

Cake



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Cate Kennedy was born in England, where her father was on a posting with the air force, but moved to Australia with her parents when she was a child. After graduating from the University of Canberra with a BA in literature, she worked as a community arts organizer, a waitress, a kitchenhand, a theater director, and a writer-in-residence at several schools in Melbourne. She also lived in Central Mexico for two years while teaching literacy to peasant communities with Australian Volunteers International. Kennedy's writing spans diverse genres—her novel *The World Beneath* won the People's Choice Award at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards in 2010, and her poetry collection *The Taste of River Water* won the CJ Dennis Prize in 2011. However, she is most well known for her short stories. Her collection *Dark Roots* was shortlisted for the Steele Rudd Award and her collection *Like a House on Fire* won the award a few years later. She currently resides in Victoria, Australia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Like a House on Fire was released shortly after Australia introduced its first government-funded Paid Parental Leave policy on January 1, 2011. New mothers had access to up to eighteen weeks of taxpayer-funded maternity leave to care for new babies or recently adopted children. Fathers and same-sex partners could also receive two weeks of paid leave from work. "Cake," examines the experience of a mother who has been out of the workforce for eighteen months and still doesn't feel that she has had adequate time with her child. Written at a time when government policy and family law were slowly adapting to accommodate the needs of working mothers, Kennedy's story examines the pressures facing families that must rely on two incomes. Kennedy's general focus on the significance of everyday moments in characters' lives may also be informed by the rise of social media like Facebook and Twitter in the early 2010s, which allowed any moment in anyone's life to be documented and examined online.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Kennedy's stories are first and foremost concerned with the emotional resonance of ordinary life. She probes moments that audiences might believe to be dull or inconsequential for depth and meaning. Her collection *Dark Roots* is similar to *Like a House on Fire* in that it also features stories about family, marriage, and personal epiphanies. Kennedy has also identified several

acclaimed contemporary short story writers who have had an impact on her work, including George Saunders, Alice Munro, and Jhumpa Lahiri. George Saunders's collection *Tenth of December* and Jhumpa Lahiri's collection *Interpreter of Maladies* are similar to Kennedy's work in their focus on the significance of personal relationships, character studies, and brief moments that are revealed to have extensive symbolic and emotional meaning.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Cake
- **Where Written:** Victoria, Australia
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Realistic Fiction, Short Story
- **Setting:** An Australian suburb and office
- **Climax:** Liz returns home from work and sits down to feed Daniel from a bottle. When his hands move to her shirt, she experiences intense internal conflict, and all of her emotions and exhaustion from her first day back at work seem to descend on her at once. Although she knows it will only make returning to work more difficult, she gives in and breastfeeds.
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

In Real Life. Kennedy was inspired to write *Habit*, her prize-winning short story about a dying woman who attempts to smuggle drugs into the country, while working for the Australian Customs Service.



PLOT SUMMARY

Liz is a new mother starting her first day back at work after maternity leave. She drops her son, Daniel, off at the daycare center Kidz Rezort and experiences intense anxiety and guilt for "abandoning" him there. When she gets to her desk at work, she is struck by how little the office has changed in her absence, and the only hint of passing time is the different date on the calendar. Her coworkers Caroline, Stella, and Julie welcome her back by asking questions about the baby and sharing their own maternity leave experiences, which Tim and Dave react to with disdain. The women experienced intense boredom while staying home and expect Liz to share similar horror stories of monotony and midnight feeding. Liz, on the other hand, points out that she actually enjoyed staying home and feels unable to relate to them.

Liz reads an informational pamphlet for new mothers about returning to work that emphasizes the relief most women feel when they leave home and return to work again, but Liz feels anxious and miserable. She calls Kidz Rezort to check on Daniel, only to be informed by the attendant that her 18-month-old son is riding a tricycle, and it becomes obvious that the attendant is not even watching him. Julie then asks Liz if she can contribute three dollars to a morning tea celebration, where there will be **cake** to celebrate a birthday and Liz's return to work. Liz takes a **five dollar note** out of her bag and glimpses a photo of Daniel in the process. She also finds a note that she left to her replacement emphasizing the importance of copies and invoices, which makes her realize how meaningless she finds her work.

Later that day, Caroline, Stella, and Julie take Liz out for lunch and cake at an Italian restaurant, where Liz notices the **lasagna** is store-bought. The women ask Liz if Daniel is doing anything cute these days, and when she tries to imitate him she sees that she is not entertaining her peers. She becomes angry when the women start discussing the importance of early weaning. Later, Liz becomes emotional when her boss, Frank, asks her how she feels about an upcoming meeting, and she mistakes his question for one about leaving Daniel at childcare.

Embarrassed, Liz counts the moments until she can leave work and pick up her son.

That night, when Liz arrives home and tells her husband, Andrew, how difficult her day was, he responds unsympathetically and reminds her that she wanted to go back to work so that they could pay off their mortgage. He also presents her with cake he bought to celebrate her first day back. Liz takes Daniel into the bedroom and takes off her work clothes to begin feeding him with a bottle. He motions towards her chest and she is overcome with guilt and exhaustion. She finally begins to feel better about her day when she gives in and breastfeeds him. When he is asleep, she takes off her watch and decides to look at the mortgage again to see if there is any way she can continue to stay home.

Throughout her workday, Liz is aggravated by the constant presence of **cake**. The dessert reminds her that everyone expects her to celebrate her return to "the world of the living," which only makes her feel guiltier. Liz does not have a particularly close relationship with her husband, Andrew, who is unsympathetic when she tells him how much she hated going back to work—he is far more focused on the fact that they need two incomes in order to pay off the mortgage. Liz only experiences a sense of peace at the end of the story, when she reunites with her son and breastfeeds him.

Daniel – Liz's son. Daniel is 18 months old when Liz drops him off at childcare for the first time. He is a calm baby and doesn't appear to be fussy or unhappy, despite his mother's worries. He was weaned before she returned to work but still wants to breastfeed, which makes her feel intensely guilty—society tells Liz that she needs to wean Daniel so that she can live a more independent life, but *both* Daniel and Liz want to keep breastfeeding. Liz's desire for physical contact with Daniel and her desire to stay home with him rather than return to work makes her feel "too needy" and contributes to most of her unhappiness throughout the story.

Julie, Stella, and Caroline – Liz's female coworkers. They attempt to be supportive when she returns to the office after her maternity leave but ultimately project their own experiences onto her instead of listening. They each reminisce about the boredom of being a stay-at-home mother and think Liz must have been "counting the days" until she could come back to the office. Liz senses "some alliance wavers and falls" when she admits that she actually enjoyed staying at home and they can't relate to her experiences. They also take Liz out to lunch and ask her questions about Daniel, but appear uninterested in her imitation of him and then move on to discussing the importance of weaning. One of the women makes a comment about how children "can't be dictating everything," which angers Liz. Their attitudes make Liz feel alienated and out of place, lacking a support network.

Frank – Liz's boss. In the morning, he reminds her of a meeting they have to attend and says, "See, got to crack the whip now. Got to get you back into gear again." Frank is not a bad person, but his words highlight Liz's discomfort with being back in the office. Knowing the adjusting to coming back to work must be difficult for Liz, he attempts to be supportive and makes a sympathetic comment about the difficulty of going into a meeting. However, Liz mistakes it for a comment about the difficulties of leaving a child at childcare. She becomes very emotional thinking about abandoning Daniel and is embarrassed when Frank clarifies he was talking about work, not her son. Frank means well but is clueless about how Liz is actually feeling, and their exchange emphasizes her profound sense of alienation.

Tim and Dave – Liz's male coworkers. They exchange looks of disdain when she returns and talks incessantly about Daniel



CHARACTERS

Liz – The protagonist of the story, Liz is a new mother who returns to work at her office 18 months after giving birth to her son, Daniel. She feels extremely anxious and guilty about leaving him at daycare and feels out of place when she goes back to work. Liz does not find her job particularly meaningful and is stressed by the meaningless tasks and awkward social interactions it entails. She cannot relate to the other women in her office, who wanted nothing more than to return to work after having children, and the men view her emotions with a combination of confusion and disdain. She is so anxious that she calls the daycare center, Kidz Rezort, to check up on her son, and has to sternly remind herself not to call a second time.

with her female coworkers, Julie, Stella, and Caroline. Tim has a jar of gourmet herbal teas in the office kitchen, and watching him drink reminds Liz how little has changed since she left on maternity leave, making her workplace seem dull and stagnant. The two men make Liz painfully aware of her isolation at work and the monotony of her job.

Andrew – Liz's husband and Daniel's father. He has a “soft, slumped,” look from all the hours he spends commuting and working, and his appearance reminds readers of the physical toll of modern capitalism on workers. Liz marvels at how little emotion he displays when greeting Daniel in the evening—unlike Liz, Andrew is used to leaving Daniel every day to go to work. He is also not very supportive or sympathetic towards his wife. When Liz complains about how miserable she felt at work, he reminds her that she “chose” to return and that they are “locked into” their mortgage. “You think I love every minute of my job?” he asks bitterly. He also mentions that he picked up **cake** to celebrate Liz's first day back, a celebration that Liz feels she has been pressured into having, making her feel even more trapped and exhausted in her role as a working mother.



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.



GUILT

In Cate Kennedy's short story “Cake,” Liz is a new mother struggling to adjust to leaving her 18-month-old son, Daniel, at daycare and going back to work. She experiences intense, all-consuming guilt when she drops Daniel off at daycare and her feelings of inadequacy shape the entire day, from her interactions with coworkers to a conversation with her husband about finances when she finally returns home. No matter what Liz does, she is plagued by uncertainty about her decisions as a mother. Her desperation for more time with her son constantly conflicts with the messages she receives from her husband, her coworkers, and an informational pamphlet for new mothers, all emphasizing how much she should want to go back to work. Her guilt illustrates how financial and societal pressures force mothers to make decisions that may conflict with their true desires and needs, which inevitably results in a sense of failure.

Liz's feelings of guilt are most pronounced at the beginning of the story, when she drops Daniel off at the daycare center, Kidz Rezort. Her strong urge to run back inside and take him home lays the foundation for the clash between her decision to go

back to work and her need to spend more time with her child. Her sense of uncertainty is highlighted by her frequent self-questioning. “Nobody looks guilty, do they?” she thinks about the other parents outside the daycare center, wondering if anyone else is “eating themselves alive,” like she is. Later, contemplating the eight hours that Daniel will spend at the facility, she worries, “That's a long time for a baby. Isn't it?” She becomes even more miserable as she imagines the charges of Kidz Rezort to be “bereft” without their parents and her own son to be “miserable and bewildered” when she leaves. She believes she has “abandoned him to a room of rampaging strangers,” and that she is a neglectful mother. Later, when she caves to her anxiety and calls the daycare center to check on Daniel, she alternates between feeling embarrassed for calling in the first place and wanting to call a second time. She tries to convince herself that she is being unreasonable by repeatedly pressing the delete key on her computer as she works, as if this can somehow erase her fretful actions and thoughts. In addition to feeling guilty about leaving Daniel, she feels guilty about feeling guilt in the first place.

Liz also feels as though she is failing to socialize appropriately when she returns to the office, adding another layer to her guilt. When her female coworkers Julie, Stella, and Caroline share their memories of relief at returning to the workplace after the monotony of staying at home during maternity leave, Liz says that she actually enjoyed the experience—and then instantly feels she has let her coworkers down when she senses “that this is not the answer they wanted.” Later, when her coworkers take her out for lunch to celebrate her return, Liz reenacts Daniel's response to the song “If You're Happy And You Know It.” She sings for too long and notices her coworkers' awkward expressions “get a little stiff.” She realizes that she has disappointed them and likens her performance to that of a lackluster comedian whom “they expected to be entertained by, who doesn't actually have any new material at all.” Her embarrassment at the thought of being a social disappointment when she doesn't want to be back at work in the first place compounds her guilt about Daniel, exacerbating her feeling of failure as a mother.

Kennedy also uses the fraught act of breastfeeding to highlight the conflict between Liz's desires to maintain this connection with her son and the external pressures she faces to wean him so that she can go back to work. When her colleagues discuss how early they weaned their children in order to return to work, Liz can't help but feel a fresh wave of guilt when she thinks about how Daniel has been “looking at her and the bottle in her hand with a baffled uncertainty that stabs at her heart.” When she returns home at the end of the day and Daniel grasps for her shirt, she feels as though something is “tearing inside her, slowly and deliberately, like a perforated seam.” This tearing refers to the incompatibility of her desire to connect with her child and the necessity of weaning him so that she can

return to work; she can either bottle feed him and feel like an inadequate mother, or she can breastfeed him and feel like she has failed to commit to her work. She can't escape the knowledge that "giving in will only make things worse tomorrow," when she gives in and breastfeeds him.

The conflict between Liz's return to work and her overwhelming urge to stay home fuels her sense that she's "too needy." While her husband, Andrew, refers to her "decision" to return to work, Liz's compounding sense of guilt and inner conflict reveals that she has acted out of obligation, not desire. Just as Liz's coworkers don't want to be forced to stay at home, Liz does not want to be forced to go back to work. With this, Kennedy makes the reader question the validity of holding mothers to a single standard of living that involves both work and childcare.

CAPITALISM



Most of Liz's difficulties in "Cake" stem from the mechanisms of capitalism. She and her husband, Andrew, are "locked into" a mortgage that requires two incomes to pay off, and even though Liz's work is necessary in this respect, she finds the actual content of her work menial and pointless. Her dependence on the salary provided by her dull 9-to-5 office job forces her to endure tedious, repetitive work and separate from her child before she feels ready. Kennedy uses Liz's despair surrounding work and finances to showcase the toll modern capitalism takes on families, especially working mothers.

After struggling with the sadness of dropping off her son, Daniel, at daycare, Liz drives to her workplace, where her first impression is of stagnation. The office appears unchanged from when she took maternity leave, and "only the calendar has been changed." She finds the note she left her replacement, rife with underlined reminders about copies and spreadsheets, and is struck by the meaninglessness of it. "As if it meant something, as if things would all fly apart without her, as if anyone would give a flying toss," she thinks bitterly. As Liz goes through her day, she experiences "the endless clock-watching dreariness of it." When she feels overwhelmed by boredom and longing for her son, she reminds herself "The salary. Eyes on the salary." Kennedy draws the reader's attention to the monotony of office work by juxtaposing Liz's boredom and stress with the cheerful informational pamphlet's assurance that a return to work, "where your expertise and skills are valued," is a relief after staying home. For Liz, however, the financial obligation to return to meaningless tasks when she would rather be at home raising her son is the opposite of relief—it is a source of immense unhappiness.

Even though Liz returns to work for the sake of earning money, her return ends up costing her in more ways than one. "Can you put in three dollars? For the morning tea," Liz's coworker asks her. In addition to contributing her labor and time to her office,

Liz is also expected to contribute actual money to social activities she feels no enthusiasm for. When she reaches to remove a **five-dollar note** from her wallet, she notices a picture of Daniel and is reminded of the time she is spending away from him. Kennedy uses the juxtaposition of the picture of Liz's son and the money she is paying for a work-related event to illustrate that capitalism has both an emotional and financial cost.

The difficulties of capitalism, the necessity of work and the implications of home ownership also impact Liz's relationship with her husband. When Liz returns home from her stressful day and tells her husband of her struggles, he doesn't sympathize. Instead, he reminds her of the necessity of her income by emphasizing that they're stuck in this situation because of their finances. Kennedy reveals that prior to Liz's return to work, she and her husband spent a great deal of time conducting a "grim assessment of their down-to-the-wire mortgage." Liz experiences a strong sense of hopelessness as she reminds herself, "She's going to have to do this every day, so she'd better pull herself together right now." She also notices that her unsympathetic husband's job seems to have had a physical effect on him. He is someone "on a peak-hour commuter train, unfit and round-shouldered." This observation characterizes the capitalist cycle of consumerism and work as a kind of trap, one that warps both physical bodies and personal relationships.

Liz's unhappiness with the eight-hour workday and the financial pressures of homeownership put the challenges of working motherhood on display. As Liz struggles to find sympathy for her plight, Kennedy invites readers to speculate on solutions that might offset the personal and financial costs of a capitalist society.

MOTHERHOOD



"Cake" depicts Liz, a new mother, in a difficult transitional stage: leaving her 18-month-old son, Daniel, to re-enter the workforce. Kennedy centers Liz's maternal emotions and her coworkers' experiences as mothers throughout the story. As Liz goes throughout her day, she cycles through intense guilt, anxiety, anger, and joy as a result of her role as a mother. Through Liz's less-than-joyous return to work, Kennedy suggests that while motherhood should perhaps be about solidarity and community, in reality it is usually a lonely, isolating experience.

Liz's fellow working mothers Julie, Stella, and Caroline are eager to hear about her experiences on maternity leave and see pictures of the baby. But while Liz's female coworkers initially seem to offer her a source of solidarity and community, this quickly dissolves. When these women arrive at the subject of returning to work, they do their best to be supportive initially, but they only want to hear stories that validate their own experiences. "When I had Toby, I couldn't wait to get my brain

working again after all those months home bored out of my skull," one comments. Another reminds the younger women that when she had kids, "there wasn't any of this going back to work. You were just stuck there, getting driven up the wall." When Liz does not indulge in maternal horror stories of "midnight feeds and daytime television and projectile vomit," and says meekly that she actually enjoyed staying home, she notices that there is an "alliance that wavers and falls at her words." Rather than allowing her to bond with her coworkers, her attitude towards motherhood sets her apart from them. Returning to work, far from providing her with a sense of community, only makes Liz feel alienated from other women in her position.

The men at Liz's office don't even offer the pretense of solidarity, making her feel even more isolated. While the women crowd around her asking for stories, Liz notices "something pass between Tim and Dave—an eyeroll, a resigned grin. Then the faintest headshake, unmistakable to her. Disdain." Desperate for comfort after lunch, she mistakes her boss's questions about her feelings regarding a business meeting for questions about coping with being a working parent, and feels embarrassed after she responds emotionally about how hard it was to leave Daniel at childcare. Even her husband, Andrew, offers little sympathy, chastising her for complaining about her difficulty adjusting because they agreed she had to work to pay off their mortgage. Liz notices how casually he reacts to seeing Daniel come home from daycare, thinking begrudgingly, "For him, this is normal." Since he is used to leaving the house and returning to Daniel in the evening, he can't relate to her experience of having to leave her child for the first time. The men she interacts with throughout the story react to her experiences of motherhood with disdain, apathy, and judgement, increasing her sense of isolation and incompetence.

Rather than questioning the source of her frustrations, Liz directs her anger and sadness inward. She blames her "baby brain," and surging hormones for the intense emotions. When Julie makes a remark about the importance of weaning and preventing babies from "dictating" one's "own life," Liz's anger quickly morphs into self-loathing. She reminds herself, "No point aiming this seething fury at anybody but yourself" Liz believes a cocktail of maternal hormones and personal weaknesses are to blame for her maladjustment, but in reality she is faced with peers who invalidate her feelings and judge her approach to motherhood. Liz's approach to motherhood brings her both joy and sorrow, creating a close bond with Daniel but driving a wedge between her and other adults, especially other mothers. Her coworkers and husband react to her motherly emotions as if they are a sign of weakness, but it is only when she is able to spend time with her son at the end of the story that she feels a sense of strength. With this, Kennedy suggests that while motherhood can involve a deep, loving

connection with one's child, it can also be a painfully lonely and alienating experience.

EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY



Upon her return to work, Liz's coworkers congratulate her on re-entering the "world of the living," welcoming her with **cake** and their own stories about how they were "counting down the days" to go back to work. But while they see Liz's return as a cause for celebration, Liz is clearly in mourning, devastated about leaving her son at daycare and unexcited about returning to her menial desk job. This tension between expectations and grim reality persists throughout the story, as Liz remembers other experiences that didn't quite go as planned, like a lackluster comedy show she attended once. The constant dissonance in the story between attempted celebration and ultimate disappointment emphasizes the gap between the expectations Liz feels she must live up to and the stark reality she encounters.

The recurring symbol of cake, which gives the story its title, represents failed attempts at celebration and happiness in Liz's work life. When she returns to the office, her coworker notifies her that everyone has decided "to have birthday and welcome-back cakes on the first Wednesday of each month." Liz remembers these cakes from before she left as overly sweet and unappetizing, "cakes that you need to empty the remains of into the desk bin when nobody's watching." At the mediocre Italian restaurant she goes to for lunch, her coworkers' mentioning cake on the dessert menu makes Liz think, "If anyone mentions fucking cake again today I'm going to burst a blood vessel." Finally, Liz's husband, Andrew, gives her cake when she comes home as a surprise "to celebrate [her] first day back," after reminding her that she has no choice but to go to work. The presence of cake is linked to the false nature of these celebrations, which don't actually bring Liz any joy.

Another failed attempt at celebration occurs when Liz's coworkers take her out to lunch at an Italian restaurant. Liz takes a bite of **lasagna** and immediately recognizes that it is store-bought rather than homemade due to the amount of times she has eaten it at home on a tight budget, thinking, "those cheats." Liz is uncomfortable throughout the meal and feels as though she must entertain the other women with stories about Daniel. Ultimately, she feels like a comedian who she bought tickets to see live with her friends even though "his stage act was almost identical to what they'd already seen him do on TV." For Liz, lunch is riddled with awkwardness and disappointment, which is exacerbated by the fact that it is supposed to be celebratory and fun.

Everyone Liz interacts with throughout the story expects her to be happy to be back at work, when in reality she is miserable and wants to be with her child. The informational pamphlet that she reads in order to prepare herself to return to work does

not speak to her experiences at all. The pamphlet states that staying at home with children is difficult for women “who have experienced the challenges of a satisfying job and the stimulation of daily adult conversation.” Liz, however, does not have a satisfying job—she finds her work meaningless and repetitive—and truly enjoyed staying at home during maternity leave. She also feels alienated from her unsympathetic coworkers. “How could she have forgotten this need for constant, ridiculous, social smiling?” she thinks after a particularly awkward interaction. Liz also notes that the model on the cover of the pamphlet has “no bra-strap showing through her shirt, no midriff bulge. Shiny hair,” sending the message that returning to work after maternity leave is easy and effortless, as if a woman could simply pick back up all of the pieces of her life—including her pre-pregnancy body—that got pushed aside for the baby. Liz, by contrast, struggles to fit into her pre-baby clothes and to find motivation in her job again. Liz feels so frustrated and angry about her experiences by the end of the day that she fumes “she’s been taken in by a stupid pamphlet.” This feeling of being fooled by the unrealistic expectations from the pamphlet mirrors her experience of feeling “cheated” at the restaurant.

Even though Liz receives the message from all sides that she should celebrate the end of her maternity leave and her reintroduction into the work world, everything about her return—from coworkers’ smiles to her lasagna noodles—seems fake and dishonest. Ultimately, Liz would rather be at home with her son than eating the sickly sweet cake her peers keep pressing on her. This gap between the expectations and reality of returning to work as a mother makes Liz feel anxious and frustrated, and she longs to approach motherhood in a way that feels more authentic to her, even if it goes against the grain of what society says she *should* want. With this, Kennedy suggests that motherhood often resists expectations and looks different in practice than one might expect.



SYMBOLS

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



CAKE

In the story, cake appears throughout Liz’s first day back at work as a symbol of celebration that she does not want to be participating in—to her, returning to work and leaving her son at daycare is a miserable experience, not a joyous occasion. Cake first appears in the story when Liz remembers the ubiquity of store-bought cakes at office celebrations, cakes she doesn’t enjoy and must empty into the garbage “when nobody’s looking.” It also appears as dessert on the menu of the mediocre Italian restaurant Liz goes to for

lunch with her coworkers. Liz is angered by the women’s conversation about the importance of weaning children so they don’t “dictate” their mother’s lives, when Liz has been perfectly happy breastfeeding and centering her days around her son. This anger bubbles up during dessert, and she feels as though she’s going to “burst a blood vessel” if anyone mentions cake again. At the end of the day, she has a dispiriting conversation with Andrew about their mortgage and he presents her with a paper bag—he bought cake to celebrate her first day back. The constant appearance of cake echoes the constant pressures Liz confronts as people tell her how she should feel and behave. Society dictates that she should be celebrating her return to work, when in reality she does not enjoy her job and would rather be spending time with her son.



FIVE-DOLLAR NOTE

The five-dollar note that Liz takes out of her purse symbolizes the towering costs of capitalism. When Liz is asked to contribute money to the office morning tea, a celebration of important occasions like birthdays and returns from maternity leave, she takes a five-dollar note from her wallet and tries not to look at the photograph of Daniel, with his “smile like a booby trap.” The proximity of the money and the picture symbolizes the personal and financial costs of capitalism—Liz is contributing her own money to a work event and is sacrificing time she could be spending with her child in the process.



LASAGNA

The lasagna Liz eats for lunch represents her feelings of being deceived into thinking going back to work was a good decision. Julie, Stella, and Caroline take her out to lunch at an Italian restaurant to celebrate her return to the office after her maternity leave. When her food arrives, Liz takes a bite and thinks “Those cheats,” because she recognizes the store-bought brand of pasta from all the times she has eaten it on a budget at home. The feeling of being cheated or duped applies to her entire day—while her coworkers, husband, and informational pamphlet assure her that going back to work will be a relief after staying at home, Liz does not enjoy the experience at all and feels like she has been swindled by the messages of the people around her.



QUOTES

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

Cake Quotes

“ Nobody looks guilty, do they? Nobody else is eating themselves alive like this, trying not to run to that childproof gate and tear back in there, scoop up their kid from the floor of the Tadpole Room and run screaming out of the place.

Related Characters: Liz

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Liz feels wracked with guilt over leaving her 18-month-old son at childcare while she goes back to work for the first time since taking maternity leave. In addition to feeling miserable about this prospect, she feels isolated because she appears to be the only one of the working parents in the vicinity struggling to contain her intense emotions—or even experiencing negative emotions at all. Not only are the other mothers not running and screaming, they don't seem to be bothered at all by dropping their kids off at daycare. The self-questioning in the narration reveals that Liz is not sure whether she has made the right decision to go back to work, and her uncertainty shapes her view of the world around her. It also indicates that she is aware of the societal expectation that mothers make a seamless transition from maternity leave to a re-entry into the workforce, even though this may not feel realistic for her.

Liz's misery and anxiety sets the stage for Kennedy's commentary about the problems with a one-size-fits-all approach to motherhood, one that centers balancing work and family even if a woman wants to spend more time at home—or, like Liz's coworkers, would rather be the picture of the working woman rather than a stay-at-home mom. The focus on the daycare and Liz's guilt at “abandoning” her child there also challenges audiences to think of a solution to Liz's plight, perhaps creating childcare facilities in offices or just closer to workplaces.

“ And he's in there, alone, where she's left him. Abandoned him to a roomful of rampaging strangers: big, chunky, runny-nose buzz-cut boys in miniature camouflage gear, already seasoned commanders of the play equipment and the puzzles.

Related Characters: Daniel, Liz

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Liz's imagination goes wild before she drives to work as she anticipates the threats to her young son in the daycare center. Picturing the other children as “seasoned commanders” of anything is far-fetched, but the exaggerations Liz conjures indicate real anxieties about the time she is spending away from her child. The aggressive charges of Kidz Rezort are a manifestation of other concerns—is she spending too much time away from her son? Will he adjust? How will she function at work if she doesn't know how he is doing after 18 months of staying home with him?

Her idea of a ruthlessly competitive daycare environment (she later compares it to “guerilla warfare”) can also be compared to a capitalist society, where workers must struggle with each other for survival. Her lack of excitement about returning to work suggests she is not passionate about her job and only returned because of the salary it provides. As a worker, Liz occupies a high-pressure environment of her own, one that she projects onto Kidz Rezort.

“ Another set of glass doors: her own boundary gates this time, back at her old office, still with the two dusty ficus trees in the foyer, unchanged; perhaps they're plastic, she's never noticed before. Her work colleagues all at the same desks, Stella at the front reception, same smell of cardboard and carpet vacuum powder; only the calendar has been changed.

Related Characters: Julie, Stella, and Caroline, Tim and Dave, Liz

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Liz walks back into her workplace for the first time since she left on maternity leave. Liz's mention of “her own boundary gates” in her office highlight her earlier projections of the competition and unhappiness she faces in her work environment onto Daniel's daycare facility. She becomes disoriented when she enters her office again due to a combination of readjustment and eerie stagnation. While the surroundings are familiar, she has not been back

for a long time, and she notices things that didn't register before maternity leave. The potted plants have collected dust, so it occurs to her for the first time that they may actually be artificial. This observation makes the reader question what else she hadn't noticed before she left work, and what might become apparent now that she has returned with fresh eyes. The overall lack of change in the office suggests that the environment is one of tedium and monotony, and the setting feels unnatural and constructed. Liz still does not indicate any positive emotions towards coming back to the office, and Kennedy's use of oppressive imagery reflects this.

 'I mean,' she fumbles, feeling her face flush, 'I'm very glad to be back, of course, but I actually *like* staying home. I've liked it, I mean.' She senses, as they nod and smile, that this is not the answer they want.

Related Characters: Liz (speaker), Julie, Stella, and Caroline, Tim and Dave

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

When Liz's female coworkers swap stories about how excited they were to return to work after maternity leave and how much they disliked staying home, Liz bravely ventures that she enjoyed the experience immensely, and an awkward silence falls over the women. Throughout the story, Liz's interactions with her coworkers are awkward and forced. Julie, Stella, and Caroline do their best to welcome her back by enthusiastically asking to see pictures of Daniel, but they are not empathetic when she reveals that she enjoyed being a stay-at-home mother. The other women all agree that they couldn't wait to come back to work due to the "monotony" of staying home with their children, and they expect Liz to feel the same way. Now, in addition to her guilt at leaving Daniel at daycare, Liz feels alienated when she is once again reminded that her peers don't relate to her feelings towards motherhood.

Kennedy is not attempting to discredit either side's views; instead, she is merely pointing out that each woman's feelings are valid and deserving of support, including Liz's. At the time of writing, new maternity leave policies in Australia were designed to encourage women to work and raise families, but these did not account for women like Liz who wanted to continue being stay-at-home mothers.

 These are the cakes that have marked each office birthday and celebration, cakes that leave a fur of sugar on your teeth and a pile of brightly colored crumbs, cakes you need to empty the remains of into your desk bin when nobody's looking.

Related Characters: Liz

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

After Liz's awkward conversation with her coworkers about enjoying being a stay-at-home mother during maternity leave, she anticipates the morning tea that will celebrate her return to the office. Up until now, every major occasion at work has been marked by serving a sickly sweet cake. This cake is a symbol of the artificiality that Liz loathes in her office—it's imbued in everything, from the plants to the overly cheerful social interactions that involve constant smiling.

Cake is also a reminder of the constant pressure to celebrate and participate in rituals that seem meaningless to her, including birthday parties and her own welcome-back celebration. In the story, cake emphasizes the societal expectations that Liz's coworkers harbor that she must be thrilled to return to her job, eager to pursue a version of motherhood that involves working while someone else takes care of her child during the day. Liz hates both the artificial taste and the expectation to celebrate when she feels guilty, anxious, and unhappy—it reminds her that she is failing to meet the expectations of the people around her.

 Being a stay-at-home mum can begin to seem mundane and repetitive to many women who have experienced the challenges of a satisfying job and the stimulation of daily adult conversation, it begins.

Related Characters: Liz

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

This is a passage from the informational pamphlet Liz consults for advice about re-entering the workforce as a

new mother. She takes it out after she anxiously calls Kidz Rezort for an update on Daniel and the staff responds with an obvious lie about him riding a scooter (Daniel is only 18 months old and can't even balance on a tricycle yet, so Liz knows the staff member is referring to a different child). Unfortunately, the pamphlet makes the same assumptions as Liz's coworkers do—that she must be happy to be back at work after going months without the “challenges” of work and adult contact.

The passage fails to address the paralyzing guilt and painful isolation Liz experiences during her first day back at work, effectively making her feel more guilty and isolated because it invalidates these emotions. Once again, Kennedy calls attention to the failures of one-size-fits-all motherhood that emphasizes work rather than considering the possibility that some women might prefer to stay at home. It also suggests that Liz may need a more meaningful job in order to combat her negative feelings about returning to work.

“ Liz fishes out her wallet and finds a five-dollar note, snaps it shut before she has to look at the photo of Daniel tucked in there. His shy smile like a boobytrap. He'd have his thumb in his mouth right now. Not smiling, that's for sure.

Related Characters: Julie, Stella, and Caroline, Daniel, Liz

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

When Liz's coworker Julie asks her to contribute three dollars for the morning tea to celebrate her arrival back at work and Dave's birthday, Liz does not want to participate in the celebration but feels she must comply due to peer pressure, and thus hands over five dollars. This exchange illustrates how, although she is only back at work to earn her salary and pay off her mortgage, her job exacts a toll from her in the form of time lost with Daniel and the actual money she is expected to contribute to office events.

The juxtaposition of the money with Daniel's photo symbolizes the various sacrifices workers make for their jobs, such as losing time with family, even as they are encouraged to believe work provides the same level of emotional fulfillment. Her assumption that Daniel isn't smiling at this moment is not a guess based in

reality—although it is possible he is also having difficulty adjusting to his new surroundings—so much as a projection of her own mood, which is still guilty and anxious.

“ And those conscientious exclamation marks, as if it all urgently mattered. As if it meant something, as if things would fall apart without her, as if anybody could give a flying toss.

Related Characters: Liz

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

Liz finds the handwritten note she left to her replacement during the final days of her pregnancy and is struck by how her perspective on her job has changed since then. Her use of underlines and exclamation points for emphasis on the sentences about spreadsheets and invoices suggest that she did find her work at least somewhat meaningful and important before giving birth. Maybe the work was not terribly exciting, but it gave her a sense of purpose to do things correctly, and so she wanted her replacement to do things the right way, too. However, similarly to her recent awareness of the artificial plants, Liz now views her job as stagnant and meaningless.

Liz's realization that everything has stayed the same without her makes her question the value of her work as well as the whole idea of returning to the office in the first place. This moment debunks the pamphlet's confident claims about the rewards and challenges of work for mothers finishing maternity leave—many women do find great value and meaning in their work, but the note only intensifies Liz's impressions of monotony.

“ Liz concentrates on swallowing the claggy paste of cheese and pasta in her mouth. God in heaven, she thinks, forcing it down, if anyone else mentions fucking cake again today I'm going to burst a blood vessel.

Related Characters: Julie, Stella, and Caroline, Liz

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

Although Julie, Stella, and Caroline take Liz out for lunch in an attempt to be “sisterly” and support her re-entry into the office, the meal is awkward because Liz can’t relate to her peer’s feelings towards motherhood, and vice-versa. When the conversation turns to weaning and breastfeeding, the women make judgmental remarks about how long Liz chose to breastfeed Daniel, whereas they felt it was better to stop sooner than later. Liz becomes angry when they mention ordering cake for dessert because it reminds her that they feel like returning to work should be celebrated, while she feels guilty and unfulfilled back in the workplace and misses her son dearly.

Liz’s focus on swallowing her food also represents her attempts to bottle her emotions at work. She feels she must constantly suppress her real feelings throughout the day because no one else can relate to them, nor does anyone express the faintest glimmer of sympathy for them. Her angry reaction to the mention of cake is a result of her frustration with the fake cheerful social interactions, the constant emphasis on celebration, and the pressure to conform to a version of motherhood that doesn’t feel right to her.

“That’s what I mean. Having to walk into a room full of pretty competitive strangers, all with their own agendas. That’s a bit of a tough gauntlet to run, doing it cold like that, getting thrown into the mix.”

Related Characters: Frank (speaker), Liz

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Liz’s boss, Frank, asks her how she is feeling before they attend their big afternoon meeting. Liz recalls that Frank has children and thus thinks he is referring to her experience leaving Daniel at Kidz Rezort for the day. Frank’s mention of “competitive strangers” sounds similar to Liz’s fears about bullies in Daniel’s daycare, decked out in camouflage and prepared for “guerilla warfare.” Just as she projects her anxiety about work onto the daycare facility in the beginning of the story when she imagines children as “seasoned commanders” with “buzz cuts,” Liz now projects

her anxiety about the daycare facility onto her work environment. She mistakes Frank’s question about the meeting for a question about Daniel, and when he clarifies what he was truly talking about—the important meeting they’re en route to—she becomes intensely embarrassed. She is unable to focus on the meeting afterward because she is so aware of her emotions. Her mistake reveals her desperation for sympathy towards her experience, which she has not encountered in any of her coworkers thus far.

“The day yawning ahead with tiny variations, the endless clock-watching dreariness of it. The salary. Eyes on the salary.”

Related Characters: Liz

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Liz’s afternoon passes excruciatingly slowly—she is not engaged in her tasks or paying particularly close attention to her work. She is also bewildered by her coworkers, who seem to move through the day without the urgency she feels. The mention of the clock brings attention to how Liz’s life is now beholden to the rigid structure of the work day and the sharp division between her personal and professional life, which she did not have to be concerned about when she was staying at home. While Julie, Stella, and Caroline felt stifled by staying at home, Liz realizes that being at home meant she was free from the “clock-watching dreariness” that now governs her days. Although everyone around her has been offering their own explanations for why she has returned to her job, it is now explicitly clear to the audience just what her motivation is: the repetition of the word “salary” emphasizes that Liz is only at the office enduring conditions that make her unhappy because of the financial incentive.

“We agreed it was always only going to be a temporary thing, you staying home,’ he goes on in a low, reasonable voice, his back still to her. ‘Because, you know, we’re locked into this.’

Related Characters: Andrew (speaker), Liz

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

After work, when her husband Andrew asks how her day went, Liz admits that she was miserable. As this passage shows, Andrew immediately reminds her that she “wanted” to go back to work and they had previously agreed on a financial plan. He tries to convince her that this is her “choice” even as his comments about the mortgage make it clear that she does not have an alternative based on their previous discussions.

Rather than offering support, Andrew behaves like Liz’s coworkers—projecting their ideas of what she *should* want rather than listening to how she actually feels. He presents one more set of expectations Liz feels unable to meet, which makes her feel discouraged. Liz also notices how his job has impacted him physically, noting that he is unfit and slouching from commuting and sitting at a desk all day. With this, Kennedy paints a dreary picture of the 9-to-5 grind, suggesting that Liz and her husband are trapped in a capitalistic world that forces them to work long hours at unfulfilling jobs just to make it by.

Related Characters: Daniel, Liz

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

When Liz goes to the bedroom to feed Daniel his bottle, he starts reaching for her chest, indicating he wants to breastfeed. Kennedy’s use of the word “tearing” to describe Liz’s response illustrates the divide between societal expectations that Liz feels she must conform to and her own desires. The sensation is the culmination of a day’s worth of interactions that invalidate her emotions and make her feel as though she is constantly doing something wrong, both due to her own guilt and the opinions of people around her.

There is also a dissonance between what she thinks—“admonishing” herself because she knows giving in will make returning to work more difficult—and what her hands do, seemingly of their own accord. The fact that Liz breastfeeds even though she knows it will make her life more difficult if she continues working suggests that this is truly her choice, and this is the point in the story where she exercises the most agency and feels most natural and right as a mother.

Something is tearing inside her, slowly and deliberately, like a perforated seam. And even as she’s admonishing herself that giving in will only make things worse tomorrow, her hands are functioning outside her own volition again, unbuttoning her shirt.



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.

CAKE

Outside of Kidz Rezort, Liz tries to force herself to drive away, but she can't work up the nerve to do so. She thinks critically of the spelling of the daycare center's name—"that voluntary illiteracy"—and watches as other mothers act totally unaffected by dropping their children off at daycare. These mothers are either chatting easily amongst themselves or glued to their cell phones, ready to handle the next thing on their to-do lists. None of these mothers look "guilty," and certainly none of them are "eating themselves alive" the way Liz is, fighting the urge to run back into the daycare center and take her child right back home.

Liz's concerns about her child's well-being at Kidz Rezort and her overwhelming sense of guilt suggest that she is not ready to be away from him. There is no sense of excitement about the day ahead, only hand-wringing about leaving her child and bewilderment that the staff and other working parents don't appear to share her anxiety and grief. In fact, the playful spelling of the daycare center's name coupled with the casual attitudes of the other mothers only heighten Liz's anxiety and make her feel disconnected from other mothers. Rather than feeling a sense of solidarity with her fellow working parents, she feels isolated and out of place. Liz is not mentally prepared to handle the day ahead.



Liz imagines what would happen if she did run back into the daycare center to rescue Daniel: she'd burst through the soundproof doors of the "under-twentos room"—doors that are meant to muffle the screams of distraught toddlers crying out desperately for their parents. Her son would be crouched in a corner, face flushed from crying and clutching a plastic toy. She imagines Daniel being surrounded by "big, chunky, runny-nosed buzz-cut boys in miniature camouflage gear, already seasoned commanders of the play equipment and the puzzles." Even the jungle gym is "guerilla warfare."

Liz's overactive imagination about the conditions in the daycare stem from her own guilt and aren't realistic fears. The misery she conjures in the building is a projection of the feeling that she has "abandoned" her son. She also feels guilty and embarrassed about her desire to run back inside to rescue him, which only adds to her misery.



Liz feels like she should be prepared for this moment—Daniel's name has been on this daycare center's waitlist for months, and he's already gone through the three "accompanied play" sessions to acclimate him to the new environment. And yet, Liz still struggles to leave him behind for her first day back at work. She thinks that leaving Daniel behind for eight hours is a "long time" for a boy of only 18 months.

Liz feels as though she has already failed to meet expectations of a perfect working mother—although she has been preparing for months, she still feels overwhelmed at the prospect of leaving Daniel behind while she goes to work. She questions her negative feelings but also questions her decision to leave him, thinking that it is too long for him to go without her.



Liz arrives at her office and notices how little has changed since she went on maternity leave. The plants are so unchanged she wonders whether they're made of plastic, and the space still smells of "cardboard and carpet vacuum powder." Her coworkers welcome her back to "the land of the living." Liz's female coworkers, Julie, Stella, and Caroline, ask all about Daniel. Liz shows them pictures of him on the swing and at his swim class, which makes them gush about how cute he is. Nearby, Tim and Dave exchange looks of "Disdain." Liz's female coworkers swap stories about how they all couldn't wait to return to work after having children, but Liz awkwardly admits that she was happy staying at home. She immediately senses that this wasn't what the women wanted to hear.

Everyone returns to their desks, and Liz anticipates the **cake** that will be served at the morning tea. Before she went on maternity leave, sickly sweet store-bought cake was used to mark all kinds of celebrations in the office. She disliked the "fur of sugar" they left on her teeth and would always throw them away when no one was looking. Later that morning, Liz's coworkers present her with a card but explain that they are now limiting cake celebrations to once a month. Liz insists they don't need to get her a cake, but they tell her they'll provide one anyway to celebrate Dave's upcoming birthday. Liz's boss, Frank, reminds her about the meeting they have to attend in the afternoon. He jokes that he must "crack the whip" now that she has returned.

Liz calls Kidz Rezort to check on Daniel. A staff member assures her that he is fine and riding a scooter, but Liz knows they are obviously looking at the wrong child because Daniel is only 18 months old and can't even ride a tricycle yet. Frustrated and embarrassed, Liz presses the delete key on her computer over and over again. For comfort, she reads an informational pamphlet about going back to work after having maternity leave. The cover features a young woman who looks happy, fit, and glossy. The pamphlet assures her that most women find returning to work and socializing with other adults to be a relief after the "mundane" time at home with their children.

Liz is asked to contribute money for the celebratory morning tea. She takes a **five-dollar note** out of her purse and tells herself not to look at the photo of Daniel she has in there. She thinks of his smile "like a boobytrap." She is overcome with longing to hold him and feels "unbalanced" without bearing his weight, thinking fondly of all the times he would cling to her leg while she tried to do laundry or cook dinner. She resists the urge to call Kidz Rezort again and continues to press the delete key when she is embarrassed by her thoughts.

The apparent stagnation of the office environment strikes Liz because it does not reflect the immense changes that have taken place in her own life and attitudes since becoming a mother. Her coworkers' reference to the office as "the land of the living," contrasts with Liz's impression of lifelessness and sluggishness. Her peers' response to her stories about her son are highly gendered—the men make it clear that they think her stories are frivolous and the women want to hear stories that speak to their own experiences of motherhood. Liz feels awkward and isolated once again when she realizes she and her coworkers are not meeting each other's expectations for her re-entry into the office.



Liz's associations of office celebrations with unappealing, overly sweet cakes emphasizes the forced nature of these work celebrations, when her enthusiasm (or lack thereof) did not match other people's expectations in the past. Now that she has returned from maternity leave, her attempt to politely refuse cake reveals she feels even less enthusiastic about the prospect of celebrating her return. Julie informs her that there will be a cake regardless of whether she wants one or not because there are multiple celebrations taking place, which pressures Liz into partaking even though she doesn't want to and further strips the celebration of meaning.



Liz's repeated pressing of the delete key after the guilt-ridden call reflects her embarrassment, but it also highlights her regret now that she realizes how much she enjoyed staying at home compared to working. She feels she cannot relate to the pamphlet's depiction of working motherhood and feels it contains unrealistic expectations, both in the physical perfection of the cover model and the idealization of work itself. Her inability to meet yet another set of expectations about working motherhood intensifies her sense of isolation and frustration with herself.



Liz's contribution of the five-dollar note represents the costs of her job. In addition to spending money on an event she does not want to partake in, it brings her attention back to Daniel and the time she is unable to spend with him because of her dependence on her salary. Her sense of being "unbalanced" without Daniel mirrors her general sense of discomfort at being back in the office. This scene illustrates what capitalism costs workers in terms of time, money, and personal relationships.



Liz finds the note that she left to her replacement and recalls the days before she left the office, when she was “breathless and uncomfortable” from pregnancy. The handwritten note stresses the importance of photocopying invoices and formatting spreadsheets. Liz is struck by how meaningless her job feels, although it seemed important before she gave birth. She looks at the informational pamphlet again and finds she cannot relate to the comments about the satisfaction of working. The work has not changed, but her attitude towards her job has.

In the afternoon, Julie, Stella, and Caroline take Liz out to lunch at an Italian restaurant. Liz fights the urge to run over to the daycare center to check on Daniel. When her food arrives, she tries her **lasagna** and feels cheated—it is made with the same cheap, store-bought ingredients she ate so often at home on a budget while she was away from work. During lunch, Liz tries to entertain her coworkers with stories about Daniel’s antics and mimics him reacting to his favorite song, “sticking out her tongue, pointing to the sky.” After a few seconds, she can tell by her coworkers’ expressions that they are disappointed and bored. Liz believes she has disappointed the other women and reminds herself of a lackluster comedian she once went to see with friends.

The conversation turns to breastfeeding. Julie, Stella, and Caroline all agree on the importance of early weaning, because children shouldn’t be “dictating” their mothers’ lives. Liz feels indignant because she has enjoyed breastfeeding for a year and a half. Daniel wants to continue and she doesn’t feel as if he has been “dictating” anything. She becomes angry when her coworkers begin to discuss ordering the **cake** on the dessert menu, fuming privately, “if anyone else mentions fucking cake today I’m going to burst a blood vessel.” She directs her negative emotions towards herself, thinking furiously, “Put your phone with its two hundred pictures away, back in your ridiculous cavernous mummy-bag, and agree to orange poppyseed.”

Liz’s discovery of the note she left her replacement further emphasizes how dramatically she has changed in the last several months even as the surroundings of the office stayed the same. Work now seems like a series of redundant and mundane tasks. Motherhood has altered her priorities and sense of purpose, which she now derives mainly from her son instead of her job.



Liz wants to contact Kidz Rezort again out of guilt but also because she craves an escape from social interaction with Julie, Stella, and Caroline, which once again highlights how out of place she feels now that she’s back in the fold of her workplace. The meal is a series of letdowns—first she recognizes the lasagna is made from cheap, store-brand ingredients and feels duped. Then, she feels that she is herself a disappointment when her imitation of Daniel fails to entertain Julie, Stella, and Caroline. The lasagna represents Liz’s frustration at being pressured to pursue a version of motherhood that doesn’t feel right to her, and her failure to meet her peers’ expectations of entertainment makes her feel even more isolated.



Breastfeeding is a notoriously fraught subject among mothers, especially those who work. Julie, Stella, and Caroline all felt limited and trapped by the initial need to breastfeed, but they fail to consider that Liz may feel differently. Liz cherishes the connection that breastfeeding fosters between her and Daniel and had no desire to give it up other than financial pressure to return to work. When her coworkers start discussing having cake for dessert, Liz is reminded again of the pressure to celebrate things—work, weaning, leaving Daniel at childcare—that actually make her miserable. Her angry inner dialogue reveals that she blames herself for harboring these feelings rather than considering the aspects of her environment that make her unhappy.



Later that day, Liz heads to an important meeting and her boss, Frank, asks her if she is feeling well about the “hard adjustment” of entering a room full of “competitive strangers.” Liz assumes he’s referring to leaving her son at childcare and returning to work, and she has an emotional outburst about her difficulties, “shoving him in there and expecting him to cope, when he’s just a little baby.” Frank awkwardly explains that he was just asking about her readiness for the meeting. Deeply embarrassed, Liz tries to get through the rest of the day as quickly as possible. She can’t believe how slowly the time passes or how leisurely her coworkers behave, “like they’ve all been drugged.” She stays motivated by reminding herself about the importance of her salary.

At the end of the day, Liz leaves work and picks up Daniel. She talks to him using an “inanely cheerful voice” that seems forced. She feels intensely relieved at their reunion and goes home to her husband, Andrew. She is shocked at “how casually” Andrew interacts with Daniel after being apart from him all day and realizes that he is accustomed to leaving Daniel every day for work. When Andrew asks her about her day, Liz admits that she felt miserable, and he chastises her about how she needs to go to work so that they can pay off their mortgage. She notices the physical impact work and commuting have had on his body, making him appear soft and slumped. He also presents her with **cake** that he bought to celebrate her first day back.

Later, Liz takes Daniel to the bedroom to feed him his bottle, but he reaches for her shirt. She tries to resist but feels overwhelmed by guilt and exhaustion. She experiences a sense of release when she gives in and breastfeeds him, even though she knows it will make returning to work harder in the long run. She imagines taking off the rest of her work clothes and going to look at the mortgage again to see if there is any way for her to continue to stay at home. She has “full command of her hands,” while feeding Daniel and “carefully, expertly” takes off her watch.

Liz’s maternal guilt colors every aspect of her day, preventing her from focusing and engaging with her tasks at work. Even though Frank and some of her other coworkers have children, they do not indicate that they can relate to what she is feeling. Their experiences as parents seem to involve total separation between family and daily work, which Liz is not sure that she can cope with. Her focus on the salary as her sole motivation shows that the financial pressures of capitalism force workers to stay in jobs where they are not happy.



Liz’s altered voice is reminiscent of the overly enthusiastic demeanor she feels expected to adopt at work, and also feels reminiscent of the overly sweet taste of the cakes pressed on her during office celebrations. It is part of the performance she feels pressured to act out, that of the perfectly balanced working mother. She feels pressure from Andrew to be more positive about work as well, since he reacts to her story about her day by immediately reminding her of the importance of her salary rather than empathizing with her pain. Her amazement at the casualness with which he greets Daniel mirrors her amazement at the casualness of the parents dropping off their children at Kidz Rezort earlier in the day. Liz is even more disheartened when he presents her with cake—performative celebration follows her even when she isn’t at the office.



The only time Liz experiences a sense of relief, relaxation, and control during this story is when she breastfeeds Daniel, though it will inevitably interfere with her return to the workforce and disrupt the transition to bottle feeding. She has moved through her day with uncertainty and anxiety, but at this moment she returns to having “full command” and moving “expertly,” highlighting how breastfeeding and being close to her child feels natural to her. Breastfeeding instills a sense of confidence and resolve in her to change her situation, to pursue a version of motherhood that feels right to her even as she must confront the challenges of her financial situation.





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