

# Future Home of the Living God



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LOUISE ERDRICH

The daughter of a Native American mother from the Ojibwe tribe and a German-American father, Louise Erdrich grew up as the oldest of seven children in Little Falls, Minnesota. She and her mother's family are members of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, a recognized tribe of which her maternal grandfather was tribal chairman. Erdrich wrote short stories and poetry from a young age, and in 1976 became among the first women to graduate from Dartmouth College. After completing her B.A. in English, she pursued an M.A. in Creative Writing at Johns Hopkins. There, she wrote many stories that took her indigenous heritage as inspiration. Her first novel, *Love Medicine*, won the National Critics' Book Circle Award in 1984, and was based on a short story she collaborated to write with her ex-husband, Michael Dorris. Currently, Erdrich lives in Minnesota where she continues to write and runs the Birchbark Books, an independent bookstore that seeks to create space for Native American authors.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Erdrich began writing the short story version of this narrative just after George W. Bush's election in 2000. At the time, Erdrich was deeply concerned about threats to women's reproductive rights under the Bush administration. She created Cedar's character because at the time she identified strongly with the concerns of pregnant woman, especially those who may have high-risk pregnancies, as it is implied Cedar has, and may need abortions. While the short story itself is not dystopian, the novel it gave rise to, published in 2016, is. This novel came forth in a similarly divided and emotionally charged political climate, in which Erdrich was concerned about women's rights and climate change.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In 2016, Louise Erdrich published the novel *Future Home of the Living God*, a dystopian novel set in the near-distant future based on the characters of her 2009 short story with the same name. In it, climate change is out of control, the U.S. is under authoritarian regime, and evolution itself is even reversing. Consequently, pregnant women are rounded up by the government to give birth in controlled conditions. Erdrich wrote the novel in a matter of months, claiming that the political climate of 2016 gave her a sense of urgency to complete a narrative in which "we are moving backwards instead of forwards." Due to its dystopian treatment of women's reproductive rights, the novel drew widespread

critical comparison to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was remade as a Hulu show that same year.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Future Home of the Living God"
- **When Written:** 2002
- **Where Written:** Minnesota
- **When Published:** 2009
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary, Postmodern
- **Genre:** Short Story, Realistic Fiction, Native American Fiction
- **Setting:** Minnesota
- **Climax:** Cedar's adoptive parents arrive at her birth mother's home, overwhelming her.
- **Antagonist:** The desire to be isolated from family
- **Point of View:** First-Person and Second-Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Adoption Runs in the Family.** Adoption is an important theme both in the short story and in Erdrich's life. While Erdrich herself is not adopted, she and her ex-husband, Michael Dorris, were parents to his three adopted children. He was the first single man to successfully adopt in the United States.

**Close to Home.** Erdrich herself was pregnant with her youngest while writing the story for the first time, which is why concerns about pregnant women were so close to her heart.



### PLOT SUMMARY

Cedar Hawk Songmaker is pregnant, and the doctor thinks the baby may have inherited a serious genetic disease. For some expectant mothers, finding out about genetic conditions that run in the family is the matter of a simple phone call. But for Cedar, a Native American woman adopted into a white liberal family and estranged from her birth mother, things aren't so simple. Reestablishing contact with her family of origin means dealing with the lifetime of resentment she's felt towards her birth mother.

The story begins with Cedar in the doctor's office for her first ultrasound. There, through her first-person narration, Cedar reveals to the readers that she is isolated from both her adoptive family and her birth family. She comments that most other women come to their ultrasound with a romantic partner or friends, but she's come alone, citing as a justification for that the fact that she has disappointed Alan and Sera Songmaker,

her adoptive parents. Plus, all of her friends are in jail or dead. When the nurse asks her about history of family disease, Cedar reveals that she is adopted. Although she lies to the nurse and says that she is in contact with her birth family, she reveals to readers that in fact she has in her life only received one letter from her birth mother, which she never returned.

Cedar returns to her adoptive parents' home, where she hasn't been in months, in order to find the letter on which her birth mother wrote her phone number. This causes her to feel nostalgic about Alan and Sera, from whom she has recently become estranged. When she speaks to her birth mother on the phone, she feels anxious, and is hurt when someone asks her birth mother who she's talking to on the phone and she replies "No one!" Already, Cedar's feelings of resentment are triggered, but she resolves to go anyhow.

When she arrives at her birth mother's house on the reservation where she lives, Cedar is stunned by her birth mother, who has introduced herself as Mary Potts Almost Senior, or "Sweetie." She finds her birth mother beautiful and younger than she expected, but reacts negatively to being told that they look alike. Cedar enters the house and meets her grandmother, lovingly referred to as Mary Potts the Very Senior. Cedar then asks why she was given up, and whether there are genetic disease that run in the family. Mary Potts Almost Senior responds hesitantly and awkwardly to the first question, and Cedar reacts with hostility. The discussion is interrupted by the arrival of Little Mary, the younger daughter Mary Potts Almost Senior didn't give up. Although Mary Potts Almost Senior insists that Little Mary doesn't "fuck or do drugs," Cedar immediately notices that her younger sister is extremely high, and feels grateful that she was raised with her adoptive parents instead of in her birth family.

When Little Mary and Mary Potts Almost Senior leave the room, Cedar has time to speak with her grandmother, who at that point is the only member of her birth family that she's warmed up to. It is the grandmother who reveals not the specifics of any genetic diseases, but the fact that miscarriages are common in the family. After speaking with her grandmother, Cedar tucks her into bed, marveling at the woman's old age. Cedar then has a hostile discussion with Little Mary, who clearly resents and feels threatened by her. After they fight, Little Mary retreats into her room. Cedar then hears her adoptive father, Alan's voice. Realizing that Mary Potts Almost Senior must have called her adoptive parents to support her through the difficult process of meeting her birth family, Cedar feels overwhelmed to have so much family in one space, and to see her two worlds intersecting. She retreats into Little Mary's room, as she has nowhere else to run.

There, Little Mary, rather than meeting her with hostility, asks Cedar to help her clean her **messy bedroom**. This gesture of vulnerability touches Cedar, who resolves to help her younger sister. As they clean the room together, the two sisters speak

amicably with one another. When Little Mary wraps Cedar into an unexpected hug, Cedar begins to cry, knowing that she's entering uncharted territory by reconnecting with both of her families.



## CHARACTERS

**Cedar Hawk Songmaker** – The protagonist and first-person narrator of the story, Cedar at birth was given up by her Native American birth mother, Mary Potts the Almost Senior, and adopted by wealthy white liberals, Alan and Sera Songmaker. It was Alan and Sera who gave Cedar, originally named Mary Potts like the rest of her female relatives, the overtly indigenous-sounding name "Cedar Hawk Songmaker." Torn between her indigenous roots and the affluent white culture of her adoptive parents, Cedar seems to fit into neither cultural group. She mentions several times that she has disappointed her adoptive parents—she seems to run in a dangerous circle of friends, who are all "dead or in jail," and the story centers around her presumably unexpected pregnancy (she never mentions a partner or anyone to support her through the process). Cedar seems to be ashamed of her choices and, consequently, isolates herself from her family. Although she feels negatively about the circumstances of her life, she views her pregnancy with a sort of reverence, and she is dedicated to being the best mother possible to her unborn child. This determination is what leads her to enter into contact with her previously estranged birth mother to learn about genetic diseases that may affect her child. Though Erdrich initially characterizes Cedar as misguided and unsuccessful, over the course of the story she gradually reveals Cedar's responsibility and willingness to learn. By the end of the story, Cedar seems terrified but ready to let both families—biological and adopted—back into her life.

**Mary Potts Almost Senior ("Sweetie")** – Cedar's birth mother, Mary Potts Almost Senior, or "Sweetie," as she is known to her family, is an indigenous woman reaching the late stages of her middle age. While she struggled with drug and sex addictions as a young woman, which caused her to give up Cedar as a baby, she has since recovered and is able to live a relatively healthy, stable life on the reservation where she lives with her mother, Mary Potts the Very Senior, and her daughter, Little Mary. In spite of the improvements to her own life, Sweetie deeply regrets having given up Cedar for adoption, and struggles to justify this choice to Cedar when she comes to visit. However, Erdrich doesn't paint Sweetie as the most competent of mothers; while she insists that her younger daughter, Little Mary, doesn't "fuck or do drugs," Cedar immediately notices that her younger sister is under the influence of drugs when they meet, and the young girl's room is littered with racy lingerie. Mary Potts Almost Senior is characterized as well-intentioned but a little delusional when it comes to parenting,

and, more generally, as an older woman reckoning with the poor choices of her youth as she approaches old age.

**Little Mary** – Mary Potts Almost Senior’s daughter and Cedar’s younger sister. Although Mary Potts believes that her daughter doesn’t use drugs, as she herself used to, Little Mary’s drug use is clear to Cedar and to the reader. Little Mary self-describes her style as “Gothlolita”—a mix between a tough, Halloween-esque, punk look and an infantilizing, sexualized aesthetic (Cedar picks up the reference to the novel *Lolita*, though Little Mary hasn’t heard of the book and only found the term “Gothlolita” on the internet). Little Mary’s personality is similarly divided between the scary and the sweet. Initially, she is incredibly hostile towards Cedar when they meet, and clearly feels threatened by the arrival of an older sister she has never met. However, later in the story when she asks for Cedar’s assistance in cleaning her **filthy room**, she reveals her vulnerability and her need for positive adult influences in her life. The story draws to a close with the two sisters wrapped in an embrace, both girls beginning to navigate the new and potentially scary territory of welcoming new family members into their lives.

**Mary Potts the Very Senior** – Cedar and Little Mary’s grandmother and Mary Potts Almost Senior’s mother, who is over a hundred years old. She is the only member of Cedar’s birth family that Cedar initially warms to. With an old, wise, and comforting presence, Mary Potts the Very Senior is the one to let Cedar know that miscarriages are genetically passed down through the family, suggesting that Cedar does, in fact, have a high-risk pregnancy. The old woman’s relationship to her family is both affectionate and distant; she doesn’t seem to know about her granddaughter Little Mary’s drug problem and seems interested, but relatively uninvested, in Cedar’s sudden reappearance. At her age, she is on the precipice of death, after all, and seems to navigate family relationships with accordant detachment.

**Sera Songmaker** – Cedar’s adoptive mother, a wealthy white liberal. Sera and her husband, Alan, hail from wealthy Minnesota robber barons. In what may be an attempt to compensate for the harm their ancestors have done to the land, Sera and Alan donated much of their inheritances to well-meaning but impotent liberal causes, which are now totally “defunct.” In addition, Sera has a superficial interest in indigenous culture. At one point in the story, Cedar recalls one of Sera’s many “self-invented” rituals that involved smudging sage and drinking wine. Depicted as a well-intentioned but somewhat silly white liberal, through Cedar’s narrations readers view Sera as nonetheless a competent mother whom Cedar admires, and, consequently, regrets disappointing.

**Alan Songmaker** – Cedar’s adoptive father and Sera’s husband, who is also a wealthy white liberal. Alan’s politics, personality, and background are not notably distinguished from those of his wife. However, there is a notable moment where Cedar says

something that reminds her of him, and fondly remembers her childhood. Like Sera, then, Alan is characterized as a benevolent and well-intentioned, even if slightly ridiculous, parent.

**The Nurse** – The nurse who takes care of Cedar during her ultrasound appointment and encourages her to talk to her birth mother about possible genetic conditions that run in the family. She looks amused when Cedar reveals that her overtly indigenous-sounding name, Cedar Hawk Songmaker, was given to her by her white liberal adoptive parents.



## 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.



### ISOLATION VS. INTERCONNECTEDNESS WITH FAMILY

In “Living Home of a Future God,” the narrator and protagonist, Cedar, must contact her birth mother for the first time because she is pregnant and needs information about genetic diseases that may run in the family. While initially Cedar seems to view her pregnancy as an opportunity to build a better future for herself and her unborn child, completely divorced from her family’s past, over the course of the story she seems to open to integrating her estranged adoptive and birth families into her life in new ways. Importantly, Cedar’s birth family is indigenous, and so reconnecting with her family isn’t just about restoring individual relationships, but rather about connecting with an entire cultural and ethnic lineage that she hasn’t recognized. Through demonstrating the tension between Cedar’s desire to start her new family from scratch and her obligation to engage with her birth family for the sake of her unborn child, Erdrich illustrates the necessity of living interconnectedly with one’s family.

At the beginning of the story, Cedar’s view of herself and of the life she will provide for her child is very future-oriented, isolated both from her family and from her past. Her adoptive parents are “alienated” from her, and she’s “never answered” the single letter her birth mom sent her, demonstrating Cedar’s desire to build a future that does not engage with her past. Immediately, readers notice that the story is written in second person, as Cedar is addressing her unborn child. This is an important choice, in part because it shows that the narrator is almost entirely oriented towards the future. She frames the present moment in the context of a life that hasn’t even begun yet, rather than in the context of events and relationships from the past. In the first paragraph, Cedar boldly thinks, “I’ll be a

good mother even though I've fucked up everything so far." Here, she doesn't acknowledge how exactly she's "fucked up," and assumes she'll be able to build future without engaging with the mistakes and challenges of the past.

Cedar is not the only one in the story who has isolated herself from her family. Cedar explains, "I was removed from my Potts mother because of our mutual addiction to a substance she loved more than me." In giving up her daughter for adoption, Mary Potts Almost Senior interrupted the family lineage—a rupture that would have been permanent were it not for Cedar's pregnancy. In addition, Cedar's adoptive parents, Sera and Alan Songmaker, have also isolated themselves from their pasts. They both come from wealthy parents—"legendary robber barons who scalped the Minnesota earth of ancient forests." Sera and Alan's left-leaning politics lead them to be ashamed of their family wealth, and so they donate much of their inheritance to charitable "causes now defunct," extricating themselves from their families' politics and the wealth they accrued through shady means. Both of these cases represent people who have broken from the legacies of their families, and consequently seem to have started anew with each generation.

While Cedar at first resists acknowledging a connection to her birth family, she slowly begins to embrace them. Cedar originally sees her trip to visit her birth mother as only an obligation she has to protect the health of her child. She is resentful and resistant to acknowledging any connection she has to her birth mother. When Mary Potts Almost Senior tells Cedar that she looks like her, Cedar responds instantly that she "[does] not." Her resistance to admitting that she looks like her mother reflects her desire to maintain the ruptured family lineage and her disconnection from her birth family. Over the course of the visit, though, Cedar slowly warms to the family. The first hint of this warming is when she thinks that she's glad she didn't have "this mother and this family, except maybe this grandmother." It is significant that Cedar's favorite member of the family is the grandmother, the oldest person, as it suggests that Cedar is beginning to value the past rather than orient herself only toward the future.

Towards the end of the story, Cedar's engagement with her family shifts from an obligatory, one-time visit to a deeper emotional engagement. When Cedar's adoptive parents arrive, invited by her birth mother, Cedar feels she is in the middle of "some sort of vertex" and "[goes] dizzy." Her negative reaction to having to confront her past both with her adoptive and birth family is to flee, but the only place to go is into her younger sister's room. In this moment, Erdrich demonstrates that engaging with family and recognizing interconnection is inescapable, no matter how much Cedar may want to avoid this obligation. The room into which Cedar escapes belongs to her younger sister, Little Mary, and is extraordinarily **messy**. Earlier in the story, Little Mary asked Cedar to help her clean it, but Cedar thought the mess was too much to handle. However,

upon this second instance, Cedar resolves to help her sister clean up. This moment is important because it represents a shift in Cedar's relationship with her family. She could have just taken refuge in Little Mary's room without helping to clean, but her willingness to help out represents Cedar opening herself up to having a deeper relationship with her family, and an acknowledgement of their interconnectedness. Digging through the junk in Little Mary's room also serves as a metaphor for Cedar's willingness to dig through her past and understand her relationships to family. Even though it's messy, she is willing to face the challenges of acknowledging relationships with family.

Over the course of the story, Cedar transforms from a woman who has little interest in connecting with her family to someone who is beginning to open to connecting with family in meaningful ways. By highlighting the ways in which Cedar develops towards a more integrated, interconnected understanding of family, Erdrich demonstrates, without sentimentality, not only the value but also the inevitability of family relationships.

## NON-BELONGING AND FORGING INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY



In "Future Home of the Living God," the narrator, Cedar Hawk Songmaker, grapples with a sense of her own identity. Descended from a working-class Native American mother and adopted by wealthy white liberal parents, Cedar has a sense of being caught between worlds and identities, unable to locate herself fully in either one of them. Through navigating her complicated heritage, Cedar is able to forge an individual identity not based on fitting in with one specific group, but on picking and choosing what to keep of her heritage and what to leave behind.

Cedar lacks connection to her cultural roots. Her birth family is indigenous, and while her white adoptive parents, Sera and Alan, try to connect her with this heritage, their efforts are superficial and ultimately render her disconnected from her ethnicity. When Cedar is in the doctor's office, the nurse asks if she got her name from "her tribe." Cedar responds, saying, "My Indian name is Mary Potts." This exchange is ironic; even though Cedar is truly descended from an indigenous family, the name the nurse mistook to be "tribal" comes instead from her white adoptive parents, who are "Minnesota liberals," while the name Mary comes from Cedar's indigenous birth mother, who is also named Mary, along with her own mother and her second daughter. Cedar's adoptive parents, while they may have been trying to honor Cedar's heritage with her name, have not represented indigenous lineage in the same way Cedar's birth mother, who actually form part of that culture, has chosen to. This makes Cedar only partially connected to this part of her ancestry, fully belonging neither to indigenous culture nor to white, liberal culture. Cedar also references her adoptive

parents' superficial engagement with indigenous ritual and tradition. While she was growing up, her adoptive mother invited her to participate in "many self-invented ceremonies" loosely based on indigenous culture. Although Cedar says that participating in these rituals are some "of the best memories of [her] life," she adds that this was all "before she disappointed" her adoptive parents. Cedar implies that while these rituals were fun when she was younger, they did not provide her with a sustainable source of support or even connection to her family, as traditions deeply rooted in a family's shared cultural background might.

Cedar's adoptive and birth families also come from very different class backgrounds, and she is unable to locate herself within either group. One of the reasons Cedar's birth mother, Mary Potts Almost Senior, chose to give her up is that she didn't feel able to provide for a baby. She says she gave Cedar to "a good family, rich as hell," highlighting her desire for her daughter to have access to class privileges beyond what she can provide. Of course, Cedar's adoptive parents have given away their money to "causes now defunct" and are no longer "rich as hell" which perhaps has to do with Cedar's inability to fit in with extremely privileged circle. However, Cedar seems not to fit into the mold of a young adult raised by a white, liberal, upper-middle class family, either. Cedar mentions several times that she has disappointed her adoptive parents. She never states exactly why but does mention offhand in the beginning of the story that "all of her friends were in jail, or dead." This is not at all typical of people who run in wealthy, privileged social circles, and implies that Cedar may have been involved in illicit activity, particularly drug use. Although it is never clear whether Cedar abused drugs, if she were to have, she would have engaged with exactly the type of behavior her birth mother hoped to protect her from by giving her to a wealthier family. Even if not, she clearly has not taken advantage of the opportunities that class privilege could have offered her. Finally, Cedar also feels uncomfortable in the context of her birth family. When she meets her younger sister, Little Mary, Cedar feels "glad that [she] didn't have this mother and family" and "thinks of Alan and Sera and all that [they] share." That she immediately thinks this after observing the way she could have "turned out" had she stayed in this family and class background reveals that she is uncomfortable in these circumstances, and grateful for the privilege that she has.

Ultimately, Cedar must develop an individual identity that draws from her various backgrounds without embracing all aspects of them. Because neither background can fully represent her, she must pick and choose what aspects of her lineage she will allow to form meaningful parts of her identity moving forward. In the same moment that she thinks to herself that she's glad not to have grown up around her birth family, Cedar adds "except maybe this grandmother," referring to Mary Potts the Very Senior. This is the first clear instance in the story

of her willfully wishing to integrate some aspects of her birth family into her identity. The fact that she picks only the grandmother illustrates the selective way in which Cedar goes about constructing her identity—she isn't obliged to fully embrace either family, but chooses what she wants to keep. Additionally, in the last scene of the story, when Cedar is sorting through her younger sister's **messy room**, Little Mary asks Cedar what she will name her baby. Cedar holds up a "swatch of red boy-leg lace and [reads] the label," and then says "Victoria." The implication that Cedar read the name off of Little Mary's clothing is significant—it is through digging through the mess of her past that she will forge her future and what she will pass down to her child. Her choice of name is an act of individual decision-making, but it is still contextualized within family. The fact that the name itself is Victoria—and not Mary, the name of three generations of women in Cedar's birth family—also represents an overcoming. Cedar's "victory" will be emerging from the mess of tangled family relationships with a fully formed individual identity.



## GROWTH AND AGE AS NONLINEAR

In "Future Home of the Living God," both the main character, Cedar, and her younger sister, Little Mary, seem simultaneously childish and very adult.

Both are preparing to make major transitions in life: Cedar is about to become a new mother, and Little Mary is a teenager on the cusp of adulthood. While it can be tempting to think of maturing as a linear process, Erdrich challenges assumptions about the trajectory of growth by showing readers characters who demonstrate traits of different maturity levels and stages of life all at once.

As Cedar prepares for her visit to her birth mother's home, she makes several observations about herself and about time that set readers up to perceive time and maturing as nonlinear. When Cedar is leaving her adoptive parents' house, her "childhood training kicks in" and compels her to leave a note to her adoptive parents saying where she's gone. Since the story hinges on Cedar's pregnancy and coming transition to motherhood, it is jarring to witness her still bound by behaviors learned as a child. This challenges the idea that transitions between stages of life are definite and linear, and instead shows readers that Cedar's childhood self is present with her even as she prepares for this major transition as an adult woman. Later, Cedar similarly integrates aspects of the past with aspects of the present and future when she observes that on highways she always feels that she is going "backwards and forwards at the same time." This is important to recognize, as her sense of time on the highway parallels her destiny as a mother. She will not be able to become a mother herself—or at least not a good one—if she does not return to her birth mother to learn about genetic diseases they may have passed down. However, she still carries pain from feeling as a child that she was abandoned by

her birth mother, and thus must revisit and face those childhood feelings before she can enter into motherhood. That the story revolves around Cedar's relationships with her biological mother and adoptive parents is also significant in itself, as it figures Cedar as a child rather than an adult. Even though Cedar is a fully fledged adult woman and is about to become a mother herself, she is also still somebody's daughter and child.

Cedar's younger sister, Little Mary, is a rebellious teenager on the precipice of adulthood. Although she seems to struggle with addiction, and adopts infantilizing behavior, she also seeks to grow, and requests Cedar's help in the process. Many of Little Mary's fashion choices confuse and fascinate Cedar, as they represent both her younger sister's sexuality and her childishness. Little Mary describes her own style as "Gothlolita," referencing the titular character in the novel *Lolita*. Little Mary's infantilized sexuality represents immaturity and maturity at the same time—she engages in adult behaviors, like sex and dating, without having the emotional maturity or wisdom to navigate this territory properly. This speaks to her need to grow up, to develop the skills and knowledge she needs to handle making adult decisions. Because her growth process would include distancing herself from behaviors she is too old for (like wearing childish clothing) and those she is too young for (like sex, drugs, and drinking), Little Mary also exemplifies a trajectory of maturing that is nonlinear.

Importantly, Cedar's role in Little Mary's life also speaks to a concept of aging or maturity that doesn't quite fit within a linear framework. Mary Potts Almost Senior, Cedar and Little Mary's mother, naively believes that her younger daughter doesn't engage in any bad behavior (although Cedar immediately realizes that Little Mary abuses drugs), Little Mary lacks the catalyst she needs in order to grow until Cedar comes along. This is represented by the scene at the end of the story, when Cedar helps her younger sister clean up her **messy bedroom**. In this instance, Cedar provides the moral guidance that Little Mary's own mother could not provide, in spite of being older and more experienced than Cedar herself. Thus, Cedar interrupts any concept that age is a hierarchy wherein with increased age one necessarily becomes wiser and more able to provide guidance.

While Cedar and Little Mary represent the clearest examples of characters who demonstrate traits of different age groups and maturity levels, all of the characters in the story seem to represent their age in ways that are somewhat arbitrary. For instance, Cedar's birth mother is called Mary Potts Almost Senior, a name that necessarily makes readers wonder why she is "almost" senior, and who or what her age is measured in relation to. By creating characters whose behaviors incorporate characteristics of various age groups, Erdrich challenges the assumption the growth is linear and instead provides a more complex and realistic picture of age and

maturity.



## SYMBOLS

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



### LITTLE MARY'S MESSY ROOM

The mess in Little Mary's room symbolizes the messiness of Cedar's life, especially in regards to her complicated and strained family relationships. When Cedar is visiting her birth mother's house for the first time, she is shocked to meet her younger sister, Little Mary—a sassy, hostile teenager who, as it happens, has a very messy room. While at her birth mother's house, Cedar finally grasps the extent to which her engagement with her birth family will require a great deal of emotional energy and labor on her part. She hasn't been willing to engage with this work thus far in life, but over the course of the story she slowly opens to the possibility of it. Her engagement with the mess in Little Mary's room parallels this gradual willingness to untangle her knotty and complicated family life. At first, Cedar is disgusted by the mess in the room, and refuses to help her younger sister to sort through it. But by the end of the story, forced to flee into Little Mary's room to temporarily avoid confronting her birth family and adoptive parents together, Cedar willingly begins to help Little Mary sort through the chaos. As the girls clean, they begin to speak more kindly to one another, and the story even closes with Little Mary wrapping her arms around Cedar lovingly. So, by avoiding her two families and fleeing into Little Mary's messy room, Cedar actually ends up in the arms of *more family*, and her sorting through the room's contents suggests that Cedar is beginning to open herself up to exploring her family relationships.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *The Red Convertible: Stories* published in 2009.

### Future Home of the Living God Quotes

•• I promise you this: I'll be a good mother even though I've fucked up everything so far.

**Related Characters:** Cedar Hawk Songmaker (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 462

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Cedar is walking into the hospital for an ultrasound, having gotten pregnant from a one-night stand. In spite of this fact, she eagerly awaits her appointment, hoping to be the best mother she can. This quote epitomizes Cedar's orientation towards the future at the beginning of the story. She addresses her unborn baby in the second person, contextualizing the present moment in the context of a life that hasn't begun yet. This demonstrates both her excitement for the baby to arrive and her eagerness to leave the past behind her. Her sentiment that she will be able to be a good mother in spite of having made a mess of the rest of her life is ominously naïve: of course it is impossible for anyone all of the sudden to change their lifestyle and habits to be a "good mother." Over the course of the story, indeed, will need to reckon with various aspects of her past in order to create the future she envisions for herself and her child.

universe implies that the boundaries of the room have dissolved, metaphorically, and this parallels the coming dissolution of the boundaries Cedar has created between herself and her family.

“ I ignore the awful prickling in my throat, the reaction to the second time she said *nobody*.

**Related Characters:** Cedar Hawk Songmaker (speaker), Mary Potts Almost Senior ("Sweetie")

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 468

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Cedar is on the phone with her birth mother, Mary Potts Almost Senior. It is the first time the two are ever speaking to each other, and yet Mary Potts Almost Senior has flippantly referred to Cedar as "nobody" to someone in the background. Although Cedar has, until this point in the story, maintained an indifferent front regarding her relationship to her birth family, her sensitivity at being called "nobody" reveals a deep emotional wound and residual feelings of abandonment. Cedar may act emotionally detached from her birth family, but this quote demonstrates that she still nurses an emotional attachment to her mother. Were that not the case, Cedar would likely be indifferent to being called "nobody." She wouldn't feel the need to matter to people who didn't matter to her. But, at the bottom of her heart, Cedar knows that her birth mother does matter to her and she wants to matter to her birth mother. It is this emotional investment that establishes the possibility for Cedar to build genuine relationships with her birth family.

“ The room yawns open. I have the sensation that time has shifted, that we are in a directionless flow, as if this one room in the hospital has suddenly opened out onto the universe.

**Related Characters:** Cedar Hawk Songmaker (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 464

### Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Cedar has just asked the doctor about the gender of her baby—but he is curiously silent. As Cedar looks at the image of her baby's heart, she has the peculiar feeling that the hospital has "opened." Prior to this moment, Cedar had been feeling isolated in the hospital, noticing that all the other patients had loved ones accompanying them to their ultrasounds, while Cedar is all alone. It's telling that at the moment of seeing her baby's heart, she develops a deeper sense of interconnectedness, connecting her to the whole "universe" and "opening" a door to a new world. At the end of the story, Cedar conceives of family as a door, not "know[ing] whether [it] opens in or opens out." So while Cedar might wish to be isolated from her family, the baby carries in its genetics and in its soul Cedar's lineage, a connection to the people that raised her, a whole other "universe" of family connection that she is entering into. The comparison of the hospital room flowing out into the

“ Later, I am about to leave the house, but then, my childhood training takes over.

**Related Characters:** Cedar Hawk Songmaker (speaker), Alan Songmaker, Sera Songmaker

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 469

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Cedar is leaving her adoptive parents' house to go

and meet her birth mother for the first time. Although she hasn't spoken with Alan or Sera about her plans, and although she's an adult, she feels obliged to leave them a note explaining her whereabouts due to "childhood instinct." That Cedar refers to herself as a "child" draws attention. Not only is she already a grown adult, she is about to become a mother, thereby officially ending the childhood phase of life. This moment reflects Erdrich's complex treatment of themes of growth and maturity—it is clear that both things are nonlinear in the story. Cedar's level of maturity is dependent upon the context in which she operates. With her parents, there will always be part of herself that is a child, as she will always be their daughter—their child—no matter what age she is.

Always, on four-lane highways, I have this peculiar sensation, as though I am going backwards and forwards at the same time. The future could be pouring into the past, and it would be like this, my car, the connecting bottleneck.

**Related Characters:** Cedar Hawk Songmaker (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 469

### Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Cedar is on the highway driving to the reservation where her birth mother lives to meet her for the first time. This quote perfectly epitomizes the treatment of time in the story. Cedar needs to visit her birth mother in order to learn about any inherited genetic diseases that run in the family that might affect her baby. Therefore, in order to create the future—to have her baby and be a good mother—she must confront a part of her past that she has never had to engage with before. The analogy, then, that the future and the past are "flowing" into one another is exactly what is happening to Cedar in the story. While she is moving forward in terms of carrying out the pregnancy, she is also moving back by committing to meeting her birth mother and reconnect with her roots. They are opposite movements occurring simultaneously. Her car, indeed, is the "connecting bottleneck," as it is a metaphorical time machine, transporting her from a world in which she was totally focused on the future into one in which she will have to come head to head with the greatest sorrow of her past.

Church billboards. ENDTIME AT LAST! GET READY TO RAPTURE! In one enormous, empty field stretching to the sky a sign is planted that reads FUTURE HOME OF THE LIVING GOD.

**Related Characters:** Cedar Hawk Songmaker (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 469

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Cedar is still on the highway, and is observing the evangelical billboards along the way as she drives to her birth mother's house. These are significant because it is from this passage that the title of the story comes: "Future Home of the Living God." The signs, like Cedar's thinking at the beginning of the story, demonstrate an eagerness for a future event—for Cedar, this is her pregnancy, whereas the billboards reference the rapture, the Christian belief that all believers will ascend to heaven in the end times. In both cases, people are looking forward to a future event that will be radically different from the present moment, and yet they are completely unprepared to receive what is to come. Cedar is just as unready to give birth to a baby just as the world will be taken by surprise, Christians believe, when the rapture happens.

"Just looking at Little Mary I can tell what a good mother you would be."

**Related Characters:** Cedar Hawk Songmaker (speaker), Mary Potts Almost Senior ("Sweetie"), Little Mary

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 474

### Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Cedar is in Mary Potts Almost Senior's home and has just met her half-sister, Little Mary, who clearly abuses drugs. Because Little Mary was raised by Cedar's biological mother, she functions as a sort of foil for Cedar. Had Cedar been born into the family, she may have turned out like Little Mary who seems to be worse off than Cedar, who isn't the most well-adjusted character herself, either. This moment of comparison provokes in Cedar a feeling of nostalgia for her adoptive parents, which is the first time in the story that she's expressed desire to be close to them. It's also significant that at first Little Mary and

Cedar are positioned as opposites, as their relationship dynamic changes significantly over the remainder of the story. At first, Little Mary is a reason for Cedar to distance herself from her birth family, but she eventually becomes a person that draws her closer.

From the picture window of the house, I can see them in the driveway, all together now, gesturing and talking, a phantasmagoria of parents [...] I am at the center of some sort of vortex. I go dizzy.

**Related Characters:** Cedar Hawk Songmaker (speaker), Mary Potts Almost Senior ("Sweetie"), Sera Songmaker, Alan Songmaker

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 478

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Cedar realizes that her adoptive parents, Alan and Sera, have arrived at her birth mother's home. This moment represent a marked difference from her position at the beginning of the story, when she admitted to being isolated not only from her birth mother but also from Alan and Sera. At this moment, Cedar is literally surrounded by parents, and because of this she recognizes the inevitability of living interconnectedly with her family. The idea that she is at the center of some sort of "vortex" implies that she is almost like a magnet attracting all of these family members towards her. The language in this quote emphasizes the fact that living with family is truly unavoidable; Cedar feels dizzy not only because she is overwhelmed, but also because she recognizes that her efforts to isolate herself have been and will be in vain.

I look down. At my feet there is a box of black Hefty steel sacks, no doubt placed there by Sweetie as a subtle hint. I bend over, put my pack and computer where I hope I'll find them again, and pull the first plastic bag from the box.

**Related Characters:** Cedar Hawk Songmaker (speaker), Mary Potts Almost Senior ("Sweetie"), Little Mary

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 479

### Explanation and Analysis

This moment exemplifies Cedar's change in heart with regards to her relationship with her family. While earlier in the story, Cedar refused when Little Mary asked her to help clean up her filthy room, in this moment Cedar accepts the monumental task of sorting through all of the junk on the floor. The mention of Mary Potts Almost Senior serves to emphasize the fact that Cedar is able to help Little Mary in ways that her own mother is not. Where Mary Potts Almost Senior has only been able to hint at cleaning, Cedar is able to get Little Mary to see the necessity of cleaning up her mess and to help her do so. This is not to say that Cedar replaces Mary Potts Almost Senior but instead shows that there is a role in the family that only she can fill. Cedar's willingness to sort through the physical mess in Little Mary's room parallels her willingness to sort through the metaphorical mess of her family relationships. She has far to go, but she isn't turning her back on them anymore.

I have accidentally tampered with and entered some huge place. I do not know what giant lives in this fast and future home.

**Related Characters:** Cedar Hawk Songmaker (speaker), Little Mary

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 481

### Explanation and Analysis

In this moment at the very end of the story, Cedar is hugging her sister, Little Mary, and crying. She is in shock at her family situation having shifted so quickly. At the beginning of the day, she was alone in the hospital, disappointed at not having anyone with her, and now she is surrounded by all of her parents, hugging a sister she had never met before. There are many passages in the story that relate to an opening up of space, and this one represents the culmination of that theme. The interconnectedness Cedar has entered into over the course of the story is the "space" that has opened up. It seems as though Cedar's uterus is the "Future Home of the Living God," especially based on metaphors closer to the beginning of the story. At some points she comments to the nurse that a uterus should be called "God" based on its miraculous power to create and support life. However, in this moment, readers realize that the true "future home" of Cedar's baby is in the

space held and created by all members of her family, rather

than just her alone.



## 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.

### FUTURE HOME OF THE LIVING GOD

The narrator walks down the hallway of a hospital in Minneapolis, en route to her ultrasound appointment. She reflects that she'll "be a good mother even though [she's] fucked up everything so far." Addressing her unborn baby, she explains that she's been doing a lot of research about pregnancy. The narrator says she knows her baby is "fine" and doesn't have any major birth defects or genetic disorders.

Here, the narrator reveals that she is more oriented towards the future than the past. She addresses her narration to an unborn baby, which reveals that she is considering the events of the present as they relate to the future and not the past. Her belief that she will be a good mother in spite of having made a wide variety of mistakes in her life suggests that she is perhaps not interested in engaging with her past, believing she can build a solid future without grappling with those past mistakes.



A nurse, who is "probably Vietnamese" but has a distinctive Minnesota accent, asks the narrator several questions about any possible inherited conditions in her family. The narrator responds that she's adopted, and that she received a letter from her biological mother about a year ago. Even though she tells the nurse that she keeps in touch with her mother, she thinks privately that she never answered the letter. The nurse tells the narrator to ask her mother about any genetic conditions that run in the family, noting that doing so could be really beneficial for her baby.

In this passage, the narrator reveals a deeper level of aversion to her past. As she thinks to herself that she has never answered the letter from her mother, she demonstrates not just a disregard for her past, but an active desire to ignore her family of origin. However, the nurse's implication that she may need to contact her birth mother sets the precedent for the narrator to return to investigate aspects of her past.



The nurse compliments the narrator, Cedar Hawk Songmaker, on her name, asking if she got the name from her tribe. Used to this question, Cedar explains that Songmaker is a British last name, adding, "My Indian name is Mary Potts." Cedar reflects on her adoption: she was taken away from her biological mother "because of our mutual addiction to a substance she loved more than me." Cedar was then adopted and renamed by a liberal couple from Minneapolis, who, she adds, she always "disappoint[s]." Cedar thinks back to receiving the letter from her birth mother—how she had read the letter and then crumpled it up, but ultimately kept it.

The information about Cedar's family in this passage is key to the story. Here, readers learn that Cedar's birth mother is indigenous, which means that her lack of connection to her birth family also renders her disconnected from parts of her culture and ethnicity. The irony that Cedar's "Indian name," is Mary Potts, while the name Cedar was given to her by Minnesota liberals, reveals a confused mixture of cultures and identities in Cedar's life. Finally, Cedar reveals her distance from her adoptive parents as well as her birth mother, revealing to readers the full extent of her isolation from both her family and her past.



Cedar promises the nurse that she will contact her birth mother, but the question has clearly left her unsettled. She observes that other women haven't come alone to their ultrasounds, and begins to reflect on how the baby really isn't arriving in the easiest of circumstances—all of her friends are "dead or in jail," she is on the brink of losing her job, and she doesn't know the name of the baby's father, who she only knew for one night.

The doctor then arrives, along with the technician, and begins performing the ultrasound. Cedar is both in awe and afraid of the image she sees on the screen. At one point, overwhelmed, she almost asks the technician to stop, but instead asks the doctor about the baby's gender. No one responds. She becomes fascinated by the image of the heart, which makes her feel as though the room has "yawned open," that "one room in the hospital had suddenly opened out into the universe."

Cedar asks again whether she has a boy or a girl, and again, no one responds. Stopping on an image of the baby's brain, which looks like "an icy swirl of motion held in a perfect circle of white ash," the doctor and technician look worried. Even Cedar herself knows that something isn't quite right. The doctor tells her they don't know the gender of the baby and informs Cedar that she'll have to get in touch with her birth mother—there might be something wrong with the baby.

Rattled by the scary news, Cedar leaves the doctor's office "wanting in the very worst way to get drunk, pop a couple of Atvians, chill." She is so anxious that she vomits as soon as she gets in the car. She feels like she is a "child again, caught in giant trouble" and drives over to the home of her adoptive parents, Alan and Sera Songmaker, to get the letter that her birth mother sent her a year ago. Cedar has fond memories of her adoptive parents, although she also thinks they're somewhat silly. Minnesota liberals who inherited robber baron wealth, Sera and Alan donated all of their inheritance to defunct leftist causes, but still raised Cedar with plenty of faux-indigenous rituals that she enjoyed as a kid. She resolves to tell Alan and Sera about her pregnancy as soon as she walks in the door, but they are not home.

Indeed, the nurse's comments about contacting her birth mother trigger a sense of loneliness in Cedar. Her observations that all of the other women are accompanied by a loved one implies a sadness that she doesn't have anyone to come with her, which again creates an opening for her reconnection with her past and her family. The fact that Cedar's friends are all "dead or in jail," and the revelation that she is about to lose her job, suggest that in spite being raised by well-to-do "Minnesota liberals," Cedar might engage in illegal activity and may not be much better off than she would have been with her birth family.



Cedar's perception here that the room "yawns open [...] out into the universe" symbolizes an ending to her isolation. The phrasing of this quote reflects a sense of interconnectedness—although Cedar is physically alone in this moment, the results of the ultrasound will force her to confront the wider "universe" of her family and her past.



Cedar's insistence on knowing the gender of her baby further illustrates how oriented she is towards the future. In this moment, however, she must change this mindset and accept that she needs to contact her birth mother, thereby facing her past. Consequently, in this passage, Cedar is unable to move towards the future without confronting her past.



Here, Cedar's reaction to the news—wanting to get drunk and casually take prescription medicine to "chill"—imply that she has abused substances, a habit she may have inherited from her birth mother in spite of never having met her. Additionally, her feeling that she is a "child again" highlights the fact that she is on the precipice of growth, in some ways stuck between ages. Even though she is about to be a mother herself, the story centers around her relationship with her parents, adoptive and biological, thus figuring her more like a child than an adult. Finally, her thoughts about the rituals Sera and Alan performed reveal that their engagement with indigenous culture was superficial, and hasn't provided her with a sense of family or cultural connection that she may have enjoyed had she been raised by her birth mother.



In her own room, Cedar finds and briefly rereads the letter. In it, her birth mother mentions wanting to be in touch with her, hoping to hear back, and the fact that she and her other daughter own the Superpumper on the reservation. After briefly skimming the letter, she dials the number written. Stammering, Cedar introduces herself as Mary Potts, originally, and asks if the person on the other end is Mary Potts Senior. But the speaker reveals herself to be Cedar's younger half-sister, who screams at her mother that "some insane bitch" is on the phone claiming to be part of the family. Cedar hears a ruckus on the other end of the line—her younger sister screaming, a door slamming, and an older voice that asks who it is, to which a third woman's voice replies "Nobody!"

Finally, Cedar has her birth mother on the line. The older voice in the background asks again who is on the line, and her birth mother again replies that it is nobody. Hearing this, Cedar feels an "awful prickling in [her] throat, the reaction to the second time she said *nobody*." Cedar's birth mother introduces herself as Mary Potts Almost Senior, or "Sweetie." Hearing each other's voice is a shock for both mother and daughter, but the conversation still becomes tense as Cedar asks for directions to Mary Potts Almost Senior's home, saying "Might I ask for directions to your house?" To this, Mary Potts Almost Senior replies, "You said you might ask. You askin'?" Cedar finds her mother's coy attitude to be "petty manipulation," but decides she can handle it and starts on her way.

Before Cedar can leave the house, her "childhood training takes over" and she decides to leave Alan and Sera a note. She drives to her birth mother's house in an old but beloved Chevy that "will not die." As she drives along the highway on the way to her "Potts reservation home," Cedar feels that she is "moving forward and backward at the same time." She passes many things along the roadside, saying that it "comforts [her] to pass things too swiftly to absorb." Among the many things she sees are several evangelical billboards that read "ENDTIME AT LAST!" and "GET READY TO RAPTURE" and "FUTURE HOME OF THE LIVING GOD." These billboards, in spite of their bold declarations, are in the middle of empty, barren fields on the side of the highway.

That Cedar's birth mother is proud to own the Superpumper on the reservation is the first hint of her working-class background, and consequently, the great class difference between Cedar's adoptive and birth family.



Cedar's sadness at her birth mother referring to her as "nobody" demonstrates that although she might have told herself she was okay with being isolated from her family, there is a part of her that wants to be recognized by and connected with her birth mother. The abandonment she feels at having been given up for adoption is first revealed in this moment. The tension that occurs when Cedar asks for Mary Potts Almost Senior's address reveals both of their defensiveness; both want to connect with the other but feel uncomfortable admitting this with vulnerability and openness. Finally, in going by Mary Potts Almost Senior, Cedar's birth mother also demonstrates a sort of confusion with regards to age, similar to Cedar's.



Again, the implication that Cedar still has thoughts and behaviors that bring her back to her childhood emphasizes that growth in this story is nonlinear. Everything she observes on her way to the reservation highlights the mixing of the past and the future. For instance, the fact that her car "will not die" reveals a desire for something in the past to end to make room for the future—in other words, Cedar wants the car to die in order to get a new one, but it refuses. Similarly, the billboards reflect an eagerness for a future event—the rapture—that is nowhere in sight. Cedar's sense that she is moving "backwards and forwards at the same time" perfectly captures the confusion of time in this passage. She is moving towards her past in order to make room for a better future.



When Cedar arrives at the reservation where Mary Potts Almost Senior lives, she is feeling more clear-headed. She observes the view with a calm sense of admiration and curiosity, and sees the Superpumper that the members of her family own. Upon seeing her mother for the first time, she is surprised by her beauty. Still, the first encounter between mother and daughter is awkward. Cedar gets out of the car and doesn't know whether to hug her mother, who has teared up. Not knowing what to say, Cedar compliments Mary's earrings. However, the tender moment ends when Mary Potts Almost Senior comments that they look alike, and Cedar snaps that they don't.

Once inside, Mary Potts Almost Senior yells to someone in the other room that Cedar "turned out nice." She is talking to Mary Potts the Very Senior, Cedar's grandmother, who is a hundred and a half years old. The three sit down in the living room, and Cedar immediately asks her birth mother whether there are genetic diseases in the family and why she gave her up.

Mary Potts Almost Senior first tries to explain herself, saying it wasn't because she was "that young," and eventually admitting that she struggled with drug and sex addiction and didn't feel able to take care of a child. She tears up as she speaks, and says she felt "stupid, just plain stupid" for having given Cedar up. She also admits that she couldn't bear hearing news about Cedar, and so after two years asked Alan and Sera to stop sending photos. She tells Cedar that "not one day" went by that she didn't think of her. Although Cedar is thinking about how much she wanted her mother growing up, she replies, "Well, you thought of me more than I thought of you."

Before Mary Potts Almost Senior can respond to the question about genetic diseases, her younger daughter arrives. When Cedar learns that her sister's name is Little Mary, she asks her mother if she "has no originality," and feels that she sounds just like her adoptive father, Alan. Cedar is both horrified and impressed by her younger sister's princess-meets-Goth aesthetic, and she also immediately notices that Little Mary is under the influence. When Cedar sees this, she begins to feel nostalgic for her adoptive parents, and is grateful she was raised by them rather than growing up in this family. She says to Mary Potts Almost Senior, "Just looking at Little Mary, I can tell what a good mother you would have been."

In this passage, the defensiveness and resentment that exist between mother and daughter coexist with longing and sense of loss. Cedar's admiration for her mother's beauty reflects her repressed love and desire for connection. However, her negative, knee-jerk reaction to being told that they look alike demonstrates that she still feels resistant to having a real connection to her family, in spite of the simultaneous longing that she clearly feels.



The introduction of Mary Potts the Very Senior contributes to a sense of confusion with regards to age in the story. Like her daughter, Mary Potts Almost Senior is in some ways stuck between childhood and adulthood—she is "Almost Senior" and yet lives with her mother, who is truly the elder of the family.



Here, Mary Potts Almost Senior's vulnerable reflection about the grief she's felt about giving her Cedar reveals that she, like Cedar, tried to distance herself from family and her past. It was too painful for her to receive news about Cedar, so she chose not to, demonstrating a similar style of thinking to her daughter, who also chose to be isolated from her birth mother because it was painful, and from her adoptive parents presumably because she disappoints them. However, Mary Potts Almost Senior's final decision to reach out and connect with her daughter, no matter how difficult or painful the encounter, illustrates the value and inevitability of family connections.



In many ways, Little Mary serves as a foil for Cedar. Cedar sees her younger sister as what she could have been had she been raised in that family. Although earlier in the story Cedar implies that she engages with illegal activity, which in some ways connects her with her birth mother, Little Mary represents the extent to which Cedar could have been "messed up" if she'd been raised in that house. This triggers Cedar to feel nostalgic for her birth family, which opens up the possibility for her to reconnect with them as well as her birth family. She realizes that she needs them.



Little Mary is hostile towards her older sister, addressing her as “nobody,” and sits down silently to watch TV. Mary Potts Almost Senior, clearly feeling defensive after Cedar’s sarcastic comment, tells Cedar that she might not be the best mom in the world, but that 16-year-old Little Mary is doing well and has no drug habit. Mary Potts Almost Senior then leaves to make a phone call, leaving Cedar alone with her sister and grandmother.

Little Mary ignores Cedar, but Cedar observes her younger sister as she watches TV. She notes that Little Mary smells like “something going rotten” and glances at the girl’s room, which is a “**stupefying dump**.” Cedar than draws her attention to her grandmother, who has fallen asleep at the table. Cedar marvels at her old age, observing that she has never seen anyone that old. When Mary Potts the Very Senior wakes up, she and her granddaughter laugh and talk together. Mary Potts the Very Senior reveals to her that women in the family have many miscarriages, saying “we lose some.” When Cedar asks what specifically she means, her grandmother falls into a deep sleep again. Cedar then puts her grandmother to bed, marveling at her old age as she does so.

Cedar then returns to the living room and tries to speak to Little Mary. Cedar is still marveling over her younger sister’s appearance, which she describes as “creepy and cute.” Little Mary is hostile towards Cedar, calling her a “slut” for being pregnant. Cedar responds with maturity and measure to her little sister’s attacks, but still feels hurt by them. The tables turn, though, when Cedar reveals that she knows that Little Mary uses meth. At this, her younger sister begins to cry, begging her not to tell her mother. Cedar responds saying that she thinks they already know, since they live with her and can “smell her **room**.”

Little Mary then asks Cedar to help her clean her **filthy room**, in a tone of voice much more modest and shyer than before. Cedar thinks to herself that she would “almost be charmed” if the room itself weren’t so disgusting. The room is “knee-deep” in clothes on the floor, and smells like “rank socks, dried blood, spoiled cheese, girl sweat and Secret.” After looking around, Cedar refuses to help clean up because the space is too messy. She comments to Little Mary that it is “her mother’s job” to make her clean up. Cedar thinks to herself that the state of her sister’s room is due to an inherited mental instability, and again begins to worry about her baby. She then goes back into the living room and prepares to leave.

When Mary Potts Almost Senior says she believes her younger daughter does not use drugs, she reveals a naivete that might render her a worse mother than Cedar had thought. Because Cedar instantly perceives Little Mary’s drug use and their mother doesn’t, Cedar will be able to help Little Mary in ways that Mary Potts Almost Senior simply can’t due to her inability or unwillingness to recognize the truth.



In this passage, Cedar’s aversion towards Little Mary is juxtaposed with her admiration for Mary Potts the Very Senior. Little Mary represents in some ways everything that is “wrong” with her birth family, but Cedar finds much to appreciate about her grandmother. While the arrival of Little Mary made Cedar nostalgic for her adoptive parents, her newfound appreciation for Mary Potts the Very Senior demonstrates her desire to connect with her birth family beyond the simple obligation to learn about genetic disease in the family.



The discussion between Little Mary and Cedar represents an important turning point in the story. Little Mary was the member of Cedar’s birth family least willing or able to accept that Cedar even existed. However, over the course of this conversation, Little Mary reveals that she may need Cedar in a way—Cedar is an adult figure who sees Little Mary’s problem and, because she knows what’s wrong, is able to help her. In this moment, readers realize that it’s not just Cedar that needs her birth family; they need her, as well.



In asking for help clearing her room, Little Mary is also opening the door to building a relationship with her sister, further demonstrating the fact that Cedar’s family needs her. Cedar’s comment that it is Mary Potts Almost Senior’s job to make Little Mary clean up highlights her mother’s failure as a parent, and the possibility for Cedar to compensate for her blind spots. However, the mess in Little Mary’s room symbolizes the difficult path ahead if Cedar is to accept the invitation to build a relationship with her family. The mess represents the complications of family dynamics, and the work necessary to unravel and understand them.



However, just as Cedar is leaving a note to Mary Potts Almost Senior, she sees a car pulling up that looks like Alan's old Volvo, and wonders if her adoptive parents had known that she would need them, or if Mary Potts Almost Senior had called them. Indeed, Alan and Sera pull up in the driveway. Imagining the thought of them being with her birth mother overwhelms Cedar, and she feels dizzy, as if she's "in the middle of some sort of vertex." To avoid confronting her birth mother and adoptive parents all together, Cedar retreats back into Little Mary's room, walking backwards through the living room, "somehow, by subterranean memory, not bumping into anything."

When Cedar enters the room, Little Mary assumes that her older sister has resolved to help her. She sits crying on a large pile of clothing that Cedar assumes is her bed, and says "You changed your mind? Oh, wow! I know it's a lot to ask." Cedar reaches below her to grab one of the garbage bags she assumes Mary Potts Almost Senior had left in the room as a hint, and in doing so commits to helping clean up.

As the two sisters are sorting through the huge piles of clothing on the floor, Little Mary and Cedar begin to chat. Little Mary tells her older sister that her style is called "Gothlolita." Surprised, Cedar asks if Little Mary has read the book by Nabokov, but her little sister reveals that she found the term "Gothlolita" online. As Cedar sorts through the piles and piles of black clothing, her sister looks at her with awe and gratitude. In the distance, Cedar hears the sound of her Mary Potts Almost Senior, Alan, and Sera having drinks in the kitchen.

The two sisters are making progress on clearing away the **mess** when Little Mary asks Cedar what she'll name her unborn child if it's a girl. Cedar tells her little sister that there might be something wrong with the baby that she's carrying, and Little Mary reveals that Mary Potts Almost Senior lost two babies after having Cedar but before giving birth to Little Mary—and that Mary Potts Almost Senior thought it was "punishment for giving [Cedar] up." Cedar asks her younger sister if there was a name for the condition that ran in the family that caused these miscarriages, and her sister merely replies that "it had thirteen in it," adding that Mary Potts Almost Senior named her not after herself, but after Cedar.

Cedar's negative reaction to seeing her adoptive parents reflects her realization that remaining isolated from family is impossible, no matter how much she might wish to keep her distance. Her feeling that she is in the middle of some sort of "vortex" creates a similar image to the room "yawning open" in the hospital at the beginning of the story. This is a moment where Cedar recognizes the inevitability of interconnection and codependence of family. The fact that she tries to escape both sets of her parents by backing into her younger sister's room is further evidence for the fact that family is inescapable.



Cedar's willingness to help clean up the mess reflects a change in attitude on her part. Now that she realizes that engaging with her family is unavoidable, she resolves to do the work necessary to build the relationships literally, by helping her sister clean up, and also figuratively, as she will presumably put similar effort into building and maintain the relationships.



Cedar and Little Mary having a respectful conversation is symbolically parallel to their cleaning up the mess together: they're putting in the work to get to know one another. Although Little Mary reveals, in not knowing about the book *Lolita*, the extent to which her class background makes her different from her sister, Cedar's admiration for her style reflects a respect for this difference.



In this passage, Little Mary reveals the extent to which her mother grieved having lost Cedar. That Little Mary is named after Cedar and not their mother illustrates that Cedar really did have a place in that family, even though at the beginning of the story she may have doubted it. Additionally, the fact that miscarriages run in the family presents further motive for Cedar to become close to her birth family—if the same thing happens to her, she may have to lean on them for emotional support.



Following that thought, Little Mary says, "Hey! You're not going to name your baby Mary, are you?" In response, Cedar reads the label off Little Mary's lingerie, and says, "Victoria." Little Mary says the name is beautiful and wraps Cedar up into a hug. Cedar then begins to cry, not with "pity for [her]self" but at feeling overwhelmed at the sense of having "tampered with and entered some huge place." But, holding her sister, she feels that she is not alone as she waits for the answers she needs.

By choosing the name based on something written on Little Mary's underwear, Cedar demonstrates a willingness to engage with family. This choice epitomizes the lesson Cedar has learned over the course of the story: to integrate an understanding of her past into the construction of her future. Additionally, the choice of the name "Victoria" suggests that what Cedar desires for her baby is not just a continuation of family lineage, but an ability to overcome the obstacles her family has faced. The story ending with the two sisters in an embrace represents the union of Cedar with her family. No matter what unknown obstacles that they will face in the future, they seem poised to face them together.





## HOW TO CITE

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