Housekeeping

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARILYNNE ROBINSON

Marilynne Robinson was born Marilynne Summers in Sandpoint, Idaho in 1943. She was close with her brother, who also grew up to become a writer and an art historian. After studying American Literature at Pembroke College (the former women's college at Brown University), she went on to earn a doctorate in English from the University of Washington, where she wrote her dissertation on Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 2*. She penned *Housekeeping* in the late 1970s, and though she expected it to receive little attention, it became an object of national acclaim and the winner of the prestigious PEN/Hemingway Award for best first novel. After the publication of *Housekeeping*, Robinson turned to nonfiction and completed several books of critical work—she would not release her next novel, *Gilead*, for over twenty years. In 2005, *Gilead* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and Robinson wrote two follow-up novels, which follow the characters from *Gilead* over the course of the next ten years. She received a 2012 National Humanities Medal from President Barack Obama, and currently lives in Iowa City, where she is Professor Emeritus and a former faculty member at the distinguished Iowa Writers' Workshop. She lectures regularly around the country, and is rumored to be at work on a fourth installment in the *Gilead* saga.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There is no explicit declaration within the text as to what year the events of the novel take place, but Robinson has stated in interviews that she imagines *Housekeeping* taking place in the 1950s. Robinson herself was born in 1943 in Sandpoint, Idaho—a small town on the edge of a vast lake—and no doubt the atmosphere of her hometown has made its way into the pages of her acclaimed novel. Though the women of *Housekeeping* seem both removed from and uninterested in the political and social world beyond—and even within—their small town, the characters' and townspeople's anxieties about Sylvie's transient ways and ambivalence about her mysterious marriage reveal deeper fears about both the breakdown of the idyllic nuclear family unit as well as the idea of women shirking their "duties" and living in pursuit of their own physical, emotional, and intellectual freedoms.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

One of Marilynne Robinson's primary influences in the composition of *Housekeeping* seems to be Henry David Thoreau. An American writer of the Transcendentalist style, his book *Walden*, about his life lived apart from society on the edge of an idyllic lake in Massachusetts, contains a deep reverence for nature, an ideological investigation of what it means to be a part of society, and the twinned loneliness and beauty of life itself. Robinson also takes inspiration in both her fiction and nonfiction from the sixteenth-century religious thinker and reformer John Calvin, whose magnum opus of thought on the Christian religion is known today as *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Marilynne Robinson's oeuvre—which began with *Housekeeping*, her first novel, in 1980—consists of an accomplished body of fiction and nonfiction which wrestles with the major questions facing humanity: love, responsibility, religion, science, and nature. The themes of memory, loss, and nature established within *Housekeeping* reverberate throughout her later novels, most prominently *Gilead*, and her works of nonfiction including *Mother Country* and *When I Was a Child I Read Books*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Housekeeping*
- **When Written:** 1970s
- **Where Written:** Amherst, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1980
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction, generational saga, coming-of-age tale
- **Setting:** The fictional town of Fingerbone, Idaho
- **Climax:** Sylvie and Ruth burn down their family's ancestral home and leave Fingerbone forever.
- **Antagonist:** Lucille
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Happy Accident. Marilynne Robinson's interest in the metaphoric language of nineteenth-century American writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson led her to work privately on a series of extended metaphors as an exercise during her Ph.D. program at the University of Washington—an exercise that would become the framework for *Housekeeping*.

PLOT SUMMARY

The adult Ruth Stone looks back on her unrooted childhood. After Ruth and Lucille's mother, Helen, commits suicide, the two sisters go to live in Fingerbone, Idaho, with their grandmother Sylvia Foster. After their grandmother's death, the girls enter the care of their anxious spinster great-aunts

Lily and Nona, and then at last their mother's sister, Sylvie, comes to Fingerbone to take up **housekeeping** and look after them. Sylvie is eccentric and odd, and has been living for years as a transient drifter. Despite having once been married, she seems loath to acknowledge that she ever had a husband or to answer questions about where her husband is. Sylvie reminds Lucille and Ruth intensely of their mother, but she is perhaps even more mysterious and inscrutable. They grow afraid that Sylvie will soon leave them, too, but in the weeks that follow her arrival, being forced to endure a severe flood together bonds the three of them close together.

Ruth and Lucille, tempted by the beautiful spring weather, begin skipping school almost every day to spend their days down at the vast **lake** at the center of Fingerbone—the same lake which claimed their grandfather Edmund, years before their birth, in a terrible and legendary train accident, and the same lake into which their mother drove when she took her own life. Sylvie aids the girls in their truancy rather than scolding them, writing notes to their teachers explaining that they're out sick with "the discomforts of female adolescence." Despite Sylvie's friendship, her eccentricities when it comes to housekeeping and her love of impractical, ephemeral clothes and objects soon alienate Lucille, and Ruth begins to sense that her sister longs to live in the world of "common" people.

In the summer, Lucille begins asking Sylvie increasingly personal questions about her life and past—questions which Sylvie resists answering. Lucille grows frustrated with Sylvie's embarrassing habits, which mark her as a transient through and through—she sleeps with her shoes under her pillows and often takes naps on public park benches. As Lucille resists entering the world of Sylvie's "dream," she begins constructing false memories about their mother, whom she recalls as a jovial and doting "widow […] killed in an accident." Sylvie offers friendship, kindness, and love in equal measure to both Ruth and Lucille, but Lucille increasingly longs to spend time with a group of girlfriends from school and join them in learning about makeup, sewing, cooking, and entertaining. After Lucille and Ruth have a terrible fight, Lucille begins ignoring Ruth in earnest—they return to school in the fall and must face the principal to explain their truancy, and Lucille alludes to Ruth's lack of stability and direction. She stops spending time with Ruth at lunch, refuses to eat the dinners that Sylvie cooks, and eventually even moves out of the house to live with her home economics teacher, Miss Royce, when she comes home from a school dance one night to find Sylvie sleeping on the bed that Lucille ordinarily shares with Ruth.

The morning after Lucille's departure, Sylvie wakes Ruth up early so that they can go on an adventure out on the lake—Sylvie has a "special" place she wants to show Ruth. Sylvie rushes Ruth out the door and together they steal a neighbor's boat, rowing out to the middle of the lake to avoid his shouts and screams when he catches them in the act. They arrive at a small island in the center of the lake, where Sylvie leads Ruth to a hidden, frost-covered valley, at the center of which sits a fallen-down house. Sylvie tells Ruth that sometimes, when she comes here, she believes she can hear the voices of feral children, and longs to meet them and take a look at them. Ruth and Sylvie spend the day on the island, eating lunch on the shore before returning to the valley once the sun warms it, but Ruth becomes lost in thought and gets separated from her aunt. Fearing Sylvie has at last abandoned her, as Ruth feared she would all along, Ruth becomes sad and frightened. Sylvie returns to find Ruth disoriented and weeping, and hurries her off the island and back into the boat. They float on the lake until sunrise, then climb up the bridge at the center of the lake and ride a freight train back into town.

As rumors of Sylvie and Ruth's boxcar ride spreads throughout town, the sheriff and several neighbors become concerned about Ruth's well-being and drop by the house to check on her. The house has begun to fall into disrepair—Sylvie's hoarded magazines and newspapers are piling up, and mice and cats have overrun the place. Realizing that a hearing has been scheduled to determine whether she is indeed a fit caregiver, Sylvie cleans up the house and begins putting on a normal, neighborly face. In spite of these changes, Ruth knows that the town of Fingerbone fears transience, and that she and Sylvie are "doomed."

One night, Ruth and Sylvie build a bonfire in the backyard and begin burning old newspapers and magazines. After the fire goes out, Ruth hides from Sylvie in the orchard in a kind of cruel game, knowing that with all the neighbor's eyes on her, Sylvie cannot run around calling for her. When the sheriff comes by to check up on things, Sylvie is forced to admit that Ruth has hidden away in the orchard. Ruth comes out, sheepish and shamed, and when the sheriff suggests she come spend the night at his house, she screams "no" hysterically. After the sheriff leaves, Ruth and Sylvie work together to set fire to the house and burn it down. It is tough to get the blaze started, and they are forced to leave without being entirely confident that the house will go up in flames. As Sylvie and Ruth run across the bridge over the lake and out of Fingerbone forever, Ruth cannot bring herself to look back at the house they've left behind. In the wake of the fire, news spreads that Sylvie and Ruth have died, "claim[ed]" by the lake in a terrible accident. For over seven years they ride the rails around the country, staying with Sylvie's friends and exploring the world, always together. Ruth never searches for Lucille or returns to Fingerbone, though she wonders daily what her sister is up to—whether Lucille has taken up housekeeping in the old house or moved to a big city, and if Lucille, too, thinks constantly of Ruth and Sylvie.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ruth Stone – Ruth is the novel's narrator and protagonist, Helen's daughter, and Lucille's sister. As she looks back on her formative years, Ruth's adult editorial intrusions often come through, rendering the narrative style of the novel a wistful, resonant dip into memory. Abandoned by their suicidal mother at a young age, Ruth and Lucille are raised for several years by their grandmother Sylvia. After Sylvia's death, they enter the care of their great-aunts, Lily and Nona Foster, and are eventually surrendered to their mother's eccentric sister, Sylvie Fisher. Through all of it, Ruth and Lucille are wide-eyed and almost numb—they absorb everything that happens to them but seem almost passive characters in their own lives. With the arrival of Sylvie, however, the girls begin testing the boundaries of the world around them, of their relationships with one another, and of their dreamy, eccentric, transient aunt's true devotion to them. Ruth is, from the perch of adulthood, all-seeing and able to track the subtle but devastating shifts in love and loyalty between her younger self, Lucille, and Sylvie over the course of a couple potent months. While Lucille abandons her childhood games of exploring the woods with Ruth and grows obsessed with beauty, appearances, and manners, Ruth becomes even more wild, in thrall to Sylvie's stories of life riding the rails and her unique relationship to nature. Ruth, slow to develop physically, feels barred from the gates of womanhood, and instead seeks refuge in her aunt's attentions. Sylvie says at one point, of her sister Helen, that it's "hard to describe someone you know so well," and over the course of the novel, the same becomes true of Ruth. Privy to her every fleeting thought and passing whim, the reader becomes unable to separate the character of Ruth from the open-hearted, reverent, curious way she sees the world, people, and relationships all around her. Ruth's grown-up meditations on nature, memory, love, loss, sisterhood, and religion intersperse with her recollections of her past, ultimately leaving readers with a portrait of a woman pushed to the brink by her loneliness, longing, and uncertainty.

Sylvie Fisher – Named for her mother, Sylvia Foster, Sylvia "Sylvie" Fisher is Helen and Molly's sister and Ruth and Lucille's aunt. After leaving home at a young age to marry, Sylvie essentially dropped off the map; when she resurfaces years later, she has been living alone as a drifter for over a decade. Sylvie's life of riding the rails and moving constantly from place to place marks her as a feared and loathed "other" in the small town of Fingerbone, and yet Sylvie speaks dreamily of her time living wildly—even when relaying the more eerie encounters she's had. Sylvie's carefree, unexamined lifestyle means that she is an eccentric caretaker for the girls, with odd methods of **housekeeping**: she hoards magazines and newspapers, insists on eating supper in the dark in order to enjoy the evening light, and doesn't clean but rather airs out the house by leaving doors and windows open for days on end. At first, both Ruth and Lucille are charmed and hypnotized by their aunt, and terrified that she will leave them behind and resume her transient lifestyle. When it becomes clear she plans to stay, however, Lucille starts to resent the close emotional bond Ruth and Sylvie share. As Lucille moves out of the house and begins a veritable campaign against Sylvie, the town sheriff schedules a hearing to determine whether Sylvie is a fit caregiver for Ruth. Knowing that they will soon be separated, Ruth and Sylvie burn the house down and run away from Fingerbone to live together as transients. Sylvie's staunch independence, rejection of societal norms, and calm, ethereal, almost otherworldly demeanor mark her as a mess of mysteries and contradictions which endear her to Ruth and repulse Lucille. Sylvie is an iconic character and an embodiment of several of the novel's themes: sisterhood, abandonment and loss, communion with nature, and human beings' selective relationship with their memories and painful pasts.

Lucille Stone – Lucille is Ruth's sister and the novel's main antagonist in many ways. Redheaded, opinionated, and concerned deeply with manners, propriety, and appearances, Lucille is Ruth's opposite in almost every way. Nevertheless, the girls are steadfast companions, and for the first half or so of the book, they function almost as a unit. They perceive the world in the same way and have the same likes, dislikes, and fears. After the arrival of Sylvie, however, the girls begin to diverge, and Lucille's jealousy over Ruth and Sylvie's connection turns her against both of them. Though Lucille is a year younger, she begins developing into a woman faster than Ruth—in an attempt to rebel against Sylvie's eccentric ways, quiet wisdom, and bizarre methods of **housekeeping**, the flourishing Lucille becomes obsessed with dressmaking, cleaning, and dieting, and makes a group of girlfriends in town who replace both Ruth and Sylvie in her affections and attentions. Lucille, who once skipped school with Ruth gleefully, turns on her sister when they're called into the principal's office to explain their truancy, and one night when Lucille sees that Sylvie has fallen asleep on her side of the bed, she takes her things and moves out to live with her Home Economics teacher, Miss Royce. Impetuous, headstrong, and desperate for idealized versions of love, domesticity, and perfection, Lucille is one of *Housekeeping*'s most compelling characters and a perfect foil for the quiet and changeable Ruth.

Helen Stone / Ruth and Lucille's Mother – Ruth and Lucille's mother. A quiet and mysterious woman who married a man named Reginald Stone in a haste, and yet separated from him so soon after having her girls that neither of them remember the man who is technically their father. For reasons unknown and never explained, Helen brings the girls one day when they're very young to Fingerbone, where she deposits them on their grandmother's porch and then drives a car borrowed from her neighbor back in Spokane, Bernice, straight into the **lake** which claimed her father Edmund's life years ago. Helen's suicide is the book's inciting incident, and yet the girls never learn much about who their mother was, what she was really

like, or what plagued her and drove her to take her own life. The girls are never particularly emotional when it comes to remembrances of their mother, but over time, Ruth begins to remember her as cold and distant while Lucille remembers her as loving, doting, and kind.

Sylvia Foster – Ruth and Lucille's grandmother, and Helen and Sylvie's mother. A kind and elderly woman who finds joy in small moments and simple things despite the hardships and losses she's suffered in life. Despite her age and frailty, she throws herself into taking good care of Ruth and Lucille, and Ruth senses that she seems to want to correct the mistakes of her past through the girls. Sylvia dies of old age five years after Helen's suicide, leaving Ruth and Lucille once again in a precarious, guardian-less position.

Lily and Nona Foster – Lucille and Ruth's great-aunts, a pair of old and anxious spinsters, who come to care for them shortly after their grandmother Sylvia's death. Lily and Nona are not twins, but function as a pair—they are "maiden ladies" who have lived their entire lives side-by-side, and both comfort and feed one another's fears, anxieties, and prejudices. Lily and Nona seem bewildered by Ruth and Lucille, and are unable to care for them properly. They become nervous about the prospect of living out the rest of their lives in Fingerbone, and so take the first opportunity to write to Sylvie and ask her to come take up **housekeeping** in their place. Lily and Nona are not mean or cruel, but it's plain that they don't particularly understand Ruth and Lucille, and don't want to.

Edmund Foster – Sylvia Foster's husband and father to Helen, Sylvie, and Molly. Long before Ruth and Lucille were born, he perished in a famous accident in which a train going over a bridge slid off the rails and into the large **lake** at the center of Fingerbone. His death has, over the years, become something of a legend within the Foster family.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Molly Foster – Sylvie and Helen's sister, and Lucille and Ruth's aunt. A missionary in China who is referred to but never seen within the book.

Bernice – Helen, Ruth, and Lucille's neighbor in Spokane. She is invested in their lives and kindly lends them her car so that they can take a trip to Fingerbone.

Miss Royce – Lucille's home economics teacher, with whom Lucille goes to live when she becomes suspicious of Sylvie and jealous of the bond between her and Ruth.

Mr. French – The principal at Ruth and Lucille's school. He reprimands the girls for skipping school and comes down on Ruth especially harshly. He later commends her, though, for her efforts to catch up and get ahead.

The Sheriff – The town sheriff. A kindly man who seems to take no pleasure in reprimanding Sylvie for her eccentric ways and what her neighbors perceive as her possible endangerment of Ruth and Lucille.

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.

WOMEN AND SISTERHOOD

Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* is overwhelmingly populated by women. The women of the Foster family lose, eschew, or ignore their male partners completely, and devote themselves instead to the careful art of **housekeeping** and the collaborative bringing up of their younger generations. As the main characters Ruth and Lucille navigate their own relationship as sisters, they are brimming with questions about the relationship between their somewhat reluctant caregiver and aunt, Sylvie, and their mother, Helen, whose recent suicide has thrown the girls' lives into turmoil. Surrounded by women but with little blueprint for how to navigate their burgeoning womanhood, Ruth and Lucille flail and fight as they try to discover how they should be—but are unable to find the answers in one another. As the novel progresses, Robinson explores, extolls, tests, and questions the bonds of sisterhood, ultimately suggesting that no matter how close any pair of sisters seems to be, and no matter how much their lives overlap, sisters can still be unknowable to one another.

Through two pairs of sisters—Helen and Sylvie, Ruth and Lucille—Robinson demonstrates the intense emotions and fraught decisions which comprise girlhood and womanhood. Robinson purposefully creates parallels and similarities between the two generations of sisters, but as the novel unfolds, she chooses to show how despite their shared blood, hometown, and ancestral living space, these two sets of sisters are essentially strangers to one another all throughout their lives. When Sylvie arrives in Fingerbone to take care of Lucille and Ruth, the girls pepper her almost nonstop with questions about their mother, Helen—what she was like as a girl, as a woman, as a sister. Sylvie's answers are oblique and cryptic, and she insists that it's "hard to describe someone you know so well." Sylvie's failure to be able to put her memories of her sister into words for the girls—or perhaps to access any memories at all other than the snippets and glimpses she ultimately provides—shows that sisterhood, though a sacred and intense bond, is a complicated one as well.

The distant relationship between Helen and Sylvie shows that physical proximity does not correlate with emotional closeness.

The two sisters grew up in the same household, sharing clothes and space and food, but are revealed, ultimately, to know or understand very little about one another. Sylvie and Helen saw each other only a few times after leaving their hometown, and though their respective marriages seem to have both been fraught, unstable, and unimportant to the two women, they never bonded in adulthood over the hasty unions into which they plunged almost immediately upon leaving home. In the wake of Helen's death, Sylvie's befuddlement as to the truth of who her sister was deepens—and despite her duty to care for Lucille and Ruth and shepherd them through the difficult journey of sisterhood, she seems unprepared for the daunting task. Sylvie and Helen also have a third sister, Molly, whom they haven't heard from in years since she left home as a teenager to become a missionary in China. Sisterhood does not guarantee closeness and understanding, and the fact that neither Helen nor Sylvie ever speaks of Molly or her whereabouts demonstrates this fact.

Ruth and Lucille's relationship is the central one throughout most of the text. The girls, only a year apart, are constant companions at home and at school. They share a bed, they walk to and from their junior high together, and though they aren't in the same classes, they make time for one another at lunch and recess. The girls begin cutting class together as well, spending their days exploring the shore and forests surrounding the large, dark **lake** at the heart of Fingerbone. They are physically together constantly, but when it comes to emotional connection and solidarity, the girls' relationship is actually revealed to be quite shallow. Like Helen and Sylvie before them, the girls are mysterious to one another, unable to reach out across the large but ineffable chasm between them to help one another. Lucille gets her period and enters puberty earlier than Ruth, and Ruth feels the separation between her and her sister deepen as they struggle separately with their very different relationships to Sylvie. As the gulf between the pair widens and they eventually separate forever, it becomes clear that just because Ruth and Lucille are sisters—just because they share memories, traumas, and emotional and physical spaces—they are not bonded for life. Through Ruth and Lucille, just as through Helen and Sylvie, Robinson laments the fragility of a bond widely assumed to be unbreakable. By the end of the novel, Ruth has not spoken to her sister in more than seven years, and knows nothing about where she lives or who she is as a person. Ruth imagines that her sister watches and waits for her always, but has no way of knowing for sure whether Lucille still loves, misses, or wonders about her.

The confusing and ever-shifting rules and regulations of not just what it means to be a woman but what it means to be a sister define the emotional backbone of *Housekeeping*. Women are expected to be nurturers—to staunchly defend the bonds of family and support the women within their family units. The women of the Foster family, however, struggle with this role, and ultimately find themselves confused and confined by the expectations that come with being a woman and a sister.

TRANSIENCE AND IMPERMANENCE

Throughout *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson uses the unpredictable and emotional character of Sylvie—a transient who has spent much of her adult life riding the rails across America and subsisting on her own wiles and the kindness of strangers she meets—to show both the danger and the beauty of submitting to the impermanence of the world. The citizens of Fingerbone, hardy people who have developed an insular community and a rote way of life in response to the dangerous natural forces that rule their valley, struggle to control the physical, emotional, and natural landscapes of their town, and never—like Sylvie and later Ruth—admit or submit to the fleetingness of their own lives. By demonstrating the perils and the joys of transient life through Sylvie, Robinson uses the concept of physical transience as a metaphor for emotional impermanence—ultimately suggesting that people fear transient individuals because they fear the transience of their own lives.

When Sylvie arrives in Fingerbone to "take up **housekeeping**" and begin caring for Ruth and Lucille, the girls know very little about their peculiar aunt. Right away, they sense that she is odd, eccentric, and afraid of connection and permanence. She has few possessions, she sleeps with her shoes on her feet or under her pillow, and she has a proclivity for canned or packaged food such as sardines and oyster crackers. As the girls grow closer to Sylvie, they constantly fear her leaving—a fact which is, to them, inevitable, and which sends ripples throughout the town of Fingerbone, as concern for and about Sylvie spreads far and wide. That Ruth and Lucille fear transience and transient people is a given—something instilled in them seemingly from a young age. It is unclear who taught them about the dangers of a life lived untethered to people, places, or possessions, but what is clear is that the girls are inherently skeptical of drifters. At the same time, though, once Sylvie arrives in Fingerbone, they develop an odd attraction to and fascination with those who exist on the margins of society—when they play down at the **lake**, they stare at the hoboes who gather under the bridge and at the shore, and they beg Sylvie for tales of the strange, crazy, lonely people she's met in her years riding the rails. As the months go by, though, Ruth's fascination with transience increases—while Lucille's revulsion for such a way of life compounds. When Sylvie brings the girls gifts of sequined velveteen slippers, Lucille rips all the sequins off and asks why she couldn't have gotten brown oxfords or red rubber galoshes—Lucille, according to Ruth, sees "in everything its potential for invidious change." Something invidious is unpleasant, difficult, or inspiring of discontent—so, in other words, Lucille has developed a heightened sensitivity to and fear of things changing, decaying, or devolving.

While Lucille grows more and more ashamed of Sylvie's odd outfits and odder behaviors—napping on park benches and in the family orchard, eating supper with the lights off to enjoy the evening light, cooking unlikely meals—Ruth becomes increasingly enamored of her aunt. Though both Lucille and Ruth for a long while feared Sylvie would leave them, in the end, Lucille is the one who does the leaving when she goes to stay with her home economics teacher, Miss Royce, rather than be subjected a moment longer to Sylvie's whims. Lucille so detests the potential for transience and the creeping dread of change that she takes matters into her own hands and establishes the impermanence of her relationship with both Sylvie and Ruth on her own terms—in other words, she leaves before she can be left. Once Lucille is out of the house, she begins telling others in town lurid stories of how unfit and unpredictable a caregiver Sylvie is. The townspeople of Fingerbone begin dropping in on Ruth and Sylvie more and more, poking around the house and trying to determine whether Ruth is being changed or corrupted by Sylvie's transient past. The townspeople, firmly rooted in their ways and afraid of the threat to their traditions Sylvie's irreverence represents, lodge complaint after complaint until the sheriff intervenes to schedule a hearing and it becomes clear that Ruth will soon be taken away from Sylvie. Lucille's actions and their repercussions are Robinson's way of indicting the fear of impermanence. By trying to cling to the status quo and prevent change, she suggests, one can actually bring horrible change to fruition. Lucille does not foresee, though, what will happen next—she does not realize that to Sylvie and Ruth, their independence is all that matters, and that they will do anything to maintain it.

At the end of the novel, Sylvie and Ruth work together to set fire to the Foster family home. Ruth knows that they could not abandon the house without destroying it—to leave the objects it contains to be picked over and pawed at by the people of Fingerbone would be to do disservice to (and render tangible and thus permanent) the memories within the house's walls. The fire is hard to start given the house's dampness, and as Sylvie and Ruth leave Fingerbone by walking across the bridge over the lake, Ruth refuses to look back and see whether the blaze successfully engulfed the house. This moment shows how the fire—or its lack—makes the house into an object of impermanence rather than stability for Ruth. It is both forever on fire and intact, destroyed and everlasting—she is not sure whether it survives or not, and never once in her adult life does she return to Fingerbone to see what became of it either way.

Ruth ultimately dedicates her life to riding the rails and traveling the country with Sylvie, leaving Fingerbone behind for good. She embraces transience in her actions because she has come to understand, through her relationships with Sylvie and Lucille, that impermanence is an undeniable part of life—to attempt to ignore or outrun it only makes things worse. Ruth does not allow fear of change to rule her, and instead solemnly burns her old life to the ground to make room for the unknown.

MEMORY

The entirety of *Housekeeping*—the events of Ruth and Lucille's youth as they suffer the loss of their mother, enter the care of their eccentric aunt Sylvie, and struggle to determine what kind of young women they will become—is relayed retrospectively from the adult Ruth's point of view. Interspersed with the bones of what happened to her in her childhood are reflections on nature, time, love, loss, and memory itself delivered by the older Ruth as a way of working through the fraught, enormous emotions she struggled with as a child. As the novel progresses, these fragmented moments occur more and more, and by the end, it becomes clear that the adult Ruth is a person ruled by her memories, her fractured perceptions of both her adulthood and the events of her youth, and indeed the fear of returning to Fingerbone, hunting down her sister, or in any way altering the memories that have become so precious and formative to her. Ultimately, Robinson suggests that memory is a kind of necessary torment—Ruth is both haunted and sustained by recollections of her past, and through Ruth, Robinson suggests that on some level, all people are similarly nourished and pained by their memories.

All of the major characters throughout *Housekeeping* reckon with memory over the course of the novel. Each of them struggles with the competing desires to cling to and reject their own memories—and to supplement their own painful pasts and resulting fractured understandings of themselves with one another's remembrances and opinions. Lucille and Ruth find themselves struggling to accurately remember their mother in the wake of her death. Ruth remembers her as distracted, unemotional, and distant, while Lucille remembers her as having been loving and attentive. Because Ruth is the narrator—and because Helen killed herself—readers take Ruth's account of Helen for granted as the truth. Lucille's memories of a mother she never had are manufactured to soothe and abate her feelings of abandonment, loss, and rage. She blots out the painful memory of her mother's abandonment with more palatable memories of how devoted her mother was to her in life. Lucille's active intervention within her own past is perhaps the most potent example of the power of memory—and how warped one's emotional life can become when the necessity of painful memories is erased. As a result, perhaps, of her refusal to accept pain as part of her past, Lucille seeks to remove pain, conflict, and any unpleasantness from her present. Her obsession with hair-setting and dress-making is symbolic of her attempts to try to spin an idyllic present (and future) for herself, while her attempts to recruit Ruth from Sylvie's care and perhaps even drive Sylvie out of Fingerbone show just how averse Lucille is to anything that reminds her of the truth about her past.

Sylvie, too, seems to have difficulty with memory. When the girls bombard her with questions about what their mother was like as a child, she struggles to talk about Helen, claiming it's "hard to describe someone you know so well." She remembers small snippets about her sister—like the fact that she was pretty and a good student—but struggles to characterize Helen in a meaningful way in which the girls can latch onto. Much of Sylvie's own youth is mysterious, and the factors which led her to marry and then abandon her husband for a transient, rootless lifestyle are unknown. The death of her father (Edmund) in her own youth, and the legendary quality his passing in a historic train accident took on, may have proved too painful a legacy for Sylvie to bear. Her desire to escape her childhood home and live rough in the wake of a dissolved marriage rather than return to the town that made her indicates that Sylvie, too, is dodging rather than embracing the duality of her own memories.

Because Ruth is the novel's narrator, her memories are on display as the most potent and poignant of any character. Ruth remembers each and every detail of her childhood—the lush natural landscape of Fingerbone, the peculiarities of her grandparents' home, the intense feelings of love, disappointment, fear, and embarrassment she felt during her childhood. Because Ruth is narrating the novel retroactively, readers understand that she is perhaps the only individual within the story who has chosen to accept that memories, though painful, are important to preserve. Ruth's attachment in childhood to her grandmother Sylvia's old possessions because of their sentimental value rather than their monetary worth—a lock of hair from her grandmother's first haircut, a group of flowers her grandfather pressed between the pages of a dictionary—shows that she has always had a reverence for the past and the lessons contained within it. Rather than fearing the past, Ruth has always feared the future: the changes in her own maturing body during puberty, the threat of becoming a "normal" woman and taking up **housekeeping**, and the prospect of forgetting the events and forces that have shaped her are what frightens Ruth, not the past. Because she is unique in this regard from all the other characters in the novel, Ruth's narration often delves into the deep past. She examines speculatively events from her grandparents' and parents' lives, and even attempts to imagine the moment of her own conception. Ruth is perhaps at the other end of the spectrum: so obsessed with the past that her own future slowly becomes unimaginable to her, causing her to choose a life which allows her to never settle on any one pursuit or place of residence but rather drift aimlessly through the world, indulging her extant memories rather than making new ones.

The function of memory in *Housekeeping* is complex and multilayered. Memory wounds and heals, sustains and weakens; memory creates divisions between characters and gives them a common ground. As the Foster women, throughout their generations, reckon in isolation with memories both pleasant and painful, they find themselves alternately leaning into and veering away from often difficult histories they might rather forget.

ABANDONMENT AND LOSS

In the early pages of *Housekeeping*, Lucille and Ruth are abandoned on their grandmother Sylvia's porch by their mother, Helen. Helen tells the girls that she'll be back for them soon—but she drives away in the car borrowed from a neighbor back home in Washington and promptly motors off a cliff into the **lake** at the center of Fingerbone, her family's ancestral home. Ruth and Lucille, seemingly numb to their mother's death, are passed from family member to family member until eventually their mother's sister Sylvie comes to care for them. As the girls settle into their lives with Sylvie, the emotional scars left by their own mother's abandonment at last become evident. As the three navigate their relationships with one another and their own independent relationships to loss, loneliness, and fear of rejection and desertion, Robinson argues that abandonment at any stage of life has the power to calibrate the way one moves through the world and forms relationships with other people.

The early pages of *Housekeeping* describe a terrible tragedy—Ruth and Lucille's mother Helen's suicide—but do so in a way that is removed, and almost prim, as the girls are forced to inhabit the more immediate concern of who will care for them rather than tend to their own grief. As the novel progresses, however, the ways in which their mother's abandonment has affected them become more evident—and by its end, Robinson suggests that the loss they faced in their youth has dictated the form and direction of both their lives. Ruth and Lucille's grandmother cares for them after their mother's death. Being raised by the woman who raised their mother is a comfort to them, and the time they spend in Sylvia's care is nourishing and nurturing. When Sylvia, too dies, the girls are plunged once again into feelings of loss and abandonment. Their great-aunts Lily and Nona come to Fingerbone to watch over them—but the nervous, elderly spinsters are unequipped to understand or care for children, and quickly try to pawn the girls off on their aunt Sylvie, a transient and an eccentric woman who has been living all over the country for several years. Again, the girls are shown to feel detached from any emotions at all about Lily and Nona, or their desire to get away from Fingerbone; at night, Lucille and Ruth listen to their aunts' conversations with mild interest, and seem to expect that the women will abandon them sooner or later.

Sylvie's arrival seems to indicate that the girls have passed into the care of a permanent guardian at last. Sylvie is their mother's sister, and they try to pry stories about what their mother was like as a young girl from their unwilling aunt in an attempt to grow closer both to their new caretaker and their rapidly

deteriorating memories of their own mother. As Sylvie's odd behaviors escalate, it becomes apparent that she has not fully let go of her transient ways and the habits she picked up over the course of a life spent riding the rails—the girls are gripped for the first time by a real fear of being abandoned. Their mother and grandmother's abandonments through death snuck up on them, and Lily and Nona's was not impactful enough to feel like a loss—but for Sylvie to leave them would indicate a willful abandonment. Anytime Sylvie leaves the house, the girls follow her into and around town; Ruth and Lucille themselves skip school and spend their days in the woods, seemingly testing the boundaries of what Sylvie will or won't tolerate. It's almost as if they want to prove to themselves that she will abandon them just as everyone else has—but when she discovers the girls' truancy, she covers for them by writing their teachers notes explaining their absences and allows them to attend or not attend school as they please. Sylvie is devoted to the girls and loves them deeply, but even as they warm to her they constantly fear her leaving—abandonment is the only thing they have known.

Towards the end of the novel, Robinson briefly flashes forward into Ruth's adulthood as Ruth describes the person she's become and the life she's lived. Ruth has embraced Sylvie's transient lifestyle and become a rail-rider herself. They never set up shop in any one place for long, and if they do, they quickly begin to feel uncomfortable, vulnerable, and visible. Ruth relishes her freedom and her relationship with Sylvie, but freely admits that she and Sylvie have remained tethered together for so long less out of pure devotion to one another and more by circumstance. Ruth doesn't know what has become of Lucille, but speculates that her sister is frequently alone and unsuccessfully tries to keep herself from always listening, waiting, and hoping for the return of Ruth and Sylvie into her life. Ruth and Sylvie have created a bond based on their commitment to continually leave their pasts behind, whereas Lucille, who once rejected Ruth and Sylvie, has become the one rejected by them. However, Ruth's hopeful vision of Lucille—someone whose life has been calibrated by the loss of her and Sylvie—seems to indicate that it is Ruth almost wants her sister's life to have been irreparably changed by her own abandonment. Ruth wants to believe that Lucille has felt the loss of her and Sylvie acutely and profoundly. Because of Ruth's own traumas related to abandonment—Helen's abandonment, Lucille's abandonment, and Sylvie's dreamy indifference—she wants to know there's at least one person out there she's been important to. By imagining that Lucille pines for her continually, Ruth is able to feel worthy of love at last.

The complex psychologies of the women who populate the pages of *Housekeeping* reveal the intense, lifelong effects of abandonment. Ruth and Lucille, abandoned by their mother, fear being abandoned and long to be the ones doing the abandoning. Sylvie, spurred along by the mysterious drive to erase and minimize herself, lives a transient life and leaves almost no footprints along the way, staving off the potential to abandoned by positioning herself as a continual abandoner, even of people she's presumably close to (her mysterious husband) and places she's familiar with (Fingerbone, for example.) All three women create patterns, ruts, and self-determined outcomes for themselves based on the ways the abandonments and losses they've suffered have altered and traumatized them.

NATURE

In Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, the natural world is a character in and of itself. From the beautiful but dangerous **lake** at the center of Fingerbone to the rare and transformative experiences Ruth and Lucille have during their various explorations of the Idaho wilds, nature plays a pivotal role in the text and serves as a kind of litmus test in Ruth and Lucille's attempts to discover what kind of women they want to be. Though Robinson frames nature as an intimidating and occasionally dangerous force, she ultimately argues that nature has the power not just to destroy but to remake, refract, and in a way christen those who encounter it with an open heart and mind.

By positioning the threatening, lush natural world of Fingerbone in direct opposition to the town's genteel interiors—the houses full of furniture adorned with doilies, the soda shops teeming with girls poring over dress patterns in magazines, the schoolhouse full of children in neat rows—Robinson establishes the strange duality of her fictional town. As the novel progresses, Ruth and Lucille's encounters with nature both nourish and frighten them, and Robinson explores both girls' entry into womanhood through their very different relationships with the natural world. Ruth and Lucille are, at the start of the novel, both haunted by and drawn to nature. They arrive in Fingerbone knowing already that the vast lake at its center once claimed their grandfather Edmund's life, only to have their mother Helen allow the lake to claim hers, too. Nevertheless, the girls soon begin skipping school frequently to ice-skate along the lake's surface, fish down at the lake's shore, and explore the woods around it. The girls are unintimidated by nature and coexist with it almost without a second thought. After a night spent out in the woods, though, the girls' relationships to nature begins to change. While Ruth finds herself increasingly drawn to the dense forests of Fingerbone, the orchard behind her own house, and the magnetic, dangerous lake, Lucille begins to eschew the natural world and focus more and more intensely on beauty, grooming, and socializing. She becomes obsessed with making a dress for herself, starts hanging around with other, more "normal" girls from school, and even crushes some old pressed flowers Ruth finds in a dictionary to demonstrate how little nature has come to mean to her.

Towards the novel's end, when Lucille moves out of the house and goes to stay with one of her teachers, Miss Royce, Sylvie fervently begs Ruth to accompany her on a journey to a "special" valley on one of the lake's many island outcrops. Ruth is initially reluctant, but after realizing that Lucille is not coming back, she agrees to skip school so that Sylvie can take her to the lake as soon as possible. During their trek out to the valley—a frost-covered clearing in the middle of which sits a fallen-down house, reclaimed by nature itself—Ruth finds herself tormented by visions of her dead mother, questions about the ever-growing distance between her and her sister, and fear that Sylvie, too, will soon abandon her. Ruth's intense journey into nature breaks her down and then builds her back up—when she and Sylvie at last leave the woods together, Ruth has reckoned with several huge questions about the nature of life, love, and memory, and seems reborn as Sylvie's daughter rather than her mother's. Indeed, in the novel's startling final pages, Sylvie and Ruth work together to set fire to their family's ancestral home in preparation for setting out together as a pair of transients. Their symbolic burning-down of the house reveals their commitment to eschewing the genteel interior spaces of the place that has become their shared hometown, and venturing out into the unknown—venturing out into nature—as a way of finding a place that will not try to contain them, but will rather allow them to continually expand and remake themselves.

At the novel's end, Ruth tries to imagine her sister, Lucille, living in the old house in Fingerbone, but ultimately cannot. Instead, she pictures her sister living in Boston, a big city removed from nature—removed from the self-examining forces of refraction and rebirth. Ruth has chosen the stranger and more difficult path in life, the path Sylvie laid out for her—a path which continually demands she commune with the natural world and give herself over to its powers. Lucille, however, has chosen the simplicity of a normal life: a life full of doilies, dinners in fine restaurants, and perhaps a devotion to the art of **housekeeping**, the art of preserving the very spaces which entrap her.

SYMBOLS

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

THE LAKE

The lake which sits at the center of Fingerbone is vast, deep, and full of both bodies and secrets, making it a complex symbol of life and loss. The novel opens with a recreation of a pivotal moment in the town's history—a train accident in which a passenger train traveling along the large bridge over the lake slid "like a weasel" into the frigid depths, killing the Foster patriarch (Edmund) and several other individuals. Years later, Lucille and Ruth's suicidal mother, Helen, drives herself off a cliff and into the lake in a neighbor's borrowed car, adding her body to the uncountable remains which lie at its bottom. The lake is a place of fear and loss, but also, strangely, one of beauty and refuge. Though Ruth and Lucille know that their mother and grandfather have lost their lives to the lake, they ice-skate along its surface for hours each day in winter and explore its sandy shores in summer.

A place of pleasure and pain alike, the lake claims life but also hosts and gives life. The many islands which dot its vast surface are a source of intrigue to Sylvie and Ruth, and the lake's status as an almost holy place which houses life and death alike is cemented late in the novel when the two of them set out to explore a forgotten valley on one such island. Sylvie has been several times, and believes that she can hear feral children playing in the woods just out of sight; however, when Ruth enters the valley, which has become Sylvie's "special place," she encounters nothing but fear and dread. She worries Sylvie will abandon her and she will be alone forever, and as her thoughts spiral out of control, she meditates on the moment of her own conception (to which she was, she states, "unconsenting") and the metaphysics of craving and longing.

Each time the lake appears in the novel, it is rendered differently: both imposing and inviting, placid and menacing, the lake becomes a potent symbol of life, death, and rebirth. As Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie explore the woods and sandy shores around the lake, the islands within it, and the bridge which hovers over its surface, they poke and prod fruitlessly at the answers to life's undulating patterns of joy, loss, and despair, as well as the truth about what awaits in the realms beyond.

HOUSEKEEPING

Housekeeping is, throughout the novel, more than just cleaning house and keeping things in order. It is a sacred act of guardianship and preservation—to "take up housekeeping" within the novel, a duty circumscribed to its female characters, is to accept stewardship of a home and all the lives, memories, and precious inanimate objects contained within it. Housekeeping is a subjective process, interpreted and carried out differently by all the novel's major characters. To Sylvia Foster, the Foster family matriarch and Ruth and Lucille's grandmother, housekeeping means cookies and applesauce on rainy days, locks of hair from her children's first haircuts saved in drawers, "whit[ing] shoes and braid[ing] hair and fr[ying] chicken." To her daughter Sylvie, however, housekeeping is less about the act of keeping house than it is about maintaining the soul of the home. Sylvie regularly sets curtains aflame when cooking, and becomes a hoarder of old magazines and newspapers—but she attempts to fill the house with dusky evening light, fresh air from the back door to the apple orchard, and old cans and jam jars for which she knows she'll someday

find a use. Throughout the novel, the act of housekeeping becomes a potent symbol for the various ways in which women assume—or shirk—responsibility for their families and family legacies. In the end, Ruth and Sylvie burn down their family's ancestral home, and "there [is] an end to housekeeping." They reject traditional notions of femininity and opt for a life riding the rails, a life lived freely and untethered—but they always wonder whether the house survived, and whether Lucille has taken up housekeeping in their place. The burdens and pleasures of housekeeping are different to every woman within the text, as they are, in life, to every person in the real world who has ever faced the decision of whether to save or discard, to tidy or ignore, to stay or to leave.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Picador edition of *Housekeeping* published in 1980.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Now and then Molly searched Sylvie's room for unreturned library books. Occasionally Helen made a batch of cookies. It was Sylvie who brought in bouquets of flowers. This perfect quiet had settled into their house after the death of their father. That event had troubled the very medium of their lives. Time and air and sunlight bore wave and wave of shock, until all the shock was spent, and time and space and light grew still again and nothing seemed to tremble, and nothing seemed to lean. The disaster had fallen out of sight, like the train itself, and if the calm that followed it was not greater than the calm that came before it, it had seemed so. And the dear ordinary had healed as seamlessly as an image on water.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Sylvia Foster, Edmund Foster, Helen Stone / Ruth and Lucille's Mother, Sylvie Fisher, Molly Foster

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening pages of the novel, Ruth, narrates the things she has been able to glean about her mother's youth with her sisters (Sylvie and Molly) and their mother, Sylvia, in the wake of losing their patriarch, Edmund. Ruth paints a serene and almost holy picture of the three girls, attending to the tasks of housekeeping and looking after one another against a backdrop of "perfect quiet." Ruth suggests that the "dear ordinary" of their lives has returned in the wake of the accident, healing over the scars of their loss. However, in the story to come, Ruth will actually examine the fact that her family has largely remained unhealed from the losses, abandonments, and traumas of its past—and the ways in which those things will resurface and reverberate throughout Ruth and her sister Lucille's own less-than-idyllic childhoods.

Lucille and me she tended with scrupulous care and little confidence, as if her offerings of dimes and chocolate-chip cookies might keep us, our spirits, here in her kitchen, though she knew they might not.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Sylvia Foster, Lucille Stone

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

After Ruth and Lucille's mother, Helen, commits suicide by driving into the lake—a devastating event spurred by mysterious forces unknown to the girls, who knew their mother as a quiet and distracted but kind woman—the young girls go to live with their grandmother, Sylvia Foster, in the town of Fingerbone, where their mother was raised. In her attentions to the girls, Sylvia is "scrupulous" but nervous. Sylvia has sustained the death of her husband (Edmund) and the departure of all three of her daughters (Helen, Sylvie, and Molly), and now has had to deal with the recent death of her middle child. The Foster women are becoming conditioned to accept—and even anticipate—loss and abandonment. Sylvia's careful handling of the girls suggests that she wants to nurture them but not constrict them, and do everything she can to keep them under her roof.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Lucille and I took our skates to school, so that we could go to the lake directly and stay there through the twilight. Usually we would skate along the edge of the swept ice, tracing its shape, and coming finally to its farthest edge, we would sit on the snow and look back at Fingerbone.

We felt giddily far from shore, though the lake was so solid that winter that it would certainly have supported the weight of the entire population of Fingerbone, past, present, and to come. Nevertheless, only we and the ice sweepers went out so far, and only we stayed.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Lucille Stone

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33-34

Explanation and Analysis

Though the lake at the center of Fingerbone is vast, deep, and imposing, having claimed not just Ruth and Lucille's grandfather's life but also recently their mother's life, the girls blithely and happily skate across its surface each day in winter. They are drawn to the lake, and have many happy times playing on or near it in all seasons of the year. The act of ice-skating across the surface of the lake, though safe due to the ice's thickness, seems to be a direct provocation of fate and nature alike. The girls do not know why they are pulled towards the place which has come to symbolize death, loss, and abandonment for their family, but as the novel progresses, they will become more and more intrigued by what hides in its depths—and what it means to either face down or ignore the traumas which have marked their family over the years.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ We had planned to try Sylvie, but perhaps because Sylvie had her coat on and appeared so very transient, Lucille did not wait till we knew her better, as we had agreed to do.

"Oh, she was nice," Sylvie said. "She was pretty."

"But what was she like?"

"She was good in school."

Lucille sighed.

"It's hard to describe someone you know so well."

Related Characters: Lucille Stone , Sylvie Fisher, Ruth Stone (speaker), Helen Stone / Ruth and Lucille's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, shortly after Sylvie's arrival in Fingerbone to take over housekeeping and care of the girls from their reluctant great-aunts Lily and Nona, Lucille begins peppering Sylvie with questions about their mother, Helen. The girls knew their mother as a remote and distant woman who spoke little of her past, and never shared her feelings. With the arrival of Sylvie, the girls feel they have a chance to reclaim—or even establish for the first time—some sense of who their mother truly was. They want to ask Sylvie their questions right away, as they fear that she, as a transient individual, will soon leave them too. Sylvie, though, experiences a failure of memory as she tries to describe her sister to her nieces. As the book goes on, Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie will all struggle with the problem of memory—how fallible and imperfect it is, and how sometimes it precludes people from seeing clearly what they most what to see. This moment is the first in the novel that truly examines the impossibility of looking back on memories that have been held so close for so long, and sets in motion questions about the nature of sisterhood and its uncertain bonds.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Altogether [the snowwoman's] figure suggested a woman standing in a cold wind. It seemed that we had conjured a presence. We took off our coats and hats and worked about her in silence. [...] We hoped the lady would stand long enough to freeze, but in fact while we were stamping the gray snow all smooth around her, her head pitched over and smashed on the ground. This accident cost her a forearm and a breast. We made a new snowball for a head, but it crushed her eaten neck, and under the weight of it a shoulder dropped away. We went inside for lunch, and when we came out again, she was a dog-yellowed stump in which neither of us would admit any interest.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Sylvie Fisher, Helen Stone / Ruth and Lucille's Mother, Lucille Stone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ruth and Lucille build, unwittingly, a snow-

person in the form of a woman "standing in a cold wind." The girls are slightly spooked by their own creation, and though they struggle to refine her even in the face of their uncertainty, she resists being molded to their desires. Having failed to properly make the woman, the girls abandon her and ignore her. The snowwoman, in this passage, could either be seen as a metaphor for Helen, the girls' mother, or Sylvie, their transient and unpredictable aunt. Both women seem to "stand in [the] wind" of their past pain and disappointment, staunchly holding their ground until something shatters and forces them to move on. Both women resist easy categorization, and both women resist the girls' attempts to love and influence them. Helen shirked her duties as a mother and abandoned the girls by committing suicide; Sylvie takes care of them, but her own longings and eccentricities preclude her from being the kind of stable guardian the girls need.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ Thus finely did our house become attuned to the orchard and to the particularities of weather, even in the first days of Sylvie's housekeeping. Thus did she begin by littles and perhaps unawares to ready it for wasps and bats and barn swallows. Sylvie talked a great deal about housekeeping. She soaked all the tea towels for a number of weeks in a tub of water and bleach. She emptied several cupboards and left them open to air, and once she washed half the kitchen ceiling and a door. Sylvie believed in stern solvents, and most of all in air. It was for the sake of air that she opened doors and windows, though it was probably through forgetfulness that she left them open.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Sylvie Fisher

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

As Sylvie takes up housekeeping in earnest and decides to stay in Fingerbone to look after the girls for good, the girls notice that her notions of keeping house are very different from the examples they've seen from the other women in their family. Sylvie's eccentric respect for the piles of leaves that gather in the corners of the house, her exciting plans and pitiful lack of follow-through, and her simple neglect make the house a strange place open to the influences of nature. Sylvie wants to be the kind of caregiver the girls need, but even as she gives it her all, she comes up short. This moment—gleeful and quirky though it is—foreshadows the ways in which Sylvie will increasingly fail the girls, especially Lucille, in terms of becoming the stable and attentive mother figure they both want and need her to be.

❝ I was content with Sylvie, so it was a surprise to me when I realized that Lucille had begun to regard other people with the calm, horizontal look of settled purpose with which, from a slowly sinking boat, she might have regarded a not-too-distant shore. She pulled all the sequins off the toes of the blue velveteen ballet slippers Sylvie bought us for school shoes the second spring after her arrival. Though the mud in the road still stood inches high and gleamed like aspic on either side where tires passed through the ruts, I had liked the slippers well enough.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Lucille Stone , Sylvie Fisher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92-93

Explanation and Analysis

As the months pass, Ruth delights in Sylvie's company and her eccentricities—but Lucille, Ruth's sister, becomes nervous and miserable in Sylvie's presence. Lucille does not want to slip into strangeness and transience—she longs for sturdy possessions that will resist change and normalcy in all things. She destroys the pretty but totally impractical and whimsical slippers Sylvie procures for her and Ruth in a direct protest of Sylvie's attempt to fill the girls' lives with ephemeral, transient things. Lucille seems to want to be rescued from the "sinking boat" of her life, foreshadowing the desperate measures she will take in the novel's subsequent chapters as she strives to edge away from Ruth and Sylvie's "dream" land and take up residence in the world of common, normal people in polite society.

Chapter 6 Quotes

Lucille had startled us all, flooding the room so suddenly with light, exposing heaps of pots and dishes, the two cupboard doors which had come unhinged and were propped against the boxes of china. […] Everywhere the paint was chipped and marred. A great shadow of soot loomed up the wall and across the ceiling above the stove, and the stove pipe and the cupboard tops were thickly felted with dust. Most dispiriting, perhaps, was the curtain on Lucille's side of the table, which had been half consumed by fire once when a birthday cake had been set too close to it. Sylvie had beaten out the flames with a back issue of *Good Housekeeping*, but she had never replaced the curtain.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Sylvie Fisher, Lucille Stone

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the girls are eating dinner with Sylvie in the dark one summer night. Sylvie adores the evening light, and insists they all eat supper with the lights off so that they can enjoy the peculiar light and sounds of insects and birds. When Lucille feels she has an itch one evening, she jumps up to turn on the light and look at her own skin to see if she has a bug bite—in the process, perhaps on purpose, she floods the kitchen in harsh and unforgiving light which exposes the shoddy job of cleaning and housekeeping that Sylvie has done. As Ruth reflects on how the kitchen got into such a state, she reveals a humorous anecdote about Sylvie beating back flaming curtains with a copy of *Good Housekeeping*, a magazine dedicated to telling women how to keep house according to polite society's unspoken rules and regulations. Though Lucille wants to shine a light on Sylvie's imperfections—and does so literally in this passage—Sylvie has no reverence for the rules by which other people think she or her charges should be living.

I wanted to ask her if she knew what she thought, and if so, what the experience of that sort of knowledge was like, and if not, whether she, too, felt ghostly, as I imagined she must. I waited for Sylvie to say, "You're like me." […] I feared and suspected that Sylvie and I were of a kind, and waited for her to claim me, but she would not.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Sylvie Fisher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

As Lucille begins to drift away from Ruth and Sylvie and toward the normal people in polite society, Ruth feels lonesome and longs to know that Sylvie loves and wants to "claim" her. She wants to be like Sylvie, though she knows that Sylvie's ways are repulsive to Lucille—Ruth feels ghostlike and invisible most of the time, and has trouble articulating her present feelings and her past memories. She thinks that in being "claim[ed]" by Sylvie, she'll have a blueprint for womanhood or at least for how to be and how to feel—but when Sylvie almost purposefully refuses to say anything, Ruth feels hurt and cast out. It's possible that Sylvie is trying to prevent Ruth, in a way, from idealizing the transient lifestyle that Sylvie has lived—or it's possible that Sylvie, simply dreamy and lost in thought, doesn't realize just how desperately Ruth wants her validation and support in this moment.

Chapter 7 Quotes

Lucille's mother was orderly, vigorous, and sensible, a widow (more than I ever knew or she could prove) who was killed in an accident. My mother presided over a life so strictly simple and circumscribed that it could not have made any significant demands on her attention. She tended us with a gentle indifference that made me feel she would have liked to have been even more alone—she was the abandoner, and not the one abandoned.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Helen Stone / Ruth and Lucille's Mother, Lucille Stone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ruth begins to realize that she and Lucille have, over the years, begun to develop vastly different recognitions of their mother—despite the fact that they both knew her at the same time, in the same ways, and suffered the same abandonment through her suicide. Lucille, blind to the truth—or perhaps conscious of it but unwilling to entertain it—begins to remember her mother as

an "orderly," loving victim who lost her husband before tragically losing her own life in an "accident." Ruth, however, knows that her mother was inattentive and "indifferen[t]," and abandoned the girls by selfishly taking her own life. This passage shows that despite their shared childhood in their mother's company, Ruth and Lucille have entirely different memories borne out of desires either to preserve the truth perfectly but painfully—or preserve a more comfortable lie. It's unclear whether Lucille's false memories are a deliberate affect or a defense mechanism, and Robinson suggests that in the end it really doesn't matter—what does matter is that memory is imperfect, corruptible, and changeable based on the needs of the one doing the remembering.

"I was a baby, lying on my back, yelling, and then someone came and started wrapping me up in blankets. She put them all over my face, so I couldn't breathe. She was singing and holding me, and it was sort of nice, but I could tell she was trying to smother me." Lucille shuddered.

"Do you know who it was?"

"Who?"

"The woman in the dream."

"She reminded me of Sylvie, I guess."

Related Characters: Ruth Stone, Lucille Stone (speaker), Helen Stone / Ruth and Lucille's Mother, Sylvie Fisher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

After being forced to spend a night in the woods during a fishing trip gone wrong, Ruth and Lucille return home exhausted and slightly embarrassed. After napping, Lucille wakes up and begins setting her hair and picking out a fine outfit so that she can go into town and do some shopping. As she readies herself, she tells Ruth about a bad dream she had during her nap—a dream in which she was a baby, and a woman who "reminded [her] of Sylvie" was "smother[ing]" her. This dream can be interpreted several ways: either Lucille feels that Sylvie's transient ways are rubbing off on her and smothering her, so to speak, within a lifestyle she wants no part of—or Lucille was not dreaming of Sylvie at all, but was dreaming of Helen, a woman who indeed reminds them of Sylvie. Lucille is perhaps being suffocated by the false memories she's constructed of her mother—and the ways in which she's using that memory to demonize Sylvie, tear herself apart from Ruth, and strike out on her own.

"I just want to go home," I said, and pushed the door open. Lucille grabbed me by the flesh above my elbow. "Don't!" she said, pinching me smartly for emphasis. She came with me out onto the sidewalk, still grasping the flesh of my arm. "That's Sylvie's house now." She whispered hissingly and looked wrath. And now I felt her nails, and her glare was more pleading and urgent. "We have to *improve* ourselves!" she said. "Starting *right now*!' she said. And again I could think of no reply.

Related Characters: Lucille Stone , Ruth Stone (speaker), Sylvie Fisher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

While in town to do some shopping, Ruth and Lucille run into a group of Lucille's school acquaintances at the soda fountain—a run-in which seems to have been orchestrated on Lucille's part. As the girls look through magazines and dress patterns, Ruth becomes bored and tries to leave, but Lucille almost hysterically tries to hold Ruth back and impress upon her the importance of starting to "improve" themselves, and ignore Sylvie. Ruth is stunned by this—she loves Sylvie, and is beginning to resent Lucille for going against their aunt at every opportunity. Ruth wants no part of the ways in which Lucille is maturing into a woman and embracing the traditional trappings of femininity—she longs to be wild and free like Sylvie, and sees nothing about her aunt's way of life that needs improvement. This speaks thematically to the disconnect between Ruth and Lucille despite their sisterly connection, as well as the pattern of ongoing abandonment rippling through the family—Ruth feels Lucille is abandoning her and Sylvie, while Lucille surely feels that Ruth, in embracing Sylvie, is abandoning *her* and seeking out a different "sister."

Chapter 8 Quotes

I found a bag of marshmallows among the odds and ends that Sylvie had bundled into a checkered tablecloth and brought along for lunch—a black banana, a lump of salami with a knife through it, a single yellow chicken wing like an elegant, small gesture of defeat, the bottom fifth of a bag of potato chips.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Sylvie Fisher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

After Lucille finds Ruth and Sylvie sleeping in the bed that the sisters usually share, she becomes hurt and feels left out—she moves out of the house that very night and goes to stay with a teacher. Ruth, who had been hesitant about joining Sylvie on a mysterious trip to an island at the center of the lake, agrees to let Sylvie write her a note to get out of school so they can take the trip the next day—she feels that without Lucille, she has nothing left to lose, and may as well devote herself entirely to Sylvie's influence. On the trip, Ruth finds herself disturbed by Sylvie's blatant theft of a neighbor's boat and underwhelmed by the picturesque but overgrown valley Sylvie has taken her to. When they stop to eat a lunch Sylvie has packed for them, Ruth gazes in pity and horror at the "odds and ends" Sylvie has assembled—limp, disparate foods which seem to admit "defeat" in and of themselves. Ruth is conflicted about surrendering to Sylvie and taking on her way of life, and her reaction to the sad picnic lunch symbolizes this fact. Like everything else in Sylvie's life, even the food she eats smacks of transience and is designed to be consumed hurriedly and unthinkingly.

I knew why Sylvie felt there were children in the woods. I felt so, too, though I did not think so. [...] I knew that if I turned however quickly to look behind me the consciousness behind me would not still be there, and would only come closer when I turned away again. [...] In that way it was persistent and teasing and ungentle, the way half-wild, lonely children are. This was something Lucille and I together would ignore, and I had been avoiding the shore all that fall, because when I was by myself and obviously lonely, too, the teasing would be much more difficult to disregard. Having a sister or a friend is like sitting at night in a lighted house. Those outside can watch you if they want, but you need not see them.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Lucille Stone , Sylvie Fisher

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

Sylvie has told Ruth that she believes there are feral children—perhaps numbering in the hundreds—living in the woods on the island in the center of the lake. Ruth is perplexed by Sylvie's invocation of the children, and even more so by her aunt's desire to catch and observe one of them—but is forced to admit, once she herself enters the woods, that she does sense a strange presence that reminds her of cackling, teasing children. Ruth is perturbed but intrigued by the presence, which she describes as a "consciousness." The consciousness can be interpreted as many things—the awareness of the pull of death, the transience and impermanence of all human relationships, the ways in which Ruth feels like an insufficient friend and sister, or the nagging threat of Sylvie's abandonment. Whatever this "consciousness" is, Ruth finds herself having a harder and harder time ignoring it without the distraction of Lucille's company or even Sylvie's. This passage implies that Ruth is going to have to reckon with her past and put herself on a path to a future, and soon, whether she likes it or not.

I sat down on the grass, which was stiff with the cold, and I put my hands over my face, and I let my skin tighten, and let the chills run in ripples, like breezy water, between my shoulder blades and up my neck. I let the numbing grass touch my ankles. I thought, Sylvie is nowhere, and sometime it will be dark. I thought, Let them come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Sylvie Fisher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

While looking at the abandoned house in the middle of the valley, Ruth becomes lost in thought, and doesn't notice at first when Sylvie is no longer sitting beside her. As the minutes and perhaps even hours drag on, though, Ruth finds

herself spiraling into a kind of madness as she grows to believe Sylvie has purposefully abandoned her in the woods. She is made so miserable by the thought of having lost her mother, her grandmother, her emotional connection with her sister, and now her aunt, too, that she begins having terrible thoughts and longing, in a way, for her own death. Ruth misses those she has lost, and remains haunted by her family's enduring legacy of unconfronted losses and abandonments. The fear of moving forward, giving herself over to Sylvie's care, and severing herself further from her sister is all too much in this moment, and Ruth wants to be put out of her misery.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Who would think of dusting or sweeping the cobwebs down in a room used for the storage of cans and newspapers—things utterly without value? Sylvie only kept them, I think, because she considered accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping, and because she considered the hoarding of worthless things to be proof of a particularly scrupulous thrift.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Sylvie Fisher

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

As neighbors come to call on Ruth and Sylvie more and more often in order to check in on Ruth after rumors of her and Sylvie's ride in a boxcar spread through town, they are alarmed to find the house in a state of disrepair. Mice, cats, and swallows have taken up residence in the home, and the kitchen and parlor are overstuffed and unkempt. Sylvie, however, with her odd ideas about the true nature of what it means to keep house, is almost blind to these bizarre and even hazardous accumulations. She sees the gathering and hoarding of things as the "essence" of keeping a house—tidiness, cleanliness, and minimalism mean nothing to her. This passage serves to solidify that even under her neighbors' watchful eyes, Sylvie refuses to compromise who she is and what she believes. She is set in her ways, and will not change the organizing principles of her life for anyone.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ [Sylvie] did not wish to remember me. She much preferred my simple, ordinary presence, silent and ungainly though I might be. For she could regard me without strong emotion—a familiar shape, a familiar face, a familiar silence. She could forget I was in the room. She could speak to herself, or to someone in her thoughts, with pleasure and animation, even while I sat beside her—this was the measure of our intimacy, that she gave almost no thought to me at all.

But if she lost me, I would become extraordinary by my vanishing.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Helen Stone / Ruth and Lucille's Mother, Sylvie Fisher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

As Ruth and Sylvie confront the possibility that they will be separated by the authorities after a night spent riding in a boxcar on a freight train, Ruth imagines Sylvie's thought process—which she knows well. She knows that if Ruth is taken away or "vanish[ed]," she will become "extraordinary" in Sylvie's mind, heart, and memory. The reason Ruth and Sylvie take such refuge in one another is because they see one another as unremarkable, unchanging constants. Their intimacy stems from the fact that they do not think or worry much about one another. If Ruth is taken away, however, her loss will loom large in Sylvie's head, and Sylvie will begin to think of her differently.

Ruth explains this phenomenon by considering the way she and Lucille began to think of their mother in the wake of her suicide. She became "extraordinary" by virtue of her abandonment—if she had not killed herself, she would have been unremarkable to the girls, and soon would have transformed into a commonplace burden for them. Abandonment throws someone's character into sharp relief, almost turning them into someone else in the abandoned party's memories.

Chapter 11 Quotes

Sylvie and I (I think that night we were almost a single person) could not leave that house, which was stashed like a brain, a reliquary, like a brain, its relics to be pawed and sorted and parceled out among the needy and the parsimonious of Fingerbone. […] We had to leave. I could not stay, and Sylvie would not stay without me. Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Sylvie Fisher

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

After Sylvie and Ruth realize that they are "doomed" to be separated by a hearing which will surely remove Ruth from the flighty, transient Sylvie's custody, they decide to take matters into their own hands and escape Fingerbone—but not before burning their family's ancestral home to the ground. As Sylvie and Ruth work to set the carpets, curtains, and furniture on fire, they work together as a "single person," desperate to preserve the memories of their family and history by destroying it. They know that leaving their ancestor's possessions in the house will cheapen and disgrace them—and yet, at the same time, they cannot take the items with them as they embark upon a life riding the rails. The only solution is to cast themselves out "to wander" permanently and put an end to the cyclical, repetitious tradition of housekeeping within the home that has become both refuge and prison to both of them.

No one watching this woman smear her initials in the steam on her water glass with her first finger, or slip cellophane packets of oyster crackers into her handbag for the sea gulls, could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie.

Related Characters: Ruth Stone (speaker), Sylvie Fisher, Lucille Stone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's final paragraphs, Ruth reveals that more than seven years after she and Sylvie departed Fingerbone—and were reported dead, claimed by the lake—neither of them has ever contacted Lucille to let her know they're alive or find out where she lives or what she's up to. Ruth passes her days often mired in specific and intense visions of her sister either taking up housekeeping in Fingerbone or living her life in a large, anonymous city (earlier in the novel, Lucille spoke of wanting to move to Boston when she grows up). In the novel's final lines, Ruth constructs an image of Lucille as a woman haunted by the final, dual abandonments of her life—that of Ruth and Sylvie. Lucille keeps oyster crackers into her pockets like Sylvie used to, and suffers thoughts "thronged" by the absence of her aunt and sister. The fact that Ruth imagines Lucille as someone who "does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope" for Ruth and Sylvie's correspondence or return is interesting, and difficult to unpack. Ruth either believes that Lucille does wish and hope and wait for these things, and has simply told herself that she does not; or Ruth believes that her and Sylvie's departure and abandonment was so cruel, so violent, so painful that Lucille truly will not allow herself to spend time imagining her family's return. The novel ends on a melancholy image which sums up the effects of loss and abandonment and displays the powerful yet tenuous bonds of sisterhood.

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.

CHAPTER 1

The novel's narrator and protagonist, Ruth, introduces herself and describes the complex organization of her family. She and her sister, Lucille, grew up mostly under the care of their grandmother Mrs. Sylvia Foster; when she died, they entered the care of Sylvia's sisters-in-law, Lily and Nona; and when their aunts "fled," the girls at last entered the care of their aunt, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher. Despite their ever-changing caregivers, Ruth and Lucille always lived in their grandmother's house, which was built for her by her late husband, Edmund Foster. Edmund died years before Ruth was born, but it was he who moved their family to the "unlikely" town of Fingerbone, Idaho.

The first lines of the novel establish the repetitious instances of abandonment and loss which mark Ruth and Lucille's shared childhood. By delving into and establishing their family's history right off the bat, Robinson imbues her novel with an epic feel and foretells that this will be a tale about the ways in which conscious choices and unforeseen tragedies alike reverberate through the many generations of a family.

Edmund Foster, an employee of the railroad, grew up in the Midwest in an unusual house "dug out of the ground." As Edmund grew older and began reading, he longed to escape the confines of his constricting home and small town, and took up painting as a way of imagining himself somewhere else. Eventually, longing for more, he took a train west towards the mountains and settled in Fingerbone—a damp town largely at the mercy of an ever-flooding **lake**. Edmund rose through the ranks as a railroad worker until one night, a "disaster" of a train wreck claimed his life. While riding into Fingerbone on tracks which ran over the large lake, the train slid off the tracks and into the water "like a weasel sliding off a rock."

This passage introduces one of the most potent symbols throughout the novel: the lake at the edge of Fingerbone. A metaphor for the unknowability and unpredictability of both life and death, the lake claims Edmund's life and lends an epic, legendary feeling to his death. The story of the train wreck will be passed down from generation to generation and mark the lake—within the Foster family and beyond—as an object of both fear and reverence.

Though the residents of Fingerbone came down to the water's edge with lamps and rope to try and salvage pieces of the wreck—and divers entered the water to look for survivors—only a couple pieces of debris (a suitcase, a seat cushion, and a head of lettuce) were retrieved. Eventually, as morning arrived, one amateur diver said he was able to find the train at the bottom of the **lake**, but the dive wore him out and he could not descend to it again. The boy, though, had a reputation in town for being "an ingenious liar," and "his story was neither believed or disbelieved." By the next evening, the lake had iced and "sealed itself over."

The lake resists any attempts to discover its mysteries or uncover—or recover—what it takes. The diver who claims to have found the train, but whose story can be neither proved nor disproved, foreshadows yet another instance of uncertainty which will arise towards the very end of the book.

The accident turned three Fingerbone women in to widows—among them was Ruth's grandmother Sylvia. Though the other two widows left town and moved away to be nearer to family and friends, unable to stand the sight or smell of the **lake**, Sylvia remained in the house Edmund had built for her. Ruth suspects the woman never considered leaving, having spent her whole life in Fingerbone. A religious woman, Sylvia believed she'd one day be reunited with Edmund, and "became altogether as good a widow as she had been a wife."

Sylvia is shown to be a staunch but sensitive woman unwilling to allow her life to become derailed by loss. She does not fear death, and for this reason is able to remain in such close proximity to the lake which claimed her husband.

In the wake of Edmund's death, Sylvia's daughters Molly, Helen, and Sylvie—sixteen, fifteen, and thirteen, respectively—began following their mother around everywhere she went, sitting at her feet while she sewed and "cluster[ing] about her" every chance they got. Their attention, she reasoned, came from their sudden and profound awareness of her. The girls occasionally cried in the night, but on the whole, the years after Edmund's death were "years of almost perfect serenity." The girls grew older, and Sylvie grew more and more religious. After five peaceful years, Molly, the eldest, went off to China for missionary work while Helen—Lucille and Ruth's mother—was courted by their father, a man neither Ruth nor Lucille can remember.

The intense closeness of the Foster women in the wake of the death of their patriarch creates the false illusion that their close-knit ties are permanent. Before long, all three girls have begun moving on with their lives in one way or another, shattering the bonds between them and demonstrating that physical proximity does not equal emotional proximity.

Helen married hastily and in secret, eloping much to her mother's chagrin before "set[ting] up **housekeeping**" in Washington. To ease Sylvia's disappointment, Helen and her husband returned home briefly to marry before Sylvia's eyes in Fingerbone. A few weeks after the second wedding, Sylvie visited Helen in Seattle and then set off on her own adventures, returning home only once for her own wedding. In the course of a year, all three of Sylvia's daughters had left home, and the quiet and instinctual rituals of their lives together were gone.

This passage establishes a significant fact: that Helen, Ruth and Lucille's mother, is the only of Sylvia's children to take up housekeeping. The act of housekeeping—a double-edged symbol representing both the sacredness of attending one's familial history, and the claustrophobic roles prescribed to and for women—will have sharp and occasionally devastating reverberations throughout the Foster family's generations of women.

Sylvia was lonely in the wake of her daughters' departures, feeling that in mothering them she had been "constant as daylight" but also "unremarked as daylight"—in other words, taken for granted. Sylvia took pleasure and refuge in simple tasks like hanging laundry to dry and picking new potatoes from the garden, all the while trying to push away the sad knowledge that "she had never taught [her daughters] to be kind to her."

Though relatively unperturbed by her husband's death, the loss of her daughters rattles Sylvia and causes her to wonder whether she's done herself and her daughters a disservice, or deprived them of an important foundation in life.

Seven years after leaving Fingerbone, Helen returned at last to her hometown and to her mother's house. It was a Sunday morning when she knew Sylvia would not be at home. She deposited Ruth and Lucille on the screened-in front porch with a box of graham crackers and left. In Washington, Ruth and Lucille had lived with their mother in a sparse apartment—"two rooms at the top of a tall gray building." The three of them had few friends or visitors except for their neighbor Bernice, an old woman with garish hair and makeup that made her look like "a young woman with a ravaging disease."

Helen abandons her daughters at her mother's house for reasons that are not yet known. Ruth describes the insular and drab life the three of them seemed to have led back in Washington, hinting at her mother's unhappiness and loneliness.

Helen borrowed Bernice's car for the week to drive to Fingerbone—Bernice had urged Helen to go and visit her mother while she was still living. The visit, Ruth says, turned out to be a "fateful journey"—after dropping Lucille and Ruth at Sylvia's house, Helen drove Bernice's car up a mountain and off a cliff into the **lake** at the bottom of Fingerbone, the same lake where her own father, Edmund, had perished.

Helen's suicide—an event whose motivation is difficult to name—serves as the catalyst for the book's action. Helen abandons her daughters and symbolically follows her father into death and the underworld, allowing the place which claimed his life to claim her own.

After Helen's suicide, Sylvia spent many days alone in her bedroom, uninclined to move or go out. Her friends took turns looking after the shell-shocked Ruth and Lucille, and the girls took comfort in the company of Sylvia's eccentric friends. Sylvia cared for Ruth and Lucille for five years thereafter in a manner that was at once urgent, attentive, and "abstracted," as if she were raising Helen all over again and trying to correct whatever mistakes she'd made in her own daughter's youth.

Sylvia's attempts to correct the mistakes of her own past through her attentiveness to Ruth and Lucille shows that Sylvia wants to keep the girls from growing up to abandon her or one another. She doesn't want them to make the same mistakes her own daughters made, but isn't sure how to prevent them from encountering the pain of the world and being affected deeply by it, as Helen clearly was.

Though "straight and brisk and bright" even in her old age, Sylvia soon started to decline. She lost her hair and grew stooped and small and thin. She began looking forward to leaving the house to Lucille and Ruth, and advised them to hang onto it by any means necessary, even if they had to sell off the surrounding orchards one day. After Sylvia's death, her sisters-in-law, Lily and Nona—about ten years younger than her and nearly destitute—were grateful for the chance to live rent-free in a "rambling house surrounded by peonies and rose bushes" until Ruth and Lucille came of age.

Sylvia's desire to impress upon Lucille and Ruth the importance of keeping and maintaining the house shows just how central housekeeping is to the Foster family. The house is what brings all the disparate members of the family together and unites them across age, time, distance, and difference.

CHAPTER 2

Lily and Nona arrive from Spokane, Washington, to "[take] up **housekeeping**" in Fingerbone. They are nervous, plump women, "maiden ladies" alike in appearance and disposition. As they settle into the house they seem not to know how to talk to or what to do with Ruth and Lucille, and feed them and put them to bed too early. Upstairs, Ruth and Lucille lie in their beds and listen to their aunts' conversation. The women remark on how young Sylvia died, at only seventy-six, and wonder how things could have gone "so badly" for both Sylvia and her daughters. They discuss Helen's suicide and Sylvie's itinerance—they describe her has a "drifter," and wonder how they will track her down to inform her of Sylvia's passing.

Lily and Nona's housekeeping is, right off the bad, unfamiliar and insufficient. They are less concerned with helping the girls and attending to their needs than they are with gossiping with one another and trying to get to the bottom of what has gone wrong in the Foster family.

As the winter goes by, Lily and Nona refuse to make friends in town or learn how to cook, and complain often of arthritis pain. Ruth and Lucille, though, enjoy the season, and go skating on the frozen-over **lake** every day after school. They teach one another to skate backward and on one foot, and are often the last to leave the lake each night. On one such night, Lily and Nona reprimand them for staying out too late, and then become distressed when a blizzard hits in the middle of dinner, taking out the power. That night, in bed, Ruth and Lucille again overhear their aunts conversing, wishing aloud they could take the girls back to Spokane and away from Fingerbone. They admit that the girls are hard to take care of, and that someone younger might have an easier time with them—someone like Sylvie.

Lily and Nona are inadequate caregivers, and so Ruth and Lucille lean on one another for support, care, and a sense of normalcy. Despite the trauma of their mother's suicide in the lake, they skate upon its surface blithely and happily throughout the deep winter months. Their actions befuddle their great-aunts, who begin to fear they are unequipped to deal with such strange and occasionally rebellious girls.

One day soon, a letter from Sylvie arrives. She does not know that Sylvia is dead, and has written to tell her mother that she is staying in Montana. After the aunts devise a gentle response and send it off, Lucille and Ruth find themselves anticipating Sylvie's arrival with excitement—they hope that she will look like their mother, and will be able to tell them stories about Helen as a young girl.

The girls are intrigued by the mystery that is their aunt Sylvie. They don't know her at all, but believe that once they meet her, they'll be able to unlock their mother's secrets, sustain her memory, and perhaps even retain a piece of her through getting to know and love her sister. They assume that Helen and Sylvie are similar and even interchangeable because of the simple fact of their sisterhood.

Lily and Nona, too, stay up late each night discussing the possibility of Sylvie's arrival with excitement. They feel they have been chosen to be Ruth and Lucille's guardians in error, and that even if Sylvie is the "errant" child, her mistakes must be forgiven and she should be given a chance to return home. As the days pass, all four of them increasingly anticipate Sylvie's homecoming to Fingerbone.

Everyone is thrilled and slightly nervous about whether Sylvie will respond and decide to come to Fingerbone. Lily and Nona are desperate to get out of the situation they've been thrust into, and Ruth and Lucille desire both a better caretaker and a way of reconnecting with their mother's memory.

CHAPTER 3

One spring day, after several months of correspondence with Lily and Nona about Sylvia's death, the state of the house, and the presence of Ruth and Lucille, Sylvie finally arrives in Fingerbone. Nona greets her at the door and brings her into the kitchen, where Ruth and Lucille lay eyes upon their mother's sister for the first time. Sylvie is thirty-five years old, tall and narrow, with wavy brown hair. She is dressed unseasonably in a thin raincoat and loafers with no socks. Sylvie greets both the girls warmly, and Lily and Nona help her take her coat off and sit by the stove to get warm. Sylvie is wearing a beautiful deep-green dress, and Lily and Nona both admire it. Ruth and Lucille know that in admiring the dress, Lily and Nona have decided that Sylvie will be an adequate caretaker for the girls.

Sylvie's arrival is full of excitement—but also apprehension and appraisal. Lily and Nona know that Sylvie has been living a transient existence for some time, and worry that she will not be an adequate caretaker for the girls. At the sight of her nice clothes and kempt appearance, however, they relax, and begin to feel more comfortable with the idea of leaving the girls in Sylvie's care.

After eating a poached egg on toast and warming up, Sylvie allows Lucille and Ruth to help her take her suitcases upstairs to her bedroom, a "narrow dormer" with a single round window. Sylvie thanks the girls for their help and kisses them each on the head. She tells them that it's been a long day and she needs to go to bed—but that tomorrow, she'll buy them presents.

Sylvie seems tired from the trip, but doesn't let her own feelings get in the way of showing the girls warmth and tenderness. The promise of presents makes them excited, and endears her to them from the very beginning.

Ruth writes that throughout her adulthood, she has often wondered what it was like for Sylvie to return to the house where she grew up. Sylvie betrayed little emotion, and always walked with her head down and an "abstracted and considering expression" on her face, so it was often hard to discern how she truly felt. Ruth remembers thinking, when she first met Sylvie, that Sylvie's beautiful green dress looked as if it were borrowed.

Though Sylvie has had a warm welcome back into her childhood home, Ruth looks back on Sylvie's arrival with a kind of dark cloud over her memories. She remembers thinking that Sylvie looked as if she'd cobbled together her appearance, or changed herself in order to fit in, but could not truly conceal her dreamy, detached nature.

The day after Sylvie's arrival, Lucille and Ruth wake early to "prowl the dawn"—a custom they both adopt on any day of major significance. They go downstairs to the kitchen, expecting to be alone, but find Sylvie there already awake with her coat on, eating oyster crackers by the stove in the dark. Lucille and Ruth sit on the rug at Sylvie's feet in the predawn darkness, and she shares her crackers with them. She tells them about the long journey she's had—eleven hours by train—and when she learns that the girls have never taken a train before, she describes the dining and passenger cars in beautiful detail, promising to take the girls anywhere they want one day. Ruth imagines taking a train journey with delight.

Though Sylvie's life of transience inspires fear and uneasiness in many of the adults around, as seen through Lily and Nona's hesitations about her, her lifestyle actually seems to enchant and inspire both Ruth and Lucille—at least for the moment.

Lucille abruptly asks Sylvie to tell the two of them about their mother. None of the adults have spoken about Helen since her death, and though the girls have grown accustomed to it, they long to know what she was like. Sylvie admits it's difficult for her to describe someone she "kn[e]w so well," but tells them that Helen was quiet, enjoyed the piano, and loved cats. She tells them that their mother's wedding was small, and "just to please Mother." The girls begin asking questions about the father they never knew, and Sylvie tells them that he was from Nevada and "awfully quiet." Sylvie asks the girls if they know where their father is, and Ruth says they do not—though once, she remembers, a letter came from him for their mother, but Helen tore it up and threw it into the trash.

The girls see Sylvie as a way to access the things that have been kept from them all their lives. They have many unanswered questions about their own pasts—about the mother they thought they knew but didn't, about the father they never got a chance to know, and about the world from which they themselves are descended. Sylvie is reticent—or unable—to answer their questions, insisting that it's difficult to gain objectivity when it comes to people one is close to. Whether this is the truth or a carefully constructed lie to disguise the fact that Sylvie didn't really know her sister, either, will be thrown into question as the novel progresses.

As Ruth studies Sylvie, she can't help but think how much the woman looks like her mother. She even senses the same energy in them—both Sylvie and Helen seem "startled by the [...] awareness" that Lucille and Ruth are always watching them. Ruth wonders what Sylvie sees in her mind when she thinks of Helen, and wonders if she'd be able to describe her own sister Lucille if someone were to ask her to. As she reflects on how she sees Lucille, though, she finds herself thinking in snippets and fragments which are "isolated, and arbitrary as glimpses one has at night through lighted windows."

Ruth and Lucille had hoped to get quick, straight, easy answers from their aunt. Instead, even early conversations with Sylvie are opening up large existential questions about family, memory, perception, and closeness for Ruth.

Sylvie makes Ruth and Lucille cornflakes and cocoa for breakfast, and then tells them she's going out for a walk through town. She buttons her coat and heads out without a scarf, gloves, or boots—as the door shuts, Lucille tells Ruth that she fears Sylvie is never coming back. The girls run upstairs and put on their jeans, boots, and coats, planning to follow Sylvie to see where she's headed. As they walk, Lucille begins crying, and Ruth tries to comfort her.

Ruth and Lucille have been abandoned or cast off by so many caregivers in recent years that they seem to expect Sylvie to abandon them, too. Lucille takes the idea that Sylvie could want to leave them much harder than her sister—an interesting fact considering the ways in which Lucille will come to resent Sylvie as the book goes on.

Lucille and Ruth follow Sylvie in and approach her, fearing she's leaving. Lucille tells Sylvie that she's left all her things back at the house. Sylvie is surprised to see the girls, but happy as well. She tells them she's simply come inside to get warm, as nothing else is open yet in town. The girls tell Sylvie that she needs some winter gear, and she responds by telling them that she wants to stay with them. The girls are happy.

Sylvie promises the girls that she was never going to leave them—but her walk through town alone seems to indicate that she needs her space and solitude, and has parts of her life that she wants to keep separate from her new charges.

When the shops open, the girls follow Sylvie around town as she purchases a plaid scarf and gray gloves. When Sylvie remarks to the girls after leaving one of the stores that the shopkeeper looked familiar, they ask if she still knows people who live in Fingerbone. Sylvie admits she and her sisters, Helen and Molly, never had many friends in town—they mostly kept to themselves. Sylvie admits she's only been back to Fingerbone once since she left sixteen years ago.

Sylvie hints a little bit more at her and Helen's shared childhood as she leads the girls through town. Ruth and Lucille are coming to understand that their family have long been outsiders in the town of Fingerbone—insulated and isolated from the rest of polite society.

Back at the house, Lily and Nona welcome Sylvie and the girls home, but chide Sylvie for wearing only loafers out on the snowy roads and Lucille and Ruth for going out in their nightgowns and jeans. When the aunts ask why the three of them have been out in the cold, Lucille lies—she says that she and Ruth went out to watch the sunrise, and Sylvie came looking for them to bring them in from the cold. As Lily and Nona gripe about what trouble the girls are, Lucille, Ruth, and Sylvie settle in at the kitchen table. They complete a crossword puzzle together while Lily and Nona pack. That evening, a friend of Sylvia's comes to pick up the aunts and drive them back to Spokane—Ruth, Lucille, and the house are all Sylvie's.

Ruth describes herself, Lucille, and the very house they live in as all belonging to Sylvie as this chapter comes to a close. This moment represents the fact that she and Lucille are in total thrall to Sylvie, and simultaneously at her mercy—for better or for worse.

CHAPTER 4

The week after Sylvie arrives in Fingerbone, the weather is sunny and balmy. Lucille and Ruth play in the snow and build a snow-woman who looks as if she's "standing in a cold wind." The girls feel they have "conjured a presence," but after lunch time, the woman has begun to melt and has grown "dog-yellowed"; Lucille and Ruth abandon her.

The girls are spooked by the snow-woman they build, who seems to remind them, perhaps, of their mother. They abandon the snow-woman as their mother abandoned them, haunted by what they've created and what it says about how their mother lingers in their memories.

The sunny weather soon turns rainy, and rain during the late winter months in Fingerbone is a "disaster." The snow melts but the ground doesn't thaw, and after three days of rain, the entire town is flooded. Normally, Sylvia's home is high enough up that it's safe from the floods—but this year the flooding is so bad that the first floor of the house is covered in four inches of water, and Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie are forced to live upstairs for a number of days and wear galoshes anytime they have to enter the kitchen.

The flood is reminiscent of the Biblical flood, especially when one considers Robinson's writerly interests in religion and the stories of the Bible. The flood portends a wiping-away and a starting-over—it heralds Sylvie's arrival in earnest, and the start of her relationship with the girls.

Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie eat dinner upstairs, and afterwards, Sylvie suggests they play cards. Lucille, bored, says she doesn't want to play—she wants to "find some other people." She says that tomorrow she wants to "wade up to higher ground" and find people camping up in the hills. Sylvie says she doesn't see any reason to leave the house, as the three of them are perfectly cozy and have enough food. When Lucille says she's tired of being alone in the house with Ruth and Sylvie, Sylvie warns Lucille not to let herself be bothered by her loneliness—often, attempts to remedy one's loneliness often end in more sorrow and isolation. Sylvie describes the lonely women she's met during her travels and shares their sad stories with Ruth and Lucille. The stories disturb the girls, and one about a woman losing custody of her children alarms them particularly.

Lucille has only been alone with Ruth and Sylvie for a short while, and yet she already longs for contact with the outside world. Her sister and eccentric aunt are not enough for her, and as the novel progresses, Lucille's resentment of the insular world they long to create will continue to intensify and rip them all apart.

Lucille and Ruth are still uncertain that Sylvie will stay with them for good. She looks so much like their mother that they find themselves conflating the two, and half-waiting for Sylvie to abandon them at any moment. They have also noticed that Sylvie rarely takes off her coat—they worry that this means she's planning to leave them soon.

Lucille and Ruth keep expecting Sylvie to leave because the trauma of their mother's death still haunts them. They have been abandoned so many times in the last several years, and suffered so much loss, that it's become their norm.

Lucille asks Sylvie why she doesn't have any children. Sylvie tries to dodge the question, but when Lucille persists, Sylvie curtly tells her that "some questions aren't polite." She suggests they play cards after all, but before she sets up the game, she asks Ruth and Lucille to come downstairs with her and help her fetch warm bricks from the stove. Lucille and Sylvie take candles downstairs so that Sylvie can see what she's doing, but on the way to the kitchen, Sylvie decides to go out to the porch for some wood for the stove. Out there, she gets distracted by the immense darkness of the night. While Ruth and Lucille stand silently inside, and Sylvie stands outside, Ruth feels as if there is "no proof that [any of them are] there at all."

This passage shows that Sylvie's dreamy distractedness is a trait she shares with Ruth. Ruth is pulled into Sylvie's fantasies easily on, and as she observes Sylvie entertaining her solitude and fantasies, Ruth allows herself to indulge in these things as well.

Lucille snaps Ruth—and, it seems, Sylvie—from their moonlit trances by saying she's tired of waiting. Sylvie goes over to the stove, puts the wood in, and retrieves their hot bricks. Ruth and Lucille carry chairs for cards upstairs to the bedroom, but notice that Sylvie is not behind them. Ruth goes out to the top of the stairs to shout for Sylvie, but her aunt does not return her calls.

Lucille, increasingly the outlier among the three, is still able to drag Ruth back from Sylvie's dreamy, distant world—but even in the face of the girls' summons, Sylvie remains hypnotized by solitude.

Ruth goes downstairs and all through the house looking for Sylvie, and at last finds her standing in Sylvia's old bedroom. Ruth asks Sylvie to come upstairs, and Sylvie says she'll be up in a minute. Ruth wades through the water and the dark towards where Sylvie is standing by the window and touches her face tenderly before pulling back her arm and hitting Sylvie in the middle. The two of them wordlessly make their way back upstairs, where they wrap themselves in blankets and play gin rummy with Lucille.

This moment of slightly playful aggression between Ruth and Sylvie shows that there is a deep unspoken connection between them. Ruth seems to feel that Sylvie owes her something—her specifically, not Lucille—and they are positioned as co-conspirators and silent allies.

"Fragments of the quotidian" wash up in strange places throughout Fingerbone as the flood recedes into the **lake** and the river, leaving the earth "warped and awash in mud." Sylvie, Ruth, and Lucille do not participate at all in the slow restoration of the town—they and their whole family, the late Sylvia included, are known as "standoffish" throughout Fingerbone. They give out some canned goods to their neighbors, who with "polite envy" survey the comfort and order of the house up on the hill. Two weeks after the water is gone, most of their neighbors believe that their house has not been touched by the flood at all.

This passage reveals that the Foster women have had a reputation in Fingerbone for years for being isolated and unfriendly. The clever positioning of their house saves them from the ruin and difficulty many of their neighbors have to face, but it seems almost like a taunt or provocation to the others. This foreshadows the ways in which the town of Fingerbone will respond to the increasingly strange goings-on at the Foster home as the novel progresses.

CHAPTER 5

After the mud has been cleared, school starts up again. Ruth and Lucille are in junior high, and attend school in a square, symmetrical red-brick building named for William Henry Harrison. Ruth is a year older than Lucille, and though they aren't together in classes, they spent time with one another in study hall and at lunch. Neither is a particularly good or bad student, and because they are quiet and unremarkable, they are largely left alone. Ruth has a "cold, visceral dread" of school, but has learned to ignore this discomfort, which is "not to be relieved."

Even at school, where the girls are separated by grade, they continue to function as a unit. They both regard school with the same disdain and fear, and make every effort to be together as often as they can throughout the school day.

One day, when Lucille is caught cheating off of a classmate, she stays home from school the following week feigning illness. When she returns to school, she does so with a required note from Sylvie—the note basically states that Lucille was faking sick every day and would not be made to go to school. Lucille crunches the note up and throws it into the road on the way to school, and though she frets that someone from school will call Sylvie on the phone or come by the house, Ruth assures her everything will be fine. Still, as they approach the building, Lucille's fear increases, and she tells Ruth that she's going to skip school and spend the day down by the **lake**. Ruth says she'll go, too, unworried about getting into trouble.

Lucille is afraid of stepping even a toe out of line, and feels so embarrassed and ashamed of her bad behavior that she makes things even worse for herself. Lucille almost wants to punish herself for her transgression by making herself even more isolated and rebellious, foreshadowing the ways she will come to think about hiding herself away from the world in the face of difficulty or conflict.

Every day that week, Lucille and Ruth skip school and spend their days down at the **lake**. They try to come up with ideas to explain their absences, but after the third day of skipping, they give up on making excuses and decide they have no choice to "wait until [they are] apprehended." They are afraid to go back to school, and feel "cruelly banished from a place where [they have] no desire to be." Sylvie knows nothing of the girls' truancy, and they dread facing her once she finds out what they've been up to.

Ruth and Lucille escape the strain and embarrassment of everyday life by seeking refuge in nature. They are not particularly happy to be there, though—they are stuck between two places they dread equally. This moment in time symbolically represents the way the girls are positioned on the cusp of coming into womanhood.

On the fourth day the girls spend down by the **lake**, they see Sylvie at the shore. Lucille worries that Sylvie is looking for them, but Sylvie seems to be there just to look out across the lake and get lost in thought. The girls find themselves irked by her obliviousness, and almost wishing she'd catch them after all. The girls follow Sylvie as she walks up onto the bridge, talks briefly with some hobos, and walks fifty or so feet out into the middle of the lake on the train tracks. As the girls stare up at Sylvie, she spots them at last. She greets them with a wave and hurries back to them.

The girls have glimpsed some of Sylvie's odd, eccentric behavior—but watching her walk out onto the middle of the train tracks over the lake is the first thing she's done that truly fills them with alarm. Ruth has been thinking of how like her own mother Sylvie is—and seeing Sylvie seemingly poised to jump into the lake makes the comparison, for Ruth, terrifying rather than comforting.

Sylvie remarks that she didn't realize it was late enough for school to be out—Lucille replies only that "school isn't out," and Sylvie says nothing more about their absences. As the three of them walk home, Sylvie remarks that she always "wondered what it would be like" to stand out on the middle of the bridge. Lucille chides Sylvie for being so careless, and points out that if she had fallen in, "everyone would think you did it on purpose. Even us." Sylvie apologizes for upsetting the girls, but states that she didn't know they were skipping school and had no idea they'd be down at the **lake**.

Sylvie, it seems, was not thinking about death at all—or if she was, she's doing her best to make her walk out onto the bridge seem like just another one of her dreamy, detached wanderings. Lucille chides Sylvie as if she's the adult, warning her that if she were to die it would be the way she died rather than the fact of her death that truly mattered in Fingerbone.

The incident upsets Ruth and Lucille, who realize that their aunt is "not a stable person." The girls, however, never discuss their fears about Sylvie outright. Sometimes they wake in the night to the sound of their aunt signing, and often find her awake and wandering about the house in the middle of the night—sitting on the back porch steps, standing in the orchard, or playing solitaire in the kitchen. As the girls fight sleep night after night hoping to figure out what Sylvie's up to, they find themselves having difficulty telling what's real and what isn't when it comes to their aunt. They worry often about what would have happened if she hadn't seen them up on the bridge, and whether she would have kept walking, been hit by a train, or flung herself into the **lake**.

Sylvie keeps odd hours and engages in strange and slightly creepy activities in the nighttime. Her love of solitude and evening is strange to the girls, who aren't sure what to make of her—but are desperate to observe her and try to understand her as much as possible for fear that the second they look away or give up, Sylvie will leave them.

Despite Ruth and Lucille's worries after the incident on the bridge, they have a pleasant weekend with Sylvie, playing Monopoly and listening to the stories of people she's met during her travels around the country. On Monday, the girls go back to school, and despite their absences, no one questions them. They realize that someone at school has decided that their circumstances are "special." As the days and weeks pass, the girls fall into a regular routine of going to school and coming home to Sylvie, slowing growing used to their aunt and her eccentricities.

Things are good and easy between Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie for a while. The girls realize they had nothing to fear all along in terms of their truancy—because of their recent losses and upheavals, the girls are given special treatment at school. The girls begin to relax, grateful for a return to normalcy, routine, and stability at last—even as Sylvie's oddities lurk in the backs of their minds.

Sylvie fails to sweep the leaves from where they have gathered over the course of the winter in the corners of the house, and yet she "talk[s] a great deal about **housekeeping**." She soaks tea towels in water and bleach for days on end and airs out all the cupboards in the kitchen—she believes "most of all in air," and often accidentally leaves doors and windows open all day. She only likes to eat supper after dark, and so during the summer Lucille and Ruth eat late and stay up late. Sylvie likes cold food, mostly—cheese, doughnuts, sardines, and fruit pies—and always eats with her fingers. She has endless entertaining stories of her days riding the rails and meeting all sorts of strange, eccentric people, and Lucille and Ruth delight in her tales, which she often tries to make "useful" for the two of them through morals and lessons.

Sylvie's ideas about housekeeping are strange and unorthodox. She is committed to the act of establishing a way of doing things around the house—but her methods are unusual to the girls. She is teaching them more and more about herself every day—her likes, her habits, her history—and thus showing them that there are other ways of moving through the world as a woman than what they've been taught.

Sylvie moves from upstairs to downstairs and takes over Sylvia's old room off the kitchen. Three steps below the rest of the ground floor, the room has glass double doors which open onto the orchard. Sylvie keeps the room furnished very plainly, and Lucille and Ruth occasionally spend time digging through the bottom drawer of a chest which once belonged to their grandmother. The drawer is full of odds and ends—old candles, unworn socks, twine, and pamphlets for missionary work in China. As Ruth spends hours playing with the odds and ends, she imagines disparate things—her aunt Molly off in China, the bottom of the **lake** in Fingerbone and all the treasures it must hold, and the "fragments" of the lives of people all around her.

Sylvie assumes her mother's old rooms, symbolically announcing that she has definitively decided to stay on in Fingerbone. She is committed to being the girls' guardian and to devoting herself to keeping house. Meanwhile, Ruth and Lucille continue longing for an understanding of their family's history, and the more mysterious aspects of the legacy they stand to inherit as they come into womanhood.

Ruth is content with Sylvie and loves her very much. Lucille, however, begins appearing to Ruth as someone on "a slowly sinking boat," who looks at the other people in Fingerbone as "a not-too-distant shore." When Sylvie brings home blue sequined velveteen ballet slippers for the girls to wear, Lucille pulls all the sequins off; when Sylvie goes out shopping, Lucille gripes at the things she brings back to eat. Ruth begins to see how practical and common her sister is in contrast to Sylvie's dreamy flightiness. Sylvie showers the girls in "treasures" both physical and emotional of which Lucille wants no part.

Ruth can't help noticing that even as things settle into a rhythm with Sylvie, Lucille balks at being along for the ride. She's increasingly obsessed with practicality, modesty, and normalcy, and every attempt Sylvie makes to bring Lucille into her world fails. This tension sets up the central problem of the second half of the novel: the fact that Ruth cannot have both Sylvie and Lucille.

CHAPTER 6

Ruth begins to sense that Lucille's loyalties lie in "the other world"—the world of normal people. The girls stop going to school at the end of March, as soon as the weather is nice, though they don their school clothes and walk in the direction of the junior high each morning "as a courtesy to Sylvie." The girls go to the **lake** each day, ignoring the advice their grandmother Sylvia taught them long ago about staying away from both trains and hoboes. Ruth often wonders if she, her sister, and the hoboes are awaiting some kind of "resurrection" of all the bodies at the bottom of the lake—including the bodies of Ruth and Lucille's mother and grandfather, Helen and Edmund.

Ruth and Lucille play each day on the shores of the lake, and Ruth herself is able to see and admit the dark pull the lake represents for both of them. It is a place which has claimed several members of their family and symbolizes, in a way, death; yet Lucille and Ruth do not seem to fear it, and are simply curious about it instead. They enjoy flirting with the danger that truancy, proximity to transients, and closeness to the dark lake all represent.

Sylvie occasionally receives notes from school informing her of the girls' truancy, and she writes back explaining that "the trouble lay with the discomforts of female adolescence." Sylvie's notes are not entirely untrue: Lucille, though younger than Ruth, is becoming a "touchy, achy, tearful creature" whose clothes "bind and pull" as she develops breasts that "alarm" Ruth. While Lucille transforms into a "small woman," Ruth remains a "towering child."

Sylvie is not a traditional guardian who might be mad or irritated to discover her charges skipping school. Instead, she aids them in making excuses and doesn't even really encourage them to go back to school. Meanwhile, the chances occurring in Lucille make Ruth feel stuck and stunted, and perhaps jealous of her sister's sudden entry into the realm of womanhood.

The girls often play at an old quarry in the forest, though the woods "disturb" them. They like finding small clearings where wild strawberries and buttercups grow, but become frightened and nervous when they enter the deeper parts of the woods. Still, they often stay in the forest until well into the evening as spring turns to summer, forced home only by the chill settling into the evenings. Ruth notices that she loves being in the woods "for the woods' own sake," while Lucille "seem[s] to be enduring a banishment there."

As the girls' summer goes on, Ruth develops a closeness and true love of nature, while Lucille seems to regard her forays into nature as a punishment or "banishment." It's clear that the two sisters, once so close to function almost as twins, are diverging significantly in both appearance and interests.

Each night when the girls arrive home, Sylvie is waiting for them in the dark of the evening—her "special" time of day. Many evenings, the dark is, to Sylvie's mind, too beautiful to disturb, and they cook and eat supper with the lights out, using their "finer senses" to accomplish tasks in the kitchen. One of these evenings in the dark, Lucille, feeling itchy, goes to the light switch to turn it on and see if she has bug bites or a rash. As soon as the kitchen is flooded with light, it transforms from a place of serenity and magic to a dirty, sloppy room marked by dust, soot, and shabby dinnerware. Lucille determines that she has no bites and hurriedly turns the light off again.

Lucille's innocent pulling of the light switch reveals the kitchen to have fallen into serious disrepair. The dreamy, almost magical illusion Sylvie casts with her suppers in the dark is shattered by Lucille's practicality, and all three are slightly sad and embarrassed to learn the truth of what their kitchen looks like and have their perceptions altered.

Lucille grows increasingly frustrated with Sylvie's way of **housekeeping**. Sylvie does have odd habits—she keeps her clothes, hairbrush, and toothpaste in a box under her bed, and always sleeps in her clothes with her shoes under her pillow. Obviously the habits of a transient person, Sylvie's odd rituals "offend" Lucille, and she begins growing worried that the more "well-tended" and popular girls at school—girls whom she knows "only by name"—will somehow find out about the strange way she and Ruth are living. Lucille complains to Ruth about Sylvie's strange and embarrassing ways, but Ruth actually takes comfort in Sylvie's oddities, believing that as long as Sylvie's able to indulge the transient behaviors she's found comfort in in the past, she'll stay in Fingerbone with the girls forever.

Lucille sees Sylvie's transient ways as a direct threat to her and Ruth's well-being and their ability to prosper and earn respect within Fingerbone. She tries to curtail Sylvie's habits at every turn. Ruth, meanwhile, is petrified that if Sylvie feels too observed or controlled, she'll give up and run away; Ruth is desperate to keep Lucille from smothering Sylvie for this reason.

Any time Sylvie makes any allusion to her former transience—bringing home newspapers she's collected at the train station for the girls to do crosswords in, talking about meeting someone who'd ridden the rails to Fingerbone—Lucille becomes irate and accuses Sylvie of acting embarrassingly. Lucille feels the constant pressure, Ruth notes, of wondering how people of "reasonableness and solidity [might] respond to such tales." Lucille constantly compares herself to one of her classmates, Rosette Brown, and imagines how Rosette and her mother would react to Sylvie's stories. Though Lucille regards Sylvie with sympathy, she behaves towards her with "no mercy, and no tolerance."

Lucille has begun to notice other people and make friends at school, and constantly compares herself to her classmates and her family to her classmates' families. She wants to be like everyone else, and is unhappy with the strange and sad legacy she's inherited. She lashes out at Sylvie over and over again, but Sylvie is kind and wise enough to understand and excuse Lucille's behavior.

One day, Lucille and Ruth are on their way to the post office when they see Sylvie sleeping on a park bench. Lucille is horrified, and orders Ruth to wake Sylvie up while she herself runs towards home to avoid being seen with Sylvie. When Ruth manages to wake Sylvie, Sylvie is happy to see her, and pulls a chocolate bar from her pocket for Ruth to enjoy. Sylvie confesses that she's glad to have a moment to talk to Ruth alone—Ruth is so quiet, Sylvie says, it's hard to know what she thinks. Ruth confesses, to her own embarrassment, that she doesn't quite know what she thinks. She often feels invisible and incomplete, like a ghost. Ruth waits for Sylvie to respond, hoping that she will say Ruth is a lot like her—but Sylvie does not "claim" her.

Lucille, in this passage, endures what is to her mind the ultimate humiliation: Sylvie engages in a public expression of her love of the transient way of life by napping on a park bench. The moment represents a shattering in relations between Lucille and Sylvie, but oddly, Ruth seems to want to get even closer to Sylvie, still hoping that Sylvie somehow holds the answers to all the things Ruth worries about: who she is, who she will become, and why. Ruth idolizes Sylvie, and longs to be like her, whereas Lucille wants to distance herself from the both of them.

Sylvie and Ruth walk home together, and when they arrive, Lucille confronts both of them, shouting at Sylvie for sleeping on a bench in the middle of town in the middle of the afternoon where anyone could have seen her. Sylvie goes out the door into the orchard, and Ruth yells at Lucille for frightening Sylvie off. Ruth warns Lucille that if she's cruel to Sylvie, she might leave for real, but Lucille insists they'd be better off without Sylvie around. Exhausted and sad, the girls sit at the kitchen table playing a game in which they list the capitals of the states and the countries of the world until Sylvie returns from her walk. She has fresh berries for the girls, and makes them pancakes for dinner. As the pancakes cook, she joins in the game they're playing, noting that she and Helen used to play the same game as girls.

Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie are locked permanently in a precarious situation. Sylvie's behaviors provoke Lucille, and when she attempts to provoke Sylvie back, Ruth is afraid that the "slowly-sinking boat" they're all on will rock out of control. Ruth fears losing Sylvie above all else, and doesn't know how to hang on to both her and her sister as they fight one another for control.

CHAPTER 7

That summer, Lucille remains "loyal" to Ruth and Sylvie more out of necessity than anything else—they are both her "chief problem" and her "only refuge." Ruth and Lucille are always together, and they spend much of their days indulging in reminiscences of their mother. They have begun to remember her differently, though, and often quarrel about what she was really like. Lucille begins describing their mother as "a widow [...] who was killed in an accident," but Ruth sees her mother as "the abandoner, and not the one abandoned."

Though Lucille and Sylvie's relationship has begun to fracture—and her relationship with Ruth is changing as well—the girls have nowhere to turn but to one another. Lucille is already trying, though, to revise their shared history—possibly to make things less painful or more normal for herself in retrospect.

The girls realize—Lucille rather reluctantly—that they are "in Sylvie's dream with her." As they play at truancy and hide in the woods, they realize they have in all likelihood never come to a place where Sylvie has not been before them. One night, Lucille and Ruth wander too far into the woods while trekking to a small inlet to do some fishing, and are forced to spend the night. The girls enjoy a hike to the inlet where they catch, cook, and eat fish and huckleberries without any thought as to the time, and soon realize it is too late to return home through the woods. They pass an uncomfortable night in a makeshift hut—Ruth is haunted by visions of her mother, her grandmother Sylvia, and Sylvie, dreaming the half-dreams of uneasy sleep.

Lucille, who has so loathed Sylvie's dreaminess, strange habits, and love of sleeping outdoors, finds herself stranded in the woods and forced to stay there overnight. This brief brush with transience will affect her deeply after she returns to the house.

As dawn approaches, the girls walk home through the woods and eventually along the railroad tracks. They arrive home to find Sylvie waiting for them with quilts and tea, and Ruth, wrapped in a blanket, quickly falls asleep right at the kitchen table. Ruth has more upsetting half-dreams in which she's waiting for her mother to come in the front door. She feels as if she's dying, and though she can make out Lucille and Sylvie speaking to one another, she can't hear what they're saying. When she startles herself awake much later, Sylvie smiles at her and tells her that sleep is best when one is exhausted—"you don't sleep," she says, "you just die."

Ruthie's "dead" sleep is one familiar to Sylvie—Sylvie seems almost excited to bond over the strange, unsettling feeling of sleeping when truly exhausted from fear, exposure, or walking, all of which are aspects of transience. Sylvie sees Ruth's experiment with transience as a point of connection—but it is impossible to say what she and Lucille discuss while Ruth is asleep, or how it will affect them all going forward.

Ruth goes upstairs, where Lucille is getting dressed. As Lucille helps Ruth brush out her hair and choose an outfit for the day, she confesses that she, too had a bad dream upon falling asleep, in which a woman who "reminded [her] of Sylvie" was trying to "smother" her with blankets. The two of them walk to the drug store, and when Ruth crosses her arms over her chest once they get to town, Lucille warningly tells Ruth she'll just "make people notice it more." Ruth notices how Lucille has learned to set her hair, dress, and walk with a swing in her hips, while Ruth just feels tall and out of place no matter what she wears or how she does her hair.

Lucille attempts to clean herself up after the night in the woods as a way of smothering or erasing the memory of having done something so embarrassing and socially deviant as sleeping outside. Lucille dream of someone who "reminded [her] of Sylvie" smothering her seems to indicate that she's feeling repressed by Sylvie—or, perhaps, by a vision of Helen she isn't willing to admit to.

Ruth is not enjoying the shopping trip and tells Lucille she wants to go home, but Lucille entices her to stay in town for a Coke. While the girls drink their sodas, they're joined by two girls Lucille knows from school. As Lucille looks over a magazine with the other girls, Ruth retreats into herself. She tells Lucille that she wants to go home, but Lucille pinches her and whispers to her that their home is "Sylvie's house now," and they must learn to "improve" themselves without her. Ruth ignores Lucille and leaves, walking towards home.

In the wake of the girls' night outside, Lucille is throwing herself into socializing with other girls her age and exploring feminine, respectable ways of being. Ruth feels overwhelmed and alienated, but Lucille believes that if they give themselves over to Sylvie's "dream" of how life should be, they'll be cast out of polite society forever.

As Ruth approaches the house, she feels comforted by the familiar sight of the orchard, but also finds herself taking stock for the first time of the changes that have "overtaken" it. The lawn is high and unkempt, and the steps of the porch have shifted to meet the height of the foundation. Ruth observes that the house looks as if it is about to either founder or float.

Just as when Lucille snapped the kitchen light on and they all saw its shabbiness for the first time and were embarrassed, Ruth feels a kind of disgust and embarrassment upon noticing the sorry state of the house and lawn. Her premonition that the house is about to "founder or float" shows how precarious the situation with Sylvie and Lucille has become, and how uncertain Ruth is about her own feelings or future.

Lucille arrives home with an armful of dress patterns and fabric. Lucille describes the pattern for a skirt and small jacket in detail, and urges Ruth to help her sew it. They clear aside the cans and bottles Sylvie has collected on the kitchen table and set to work. When Lucille asks Ruth to grab the dictionary and look up pinking shears, Ruth finds dried flowers pressed between several pages—roses under R, Queen Anne's lace under Q. Lucille tells Ruth to throw the flowers in the stove—they're not good for anything, anymore, she says. Ruth says she'll save the flowers in another book, but Lucille begins picking them out and crushing them. Ruth tries to hit Lucille with the dictionary, but when Lucille blocks the blow, she drops it to the floor and storms out of the kitchen.

This passage shows very plainly that while Lucille is trying to prove her normalcy and traditional femininity through an obsession with dresses and sewing, Ruth clings to nature, memory, and transient or impermanent objects such as the pressed flowers. The two are directly at odds, and get into the first physical fight they've had since, it seems, the start of the novel.

Lucille and Ruth don't speak for several days, and Lucille often goes into town to spend time with her new friends at the drug store. Ruth is hurt by Lucille's avoidance, and though she tries to peek in on Lucille's work on the dress, Lucille yells at Ruth any time she comes into the spare bedroom where she's working. One afternoon, Lucille emerges from the bedroom with the completed dress in her arms and puts it into the stove. She bunches newspaper and throws that in as well, then lights everything on fire with a match and lets it burn. Lucille sits at the kitchen table with Ruth, and the girls apologize to one another. Lucille tells Ruth that she thinks they spend too much time together, and need "other friends."

Ruth is deeply hurt by her sister's coldness, and she expects that when they make up, they'll make up for real. Instead, Lucille cruelly tells Ruthie that they need "other friends," implying that the friendship and closeness they have with one another is no longer enough for her—or worse, that Ruth has become just as embarrassing to Lucille as Sylvie is.

Ruth is hurt. Neither of them have ever really had any friends other than each other—Lucille's friends are brand new. While thinking about how she and Lucille have leaned on one another to make sense of the world around them, Ruth recalls a night a little while ago when she and Lucille observed Sylvie brushing her hair and styling it different ways in the mirror. They'd once watched their mother do the same thing, and though the girls tried to interpret the moment as a "meaningless" coincidence, they both watched Sylvie a very long time that night. Ruth is snapped back to the present moment when Lucille announces that she can't wait to leave Fingerbone and go to Boston. When Ruth asks Lucille why she wants to go to Boston, Lucille responds: "Because it isn't Fingerbone."

As she talks with Lucille about the uncertain future of their relationship, Ruth is assaulted by a memory of Sylvie appearing to them as their mother almost exactly. She is wondering about the closeness between sisters, and whether emotional closeness and physical closeness matter at all. Helen and Sylvie hardly knew one another, and yet in many ways they are the same—it seems Ruth is wondering if she and Lucille have a similar bond between them, and will always be bound by the simple fact of their sisterhood even if Lucille tries to distance herself from Ruth more and more.

As August passes, Lucille begins doing exercises and brushing her hair a hundred strokes each night. School is approaching, and Ruth knows her sister is "determined now to make something of herself." Lucille reads almost constantly and ignores Ruth's invitations to go play down by the **lake**. Lucille also begins keeping a diary, which Ruth reads hoping to divine her sister's thoughts. Instead, she finds only a list of exercises, a table grace, and a list of instructions for setting the table at a dinner party. Ruth knows that the "old Lucille" is gone.

Lucille is working hard—around the clock, it seems—to transform herself into a normal and respectable young lady. She is becoming obsessed with the trappings of traditional femininity and polite society, and in her diary writes no uncensored thoughts or feelings but only careful instruction manuals for entertaining and hosting—things she isn't in a position to do and won't be for many years. It's almost as if Lucille is trying to armor herself in any shred of normalcy she can grasp at.

On the first day of school, Lucille leaves early, without Ruth. During first period, the girls are called to the principal's office from their separate classes. The principal, Mr. French, confronts the girls about their truancy, and Lucille assures the principal that her attitude has changed, but throws Ruth under the bus by telling the principal that Ruth can't be reasoned with when it comes to "practical things"—they don't matter to Ruth. The principal asks Ruth what does matter to her, and she shrugs. The principal shrugs back, mocking her. Lucille speaks for Ruth, saying her sister hasn't figured out what matters to her yet—she "likes trees." The principal urges Ruth to learn to speak and think for herself. Looking right in Ruth's eyes, Lucille tells the principal that Ruth "has her own ways."

In this passage, Lucille attempts to throw Ruth under the bus as a way of saving herself. She tries to present Ruth as odd, regressive, and obsessed with all the wrong things—nature, ephemera, and dreams. Lucille wants to paint herself as the picture of normalcy, and uses Ruth's comparative oddities in order to accomplish this goal. She has no regard for Ruth's feelings—only her own appearance.

The girls hardly see each other at school anymore, and Ruth often eats lunch alone. She focuses on her schoolwork intently as a way of finding "refuge" without her sister's company, and after a month or two, Mr. French calls Ruth into his office to tell her he's proud of the improvement in her work ethic. Lucille, meanwhile, grows increasingly "fastidious" and refuses to eat the dinners Sylvie cooks, or even join Sylvie and Ruth for meals. Ruth can tell that Lucille's absence saddens Sylvie, and though Ruth longs to comfort her aunt, she doesn't know how to.

Lucille has fully abandoned her sister, but Ruth faces the slight mutely with her head down, determined to focus on other things. She doesn't know how to help Sylvie, though, and is perhaps fighting off the continual fear that Lucille's slights or provocations will cause Sylvie to turn tail and leave.

One night, when Lucille goes out to a school dance, Sylvie excitedly tells Ruth that she has a "pretty" place to show her. Nearby, Sylvie says, there is a little valley with a house and an orchard. The valley is small, and barely gets any sun at all; frost covers the ground all day long, even in July. Sylvie wants to take Ruth to the valley right away, in a little boat, but Ruth has studying to do. Sylvie offers to write Ruth a note so that she can skip school on Monday and they can go together, but Ruth insists she has a report due. When Ruth goes upstairs to read, Sylvie comes up behind her and sits on Lucille's side of the bed to read alongside Ruth.

Sylvie, in an attempt to comfort Ruth, offers her the chance to skip school and embark on an adventure in nature. Ruth is trying to be at least a little practical, holding off as long as she can going over the cliff into Sylvie's "dream" and away from her sister, from Fingerbone, and from normalcy.

When Lucille comes home, she sees Sylvie asleep in the bed and offers to sleep downstairs. When she goes down, though, Sylvie, having heard her, gets up from the bed to go downstairs and offer the bed back to Lucille. She comes back up, though, after a moment to announce that Lucille is not in the house. The next morning, Sylvie and Ruth will learn that Lucille went to the home of Miss Royce, her Home Economics teacher, a "solitary woman" with a "frightened devotion" to her students. Miss Royce let Lucille stay in the spare room, and after that night, Ruth had "no sister"—Miss Royce effectively adopts Lucille as her own.

Lucille comes home to find that Sylvie has, quite literally, taken her place in Ruth's life. Though she has wanted nothing to do with Ruth or Lucille for months, she takes Sylvie's presence in her bed as a hurtful slight, and decides to take matters into her own hands. Lucille has been working so hard to construct a front for herself and distance herself from Ruth and Sylvie that it perhaps never even occurred to her that she could be the one abandoned rather than the abandoner.

Before Sylvie and Ruth know any of this, though, they spend the night wondering whether they should call the sheriff or go out looking for Lucille. Sylvie says they shouldn't bother the police—Lucille is probably just at a friend's house. The next morning, though, Miss Royce knocks on the door, and she and Sylvie talk out on the porch for a long while. Sylvie comes back in to retrieve some of Lucille's things and bring them back out to Miss Royce. When Sylvie comes back inside, she relays to Ruth that Lucille, apparently, has said that Ruth can have all her things. Ruth says perhaps Lucille doesn't plan to be gone very long. She asks Sylvie if she'll still write her the excuse note to get out of school the next day.

With the news that Lucille has chosen to move out of the house, Ruth grows despondent. With her sister gone, Ruth finally surrenders completely to Sylvie and becomes her true companion in truancy, transience, and the rejection of the people, things, and places that represent normalcy and tradition.

CHAPTER 8

Sylvie wakes Ruth very early the next morning so that they can eat breakfast and set out on their little trip. It is nearly November, and the cold air outside makes Ruth sluggish. Sylvie is in a big hurry, and hardly waits for Ruth to tie her shoes before rushing her downstairs. Sylvie gives Ruth an egg on toast for breakfast, and tells her to eat it on the way. Ruth runs out the door after Sylvie, struggling to keep up through her haze of sleepiness. As Ruth follows Sylvie down to the **lake**, she thinks about how the two of them are the same—about how Sylvie might as well be her mother.

As Ruth and Sylvie set out on their little trip to the lake, both of them seem to be able to sense that it will be a fateful journey in many ways. Ruth has begun to feel that Sylvie is truly her mother, and this feeling throws into relief a portion of the book's thesis on the idea of sisterhood: that sisters (or mothers and daughters) are made, not born; being born as sisters does not guarantee the emotional closeness that all sisters are presumed to share.

Down at the shore, Sylvie finds that the boat is not where she left it—someone else, she reasons, must have used it and tied it up somewhere else. Eventually, Sylvie spots a large tarp covered with branches and needles—she unearths the boat and oars from beneath the hiding-place, and Ruth helps her push it into the water. As Ruth climbs in, she can hear a man yelling after them, but Sylvie hops in and begins rowing anyway. The man's voice grows louder and more full of rage the farther they get from shore, but Sylvie urges Ruth to ignore him—"He always acts like that," she says.

This passage makes it clear that Sylvie is in the frequent habit of stealing this man's boat. In spite of the pains he has taken to keep it hidden, she's always able to find it, and has no fear of retribution or discovery.

The sun rises over the **lake**, and Sylvie remarks that maybe a hundred people live on the islands within it and the hills around it. She describes sometimes seeing smoke rising from one of the islands when she's out on the boat by herself—she has gone towards the smoke before, and felt sure that she is in the presence of wild children, but can never quite see them. Sylvie confesses to Ruth that she once tried to "catch one"—she left marshmallows on the branches of the apple trees trying to lure a child out of an abandoned house in the woods. Sylvie tells Ruth that she didn't want to take the feral child or get near to it—just "look at it." Ruth intuits that the place Sylvie is describing is the place they're rowing towards now.

Sylvie's strange and fanciful ideas about the feral children who may or may not live on the islands at the center of the lake position the trip she and Ruth are going on as a kind of fairytale. They are going out onto the lake—a place which represents death and the pull towards oblivion—in search of young, fresh life. Whether Sylvie really believes there are feral children living on the island or is simply telling Ruth a nice story is unclear—what is clear is that Sylvie's dreamy instability is becoming Ruth's norm.

Sylvie grows quiet, and she and Ruth float across the lake in silence. The boat rows unevenly, and the two are pulled towards the middle of the **lake**—as they are, Ruth thinks of Edmund, the grandfather she never met, pulling his entire family "unborn" behind him to Fingerbone.

Ruth experiences a kind of fear or dread as she and Sylvie head out onto the lake. The lake is becoming a symbol of the unstoppable cycles of life, death, rebirth, and change more acutely than it yet has in the context of Ruth's life.

Eventually, Sylvie and Ruth reach the outcrop they've been destined for and pull the boat to shore. They walk through the valley made by the surrounding mountains and eventually come upon the "fallen house" and "stunted orchard" Sylvie has described to Ruth. Sylvie asks Ruth if she thinks it's pretty, and Ruth agrees that it is; Sylvie says they should wait for the sun to come all the way up, so they can see it at its prettiest. Sylvie wants to crouch and wait to see if they can spot any feral children, but Ruth is cold, so they head back to the boat. Ruth, hungry, digs through the lunch Sylvie has brought for them—"among the odds and ends" are some marshmallows, plus "a black banana, a lump of salami with a knife through it, [and] a single yellow chicken wing like an elegant, small gesture of defeat."

Sylvie's excitement at showing Ruth the valley is somewhat stunted when Ruth seems unimpressed by the place, and too cold to enjoy it. The picnic lunch they two of them share, too, is slightly depressing and disappointing—there is "defeat" in the items Sylvie has chosen to pack. Ruth is perhaps beginning to question her choice to remain allegiant to Sylvie, a woman who can hardly take care of herself, let alone a child. The two are bonded, though, and Ruth will have a hard time choosing practicality over the love she feels for Sylvie.

Ruth builds a fire and toasts marshmallows while Sylvie naps. After a while, Sylvie wakes and stretches, declaring that it is warm enough now to return to the valley. Indeed, when they go back, Ruth finds the place "changed"—the frost on the ground, which looked before like barren salt, seems to have flowered, and the trees are alive with falling petals and dripping water. The older Ruth's memories of the beautiful, frost-covered valley mingle with her present-day musings on the nature of growth, need, and loss.

Ruth finds herself transformed by the valley, as Sylvie told her she would be. She is flung into a sort of metaphysical space where she thinks about the losses she's endured, the love she's felt, and the pain she's suffered—nature is a force of rebirth for her, and being in such a hallowed space allows her the safety and remove to confront her feelings at last.

Ruth looks around and realizes that Sylvie is gone. She wonders whether her aunt is teasing her by hiding in the woods, and so pretends not to know she is alone, or grow frightened by her aloneness. Ruth stays still and silent in the valley listening to the drip of melting snow and admiring the flowery trees. After a while, she walks out of the valley and down to the shore, sure that Sylvie has gone down to move the boat or fetch some food. When she doesn't see her aunt, though, she sits on a log and waits, trying not to panic. Alone, without Lucille or Sylvie, Ruth feels a deep-seated dread, and imagines she can feel "cold, solitary children" from the woods creeping up behind her.

Ruth worries that she has at last been abandoned by Sylvie, once and for all. She has feared the loss coming all along, but when she believes it has at last arrives, she seems to go a bit mad with the shock and pain. She is terrified by the idea of being left alone, and it becomes clear that Ruth cannot sustain yet another abandonment.

Ruth returns to the valley to wait for Sylvie there, but the stone steps of the sunken house are too cold to sit upon, and Ruth shivers in the wind. She wonders how the house came to fall into such disrepair, and thinks of all the stories she's heard of families in Fingerbone struggling to survive in their old houses during the harsh, bitter winters. Ruth remembers thinking about abandoned places and abandoned people, and, as an adult, remarks on how "loneliness is an absolute discovery."

The fallen-down house at the center of the valley seems to portend the slide into disrepair of Ruth's family's own ancestral home. The thought frightens her, but also forces her to consider how lucky she and her family have been so far. Even homes, it turns out, are impermanent objects, subject to the whims of nature.

Ruth begins pulling loose planks from the ruins of the house to make a fire, and as she does, she imagines that she will find the feral children buried in the wreckage below. She soon grows both tired and fearful of the stories she's telling herself, though, and sits in the grass and cries as she fears Sylvie has abandoned her. She almost longs for the feral children to come "unhouse [her] of [her] flesh" and pry the house of her body apart—she wants to be with her mother, and her grandmother Sylvia, and all those she has lost.

Ruth continues to slide into fear, anger, and again a twinge of madness. She is so distraught by the idea that she has been left alone that she wishes for the end of her life. She has suffered so much at such a young age, and would rather die and be reunited with those she's loved and lost than continue living and lose even more loved ones.

Sylvie returns to the valley and wraps her arms around Ruth, startling the girl. They look at one another and say nothing. Sylvie bundles Ruth in her coat and sways her back and forth, and Ruth tries to let herself be comforted by the "awkward" embrace. Ruth begins weeping, and tells Sylvie that she couldn't see the children. Sylvie assures they'll find them "another time," and then they get up to leave. Sylvie takes her coat off and puts it on Ruth, buttoning her up safe inside. Ruth feels heartened and sheltered by the gesture.

Sylvie returns and comforts Ruth. Ruth is uncertain of where she was—if she was off exploring or playing hide-and-seek—but whatever her game or task was, it was cruel, and it plunged Ruth into the depths of her psyche. Sylvie realizes the error of her ways and tries to make it up to Ruth, who is receptive to her aunt's tenderness.

Sylvie and Ruth climb into the boat and set off back across the **lake**. Ruth is worried that the boat will capsize and she will sink to the bottom of the lake, just like her mother did. As she thinks of the reflective power of water, she realizes that though her mother tried to erase herself from the world by driving into the lake, her actions only refracted her into "a thousand" pieces that Ruth sees whenever she closes her eyes.

This passage shows that Ruth, transformed by her visit to the island and the valley, is still ruminating deeply on the nature of loss and the ways in which the attempt to abandon one's life only makes one more present in the world, not less. This fact will have devastating implications for Ruth and Sylvie as they return to Fingerbone and are forced to make decisions which will result in their own abandonments of Fingerbone, and of Lucille.

Sylvie rows the boat underneath the bridge, and she and Ruth sit and wait for the train in the dark. Ruth is tired and confused, and as she waits with Sylvie she recalls the morning that she and Lucille found their grandmother Sylvia dead in her bed, positioned as if "she had leaped toward ether" in her final moments. Ruth grows frustrated with waiting. As the tedious minutes pass by, Ruth says Sylvie's name several times to get her attention, but her aunt doesn't respond. After several attempts, Ruth calls out to Sylvie by the name of "Helen," and in that moment, the bridge begins to rumble and the train passes by overhead. Sylvie wonders aloud how many dead bodies are at the bottom of the **lake**—and how many unknown, unseen transients riding the rails perished in the great train accident which claimed Edmund's life.

The strange and twisting cycle of dreamlike thought and confusing, spiraling fears Ruth finds herself in continues. She wonders about what death must feel like, and whether it is an ecstatic experience to leave behind one's life. In spite of her new closeness with Sylvie, she still sees her mother in the woman, and wonders if Sylvie is destined to leave her behind, soon, too. Sylvie's thoughts are morbid as well, pointing to the fact that she and Ruth truly are alike—they have both been changed and shaped by the things they've seen and felt in the valley.

Ruth tells Sylvie she's cold, and Sylvie says they can go home. She rows the two of them back to shore against the current, and it takes a long time for them to travel a short distance—Ruth, frightened, wonders if they are "tethered to the old wreck on the **lake** floor." Ruth offers to row for a while, but she can't make any headway either. The two of them give up and lie down in the boat, wishing aloud for hamburgers, pie, coats, and blankets. They keep from falling asleep by singing songs and telling stories.

The lake seems, in this moment, to entrap both Ruth and Sylvie, refusing to let them edge away from the profound but painful thoughts and memories they're experiencing. They eventually surrender themselves to the lake's power, lingering in the uncomfortable and liminal space it has created for them.

As the sun rises, Sylvie and Ruth drift to the lake's opposite shore and clamber out of the boat and up onto the bridge. They hop aboard an eastbound freight train and share a boxcar with an old woman. As the train heads for town, it becomes clear that Sylvie and the woman know one another. After disembarking at the freight yard in Fingerbone, Sylvie and Ruth walk home together, disheveled and tired. As they pass through town, Sylvie tells Ruth to ignore everyone's stares. When they walk past the drug store, Sylvie sees Lucille there with her friends, but doesn't make eye contact so as not to embarrass her sister.

Here, Ruth is the very image of a transient—disheveled, tired, and fresh off the rails. All of the other moments that have slowly eroded her connection to Lucille, to Fingerbone, and to normalcy itself pale in comparison to her trip in the freight car with Sylvie. Ruth, whether she is fully conscious of it or not, has chosen Sylvie above all else, and it seems there is no turning back.

At home, Sylvie makes a fire for Ruth and then heads to bed. Ruth nearly falls asleep at the kitchen table, but snaps to attention when Lucille comes in and sits down with her. She asks Ruth where she and Sylvie have been, but Ruth finds that she cannot put the trip with Sylvie into words. She has strange visions of drifting through the dark with Sylvie across the bridge and into the lake. Ruth becomes aware that Lucille is talking to her and offering her the chance to come stay with her and leave Sylvie behind, but Ruth cannot manage a response.

Lucille offers Ruth one more chance to leave Sylvie behind and choose a life of ease, normalcy, and stability. Ruth is so exhausted from the emotional journey she's been on that she can't respond to Lucille—and if she could, probably wouldn't be able to abandon all the knowledge she's gleaned about herself on the fateful trip into the woods.

CHAPTER 9

In the weeks following Ruth and Sylvie's excursion to the **lake**, the sheriff comes by the house twice. Though the sheriff has many ceremonial duties in town such as leading the parade each year, Ruth knows that Fingerbone can be a dangerous place—there are "pitiable crime[s]" and "appalling accident[s]" all throughout the county. He does not come to the house because of Sylvie's theft of the boat or Ruth's truancy, but rather because Sylvie was seen riding the rails with Ruth in tow. The sheriff worries that Sylvie is "making a transient of [Ruth.]"

At the start of this chapter, Ruth tells some truth about Fingerbone she's been holding back. It's not the sleepy and idyllic place it seems to be—instead it's a rather violent one. Sylvie and Ruth have both gotten into various kinds of trouble, together and separately, and yet in spite of their other infractions—and the very real violence the sheriff apparently has to worry about—their transient behavior and riding a freight car is highest on his list of gripes. This shows just how much Fingerbone fears transience.

Ruth suspects that transients are so "terrifying" to the citizens of Fingerbone because they are not all that different from them. Fingerbone is subject to floods and fires, violence and calamity, and "a diaspora threaten[s] always"—this, Ruth believes, is why transients are so frightening to her neighbors. Fingerbone is full of transients and drifters, but most residents attempt to ignore their presence and "consider their histories complete."

Ruth reveals that transience is such a feared thing in Fingerbone because people are afraid to imagine what it would be like to be forced out of their hometown by flooding or violence. Being placeless, homeless, or stateless is a very real fear to Fingerbone's citizens, and they attempt to shun or punish anyone who willingly lives in the way they most fear living.

Neighbor women begin bringing casseroles and cakes by the house, as well as knitted socks and caps for Ruth. They ask polite but probing questions about Sylvie's odd methods of housekeeping, and Ruth finds herself feeling grateful that Lucille, still living with Miss Royce, is "spared these scenes." The house has fallen into disrepair—the magazines, cans, and paper bags Sylvie hoards have bred mice, and so Sylvie has acquired a cat which has littered twice and whose kittens have begun killing the swallows nesting upstairs. The small corpses of birds are visible throughout the house, and thirteen or fourteen cats and kittens mill about at any time.

This passage shows just how concerned Ruth and Sylvie's neighbors are becoming—and also suggests that they have a right to be. The house is overgrown, overstuffed, and filled with vermin and animals. It is not the orderly, swept, light-filled place Sylvia Foster kept it—it is a monument to carelessness and impermanence, living in the moment and fixing things as they need fixing rather than thinking long-term about any one solution.

Sylvie and Ruth's neighbors are disturbed but not panicked, and often try to visit with Sylvie and ask her about her life. When one of them asks if she's made any friends in Fingerbone, Sylvie replies that Ruth is her friend, and in fact "like another sister." Ruth overhears this and becomes startled when Sylvie adds that Ruth is "[Helen] all over again." Ruth knows that the women who come by are pious and generous but not tactful, and that though they fear Ruth's "social graces [are] eroding away" and she will soon "be lost to ordinary society," they do not know how to help her.

This passage makes it clear that Sylvie does see Ruth as a kind of sister and equal. The true sisters both of them have had—Helen and Lucille, respectively—have avoided and abandoned them. Ruth and Sylvie have one another, though, and share feelings and interests neither of them shared with their own real sisters. This important connection doesn't matter to the townspeople of Fingerbone, though—they can't understand why Ruth and Sylvie need each other so much.

One day, Ruth overhears a neighbor ask Sylvie about whether Ruth is all right leading a life that is not "orderly," and whether she's feeling sad. Sylvie answers blithely that Ruth is of course is sad—but that she "should be." Sylvie insists that "families should stay together," and that she and Ruth have had "trouble enough" with loss and grief.

Sylvie doesn't treat Ruth like a child, and doesn't try to mollify her complicated emotions. She knows that Ruth is wrestling with her mother's abandonment and doesn't want to erase whatever painful feelings she might have. Sylvie believes in emotional truth and togetherness above all.

The next day, when Ruth comes home from school, she finds that Sylvie has begun cleaning up the living room and emptying it of detritus and debris. There is a bouquet of flowers on the kitchen table, and Sylvie is frying up chicken for dinner. Sylvie asks Ruth how school was, and Ruth lies and says it was good—in reality, she is outgrowing her clothes and losing her ability to focus in class. Sylvie asks if Ruth sees Lucille at school, and Ruth says she does—but doesn't mention that she and Lucille never speak anymore. Sylvie says that after dinner she'll bring Lucille some chicken and have a visit with her.

In spite of the emotional support Sylvie gives her, Ruth is flailing and falling into a depression. She has lost her sister, and she is on the verge of losing Sylvie, too. Sylvie is trying her best to take up housekeeping in earnest and stave off the inevitable—they both know that Fingerbone will not tolerate their odd arrangement much longer. Both women are trying to push the truth away from the surface and continue living in a "dream" a while longer.

It is late when Sylvie returns from Lucille's. She sits down with Ruth and tells her that "women have been talking to Lucille"—Sylvie implies that the women in town want to enlist Lucille's help in taking Ruth away from Sylvie's care. The next morning, Sylvie helps Ruth with her hair for school, insisting she needs to look her best. Ruth realizes how much is at stake, and begins to fear the two of them are "doomed." Ruth arrives home that evening to find Sylvie in a "swept and catless parlor, speaking softly with the sheriff." Ruth overhears the sheriff informing Sylvie that there will soon be a hearing, but when he spots Ruth listening, he sends her up to her room. Ruth feels "no curiosity about what [is] destined for [her,] and no doubt."

Sylvie realizes that no matter how quickly she spiffs up the house and acts like a socially acceptable woman, it is too late—the tides of society have turned against her, thanks in large part to Lucille. Ruth shares in Sylvie's sorrow as they both realize that their time together is about to come to an end, but Ruth is so accustomed to being abandoned that she mostly feels numb.

CHAPTER 10

"The force behind the movement of time," Ruth writes, "is a mourning that will not be comforted." Citing the Bible, she states that the "first event" was an expulsion, and the last is "hoped" to be a return. She describes the rending of numerous biblical families—the families of Cain and Abel, Job, and Rachel. Families, Ruth says, "will not be broken" even in the face of "a thousand sorrows," and points out that when God came to Earth in the form of Jesus, He spent his time mending broken families and easing sorrows of those he loved. Those who have lost, Ruth says, are always waiting for those "whose lack [they] always feel" to "step through the door finally" and resume their lives as usual.

This chapter opens on a moment full of doubt, doom, and pain, and Ruth considers the intense, biblical pain of families throughout history who have been wrenched apart by forces beyond their control. Ruth's allegorical monologue here speaks to her memories of the feelings of fear she had when she thought about losing Sylvie after having already lost so many—her mother, her grandmother, and her sister.

Ruth knows that Sylvie does not want to lose her; she does not want to have to face the immense loss of someone she loved. Ruth believes that the measure of the intimacy between her and Sylvie is that they gave one another "almost no thought [...] at all." Ruth realizes that if her own mother had not committed suicide, and had come back from the **lake** to resume a normal day with her daughters and Sylvia, Ruth would not remember her mother as poignantly or starkly as she does. As the girls grew older they might have forgotten their mother's birthday or grown "irked and embarrassed" by her. In other words, their relationship would have grown ordinary and unremarkable.

This passage introduces a difficult and melancholy idea. Ruth posits that she was able to love, miss, and revere her mother more after she died because of how intensely she and Lucille grew to miss her. In losing someone, they grow large and painful in one's mind, whereas Ruth and Sylvie, who see each other every day, are able to think of and treat each other more casually. Ruth expresses a tension between wanting someone to stay forever but fearing their becoming off-putting and embarrassing, while knowing that if they become lost or dead, they will become perfect in the memories preserved of them.

Even as Sylvie grows nervous that her hearing, set to take place in a week's time, will not turn out well, she "persist[s] in her **housekeeping**," brightening up her mother Sylvia's house by polishing the windows and straightening up. One afternoon, she and Ruth start a fire and burn old boxes, papers, and other hoarded things. Sylvie seems delighted by the fire, and keeps adding more and more pamphlets and soapboxes and magazines to the blaze. Ruth delights in Sylvie's "zeal and animation" as Sylvie outlines her plans to buy Ruth a nice suit, take her to get her hair permed, and begin bringing her to church each Sunday.

The only method for exhibiting practiced and accomplished femininity Sylvie has is housekeeping. In this time and place, housekeeping is simply what women do, and Sylvie's having shirked traditional housekeeping duties for so long renders her strange and dangerous in Fingerbone. By submitting to tradition and conforming to polite society, Sylvie hopes to reframe how the people of Fingerbone see both her and Ruth.

Ruth says she wants to go inside, and Sylvie agrees it's time to put the fire out. She shovels dirt onto the blaze, and then, in the total darkness, Ruth runs into the orchard and hides. Sylvie whispers loudly and reprovingly after her, but Ruth stays hidden—she knows that with the impending trial, Sylvie cannot very well go calling her name throughout the yard. Sylvie retreats into the house after urging Ruth, quietly, to come inside where it's warm. Ruth looks at the lighted house and struggles to imagine going inside. She sees herself as a character in a fairy tale or in the Bible, and worries that walking into the house will change her forever in ways she can't anticipate.

In this passage, in a reversal of the scene in the valley on the island, Ruth is the one hiding from Sylvie. Ruth believed, back on the island, that Sylvie was playing a game of hide-and-seek that was perhaps meant to torment her; now, she cruelly turns the game around on Sylvie, knowing that Sylvie can't go around calling for her lest she draw even more attention from the disapproving townspeople. This is another instant of Ruth lashing out and testing the boundaries of Sylvie's love for and devotion to her.

Ruth is startled from her game when she sees the sheriff walk up the porch and knock on the door. She overhears him talking to Sylvie—he has noticed that all the lights are on, an oddity for Sylvie, and asks to know if Ruth is home and all right. Sylvie says she's upstairs sleeping, but when the suspicious sheriff demands to go see her, Sylvie admits that Ruth is hiding in the orchard. Ruth comes out at last, ashamed. The sheriff asks if Ruth would like to come spend the night at his house, but Ruth insists she wants to stay with Sylvie. The sheriff tries to coax Ruth into coming with him, but she remains adamant about staying, and the sheriff leaves—warning that he will come back tomorrow to talk with both of them.

Ruth realizes that her silly game has made things much worse for both her and Sylvie. She feels ashamed and angry, and balks at the sheriff's persistent insinuation that she's not safe with Sylvie, whom she loves fiercely.

CHAPTER 11

After the sheriff leaves, Sylvie and Ruth turn out the lights and work together to burn the house down. They have difficulty doing so, as the house is dank and damp, but they move through its rooms like "unhuman spirits" lighting on fire anything that will burn. Sylvie and Ruth know that they must leave, but also know that they cannot leave the house to be pawed through and parceled out. They know that Ruth will not be allowed to stay, and that Sylvie won't stay without Ruth—they have been "cast out to wander, and there [is at last] an end to **housekeeping**."

Sylvie and Ruth are faced with an impossible decision as the novel speeds to a close. To stay behind in Fingerbone means certain separation for them, and to leave together but keep the house intact means that strangers and enemies would descend upon the house and defile the Foster family's ancestral home, laying claim to its contents. Sylvie and Ruth choose to burn it, attempting to put an end to the cycle of women taking up housekeeping there and preserve the house as they love and remember it.

Having set fire to the curtains and sofas and rugs, Sylvie hurries Ruth out of the house when they hear the whistle of an approaching train. They run into the orchard and through the garden towards the tracks, but as they come through the trees they find they've missed the train. They hear the windows of the house begin to pop and shatter, and can make out a neighbor shouting. Sylvie becomes overcome with panic, knowing that soon the authorities will come looking for them. Sylvie suggests there is only one thing to do: walk across the bridge over the **lake** on foot. Ruth agrees that they should go. Sylvie tells Ruth that she'll find that drifting isn't "the worst thing."

Ruth, in spite of the hesitations she seems to have, agrees to run away with Sylvie and embark on a life of transience and impermanence. Sylvie is excited by the prospect of conscripting Ruth to such a life, and of having a friend and companion to navigate the world with.

As the two of them make their way across the bridge over the **lake**, Ruth worries that a trail will come and crush them, but Sylvie insists there isn't another one until morning. Ruth relaxes and begins to feel giddy and strange. She imagines the house burning down, and its contents smoldering and shattering. Though curious about what the blaze must look like, she does not turn around to check if she can see the fire.

Ruth's inability to turn around and check on whether the house has burned down or not shows that she wants to preserve the house as it is in her memory. In refusing to look back, she is dooming herself to a life of uncertainty but also creating a sense of possibility and hope: as long as she doesn't look at the house, she won't know what happened to it, and can forever remember it as her beloved (albeit strange) childhood home.

Ruth writes from the present day. Sylvie has, for years, kept a neatly folded newspaper clipping pinned to the underside of her coat's lapel; it reads "LAKE CLAIMS TWO," and describes Sylvie and Ruth's attempt to burn the house down—and their subsequent, supposed death in the **lake** at the foot of Fingerbone. It has been many years since Ruth and Sylvie fled, and in all that time, they have never contacted Lucille. Even after seven years passed—the time frame during which Sylvie claimed the authorities could still "get you"—they made no effort to get in touch. Ruth writes that she and Sylvie are drifters—now that they have their feet on that path, "it is hard to imagine another one."

Ruth and Sylvie originally allowed the world to believe they were dead out of a desire to avoid trouble with the law. Even after a long period of time has passed, though, they refuse to contact Lucille because they are set in their ways and uncertain of what reconnecting with her might look like. Robinson shows why transient people sometimes stay transient: fear of being rejected or alienated by the lives they've left behind.

Sylvie and Ruth go everywhere together, but never stay anywhere for long. Ruth occasionally takes jobs in restaurants or shops or movie theaters, but Ruth always begins feeling conspicuous and disconnected within a short time, and they move on. Ruth wonders when she became "so unlike other people"—she is unsure of whether it happened when she followed Sylvie across the bridge above the **lake**, or when Helen abandoned her, or perhaps even at her own conception (an event to which she was "unconsenting").

Ruth's life is full of questions. Despite her companionship with Sylvie, she feels isolated and confused as to the reasons behind the socially deviant choices she's made. Ruth has known for a long time that she is different from "normal" people, but she still can't understand why. She tries to pinpoint the moment she became so strange and othered, but cannot, and this too is a lonely feeling.

Ruth remembers a moment on the treacherous walk across the bridge when she and Sylvie heard "some sound too loud to be heard, some word so true [they] did not understand it." She has trouble to this day discerning whether the moment was real or imagined—she does not, and has never, "distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming."

This remembered moment gestures at the supernatural or sublime. Because it is an old memory, it is impossible to tell whether Ruth is remembering the moment as it occurred, or injecting some sense of fate or doom into it—her memory, she admits, is fallible and changeable.

After leaving Fingerbone, Sylvie and Ruth traversed the Pacific Northwest hoping to "elude discovery." They have been many places together, but "are not travelers"—they rarely go anywhere out of desire to be there, and instead move around the country based on where they can find shelter with friends. Occasionally, riding the train through Fingerbone on their way somewhere else, they try to catch a glimpse of the old house. Though they can never quite see it, Ruth imagines that someone is living there, keeping up with the garden and maintaining the orchard. Ruth occasionally imagines Lucille has taken up **housekeeping**, but knows that she's probably gone to the city. Sylvie once tried to find a listing for her in Boston but was unable to. Ruth tells herself that one day, when she is "feeling presentable," she will go into Fingerbone and make some inquiries.

Despite the close bond Ruth has long felt with Sylvie, she now admits that what tethers them together is circumstance and habit rather than true devotion to one another. Whereas as a child all Ruth wanted was Sylvie's attention, devotion, and commitment, she now finds herself distracted in adulthood by thoughts of the world and the people she left behind, like her sister. She longs to return, but it seems as if she never will—the unknown is too great.

Ruth cannot explain why she never does get off the train in Fingerbone and go to see her grandmother Sylvia's house. She wants to "expel [her vision of] poor Lucille" who, in her imagination, has "waited there in a fury of righteousness" for years. She imagines Lucille waiting and waiting for Sylvie and Ruth to return, and wonders whether Lucille has had daughters of her own who look out the "black window" at night, wondering what their mother is always staring out at.

Ruth's childhood was defined by her relationships to inscrutable, unknowable women—women who kept secrets, women who abandoned her, women who could never love her fully because of the weights of their own respective pasts. Now, Ruth finds herself almost praying that Lucille is the one missing her, since Ruth was always the one doing the missing as a girl.

Ruth sometimes imagines Lucille in Boston, "tastefully dressed" and waiting at a table in a restaurant for a friend to arrive and meet her. Ruth imagines that no one looking at the prim, stoic Lucille could ever know that although she moves through the world in an ordinary way, betraying no melancholy or sadness, "her thoughts are thronged by [Ruth and Sylvie's] absence," or that she waits and hopes "always" for their return.

Ruth imagines her sister as pining unendingly for her and Sylvie. The melancholy of the book's final lines is deep and total: whether Ruth's vision is true and Lucille's life has been calibrated by the loss of Ruth and Sylvie, or whether it is false and Lucille has moved on entirely, never stopping to think of her long-lost aunt and sister, the feelings of loss and longing Ruth holds within her are intense and inescapable.

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