

Whirlpool



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

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

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While it's important to note that "Whirlpool" offers no indication of how overweight Anna is (or indeed, if she actually *is* overweight), instances of obesity and overweight in Australian children are nevertheless on the rise. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare estimates that about 25% of Australian children are obese or overweight, and that this issue impacts Indigenous children and other disadvantaged groups most of all. Training bras—which play an important role in the conflict between Anna and her mother—didn't exist until the mid-20th century, when the ideal body shape for women shifted to become bustier and curvier (prior to this, developing girls just wore camisoles until they were older). This shift helped transform getting one's first training bra into the rite of passage it is today.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A number of Kennedy's stories tackle issues of parenthood and family life, while some also focus on children's struggles with their families. "Seventy-Two Derwents," for instance, follows a young girl whose mother's actions render her powerless—and put her at risk of abuse at the hands of her mother's predatory boyfriend. As a writer of realist short fiction, Kennedy pays close attention to the mundane nature of everyday life. In this sense, her stories can be compared to that of other realist authors like Raymond Carver and John Steinbeck, and she's mentioned the Russian author Anton Chekhov in talking about her own work. She's also said that at the time she published her

first short story collection *Dark Roots* in 2006, there were almost no short story collections being published in Australia; most authors—herself included—were publishing individual stories for competitions. Since then, a number of Australian short story writers have risen to prominence and published award-winning collections, including Ceridwen Dovey (*Only the Animals*) and Debra Adelaide (*Letter to George Clooney*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Whirlpool"
- **When Written:** 2011
- **Where Written:** Victoria, Australia
- **When Published:** "Whirlpool" first appeared in the December 2011 issue of *The Monthly*. It was later included in Kennedy's 2012 short story collection *Like A House On Fire*.
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realist Short Story
- **Setting:** Australian suburbs
- **Climax:** Anna and Louise refuse to smile genuine smiles for the family Christmas photo.
- **Antagonist:** Mum
- **Point of View:** Second Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Training Bras and Consumerism. The rise of training bras happened in part because bra manufacturers saw an opportunity to tap into a new market: preteen girls. In recent years, manufacturers have attempted to target girls at increasingly younger ages. Several have created bras for girls as young as three years old, attracting intense public backlash.



PLOT SUMMARY

Louise stands at the edge of her family's aboveground **pool**, telling the narrator—her sister, Anna—that Mum wants her to get ready for the family's Christmas photo. Dad has taken lots of photos of the family, but when Mum looked through these photos, she decided that they were all awful, so she hired a professional photographer to come.

The family lives in an Australian suburb, and every year they know that summer has begun when Dad mows the lawn and sets up the pool. A few weeks later, he picks up a Christmas tree, although Mum wasn't impressed by his choice this year. Mum spends her summers watching tennis and drinking iced coffee. She bemoans that Dad is "obsessed" with the pool and wishes it were in-ground. When Anna agrees, she feels like a

traitor.

Every morning, to avoid provoking Mum, Anna and Louise try to sneak outside without her noticing. Even though Mum complains about the kids next door always coming over unannounced, Chris and Leanne don't come to the front door these days—instead, they stand by the fence and wait until Anna and Louise invite them to swim. The four of them love to play Whirlpool. This consists of running around the pool's perimeter to create a current and then throwing oneself in the middle to enjoy the spinning sensation. Chris doesn't like to be in the middle, but the girls force him in anyway.

When Anna heads inside to prepare for the photo, she finds what Mum laid out for her to wear: a sundress that doesn't fit anymore. Louise is wearing a sundress too, but she's thin enough that it looks okay. The sundress strains over Anna's developing breasts. Not long ago, she asked Mum for a training bra, but Mum replied that Anna is too young and that it's normal to be self-conscious about her weight. Louise notices Anna pulling at her dress and she calls Anna fat.

Downstairs, Mum arranges roses on the mantel with the Christmas cards from Canada and England—cards from friends that Mum and Dad met on their Tahitian honeymoon 14 years ago. Anna can tell that Louise is Mum's favorite child today, and when Mum arranges the family around her, she makes Anna sit on the floor. Dad nudges Anna and quietly says that he put the hose in the pool, but Mum stiffly asks that they not talk about the pool. When the photographer tells everyone to smile, Anna quickly glances at Louise and is shocked that Louise meets her eyes. Something passes between them and they both smile "robot smiles," hoping that when Mum's friends see the picture, they'll realize that Mum is manipulative. But in an instant, Anna realizes that Mum is mean and controlling for a reason: she is afraid, especially of her daughters growing up.

Once they're done, the photographer offers to take some pictures of just Mum and Dad, which seems to catch Mum off guard. Anna can see Mum plotting her next move as she adapts to this new development. Holding back tears, Anna races to change into her swimsuit and heads for the pool.

contentious relationship) and invite the neighbor kids, Chris and Leanne, to play with her. The pool also fuels Anna's relationship with Dad, who's supportive of her love of swimming. Anna's favorite game to play in the pool is Whirlpool. The game allows her to feel powerful, but it also gives Anna the opportunity to feel safe in her powerlessness as she floats in the middle of the pool and allows the current to dictate her movements. This is the only time that Anna feels safe giving up any modicum of control, as in the house, Mum controls Anna's every word and move. This becomes especially apparent when Mum hires a photographer to take the *perfect* family Christmas photo. Her idea of perfect, though, doesn't seem to have room for Anna just as she is. Though Anna is just beginning puberty and is starting to physically mature, Mum insists that Anna wear an uncomfortable, unflattering dress designed for a child several years younger. Mum also makes Anna feel self-conscious about her body and her weight. Anna generally feels as though she can't stand up to Mum, but this begins to change at the very end of the story as she and Louise both refuse to smile for the photo. Anna hopes that when Mum's friends receive this photo in the mail, they will see that Anna is too old to be forced into such a childish role, and that Mum is cruel and manipulative.

Mum – Anna and Louise's Mum is the manipulative and domineering antagonist of the story. She's a gorgeous, perfectly coiffed woman, but her beautiful outward appearance masks her meanness. Mum is obsessed with making her family appear perfect to others. Much to her chagrin, though, none of her family members care about this—and they all fall short of her expectations in one way or another. Instead of staying inside and joining Mum in sipping iced coffee and watching tennis on television, for instance, Anna, Louise, and Dad spend as much time as possible outside in the **pool**. The pool—which is an above-ground, temporary one—also feeds into Mum's sense of inadequacy, as she believes a perfect family should have a proper in-ground one instead. It also seems that Mum hates the pool because it gives her husband and daughters someplace away from her, where they can enjoy agency. Mum's controlling behavior follows a very specific format: she draws a family member in with what seems like kindness and then says something horribly mean. Mum is also very frightened of the prospect of her daughters growing up. Thus, her attempts to control Anna and Louise often center on making them seem as childish as possible, such as when she makes them wear dresses made for much younger kids for the family photo. This is also why she refused to get Anna a training bra for Christmas—buying her a bra would mean acknowledging that Anna is growing up. Though Mum succeeds in getting her family members dressed up and seated for the Christmas photo, Anna implies that this is *all* Mum will get. Anna and Louise refuse to smile for the photo, which will make it clear that Mum's family isn't as happy and perfect as she'd like people to believe.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Anna (The Narrator) – Anna is the 12-year-old narrator of the story. She lives in the Australian suburbs and spends almost all of the Christmas holidays swimming with her sister Louise in the above-ground **pool** that their Dad built in the family's backyard. Anna adores the pool—it's the only place where she feels happy, free, and powerful. This is in part because Anna's Mum is domineering and manipulative, so the house—which is Mum's domain—is unpleasant. But in the pool, Anna can form an alliance with Louise (with whom she has an otherwise

Louise – Louise is Anna’s sister; it’s unclear if she’s older or younger than Anna, but she’s implied to be around the same age. Most of the time, Anna and Louise ignore each other. The only time they break this habit is when they invite the neighbor kids, Leanne and Chris, to come swim in the **pool** so they can play Whirlpool. Louise’s one defining characteristic is that she’s thin—or at least thinner than Anna is, something that may help Louise stay in Mum’s good graces more often, given that Mum often makes disparaging comments about Anna being overweight. Possibly because of Mum’s attempts to manipulate her family members, Louise is cruel to Anna—she’s the one to explicitly call Anna fat, for instance, and she seems to feel happy at times when Mum picks on Anna. But Louise also seems to resent Mum, just like Anna does. Like Anna, Louise tries to spend as much time as possible outside in the pool, and she also seems unimpressed when Mum attempts to get her to make fun of Dad. The story offers hope that Anna and Louise will be able to improve their relationship when the girls find themselves in silent agreement that they shouldn’t smile for the family Christmas photograph. This, more than anything else, makes it clear that Louise is just as unhappy as Anna is—but perhaps because of her thinness, she may just suffer slightly less.

Dad – Anna and Louise’s dad is a supportive figure in their lives, though Anna implies that his and Mum’s marriage is an unhappy one. Dad spends his summer days tending to the **pool** in the backyard, keeping it clean and filled so Anna and Louise can play in it as much as possible. In this way, Dad resists Mum’s attempts to control the family, though he consistently refuses to actually confront Mum about her bad behavior. Anna finds his silence particularly difficult to bear, though she recognizes that Dad suffers Mum’s cruelty too. Mum regularly asks her daughters to join her in making fun of Dad and seems to see him as a disappointment and a failure. Despite Mum’s ungenerous view of him, though, Dad is the only person in the story to show Anna genuine kindness: during the family photo, he tells her that he’s filling up the pool for her so that she can swim again later. With this, he shows that he understands that the pool is Anna’s one safe space and pledges to maintain it for her. In this way, Dad shows that he’s supportive of his daughters, but only to a point. He still falls short in protecting them from Mum’s cruelty, even as he offers them a place to escape it.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Chris – Chris is a neighbor boy who regularly joins Anna and Louise in their **pool**; he’s Leanne’s brother. He’s the only one in the group who doesn’t like being in the middle of the whirlpool, so the girls have to throw him in.

Leanne – Leanne is Chris’s brother and often swims in Anna and Louise’s pool.



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.



FAMILY, APPEARANCES, AND DYSFUNCTION

“Whirlpool” follows 12-year-old Anna as she prepares for her family’s Christmas photograph.

Having the family professionally photographed was Anna’s Mum’s idea—Mum wants to include the photo in the Christmas cards that she sends to all of her international friends every year. To Mum, it’s extremely important to show these friends that her family is perfect—this is why she forces her husband and daughters, Anna and Louise, to wear their best clothes and then meticulously poses her family members around her, instructing them on how to smile. In the photo, the girls look prim, proper, and obedient, and the whole family looks polished, harmonious, and tight knit. But this veneer of perfection is just that—a front that’s masking the family’s dysfunction. By juxtaposing the family’s appearance in the Christmas photo (and the way Mum acts during the photo) with their day-to-day reality, Kennedy emphasizes that it’s impossible to judge a family’s functionality or happiness from the outside—a beautiful exterior can easily obscure dysfunction within.

The photo that Mum crafts paints the picture of a close, loving family. Mum makes her daughters wear matching sundresses, while Dad—who’s usually behind the camera and not in the shot—is in the frame in a neat shirt. Mum, for her part, is in a beautiful linen dress and arranges her family members around her. The resulting photograph portrays what might seem like a well-groomed and harmonious suburban family. Mum’s behavior also adds to this image. While the photographer is there to take the photo, Mum acts kind, courteous, and upbeat as she speaks to her husband and daughters, and she makes sure to broadcast that the Christmas photos will be received by a number of international friends. With this, Mum suggests that her family is well connected, too.

However, the story shows that Mum is anything but the perfect wife and mother. For one, Anna and Louise seem to live in fear of angering her. When Anna discovers that Mum wants her to wear a sundress for the photo, she’s distraught by the prospect (the dress is too small and isn’t flattering). But Anna doesn’t feel as though she has any power to push back; indeed, she consistently describes Mum as someone who frightens her and will dole out undescribed but presumably harsh punishments for voicing dissenting opinions. And while Anna and Louise seem to bear the brunt of this treatment, Dad suffers too. Dad

mostly avoids Mum by spending as much time as possible working on the backyard swimming **pool**, which Mum hates on the grounds that her children should have an in-ground pool, not a temporary above-ground one. He also brings home what Mum refers to as a “dud” Christmas tree every year—and though there’s no indication he does this on purpose to upset Mum, it nevertheless feeds into Mum’s sense that her family is failing to achieve perfection.

In real life, Anna and Louise are also not the perfect little girls portrayed in the photo. Indeed, their interactions suggest that they’re almost constantly at odds—while Anna is entering puberty, making it clear that she’s no longer a child. The dresses themselves make it clear that Anna and Louise aren’t little girls anymore. On Anna, the dress is both childish and too small: it’s “tight under the arms” and “squeeze[s] across the tingling, embarrassing swell of [her] chest,” showing clearly that her body isn’t that of a prepubescent child anymore. Rather, her breasts are developing and she no longer fits into clothing designed for children. Louise’s matching dress “doesn’t look quite so ridiculous” because Louise is thin, but Anna nevertheless implies that the dress is just as inappropriate for her sister as it is for her. In this way, the dresses illustrate the disconnect between the perfect family Mum wants and the reality of what she has. Mum clearly wants to show off her adorable little girls in matching dresses to all her friends—and while Mum might be able to bully her daughters into wearing unflattering dresses that don’t fit, Anna thinks it’ll be clear to the photo’s recipients that she and Louise are far too old to be dressed and posed in this way.

Ultimately, Mum’s attempts to craft the perfect Christmas photo—and the perfect family—fail. Even aside from the fact that Anna and Louise refuse to smile happily, Anna suggests that it will be obvious to recipients that she and Louise are being forced to dress and pose like young children, not the budding adults they are. With this, Kennedy shows that Mum’s attempts are misguided in every way. Not only can Mum not bully her family into embodying her idea of perfection, she also can’t stop the dysfunction from showing through.



POWER, CONTROL, AND FREEDOM

Anna and Louise’s Mum is extremely controlling, as she will go to great lengths to manipulate or bully her family members into looking or acting a certain

way. However, there’s one thing that Mum can’t control: the above-ground **pool** in the backyard, and her husband and daughters’ love for it. The pool is the one place where Anna, Louise, and Dad can feel autonomous and joyful. By exploring this tension between Mum and her family members over the pool, the story shows how Mum attempts to create harmony by controlling her family—but in actuality, her attempts only make her family members rebellious and unhappy.

Anna and her sister, Louise, live in fear of upsetting or

contradicting Mum. Anna makes this clear when she recalls several times in the last few weeks when Mum forced the girls to agree with her disparaging assessments of Dad. It’s telling that neither Anna nor Louise say outright that they disagree with Mum; this implies that the girls don’t feel comfortable or safe speaking their mind. Instead, Anna shows readers that she does love and support her father by describing her compliant nods and smiles as “traitorous.” Agreeing with Mum may be the safest way to navigate the situation, but it won’t allow Anna to express herself or voice support for the one parent she does love and trust. Later, as Anna prepares for the Christmas photo, it’s also clear that she’s constantly fearful and anxious about upsetting Mum. Despite heeding Mum’s demands—like wearing an uncomfortable dress and sitting cross-legged on the floor for the photo—Anna still worries that she’ll set Mum off. With this, the story offers the possibility that there is no real way to please Mum. Even going along with what Mum wants is no guarantee of harmony or happiness.

There is one place where Mum doesn’t have total control: the pool in the backyard. Anna implies that Mum regularly tries to control how her family interacts with the pool. She notes that “Each morning of the school holidays, you feel a faint, smothered panic that the pool will sooner or later be the subject of attack.” But even though Mum regularly “attack[s]” the pool, she nevertheless fails to keep her husband or daughters from it. Thus, the pool becomes the one place where Anna, Louise, and Dad can enjoy a sense of agency. For instance, though Mum gripes about and seems ready to outright forbid the neighbor kids, Chris and Leanne, from knocking on the door to swim in the pool, Anna and Louise can—and regularly do—invite them to climb over the fence instead. Out in the pool, Anna and Louise can experiment with social groups of their own choosing and make choices about who they spend their time with. Dad also finds autonomy as he maintains the pool. Though Anna gives few clues about her parents’ relationship with each other aside from the implication that it’s not happy, Dad appears far happier and more relaxed when he’s either outside working on the pool or talking about the pool with his daughters. This suggests that he, too, suffers from Mum’s controlling nature. Dad’s constant maintenance also happens to undermine Mum’s power. He seems well aware that the pool is the one place where his daughters are happy and free—and it’s certainly no accident that he throws himself into keeping the pool clean and useable for them. In this way, even though he doesn’t stand up to Mum in more overt ways, Dad shows his daughters he cares about them and wants them to be as happy and free from Mum’s abuse as possible, given the circumstances.

For Anna, Louise, and Dad, the choice is obvious: spend as much time as possible in the pool so they can feel powerful and autonomous in at least one part of their lives. And while “Whirlpool” offers no solutions to this power struggle, the story

does suggest that as long as Mum continues to try to control her family members, they will continue to find ways to subvert her—and the family as a whole will never achieve the happiness and harmony that Mum so desperately desires.



CRUELTY, SELF-ESTEEM, AND ADOLESCENCE

Though Mum attempts to control almost every aspect of her husband and daughters' lives, she's particularly interested in controlling her daughters' bodies. At 12 years old, Anna is on the brink of puberty; Kennedy never reveals Louise's age, but she seems close in age to Anna. Despite the fact that her daughters are approaching their teen years, Mum does everything in her power to keep them looking and feeling as young and powerless as possible. Kennedy underscores Mum's cruelty in attempting to control her daughters' bodies—and through this, she shows how Mum denies Anna and Louise the self-esteem or confidence that would make growing up easier.

The fact that Anna and Louise are growing up seems to terrify Mum. When Anna recalls asking Mum for a training bra for Christmas, she initially only fixates on the fact that Mum refused on the grounds that 12-year-old Anna is “nowhere near old enough for that.” Anna's first description of this event shows clearly that Mum doesn't want to accept that her daughter is growing up. After all, Anna describes the “tingling, embarrassing swell of [her] chest,” suggesting that she's physically and emotionally ready for a bra no matter her age. But when Anna revisits this memory later, she realizes that Mum is actually fearful of Anna growing up. It dawns on her that “what [she'd] seen in [Mum's] face when [she'd] asked for the training bra was a tremor of terror, not scorn.” In other words, it's terrifying for Mum to confront that her daughters are growing up and entering puberty. And any proof of her daughters' maturity, like Anna's developing breasts, causes Mum's fear to bubble up—so she attempts to mask that fear with scorn.

It's telling, though, that Anna initially interpreted Mum's reaction as a *scornful* one. This suggests that Mum deals with her fear by being cruel to her daughters. The story is peppered with accounts of Mum's meanness, as when Mum regularly asks her daughters to laugh or agree with her when she speaks poorly of Dad. Anna also notes that throughout the summer, once Dad sets up the pool, she spends her days fearful that Mum is going to take issue with the **pool**—a clear indicator that Anna feels as though Mum constantly victimizes her. Mum's cruelty intensifies when she speaks cruelly about Anna's body. When Anna asked for a training bra, Mum didn't just refuse—she told Anna that “it's normal for young girls to feel self-conscious about their weight.” With this, Mum essentially told Anna that she is overweight and should feel self-conscious about that. But it's telling that it's only at the end of the story,

when Anna and Louise refuse to smile for the Christmas photo, that Anna realizes why Mum is so cruel. That Anna makes this leap in understanding shows that despite Mum's cruelty and fear of her daughters' maturity, Anna is well on her way to growing up. She's developing a more critical and thoughtful way of seeing her parents and is no longer a child who accepts Mum's behavior at face value.

Mum deals with her fears about her daughters' maturity by making them feel as childish as possible. This shows up most clearly in Mum's refusal to get Anna a bra for Christmas—and then in her insistence that her daughters wear childish sundresses for the Christmas photo. Refusing to buy Anna a bra denies her a garment that would mark her as an adult, while forcing both Anna and Louise into dresses designed for children undermines the girls' budding maturity. And to make things worse, the dress fits Anna poorly and is unflattering, which continues to destroy her self-esteem. It also forces Anna to think about her size—and makes Anna an easy target for Louise's bullying when she says disparagingly that Anna has to wear a dress like a tent because she's fat. In this way, the story shows how Mum makes her daughters accomplices in this project of keeping them young and powerless. Mum doesn't have to say anything about the dress to hurt Anna's feelings when Louise has already done so.

“Whirlpool” ultimately suggests that Mum won't be successful in keeping her daughters children forever. The simple fact that Anna is entering puberty makes it impossible to ignore that she's growing up and will one day have the opportunity to escape Mum, simply by virtue of becoming an adult. But even more than this, Kennedy suggests that despite their youth, the girls are already well on their way to escaping Mum's control. Indeed, it's significant that the girls refuse to smile genuine smiles for the Christmas photo—in this instance, they refuse to play along with Mum's games and instead assert their agency over their bodies. Decisions like this one suggest that the girls will take control of their bodies as they grow up and gradually subvert Mum's attempts at control.



SYMBOLS

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



THE POOL

For Anna, Louise, and Dad, the pool symbolizes power and autonomy, as it's the only place in the house where they can escape Mum's controlling nature. In the pool, Anna is free from Mum's manipulation and presumably Louise feels the same. Most importantly for Anna, the pool is a place free from Mum's cruel comments about her body (Mum often implies that Anna is overweight), so the pool becomes a

safe space for her to form her own opinions about herself and her body. Dad also sees the pool as a place where he can be more autonomous. He avoids Mum, who spends all her time indoors, in favor of spending as much time as possible tending to the pool for his daughters. Doing this not only gives Dad a break from Mum, but it also allows him to subvert her authoritative rule over the family by making sure his daughters have a place to enjoy themselves away from Mum's watchful eye.

However, the pool isn't a straightforwardly positive symbol of power and autonomy. It's also a place where Anna and Louise can reproduce Mum's abuse. They do this by teaming up with Leanne to throw Chris into the middle of the swirling current when they play Whirlpool—something Chris doesn't like. It's possible to interpret this as Anna and Louise doing much the same to Chris that Mum does to them; they force him to bend to their will and play by their rules, just to make themselves feel powerful.

dresses her preteen daughters like one might dress a doll. It's telling, though, that the Clearasil is so obviously the wrong color. This suggests that Mum won't be successful in controlling her daughters, even though she treats them like dolls still. It's notable, then, that Anna and Louise refuse to smile for the photograph at the end of the story. In doing this, they begin to assert their independence. Even at this stage, they're becoming less doll-like—and Mum's attempts to make them look like dolls are becoming more and more obvious.

☞ You all waited, silent, braced for the rest. "There isn't a single shot," she added with finality, "where we don't all look dreadful."

And you thought, *all*, seeing your mothered centred there in the pictures, gripping her two girls, your father nowhere—just a peripheral shadowy shape, stretched thin.

Related Characters: Anna (The Narrator), Mum (speaker), Louise, Dad

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 133-344

Explanation and Analysis

When Mum looks through the photos that Dad took of her, Anna, and Louise—which will accompany Mum's Christmas cards to her friends in Canada and England—she insists that everyone pictured looks horrendous.

It's telling that everyone "braced" for what Mum is about to say; this suggests that they expect Mum to say something mean or rude. In other words, Mum's verbal cruelty is commonplace in their house. The family's silence, though, suggests that they don't feel like they have any way to effectively push back against Mum's cruelty.

Indeed, Anna's response to Mum's declaration is entirely internal. But it's possible to take Anna's inner monologue in several ways. It's possible to see, for instance, her emphasis on the word "all" as sarcastic. Later in the story, Anna reveals that she's beginning puberty and may be overweight, so she may read Mum's use of "all" as actually referring to her alone. However, it's also possible that Anna takes the "all" to mean everyone pictured—Mum, Anna, Louise, and Dad by way of his shadow. This would suggest that Mum also looks "dreadful," an acknowledgement that Mum is failing to make her family look perfect. In this reading, Mum realizes that she can't make her family look



QUOTES

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

Whirlpool Quotes

☞ The cream is not the color of skin but the strange pink-orange of a bandaid, or a doll.

Related Characters: Anna (The Narrator) (speaker), Louise

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

When Louise comes outside to tell Anna to get ready for the family Christmas photo, Anna takes note of Louise's Clearasil skin cream, which isn't quite the right color. While poorly matched skin cream might not be uncommon, describing the Clearasil's color as being that of a doll is significant within the context of "Whirlpool." This is because the story overwhelmingly suggests that Mum wants her daughters to be more like dolls than actual people. Because Mum desperately fears her daughters' getting older and developing their own thoughts and personalities, Mum works extra hard to keep them looking and feeling as young as possible. Later on, this is why she insists that Anna and Louise wear their matching sundresses, which are inappropriately immature for girls of their age—and Anna's doesn't fit her pubescent body. In other words, Mum

perfect by sheer force of will. Rather, she needs to have a professional come in to take photos that will be better able to obscure the truth of what's going on.

Finally, noting that Dad's shadow is "stretched thin" also invites multiple readings. This refers to Dad's actual shadow, which seems to extend into the photograph's frame. But saying it's "stretched thin" may refer to how Dad feels about his life. It's no doubt exhausting for him to try to hold it together when Mum is so controlling and manipulative. This is especially true since Dad seems to not agree with Mum's desire to be perfect all the time—he does, after all, spend his summers maintaining the pool for his daughters, which Mum openly hates. It may be difficult for him to maintain even this level of resistance, leaving him "stretched thin."

☝ "It's bad enough we haven't even got a proper in-ground one and you girls have to put up with that stupid thing that should have been thrown out years ago," she adds. She turns to you then, extending her arm to take you in, watching you. "He's absolutely obsessed, isn't he?"

You feel yourself nod and smile again; a sickly, traitorous smile of concurrence.

Related Characters: Anna (The Narrator), Mum (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, while Dad is out skimming debris out of the pool, Mum attempts to draw Anna into her callous, dismissive treatment of Dad. Mum's insistence that her daughters should be playing in an in-ground pool instead of a temporary above-ground one suggests that the pool annoys her for several reasons. For one thing, it's where Anna, Louise, and Dad are happy and free from Mum's controlling grasp. But perhaps even more importantly to Mum, the pool doesn't help make the family look as successful and perfect as Mum wants—and maintaining this façade of perfection is always Mum's chief concern. If the pool doesn't help this image, it makes sense that she'd resent it.

Mum's cruelty also shines through in this passage. In her

mind, Dad is inappropriately "obsessed" with a pool that's "stupid." This, of course, ignores the fact that everyone else in the family loves the pool and spending time in and around it. In other words, the pool may not look all that nice, but it nevertheless provides a needed escape from the heat and from Mum's abuse. Even more noteworthy, though, is that Mum attempts to rope Anna into disparaging Dad—and she wants to make it seem like a positive thing by drawing Anna into a hug first. But Mum also doesn't give Anna any power to disagree, even though Anna clearly does. Feeling "traitorous" for agreeing with Mum shows clearly that Anna prefers Dad and doesn't think he's in the wrong for working on the pool—indeed, she probably thinks the opposite. This becomes another way for Mum to exert her power over her daughters by forcing them to agree with her, even when they don't. It deprives them of agency and makes it clear that any dissent will not be tolerated.

☝ Each morning of the school holidays, you feel a faint, smothered panic that the pool will sooner or later be the subject of attack. You try to stay casually offhand as you change into your bathers and escape out the back door. You can feel Louise doing the same, picking up her folded towel with studied nonchalance, as if the thought has just occurred to her. You slip through the house, expressionless and furtive, avoiding your mother on the way out.

Related Characters: Anna (The Narrator) (speaker), Mum, Louise

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

As Anna explains what her summer holidays look like every year, she makes it clear that she enjoys being in the pool—but the process of getting out to the pool is fraught and anxiety inducing. The note that Anna's panic is "faint" and "smothered" suggests that it's the kind of low-level anxiety that Anna simply can't escape. It makes her feel trapped and powerless knowing that at some point over the course of the day, Mum is going to take issue with the pool and try to keep her from it.

This is understandably why both Anna and Louise try to sneak outside to the pool. To them, it doesn't seem safe to change and go out matter-of-factly—that would attract

Mum's ire, and Anna implies throughout the story that Mum can be dangerous when she's angry or when others aren't doing what she wants. In this way, Mum forces her daughters into being sneaky and manipulative themselves—something Mum probably doesn't want. Mum's manipulation, then, will inevitably backfire as her daughters learn to live with it and work around it.

It's also telling that Louise seems to feel the exact same thing that Anna does. Louise and Anna's relationship reads as very contentious, possibly because Mum doesn't encourage them to be friendly with each other. But this doesn't mean that the girls aren't both experiencing Mum's cruelty and abuse, or that they don't agree that Mum's cruelty is hard to bear. In a sense, then, this suggests that Anna and Louise might have more in common than they think they do—if only because they share a common enemy in Mum.

☛ You feel a surge of sly, teeth-gritted pleasure at his protests, his skinny, weak-limbed acquiescence. You watch the helpless ridge of his spine arching as he flounders, gasping, and your power is cool and blue and chemical. He has to learn. You girls eye each other, expressionless, as he staggers humbly to his feet afterwards, blinking and choking.

Related Characters: Anna (The Narrator) (speaker), Mum, Chris, Leanne, Louise

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Anna describes her pleasure at throwing Chris, the neighbor boy, into the middle of the whirlpool, despite the fact that he doesn't like taking his turn in the middle. For Anna (and Louise and Leanne), throwing Chris into the middle is one way that they can gain a sense of power and control. Particularly for Louise and Anna, tossing Chris in is an instance in which they actually reproduce the abusive behavior that Mum exhibits toward them. Neither Anna nor Louise seems to ever want to give in to Mum's manipulation or cruelty—and yet, they've both seemingly “learned” that this is just what has to happen.

In this light, it's interesting that Anna feels pleasure seeing Chris forced to give in. This suggests that Mum might enjoy

manipulating her daughters for no other reason than that it makes her feel powerful. But further, it also suggests that anyone—even someone like Anna, who's on the receiving end of her fair share of cruelty—can, under the right circumstances, take pleasure in making others feel weak and powerless. This quality is, the story suggests, something that's part of being human. It's normal to want power. The difference, however, is that Anna, Louise, and Leanne are exerting their power over Chris, a peer who's more or less on the same level as they are—and it's in the low-stakes context of playing pool games. When Mum, an adult, exerts her power over children like Anna and Louise, it exacerbates the power imbalance and makes it harder for Anna and Louise to ever experience autonomy and agency.

☛ Your heart sinks at what's lying ready for you on the bed. “The sundresses?”

“That's what she said.”

Louise has hers on already. She's thin, so it doesn't look quite so ridiculous, but yours is tight under the arms, where it's elasticised, then sack-like all the way down to mid-calf.

Related Characters: Louise, Anna (The Narrator) (speaker), Mum

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

When Anna gets to her room and discovers that Mum wants her and Louise to wear matching sundresses for the Christmas photo, her bad day gets even worse. Anna's reaction to seeing the sundress suggests that it's well known that she hates the dress; referring to them as “*The sundresses*” indicates that there's only one set of matching sundresses. Given Anna's description of the dresses, there's good reason for her to dislike them: they sound unflattering, especially at Anna's age and where she is in her physical development. Given that Anna is just beginning puberty, she may feel self-conscious about her body for a whole host of reasons—and forcing her into an unflattering sundress no doubt makes this worse.

Further, the way that Anna describes her dress shows that it doesn't fit. It's too tight under the arms—and not long after this, Anna reveals that her breasts are beginning to develop, which would make tightness in this area even more uncomfortable. In other words, it's not just that Anna hates

the dress because of how it looks on her. Instead, she also hates the dress because of how it feels.

Then, Anna implies that this dress is a bad choice for even Louise. Louise's "doesn't look quite so ridiculous," so it's clear that it looks at least a little bit ridiculous. While Kennedy never reveals if Louise is older or younger than Anna, it's not hard to imagine all the ways that Louise's dress looks just as inappropriate as Anna's. If Louise is older but thin, it may still be very apparent that she's wearing a child's dress. If she's younger than Anna, the fact still remains that she's wearing a dress that's probably too small for her. It may only be because of the elastic that Anna and Louise are still able to get into these dresses at all.

Finally, it's worth considering why Mum would insist on dresses like these for her daughters. Mum fears her daughters growing up and maturing, so she may reach for little girls' dresses as a way to make her daughters look younger. But given Mum's cruelty, it may be intentional that she's chosen dresses that are unflattering and uncomfortable. This may make Anna and Louise even more self-conscious about their developing bodies, since wearing ill-fitting clothing means they'll always feel too big. In the future, this could create dangerous pressure to fit into smaller clothing, illustrating just how cruel and dangerous Mum's methods of controlling her daughters really are.

☛ The dress is squeezed across the tingling, embarrassing swell of your chest, a nine-year-old's dress. A few weeks ago, you'd tentatively said you wanted a training bra for Christmas.

"Oh, *darling*," your mother replied, looking at you indulgently. "You're barely twelve, you're nowhere near old enough for that." Her tenderness felt as treacherous and irresistible as a tide, something you leaned into, hypnotised, as it tugged you off your feet.

"*Anna*," your mother smiled kindly, her voice low, "it's normal for young girls to feel self-conscious about their weight, sweetie."

Related Characters: Mum, Anna (The Narrator) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

As Anna puts on the sundress that Mum picked out for her to wear in the family Christmas photo, she recalls what happened when she asked Mum for a bra not long ago. Even

though Mum insists that Anna isn't old enough to wear a bra, describing her chest as a "tingling, embarrassing swell" makes it clear that Anna is physically and emotionally ready for a bra. She already feels self-conscious about her developing breasts, and it's possible they hurt as well (especially in such a tight, ill-fitting dress). This is a major indicator that Mum isn't willing to face reality and the evidence in front of her when it comes to the fact that her daughters are growing up. What matters to Mum is what Mum *wants* to be true. And in this case, it seems that Mum wants her daughters to stay young.

Things take an even more sinister turn as Anna describes Mum's tenderness as being "treacherous and irresistible." This implies that Mum isn't being genuinely kind or tender—she's being nice to draw Anna in, make her feel safe, and then manipulate or deride her. This is why Anna uses "hypnotized" to describe what Mum is doing: she's taking away Anna's agency and putting Anna in a vulnerable position. And Anna shows that Mum is very good at doing this. It's easy, she implies, to give in to Mum, just like it's easy to give in to powerful tides.

The cruel, manipulative moment comes when Mum insists that it's normal for young girls to be self-conscious about their weight. It's important to note that throughout "Whirlpool," there are few clues that Anna is actually overweight. Anna is just beginning puberty, which sometimes brings weight gain with it and always changes a young person's body shape. It's possible that Anna isn't overweight; she's in the early stages of puberty, and so she might just look bigger or more awkward than her thin mother or Louise. But when Mum insists that it's normal to be self-conscious about one's weight, she makes sure that Anna thinks that she *should* worry about her weight. In other words, whether Anna's weight is actually a problem or not, Mum ensures that Anna is now thinking about it.

Through doing this, Mum also invalidates Anna's perception of her own changing body. The story implies that Anna is old enough to begin taking control of her body, and she's old enough to know, for instance, whether she's emotionally or physically ready to start wearing a bra. But Mum essentially implies that Anna is too young to know what she's talking about—and implies that Anna's breasts aren't actually developing. This, the story suggests, makes Anna's self-esteem even worse. It guarantees that Anna will be without a bra she wants and needs, while also making her feel inappropriately overweight and inadequate.

☛ She turns sunnily to your father. “We met them while we were on the cruise, didn’t we, darling?”

That word in your mother’s mouth, the way she looks your father in the face to say it, her touch on his arm as she goes past, makes something turn over in your stomach, cold and glassy. You shudder. You can’t help it.

Related Characters: Anna (The Narrator), Mum (speaker), Dad

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

As Mum explains the purpose of the Christmas photo (they’ll be included in Christmas cards to international friends Mum and Dad met on their honeymoon cruise) to the photographer, she calls Dad “darling.” Anna’s reaction is significant, as it implies that it’s unwise to trust that Mum’s affection or pet names are ever genuine. And when Dad is the target of Mum’s affection, it shows that it’s not just Anna and Louise who suffer Mum’s manipulation and abuse—Dad is also a target. This may explain why his resistance to Mum’s bullying is confined to maintaining the pool for his daughters. Resisting quietly like this may be something he feels comfortable risking—but calling Mum out on her cruelty may bring about all manner of undesirable consequences.

Anna’s involuntary physical reaction speaks to just how frightening Mum’s cruelty is to her. Even when Anna’s not the target, she seems to understand exactly what Dad must be feeling (or perhaps she’s projecting what *she’d* be feeling onto him) and can’t distance herself from that. In this way, Anna feels victimized all the time, even if she’s not the direct victim of Mum’s abuse. This also shows that Anna is empathetic and understands deeply how Mum’s abuse affects people. Probably because of how Mum’s cruelty affects her, Anna seems to assume that Dad will sense the danger in Mum’s words and fear the worst.

☛ “I put the hose in the pool for you,” he says in a low voice. “We’ll let it fill up a bit more, eh? So it’s all ready.”

Your mother hears. “Robert, do you think we could forget about that dinky little pool just for five short minutes?” Her voice is almost breathless with forced breeziness.

Related Characters: Mum, Dad (speaker), Anna (The Narrator)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

As Mum arranges her family members around her for the Christmas photo, seating Anna on the floor in front of her and Dad, Dad takes the opportunity to tell Anna that the pool will be ready for her when this is all over. This moment between Anna and Dad is probably the tenderest moment in “Whirlpool.” It makes it clear that Dad *does* love and support Anna through his actions. He seems to understand that the pool is the one place where his daughters feel happy and powerful—and he feels compelled to make sure they have access to the pool because of this. This is also probably why the family still owns the pool they have; Mum has said previously that the pool should’ve been thrown away years ago. But if the pool is the one place where Anna and Louise are happy, Dad believes it’s essential to keep it around. Noting that he filled the pool also gives Dad the opportunity to remind Anna that this photo—and the torturous experience of having to wear a humiliating dress—won’t last forever. It’ll be over soon, and Anna will be able to escape to the pool.

For Mum, though, this is further proof that Dad is “obsessed” with the pool. The pool threatens her authority, since it’s where her daughters have agency and where she can’t control their every move. But even more importantly, the pool is “dinky”—in other words, it doesn’t line up with what Mum thinks a pool should look like. In this sense, the “dinky,” temporary, above-ground pool feeds Mum’s sense that her family is inadequate and imperfect. She may object to the pool less on the grounds that she can’t control her daughters there, and more because it makes her feel self-conscious. And having the subject of the “dinky” pool come up now, while she’s trying to arrange a photograph that portrays the family as perfect, may be particularly maddening for her. Mum can’t escape the pool—just like she can’t escape the fact that her family isn’t perfect, no matter how hard she tries to make it so.

☛ It only takes a second, but you’re stunned to see her, at the exact same moment, looking back at you. Something passes between you. It’s like the reckless moment after running hard around the pool’s perimeter, when you eye one another, savage and panting, before launching Chris or yourselves into the stirring, threshing current of the whirlpool.

Related Characters: Anna (The Narrator) (speaker), Louise

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

As the photographer prepares to take the first photograph of Anna's family, Anna takes stock of each family member and is surprised to see Louise doing the same. In this moment, Anna and Louise's tense, adversarial relationship takes a new turn—it seems like this is the first time when the girls find themselves on the same side outside of when they're playing in the pool. In the pool, the girls are able to set aside their differences and play together, especially when the neighbor kids come to play. This is why Anna likens this moment to the moment just before the girls throw either themselves or Chris into the whirlpool. It's a moment when the girls size each other up and come to a silent agreement about who's going to suffer—and in this case, it's significant because Mum is the one who will end up at the mercy of the currents around her. And this is significant in part because this seems like the first time that the girls are unified in the face of Mum's bullying.

By likening this moment to the moment when they throw either themselves or Chris into the whirlpool, Kennedy suggests that what Anna and Louise are about to do (refuse to smile for the photo) is something that will give them power—which normally, they only enjoy when they're in the pool. Not smiling for the photo will deny Mum what she wants—that is, a photo of a perfect, happy family—and this will start to eat away at Mum's power. Especially if the recipients of this photo do notice that Anna and Louise aren't happy, they'll begin to suspect that there's something amiss with the family and Mum will no longer look perfect in their eyes.

☛ You let another dead, robot smile turn up the corners of your mouth. With your eyes you will your mother's friends to understand, [...] seeing everything encoded there. They will see how stiffly you are sitting in this humiliating dress, cross-legged like a child, how heavy and proprietorial your mother's hand is on your shoulder. They will imagine the weight of that hand. You understand, as the camera's indifferent shutter clicks again, that the sundresses are about your mother, that what you'd seen in her face when you'd asked for the training bra was a tremor of terror, not scorn. All this blooms in you, too fast, the flash's nebula blinding as phosphorus.

Related Characters: Anna (The Narrator) (speaker), Louise, Mum

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

During the photo, both Anna and Louise refuse to smile genuine smiles and instead, offer “dead, robot smile[s]” that Anna hopes will clue in Mum's friends as to the truth of the family's dysfunction.

That this is the only way Anna and Louise feel like they can call out for help underscores how powerless they feel at home. It's a long shot that this attempt to call for help will do anything—all of Mum's friends are abroad in Canada or England, and it seems unlikely that any of them would actually go to the trouble of trying to help the girls, if they noticed the girls need help at all.

It's telling that what Anna really wants Mum's friends to notice is how Mum wants her daughters to look like small children. Anna implies that she's far too old and developed for her dress to be cute; it's simply “humiliating” on her. Mum's hand adds to the humiliation and Anna's sense of powerless, as it holds Anna down and makes it clear to viewers that Anna is here whether she wants to be or not. She's powerless to dictate what she wears, or where she sits.

But aside from what Anna wants Mum's friends to notice, this passage is also important because of what Anna realizes here: that Mum wants her daughters to stay little because she's afraid of them growing up. In revisiting her conversation with Mum in which she asked for a training bra, Anna realizes that she was incorrect to interpret Mum's reaction as a scornful one. Instead, Mum was afraid—and was possibly trying to cover up that fear with scorn. Realizing what Mum fears may give Anna some leverage going forward, as now she knows better how to push Mum's buttons and make Mum feel unmoored.

☛ You witness the opposing forces of charm and chill collide in your mother as she's caught of guard. She hesitates, then says hurriedly, “Yes, yes, of course,” and there it is, you're sure of it now; you glimpse in that moment her wire-tight thoughts running ahead, grim with the need to plot exile and allegiance, the constant undertow shift of churned, compliant water.

Related Characters: Mum, Anna (The Narrator) (speaker),

Dad

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

When the photographer suggests taking a few portraits of just Mum and Dad, Anna understands, for the first time, what she's seeing in Mum—that is, Mum's attempts to plot to manipulate her family members. This allows Mum to maintain her power. Anna describes the “opposing forces of charm and chill collid[ing]” in Mum, which reveals that Mum's charm and kindness can usually obscure her chilly, manipulative nature. Most of the time, Mum is in control and is able to exude charm—but in moments like these, when someone or something surprises her, she's not as skilled at hiding her true intentions.

And the intentions that Anna picks up are sinister. Mum, after all, is plotting “exile and allegiance,” which is an allusion to the way that Mum pits her family members against each

other and forces them to vie for her favor. In other words, Anna can tell that Mum is now having to rethink her manipulation going forward and decide again which family member she wants to pick on, how, and for what purpose. Describing Mum's thoughts as a “tight wire,” though, suggests that Mum is expending a lot of energy as she plots. This may expose a crack in Mum's control, since it seems like a lot of effort to maintain her sense of power over her other family members. It's possible that at some point, this metaphorical wire will snap and Mum will no longer be powerful.

Finally, mentioning “the constant undertow shift of churned, compliant water” speaks to how sneaky Mum is about her manipulation. Mum, in this metaphor, is like the undertow—which can, if beachgoers aren't careful, pull people out to sea. Just like the undertow (which, significantly, is a tide similar to a whirlpool), Mum can influence the “compliant water” that is her family and keep them constantly off balance, or in danger of suffering.



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.

WHIRLPOOL

The narrator's sister, Louise, says that Mum wants her to come inside. Louise is already preparing for the family photo; she has her hair wrapped up in rollers and tinted Clearasil on her face, even though the Clearasil is "the strange pink-orange of a bandaid, or a doll" and doesn't match her skin tone. The ridiculousness of Louise's rollers makes the narrator less afraid.

It's telling that the narrator becomes less afraid when she sees Louise in her hair rollers. While it's still unclear why the narrator would be afraid in the first place, it seems to have something to do with Mum or the upcoming photograph. With this, the story suggests that the narrator isn't comfortable in her home or at big events like this photograph. It's also significant that Kennedy likens the color of Louise's Clearasil to the color of a doll. This offers early clues for the later revelation that Mum is controlling of her daughters' bodies. Since Louise's Clearasil makes her look like a doll and less like a real person, she's possibly more under Mum's thumb than Louise is.



Louise puts her hand on her hips, irritated, and her shadow stretches across the pool. Her shadow reminds the narrator of Dad's shadow whenever he takes family pictures. A few weeks ago, he took "tentative" pictures of Mum, with Louise and the narrator on either side of her. But two weeks ago, when she was trying to choose a photo to include with her Christmas cards, Mum snapped that she needed to have a professional photograph the family. Every photo Dad took is, in her opinion, disastrous.

Describing Dad's photos as "tentative" adds to the sense that this household isn't a happy one. He may be afraid to upset Mum by taking more purposeful photos. However, when Mum insists that the photos Dad took are disastrous, it suggests that Dad can't win. Even when he tries to tiptoe around his wife's desires, he fails to please her. It's also telling that Dad is never in the photographs. While Mum doesn't say that this is something that makes the pictures awful, it's worth considering that Dad's absence in the photos may make it harder to present a united, perfect front.



Everyone waited in silence, braced for whatever else Mum was going to say. Mum finally declared that there were no pictures in which "[they] don't all look dreadful." The narrator fixated on Mum's "all." In each photo, Mum was centered and had a firm grip on her daughters, while Dad was just a shadow "stretched thin."

The fact that everyone waits in silence for Mum's next words makes it clear that it's not just Anna who fears her—Dad and Louise seem to fear Mum, too. That they brace for Mum to say something else indicates that Mum hurts people primarily through her cruel words. Indeed, the narrator seems to take Mum's insistence that they all look "dreadful" not to mean that they all had their eyes closed or something objectively undesirable in a photo—rather, she seems to take it as judgment on how she, Louise, and Dad actually look. In this way, the story reveals that Mum is very concerned with how her family looks—and she wants them to look perfect. Describing Dad's shadows in the photographs as being "stretched thin" may literally describe a long shadow—but also suggests that Dad struggles to hold it together in this dysfunctional household and is "stretched thin" emotionally.



Louise heads back inside. The narrator swims across the **pool** and doesn't want to get out. She wants to stay in the water until she's bleached and wrinkled. Then, she wants to lie on a towel in the sun. She floats with her eyes closed and tells herself that soon, she'll "heave" herself out of the pool and "surrender this lightness."

As the narrator describes what she'd rather spend her day doing, she establishes the pool as her happy place. It's where she's in control of her body and where she feels "light." This is one of the story's few indicators that the narrator might be overweight, especially when Kennedy writes that the narrator would have to "heave" herself out. "Heave" would imply that getting out is a struggle—and it may be a physical struggle because of her weight, but it might also be an emotional struggle because being outside of the pool is so unpleasant.



Every year, summer starts on the day that Dad mows the lawn, pulls out the above-ground **pool**, and sets it up. Then, in the second week of December, Dad brings home a Christmas tree from the scouts. This year, Mum looked at the tree in disbelief. When Dad went outside to look for wire, Mum crouched down. Conspiratorially, she asked narrator and Louise if the scouts "keep the dud one" for Dad every year. The narrator forced herself to smile and then set about decorating the tree with Louise. They worked silently, even when Mum wasn't watching, and ignored each other.

Summer might be the happiest time of the year for the narrator, simply because it gives her daily access to the pool. When Mum takes issue with Dad's tree and tries to rope her daughters into being mean, it shows how Mum actively tries to divide her family members. This crops up again when the narrator notes that she and Louise ignored each other while they decorated the tree; there's no indication that the girls feel any camaraderie or solidarity because they both have to put up with Mum's abuse. Mum may resent Dad for his work on the pool and the fact that their daughters love the pool, so she may be trying to get the girls on her side in this moment.



Mum spends her summers inside watching tennis and drinking iced coffee. Even with the fan on, the air is still thick. Mum sighs that "you could set your clock by [Dad]" as he sweeps leaves out of the pool. The narrator stands still, unable to move, as Mum gripes that they don't have an in-ground **pool**. She sighs that the "stupid" pool should've ended up in the trash years ago. Then, Mum pulls the narrator close and remarks that Dad is "absolutely obsessed." The narrator smiles and nods, but the smile feels "traitorous."

The fact that Mum spends her summers inside suggests that the inside of the house is her domain, while the yard and the pool are her husband and daughters' domain. Her exasperation is palpable when she remarks that a person could set a clock by Dad's daily pool skimming. Especially as she goes on to refer to the pool as "stupid" and calls Dad "obsessed" with it, it makes it clear that Mum resents the pool—possibly because her family members seem to love it so much. But complaining about not having an in-ground pool also suggests that their temporary above-ground pool might just be another indicator that the family isn't perfect (the implication being that a perfect family would invest in a proper in-ground pool). The way that Mum draws in the narrator shows that Mum doesn't care about her daughters' opinions—or want them to have strong relationships with their dad. Mum might be unsuccessful in keeping her daughters and husband apart, though; describing her agreement as "traitorous" suggests that the narrator does love and care for her father, she just can't say so in front of Mum.



Mum squeezes the narrator and offers her an iced coffee. A tennis player on the TV hits the ball hard as the oscillating fan seems to shake its head critically. The narrator swallows her iced coffee, which is so sweet that it hurts her teeth.

Offering the narrator an iced coffee reads as Mom inviting her to sit and spend time with Mum in front of the TV. This may be an attempt to convince the narrator to agree with Mum's way of seeing the family, but the narrator isn't buying it. Instead, she feels judged by the fan (an object inside the house—a part of Mum's domain) and the coffee is sweet to the point of being painful. The coffee symbolizes how Mum torments her daughters: she's outwardly kind and sweet to them, as when she draws them in for hugs and smiles. But in actuality, she's hurtful and cruel and causes her daughters pain.



Mum restlessly watches the match and notes that “those next-door kids” will be over any time now to swim. Their parents won't have any plans for the school holidays and instead expect Mum to “feed and entertain” their children.

Speaking disparagingly about the kids next door allows Mum to feel better about herself and her own parenting. She implies that she's the parent on the block who plans activities and can feed neighborhood kids—and that other parents in the neighborhood take advantage of that. Refusing to use the kids' names (by referring to them just as “those next-door kids”) adds another layer to Mum's cruelty. These kids, in her opinion, are so inferior that it's not even worth it to refer to them by name.



Every morning of the narrator's school break, she feels panicky. Sooner or later, the **pool** will come up in conversation and come under attack. She casually changes into her swimsuit and slips out the back door, and Louise does the same. They both avoid Mum. Mum gripes regularly that the kids next door will come through the house so they can swim, but these days Leanne and Chris wait by the fence for an invitation to swim. The narrator piles up bricks as a step and whispers for them to climb over the fence.

Though the narrator doesn't say specifically here that Mum will be the one to attack the pool, the fact that both the narrator and Louise avoid Mum on their way to the pool indicates that Mum is their adversary here. The fact that Louise and the narrator both avoid Mum in the same way indicates that Louise is just as unhappy with Mum's treatment as the narrator is. And though Mum takes issue with the kids next door, it seems as though Leanne and Chris know to avoid Mum. Indeed, it seems as though Mum is on the verge of banning Leanne and Chris from the house outright—something she can do, as the house is her domain. But Mum doesn't have that power over the pool. Out there, the narrator and Louise can decide who they play with and experiment with their own social groups.



With other kids around, the narrator and Louise stop avoiding each other. It's better to play Whirlpool with four people. Everyone runs around the edge of the **pool** until a slow current forms. Then, everyone takes turns to jump into the middle and spin around. Chris doesn't like being in the middle, so the narrator, Louise, and Leanne wrestle him into the whirlpool. It makes the narrator feel "sly, teeth-gritted pleasure" when Chris struggles and finally gives in. She feels powerful and like Chris "has to learn." The girls eye each other as Chris pulls himself to his feet. Then, they start running again.

In the middle of the **pool**, when it's the narrator's turn, she closes her eyes. The current seems to "flex[] like a muscle." She's in the middle of it, "loose and helpless," and stares at the sky. If she could rise up into the sky, she'd see the rectangles of yards and houses. There would be dots of blue "like bright precious stones" with yellow grass around the edges, which grows only because water slops out during games of Whirlpool.

Inside the house, the air is thick and smells like the Christmas tree. Mum, dressed in her beautiful yellow linen dress, reminds the narrator that they're having the Christmas photo taken today. Her tone is bright and she smiles an animated smile. From Mum's tone, the narrator can tell that the photographer is already here. She turns to run as Mum whispers that she has 10 minutes to look presentable—and she "mean[s] it."

The game of Whirlpool shows that the pool isn't just where the narrator and Louise feel powerful. Rather, it's also where they can experiment with reproducing some of Mum's abuse by throwing Chris into the whirlpool against his will. That the pleasure the narrator feels is "sly" and "teeth-gritted" suggests it might not be genuine pleasure—it may be tinged with cruelty or anger. But she remains firm that Chris "has to learn." This suggests that the narrator accepts that she can't stand up to Mum—and indeed, it's impossible to stand up to forces or people that are more powerful than oneself.



The pool also offers the narrator and Louise the opportunity to experiment with giving up power—and the narrator suggests that it can actually be freeing to do so. In this sense, it's having the choice and the autonomy that makes a person powerful—not just being cruel or controlling. The description of the pools as being "like bright precious stones" with the yellow around the edges adds to the sense that the pool is a wonderful place. Indeed, the yellow grass around the edges gives the sense that the "stones" of the pools are set into gold, making them even more valuable. And the fact that these precious pools and their golden settings are everywhere and occur due to the game of Whirlpool makes it clear that pools offer kids everywhere the opportunity to experiment with power, control, and autonomy.



Once again, Mum's cheerful appearance—her sunny yellow dress and warm smile—contrasts sharply with a current of danger and cruelty underneath. Mum might be beautiful, bright, and smiling, but she's also willing to threaten her daughter if the narrator doesn't comply. This creates a situation in which the narrator probably doesn't trust any of Mum's kindness, as it seems to always barely obscure cruelty.



Louise is in the girls' shared bedroom, putting on bubblegum lip gloss. Her hair is already done, secured on the top of her head with a rainbow comb. The narrator's heart sinks when she sees what's on the bed: the sundresses. Louise says that Mum insisted on them. Louise is already wearing her dress and since she's thin, it's "doesn't look quite so ridiculous." But the narrator's dress is tight under the arms and then falls like a shapeless sack down to her calves. Louise adds that the narrator has to wear her sandals, too.

The bubblegum lip gloss and the rainbow comb give the impression that whatever Louise's age (Kennedy never reveals it), she's dressing like a young child. This, the narrator later discovers, is something Mum encourages, and it gives the impression that Mum wants her daughters to stay little girls forever. Given the way that the narrator describes the fit of her sundress, it seems as though it's both unflattering and too small. It's possible, then, that Mum wants her daughters to wear the dresses to make it seem like they're still small and controllable, but this has the adverse affect of making the narrator feel uncomfortable with how she looks in this dress. It's also important that the narrator notes that the dress is "ridiculous" on Louise too, suggesting that the sundress is just as inappropriate for Louise (though for different reasons, perhaps) as it is for the narrator.



The narrator pulls off her swimsuit and tugs the dress on over her chest. She tries to brush her hair into a ponytail like Louise's, but it's impossible without Mum's hairspray and comb. She's also sunburnt and is going to look bright pink in the Christmas photo.

Despite Mum's clear attempts to make her daughters look younger and perfectly polished, the narrator realizes here that Mum isn't going to entirely get her way with this Christmas photo. Indeed, the fact that the narrator has to tug the dress over her chest implies that it doesn't fit well and won't look good. Further, the narrator is going to look like she spends a lot of time in the sun and hasn't had the time or the help to worry much about her hair, which might also irk Mum.



The dress squeezes across "the tingling, embarrassing swell" of the narrator's chest. It's a dress for a nine-year-old. A few weeks ago, the narrator asked for a training bra for Christmas. In a sweet voice, Mum said that at 12 years old, the narrator isn't old enough for a bra. Mum's tenderness felt "treacherous and irresistible" like a tide, and she leaned into it "as it tugged [her] off [her] feet." In a low voice, Mum told Anna that it's normal for "young girls" to feel self-conscious about their weight.

Even if Mum might honestly believe that 12-year-olds are too young for bras, Anna's description of her chest as "the tingling, embarrassing swell" makes it clear that physically and emotionally, she's ready for a bra. And in part because she's so ready for a bra and the maturity it symbolizes, being forced to wear a nine-year-old's dress seems especially egregious. But it's telling that Anna describes Mum as being treacherously and irresistibly tender. Mum, this reveals, is a master manipulator. She draws her daughters in with tenderness and kindness, makes them feel safe, and then "tug[s] them off [their] feet." She does this here by insinuating that Anna should feel self-conscious about her size. It's important to note that there are no indicators in the story that Anna actually is overweight. She definitely doesn't fit into children's clothing anymore, but that's a normal development for a girl whose body is beginning to develop—children's clothes aren't designed to accommodate the curves of a girl who's entered puberty. It's possible, then, that Mum is purposefully trying to make Anna feel self-conscious to gain more control over her daughter.



Louise had smirked triumphantly then and now, she sneers in the same way. As Anna tugs her dress over her body, Louise says airily that it makes sense that the narrator has to wear a tent-like dress because she's so fat. Anna's breath falters, but she "master[s]" it.

When they're not in the pool, Louise and Anna (the narrator) seem to constantly be at odds. And the story reveals here that this is in part because Louise has learned from Mum that it's okay to be cruel and make Anna feel awful about her body. Since Louise is thin, she may fit into Mum's idea of what the perfect daughter should be like, affording her even more power over her sister. When Anna "master[s]" her breath, it suggests she's done this before—abuse like this may be commonplace for her.



Having the photographer in the house seems to charge the atmosphere. Mum arranges roses and apologizes for taking up his time as Anna comes into the living room. The roses are on the mantel with Christmas cards from Mum's friends in Canada and England. Mum and Dad met them all when they went on their honeymoon cruise to Tahiti 14 years ago. The cards include letters and holiday greetings to "your two little girls."

Apologizing to the photographer for taking up his time is essentially an apology for the family not being perfect—if they were perfect, they would've been set up and ready for the photo long ago. Describing the cards on the mantel and where Mum and Dad met these friends suggests that Mum clings to what might have been a really happy time long ago. Mum may simply be yearning for an earlier time when she was happier, and this may explain some of her cruelty and her attempts to control her family. The greetings to Mum's "two little girls" suggests that at least when it comes to these friends, Mum is successful at making people think her daughters are still small. Neither these friends nor Mum have accepted yet that Anna and Louise are growing up.



Every year at the beginning of December, Mum sits with a stack of blank cards and a list, writing out the cards. She tells Anna that one day, she'll thank her for keeping up with these people—Anna will be able to stay with them when she travels overseas. Now, Mum's cards sit in unsealed envelopes on the table. Each waits for a print of the family Christmas photo.

These international friends may not be actual friends to Mum. They might just be a way for Mum to feel cultured and well connected. Mum's snappiness when she tells Anna that these friends will help Anna get ahead later reveals no deep affection for these people or happiness at one day introducing Anna to them. These friends seem to exist only to bolster Mum's sense that her family is perfect and will one day travel internationally.



Dad sits in an armchair in a fresh shirt. Everyone listens when Mum pauses and asks if the photographer can get the Christmas tree in the background. She explains that the photo is for their Christmas card, which they'll send to their many international friends. Brightly, she turns to Dad, calls him "darling," and confirms that they met the friends while they were on the cruise. That word and the expression on Mum's face makes Anna's stomach turn over. She shudders involuntarily as the photographer moves his camera.

The fact that everyone stops to listen to Mum here mirrors how everyone waited for Mum's assessment of Dad's photos earlier in the story. Mum runs the show in this family—and everyone else can only sit back and do what she says. When Mum makes it clear to the photographer that this photo will go to international friends, it supports the possibility that Mum is only sending these cards because she wants to look cultured and connected. And when Anna has such an adverse reaction to Mum calling Dad "darling," it implies that Mum and Dad's relationship isn't happy and tender. Indeed, Mum is probably doing to Dad what she's done to Anna: drawing him in with kindness and sweetness so she can then cut him down just when he feels safe.



Mum asks Louise if she thinks the white pinecones on the table look Christmassy. Louise agrees and Mum asks her to move an angel holding a candle onto the table too. Anna dawdled an extra five minutes in the **pool**, so Louise is the favorite today. Anna knows this for sure when Mum puts a heavy hand on her shoulder. It seems to say, “Just you wait.”

The clarification that Louise is the favorite today implies that Anna isn't Mum's only target; sometimes, Louise finds herself the recipient of Mum's ire or cruelty, just like Anna. Mum's heavy hand on Anna's shoulder communicates how dangerous Mum is (“Just you wait” is threatening), but the heavy hand is also controlling. It means that Anna can't move where she'd like to. Instead, she has to go where Mum wants her.



Mum steers Anna to sit on the floor in front of the couch. She then tells Louise to sit on one side of her and Dad to sit on the other. Mum checks her hair in the mantel mirror before she sits down and tells the photographer that they're ready. Anna knows that next year, Mum's friends will write that they haven't changed at all.

The way that Mum arranges the family creates the illusion that this is a well-groomed, close-knit family. Given what Anna has said about Mum's cruelty, this couldn't be further from the truth. In this way, the story makes it clear that it's impossible to judge a family's functionality from the outside, such as from a Christmas photo. Photos can obscure all manner of dysfunction, as evidenced by Anna saying that Mum's friends will think nothing has changed. In reality, nothing probably has—there's no indication that Mum wasn't abusive last year—but this shows that Mum is successfully putting on a show for her friends.



Everyone is touching and it's weird. Mum's knee, which is covered in nylon, is behind Anna. The nylon must be hot today. Dad's shin presses into Anna's back and he leans forward. In a low voice he says he put the hose in the **pool** to get it all ready, but Mum hears and asks Dad if they can “forget about that dinky little pool” for five minutes. Her voice is forced and breezy.

When Anna thinks of how uncomfortably warm Mum must be in her nylon stockings, it's the first indication that Mum might be uncomfortable or unhappy with her life more generally. But it's also important to note that Mum is doing this on purpose; the photo was her idea and her clothing choices were, presumably, her own. On another note, Dad's mention about filling up the pool becomes one of the most tender moments in the entire story, and it shows that Anna and Dad are fairly close. To Mum, this is unacceptable and perhaps makes her feel threatened. This is why she asks if they can “forget” the “dinky” pool—it's the one thing that deprives her of power, so it makes sense that she'd want to pretend it doesn't exist.



Anna stares into the camera lens staring back at them. Mum tells Dad to keep his eyes open and his mouth closed, laughing a bit as she does. Anna thinks bitterly and hopelessly that Dad isn't going to answer her. The photographer tells everyone to smile and Anna knows what Mum's smile will be like. It'll be “triumphant.” Dad will look uncomfortable to be in the picture for once.

Even if Dad supports Anna and Louise by maintaining the pool for them, Anna still seems bitter that Dad won't actually stand up to Mum. In this way, the story shows that Anna feels alone and unsupported in her family. The idea that Mum's smile is going to be “triumphant” suggests that this photograph will be a win for Mum. It will create the illusion that she has a perfect family—even if Dad looks uncomfortable, and even if Anna is supremely unhappy.



Anna glances toward Louise and is shocked that Louise is staring back. Something passes between them; it feels like the reckless moment before one of them throws themselves or Chris into the middle of the whirlpool. The girls turn back to the camera. Anna doesn't smile and she knows Louise isn't smiling either. Instead, their faces are "compliant and empty." The photographer reminds the girls to smile, and Anna flashes a "dead, robot smile."

With her eyes, Anna tries to beg Mum's friends to see everything coded in in the photo. She wants them to see how stiffly she sits in this humiliating dress, cross-legged like a child. She hopes they see how "heavy and proprietorial" Mum's hand is on her shoulder. Suddenly, Anna understands that the sundresses are about Mum—and she realizes that the look on Mum's face when she asked for a bra wasn't scorn. It was terror. All of these realizations "bloom[]" too fast as the camera flashes.

When the photographer says "OK," Louise asks if they can be dismissed. Anna feels fear run through her when she notices the sullen tone of Louise's voice. Louise can only take this risk because the photographer is here, oblivious to the fact that he's a "circuit-breaker."

This moment of unity clarifies that Louise suffers at Mum's hands, just like Anna does. She also seems to want to subvert Mum just as much as Anna does. In this moment, then, Anna and Louise begin to move the more positive relationship they enjoy in the pool into a new realm. This offers hope that Anna and Louise will, as they get older, learn to support each other as they weather Mum's cruelty. And by choosing to look "compliant and empty" or giving a "dead, robot smile," Anna and Louise try to help viewers of the resulting pictures see that they're victims here. They essentially rebel quietly against Mum by doing this. Mum will technically get the photos she wants, but they're not going to portray genuinely happy girls. Instead, the photos will portray the girls as dolls, harkening back to Louise's off-color Clearasil being the color of a doll at the beginning of the story.



Anna wants Mum's friends to understand that she's a victim and Mum isn't actually a nice person. Mum is actively trying to make Anna and Louise seem younger than they are, for longer than is actually possible—this is why Anna wears a child's dress and sits cross-legged on the floor. Most importantly, Anna recognizes that Mum wants her and Louise to stay young because Mum is afraid of her daughters growing up. It's possible that Mum tries to disguise her terror as scorn and cruelty. This, it seems, is why she wouldn't get Anna a bra: buying the garment would mean acknowledging that Anna is maturing, a prospect that terrifies Mum and threatens her sense of control. Mum's "heavy," "proprietorial" hand on Anna's shoulder symbolizes this control.



This passage confirms that Mum doesn't normally tolerate any pushback, since Louise is only able to be as sullen as she'd like to be with the photographer around. Anna's fear—and her understanding of why Louise can talk like this—speaks to how dangerous or fraught behaving like this would be at any other time. But the fact that the photographer has no idea that he's a "circuit-breaker" shows that Mum is still doing a good job of presenting her family as perfect and functional, as the dysfunction clearly isn't registering with the photographer.



Dad speaks up before Mum can and says the girls can go—it's too hot to be inside, "trussed up" in good clothes. Mum will make Dad will pay for his use of "trussed," Anna knows. She thinks of how each evening, he gathers abandoned towels and hangs them on the clothesline. He always sweeps them off regretfully before coming inside. Anger rises in Anna.

When Dad steps in, he stands up for his daughters and undermines Mum's power. Saying that the girls are "trussed up" suggests that Dad doesn't agree with Mum's attempt to make everyone look perfect and childish—he'd probably rather his daughters be who they want to be. Anna might be angry as she thinks of Dad's nightly tidying because she recognizes how sad it is that Dad has to take time and power for himself in these ways. The pool is no doubt a positive thing for Anna, Louise, and Dad—but Anna might also believe that they all should feel just as comfortable inside the house, too.



The photographer offers to take portrait shots of just Mum and Dad together, Anna watches the "charm and chill collide" in Mum; the offer catches her off guard. Though she hesitates, Mum agrees to the photos. Anna is certain she sees Mum's thoughts running ahead grimly, plotting "exile and allegiance" and acting like the undertow.

Anna describes watching Mum's thoughts as though this is the first time she's seeing them and able to confirm her suspicions about how Mum functions. Anna confirms that Mum uses her charm to hurt people when she talks about watching the "charm and chill collide." This collision also suggests that Mum's perfect facade breaks momentarily, revealing how conniving she is. The fact that Mum is clearly plotting "exile and allegiance" shows that she gains power by pitting her family members against each other and forcing them to fight for her approval. In a setup like this, Mum is like the undertow in the ocean, moving everything around without others seeing—but she's dangerous as she does so. Just as the undertow has the power to pull people out to sea, Mum has the power to knock her family members down with very little effort.



Anna races upstairs, pulls off her dress, and puts her swimsuit back on. She pulls the pins out of her hair and then races out the screen door for the **pool**. It's full now and seems like a "watching eye" ready to spill "glinting, unshed tears."

Realizing the truth about Mum's actions and fears might be overwhelming for Anna, hence her mad dash for the pool. Even as she begins to take control of her body (by refusing to smile) and develops a more critical understanding of her mother, this doesn't mean she's ready to deal with the truth all the time. Describing the pool as a "watching eye" ready to shed tears suggests that Anna sees the pool as a sympathetic, larger-than-life figure. It's there to cry for her and accept her as she is, and it gives her a safe space to think through these revelations in her own time. But this passage also suggests that it's Anna's eyes that are filling up with angry, frustrated tears that she knows she can't shed under Mum's "watching eye."





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