He thinks this is a painful name for a book about children struggling with polio. Frank ignores this and instead announces he's just published a book about Sullivan Backhouse, including all his poetry and an essay by Frank about their brief friendship and his introduction to his vocation. Frank says he's still trying to finish "On My Last Day on Earth."

Frank's work makes clear that he's still very much influenced by the events of his childhood–in one sense, this period is a "golden age" because it's held so much sway over the rest of his life. He's also deeply loyal to Sullivan, despite the brief nature of their friendship.

Frank tells Jack II that "**The Golden Age**" is a kind of sequel to "The Trains," his most famous poem. His last collection is both an "answer" and a "counter" to it.

These two poems are obviously references to the two challenges Frank survived as a child. It's finally clear that, rather than compounding his suffering during the Holocaust, polio and his time at the Golden Age were what helped Frank recover from and move past the suffering of his early childhood.

Frank was inspired to write "**The Golden Age**" when he had to take charge of Edie, the daughter of a friend who was hospitalized for several months. At first he was annoyed to sacrifice his solitude and routine for a child, but soon discovered he loved taking care of her. The experience made him realize how easy it is to love children even if they're not one's own, and it reawakened his memories of the Golden Age and the unstinting affection of the staff there. He says that polio is like love: "years later, when you think you have recovered, it comes back."

Although Frank has lived largely alone, it's clear that he's not isolated or cut off from the world. Moreover, unlike some of the adults who surrounded him as a child, he's sensitive to and respectful of the special consciousness of children. This is exactly the kind of sensitivity that pervades the narrative, marking a connection between the tone of the novel and the character of its protagonist.

Soon, Jack II leaves to catch his plane. To Frank, his eyes look like Elsa's, and Frank thinks there's nothing he won't learn to understand. Jack thinks that he won't see Frank again; the old man looks very frail. Once Jack leaves the building, Frank hurries the window to watch his **gold** hair disappear into the crowd outside.

The novel closes with a bittersweet parting and reference to Jack's gold hair; it's a reminder that, just like Frank's time at the Golden Age, "golden" moments aren't unequivocally happy, but rather characterized by depth, intimacy, and growth.


HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Connelly, Irene. "*The Golden Age*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 12 Jul 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Connelly, Irene. "*The Golden Age*." LitCharts LLC, July 12, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-golden-age.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Golden Age* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

London, Joan. The Golden Age. Europa. 2014.

CHICAGO MANUAL

London, Joan. The Golden Age. New York: Europa. 2014.