

# Middlesex



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JEFFREY EUGENIDES

Jeffrey Eugenides was, like Cal in *Middlesex*, born into a Greek-American family and grew up in Gross Pointe, a suburb of Detroit, Michigan (although unlike Cal, he is only half Greek; his mother is Irish-American). Inheriting a love of literature from his mother, Eugenides studied English at Brown University, graduating in 1982. He then received a master's degree in creative writing from Stanford. He has lived in San Francisco, New York City, Berlin, and Princeton, New Jersey, where he now teaches creative writing at Princeton University. In 1995, he met and later married the photographer and sculptor Karen Yamauchi, whom he met at MacDowell Colony, a New Hampshire artists' retreat. The couple had one child, Georgia, and are now divorced. Eugenides has received a large number of prestigious prizes for his writing, including a Whiting Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Pulitzer Prize (for *Middlesex*).

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Middlesex* chronicles a large number of historical events, some of which take center stage while others are mentioned in a more passing or subtle manner. Some of the most important events that take place in the first part of the novel include World War I, the Greco-Turkish War, and the Turkish destruction of Smyrna. As a result of this conflict, Cal's grandparents Lefty and Desdemona—like so many others during this era—leave Europe in order to seek refuge and prosperity in the U.S. Later on, the novel depicts the boom of the automobile industry in Detroit, Michigan, alongside racial tensions between white residents and black residents, many of whom had originally immigrated to the city during the Great Migration of black Americans from the rural South to the urban North. In one of the most unexpected historical references in the novel, Cal's grandmother Desdemona gets a job working for the Nation of Islam, and it is revealed that the (real) founder of the movement, Wallace D. Fard Muhammad, was actually Cal's (fictional) maternal grandfather, Jimmy Zizmo. (This is, of course, not actually true, and is an example of the novel blending fiction with historical reality.) Subsequent historical events chronicled in the novel including the Detroit Race Riot of 1967 and the collapse of the auto industry in the city, leading to economic depression. In Cal's later life, he lives in Berlin, and references the reunification of the city following the fall of the Berlin Wall, which happened only a few years before he takes up residence in the city.

## RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Middlesex* is part of a wave of 21st-century writing that explores the immigrant experience to the U.S. in a way that highlights the nuances of this experience, particularly in regard to ambivalent feelings many immigrants feel about their new home. Other books in this category include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish*, and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, which also features an immigrant family moving to Detroit (from Zimbabwe, in this instance). Like *Middlesex*, Many books from the emergent trans literary canon fall into the Bildungsroman genre, including Andrea Lawlor's *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*. In this novel, the main character—like Cal—escapes from a sleepy midwestern existence and discovers themselves in San Francisco. Also similar to *Middlesex* is Casey Plett's *Little Fish*, which explores the trans experience alongside questions of ancestry, inheritance, and fate.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Middlesex*
- **When Written:** 1993-2002
- **Where Written:** New York City and Berlin, Germany
- **When Published:** 2002
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Bildungsroman; Epic Family Saga
- **Setting:** Bithynios, Asia Minor; Detroit, Michigan; San Francisco, California; and Berlin, Germany
- **Climax:** Doctors discover that Callie is intersex after she is injured by a tractor.
- **Antagonist:** The Bracelets, popular girls in Callie's high school who bully her, are the closest the book comes to a traditional antagonist.
- **Point of View:** First person from Cal/lie's perspective, though after he discovers he is intersex and transitions to male gender identity, he refers to his past self in the third person.

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Too Good to be True.** When Eugenides was first told that he had won the Pulitzer Prize for *Middlesex* by an Associated Press photographer in Prague, he initially didn't believe it was true.

**Mixed Feelings.** Some representatives of organizations for intersex people have expressed approval about Eugenides' depiction of an intersex person in the novel. However, others object to the novel's emphasis on the connection between

incest and being intersex, arguing that this pathologizes intersex people.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Cal/lie Stephanides was first born as a girl in Detroit in 1960, and then born again as a teenage boy in Petoskey, Michigan, in 1974. He is intersex, and is now 41 years old and living in Germany. He has decided to write his memoir after reading about historical figures who were also intersex. Cal's grandmother, Desdemona, was born in Bithynios, a small village on Mount Olympus near Bursa in Asia Minor. Both her parents died in World War I, leaving her and brother, Lefty, as orphans. Desdemona works in a silkworm cocoonery. In 1922, Desdemona tries to set Lefty up to marry girls in their village, but Lefty isn't interested. Despite the fact that they are brother and sister, Desdemona and Lefty are secretly in love with each other.

After years of Greek rule, the Turks reinvade the area of Asia Minor where Lefty and Desdemona live, and they plan to flee to the U.S. via Smyrna. Desdemona secretly brings her **silkworm box** with her, despite Lefty's insistence that no one in America farms silk. In Smyrna, Lefty briefly encounters a young Armenian doctor named Dr. Philobosian, whose entire family is soon slaughtered in the Turkish assault on the city. It becomes increasingly clear that the whole city is about to be destroyed and on-Turkish residents killed. Convinced that they are about to die, Desdemona agrees to marry Lefty. However, at the last moment they are able to escape by pretending to be French citizens. They bring Dr. Philobosian with them. Onboard the ship to the U.S., Lefty and Desdemona pretend to be strangers and engage in a fake courtship, followed by a wedding.

In the U.S., they are greeted by their cousin, Sourmelina, who moved to the U.S. years before and has completely assimilated. They trust Sourmelina to keep the secret that they are brother and sister because Sourmelina herself also has a secret: she is a closeted lesbian. Lefty and Desdemona go to live with Sourmelina and her husband, Jimmy Zizmo. Lefty gets a job as a factory worker at the Ford Motor Company and learns English at night. However, the same day he graduates from his English course, he is told that he has been fired for living with someone (Zizmo) who has a criminal record. On this same night, Sourmelina and Desdemona tell their husbands that they are both pregnant, having conceived at the exact same moment.

Now that Lefty is unemployed, he starts working with Zizmo in the bootlegging business during Prohibition. Sourmelina gives birth to a daughter named Theodora (Tessie). While Desdemona is giving birth to her son, Milton, Zizmo attempts to drive himself and Lefty over a frozen lake to Canada for a "final scheme." However, Zizmo he drives his car into the ice and drowns, while Lefty gets out just in time. After Theodora's birth,

finding himself once again without a job, Lefty opens a speakeasy in his basement called the Zebra Room. He also tells Desdemona to get a job, and after seeing an ad in the newspaper for a silk worker, she goes to inquire about the job, only to find herself in the Black Bottom ghetto. To her surprise, the address in the ad is for a mosque run by the Nation of Islam. Desdemona starts working there, teaching the young followers of the movement how to make silk and showing them her silkworm box. While working, she listens to speeches made by the movement's leader, Minister Fard, and is forced to confront her own complicity in racism as a white person. When a scandal forces Fard to leave Detroit, he reveals to Desdemona that he is really Jimmy Zizmo (and that he faked his own death).

The narrative jumps forward to World War II, when Milton and Tessie are young adults. Desdemona has noticed an intimacy developing between them, which brings back her fears about her own incestuous relationship. Milton ends up seducing Tessie by blowing his clarinet on different parts of her body. However, Tessie then gets engaged to a young man named Michael Antoniou, who is training to be a priest. Furious, Milton enlists in the Navy. Desdemona is beside herself with worry about Milton's safety, and although won't admit it, so is Tessie. Eventually, Tessie decides that she can't marry Mike, and calls off the engagement, accepting Milton's offer instead. Mike ends up marrying Milton's younger sister, Zoë. Milton and Tessie have a son, Chapter Eleven. Milton takes over the Zebra Room, and without anything else to do, Lefty starts gambling and spends all his and Desdemona's money, forcing them to move in with Milton and Tessie. Callie is conceived when Chapter Eleven is about five, and she inherits two copies of a **recessive gene**, which causes intersex conditions, that has been in her family for over 200 years. On the day Callie is born, Lefty has a stroke and loses his ability to speak.

When Callie is seven years old, the 1967 Detroit Riot erupts, and while most of the Stephanides family spend their time hiding in the attic, Milton spends the period crouched inside the Zebra Room, holding a gun. Fearing for her father's life, Callie sneaks out to save him on her bike. A man throws a Molotov cocktail into the Zebra Room, although by this point Milton and Callie are safe. The insurance payout is large, and allows the Stephanides family to buy a Cadillac and move to the affluent suburb of Grosse Pointe, where they live in a strange house on a street called Middlesex Boulevard. Callie befriends her neighbor, a little girl called Clementine, and the two girls begin to sexually experiment together. However, then Clementine's father dies, and she and her mother move away. At the same time, Lefty has another stroke. His mind deteriorates, to the point that he forgets whole periods of his life and thinks he is living in another era. He reveals the secret that he and Desdemona are brother and sister, but no one in the family believes him, assuming he is speaking nonsense. Eventually, he dies. Despondent, Desdemona gets into bed with

the plan of never getting out again. She remains there for 10 years.

Later on, Milton opens a chain of hot dog restaurants called Hercules Hot Dogs. At 12 years old, Callie notices that other girls her age have grown breasts and started their periods, and is concerned that this hasn't happened to her. She now attends the private Baker & Inglis School for Girls, where she is socially excluded due to her class background and Greek ethnic identity. Chapter Eleven comes home from college a totally transformed person; having embraced countercultural style and ideology, he has grown his hair long, drives a motorbike, and has started meditating and taking acid. Meanwhile, in Mr. da Silva's advanced English class, Callie develops a crush on her classmate, whom she nicknames the Obscure Object. When the two girls are cast in a production of [Antigone](#), they develop a friendship.

Just as the first (and only) performance of [Antigone](#) is due to begin, another girl in Callie's class, Hettie Grossinger, collapses onstage from a brain aneurism and dies. Over the summer, Callie and the Obscure Object become inseparable. Callie meets the Object's brother, Jerome, whom she finds annoying. Callie and her family are supposed to go on a trip back to their ancestral village of Bithynios, but the Turkish invasion of Cyprus prevents this from happening, and Callie goes to the Object's summer house in Petoskey instead. There, Callie gets drunk and high on marijuana and has sex with Jerome while the Object hooks up with Jerome's friend, Rex Reese. However, shortly after this Callie and the Object start having sex themselves, although they do not verbally acknowledge that this is happening. Callie notices that her genitals look different from the Objects', but this doesn't particularly bother her.

Soon after, Jerome catches the girls having sex on the porch, and accuses them of being "Carpet munchers." Callie punches him and spits in his face, and while running away gets hit by a tractor. The Obscure Object rushes Callie to hospital, and on the way they kiss. However, this is the last time they will ever see each other. In hospital, the doctors are shocked to find that Callie is intersex. She is sent to New York to see a famous sexologist, Dr. Luce, who specializes in intersex conditions. While staying in New York for Callie's examination, Milton and Tessie try to pretend like they are having a fun vacation, but Callie is miserable. After learning that she is actually more biologically male than female, but that Dr. Luce wants to give her hormones and surgery to confirm a female identity, Callie decides to run away and assume a male gender identity, changing his name to Cal.

Cal hitchhikes across the country, cutting his hair short and acquiring men's clothes en route. He is picked by various shady people, including a man who tries to have sex with him named Ben Scheer and another man named Bob Presto. In San Francisco, Cal lives in a park with a group of young homeless Deadheads. After he runs out of money and is beaten up by two

homeless men who discover he used to have female gender identity, Cal calls Bob for help. Back in Detroit, Milton and Tessie are distraught at Cal's ongoing absence. They try everything they can to find him (although at this point they still think of him as "her"), to no avail. One day, Milton gets a phone call from someone claiming to have kidnapped Cal and asking for a ransom of \$25,000. Milton agrees to pay it immediately. In San Francisco, Cal ends up performing as "the god Hermaphroditus" at Bob's sex club, Sixty-Niners. He performs alongside an intersex person named Zora and a trans woman named Carmen. Cal lives with Zora, and from her gains knowledge and appreciation about intersex people. Zora is proud of her condition and writing a book called *The Sacred Hermaphrodite*. One night, Sixty-Niners is raided by police, and Cal is arrested.

Without telling anyone what he is doing, Milton drives to the agreed upon place to deliver the ransom money, and is shocked to find that the "kidnapper" is Father Mike. A car chase ensues, and Milton realizes that Mike robbed him and is planning to flee to Canada. Mike makes it over the Canadian border, and while trying to follow him Milton ends up driving off a bridge and into the Detroit River. Chapter Eleven comes to pick Cal up from jail in San Francisco and is surprisingly accepting of Cal's new identity. The brothers fly back to Detroit together. Cal reunites with Tessie and also Desdemona, who remains bedridden. Desdemona is now also senile, and initially thinks Cal is Lefty when she sees him. When Cal explains that he is intersex and transgender, Desdemona reveals the secret that she and Lefty were brother and sister. While Tessie and Chapter Eleven go to Milton's funeral, Cal decides to stay and guard the door of the house to stop Milton's spirit reentering, a Greek tradition performed by a male relative of the deceased.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Cal/lie Stephanides** – Cal/lie is the protagonist and narrator of the novel. Born in Detroit in 1960 to Milton and Tessie Stephanides (who are cousins), Callie is the second child after her brother, Chapter Eleven. Callie is assigned female gender identity at birth by a distracted Dr. Philobosian. Unbeknown to anyone, Callie carries two copies of a recessive **gene** that has been in her family for 250 years and that she inherited from her grandparents, Lefty and Desdemona, that causes her to be intersex. Callie is a pretty ordinary little girl, somewhat quiet though perceptive about the world. When she undergoes puberty, Callie begins to realize that she is different from the other girls at her private high school, Baker & Inglis. She doesn't get her period or breasts, and grows extremely tall. Furthermore, she develops a sexual interest in other girls—first her neighbor, Clementine Stark, and then a girl in her English class who later becomes her best friend, the Obscure Object.

Callie's romantic friendship with the Obscure Object is an intense and pivotal moment in her life, which culminates in Callie having a fight with Jerome, the Object's brother, which in turn leads Callie to get hit by a tractor and, in the hospital, finally discover her intersex condition. In some ways, Callie is a timid person—she is dutiful and studious, sensitive to other people's feelings—yet she also has occasional moments of rebellion. The most important instance of rebellion is when Callie is taken to New York City to see Dr. Luce about her condition—she ends up changing her name to Cal and adopting a male gender identity after discovering that Dr. Luce wants to surgically adjust her body to resemble a “normal” woman. Having undergone this gender transition, Cal runs away to San Francisco, where he is homeless for a while and works as a performer in a sex club. Cal eventually returns to his family and then joins the Foreign Service, where he is stationed in Berlin. There, he decides to write his memoir (which ends up being *Middlesex*) and meets an artist, Julie, with whom he starts a relationship.

**Desdemona Stephanides** – Desdemona is Cal and Chapter Eleven's grandmother, Milton and Zoë's mother, and Lefty's wife and sister. Born in Bithynios, a small village on Mount Olympus near Bursa, Asia Minor (which is part of modern-day Turkey), Desdemona initially has a simple, rural life. She is a talented silk worker, and after her parents die she takes it upon herself to take care of her only remaining immediate family member, her brother Lefty. However, Lefty and Desdemona end up falling in love. When the Greco-Turkish war forces Lefty and Desdemona to flee their homeland and emigrate to the U.S., Desdemona is initially unenthused. She is uncertain about the prospect of marrying Lefty and does not share his excitement and optimism about life in the U.S. However, they end up engaging in a fake courtship and getting married on the boat. Once they arrive in Detroit, they meet up with their cousin Sourmelina (who promises to keep the fact that they're siblings a secret) and Lina's husband, Jimmy Zizmo. Desdemona does not feel as enthusiastic about her new home as Lefty does, and does not make the same effort to assimilate (e.g., while Lefty becomes fluent in English quickly, Desdemona does not learn for a long time). This is partly due to the fact that she remains in the traditional role of a wife during this era, staying home to take care of the household and raise the two children she and Lefty have together, Milton (who is conceived at the same time as Sourmelina's daughter, Theodora) and Zoë. During the Great Depression Lefty asks Desdemona to get a job, and she ends up briefly working for the Nation of Islam, teaching young female followers of the movement how to make silk and showing them the **silkworm box** she brought with her to the U.S. This experience opens Desdemona's mind, encouraging her to be critical about injustice and anti-black racism. After Lefty dies, Desdemona gets into bed and stays there for 10 years. She desperately wants to die herself, and curses the fact that she remains alive. At the end of the novel,

when she sees Cal after his gender transition, Desdemona confesses the secret that she and Lefty were siblings and apologizes to Cal for their role in causing his intersex condition. She gives Cal permission to share her secret after her death, which eventually comes in 1980.

**Eleutherios “Lefty” Stephanides** – Lefty is Cal and Chapter Eleven's grandfather, Milton and Zoë's father, and Desdemona's husband and brother. Also born in Bithynios, as a man Lefty has more freedom than Desdemona, and he is also less mature and responsible than her. He has a weakness for gambling, which causes him problems throughout his life. Desdemona attempts to set Lefty up with girls from their village, but because he is in love with Desdemona herself, Lefty rejects them. He and Desdemona end up immigrating to the U.S. and getting married on the boat ride over. In their new country, the newlyweds meet up with their cousin Sourmelina (who promises to keep the fact that they're siblings a secret) and Lina's husband, Jimmy Zizmo. Lefty takes a job at the Ford Motor Company and learns English, although he is then fired by Ford for living in the house of someone (Jimmy) who has a criminal record. Lefty briefly gets involved in Jimmy's bootlegging business, then opens a speakeasy called the Zebra Room in his basement after Jimmy is seemingly killed in a car accident. Once Prohibition ends, Lefty reopens the Zebra Room as a proper diner, which Milton eventually inherits. Lefty is intelligent, resourceful, and charming. He enjoys spending time making translations of works of Ancient Greek literature, although this always remains a hobby, never something he does professionally. In his old age, Lefty has multiple strokes, the first of which leaves him unable to speak. Despite his failing health, he remains physically fit and helpful around the house. He has a special connection with Callie, and there is a sense that when he dies, he passes on some of himself to her.

**Milton (Militadies) Stephanides** – Milton is Tessie's husband and cousin, Cal and Chapter Eleven's father, and Lefty and Desdemona's son. His Greek name is Militadies, although throughout his life he is only known as his Anglicized name, Milton. Born in the Detroit, Milton is in many ways the most “all-American” of the Stephanides family. He is a Boy Scout and plays the clarinet, which he uses to seduce his cousin, Tessie, by blowing the instrument on different parts of her body. After Tessie rejects him to marry Michael Antoniou, Milton is so furious that he joins the Navy (a rather unwise decision considering this happens during World War II). However, this decision ultimately ends up working out well for Milton, as he is accepted into the Naval Academy and after the war is able to take out a G.I. loan to start his own business. He also ends up marrying Tessie, who realizes she loves him and not Mike. In several ways, Milton exemplifies the American dream—born to immigrants who came to the country with nothing, Milton serves his country and is then able to build a prosperous business, which takes the form of a chain of hot hog restaurants

called Hercules Hot Dogs. At the same time, Milton also exemplifies the dark sides of the U.S. Fiercely patriotic, Milton is proud of his Greek identity but ends up rejecting it and alienating his Greek friends when he feels as if American foreign policy forces him to choose between his loyalty to the U.S. and Greece. Moreover, Milton is also a bigot who is prejudiced against black people, gay people, and feminists (among others). At the same time, he is a loving father, and ultimately dies trying to rescue Cal from a fake kidnapper who turns out to be Father Mike.

**Theodora “Tessie” Stephanides** – Theodora (who starts going by “Tessie” as a teenager) is Milton’s wife and cousin, Cal and Chapter Eleven’s mother, and Sourmelina and Jimmy’s only child. She is a quiet, conventional, and dutiful person, which Cal explains was a result of her rebelling against her loud, nonconformist mother. She is very short, slender, and beautiful, and Cal describes her as more American-looking than either Sourmelina or Cal himself. Tessie is briefly engaged to Michael Antoniou, who is by far the more sensible choice for a future husband, but ultimately can’t deny her feelings for her cousin Milton, and marries him instead. Although Milton and Tessie’s relationship is at times conflict-prone, they clearly love each other. Tessie is also a loving and caring mother, though her prudishness around bodies and sex means that she is not very helpful to Callie while Callie is going through puberty. After Milton’s death, Tessie moves with her cousin Zoë to New Smyrna Beach in Florida.

**Chapter Eleven Stephanides** – Chapter Eleven is Cal’s older brother, Milton and Tessie’s first child. (His unconventional name is never explained, and the reader never learns if it is his given name or a nickname.) As a child, he is nerdy and unpopular, but after narrowly avoiding being drafted into the Vietnam War and beginning college at the University of Michigan, he undergoes a drastic transformation. Influenced by the countercultural movements of the late 1960s and early ‘70s, Chapter Eleven grows out his hair, starts meditating, takes acid, buys a motorbike, and becomes a vegetarian. He also—to the horror of his parents—switches his major from engineering to anthropology, before dropping out altogether. After Cal runs away from home, Chapter Eleven begins spending more time with his parents again, and agrees to take over Hercules Hot Dogs. However, following Milton’s death, Chapter Eleven drives the business into the ground within five years.

**Sourmelina Zizmo** – Sourmelina Zizmo is Lefty and Desdemona’s cousin, Jimmy’s wife, and Tessie’s mother. Also born in Bithynios, she immigrates to the U.S. before Lefty and Desdemona, and immediately takes to life there. It is revealed that the reason why she was sent away from the village is because her parents discovered she was a lesbian. It’s for this reason that Lefty and Desdemona trust Sourmelina to keep the secret of their illicit relationship as brother and sister. In the U.S., Sourmelina marries Jimmy Zizmo and has one child with

him, Tessie (who is conceived at the same time as Desdemona’s son, Milton). She is a bold, brash, unconventional person with an obvious vitality and love of life. When Jimmy dies (or, as the reader learns later, fakes his own death), Sourmelina never remarries. The fact that she is a lesbian eventually becomes more of an open secret, particularly after she moves to New Mexico to live with her girlfriend, Mrs. Evelyn Watson. However, people do not discuss Lina’s lesbianism openly until after her death.

**Jimmy Zizmo a.k.a. Minister Fard** – Jimmy Zizmo is Sourmelina’s husband and Tessie’s father. He changed his name from Zisimopoulos while immigrating to the U.S. A mysterious man, he has a criminal record and is involved in various criminal operations, particularly bootlegging. He is a teetotaler and vegetarian, and is obsessed with herbal medicine. During Prohibition, Jimmy gets into the alcohol-smuggling business with Lefty, but Jimmy’s behavior grows increasingly erratic and he eventually accuses Lefty of getting Sourmelina pregnant. During a bootlegging trip gone wrong, Zizmo appears to die by driving his car into a frozen lake. However, later Desdemona learns that he actually faked his own death, and reappeared with a new identity: Minister Fard, the Founder of the Nation of Islam (who was a real person, although in reality this person was, of course, not Jimmy Zizmo). While working at the NOI temple, Desdemona listens to Fard’s lectures about the white race, which he claims are the invention of an evil scientist named Yacub. After getting in trouble for his association with a human sacrifice performed by a cult, Fard briefly reveals his identity to Desdemona, then disappears.

**Dr. Luce** – Dr. Luce is a famous sexologist who specializes in considering the world expert on intersex conditions. He is seeking to prove a social construction theory of gender, meaning that the way in which a person is raised has a greater impact on how they identify than their biology. He is thrilled to meet Callie, who is intersex and is therefore a perfect test subject for him, but ends up subjecting Callie to unethical, invasive, and patronizing treatment. Without gaining Callie’s consent, Dr. Luce recommends that she undergo hormone treatment and surgery to make herself more like a “normal” woman, despite the fact that Callie’s biological sex is closer to male than female.

**Dr. Nishan Philobosian** – Dr. Philobosian is an Armenian doctor who Lefty and Desdemona meet in Smyrna during the city’s brutal destruction by the Turkish Army. Dr. Philobosian hopes that he will be kept safe by the fact that he treated the Turkish Commander in Chief, Mustafa Kemal Pasha. However, his family ends up being slaughtered, leaving Dr. Philobosian suicidal. Lefty and Desdemona bring him with them to the U.S., where he ends up settling in the same Greek community as them in Detroit and serving as their family doctor. He marries the nurse who helps him to deliver Callie.

**Michael Antoniou (“Father Mike”)** – Michael is from the same

Greek community in Detroit as the Stephanides family. While he is a young man training to be a priest, he is briefly engaged to Tessie, although when she ultimately rejects him to marry Milton he marries Tessie's cousin Zoë instead. The couple have four children: Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, and Cleopatra. A very short man, Michael initially seems caring, meek, and dignified, a pillar of righteousness in the community. However, at the end of the novel, when he tries to rob Milton and flee to Canada by pretending to have kidnapped Callie, it is revealed that his impression is completely false. Mike is actually greedy, selfish, desperate, and angry. He never gets over being "beaten" by Milton for Tessie's affections. After Milton dies in the car chase between him and Mike, Mike confesses everything to the police and is sentenced to two years in jail.

**Zoë Antoniou ("Aunt Zo")** – Zoë is Father Mike's wife, Lefty and Desdemona's second child, Milton's sister, and Tessie's cousin. She is not a particularly prominent character in the novel and is described as a "wallflower," although Cal notes that he always liked her. She comes to regret marrying Father Mike and detests the life of a priest's wife. When Father Mike is arrested for posing as a kidnapper and attempting to rob Milton, Zoë divorces him and moves to New Smyrna Beach, Florida, with Tessie.

**The Obscure Object** – The Obscure Object is a girl who attends Baker & Inglis with Callie and is also in Mr. da Silva's advanced English class. (Her name is a nickname Callie chose for her in order to preserve her privacy in the narrative.) She is beautiful, slender, and covered in freckles, and comes from a wealthy WASP family. At school, she ignores Callie, but after they are cast in a production of [Antigone](#) together they become friends. Their friendship is very intimate, and escalates quickly. Callie ends up coming on vacation with the Obscure Object's family to Petoskey. During this trip, after both girls hook up with boys, they start having sex with each other. When the Object's brother, Jerome, catches them having sex and Callie gets hit by a tractor while running away from him, the Object takes Callie to the hospital, holding her in her lap and kissing her. After this incident (which leads to Cal discovering he is intersex, undergoing gender transition, and running away to San Francisco), the two lovers never see each other again.

**Rex Reese** – Rex is a wealthy, obnoxious teenage boy who accidentally killed his girlfriend in a drunk-driving accident and whose parents also have a house in Petoskey. He and the Obscure Object hook up for a while, but after the Object and Callie's relationship turns sexual, the Object loses interest in Rex.

**Julie Kikuchi** – Julie is a Japanese-American artist whom Cal meets in Berlin. Cal is initially entranced by her, although he struggles to work up the courage to be intimate with her, due to lingering feelings of shame about his intersex condition. When Cal eventually reveals the truth about himself, Julie accepts him for who he is.

**Zora** – Zora is a beautiful intersex person whom Cal meets in San Francisco. He lives in Zora's house and works with her at a sex club called Sixty-Niners. Zora is proud of being intersex, and doesn't want to identify as a woman even though she physically passes as a cis woman. She passes on her knowledge and pride about being intersex to Cal. Zora only dates lesbians, is a heavy drinker, and is writing a book about intersex people called *The Sacred Hermaphrodite*.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Jerome** – Jerome is the Obscure Object's older brother. He is obnoxious and annoying, and has a crush on Callie. The two briefly have sex, after which Callie rejects him. When he catches Callie and the Object having sex and tells Callie to leave his sister alone, Callie attacks him.

**Mr. Object** – Mr. Object is the Obscure Object's wealthy father. He served in World War II, and can be inferred to have issues with alcohol (due to the fact that he drinks and drives with Callie in the car on the way to Petoskey).

**Mrs. Object** – Mrs. Object is the Obscure Object's mother.

**Beulah** – Beulah is the Obscure Object's family's maid.

**Clementine Stark** – Clementine is Callie's neighbor on Middlesex Boulevard in Grosse Pointe when she is a young girl. The two girls become friends and sexually experiment with each other. However, Clementine's father then dies and she and her mother move away.

**Carmen** – Carmen is a trans woman who works with Zora and Cal as a performer at Sixty-Niners. She is saving up for gender confirmation surgery.

**Bob Presto** – Bob Presto is the owner of Sixty-Niners club. A slightly sketchy man, he nonetheless takes care of Cal after picking him up as a hitchhiker on the way to San Francisco.

**Wilhelmina** – Wilhelmina is Bob's girlfriend.

**Mr. da Silva** – Mr. da Silva is the teacher of Callie's Advanced English class. Originally from Brazil, he has visited Greece and encourages Callie to embrace her Greek identity.

**Maxine Grossinger** – Maxine Grossinger is Callie's neighbor and another girl in Mr. da Silva's advanced English class. She is the only Jewish student at Baker & Inglis. She dies of a brain aneurism onstage in the class' production of [Antigone](#).

**Hettie Grossinger** – Hettie is Maxine's mother.

**Sam Grossinger** – Sam is Maxine's father.

**Sophie Sassoon** – Sophie is a member of the Detroit Greek community and owns a salon where Callie gets her mustache waxed.

**Meg** – Meg is Chapter Eleven's Marxist girlfriend, whom he meets at college.

**Morrison** – Morrison is a black man who lives across the street

from the Zebra Room. He is killed by the military during the 1967 race riots.

**Sister Wanda** – Sister Wanda is a member of the Nation of Islam who hires Desdemona.

**Matt** – Matt is a young homeless man and Deadhead (follower of the Grateful Dead) whom Cal meets in San Francisco. They become friends and live in the park together.

**Ben Scheer** – Ben Scheer is a sophisticated, bohemian gay man who picks Cal up as a hitchhiker and attempts to have sex with him.

**Ed** – Ed is a barber in Scranton, Pennsylvania who cuts off Cal's long hair.

**Dr. Bauer** – Dr. Bauer is a gynecologist who Tessie tries to take Callie to see. The Obscure Object describes him as a “pervert.”

**Mr. Go** – Mr. Go is a patron of Sixty-Niners.

**Peter Takakis (“Uncle Pete”)** – Uncle Pete is a friend of the Stephanides family in Detroit. He is a chiropractor.

**Socrates** – Socrates is one of Zoë and Father Mike's children, and is thus Cal's cousin.

**Plato** – Plato is one of Zoë and Father Mike's children.

**Aristotle** – Aristotle is one of Zoë and Father Mike's children.

**Cleopatra** – Cleopatra is one of Zoë and Father Mike's children.

**Euphrosyne Stephanides** – Euphrosyne was Lefty and Desdemona's mother, and thus Cal's great-grandmother. She lived and died in Bithynios.

**Lucille Kafkalis** – Lucille is an unattractive young woman who is one of the only two marriageable women in Bithynios. Desdemona attempts to set her up with Lefty.

**Victoria Pappas** – Victoria is the other eligible woman in Bithynios. She is also unattractive.

**General Hajienestis** – General Hajienestis is the leader of the Greek army in Smyrna. He ends up choosing to abandon the city.

**Mustafa Kemal Pasha** – Mustafa Kemal Pasha is the Commander-in-Chief of the Turkish Army during the invasion of Smyrna. He later becomes the first president of Turkey, changing his last name to Atatürk.

**Henry Ford** – Henry Ford is the founder of the Ford Motor Company, and is one of the most famous businessmen in history.

**Father Stylianopoulos** – Father Stylianopoulos is a priest at Assumption Greek Orthodox Church in Detroit.

**Gaia Vasilakis** – Gaia is a young woman whom Desdemona unsuccessfully tries to set up with Milton.

**Mrs. Evelyn Watson** – Mrs. Evelyn Watson is Sourmelina's girlfriend. They live together in New Mexico until Evelyn's death.

**Marius Wyzzewixard Challouehliczilczese Grimes** – Marius is a patron of the Zebra Room and a member of the Black Power Movement. He is fond of Callie, but Milton thinks of him as a “troublemaker” and bans Callie from talking to him.



## 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.



### REBIRTH VS. CONTINUITY

*Middlesex* can be read as a Bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel)—but rather than depicting the process of growing up as a gradual progression toward one's final, true self, it instead portrays growing up as a series of rebirths and reinventions. This is mainly shown through the main character, Cal, who is assigned a female gender identity at birth but transitions to a male gender identity after discovering that he is intersex. While this is the central rebirth that occurs in the novel, it is far from the only one—indeed, the novel suggests that human life itself is defined by a continual series of rebirths and reinventions. At the same time, the novel also explores the concept of continuity, not only in the sense of an individual's continuous identity, but continuity over multiple generations of the same family, community, or culture. As a result, the book ultimately shows that life is defined by both rebirth *and* continuity, and that rebirth itself might actually *facilitate* a certain kind of continuity.

Due to being intersex and undergoing gender transition, the novel's protagonist, Cal, frames his journey through life not as a linear process, but rather as involving (at least) two distinct rebirths. Through this narrative, the book explores the idea that sex and gender are so fundamental to who a person is that learning one is intersex and transitioning from one gender to another involves a total reinvention of someone's identity, such that they can actually be considered a different person. Moreover, Cal exacerbates this process of reinvention by actions such as changing his name, running away from home, and (eventually) emigrating from the U.S. to Germany, intensifying the notion that he has been reborn into a whole other person. The idea that Cal's life has been a series of rebirths is introduced in the very first paragraph of the novel: “I was born twice: first, as a baby girl [...] in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974.” Shortly after, Cal elaborates on what he means and how his identity has changed during these births: “My birth certificate lists my name as

Calliope Helen Stephanides. My most recent driver's license (from the Federal Republic of Germany) records my name simply as Cal [...] But now, at the age of forty-one, I feel another birth coming on." By mentioning these different forms of identification, Cal shows how the official recognition of a person's identity can make it seem as if someone who undergoes a gender transition is indeed two different people. Moreover, this quotation links gender transition to migration (from the U.S. to Germany) as two forms of rebirth, a very important idea in the novel.

Yet while Cal himself describes his life as being a series of rebirths, the novel also shows the continuity between the version of Cal who identified as a girl and grew up in Detroit, and the version who identifies as a man and runs away from home, eventually landing in Berlin. The novel calls into question the extent to which a person can reinvent themselves when so much is shaped by their cultural and biological heritage. One way in which the novel explores the limits of rebirth is, again, through Cal's narrative voice. Although once Cal transitions to male gender identity he refers to his past self in the third person, he still refers to his current self in the first person, just as he did when originally narrating his life as a child who had been assigned female identity. This creates a sense of continuity that persists through Cal's rebirths. He might be different *versions* of the same person—but he is ultimately still the same person. This point is also demonstrated through Cal's name, which is Calliope when he is born and Cal after he transitions. Cal's decision to change to a different version of his previous name highlights continuity amidst change. Another way in which the novel explores this sense of continuity is through its depiction of Cal's family. Because the novel is an epic family saga depicting multiple generations of the Stephanides clan, the reader witnesses how the birth of each child is also a *rebirth* of the family as a whole. Indeed, the birth of a child can significantly change a family's dynamic, as when the birth of Cal's father Milton causes a shift in the relationship between Cal's grandparents, Lefty and Desdemona. While previously their relationship was very egalitarian for the time, Lefty feels bitter and jealous of the baby, which makes him more conservative: "As Lefty began to feel left out, he retaliated with tradition." Nonetheless, there is also strong sense in which the birth of each child reinforces the existing traits of the family, replicating these traits on and on into the future.

While Cal's discovery that he is intersex and his subsequent gender transition is certainly the most central and important rebirth in the book, it is not the only one. Indeed, just as Cal's own moves to San Francisco and Berlin are part of his process of reinventing himself as he grows up, other characters also treat moving and migration as grounds for reinvention. This includes Cal's grandparents, Lefty and Desdemona, who are "reborn" as an engaged couple (rather than brother and sister, which they actually are) during their migration from Bithynios

to the U.S. The novel also shows reinvention and rebirth working in more mundane, small-scale ways, such as in the description of Lefty and Desdemona's sex life, which is repetitive yet always thrilling thanks to a particular corset Desdemona wears. Cal comments that "The corset made Desdemona new again," showing how rebirth is a pervasive, continuous part of human existence. Yet while in one sense the corset produces a kind of reinvention of Desdemona, this reinvention is itself a repeated ritual that is part of Lefty's faithful, predictable love for his wife. In this life, rebirth is shown to facilitate continuity, rather than negating it.



## ANCESTRY, INHERITANCE, AND FATE

As an epic family saga depicting multiple generations of a Greek immigrant family to the U.S., *Middlesex* emphasizes the importance of ancestry and underlines that everyone's fate is (at least in part) determined by their social and biological inheritance. In many ways, this is presented as a positive thing, and emphasizes the value of family, history, and culture. Yet this determinism also causes trouble for the characters, as not everything they inherit is desirable. Moreover, feeling like their existence is controlled by their inherited fate robs them of their own autonomy. Ultimately, the book suggests that although ancestry and inheritance are important parts of life, they are not the *only* factor controlling a person's fate.

One way in which the novel shows how people's fates are determined by their ancestry is through biological inheritance, yet this depiction of biology is closely tied to social factors. Cal inherits a recessive **gene** that makes him intersex, which occurred because of the actions of his grandparents, who got married and had a child despite the fact that they were brother and sister. While the book emphasizes that biological inheritance is a significant factor determining a person's fate, it also indicates that it doesn't make much sense to consider biology in isolation. Instead, biological inheritance is intimately linked to culture, which can similarly be passed down through generations and influence children's fates.

The incest that leads to Cal being intersex is a perfect example of how biological and social forms of inheritance interact. Not only does Cal inherit the gene that has been within his family for 250 years, but incest itself is also "passed down" within his family. Incest was a normal practice in the isolated town, Bithynios, where the Stephanides family come from. However, even after they relocate to America it continues when Lefty and Desdemona's son Milton (himself a product of incest) marries the daughter, Tessie, of his parents' cousin, Sourmelina. In a sense, it seems as though the Stephanides family are fated to have incestuous relationships. Moreover, incest then creates a biological fate for subsequent generations through the gene that makes Cal intersex. Cal encapsulates this fusing of social and biological heritage when he writes, "Parents are supposed

to pass down physical traits to their children, but it's my belief that all sorts of other things get passed down, too: motifs, scenarios, even fates."

The theme of ancestry, inheritance, and fate is also explored through the motif of Greek mythology, which also comes to have a kind of clever double significance in this regard. Greek mythology is Cal's cultural inheritance because he is from a Greek American family. Yet questions of ancestry, inheritance, and fate are also important themes *within* Greek mythology. Cal describes himself as having an "obsession" with fate that is linked not only to the biological "fate" he was given by being intersex, but also to his cultural heritage. At one point, he jokes, "Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic, too." The humor lies within the fact that although Cal is ethnically Greek, getting Homeric (speaking in a way reminiscent of Homer, the ancient Greek writer of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) is not truly genetic—instead it is a matter of culture. Yet this statement illustrates the notion that Cal's life has been determined by his ancestral heritage.

The influence of Cal's heritage on his fate is further emphasized through the meaning of his birth name, Calliope, which is the name of Muse in charge of epic poetry. In Greek mythology, the Muses are goddesses who preside over the science and arts, giving inspiration to people. Reflecting on the meaning of the name Calliope, Cal says, "Hers was the duty to live out a mythical life in the actual world, mine to tell about it now." (Note that by "her" he means his former self, before he underwent gender transition.) The word "duty" indicates that Cal's name gave him a particular fate, and that by changing his name (along with his gender identity), he was able to have a different fate while still being connected to the "mythical life" his birth name bestowed on him.

Indeed, the novel ultimately lands on the idea that the fates people inherit, while they can be difficult to escape, can still be changed. Cal states this most explicitly in the following lines: "In the twentieth century, genetics brought the Ancient Greek notion of fate into our very cells. This new century we've just begun has found something different [...] free will is making a comeback. Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind." This is a crucial quotation because it shows how biological determinism (the idea that people's fates are predetermined by their genes) is in some ways simply a reimagining of the Ancient Greek idea of fate. Ultimately, the novel rejects this deterministic view, showing that while ancestry and inheritance play a strong part in shaping a person's fate, they do not wholly determine it.

## FALSE BINARIES

*Middlesex* interrogates the binaries that many people take for granted, highlighting that in general, most of these binaries are actually false. This is primarily explored through the binary of sex and gender, which

is one of the most essential building blocks of Western society. Yet as an intersex person who undergoes a gender transition, Cal's life experience illuminates how false the sex and gender binary truly is. Through its depiction of gender fluidity, unconventional sexualities, immigrant identity, and shifting historical events, the novel shows that binaries tend not to accurately represent the world—in reality, human life is made up of many different parts that can fuse, overlap, and evolve into new categories.

At first glance, the book could be read as being structured in accordance with the sex and gender binary, although on closer inspection the narrative actually disrupts this binary. There is a major break in Cal's life when he transitions from female to male gender identity, and he even ends up discussing his former self while living as female as a different person. Yet the fact that Cal is intersex shows that he was never fully on one side of the binary or the other. Indeed, Cal's condition shows that the sex binary itself is false. Moreover, toward the end of the novel, Cal says that he never felt uncomfortable being a girl and doesn't truly feel like a man either. His reflection suggests that, although he is living as a man, his experience does not fall clearly on either side of the binary.

The novel also explores the disruption of the sex binary through its depiction of evolving understandings of what it means to be intersex. Callie is born in 1960 and realizes s/he is intersex in 1974, when much less was known about intersex conditions than is true today. Indeed, Cal notes that even the term "intersex" was rarely used then; "hermaphrodite" was more common instead. This word, which Cal sometimes uses in the novel (despite the fact that in the present, many consider it offensive) comes from Greek mythology. It is derived from the name of a god, Hermaphroditus, who was the child of Hermes and Aphrodite, the god and goddess of sex. When a female water nymph, Salmacis, fell in love with Hermaphroditus, a god answered her wish to be fused with him, and the two became a single, bigender person. After Cal's gender transition, he moves to San Francisco and performs as "Hermaphroditus," embracing both his intersex identity and Greek heritage. He is encouraged to do so by another intersex person, Zora, who tells him that intersex people have a special and important role in human culture: "There have been hermaphrodites around forever, Cal. Forever. Plato said that the original human being was a hermaphrodite. Did you know that? The original person was two halves, one male, one female. Then these got separated. That's why everybody's always searching for their other half. Except for us. We've got both halves already." Although Zora's words could be interpreted as reinforcing binary thinking, she also shows Cal that he can embrace his intersex identity rather than hiding it and pretending to be a biologically "typical" man or woman. This represents a major development in Cal's life and his relationship to his own identity.

The novel also hints at the falseness of binaries through its



depiction of marginalized sexualities. Although Cal is largely attracted to women, she also has a sexual experience with the brother of her crush, the Obscure Object, suggesting that sexuality is rather fluid. The notion of fluid sexuality is further explored later in the novel when Cal's girlfriend, Julie, who is a Japanese American woman, says she was initially worried Cal was gay. She calls herself a "last stop," explaining, "Haven't you heard of that? Asian chicks are the last stops. If a guy's in the closet, he goes for an Asian because their bodies are more like boys." Here Julie's words suggest that gender isn't a simple, universal binary, but rather varies across racial lines, creating a kaleidoscope of racialized gender identities. There are also other characters that exist outside of a heterosexual framework within the novel, such as Sourmelina, who is a closeted lesbian (and in a sense thus also disrupts a binary, as she is a lesbian married to a man). Moreover, even the incest in the novel disrupts a binary—the binary between familial and sexual relationships. In different ways, all these examples indicate that binaries are overly simplistic ways of looking at the world.

Not all the disrupted binaries in the novel have anything to do with gender or sexuality, but all of them are ultimately proven to be false. Like many novels about the immigration experience, *Middlesex* depicts its characters struggling to reconcile their home culture with settling into their new country. Again, however, the novel ultimately suggests that the binary between Greek (in the case of Cal's family) and American is false. The Stephanides' embrace of a hybrid Greek-American identity is perhaps best (and most comically) demonstrated by Milton's restaurant chain, which is decorated with pillars "combined his Greek heritage with the colonial architecture of his beloved native land. Milton's pillars were the Parthenon and the Supreme Court Building; they were the Herakles of myth as well as the Hercules of Hollywood movies." Details like these show that pretty much everyone and everything are made up of multiple parts, and strict binaries do not represent the way the world actually is. As Cal observes toward the end of the novel, "We're all made up of many parts, other halves. Not just me."



## MIGRATION, ETHNICITY, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

*Middlesex* depicts multiple generations of a Greek immigrant family drawn to the U.S. by the American

Dream, yet ultimately shows that this dream—like the idea of America itself—is not what it advertises itself to be. It is true that for the generation of the Stephanides family who travel over, the U.S. represents a profound opportunity for self-reinvention, success, and happiness. However, the way this works out in reality—particularly for subsequent generations—is much more complicated. In particular, the novel highlights the issues of xenophobia, racism, classism, and economic depression to illustrate that life in the U.S. does not

live up to the myth promised by the American Dream. In the end, the main character, Cal, reverses the American Dream narrative by migrating out of the U.S. and hoping to eventually end up in Turkey, the part of the world his grandparents originally left.

In many ways, the novel contains the cliched tropes of immigrants who come to the U.S. seeking a better life and who develop a strong sense of patriotism about their new homeland as a result. In particular, it emphasizes that immigrating to America can be a chance for self-reinvention. This is true of Sourmelina, who enthusiastically assimilates into American culture, embracing the comparatively liberal attitudes around gender that exist there. As Cal describes: "Somehow in the course of her life Sourmelina had become an American. Almost nothing of the village remained in her." Meanwhile, Lefty and Desdemona also seize the chance for self-reinvention, using their distance from their homeland to keep hidden the fact that they are brother and sister and thus avoid scandal when they get married. Immigrants' enthusiastic embrace of American identity continues in subsequent generations, although it takes a different form—indeed, the novel suggests that intergenerational clashes over American identity are one of the key parts of the immigrant experience. Cal's father, Milton, is a patriot who embraces particularly conservative American political views and is obsessed with the history of the nation. Cal's parents' bedroom is "furnished entirely in Early American reproductions, it offers them connection (at discount prices) with the country's founding myths." Yet as a young Callie identifies, Milton's understanding of American history is actually rather erroneous. While Milton is furious about the 1967 Detroit Race Riot that forces his family to move home, Callie points out that the Boston Tea Party was also a riot. Yet Milton refutes this, angrily asking, "What the hell are they teaching you in that school of yours?" Callie herself, meanwhile, clashes with her mother, Tessie, when Callie expresses distaste for Greek food. She requests "normal food" instead, and when Tessie asks what she means, Callie replies, "American food." While each generation of the Stephanides family embraces the U.S. to some degree, this takes very different forms and leads them to clash with one another.

The book also highlights important ways in which the American Dream is actually more like a nightmare. It primarily does so through depicting the prominence of anti-immigrant sentiment, anti-black racism, and the economic decline of Detroit. Importantly, it shows how Greek Americans like the Stephanides family suffered from some of these issues while being complicit in perpetrating others. Among the hardships the Stephanides family face in America are xenophobia, ethnic prejudice, and economic struggles. As a young child, Callie feels at home in the U.S. and has every reason to believe that her family fits in there. However, this changes when she starts attending the private Baker & Inglis School for Girls. She

observes: “Until we came to Baker & Inglis my friends and I had always felt completely American. But now the Bracelets’ upturned noses suggested that there was another America to which we could never gain admittance. All of a sudden American wasn’t about hamburgers and hot rods anymore. It was about the *Mayflower* and Plymouth Rock.” Suddenly, Callie realizes that there are people who believe that recent immigrants—particularly those who are not of Western European descent—will never be “truly” American. Her self-consciousness about her own status is exacerbated by her crush on her best friend, the Obscure Object, whom Callie describes as having colors that “agree with the American landscape, her pumpkin hair, her apple cider skin.” Callie feels that she will never be able to live up to the American ideal that the Obscure Object represents and to which Callie compares herself. Similarly, although the Stephanides family initially achieves a moderate level of financial prosperity in the U.S., this does not last. Like many residents of Detroit, they are hit hard by the economic downturn of the 1970s and particularly the collapse of the automobile industry. Following Milton’s death, the family’s restaurant business goes bankrupt within four years (in part due to mismanagement by Cal’s brother, Chapter Eleven). At the end of the novel, Cal explains that he is glad that his father, Milton, died before he witnessed the devastated fortunes both of Detroit in general and the Stephanides family in particular.

At the same time, the novel also shows that the Stephanides family are not just victims of the negative sides of life in the U.S.—they are also perpetrators. This is particularly true regarding racial tensions between black Americans and white groups in Detroit. Like other Greek American characters in the novel, Milton is a perpetrator of anti-black racism, and also holds prejudiced views about other oppressed groups. These are encapsulated by his catchphrase, “The matter is with you,” which Cal explains in the following way: “It grew into a kind of mantra, the explanation for why the world was going to hell, applicable not only to African Americans but to feminists and homosexuals.” Although the Stephanides family themselves face prejudice and oppression, this does not necessarily lead them toward fair, just, and empathetic behavior. Often, it instead leads them to perpetuate oppression themselves. While the novel does show positive sides to life in the U.S., it also severely undercuts the myth of the American Dream.



## SECRETS

*Middlesex* is full of secrets. The novel suggests that secrets are a pervasive part of life and connect people to one another even when they don’t realize it (because of the very fact that they keep their secrets hidden). Indeed, certain truths about the novel—such as Cal’s intersex identity—is unbeknownst even to Cal himself for much of his youth. Yet while secrets might be everywhere, the novel also

shows that they do not tend to *stay* secret. Even if it takes many years or even multiple generations, secrets always come out—often with explosive results.

According to the novel, two of the main reasons why people keep secrets are ignorance and shame, factors that often end up working together. Indeed, ignorance and shame can make people keep secrets against their will, hiding truths about themselves that they would rather have out in the open. Yet as the novel shows, over the course of time both ignorance and shame tend to lessen in intensity, and for some characters—including Cal—this means that they can begin to live their truth later in life, even if they weren’t able to when they were younger. Cal’s status as intersex remains a secret for much of the novel due to the dual factors of ignorance and shame. Cal inherits the **gene** that makes him intersex due to his grandparents’ incestuous relationship; however, neither Cal nor his parents initially know the nature of Lefty and Desdemona’s relationship because of the shame surrounding incest. In other words, they are ignorant because of shame. When Callie is born, the doctor who examines her, Dr. Philobosian, is also ignorant about her condition; not realizing that she is intersex, he assigns her a female identity. However, after Cal finds out the truth about himself, he doesn’t reveal this truth to many people. He explains that he avoids hanging out with girls because he is worried that they will see the truth about him: “I stayed away from them, feeling they might guess my secret. I was like an immigrant, putting on airs, who runs into someone from the old country.” This quotation links Cal’s concealment of his trans and intersex identities to the secrets kept by first generation immigrants like his grandparents.

While some of the characters are able to keep secrets for many years, the novel heavily emphasizes that all secrets come out eventually. In some cases, this is simply by accident (such as when Callie’s injury from the tractor leads doctors to discover she is intersex), while at other times it is more deliberate. Importantly, the novel also shows that the revelation of secrets isn’t always linear. Sometimes a character exposes a secret only to take it back again. The revelation of Callie’s intersex condition after she is injured by a tractor is perhaps the best example of a secret being revealed completely accidentally. In other cases, there is more ambiguity over whether the revelation was accidental or intentional. For example, regarding Sourmelina’s secret that she is a lesbian, Cal explains, “My grandparents had every reason to believe that Sourmelina would keep their secret. She’d come to America with a secret of her own, a secret that would be guarded by our family until Sourmelina died in 1979, whereupon, like everyone’s secrets, it was posthumously declassified.” Lefty and Desdemona felt that the secret of their incestuous relationship was safe with Sourmelina because of her own secret. Yet as the novel illustrates, no secret is safe forever. Once Sourmelina dies, it becomes clear that her lesbianism was more of an open secret,

or at least something that most people knew was true on some level even if they didn't admit this to each other (or to themselves). The fact that Sourmelina dies in 1979 is also significant. By this point, changing attitudes toward homosexuality mean that the people around her are perhaps better equipped to understand her experience than they were when she was a young woman. The shame and ignorance that initially led her to keep her secret have begun to fade away.

Cal's reflection about Sourmelina's secret further underlines the idea that secrets almost have an internal energy of their own and will force themselves to be known at a certain point. This is also shown by the gene that causes Cal to be intersex. The gene is recessive, which means that many generations of Cal's family carried it, including his parents Milton and Tessie, even though they are not intersex (nor is Cal's brother, Chapter Eleven). The secret of the gene remains hidden within the bodies of the Stephanides family for 250 years. However, like the truth about Sourmelina, it eventually makes itself known, thereby serving as a reminder that nothing can be kept secret forever.



## SYMBOLS

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



## THE RECESSIVE GENE

Cal's intersex condition is caused by a recessive gene which has been in his family for 250 years.

The gene symbolizes the way that a person's fate is inherited from their family, while also highlighting how this fate is often not superficially obvious, but secret or hidden. This particular gene first emerges in Cal's family 250 years before his birth. Because it is recessive, a person must have two copies of the gene in order to actually become intersex, meaning that both of their parents must carry it. The fact that Cal's grandparents Lefty and Desdemona are brother and sister thus vastly increases his chances of inheriting the gene. Indeed, the whole concept of a recessive gene is vital to the novel's exploration of secrecy, inheritance, and fate. As in the case of the gene, people inherit fates from their ancestors, but not necessarily in a direct, immediate manner. A particular fate might lie dormant for many generations before making an unexpected appearance. The gene is also important in light of the novel's consideration of biological determinism and its similarity to Ancient Greek ideas about fate. While the gene could be interpreted as a classic example of biological determinism—because Cal's life is defined by a random genetic mutation that is then passed through his family via biological inheritance—Cal also disrupts this idea through his own reflections on the gene. When describing the origin of the

mutation, he claims that the “biological gods” created it, and that they decided that Cal would inherit it while his brother, Chapter Eleven, wouldn't. Through fusing religious and biological concepts in his description of the gene, Cal highlights the intimacy between these two seemingly different belief systems.



## THE SILKWORM BOX

The silkworm box is a wooden box originally hand-carved by Desdemona's grandfather back in Bithynios. Like the **recessive gene** that runs in Cal's family, the box is a symbol of ancestry, inheritance, and fate—yet it is also a way in which the novel explores the unexpected directions that inheritance and fate take. Having inherited the box from her grandfather, Desdemona uses it to store the most precious and significant items in her life. When she and Lefty leave Bithynios, they take very few possessions with them, but among the items that Desdemona carries is the silkworm box containing a few hundred silkworm eggs. The box thus symbolizes Desdemona's desire for continuity between her past life in Bithynios and her future life in the U.S., and the fact that the box makes it there with her shows that particular objects can be a powerful conduit between past and future, origin and destination. At the same time, the box is also a symbol of Desdemona's naïveté in hoping to stay connected to the past, and of the rupture that immigration inherently involves. When Desdemona gets to Ellis Island, immigration officials force her to dump out the silkworm eggs she brought with her. Lefty tells her that she won't need them because they don't make silk in the U.S. As it turns out, this isn't entirely true: Desdemona uses the box again when she starts working for the Nation of Islam making silk in Detroit. Of course, this isn't exactly what she had in mind when she brought the box over to the U.S. The silkworm box thus shows how continuity always involves unexpected changes and reinventions.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Picador edition of *Middlesex* published in 2002.

### Book 1: The Silver Spoon Quotes

☝ I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 3

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which occurs at the very beginning of the novel, introduces Cal's experience as an individual who has been both female and male. It introduces the importance of rebirth straight away, and indicates that the novel is about binaries—including, most importantly, the sex/gender binary—but is also invested in disrupting these binaries. Cal describes the medical incident that happened when he was a teenager (which the reader will later learn is the revelation that he is intersex) as being a kind of rebirth. Yet, despite this emphasis on reinvention and personal transformation, there is also an emphasis on *continuation* in this quotation. Cal is one person who has had two different identities. By crossing over the sex/gender binary and transitioning from female to male, he has a unique insight into the way in which that binary is both arbitrary and meaningful.

☛ Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome! Sing how it bloomed two and a half centuries ago on the slopes of Mount Olympus, while the goats bleated and the olives dropped. Sing how it passed down through nine generations, gathering invisibly within the polluted pool of the Stephanides family. And sing how Providence, in the guise of a massacre, sent the gene flying again; how it blew like a seed across the sea to America, where it drifted through our industrial rains until it fell to earth in the fertile soil of my mother's own midwestern womb.

Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic, too.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker), Theodora "Tessie" Stephanides

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 4

### Explanation and Analysis

In the introduction of the novel, Cal has stated that he was "born twice" and lived as both a girl and a boy all before he was 16 years old. He has also noted that he appears within an important study on the particular intersex condition that he has. Here, Cal adopts a faux-Homeric voice to summarize

the story he is about to tell in the novel. Homer was the author of the Ancient Greek epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. In this quotation, Cal adopts Homeric style as a way of paying tribute to his own Greek cultural heritage and hinting at the epic scope of the story he is about to tell. At the same time, he also appears to be lightly mocking himself by combining this florid style with more mundane subject matter (e.g., "the fertile soil of my mother's own midwestern womb").

This quotation is also significant due to the way it explores the connection between genetics and the idea of fate, which was very important in Ancient Greek culture. Cal describes the genetic mutation he inherits as having a will of its own, and determining the events that led to him being born. His statement at the end of the novel that for him, getting Homeric is "genetic" is something of a joke, too. On one level, Cal's connection to Homeric could be considered genetic insofar as he is genetically Greek. Yet, of course, it is not Cal's *genes* that determine his Homeric inclinations, but rather his cultural heritage.

## Book 1: The Silk Road Quotes

☛ Traveling made it easier. Sailing across the ocean among half a thousand perfect strangers conveyed an anonymity in which my grandparents could re-create themselves. The driving spirit on the *Giulia* was self-transformation. Staring out to sea, tobacco farmers imagined themselves as race car drivers, silk dyers as Wall Street tycoons, millinery girls as fan dancers in the *Ziegfeld Follies*. Gray ocean stretched in all directions. Europe and Asia Minor were dead behind them. Ahead lay America and new horizons.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker), Eleutherios "Lefty" Stephanides, Desdemona Stephanides

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 68

### Explanation and Analysis

After escaping Smyrna by pretending to be French citizens, Lefty and Desdemona board a ship in Athens that will take them to America. On the ship, they pretend not to know each other, and engage in a courtship as strangers. Cal explains that the purpose of this performance was not so much to trick other people as it was to trick themselves. Here, he observes that the journey to America was a chance for reinvention not just for Lefty and Desdemona, but all the migrants onboard. Journeying across the ocean, these migrants are eager to leave their old identities and struggles

behind and envision a new and better future for themselves. This quotation helps contextualize why the American Dream was so meaningful for immigrants. The economic prosperity America promises is significant—note that each of the immigrants cited here dreams of a more financially prosperous future for themselves—but this is not the only aspect of moving to America that appeals. Indeed, Cal stresses that the most important part of this journey is the opportunity it provides for self-reinvention. In a sense, when immigrants dream of America, they are not dreaming of a physical place so much as fantasizing about a future version of themselves.

## Book 2: Henry Ford's English-Language Melting Pot Quotes

☝☝ My grandparents had every reason to believe that Sourmelina would keep their secret. She'd come to America with a secret of her own, a secret that would be guarded by our family until Sourmelina died in 1979, whereupon, like everyone's secrets, it was posthumously declassified, so that people began to speak of "Sourmelina's girlfriends." A secret kept, in other words, only by the loosest definition, so that now—as I get ready to leak the information myself—I feel only a slight twinge of filial guilt.

Sourmelina's secret (as Aunt Zo put it): "Lina was one of those women they named the island after."

**Related Characters:** Zoë Antoniou ("Aunt Zo"), Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker), Eleutherios "Lefty" Stephanides, Sourmelina Zizmo, Desdemona Stephanides

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 85-86

### Explanation and Analysis

Lefty and Desdemona have successfully immigrated to the U.S. and have arrived in Detroit via train. There, Lefty greets their cousin, Sourmelina, and informs her that he has married Desdemona. In this quotation, Cal explains that Sourmelina was a closeted lesbian. During Sourmelina's life, this remains a secret (although it seems like more of an open secret that something that was truly unknown). However, after Sourmelina's death, people begin to discuss the truth of her sexual orientation. This quotation emphasizes the idea that secrets have a kind of force of their own, and will always eventually make themselves known.

While during her life Sourmelina's family were invested in

pretending they didn't know about her lesbianism—likely in part to maintain their sense of their own respectability—after her death this willingness to keep her secret fades. Nonetheless, note that even after Sourmelina dies and her secret is openly discussed, it is done using coded language. When Aunt Zo says that "Linea was one of those women they named the island after" (referring to the Greek island of Lesbos), she avoids explicitly articulating the full truth of Lina's life, as if she is afraid of it.

## Book 2: Minotaurs Quotes

☝☝ This once-divided city reminds me of myself My struggle for unification, for *Einheit*. Coming from a city still cut in half by racial hatred, I feel hopeful here in Berlin.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker), Eleutherios "Lefty" Stephanides, Sourmelina Zizmo, Desdemona Stephanides

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 106

### Explanation and Analysis

Cal has described the moment when Sourmelina and Desdemona realized that they were pregnant at the same time, and when they told Lefty this news after he graduated from the Ford English school and was immediately fired. This moment tied to Cal's own experience as an intersex man so many decades later, since Cal has explained that, like a lot of intersex people, he can't have children himself. This is part of the reason why he joined the Foreign Service: it means he is never in one place for very long, and theoretically won't be able to form long-lasting relationships in which he has to explain his condition or infertility. Here, Cal reflects on the connection between his own "struggle for unification" and the reunification of Berlin. In doing so, he suggests that the gender binary is, like the artificial division of East and West Berlin, damaging and arbitrary.

Cal's "struggle unification" emerges from his experience as transgender, intersex person who only discovered that he was intersex in his teenager years. It was initially a challenge for him to reconcile the fact that he had elements of both genders within him, although he now accepts that fact. Crucially, he also connects this to the experience of growing up in Detroit, a city that has a history of racial segregation and racial tensions. Cal reminds the reader that the struggle for unity is a common theme across many different

contexts—from gender identity issues to race relations.

☝ Parents are supposed to pass down physical traits to their children, but it's my belief that all sorts of other things get passed down, too: motifs, scenarios, even fates.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker), Sourmelina Zizmo, Jimmy Zizmo a.k.a. Minister Fard, Eleutherios “Lefty” Stephanides, Desdemona Stephanides

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 109

### Explanation and Analysis

Cal has explained how the “Simultaneous Fertilization” happened after Lefty, Desdemona, Jimmy, and Sourmelina went to see a racy production of *The Minotaur* at the theater. Although Desdemona’s objections meant that they left halfway through, in reality all four of them were turned on by the production, which led to both couples having sex and conceiving children (Milton and Tessie) at the same time. Here, Cal reflects on the nature of ancestry, inheritance, and fate. Indeed, his words constitute one of the main messages of the novel. While physical conditions and characteristics are obviously passed down from parents to children genetically, here Cal suggests that the narrative of a person’s life is also in some sense inherited from their ancestors.

The reader sees this play out throughout the novel, as future generations (often unknowingly) reenact events that happened to their ancestors. This happens, for example, when cousins Milton and Tessie fall in love, repeating the incestuous love affair of Lefty and Desdemona. It also occurs when both Chapter Eleven and Cal undergo radical self-reinventions, just as their grandparents did when they emigrated to the U.S.

## Book 2: Clarinet Serenade Quotes

☝ If Sourmelina had always been a European kind of American, a sort of Marlene Dietrich, then Tessie was the fully Americanized daughter Dietrich might have had. Her mainstream, even countrified, looks extended to the slight gap between her teeth and her turned-up nose. Traits often skip a generation. I look much more typically Greek than my mother does.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker),

Theodora “Tessie” Stephanides, Sourmelina Zizmo

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 174

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrative has jumped ahead from Tessie and Milton’s childhood to their late teenage years, when an unexpected “intimacy” develops between them. Cal has noted that while Milton was unattractive, Tessie was beautiful. Here, he mentions that Tessie looks very American, whereas both Sourmelina and Cal himself look “typically Greek.” This quotation challenges common assumptions about heritage and immigration, including the idea that assimilation and “Americanization” works in a unidirectional manner.

Tessie’s distinctly American looks suggest that her children will look equally American (if not more so), but in reality Cal looks more Greek than his mother. Assimilation and integration—whether physical or cultural—do not occur in a straightforward fashion, but can move backward as well as forward. Of course, this becomes even more obvious after Cal undergoes his gender transition. Whereas when he lives as Callie no one comments on his resemblance to his grandfather, Lefty, after Cal transitions he ends up resembling Lefty so much that Desdemona actually mistakes him for his grandfather.

## Book 3: Home Movies Quotes

☝ The truth was that in those days Desdemona was struggling against assimilationist pressures she couldn’t resist. Though she had lived in America as an eternal exile, a visitor for forty years, certain bits of her adopted country had been seeping under the locked doors of her disapproval.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker), Desdemona Stephanides

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 222

### Explanation and Analysis

Now that her days working for the Nation of Islam are long over, Desdemona does not spend much time engaging with the world beyond her own Greek-American community. Unlike the other members of her family (particularly Lefty and Milton), Desdemona does not have a positive enthusiastic view of America and doesn’t want to become typically American. She disapproves of American

culture—particularly its lack of traditional values—and longs for home so much that she fantasizes about moving to Florida because she has heard there is a place there called “New Smyrna Beach,” which references the Greek city of Smyrna.

Desdemona’s resistance to assimilation defies common assumption about immigrants and their attitude toward their adopted country. While many immigrants of course coming to the U.S. because they like the idea of living there and want to become “American” in all senses, for many others this is not the case. Desdemona, for example, left her home country reluctantly, doing so only because of the intense conflict and danger she faced there (and because her husband wanted to go to the U.S.). She prefers her old home to her new one, and has been trying to keep her Greek identity intact, even though—as this quotation shows—she cannot totally escape the influence of American culture.

### Book 3: Opa! Quotes

☝ “The matter with us is you.” How many times did I hear that growing up? Delivered by Milton in his so-called black accent, delivered whenever any liberal pundit talked about the “culturally deprived” or the “underclass” or “empowerment zones,” spoken out of the belief that this one statement, having been delivered to him while the blacks themselves burned down a significant portion of our beloved city, proved its own absurdity. As the years went on, Milton used it as a shield against any opinions to the contrary, and finally it grew into a kind of mantra, the explanation for why the world was going to hell, applicable not only to African Americans but to feminists and homosexuals; and then of course he liked to use it on us, whenever we were late for dinner or wore clothes Tessie didn’t approve of.

**Related Characters:** Milton (Miltadies) Stephanides, Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker), Theodora “Tessie” Stephanides

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 246

#### Explanation and Analysis

The 1967 Detroit Rebellion, a series of race riots, has just erupted. While Milton rushes over to defend the family diner, the rest of the Stephanides family spend three days in the attic of their house, glued to the television. After three days pass and they do not hear from Milton, Callie goes out to find him. Meanwhile, Milton has an interaction with a black man, Morrison, who lives next to the diner and comes

over to buy cigarettes. When Milton asks what’s the matter with black people, Morrison replies “The matter with us is you.”

As this passage shows, Morrison’s words turn into a kind of “mantra” for Milton, a way for Milton to express his prejudice against various groups (black people, feminists, gay people) along with other day-to-day irritations. The irony of the fact that it is a phrase appropriated from a black man seems to be lost on Milton. Indeed, Milton’s use of the phrase highlights the illogical nature of prejudice. In general, Milton’s bigoted views could be interpreted as showing how the experience of marginalization does not necessarily guarantee that a person becomes empathetic and accepting of others. Being an immigrant himself does not mean that Milton treats black people with respect—in fact, it has the opposite effect.

### Book 3: Middlesex Quotes

☝ [...] right about this time Lefty’s English began to deteriorate. He made spelling and grammatical mistakes he’d long mastered and soon he began writing broken English and then no English at all. He made written allusions to Bursa, and now Desdemona began to worry. She knew that the backward progression of her husband’s mind could lead to only one place, back to the days when he wasn’t her husband but her brother, and she lay in bed at night awaiting the moment with trepidation.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker), Eleutherios “Lefty” Stephanides, Desdemona Stephanides

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 268

#### Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after the Stephanides family move into their new house on Middlesex Boulevard in Grosse Point, Lefty suffers another stroke, and his mind rapidly deteriorates. He forgets huge parts of his life, moving backward through time in his own mind. This passage shows how this process involves Lefty forgetting English, which then leads Desdemona to conclude that he will start thinking of her as his sister again instead of his wife. This quotation is significant in two majors ways. Firstly, it challenges the idea that immigration and assimilation are straightforward, linear processes. Although Lefty initially assimilated to American culture in a fluent and enthusiastic manner, his Greek side remained present within him, and is now resurgent at the end of his life.

The quotation is also significant in light of the novel's exploration of secrets. One important idea in the novel is that secrets have a kind of internal force of their own. They can be buried for years and even generations, but they will eventually force their way out. This is exactly what Desdemona fears will happen with Lefty.

### Book 3: The Wolverette Quotes

☞ Until we came to Baker & Inglis my friends and I had always felt completely American. But now the Bracelets' upturned noses suggested that there was another America to which we could never gain admittance. All of a sudden America wasn't about hamburgers and hot rods anymore. It was about the *Mayflower* and Plymouth Rock. It was about something that had happened for two minutes four hundred years ago, instead of everything that had happened since. Instead of everything that was happening now!

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 298-299

#### Explanation and Analysis

Callie is in seventh grade and attending a private girls' school, Baker & Inglis, where she is social ostracized due to her Greek ethnicity. This infuriates her, because—as she points out—everyone is “ethnic,” not just the Eastern European and South Asian girls who are targeted as outsiders. The most popular girls in school are a group called the Bracelets, named because of the charm bracelets they all wear. They are the daughters of wealthy industrialists who are exceedingly proud of originating on the East Coast.

This quotation explores the alienation Callie feels at her new school. Before now, Callie never saw her Greek ethnicity as taking away from her American identity. Indeed, the fact that she was able to feel this in the first place speaks to the particular status of Greek people within the American system of racial categorization. Although this was not always the case, by the time Callie is in high school Greek people are considered white, and this is part of the reason why Callie was able to feel at home in the U.S. However, after enrolling at Baker & Inglis she realizes that there is another level of Americanness and whiteness to which she will never have access. As she points out, this American identity is highly exclusionary, and seeks to promote an idea of the nation built in the past, not the present or future.

### Book 3: Waxing Lyrical Quotes

☞ I suspect that Chapter Eleven's transformation was caused in no small part by that day on his bed when his life was decided by lottery. Am I projecting? Saddling my brother with my own obsessions with chance and fate? Maybe. But as we planned a trip—a trip that had been promised when Milton was saved from another war—it appeared that Chapter Eleven, taking chemical trips of his own, was trying to escape what he had dimly perceived while wrapped in an afghan: the possibility that not only his draft number was decided by lottery, but that everything was.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker), Milton (Militadies) Stephanides, Chapter Eleven Stephanides

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 317

#### Explanation and Analysis

When Callie's brother, Chapter Eleven, comes home from his first semester at the University of Michigan, he is a completely different person. He has transformed into a hippie who has long hair, drops acid, and critiques capitalism and colonialism. Callie is shocked by her brother's self-reinvention, and in this passage she speculates that the reason behind it is the fact that he only barely avoided being drafted. Shaken up by the randomness of fate, Chapter Eleven seeks answers in hippie counterculture.

Speaking from the future, Cal also says that he is not sure if his theory is correct because he might be projecting her own “obsessions with chance and fate” onto his brother. As the reader knows by now, the reason why Cal is especially fixated on these issues is due to his intersex condition and the way this was biologically determined by his ancestors. At the same time, the fact that Chapter Eleven's life could have been so drastically altered by the random lottery of the draft shows that *everyone* is deeply affected by questions of chance and fate. For this reason, thinking about these issues is among the most fundamental parts of human existence.

### Book 3: Flesh and Blood Quotes

☞ In 1974, instead of reclaiming his roots by visiting Bursa, my father renounced them. Forced to choose between his native land and his ancestral one, he didn't hesitate.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker), Milton (Militadies) Stephanides

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 363

### Explanation and Analysis

In the summer of 1974, Milton, Tessie, and Callie were supposed to go on a vacation back to their ancestral homeland of Bithynios. However, the Turkish invasion of Cyprus means that they are forced to cancel the trip. Milton ends up at odds with the other Greek-American he is friends with. While they accuse the U.S. of siding with the Turks and “betraying the Greeks,” Milton remains fiercely loyal to the U.S. This short passage highlights the difficult position in which Milton is placed; yet it also shows that, when forced to choose, he is absolutely sure about which of his two countries he will pick. Like many (though far from all) children of immigrants, Milton’s loyalty to the country in which he was born ends up trumping his connection to his ancestral homeland.

Part of what forces Milton to make this choice is American foreign policy, which puts many immigrants—and particularly those like Milton, who served in the U.S. Army and have are themselves patriotic about the military—in a difficult position. Although, as Cal mentions here, he doesn’t “hesitate” in choosing the U.S., in reality he is facing quite a difficult decision, based in the knowledge that the U.S. government actually did abandon the people of Cyprus to advance its own interests.

intersex. In the beginning of the next section of the novel, Callie explains that the most distinctive thing about her is the result of a “recessive gene on [her] fifth chromosome.” This quotation establishes the link between genetic status and other forms of inheritance. As Cal indicates, all inheritance—whether biological, cultural, or material—plays a role in determining a person’s fate. In fact, there may be more similarities between biological and non-biological forms of inheritance than is commonly assumed.

Although the book is arguably centered on a form of biological inheritance—the gene that makes Cal intersex—it has also explored other, nonbiological forms of inheritance as well, such as Greek identity in the case of the younger generations of the Stephanides family, or wealth in the case of the Obscure Object. There are also ways in which the boundaries between biological and nonbiological inheritance are blurred. After all, did Milton and Tessie pursue an incestuous relationship like their parents because this was culturally transmitted to them somehow? Or have many generations of incest been written into their biological code? The novel leaves the answer to this question ambiguous.

## Book 4: Looking Myself Up in Webster’s Quotes

💬 In addition, the subject has been raised in the Greek Orthodox tradition, with its strongly sex-defined roles. In general the parents seem assimilationist and very “all-American” in their outlook, but the presence of this deeper ethnic identity should not be overlooked.

## Book 4: The Oracular Vulva Quotes

💬 Some people inherit houses; others paintings or highly insured violin bows. Still others get a Japanese tansu or a famous name. I got a recessive gene on my fifth chromosome and some very rare family jewels indeed.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker), The Obscure Object

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 401

### Explanation and Analysis

While on vacation with the Obscure Object and her family in Petoskey, Callie’s relationship with the Object turned sexual. During this vacation, Callie is struck by a tractor and rushed to hospital, where the doctors discover she is

**Related Characters:** Dr. Luce (speaker), Milton (Militadies) Stephanides, Theodora “Tessie” Stephanides, Cal/lie Stephanides

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 436

### Explanation and Analysis

Dr. Luce has concluded his evaluation of Callie, and brings her into his office to tell her that he recommends a treatment of hormone injections and surgery in order to adjust her body to a “normal” female state. While Dr. Luce goes out of the room briefly, Callie reads her file, which contains his conclusions from his many interviews and examinations of Callie. This quotation is part of the file. Significantly, it is the first time the reader has heard an outsider’s perspective on Callie’s family.

Of course, just because he is an outside doesn’t mean that

Dr. Luce is unbiased. As this quotation shows, he clearly considers assimilation into American culture to be the goal for immigrants, and seems to subtly disapprove of the perceived conservatism and backwardness of Greek culture. At the same time, this quotation is also significant in light of its challenge to binary thinking. As Dr. Luce indicates, being “all-American” coexists with the ongoing significance of Milton and Tessie’s Greek identity.

## Book 4: Go West, Young Man Quotes

☝☝ I’d like to work in the embassy in Istanbul. I’ve put in a request to be transferred there. It would bring me full circle.

Until that happens, I do my part this way. I watch the bread baker in the döner restaurant downstairs [...] Stephanides, an American, grandchild of Greeks, admires this Turkish immigrant to Germany, this *Gastarbeiter*, as he bakes bread on Hauptstrasse here in the year 2001. We’re all made up of many parts, other halves. Not just me.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 440

### Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the previous chapter, Callie learns that she is predominantly biologically male and decides to run away in order to avoid feminization surgery and hormone treatment. She leaves a note to her parents explaining that she discovered she is actually a boy, and from this point adopts a male gender identity and starts using male pronouns. In the opening to this chapter, Cal describes the heavily Turkish neighborhood in which he lives in Berlin, and here expresses his desire to be transferred to the embassy in Istanbul. Cal’s use of the phrase “full circle” underlines the book’s emphasis on the idea that patterns and fates from the past are repeated in the present and future, especially along ancestral lines.

From one perspective, Cal moving to Istanbul undoes the journey and “progress” made by Lefty and Desdemona when they moved to the U.S. However, Cal’s own experience indicates that viewing migration as a unidirectional act is actually wrong. Often, the reality is more circular. Meanwhile, Cal’s statement that “We’re all made up of many parts, other halves,” is one of the novel’s main messages. Although Cal faces unique challenges in understanding the two halves of himself through his intersex identity, in reality these challenges do not set him

apart from other people—they are, in fact, reflective of a universal human condition. No one is made up of one single factor or side of a binary: everyone is a mix of many different (often conflicting) parts.

## Book 4: Gender Dysphoria in San Francisco Quotes

☝☝ If one of the guys had a girlfriend there would be a girl around for a while. I stayed away from them, feeling they might guess my secret.

I was like an immigrant, putting on airs, who runs into someone from the old country.

**Related Characters:** Cal/lie Stephanides (speaker), Sourmelina Zizmo

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 471

### Explanation and Analysis

Cal has run away and eventually landed in San Francisco, where he befriends a young man named Matt and his crew of homeless kids who live in the park together. Cal adapts to life in the park, learning how to survive there from his new friends. In this passage, Cal notes that when one of the kids gets a girlfriend for a while, Cal distances himself. He explicitly links his gender transition to an immigrant’s experience of self-reinvention. This underlines one of the main messages in the book, which is the similarity between gender transition, migration, and other forms of “rebirth.” People are always seeking chances to reinvent themselves, and when an opportunity arrives, they are careful to maintain distance from anyone that might guess their secret.

The phrase “putting on airs” could be used to describe several characters in the book, but most of all it recalls Sourmelina. After moving to the U.S., Sourmelina embraces American fashion and enjoys driving a car, something that she would not have been permitted to do back in Greece (it is still somewhat frowned upon in the U.S.). Of course, in Sourmelina’s case her proud adoption of an American identity is inextricable from the way in which immigration helps conceal the secret that she is a lesbian. In her case as well as Cal’s, there is an explicit connection between their experience of migration and the desire to hide the secret of their gender/sexual identity.

## Book 4: Hermaphroditus Quotes

☛ There have been hermaphrodites around forever, Cal. Forever. Plato said that the original human being was a hermaphrodite. Did you know that? The original person was two halves, one male, one female. Then these got separated. That's why everybody's always searching for their other half. Except for us. We've got both halves already.

**Related Characters:** Zora (speaker), Cal/lie Stephanides

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 489

### Explanation and Analysis

After being assaulted by two homeless men who find the ID that lists him as female, Cal calls Bob Presto, who owns a sex theater called Sixty Niners. Cal moves in with one of the

performers at the club, an intersex person named Zora, who teaches him to be proud of his condition. In this quotation, Zora expresses the idea that rather than unnatural aberrations from the normal, correct way of being, intersex people can actually be considered the most fundamental and complete versions of humanity. By citing Plato, she connects her positive view of intersex people to Cal's Greek heritage, and also suggests that the gender binary is a somewhat false idea.

Just as Plato argued that the first person was half-man, half-woman, the biological reality is that all people have both "male" and "female" biological traits. As Dr. Luce explained to Milton and Tessie, every child that is conceived starts off with neutral gonads that only become male or female later in life. The idea that the two genders are completely distinct is actually a lie. Knowing this, Zora feels pride over her own intersex identity.



## 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.

## BOOK 1: THE SILVER SPOON

Cal/lie Stephanides was born twice: once as a baby girl in 1960 in Detroit, and then again as a teenage boy in a hospital near Petoskey, Michigan, in 1974. He is featured in a study on “5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites.” His birth name is Calliope Helen, and his current driver’s license, issued by the Federal Republic of Germany, lists his name as Cal. He is 41 years old, and “feel[s] another birth coming on.” He thinks about his “inbred” family. In floral language, he asks the Muse of his **recessive gene** to sing about how it was passed through his family for 250 years, before ending up in America. He apologizes for getting “Homeric,” saying “that’s genetic, too.”

Just before Callie is born, her grandmother, Desdemona, asks Callie’s brother, Chapter Eleven, to bring her her **silkworm box**. Obeying, Chapter Eleven goes straight up to the attic where his grandparents live and retrieves the box from under the bed. He brings it back downstairs; when he hands it over, the room full of women fall silent. Desdemona gets a silver spoon out of the box and ties a piece of sting to the handle. She then hangs it over Callie’s mother Tessie’s pregnant stomach. Desdemona has correctly guessed the sexes of 23 babies. Now, Desdemona says that Tessie is going to have a boy, which secretly disappoints Tessie, who wants a girl so much that she has already chosen the name Calliope.

Desdemona’s son Milton comes in from the other room and says that her prediction is meaningless, because of “science.” Like Tessie, he wants to have a girl, to balance out the masculine energy of five-year-old Chapter Eleven. Milton sits in the room full of men, which include Peter Tatakis, who despite not being related to the Stephanides’ is treated like family and nicknamed “Uncle Pete.” He is a “lifelong bachelor” who adores high culture and works as a chiropractor. Uncle Pete advises Milton that if he wanted a girl he should to have sex with Tessie 24 hours before her ovulation, because female sperm supposedly swim slower and thus would reach the egg at the right time.

*This opening passage introduces almost all of the important themes in the novel: rebirth, ancestry, fate, binaries, migration, and secrets. It also indicates that although the novel revolves around a single person, Cal/lie, it also has an epic scope. This is indicated by Cal’s mention of the recessive gene that passed through his family for 250 years, reflecting the long familial and cultural lineage of the Stephanides family.*



*Here, the novel explores the idea that a person’s gender isn’t a biological accident, but rather something that is fated and can be interpreted by mystical means. The fact that the ceremony of guessing an unborn baby’s gender is so important to the Stephanides family—along with Tessie’s intense desire for a girl—indicate that gender is something that has implications beyond the life of an individual person. It tends to be very meaningful in the context of family, too.*



*Milton dismisses Desdemona’s traditional form of knowledge as superstition, yet the supposedly scientific idea presented by Uncle Pete is actually just as nonsensical (if not more so) than Desdemona’s swinging spoon. This suggests there may be greater similarity between science and mysticism than it first appears, especially when it comes to the matter of gender.*



Tessie was 22 and a virgin when she married Milton. They were engaged during World War II, while Milton studied at the U.S. Naval Academy and Tessie stayed at home in Detroit. Tessie objects to Uncle Pete's advice, believing it is "hubris" to try and control the baby's sex. Cal comments that at the time, in 1959, the whole of America was swept up by technological optimism and the belief that a person could control their own destiny. A few days later, Milton gives Tessie a thermometer gift-wrapped in a jewelry box. He explains that it's to test basal temperature. Annoyed, Tessie puts the thermometer back in the box and tells Milton to get her a necklace next time instead.

In three weeks' time, Callie will be conceived. On this night, Tessie sits at her vanity table while the Acropolis night light she and Milton received as a gift lights the room. If Milton had said a single "affectionate word," Tessie would have forgiven him, and they might have conceived a whole other person. However, instead they stiffly tell each other goodnight and go to sleep.

The next Sunday, Desdemona, Tessie, and Chapter Eleven attend church. Milton never comes and neither does Desdemona's husband, Lefty, who stays home working on his modern Greek translations of Sappho. While Tessie sits in church, she thinks about the family doctor, Dr. Philobosian, telling her that the idea that male sperm swim faster is "nonsense," and Desdemona chiming in to insist that it is God who decides the sex of a baby. In front of Tessie sit Callie's cousins, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Cleopatra, while at the front Father Mike conducts the service. After the service ends, Father Mike approaches her at the coffee hour. He is the assistant priest at Assumption Greek Orthodox Church, and is married to Callie's Aunt Zo.

Long ago, Tessie and Father Mike had been engaged, but after Tessie married Milton instead, Mike married Tessie's sister Zoë. Tessie knows that Father Mike will have heard about the thermometer, and feels annoyed. However, she is instantly distracted by the chaos caused by Chapter Eleven losing control of the coffee urn and spilling coffee all over a little girl. While Tessie helps the girl clean up in the bathroom, the girl—whom Tessie doesn't know and whom she will never see again after this day—says that Chapter Eleven is "obstreperous." Tessie is impressed.

*Hubris is an important concept when it comes to the novel's exploration of fate. Hubris is a form of excessive pride that leads to a person's downfall. In Ancient Greek tragedies, a common form of hubris occurs when characters learn what their future fate will be but believe they can defy this prophecy. Here, Tessie echoes this idea, suggesting that it is dangerous to try and artificially engineer one's life rather than let it take a "natural" course.*



*The novel is filled with symbols of the hybrid Greek-American identity of the Stephanides family. These symbols often take the form of kitsch objects representing one culture or the other, such as the Acropolis night light.*



*This passage shows that even though they live in the U.S., the Stephanides family maintain a strong sense of Greek identity and culture through their immersion in a Greek community. Important pillars of this community include the extended family, the family's friends (including Dr. Philobosian), and Assumption Church.*



*In this passage, Chapter Eleven's clumsiness is contrasted with the little girl's extraordinary vocabulary. In light of gender differentiation, this could be interpreted as indicating that where boys are vulgar and graceless, girls are refined and elegant. Of course, in reality this story indicates no such thing, as Chapter Eleven is only one boy and the little girl only one girl. Their behavior isn't representative of an accurate binary.*



Two weeks later it is Easter Sunday for followers of the Greek Orthodox church. Chapter Eleven was crushed not to be able to celebrate Easter on the same date as his friends two weeks previously, but is happy he gets to participate in the Greek tradition of egg-cracking. However, during the middle of the egg-cracking, Tessie informs Milton that her basal temperature is up, and the two of them sneak off to have sex. This is when Callie is conceived. During Tessie's pregnancy, Milton feels optimistic that the baby is a girl. However, Desdemona's spoon then indicates that the baby is a boy. Milton is furious, claiming that Desdemona's streak of correct guesses must be ending.

Callie is born on January 8th, and Milton is thrilled by the news that she is indeed a girl. That same day, Lefty has a stroke, and loses the ability to speak. Desdemona, meanwhile, is disturbed that her prediction was wrong. From then on, she never predicts a baby's sex again.

*Chapter Eleven's mixed feelings about Greek Orthodox Easter correspond to Tessie's conflict about trying to control the gender of her child, followed by her feelings of disappointment when Desdemona indicates that the baby will be a boy. In both cases, members of the Stephanides family feel caught between their Greek cultural heritage and their lives as modern Americans.*



*The fact that Lefty has a stroke on the same day his granddaughter is born speaks to how family unites operate in a continuous cycle of symbolic deaths—of Lefty's ability to communicate, in this case—and rebirths. In this sense, Callie's birth seems to revitalize and continue the Stephanides family line.*



## BOOK 1: MATCHMAKING

Cal was inspired to write a memoir after reading about other intersex people in history. His case is fascinating for the medical community because he has a "male brain," but was raised as a girl, making him a perfect example for exploring questions of "nature versus nurture." However, in order to tell his story properly, Cal must rewind to before his own birth, before his grandparents even arrived in America. The story really begins in summer 1922. Desdemona is sitting in her silkworm cocoonery on Mount Olympus in Asia Minor, and feels her heart skip a beat.

Below Mount Olympus lies the Ottoman city of Bursa, home of the silk trade. Desdemona's heart palpitation was caused by grief over the recent death of her parents in the conflict between the Greeks and the Turks during World War I. For the first time, Desdemona and the others in her village, Bithynios, are living under Greek rule. Desdemona tries to distract herself from her torment by focusing on the silkworms. When she was a child, her mother, Euphrosyne, told her that the silkworms could tell if a woman was impure, and that it would show up on the silk.

*The fact that Cal's family originates from Mount Olympus adds a mythical, surreal element to the story and characterizes it as an epic family saga. While Mount Olympus is a real place, it is also hugely important within Ancient Greek mythology, as it was believed to be the place where the gods lived.*



*From this initial impression, it seems that Desdemona's life is quite traditional. She lives in a small village and has the ancient profession of being a silk worker. At the same time, her life is also being touched by distinctly modern forces—namely, World War I.*



Desdemona's brother Eleutherios, nicknamed Lefty, is singing a song in English without being able to understand the words. Just before Euphrosyne died, she made Desdemona promise to look after Lefty and "find him a wife." Desdemona is 21 and beautiful, with a curvaceous body that embarrasses her. Lefty, meanwhile, has a "softness" about him that shows that he is a somewhat spoiled young man. He is one year older than Desdemona, and the isolation of their rural existence means they have always been inseparable, almost like one person.

However, recently Lefty has been going to Bursa often, sometimes staying overnight. He has been learning French and has picked up "affected" gestures. Desdemona interrogates Lefty about what he does in Bursa, and although he at first resists, he eventually tells her that he "want[s] a woman." Desdemona is shocked. She is still completely naïve when it comes to sexuality. She is angry, and probably "a little jealous" and resentful. Shouting, she demands to know why Lefty doesn't want a woman from their village, but Lefty (accurately) points out that there are no young women for him in Bithynios.

Bithynios's already small population has dwindled in recent years. Desdemona and Lefty's cousin Sourmelina recently moved to "a place called Detroit" in America. Of the hundred people still living in Bithynios, there are only two single young women aside from Desdemona herself: Lucille Kafkalis and Victoria Pappas. However, when Desdemona brings them up, Lefty says that Lucille smells while Victoria is ugly. After Lefty leaves in a huff, Desdemona gets out the worry beads that have been in her family for generations and counts them until she feels better.

Lefty, meanwhile, goes down to the market where he reluctantly tries to sell the silkworm cocoons. He doesn't enjoy participating in "the family business," but women aren't allowed at the market and thus he has to do it. He has come late in the date, which means he will have to accept a discounted price. After completing the sale, he goes to into a church and prays, begging for help and absolution for the desires he feels. He then buys coffee, cigarettes, and ouzo, and plays backgammon. Lately he has been racking up gambling debt from these games.

*The idea of two people being almost like two halves of one person is an important motif in the book, as the novel aims to show that everyone's identity is comprised of multiple parts. While there is something very special about this connection between Desdemona and Lefty, it is also a potentially dangerous form of intimacy because it is so intense and vulnerable.*



*Desdemona's life is strongly impacted by the strict gender roles that are customary in her village. These traditional norms dictate that her life should revolve around supporting her brother and making sure that he finds a wife. The idea that Desdemona herself might want a husband seems to be unimportant.*



*While Desdemona resents the impact that conservative social norms have on her life, she also turns to her traditional cultural inheritance for comfort. Indeed, she seems to embrace traditional ideas—including the expectation that Lefty marry a girl from Bithynios—more than Lefty himself, who dreams of something different.*



*As a man, Lefty is afforded far more freedom than Desdemona, and he uses this to go off by himself, participate in city life, and indulge in vices such as cigarettes, alcohol, and gambling. At the same time, his prayer in church suggests that he is not an entirely irresponsible young man, and still feels a sense of duty to be a good person.*



At midnight, Lefty goes to a brothel and chooses a girl who has braids and sad eyes like Desdemona, although he doesn't consciously notice the similarity until they are walking to the bedroom together. He smokes a hookah filled with hashish, and while he and the woman have sex he calls Desdemona's name. The next morning, hungover and without any money, Lefty returns home. While he was gone, Desdemona invited Lucille and Victoria over; she told Lucille to wash more regularly and Victoria to get her mustache waxed. Later that week, she teaches them about lingerie, instructs them to wear different clothes and jewelry, and encourages them to adopt more feminine body language and gestures. She tells them to walk past the spot where Lefty likes to sit and read.

Lefty tells Desdemona that he's noticed that Lucille smells better and that Victoria's mustache is gone, indicating that he has changed his mind about marrying a girl from the village. They stand close together, and Desdemona has a feeling that Dr. Luce describes as "periphescence," the state of intense erotic attachment that comes early on in a relationship. However, she then tells Lefty that he should begin preparing to officially court Lucille and Victoria. On the next evening, Lefty goes to Victoria's house, an event that causes a great stir in Bithynios. Everyone is riveted, desperate to find out which girl he will pick.

Desdemona has done Victoria's hair and makeup and taught her how to hold herself. However, before Lefty even gets to the house, he turns around. Back at home, Desdemona puts on the white silk corset Euphrosyne gave her for her wedding night. She looks in the mirror and feels despair over her certainty that she will never get married. Meanwhile, Lefty goes to Lucille's house, but almost as soon as he's walked in the door he leaves again. Lefty is familiar with the lingerie catalogue that Desdemona used as inspiration for styling Victoria and Lucille; all he can think is how far these women fall from any kind of ideal.

Desdemona, meanwhile, takes off the corset, lies on the bed, and cries herself to sleep. She dreams about Lefty. Cal wonders what drew them together, pondering if it was the "gene," but then says he prefers not to think of everything as being biologically determined. Hearing Lefty reenter the house, Desdemona hastily gets dressed. He tells her that he doesn't want to marry either Victoria or Lucille. They play the Greek version of rock, paper, scissors (rock, ax, snake) to help decide.

*In this passage, it is strongly hinted that Lefty is sexually attracted to his sister. Judging from Desdemona's behavior, it may seem as if these feelings are not reciprocated. On the other hand, her enthusiastic determination to make Lefty marry one of the young women from Bithynios may not be because this is what she actually wants. Desdemona could also be trying to suppress her own feelings, and may be simply fulfilling her culturally-mandated duty, as well as carrying out the promise she made to her mother.*



*Lefty and Desdemona's attempt to stifle their attraction to each other doesn't appear to be working very well—the more they suppress it, the more intense their erotic fixation goes. At the same time, they continue to deny their true feelings and pretend that they both want Lefty to marry someone else.*



*Desdemona thinks she has done ingenious work by making over Lucille and Victoria to impress Lefty. However, in reality, Lefty knows her too well and knows what she has done. Moreover, he is not seduced by the superficial changes to the two young women, which seem, if anything, to make him even less attracted to them.*



*Lefty and Desdemona's relationship blurs the boundaries between familial and sexual love, as well as childhood and adulthood. Although they have mature sexual desire for each other, they still act like children together, as shown when they play the Greek version of rock, paper, scissors.*



Lefty wins, and tells Desdemona he wants to marry her, saying that they are not just siblings but third cousins, and third cousins can marry. They share a long hug, which gets increasingly sensual, and then start waltzing. In Bithynios, it is common for cousins to marry; “everyone [is] somehow related.” While they dance, the Greek Army goes into retreat.

*While it may indeed be common for cousins to marry each other in Bithynios, it is still deeply taboo for siblings to marry. At the same time, this taboo does not stop Lefty and Desdemona from falling in love. The fact that Lefty and Desdemona are both siblings and third cousins, meanwhile, implies that they are not the only ones in their family to engage in an incestuous relationship.*



## BOOK 1: AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL

In the present, Cal lives in Schöneberg, a neighborhood in Berlin. He takes the U-Bahn to work at Amerika Haus by the Zoologischer Garten stop. One morning, while reading a newspaper on the train, he notices a woman get onboard with her bike. She is Asian, and is carrying a camera bag in the basket of her bike. Cal has a feeling that she is American. They briefly catch each other’s eyes, but the woman then gets out of the train again. At his own stop, Cal stumbles out of the train and smokes a cigar to calm himself down.

*Although the woman on the train is very far from being Cal’s sibling, a connection is drawn here by the powerful, irrepressible desire that Lefty and Desdemona feel for each other and the instant attachment Cal feels for the stranger on the U-Bahn. Together, they indicate that desire is usually unpredictable and uncontrollable.*



Cal explains that he is not androgynous; he passes as a man, although he always uses the stalls in the bathroom, never the urinals. Overall, he is accustomed to behaving in a conventionally “male” manner, but sometimes Calliope’s gestures jump out unexpectedly, taking him by surprise. However, then Cal says that it’s time to return to the story of his grandparents.

*When Cal refers to himself prior to the discovery that he is intersex and his gender transition, he uses both the first person and the third person, highlighting a mix of both connection to and separateness from his past self.*



As the Greek Army retreats, it sets fire to everything it passes. Lefty says they can’t be in Bithynios when the Turks come back and seek “revenge.” He says they’ll go to America to join their cousin Sourmelina, taking the route via Smyrna, which is said to be the safest. Initially reluctant, Desdemona hesitantly agrees, saying she’ll bring her **silkworm box** and some eggs even though, as Lefty points out, people in America don’t farm silk. They leave on August 31 along with the rest of the villagers, most of whom are also headed to America. Before leaving the village, she says goodbye to everything, and puts a single silkworm cocoon in her pocket.

*Like so many migrants, Lefty and Desdemona do not actively choose to leave their home. Instead, they are forced out by conflict and the certainty of violence, destruction, and death. Desdemona seems especially reluctant to leave Bithynios, as shown by the fact that she tries to take a part of it with her via the silkworm cocoons, which is an ongoing symbol for the tension between one’s homeland and the country to which they immigrate.*



A week later, General Hajienestis, the Commander in Chief of the Greek Army, is informed that the Turkish army is encroaching on Smyrna. However, he can only focus on his own physical weakness and approaching death. The people of Smyrna are reassured by the sight of Western European merchant ships in the harbor. Dr. Nishan Philobosian kisses his family goodbye and leaves the house for the first time in days. Walking along, he spots a refugee picking through garbage, and is then startled to see it is a young man in a nice suit. On hearing that the young man hasn't eaten in three days, Dr. Philobosian tells him to come along with him. In his office, Dr. Philobosian treats the young man's thumb, from which the nail is missing, and gives him some money.

The young man asks if Dr. Philobosian is Armenian; the doctor replies he is, but explains that he is not planning to leave Smyrna because the city is his "home." After sending the man on his way, Dr. Philobosian retrieves a letter testifying that he treated Mustafa Kemal Pasha for diverticulitis three years ago; the letter offers assurance of Kemal Pasha's protection. Meanwhile, Lefty Stephanides—the refugee Philobosian just treated—smiles as he buys *chureki* from the bakery, feeling hopeful. In Smyrna, he and Desdemona have been able to explore their feelings for each other without anyone around who knows that they are actually brother and sister.

However, when Lefty brings Desdemona the *chureki* and she flinches, moving away from him while they eat, he walks off in a huff. He is annoyed at her, but also understands why she is resistant to their physical intimacy, which makes him even more annoyed. Lefty washes his face in a fountain. Cal interjects into the narration to quote a stanza from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which describes a merchant from Smyrna named Mr. Eugenides. Before its permanent destruction in 1922, Smyrna was prosperous and "cosmopolitan," with an extraordinarily rich cultural history. Lefty walks into a gambling club which is mostly abandoned except for a small huddle of refugees playing poker. He joins them.

Lefty has never played poker before and at first he keeps losing. However, eventually he gets the hang of it, and wins a huge amount of money. He tries to leave, but the other players force him to stay; he starts losing, and eventually leaves only after he has no money left. However, he has secretly stashed some in his sock, and when he returns to Desdemona he tells her that they have enough for the ship now, claiming he found the cash on the ground. Meanwhile, on a British ship docked on the harbor, two officers drink cognac, smoke cigars, and discuss the imminent fall of Smyrna. They will not be saving anyone (or anything) except British subjects.

*In contrast to the myopic selfishness of General Hajienestis, Dr. Philobosian is kind and altruistic. The fact that he helps the young refugee he sees is particularly moving considering that during that time, Smyrna is overflowing with refugees. It would be tempting to resign oneself to the fact that there are far too many people to help and not even try, but instead, Dr. Philobosian does what he can to help.*



*Lefty asks if Dr. Philobosian is Armenian because at this point, the Armenian Genocide has been underway for a number of years. If the Ottomans regain control of Smyrna, Dr. Philobosian and his family will not be safe. At the same time, Dr. Philobosian believes he is protected because he treated the Ottoman leader Mustafa Kemal Pasha (who will later become the first president of Turkey and change his name to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk).*



*Cal's reference of the line from "The Waste Land" about a merchant named Mr. Eugenides draws attention to the autobiographical elements of the novel. Like the fictional Stephanides family, Jeffrey Eugenides is descended from Greeks who lived in Asia Minor and immigrated to the U.S.*



*Even in the midst of the horror and devastation surrounding him, Lefty and the other refugees still devote themselves to the seemingly frivolous and irresponsible activity of gambling. On one level, of course, gambling serves as a distraction from the horrors around them. Perhaps there is also an extent to which these horrors encourage the refugees to engage in self-destructive behavior, because at least this way they are in control of their own fates.*



By September 7, every Greek man in Smyrna (including Lefty) wears a fez, hoping to “pass as a Turk.” Lefty attempts to buy a ticket to Athens, but the price has gone up since the day before, and he no longer has enough money. General Hajienestis orders the Greek ships to pull out of Smyrna, and Lefty and Desdemona watch them go. The whole Greek population of the city realizes with despair that they have been abandoned, and now lie before the Turks unprotected. Soon after, Mustafa Kemal Pasha is driven into the city.

On September 13, with Turkish troops setting fires all over the city, Dr. Philobosian sits in his house with his family, with the shutters closed. Amongst the sounds of crashing and screaming from outside, he hears his neighbor singing, and rushes out against his wife’s protests. Meanwhile, Lefty and Desdemona watch as the fires begin rolling toward them. They are surrounded by people too ill, hungry, or weak to stand. Cal notes that even in her old age, Desdemona never got over her fear of fire. Dr. Philobosian, meanwhile, finds the neighbor he heard singing dead; her apartment has been ransacked. With others, Lefty and Desdemona run to the shore. People are praying or jumping in the water to drown.

Desdemona says they are going to die, but Lefty replies that they will survive, and then get married. Suddenly, well-dressed people emerge from the French consulate, and there is an announcement that French citizens alone will imminently be evacuated. At the Philobosians’ house, there is a knock at the door, which they assume is Nishan. However, it is actually soldiers, who immediately shoot everyone inside. Lefty asks Desdemona if she’ll marry him if they survive. She is certain they are about to die, but nods. The British officers aboard the ship debate whether to rescue a 10- or 11-year-old girl drowning in the water. The captain eventually indicates that if the officers rescue any refugees before sunrise, he will turn a blind eye.

Dr. Philobosian returns hope to find that his wife and all his children have been slaughtered. His daughters are naked, with their breasts cut off. Lefty, using the French he’s learned, approaches the French officials and tells them he was born in Paris, as was his wife. He claims that his papers were destroyed in the fire. When he returns to Desdemona with visas in hand, she is standing with a man who she just stopped from jumping in the water. The man shouts, “They were illiterate! [...] They couldn’t read my letter.” Lefty recognizes him. Lefty returns to the officials with Dr. Philobosian, announcing in terrible French that the doctor is his cousin. The officials grant him a visa, too. Before long, the “three new French citizens” pull away from the burning city on a ship.

*Again, Lefty and Desdemona’s story isn’t unique, but is rather heartbreakingly typical. Forced from their home by conflict that has nothing to do with them personally, they are left to perish in brutal circumstances. Indeed, although migrants who lose everything and whose homelands are destroyed suffer enormously, they are the lucky ones, because they escaped.*



*Read on a symbolic level, the horrifying destruction of Smyrna by fire paves the way for Lefty and Desdemona’s “rebirth” in the U.S. At the same time, reading such a terrible tragedy symbolically is a tricky endeavor. Some might argue that a historical event as brutal as the destruction of Smyrna cannot be said to have any poetic or philosophical significance in this manner.*



*The destruction of Smyrna is an important backdrop for Lefty and Desdemona’s emerging relationship. Desdemona only agrees to marry Lefty because she thinks she is going to die, which leads her not to care about social taboos. Facing what she perceives to be certain death, she realizes that her love for Lefty outweighs the fact that he is her brother.*



*This passage explores how in Smyrna at this time—as for so much of human history—a person’s survival has depended on the lottery of their ethnicity and nationality. Dr. Philobosian’s family are slain simply because they are Armenian, whereas Lefty, Desdemona, and Dr. Philobosian himself escape simply because they are able to convincingly lie about being French.*



## BOOK 1: THE SILK ROAD

According to Chinese legend, silk was discovered when a silkworm cocoon fell into the teacup of a princess and began to unravel. Cal compares this story to himself unravelling his own story. Desdemona, Lefty, and Dr. Philobosian get to Athens, where they receive papers and inoculations in preparation for the trip to America. During this time, there is a ritual in which those leaving for America hold a ball of yarn and their loved ones standing on the pier hold the string, and as the ship pulls away the string unspools until finally the yarn is released to the wind.

In Athens, Desdemona gets an emergency Greek passport under her mother's maiden name, which will allow her to marry Lefty. They board the ship separately and do not speak for the whole first day of the journey. Dr. Philobosian remains suicidal. After three days at sea, Lefty introduces himself to Desdemona as if they have never met before. They pretend it is a "coincidence" that they are both traveling to Detroit. Meanwhile, other passengers on the ship discuss the "budding romance," and speculate over whether the two are a good match. When Lefty and Desdemona are seen to be walking arm-in-arm, one passenger boasts that he introduced them, while another exclaims that their supposed class difference means they won't work as a couple.

Desdemona and Lefty are thrilled that they are successfully managing to trick everyone. Over time, they begin to believe their own performance. Cal comments that this was actually the whole point: they could have just boarded the ship pretending to be engaged already, but pretended not to know each other in order to "fool [...] themselves." Like everyone else on the ship, Lefty and Desdemona are using the journey to America as a chance for self-reinvention and to imagine a different future. On the eighth day of the journey, Lefty proposes; Desdemona fakes shock, then accepts.

The wedding takes place onboard the ship, with improvised outfits. On the night of the wedding, the newlyweds lie in a lifeboat, and Desdemona undresses to reveal the corset. She feels "conflicted," as the corset makes her think of Euphrosyne, which reminds her of the incestuous nature of her marriage. Lefty feels conflicted too, but before long they lose themselves in sex. The ship's captain watches the lifeboat swaying and feels nostalgic about his own youth. Cal notes that although they didn't know it, Lefty and Desdemona were "smuggling" a recessive genetic mutation that had probably first appeared in their family in 1750. The **gene** causes the intersex condition that would occasionally appear in the people of Bithynios.

*The ritual of holding a ball of yarn highlights the fact that immigration to the U.S. was a bittersweet endeavor. However excited and optimistic migrants might have been about their new life, they still had to face the unbearable pain and uncertainty of being separated from their loved ones, possibly forever.*



*Lefty and Desdemona's pretend meeting is a much needed distraction and a kind of rebirth for them after the trauma of Smyrna (as well as the anxiety of engaging in an illicit relationship as brother and sister). Yet it also provides a welcome opportunity for distraction and healing for the other passengers on the ship. Traumatized by everything they are leaving behind in Europe, the passengers focus on Lefty and Desdemona's romance in order to keep their minds on newness, rebirth, and the future.*



*Throughout the novel, tragedy and comedy coexist in close proximity. This is perhaps never more true than at this moment, when Lefty and Desdemona escape unimaginable brutalities only to engage in a surreal fake courtship. Of course, this is a decidedly black comedy, not only because of the broader context of war and destruction, but also because of the uneasy fact that Lefty and Desdemona are committing incest.*



*It is significant that two of the most important symbols of the novel—the recessive gene and the silkworm box—are "smuggled" by Desdemona and Lefty from Bithynios to the U.S. (Of course, only the box is intentionally and knowingly transported there.) This indicates that the most important entities in life are often those that survive migration and are passed down from one generation to another, bridging different cultures as well as the present and the past.*



Every night over the next week Lefty and Desdemona have sex in the lifeboat. They try to become strangers to one another, continuing to make up invented stories about their families and pasts. Cal admits that he is obsessed with genealogy, but that it is ultimately a meaningless pastime, because you can think you know everything about your family and yet, in the case of his mother Tessie, not even know the truth of your own husband's identity or that your parents are brother and sister. Lefty and Desdemona have routine, repetitive sex, but it remain exciting because of the corset, which each night "ma[kes] Desdemona new again." After having sex, they speculate about the life they will lead in America.

Meanwhile, those aboard the ship practice what to say on Ellis Island so they will not be perceived as "undesirable" and turned away. People who commit incest are among those banned from immigrating to the country. It helps that Lefty and Desdemona have a sponsor in the form of their cousin Sourmelina. Lefty notes that she won't come to meet them in New York; instead, they'll get the train to see her in Detroit. Desdemona worries about what Sourmelina will say about the two of them being married, but Lefty points out that they can trust her because she has secrets of her own. When the New York skyline appears in the distance, Desdemona comments that she's happy to see the Statue of Liberty is a woman. She hopes this means "here people won't be killing each other every day."

*Sex is a very important part of the novel, but is usually presented in a rather comic way. This is certainly true of Lefty and Desdemona consummating their marriage inside a swinging lifeboat. Throughout the novel, Eugenides emphasizes that the humorous and silly aspects of sex make it no less significant and powerful.*



*Despite being traditional and subscribing to rather conservative gender roles, Desdemona also seems to think that women are somewhat superior to men (and even implies that the world would be better if it was run by women). This suggests that traditional social values are often not straightforward, nor necessarily entirely sexist. The reality is much more nuanced and complicated.*



## BOOK 2: HENRY FORD'S ENGLISH-LANGUAGE MELTING POT

The narrative jumps to when Callie is nine years old and going for her "annual lunch date" with Milton at the Pontchartrain Hotel. They are high up, and Milton is sweating because he is afraid of heights. As they look out over downtown Detroit, Milton points out the remnants of the Woodward Plan, an 1807 plan to structure the city in "interlocking hexagons." When Lefty and Desdemona arrive in Detroit in 1922, it is famous for producing "spinning things," including cigars, bicycles, and cars. On Ellis Island, the doctor who examines Dr. Philobosian declares him unfit for immigration, and Lefty and Desdemona are separated from him. Upon Lefty's encouragement, Desdemona is given a "makeover" inside the YWCA tent. She is furious and embarrassed when they cut off her braids.

*This is the first of many occasions in the novel wherein Desdemona becomes resentful of the pressure to assimilate into American culture. The idea of a makeover seems rather positive, but for Desdemona, being forced to cut her braids is a violation and a way of destroying her true identity. It is a rebirth and reinvention of herself that she does not want.*



Desdemona is even more devastated by being forced to dump out her silkworm cocoons. When they arrive at Grand Trunk Station in Detroit, Lefty is stunned by the marble Corinthian pillars, and feels he has arrived in “the future.” He searches for Sourmelina, whose maiden name is Papadiamandopoulos, but whose surname is now Zizmo. She is 28, and when she greets Lefty he initially doesn’t recognize her, as she has “managed to erase just about everything identifiably Greek about her” during the five years she has lived in America. Her style, accent, and tastes are all completely different.

Sourmelina asks about Lefty’s wife; he says she’s still in the bathroom. Sourmelina laments how hard it must have been for Lefty to get married and leave Desdemona in New York. After discussing the Turkish reinvasion and the destruction of Smyrna, Lefty admits that Desdemona is his wife. At this moment Desdemona emerges and greets her cousin. The newlyweds expect that their cousin will keep their secret because Sourmelina herself is secretly a lesbian. Much later on in her life, Sourmelina will tell Cal that she only had a few affairs with women because she was “picky.” Back in Bithynios, people found out about some of these affairs and Sourmelina was declared “unmarriageable,” which is what led her father to send her to America.

Sourmelina’s husband, Jimmy Zizmo, came to America when he was 30, in 1907, changing his name from Zisimopoulos when he immigrated. He insisted on a large dowry for Sourmelina and when they met for the first time he didn’t look anything like the picture he’d sent of himself. Sourmelina is surprised to hear about Lefty and Desdemona’s marriage but immediately agrees to keep it a secret. She notes that they don’t have to worry about Jimmy because he “doesn’t listen” to her anyway. Sourmelina drives them from the station, which is still considered taboo for women in 1922. As they drive past the overwhelming sights of Downtown Detroit, Desdemona feels anxious while Lefty is euphoric.

Neither Lefty nor Desdemona notice the signs of economic deprivation and anti-black racism that hint at what’s in store for Detroit in the future. Sourmelina drives them to her quiet neighborhood on the East Side. Jimmy is a macho former prisoner and “drug pusher” who doesn’t drink. At 45, he still looks like a “bachelor.” Desdemona is shocked that he looks like an “Arab” and asks Sourmelina if he has any Turkish heritage. Lina replies that she doesn’t know or care. Jimmy says that as long as Lefty and Desdemona are staying at his house, they must cook meat in separate pots as he is a vegetarian, and they cannot drink. When Lefty asks about Jimmy’s job, he replies vaguely that he is an “importer.”

*Desdemona and Sourmelina clearly have oppositional attitudes to assimilation. Whereas Desdemona wants to take as much of her old Greek life with her as possible, Sourmelina has shed her Greek identity with equal eagerness. This reflects the diversity of the immigrant experience, even among people who leave the same home country under the same conditions.*



*Just like Lefty and Desdemona, immigrating to America provided a vital opportunity for self-reinvention for Sourmelina. For all three cousins, remaining in Bithynios would have not allowed them to live the lives they wanted to. While they still face restrictions and self-imposed secrecy in the U.S., they all have more freedom there than they did in the tight-knit community from which they originate.*



*This passage further emphasizes the contrast between Sourmelina and Desdemona. Whereas Desdemona is anxious, traditional, and romantic, Sourmelina is bold, rebellious, and modern. She is so independent that she doesn’t seem to mind being married to a man she doesn’t get along with. (Of course, this clearly has a lot to do with the fact that she is actually a lesbian.)*



*Jimmy is a shady and unusual figure. In some ways he seems sinister, yet there is also a surprising gentleness about him, as demonstrated by his vegetarian diet (a highly unusual choice for a man like him during this time). The fact that he doesn’t drink perhaps heightens Desdemona’s suspicions that he is an Arab (and thus likely insinuating the he is a Muslim), yet note also that this scene takes place during Prohibition—a fact that will come to prove significant very shortly.*



That night, Jimmy asks Sourmelina if they can have sex because they've been married for five years and still don't have children. However, Sourmelina refuses. Over the next week, Lefty and Desdemona learn that Jimmy treats Sourmelina like a daughter more than a wife. He is obsessed with herbal remedies, and Sourmelina invents various "ailments" in order to get out of sex, which Jimmy treats using his herbal methods. Lefty needs a job, and Jimmy has "connections" at Ford due to the fact that he's a supplier of "assorted fuels." The two men are driving through the city together, and Lefty is horrified by a rotten, chemical smell. Jimmy tells him he will get used to it.

Jimmy takes Lefty to the Personnel Department at the Ford Factory. The manager they speak to says Lefty will have to pass an English language test. Jimmy then mentions a home delivery, and the manager requests that they speak by the back door. On the morning of Lefty's first day of work, he dances in the kitchen, making Desdemona laugh. As he and the other workers walk into the factory, they stop speaking, because languages other than English are not allowed inside. It takes 17 minutes for Lefty to be trained to do his job; mechanization means that it doesn't require any particular skill on his part. Lefty works in a small team with two other men.

The work is fast-moving, repetitive, physically difficult, and dangerous. Lefty doesn't speak during the day, but as soon as his shift is over he walks over to the Ford English School for his evening lessons. While Lefty is at the factory, Desdemona stays home, spending the whole day cooking. She serves food to Jimmy and his "business associates" and cleans up after they leave. She and Lefty manage to survive their first Michigan winter. Lefty excels at learning English, and in the spring of 1923 is asked to take part in a pageant to celebrate his class's graduation.

Around this time, two men in suits show up unannounced at Jimmy's door, saying they are from the Ford Sociological Department and asking to see Lefty. They explain that they are checking in on workers because Mr. Ford has ordered that no one should receive their \$5 a week pay until it is confirmed that they can spend the money "advisedly and conservatively." The men ask if Lefty drinks, and Jimmy says he doesn't. They then express disapproval of the fact that Lefty and Desdemona are boarders in Jimmy's house, saying that Ford workers are encouraged to get their own mortgages. They look around the house and ask Lefty about how often he washes and brushes his teeth, before handing him a new toothbrush.

*Like many lesbians during this time, Sourmelina is highly strategic about how she chooses to live her life. The fact that she doesn't love Jimmy doesn't matter to her—indeed, his decision to treat her like his daughter largely works to her advantage, as this means that he puts less pressure on her to have a sexual and romantic element to their marriage.*



*Although Lefty is clearly buoyed by the optimism of the American Dream in this passage, the realities of his employment at the Ford factory are far from ideal. Lefty's job is physically demanding but intellectually numbing, and the fact that the workers are only allowed to speak English in the factory speaks to the power of xenophobia and intolerance during this time.*



*Lefty and Desdemona's lives represent a very typical picture of European immigrants to the U.S. during this era. Their options are highly restricted due to their lack of English language skills and (in Desdemona's case) the persistence of traditional gender roles. At the same time, Lefty's success in English class suggests things might soon change for the better.*



*Considering that Henry Ford is often seen as an icon of capitalism, it might seem surprising that his company had such an invasive and controlling policy when it came to their employee's private lives. In particular, it is notable that some of the things the Sociological Department frown on—such as the fact that Lefty and Desdemona are boarders in their cousin's house—are particularly discriminatory to immigrants who come from cultures where it is normal for extended families to live together.*



Desdemona sews Lefty a traditional Greek vest for the pageant. Lefty and Jimmy go to a suit store to buy Lefty a suit, and the owners seems to “owe Zizmo a favor” and gives a 20 percent discount. Father Stylianopoulos from Assumption Greek Orthodox Church comes by to bless the house; Lefty and Desdemona pretend that they had a proper Orthodox wedding in order to be accepted as members of the church. When the priest leaves, Sourmelina and Desdemona confess to each other that they are both struck by an intense smell. That night, at the pageant, they sit in the audience holding hands.

Onstage, there is a large cauldron covered with the phrase: “FORD ENGLISH SCHOOL MELTING POT.” Lefty and the other students, dressed in traditional clothing, mime the experience of immigrating to America. Henry Ford is in the audience, watching approvingly. The performance culminates with each graduate emerging from the melting pot wearing a suit and waving an American flag, while the audience cheers. Immediately after the pageant ends, the men from the Sociological Department approach Lefty with a pink slip indicating that he is being fired. They explain that Jimmy has a criminal record. Sourmelina and Desdemona then approach Lefty, and Sourmelina tells him in English that she and Desdemona are both pregnant.

*Zizmo, Sourmelina, Lefty, and Desdemona are all united by the fact that they have major secrets. In the case of the latter three, the reader knows what these secrets are. However, this passage further emphasizes that Zizmo seems to be involved in some shady dealings. Meanwhile, Sourmelina and Desdemona’s mutual sensitivity to smell indicates that they share another secret altogether—one that will soon be revealed.*



*This passage provides a clear example of where the American Dream is not as wonderful as it appears. The graduation is supposed to be a celebration and has the veneer of celebrating cultural difference. However, in reality, it seems to promote the idea of suppressing cultural difference through conformity and assimilation. Moreover, the intolerance of the Ford Motor Company is further emphasized when Lefty is promptly fired. Meanwhile, the fact that Sourmelina and Desdemona have become pregnant at the same time seems fated and almost miraculous, further highlighting the role that predetermined destiny plays in shaping the lineage of a family.*



## BOOK 2: MINOTAURS

Like many intersex people, Cal cannot have children. Part of the reason why he joined the Foreign Service is because of this fact, as it him not want to stay in one place for a long time. He is sad to leave Berlin, though, because once-divided city reminds him of himself and his own “struggle for unification.” In principle, Cal is against feeling ashamed of his condition, but he is also not a very political person and believes each person should figure out their own way of dealing with it. Cal tends to keep it secret, although sometimes he tells strangers. When he meets women he’s attracted to, he usually disappears before they have sex, never calling them again.

Cal has seen the bicyclist again, and spoken to her this time. Her name is Julie Kikuchi, she’s from California and studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, and they are going on a date on Friday. Jumping back to 1923, Cal explains that the “Simultaneous Fertilization” happens after the two couples go to the theater to see a production of *The Minotaur*. Desdemona thought she knew what to expect, but is horrified by the modern twist of the production and the presence of chorus girls, and leaves in the intermission. Back at home, all four residents of the house pretend “that the play had no effect on them.” However, this is not actually the case, and both couples end up having sex.

*Cal’s reflections here highlight his mixed feelings about being intersex. He is neither proud nor ashamed—or, more accurately, he is both. Indeed, even as he writes as if he has come to a place of acceptance of his condition (and of his own feelings about it), the mixed messages in this passage—as well as the fact that Cal keeps the condition a secret and avoids intimacy in order to stop people knowing it—suggests otherwise.*



*One of the more minor (yet nonetheless important) themes in the novel is repressed and disavowed desire. Just as Lefty and Desdemona initially tried to repress their attraction to each other, Desdemona now pretends to have been horrified by the production of the Minotaur, when in reality she found it erotic. No matter how hard a person tries, it is difficult to truly banish sexual desire—as evidenced by Desdemona and Lefty’s illicit relationship as siblings.*



Cal notes the significance of the fact that the couples conceived after seeing a play about “a hybrid monster.” He considers how parents do not just pass on physical characteristics to their children, but also “motifs, scenarios, even fates.” Desdemona and Sourmelina’s menstrual cycles were synced, and once they both get pregnant they start throwing up in unison. Lefty and Zizmo soon realize that they do not have an important role to play during the pregnancies, and spend time with other men at the coffee house in Greektown, discussing politics over games of backgammon. At one point, Jimmy claims that the Turks were not to blame for starting the war, and Lefty has to intervene in order to stop the other men beating him up.

One night, Zizmo takes Lefty for a drive, explaining that he is going to get him a better job than what he had at Ford, one that is much higher-paying. It is three a.m., and they drive to Belle Isle, an island in the Detroit River right next to the Canadian border. On Zizmo’s signal, they get out of the car. Zizmo explains that he used to work for the railroad, but then “got smart.” A boat pulls in with two men on board. Zizmo passes them an envelope, and they reveal 12 wooden crates which Zizmo tells Lefty to help him unload. At this moment Lefty realizes that despite not drinking himself, Zizmo makes a living by importing whisky, beer, and rum from Canada.

Lefty panics, claiming this means he’s going to get deported. However, Zizmo replies that they have no choice. They both need money, as they are about to become fathers. Thus Lefty joins the business, becoming familiar with the workings of the criminal underworld. Bootlegging is mainly run by the Purple Gan and the mafia; yet while they turn a blind eye to low-level “amateur smuggling,” Zizmo is not dealing with amateur amounts. Meanwhile, in pregnancy, Desdemona is looking more and more like Euphrosyne. She feels intimately connected to all her female ancestors. Sourmelina, meanwhile, worries about the way she herself is physically changing, concerned that her “breasts will never be the same.” She feels embarrassed by her pregnant body.

One fall morning during the Desdemona and Sourmelina’s third trimester, Dr. Philobosian appears at their house. Inside, he tells them that he contracted an eye disease on the ship, yet ultimately wasn’t turned away at Ellis Island due to the fact that the government wanted doctors to immigrate. He received treatment and has been living in the Lower East Side in Manhattan, but has decided to move to Detroit because there are already too many medical practices in New York. Later, over dinner, Dr. Philobosian remarks on the extraordinary odds of both women getting pregnant on the same night. He mentions that people used to think that if a baby was born with deformities, it was caused by the mother thinking the wrong thing during the moment the child was conceived.

*The novel is full of pairs of people, who become twinned in the narratives in different ways. Lefty and Desdemona are one pair, linked not only by marriage but also by being brother and sister. Desdemona and Sourmelina are another pair, as are the unborn babies that they are carrying at the same time. In this way, people seem to be drawn together by fated emotions or events that are beyond their control.*



*As the reader may have guessed by now, Zizmo’s secret operation is importing alcohol, an extremely lucrative business during Prohibition. The fact that Zizmo himself doesn’t drink makes this venture more intriguing, though it also arguably makes him better at his job, as he has no temptation to take any of the supply for himself.*



*Desdemona and Sourmelina’s contrasting attitudes toward pregnancy highlight that pregnancy is not a universal experience, but one that varies greatly among women. For some, the experience of being pregnant feels like a fulfillment of duty and a way of being connected to a long line of ancestors. However, while these ideas are arguably beautiful and noble, they are not desired by everyone.*



*Despite the unimaginable horror that Dr. Philobosian endured back in Smyrna, immigrating to the U.S. has proven to be an opportunity for rebirth for him, too. In contrast to his morose and suicidal attitude on the ship, he seems to be in better spirits now, perhaps buoyed by his reunion with Lefty and Desdemona.*



Desdemona looks worried, and Dr. Philobosian assures her that no one thinks this anymore; now, doctors understand that deformities tend to be caused by intermarrying. Desdemona is horrified. Later, she shares her concerns with Sourmelina, who insists that the danger isn't really that great, and that "if families marrying each other was so bad, we'd all have six arms and no legs." However, this does not reassure Desdemona, as many of the children in Bithynios *did* have deformities. She would hear stories about how these individuals had horrible fates; they would end up homeless in Bursa or dead by suicide. Zizmo, meanwhile, has grown suspicious after the dinner with Philobosian, and wonders if he has been "tricked."

In the eighth month of the women's pregnancies, snow is falling, Zizmo is behaving erratically, and the Purple Gang is gaining tighter and tighter control over the bootlegging business in Detroit. Desdemona performs her spoon-swinging test over Sourmelina's belly to tell the baby's gender; Sourmelina is delighted to hear that it's a girl. Desdemona, meanwhile, prays to God that her baby doesn't have any deformities, and promises that this will be the only child she and Lefty have. On December 17, Sourmelina goes into labor, giving birth to a baby girl. Zizmo devises his "final scheme" and tells Lefty to prepare for "business" that night.

When night comes, Zizmo drives them to the affluent neighborhood of Grosse Pointe. They approach the lake, and Lefty realizes that Zizmo is planning to drive to Canada over the ice. They aren't sure if the ice is sturdy enough, and thus open both car doors to leap out if need be. Lefty prays both for the ice not to break and to stay safe from the Purple Gang, as the lake is their territory. Meanwhile, back at home, Desdemona has a nightmare about being raped by the captain of the ship that took her and Lefty to America. She wakes up and realizes her water has broken.

Back on the lake, Lefty smells something metallic from the car, while Zizmo asks why Lefty never mentions to other people that Sourmelina is his cousin. He then asks why Lina left Bithynios, and Lefty explains that there was no one in the village for her to marry. Increasingly angry and accelerating the car, Zizmo asks "Is it you! [...] Who is it!" At this moment, Cal interrupts the scene to share memories of watching "dubbed Italian versions of the ancient Greek myths" with his father, Milton, as a child. He recalls watching a film about Theseus and the Minotaur. Meanwhile, Sourmelina and Desdemona are in a taxi on the way to the hospital. Sourmelina says she was going to go that morning anyway to collect her baby.

*The contrast between Sourmelina's breezy attitude and Desdemona's worry provides a useful meditation on the way that damaging cultural practices can continue over time. Desdemona expresses the belief that incest can't be that bad because people in Bithynios have been doing it for centuries. In making this statement, she indicates that if a tradition is longstanding, then it's probably fine, and in doing so ignores the obvious evidence that it is not fine.*



*Note the contrast between this scene and the passages earlier in the novel describing the leadup to Callie's birth. When Desdemona is pregnant, there is more of a consensus around traditional knowledge and rituals like the spoon test, which reassure her. Indeed, it is the scientific knowledge that incest causes deformities that gives Desdemona reason to fear.*



*Significantly, both Lefty and Desdemona cross bodies of water in this passage (albeit in Desdemona's case, this only takes place in a dream). As shown by Lefty and Desdemona's immigration to the U.S., moving across a body of water is a symbol of rebirth. However, it also denotes danger and fear of the unknown.*



*Zizmo is wildly paranoid and jealous, and on one level he has a right to be. However, the truth of who Sourmelina is—her identity as a lesbian—is so illegible to Zizmo that he cannot even imagine the truth. Instead, he misreads the reality and accuses Lefty of being secretly in love with his cousin (which, at least in Lefty's case, is not too widely off the mark).*



Zizmo continues to accuse Lefty of being the father of Sourmelina's child, but by this point the car is so unsafe that Lefty just leaps straight out of the vehicle. He crashes onto the ice, skidding, and watches as the car keeps moving. With no idea what Zizmo is doing, Lefty watches car until it plunges into the ice and goes dark. Meanwhile, Dr. Philobosian delivers Desdemona's baby, a son. She is thrilled that the child does not have any obvious physical defects. Lefty arrives at the hospital, having walked all the way from the lake. Sourmelina's baby, taken from the incubator, is named Theodora, while Lefty and Desdemona's son is named Militadies, although he will go by the English name Milton. Although no one knows this, each baby carries a genetic mutation.

*Just as Lefty has a stroke when Callie is born, so does Zizmo disappear (and possibly die) when Milton is born. With each new generation of the family that arrives, an older one changes or dies. In this sense, every birth is a rebirth, because the birth of an individual constitutes the rebirth of the family.*



## BOOK 2: MARRIAGE ON ICE

Thirteen days after his death, Jimmy Zizmo's funeral takes place. The police were never able to find his body, but chose to accept Lefty's explanation that Zizmo had been ice fishing and was possibly drunk. An open casket containing only a framed photo of Zizmo along with his wedding crown is displayed in the house for mourners to view. Despite not having liked her husband at all, Sourmelina sinks into an intense grief. She curses Zizmo for leaving her as a single mother and widow. Father Stylianopoulos conducts the first part of the funeral service in the house, before the immediate family are driven to church in a limousine that Lefty has rented.

*Sourmelina may not have been in love with Jimmy, but perhaps over the course of their marriage she came to feel a sort of appreciation and respect for him. Even if this isn't true, back during this era when a person married, they would expect to remain married for the rest of their lives, since divorce was socially taboo. Perhaps the intensity of Sourmelina's grief is simply due to the shock of realizing this will not be the case.*



As is traditional, a man stays behind at the house while the church part of the service takes place, guarding the door so that Zizmo's spirit cannot reenter the house. After the church service, the casket is put to one side, in case Zizmo's body turns up in the spring, once the ice thaws. According to Orthodox belief, the soul of a dead person does not go straight to heaven, but rather stays for a while on Earth to haunt the living. Forty days after the initial funeral service, another service is held, at which point Zizmo's spirit is thought to leave earth for heaven. During this service, Sourmelina changes into a bright orange dress, violating the norm that widows should wear black for the rest of their lives. Desdemona is horrified.

*A connection emerges here between the Greek Orthodox tradition of preventing a dead person's spirit from reentering the house and the family's decision to put the casket to one side in case Zizmo's body shows up in the spring. Even as they mourn Zizmo, there are multiple senses in which he might not truly be gone.*



After the funeral rites for Zizmo are completed, both Milton and Theodora are baptized. Desdemona asks Sourmelina how it is possible to prevent oneself from getting pregnant again; Lina replies that women can't get pregnant while they are breastfeeding, but beyond this, the only way is to not have sex. Desdemona doesn't want to have sex at the moment anyway, much to Lefty's annoyance. Lefty has what Cal describes as the all-too-common male experience of feeling jealous of his own baby. Until this point, Lefty and Desdemona's relationship had been "unusually close and egalitarian" for the time. However, after the birth of Milton, Lefty becomes increasingly conservative and demanding.

During this time Lefty also goes in search of a new job. He spends his spare time translating Ancient Greek literature into English, but cannot find work as a translator or teacher. Eventually, he has an idea: he sets up a speakeasy called the Zebra Room in the basement of his house, named after a zebra skin Zizmo claimed to have brought over from Africa. He gets the alcohol from the same connections he used in his and Zizmo's bootlegging days, and teaches himself to be a barman. Upstairs, Desdemona and Sourmelina share the duties of raising their two children. Sourmelina is uninterested in babies; her caring talents are much better suited to teenagers.

Milton and Theodora are inseparable until Milton turns four, at which point he abandons his cousin to play with the local boys instead. By this point, Theodora doesn't care, because Lefty and Desdemona's extremely infrequent sexual encounters have led to the birth of another cousin, Zoë, whom Cal calls Aunt Zo. Desdemona once again spends her pregnancy petrified that the baby will be deformed. Yet when Zoë is born on April 27, 1928, she is perfectly healthy. Theodora is obsessed with Zoë and loves pretending to be her mother. With so many children in the house, Sourmelina and Theodora move to a new apartment right next door.

The financial crash of 1929 and ensuing Great Depression takes a toll on Lefty's speakeasy. Later, when Callie is a child, Desdemona will tell her stories about the horrors of the Depression. One night, Lefty removes his two sleeping children from the bed he shares with Desdemona and attempts to initiate sex. Desdemona refuses, which prompts an argument, and Lefty ends up telling Desdemona that she has to find a job. The next day, Sourmelina and Desdemona search through the listings until they find a mysterious post advertising for a position as a "silk worker." Nervously, Desdemona sets off, handing the address to the conductor on the streetcar as she doesn't yet really speak English.

*Although there are certain things that make Lefty and Desdemona's relationship unusual—the main one of which is, of course, the fact that they are brother and sister—in other ways they are entirely typical. In particular, this manifests as Lefty betraying a stereotypical male selfishness and resentment surrounding the birth of his child.*



*Although in some ways the Stephanides-Zizmo family adheres to strict gender roles, the scene described here is also nontraditional. With three adults left in the house, the labor of working and raising the children is spread out in a different way than it would have been with just two.*



*Because the adults of the family are something of a parenting triad, Theodora, Milton, and Zoë grow up somewhat more like siblings than cousins. Of course, the reader knows from the beginning of the novel that Milton and Theodora (Tessie) are Cal's parents. In a less direct way, the motif of incest between family members recurs in the second generation of the Stephanides family.*



*Lefty's anger at Desdemona seems to originate in the idea that if she refuses to have sex with him (i.e., perform the prescribed duties of a wife) then she must work outside the home (i.e., the typical duty of a husband). Of course, economic pressure is also a factor—during the Depression, many women sought work in order to supplement their family's falling or nonexistent income. However, they tended to face increased sexist discrimination in the workforce, which was justified by the lack of jobs.*



On the journey, Desdemona feels annoyed with Lefty, whose claim that silk isn't made in Detroit turns out to have been false. She thinks that if her silkworm cocoons hadn't been seized at Ellis Island, she could have set up a cocoonery in her backyard. She passes poor, wretched-looking people holding signs on the street and is shocked, reminded of the refugees back in Smyrna. When the streetcar reaches Hastings Street, the address from the ad, Desdemona is shocked: it is in "the Black Bottom ghetto." Ever since black people began arriving in Detroit in large numbers, this is where they have been confined. When the conductor tells Desdemona they've reach her destination, she is stunned, yet still gets out.

Walking nervously, Desdemona passes children playing, a homeless man, a street artist, and a barbershop. A woman stops to ask if she is lost, and is confused when Desdemona claims she is looking for the silk factory. When Desdemona shows her the address, she points to a building across the street. Two young black men stand outside; to Desdemona's total surprise, they are wearing fezzes. When she approaches the men with the address, they tell her to go around the back of the building. There, she encounters black women wearing white chadors and headscarves. Desdemona realizes that the building is a mosque.

One of the women introduces herself as Sister Wanda, and asks if Desdemona has come regarding the job. In halting English, Desdemona lists her experience as a silk worker. Suspiciously, Sister Wanda asks about Desdemona's ethnicity, and isn't happy to hear that she is Greek. However, her attitude changes when she hears that Desdemona immigrated from Turkey, as it's a Muslim country. Sister Wanda explains that Minister Fard has taught them about the importance of self-reliance, and cautioned against depending on white people. Reluctantly, Desdemona replies that Turkish and Greek people are "same same."

Sister Wanda takes Desdemona through the mosque, explaining that she should never go through the curtain to the main temple, and that she should start covering her hair. Cal quotes from two books about black Muslims in America, explaining that in 1930, a mysterious "peddler" began spreading messages among the black community of Detroit. This was the beginning of the Nation of Islam. The peddler went by various names, from Mr. Farrad Mohammad to Wallace Ford to Wardell Fard. There was uncertainty over his racial identity and where he came from. Sister Wanda explains that Minister Fard has advised them to start selling silk from the mosque. She opens a door to reveal a room in which 23 women are at work sewing clothes.

*Although Desdemona's attitudes regarding race have not yet been explicitly articulated, it is clear that she wants to maintain her distance from the black neighborhood of the city. A European immigrant like Desdemona may well have had little to no interaction with black people before, and this—combined with the prevalence of racist ideologies both in Greece and the U.S.—stokes powerful prejudice.*



*While Desdemona initially assumes that Black Bottom will be a place totally alien and unfamiliar to her, the presence of the mosque is a sign of familiarity. Desdemona comes from a part of the world where Muslim and Christian people live together, and has spent much of her life under Muslim Ottoman rule. Although she is not Muslim herself, the mosque nonetheless reminds her of her homeland.*



*Desdemona's claim to be basically the same as a Turkish person would have been seen as scandalous and heretical if anyone from her own community heard it. However, in the midst of her desperation to get a job (and possibly also her excitement at the prospect of working with silk again), she puts these concerns aside. This incident indicates that ethnic boundaries are less strict and meaningful as people make them out to be.*



*As much as Desdemona's involvement with the Nation of Islam might seem far-fetched, the Nation of Islam itself was very real, and was indeed founded in Detroit by a mysterious man who went by the names listed in this passage. Moreover, as the book illustrates, Fard encouraged his followers to get involved in silk production—a luxury industry that is at odds with the desperate conditions of the Great Depression.*



Sister Wanda then shows Desdemona a wooden box full of dirt, explaining that they ordered silkworms “from a company.” Desdemona examines one of the worms, which is almost dead, and speaks to it softly in Greek. Sister Wanda turns to the women and explains that Desdemona is going to teach them how to make silk. The women all turn to her, and Desdemona says that in order to “make good silk [...] you have to be pure.”

*Desdemona’s reiteration of her mother’s words of advice highlights how wisdom can be transposed across vastly different cultural contexts. The black Muslim women Desdemona is speaking to may share little in common with Euphrosyne Stephanides, but they do share her insistence on the importance of purity.*



## BOOK 2: TRICKNOLOGY

Desdemona soon gets used to working for the Nation of Islam; in a way, working there reminds her of her home country. For the black people of Detroit, the mosque is a site of empowerment. One day, Desdemona brings her **silkworm box** to show her students, explaining that her grandfather carved it himself. The women at the temple are all kind to her, although Desdemona maintains some racist suspicions about black people in general, even as she comes to respect those at the temple. She tells Sourmelina that American women could use the kind of conservative influence propagated by the Nation of Islam.

*Desdemona’s mixed feelings about the women at the Nation of Islam reflect her internal conflict about the U.S. in general, and also highlight the illogical way in which prejudice works. Due to racist ideas she has absorbed, Desdemona holds all kinds of negative beliefs about black people, even though the only black people she actually knows behave in the exact way she believes that people should.*



Under Desdemona’s supervision, young men construct a cocoonery in the temple. One day, Desdemona is in the Silk Room when she hears a voice, and is unsure of where it’s coming from. The voice explains that he was born in Mecca in 1877 to a black man from the “tribe of Shabazz” and a white woman, “a devil.” The voice explains that his father converted his mother to Islam. Desdemona is captivated by the voice, which is the voice of Minister Fard. He explains how he was destined to bring Islam to African Americans. From this day on, Desdemona hears Fard speak regularly, and is thus exposed to all the major ideas of the Nation of Islam.

*The novel’s presentation of the Nation of Islam may be one of its most controversial elements. While there are certainly things about the NOI that might seem strange or outlandish, by presenting the religion entirely through Desdemona’s perspective, the reader does not get access to important context about the longstanding existence of black Muslims in America or the reason why African Americans were drawn to Islam over, for example, Christianity.*



Eventually, Desdemona hears about how white people were created by an evil scientist named Yacub through a eugenics program. The young women installing the silkworm trays are lost in various daydreams, but Desdemona is stunned. Insulted at the idea that all white people are devils, she resolves to stop listening to Fard, but by the next day, she once again finds herself riveted by his words. Cal speculates that the guilt Desdemona felt about marrying Lefty may have been part of what made her receptive to Fard’s teachings. On one occasion around this time, Desdemona becomes upset, telling Lefty that they are “not good people” and declaring that she wishes she’d died in Smyrna.

*While Desdemona’s time working for the Nation of Islam evidently doesn’t erase her prejudice entirely, it does make her critically reflect on her own privilege and complicity in oppression. Unfortunately, rather than inspiring Desdemona to do good in the world, it instead stimulates her survivor’s guilt, which manifests as a form of self-pity. This emerges most clearly when she melodramatically declares she wishes she’d died in Smyrna.*



Desdemona watches her children closely for signs that something is wrong with them. She refuses to have sex with Lefty, and eventually he gives up trying. Lefty focuses on work instead. The slump in customers driven by the Depression leads him to take on a new business endeavor. His new associate is a photographer named Maurice Plantagenet. Lefty, Maurice, and a model named Mabel drive into a dead-end, where they park the car and Mabel takes off her coat to reveal lingerie. She poses against the car, and Plantagenet takes pictures. This is Lefty's new job: finding models for Plantagenet's racy photographs of women and cars. The whole thing was Lefty's idea.

Despite the Depression, people still buy the photographs, and Lefty's income becomes stable again. Meanwhile, Desdemona is still captivated by Fard's speeches. She begins to understand that the deprivation she witnesses in Black Bottom is not due to the deficient characteristics of its residents, but rather structural racism. She is horrified when she witnesses other white people behaving in a racist manner. She begins to accept Fard's teachings about white people. In November 1932, a black cult leader is accused of murdering a boarder in his house as part of a "human sacrifice." Members of his cult are called in for questioning, and suspicions arise from the fact that he used to spend time at the temple. Shortly after, Fard is arrested.

Fard leaves Detroit, and in May 1933, Desdemona bids a tearful goodbye to the young women of the temple. A new leader has taken over the Nation of Islam: his name is Elijah Muhammad, and he is not interested in continuing the silk production program. On her way out, Desdemona sneaks into the main temple. Fard is there, and greets her by name, asking after Lefty. Desdemona is shocked; Fard explains that he "know[s] everything." He asks about Milton and the speakeasy, and then turns to reveal his face—it is Jimmy Zizmo. He claims that "Jimmy" died so that he could dedicate himself to liberating his "people." He indicates that he knows about Sourmelina's lesbianism and Lefty and Desdemona's incest. After this, Fard disappears from Detroit and meets a mysterious end. Desdemona, meanwhile, undergoes a new medical procedure to prevent herself from having any more children.

*Although the official reason Lefty launches this side business is to make extra cash in the midst of the pressures of the Depression, it is perhaps also the case that he does so due to sexual frustration. Now that Desdemona will no longer have sex with him, Lefty is driven to seek erotic pleasure elsewhere.*



*This passage indicates that after a while, listening to Fard's teachings actually does begin to have a positive effect on Desdemona, encouraging her to adopt anti-racist beliefs (if not quite actions). At the same time, learning about racism from the Nation of Islam is perhaps not the best route, given that the movement comes to be associated with sinister fringe activities such as human sacrifice.*



*Since the real-life Fard was likely of Arab origin (some believe him to have originated from Turkey, others from Afghanistan), the decision to reveal that Fard is actually Jimmy Zizmo could be judged to be in bad taste. Whatever one thinks, the twist takes away from the randomness of Desdemona working for the Nation of Islam, establishing an air of fate and re-centering the Stephanides family within this seeming digression from the main narrative.*



## BOOK 2: CLARINET SERENADE

Cal and Julie go to dinner at a restaurant called Austria. Julie is a photographer who looks 26, though she is, in fact, 10 years older than that. Cal likes Julie, yet worries that he is getting ahead of himself, as they haven't even kissed yet. The narrative switches back to 1944. Theodora, now going by Tessie, is 20 years old. World War II is ranging, Prohibition has ended, and Lefty has closed down the speakeasy. Using the money from the erotic photographs, he opens a new Zebra Room, this one an "above-ground" bar and grill. Most of the patrons are auto workers. Working behind the bar, Lefty listens to them complain about everything from union-busting to black people.

One day, when a group of customers come in saying they have just beaten a black man to death, Lefty refuses to serve them, forcing them to leave at gunpoint. While Tessie sits at home painting her toenails, she hears someone playing an Artie Shaw tune on a clarinet. The clarinet player is Milton, who is currently a college student. Downstairs, Desdemona and Lefty are sitting in the living room with Gaia Vasilakis and her parents. The four adults are drinking sparkling wine. Gaia is one of a series of girls Desdemona has been trying to set up with Milton. Having been rejected by the army, Milton is studying at night school and working in the Zebra Room during the day.

Desdemona goes to get Milton, begging him to come downstairs. She asks why he always plays with the window open. Milton claims it is because he gets hot, but Desdemona suspects it has something to do with "the growing intimacy between Milton and Tessie." The thought of this intimacy has been giving Desdemona heart palpitations. She has taken to aggressively attempting to matchmake Milton with one girl after another. Reluctantly, Milton comes downstairs with her. He is wearing his Boy Scout uniform, and Gaia's father comments that he has a lot of badges. Milton eats one of the cookies Gaia made, and says, "This cookie is lousy."

Cal comments that it is basically impossible to imagine one's own parents falling in love. At 18 years old, Milton is unattractive, skinny, covered in zits, and prone to wearing too much Brylcreem in his hair. Tessie, on the other hand, is pretty. She is short and slender, with a "pretty, heart-shaped face." Her manner is completely American, partly due to the fact that American women helped raise her while Sourmelina worked in a florist's shop. In defiance of her boisterous, heavy-drinking, unconventional mother, Tessie is "quiet," sensible, and conservative. As a result, until recently Milton thought of her as "prim" and cold. However, this all changes when he sees Tessie with painted toenails for the first time.

*Like Jimmy Zizmo and various other characters in the novel, the Zebra Room doesn't die, but instead undergoes a kind of rebirth. Indeed, Lefty's willingness to transform the former speakeasy into a diner shows that he is aware of the changing times and is willing to change with them. Particularly as an immigrant, such flexibility is arguably key to being prosperous in the U.S.*



*Although much about the Stephanides family has changed in the years that have passed, there are also key points of continuity. Just as Desdemona once tried to matchmake a wife for Lefty, she is now attempting to do so for Milton (and, as the reader will guess from the fact that Tessie and Milton ultimately end up getting married, for the same reason). Meanwhile, Milton is going into the family business by working at the new Zebra Room.*



*Just as Lefty did when he was a young man and "spoiled" by the care of his parents and Desdemona, Milton is childish and irresponsible. Perhaps, like Lefty, his rudeness to Gaia emerges from a lack of interest in her (or any of the girls that Desdemona is setting him up with) and resentment of another person being in control of his life.*



*This passage explores the way in which children inherit both their parents' traits and their opposites through the desire to rebel against whatever precedent one's parents set. While it is generally more common for children to rebel by being more boisterous and less conservative, in Tessie's case the opposite has happened, suggesting that the underlying desire to rebel is more important than whatever one is rebelling against.*



This same day, Tessie asks Milton to play her something on the clarinet. He does, and then without knowing why, puts the clarinet on her knee and blows a note. This is the start of a strange ritual, in which Milton holds his clarinet against different parts of Tessie's body and plays, in a way that over time becomes more and more directly sexual. In 1944, however, Tessie is also being seduced by someone else: Michael Antoniou, who sings religious songs to her through the phone. He is a student at the Greek Orthodox Holy Cross Theological School in Connecticut. Desdemona is keen to encourage the romance between him and Tessie so that she will lose interest in Milton.

One day, when Michael comes over for Sunday lunch, he and Milton have an argument about religion. Tessie is struck by the contrast between the two young men. Later, when Milton offers to play a song for her, she tells him she doesn't "want to do that anymore." She and Michael start going on chaste dates every Sunday, and before long they are engaged. On hearing this, Milton curses Tessie, growing red-faced while pretending not to care. Cal reflects that it is obvious why Tessie thought Michael was the better, more practical choice. After a period of moping around, Milton suddenly decides to enlist in the Navy. Lefty is furious; he finds the decision arrogant and naïve, and reminds Milton that he missed out on becoming an Eagle Scout because he never got his last badge, which was for swimming.

## BOOK 2: NEWS OF THE WORLD

The next time Cal sees Julie, he visits her studio, and is captivated by her photographs of factories, which are her main subject. Cal kisses her, and Julie admits that she thought he was gay when they first met. She worries about being the "last stop," explaining that closeted gay men tend to date Asian women as the last stop before coming out "because their bodies are more like boys."

Cal jumps back to his "parents' story," describing the optimism and pride Greek Americans felt about the presidential run of Michael Dukakis, followed by the humiliation of Dukakis's failed campaign stunt of riding in a tank. He comments that Milton looked equally ridiculous while serving in the Navy in 1944. Milton was stationed in San Diego, having joined the Navy as an act of "revenge" against Tessie and in hope of forgetting his love for her.

*Tessie and Milton's clarinet-based sexual experimentation is undoubtedly one of the funniest parts of the novel. Again, however, it shows that just because sex can be ridiculous and comic doesn't make it any less erotic, profound, and intimate. Indeed, however bizarre the clarinet ritual might seem, it draws Milton and Tessie together against the odds of their familial proximity and parental opposition.*



*Milton is a profoundly ridiculous character, and there are many ways in which he is a poorer choice of husband in comparison to Michael. At the same time, Michael is not a perfect option either, as he is presented as being rather boring. In the end, Tessie appears to be attempting to suppress her natural inclination and make a sensible choice—something that has never worked out for the characters in the novel thus far.*



*Julie's words are an important reminder that sexuality and gender do not exist in a vacuum, but are profoundly shaped by race as well.*



*Again, Milton is both ridiculous and oddly sympathetic, given his romantic attachment to Tessie. While his actions may be silly, his genuine feelings for her make him a more appealing character than the kind but dull Michael.*



Meanwhile, back in Detroit, Tessie watches news about the war at the movie theater. She daydreams of going to Europe to visit Italy or France. When footage of American troops plays, Tessie finds herself searching for Milton's face and then feels ashamed of this. When the movie plays, she is unable to focus, distracted by her fears for Milton's safety. The movie depicts a man unable to forget about the woman he loves, and Tessie sobs.

During this time, everyone is writing letters to each other. Michael writes to Tessie twice a week, and Tessie lies in her letters back, pretending that she has spent her days volunteering with the Red Cross. Milton, meanwhile, writes Desdemona letters in poor Greek, which are in turn torn apart by the military censors. Milton, meanwhile, takes the entrance exam for the Naval Academy. Desdemona prays to St. Christopher, the martyr of Asia Minor, promising she will go back to Bithynios to repair the church if Milton stays safe in the war. Soon after, Milton gets bad news: he is being appointed to the dangerous position of signalman. He feels certain that he is going to die.

The next time Tessie is at the movies, newsreel footage of the war plays again, and this time she actually sees Milton. Tessie is stunned, and suddenly all her feelings about Milton and memories of his clarinet come back. She admits to herself that she doesn't want to marry Michael and live the life of a priest's wife in Greece. Back at home, the Stephanides family receive a letter from Milton, the last one he will be able to write. He tells them not to worry and says that when he comes back home, he "want[s] in on the family business." Distraught, Desdemona stays in bed for three days.

Tessie comes in to Desdemona's room to say that she is calling off the wedding. Desdemona sits up in bed, asking why Tessie doesn't want to marry Michael, a "good Greek boy." Tessie explains that Milton asked her to marry him a while ago, and that she is going to tell him yes. She adds that they are only second cousins, and even first cousins are allowed to marry. Convinced that Milton is about to die, Desdemona is in such a deep state of hopelessness that she doesn't even protest. Milton, meanwhile, is also convinced that he is going to die. However, he then gets the news that he excelled on the Naval Academy exam, and will immediately be sent to Annapolis.

*All too quickly, the reader sees that Tessie is not going to have an easy time suppressing her real feelings for Milton. In a sense, his stunt of joining the army has worked—Tessie now finds herself longing for him and worrying about him.*



*In different ways, both Tessie and Milton pretend to be more noble than they actually are in this passage. Tessie lies to Michael about working for the Red Cross, whereas Milton's decision to join the army was (at least not mainly) inspired by his willingness to serve his country, but rather to deal with his romantic troubles. He is not prepared to die in the line of duty (although depending on one's perspective, he can hardly be blamed for that).*



*Just as the threat of death made Desdemona agree to marry Lefty, so has the threat of Milton dying made Tessie realize that she wants to marry him. Although war interrupts and in some cases ruins the characters' lives, it is also a clarifying force, putting things into perspective and giving them access to their own desires.*



*The connection between Desdemona's consent to marrying Lefty and her consent to the marriage between Tessie and Milton is especially clear here. In both cases, she arguably only said yes because she was convinced the marriage wouldn't actually happen. However, in both cases the day is saved by the ingenuity of the Stephanides men—first by Lefty's impersonation of a French person, and now by Milton's excellent results on the Naval Academy exam.*



When Milton calls Desdemona to tell her the good news, she replies that he now has to fix the church in Bithynios, but he never gets around to doing this. Within a year he marries Tessie and they have their first child. He graduates from the Naval Academy and serves in the Korean War before coming back to Detroit and going into the family business. He never ends up going back to Bithynios, and Cal believes that this unfulfilled promise to St. Christopher caused problems later on. At Milton and Tessie's wedding, Michael approaches Zoë. Feeling sorry for him, Zoë suggests they go and get some cake.

*Again, the family (and their extended community) is shown to function in shifting pairs. As Tessie's suitors, Milton and Michael were a kind of pair. Tessie and Michael were initially a pair, but this has swapped to Tessie and Milton. Meanwhile, as cousins, Tessie and Zoë are a pair, and having failed to marry Tessie, Michael goes for Zoë instead, thereby forming yet another new pair with her.*



## BOOK 2: EX OVO OMNIA

Cal explains how everyone in his immediate family is related to each other in complicated ways. Cal's brother, Chapter Eleven, is also his third cousin; Milton is the nephew as well as the son of both his parents, and so on. Back in eighth grade English class, Callie translates a line from Ovid, *Ex ovo omnia*, which means "Everything comes out of an egg." Cal imagines himself and Chapter Eleven existing as eggs before they were conceived and born. After Milton graduates from the Naval Academy in 1949, he and Tessie live at Pearl Harbor for a while. In 1951 Milton is transferred to Norfolk, Virginia. During this time, he develops racist and anti-communist ideas.

*The idea that Cal/lie and Chapter Eleven existed in egg form before being born emphasizes the sense of predetermined fate. It also fuses biological and spiritual determinism by using a biological marker (the egg) for a rather mythical concept, that the spirits of unborn babies wait and watch the events of the world before they arrive.*



Father Mike proposes to Zoë three times, and in 1949 she eventually agrees and marries him. In 1950 the Black Bottom ghetto is bulldozed. Back in Detroit, Milton tells Lefty that he wants to run a chain of restaurants, starting with the Zebra Room. This chain, which will be called Hercules Hot Dogs, will eventually have 66 locations across the country. Milton uses his G.I. business loan to start it up, decorating the space with a "hodgepodge" of Greek kitsch items. The opening is a success; business booms, and soon Milton and Tessie are able to buy a large house in Indian Village, which is near Lefty and Desdemona's old neighborhood of Hurlbut, though much more affluent.

*This passage perfectly exemplifies how the Stephanides family end up living the stereotypical American Dream. Part of this dream is the idea that the first generation of immigrants work hard and make sacrifices in order to allow the second generation to have more options. In turn, the second generation uses these expanded opportunities to become prosperous and rise through the class hierarchy.*



Showing Lefty around the house, Milton points out that there is a library where Lefty can work on his translations. At 54, Lefty has been "pushed out" of his old role running the Zebra Room, and in a moment of despair about growing older, visits a casino hidden inside a pharmacist, which is frequented almost exclusively by poor black people. Lefty starts with small bets, but things quickly escalate. Cal speculates that part of the reason that Lefty was drawn to gambling was "survivor's guilt," which led him to be reckless and self-destructive. Everyone in the family is too preoccupied to notice Lefty's gambling. Milton is busy with the diners, Tessie is caring for baby Chapter Eleven, and Sourmelina has moved to the Southwest with her girlfriend, Mrs. Evelyn Watson.

*Although the overall story of the Stephanides family during this period is one of rising prosperity and success, this does not apply to all the family members individually. Without the sense of dignity and purpose stimulated by running the Zebra Room and providing for his family, Lefty's traumas and vices resurface. As the (former) patriarch, he is in a strangely vulnerable position precisely because no one in the family sees him as vulnerable and thus thinks to check in on him.*



Desdemona is going through a fairly happy stage in life. She is daydreaming about moving to Florida after hearing about a place called New Smyrna Beach. After 26 months, Lefty realizes with a start that he has spent all his money—he only has \$13 left in his account. On hearing this news, Desdemona shrieks and falls to the floor, ripping her clothes. She and Lefty move into Milton and Tessie’s house, living in the attic for maximum privacy. Cal believes that Desdemona liked living there because it reminded her of living back in Bithynios on Mount Olympus.

*In Greek tragedy (as well as other ancient cultural traditions), women ripping their own clothes is a sign of grief and lament. It can be interpreted as both a sign of mourning and of rage at one’s own powerlessness. Without much control over her and Lefty’s life, Desdemona resorts to turning her anger inward on her own body.*



The narrative now returns to the same time at which the novel began, on the day Cal is conceived. Cal explains that 250 years ago, the “biology gods” planted a mutated **gene** in one of his ancestors. The gene was passed down through the family to his grandparents, who then passed it on to Milton and Tessie. When Chapter Eleven was conceived, the biology gods decided that he would not inherit the gene. However, when Cal is conceived, the recessive gene finally meets its “twin.” The rather clinical manner in which Milton and Tessie have sex leads Tessie to apologize to her “baby girl,” saying she wishes it could have been more romantic. Milton replies, “Where’s my clarinet?”

*This passage once again reflects on the idea of fate while comparing scientific and mythical interpretations of the world. Cal opts to present his inheritance of the gene that made him intersex as something that was determined by the “biology gods,” thereby fusing a scientific and mythical understanding of his own fate.*



## BOOK 3: HOME MOVIES

Cal describes his memories of the day he was born, saying he knows it’s “impossible” to actually remember this day, but he still does. The nurse doesn’t notice anything wrong with Callie, and takes her to be examined by Dr. Philobosian. Dr. Philobosian, now 74 years old, examines the baby, but at the moment when he is supposed to be inspecting Callie’s genitals, his eyes catch the nurse’s. Enchanted, Dr. Philobosian is distracted from his examination, and concludes that Callie is “a beautiful, healthy girl.”

*This comic (and perhaps not entirely plausible) moment is another way in which minor accidents are shown to have a major impact on the direction of a person’s life. If Dr. Philobosian had not looked away right in that moment, everything else that happened to Callie could have been totally different.*



Back at home, Desdemona has discovered Lefty’s body on the kitchen floor. Having not been able to hear his heartbeat, she assumes that he is dead. She weeps and curses God for taking Lefty away, but at the same time she feels a surge of happiness, as the source of her worries has suddenly disappeared. However, she then hears his heart beating, and rushes him to hospitals, where he regains consciousness. Although Lefty’s mind works perfectly, he can no longer speak. Back in Cal’s adult life, he is drinking coffee and eating strudel with Julie at Café Einstein. Julie says she thinks “beauty is always freakish.” Cal describes his own physical appearance, with traits inherited from his ancestors, but adds that no one has ever truly seen all of him.

*The frankness with which Desdemona’s mixed feelings about Lefty’s death are depicted is quite profound and moving. Desdemona clearly adores Lefty and is deeply devoted to him, but this attachment doesn’t exclude feelings of resentment, anxiety, and the potential of relief at the possibility that she no longer has to take care of him.*



Two months after Callie is born, Desdemona is distressed about the fact that she still has not been baptized. When Milton calls baptism “hocus pocus,” Desdemona starts dramatically fanning herself, and begs Milton to think of Zoë and Father Mike. When Milton hears that baptism is free, he reluctantly gives in. Assumption Church has recently moved to a new site, a spectacular building designed to recall “the ancient splendor of Byzantium” while also showing off the prosperity of Greek Americans. While Callie is being dunked in the Holy Water by Father Mike, she feels at peace. She then urinates in an “arc,” hitting Father Mike in the face. Those in attendance try to stop themselves laughing. Milton is proud, while Tessie is humiliated.

Desdemona is also horrified by what happened at the baptism. It adds to the existing distress caused by the fact that for the first time, her spoon technique for predicting a baby’s sex didn’t work. Despite being resolutely opposed to assimilating into American culture, Desdemona has started to become more American by virtue of her obsession with TV. Desdemona was at first suspicious of Callie, seeing her as yet another sign of the “end times.” However, one day Desdemona goes into Callie’s room and holds her. From this moment, Desdemona is devoted to her granddaughter, who becomes her favorite member of the family.

Lefty, meanwhile, has recovered well and remains physically fit, helpful around the house, and devoted to his translations. Still unable to speak, he communicates by writing notes. At night he smokes hash in his hookah pipe. For Callie’s first few Christmases, Tessie is so excited about having a girl that she dressed her in ridiculous, frilly outfits. During this time, Milton has taken to making home movies, and Callie describes how the family look in these films. Lefty is still “dapper” after his stroke, and Desdemona’s dentures make her look like a “snapping turtle.” Chapter Eleven looks decidedly American. The family have two boxers. Later, this film (“Easter ‘62”) will be screened by Dr. Luce at Cornell University Medical School. It shows the infant Callie nursing a baby doll.

Before puberty, Callie is not physically different from other girls in a way that is visibly significant. Milton’s Super 8 film of Callie’s 7th birthday in 1967 is the last home movie he will ever make. At this time, Chapter Eleven is 12 and enjoys cutting golf balls in half in order to look at their insides. Profits from Milton’s diner have started to slump. When he looks into selling it, he is horrified to realize that he has waited too long; it is worth less than what Lefty originally bought it for, decades earlier. There is a particular patron of the diner considered to be a “troublemaker” named Marius Wyzzewixard Challouehliczilczese Grimes. He calls Callie “Little Cleopatra,” although she has been banned from speaking to him in return.

*This is one of many moments in the novel in which a profound scene turns unexpectedly surreal and comic. The fact that baby Callie urinates on Father Mike arguably indicates that she will somehow cause trouble for the family when she grows up by defying the community’s norms and expectations.*



*As Desdemona eventually realizes, her suspicion of Callie does not really have anything to do with Callie herself. Rather, it is produced by Desdemona’s anxieties about her own place in the world, particularly in regard to her family, changing social norms, and the ongoing question of how assimilated into American culture she will allow herself to become.*



*Although the reader doesn’t yet know much about what will happen with Dr. Luce, the fact that something as personal and intimate as a home movie is screened at a medical school seems somewhat invasive. Rather than simply being a happy memory, “Easter ‘62” becomes scientific evidence, turning Callie into a test subject.*



*Like all children of immigrants, Milton faces pressure not only to maintain the legacy of what his father created, but to build on it. The American Dream is supposed to involve steadily-increasing prosperity, and to lose money or a business that was created by a previous generation is perceived to be a terrible failure.*



Marius works in a record shop and is taking night classes at the University of Detroit Law School. He wears sunglasses and a beret, and likes to point out how many businesses in the neighborhood are “white-owned.” One day, Marius asks “Little Cleo” why Milton gives police officers free coffee, then tells her that it’s because Milton is afraid of black people. Callie denies this, but immediately after starts noticing signs of her father’s racism. One day, when Milton sees her talking to Marius, he shouts at her, saying she is not allowed to speak to strangers. Callie explains that Marius isn’t a stranger, to no avail. Milton stops letting her come to the diner for a while.

*As may be obvious, Marius is a member of the emergent Black Power Movement. It is clear that Callie is already more open-minded and justice-orientated than her father, who is something of a bigot. Whether this is because she has the innocent mindset of a child or because she and Milton simply have different personalities remains to be seen.*



### BOOK 3: OPA!

Cal and Julie are going away together on a weekend trip to Pomerania. Cal picks her up in a Mercedes. He feels excited about her presence and their growing intimacy, but during the trip they sleep in separate rooms. Meanwhile, back in Callie’s childhood, it is the summer after Milton banned her from speaking to Marius. Milton is terrified that the diner is going to fail. He spends his days lying on the patio and letting his beard grow out. Lefty tries to encourage him, but after the stroke Milton has begun to perceive his father as weak. At the diner, Milton continues to have the same cheery exterior, but this masks his true feelings.

*This passage explores the particular pressures that are placed on men, and the difficulties of living up to a masculine ideal. Milton obviously feels enormous pressure to provide for his family and maintain (or increase) the diner’s prosperity. Moreover, he also places emotional pressure on himself to appear resilient and optimistic. This is harmful, and leaves him feeling alienated.*



Milton and Tessie’s bedroom is “furnished entirely in Early American reproductions,” and Milton sleeps with a gun from his military days under his pillow. The gun is loaded, and the safety is off. During the summer, the city of Detroit is “bracing for race riots.” One night, a group of young black sex workers stand on Twelfth Street. They notice police arresting black men, but instead of fleeing, they fight back, soon joined by others. The riot has begun. At 6:23 a.m., Jimmy Fioretos calls the Stephanides house and frantically tells Callie to put Milton on the phone, because “the coloreds are rioting.” Milton leaps out of bed, taking his gun with him.

*The novel only provides hints about the conditions that lead to the 1967 Detroit Riot. The black community of Detroit face widespread discrimination, police brutality, de facto segregation, and cyclical poverty. In the midst of a national moment in which black Americans are energized to fight back, the black population of Detroit sends the message that they have finally had enough.*



Driving to the diner in his half-dressed state, Milton sees children throwing bricks through storefronts. He drives straight into the smoke billowing from the fires. Back at home, Tessie takes the children into the attic along with a suitcase full of food. Distraught over the news footage of the riots on TV, Desdemona claims that this is just like what happened in Smyrna. Before the riot, the white people who lived in Callie’s neighborhood had the belief that they could accept the presence of their black neighbors as long as they behaved in a way that was “normal.” Out of the whole Stephanides family, Aunt Zo is the only one who expresses sympathy for the looters during the riot.

*As this passage explains, race relations have long been tense in Detroit due to the racism of white people like the Stephanides family, who tend not to own up to their own prejudice but instead dress it up as a desire for “decency” and “civility.” In reality, of course, discriminating against a group of people and then demanding politeness from them isn’t reasonable—it is deeply oppressive.*



Lefty, Desdemona, Tessie, and the children spend three days in the attic, not bathing or brushing their teeth, consumed by the TV news. They hear nothing from Milton. Terrified for her father, Callie realizes that no one else in her family is going to save him, and thus decides to take on the mission herself. She crosses herself “in the Orthodox fashion,” sneaks out of the attic, and gets on her bike. On seeing a military tank, she is initially frightened and considers turning around, but then decides to follow it.

Milton is crouched under the cash register at the Zebra Room, holding a ham sandwich and trying desperately to stay awake. He hasn't slept since he got there, and desperately needs to use the bathroom but won't let himself. By some miracle, while all the other businesses in the area have been looted, the diner hasn't. Milton hears the doorknob of the diner rattle and walks toward it, shouting, “I've got a gun!” However, he then realizes that he is not holding his gun at all, but the ham sandwich. The person at the door is Morrison, who lives across the street. Morrison is surprised to see Milton there, noting it's not safe for white people to be in the area. He then asks if he could buy some cigarettes.

While Milton passes the cigarettes and matches through the door's mailbox, he gestures toward the riot and asks, “What's the matter with you people?” Morrison replies, “The matter with us [...] is you.” After hearing these words, Milton starts repeating them in a mock black accent. The phrase becomes a kind of “mantra” through which he expresses his various bigoted views. Meanwhile, back in the riot, Callie struggles to navigate her way through the city. She is surrounded by the terrifying violence of a “real battle,” something that in hindsight Cal views as “The Second American Revolution.” Milton watches in horror as soldiers shoot at Morrison, who is lighting a cigarette in his living room, and kill him instantly.

Callie has finally made it to the Zebra Room and is happy to see that it hasn't burned down. However, just at that moment, she sees a figure throw a Molotov cocktail through the window of the diner, shouting, “Opa, motherfucker!” Just as Milton grabs the fire extinguisher in a desperate attempt to put out the flames, it suddenly occurs to him that he has triply insured the diner, and that letting it burn down will lead to a huge payout. He runs out to his car, where he finally spots Callie, who says she is there to help him. He hugs her, and she cries at the sight of the burning restaurant. They drive home together. Cal reiterates that while the events of those days are referred to only as a riot, he maintains that what he witnessed was a “guerrilla uprising.”

*Callie's heroic but naive decision to rescue her father could be read as prefiguring her later transition to a male gender identity, as her act is arguably stereotypically male in the brave, protective sense. On the other hand, such an interpretation could be seen as reinforcing the gender binary that the novel seeks to critique.*



*In a fashion so stereotypically American that it is tragicomic, Milton's desperation to guard his property suggests he values it more than his own life. Of course, this is not because the Zebra Room has very high monetary value (as Cal has just explained, it was actually losing money). Rather, the Zebra Room is a manifestation of Milton's own pride and dignity. If he lost it, it would be an affront to his masculinity.*



*In this passage, Cal leaves a deliberate amount of ambiguity regarding whether the epic battle scenes Callie perceives are due to the exaggerations of her own childish perception, or whether this is actually what happened. The fact that at the time, the 1967 Detroit Riot constituted the largest uprising in the U.S. since the Civil War indicates that Callie was not exaggerating, and that Cal is right to think of this as “The Second American Revolution.”*



*“Opa!” is the exclamation common among Greek waiters. By shouting this while throwing the Molotov cocktail at the diner, the rioter in question expresses some level of anti-Greek xenophobia. Of course, due to the significant privilege Greek people held in comparison to black residents of Detroit, this anti-Greek prejudice comes out as rather mild in comparison to the problem of anti-black racism.*



## BOOK 3: MIDDLESEX

In the end, the riots are “the best thing that ever happened” to the Stephanides family. The insurance payout from the Zebra Room allows them to buy a 1967 Cadillac Fleetwood, which to Callie resembles a “spaceship.” This is only the first of many Cadillacs the family will own. Meanwhile, following the riots the family also decide to move to the suburbs, a common trend among white residents of Detroit, and set their sights on Grosse Pointe, which is the wealthy neighborhood where the “auto magnates” live. Finding a house is difficult, and the realtor informs Milton that a strange, “modern” house is the best she will be able to do for him.

During that time, realtors in Grosse Pointe use a “point system” to evaluate the desirability of prospective buyers. As people of Southern Mediterranean descent who are Greek Orthodox don’t work in the “right” professions, and will have grandparents living with them, the Stephanides family score low within this system. Although Milton doesn’t particularly like the house on offer, he is impressed by the realtor mentioning the name of the architect who designed it, and also likes the guest house and bathhouse outside, despite their dilapidated condition. He agrees to take the house, paying in cash.

On the day the family are driving to move into the new house, Callie points out that the Boston Tea Party was a “riot,” indicating that Milton should be less disapproving of the race riots. Fuming, Milton argues that Callie is wrong and that she has been taught nonsense in school. They drive onto Middlesex Boulevard, their new street. It is covered in enormous trees. The house itself, which Callie calls Middlesex, is extremely bizarre, “futuristic and outdated at the same time.” The house’s design is creative and rather nonsensical. Almost immediately, Callie gets her head stuck inside a pneumatic door.

The family slowly get used to living in the house. There is an intercom system that doesn’t work very well, so that it is hard to predict where in the house one’s voice will end up emerging. Although there are certain problems with the house that she never gets over, Tessie comes to like the enormous glass walls, which Lefty takes it upon himself to clean. Callie and Chapter Eleven love it because there are so many opportunities for climbing.

*The fact that the Stephanides family actually end up financially benefiting from the race riot is not actually the fluke accident it might at first appear to be. While black people face intensified police oppression in the aftermath of the riot, white people become comparatively better off, materially benefiting from the violence that was designed to harm them due to the fact that the system has been designed to work in their favor.*



*Of course, just because the Stephanides family are perpetrators and complicit in the (far more serious) issue of anti-black racism does not mean they don’t face prejudice themselves. Although xenophobia against immigrants from Southern Europe was on the decline during this period, it still remained a powerful force—particularly somewhere like Grosse Pointe.*



*It has probably not escaped the reader’s attention that Middlesex Boulevard is a significant name in relation to Cal’s intersex condition. Furthermore, the Stephanides family’s move to Middlesex—and the chapter with this title— occurs almost exactly halfway through the novel. The house, like this part of the narrative, and like Cal himself, is not quite one thing nor another, but in the middle.*



*Just as Lefty and Desdemona adjusted to a very different kind of life once they moved to the U.S., so does the whole Stephanides family now embrace their strange new home in Grosse Pointe. As immigrants and their descendants, they have acquired an ability to adapt to their surroundings.*



As a child, Callie is very close to Lefty. She finds his lack of speech “dignified,” and feels that they understand each other without needing to speak. A few weeks after they move to Middlesex, Lefty and Callie go on a walk together. When they get to the curb, Callie walks, but Lefty doesn’t. He freezes, and Callie notices that there is a terrible look of fear in his eyes. The truth is that Lefty had another stroke the previous week, and is now having significant trouble orienting himself. The effect of this second stroke has led him to conclude that, although he always believed in the existence of the soul, the truth is that people are purely biological beings. After their brains stop working, there is nothing left of them.

Callie desperately wants friends in her new neighborhood, and one day sees a possible candidate in the form of a girl with white-blond hair who lives in the house behind Callie’s. Her name is Clementine Stark; she is pale and allergic to a range of “hard-to-avoid items” like grass and dust. Because of this, she has to spend a lot of time inside, which she starts doing with Callie. The first time Callie comes over, Clementine shows Callie her freckles and asks if she wants to “practice kissing.” Without waiting for Callie to answer, Clementine puts her arms around her and leans in to kiss her. Clementine moves her head like actresses do in movies, but when Callie tries to copy her, Clementine stops her, saying, “You’re the man.”

That evening, Callie happily tells Tessie that she has made a new friend, and asks to invite her over. Tessie is pleased that Callie is settling into the neighborhood. A week later, Callie and Clementine have a bath together, and play a game where they wrap their legs around each other, giggling as they slip and fall. Suddenly, Callie is shocked to see Lefty looking at them. Clementine immediately claims that she and Callie were only playing “water ballet,” but Callie soon realizes Lefty can’t hear her. She screams into the intercom, telling everyone who can hear that “something’s wrong with *papou*.” That night, Callie feels extraordinary guilt, certain that Lefty’s stroke was caused by him seeing her and Clementine in the bath together.

Around this same time, Clementine’s father dies of a heart attack. She and her mother leave the neighborhood, and Callie never sees her again. Lefty comes home from the hospital, but over the next three years his mind slowly unravels. At first he forgets little things, but then fails to remember whole sections of his life, and moves backward in time so he thinks it is the 1960s, then the ‘50s, and so on. In order to humor him, Desdemona pretends that the kitchen is the Zebra Room, and even invites her friends from church to pretend to be patrons.

*One motif in the novel is that, for many people, death does not come in a simple, easy, or peaceful way. In Lefty’s case, his repeated strokes end up functioning as half-deaths in which each time, he loses more and more of himself. Indeed, there is a parallel here with the way in which the novel depicts life as a series of rebirths. In a way, life involves repeated deaths, too.*



*One of the motifs of Callie’s childhood is that female adolescence involves quite a lot of homosexual and homosocial activity. Indeed, this is considered a normal part of development, as long as it takes place within certain parameters. Of course, it is telling that Clementine tells Callie that she is supposed to be the man in this roleplay scenario. Perhaps Clementine recognizes Callie’s androgyny before Callie does herself.*



*During this period of her life, it is almost like Callie is being haunted by her grandfather. Each of his strokes coincides with her in a significant way. This could be interpreted as an illustration of the special connection between them, a sign that Lefty is transferring some of himself to Callie prior to his death. On the other hand, Callie herself has a more sinister interpretation, believing that she is the cause of her grandfather’s declining health.*



*The steady decline of a person’s mind is no less haunting and tragic for being so common. In Lefty’s case, it essentially means that he undergoes the American Dream in reverse, moving back in time to a moment when he was not only younger, but less prosperous and settled in his adopted country.*



When Lefty gets back to the 1930s, his English becomes bad again, and Desdemona suddenly fears that his mind is inevitably going to travel back to the moment when they are no longer husband and wife, but brother and sister. She prays that Lefty dies before he reaches this moment, but these prayers go unanswered. One morning, he greets her by writing in Greek, “Good morning, sis.” Horrified, Desdemona tries to stop Lefty writing, but is unable to do so. However, when other people notice him calling her his sister, they dismiss it as a strange and funny delusion. This stage of Lefty’s deterioration doesn’t last long; he soon reaches a point of total physical helplessness, and three months later he dies.

By the time of Lefty’s death, Callie has an innate ability to understand both genders, which gives her a special insight into the thoughts and feelings of everyone around her. The only person whose emotions remain a mystery to Callie is Desdemona. On the way back from the funeral, the hydraulic system within the Cadillac malfunctions, and Desdemona is briefly sucked inside her seat. When they get back home, Desdemona gets into her nightgown and looks briefly at her **silkworm box**. She gets into bed, and stays there for 10 years, leaving only for a weekly bath.

### BOOK 3: THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET

When the rest of the Stephanides family asks Father Mike to figure out why Desdemona refuses to get out of bed, he explains that she doesn’t like being “left alone” in the U.S., and feels that her life is over now that Lefty is dead. Father Mike promises that “it’ll pass,” but it doesn’t. Desdemona sleeps late, barely eats, and tells Callie to pray for her to die and rejoin Lefty. At this point, Cal pauses the story to provide an update on his trip to Pomerania with Julie. While they are there, Cal notices that there is a real estate boom happening in the area. Without knowing why, he suggests to Julie that they could buy a house in the area. They end up touring two of the mansions.

However, on the way back to Berlin, Cal becomes withdrawn, and after they get home Julie doesn’t call him for days, which leads him to conclude that their budding romance is over before it began. Back in Middlesex, Callie often brings Desdemona’s meals to her bed. Desdemona is always happy to see her, but frank when discussing her own misery. While bedridden she becomes more of a hypochondriac than ever, and ignores Dr. Philobosian’s advice due to the fact that he’s too old. She tells Milton and Tessie, “Get me a new doctor who isn’t already dead himself.” However, each new doctor says the same thing: there is nothing wrong with Desdemona.

*The fact that Lefty openly expresses the secret that he is Desdemona’s brother and people don’t believe him illustrates an important fact about the way secrets operates. Some things remain secret for years not necessarily because they are well hidden but because, if they came out, they would challenge people’s worldviews so profoundly that they end up seeming like an impossibility. This is true of the secret of Lefty and Desdemona’s marriage.*



*Because Callie has limited access to Desdemona’s feelings in this passage, so does the reader. Clearly, Desdemona is despondent, and seems to have lost the will to live. It is unclear whether she feels any of the relief she initially felt the first time she thought Lefty was dying, or whether this relief has perhaps now been totally overpowered by grief.*



*Through juxtaposing Desdemona’s misery following Lefty’s death and Cal’s half-joking suggestion of buying a house with Julie, this passage provides a reflection on the nature of love, and lifelong romantic partnership in particular. In a sense, Cal seems to be gripped by a fantasy that he and Julie could have what his grandparents have, even though on the grand scheme of things they hardly know each other.*



*While most people are hypochondriacs due to a fear of illness and dying, Desdemona has a tragicomic reversal of this problem. Because she wants to die as soon as possible, her hypochondria is more like a kind of aspiration or fantasy, and she is furious when doctors do not humor this fantasy.*



All members of the family try to get Desdemona out of bed, including Sourmelina, who calls from New Mexico. She refuses, and instead starts dividing up her and Lefty's possessions and making her own funeral arrangements. Desdemona doesn't fear death, which she sees as "only another kind of emigration." She believes that Lefty has "already gotten his citizenship" and is waiting for her. Milton, meanwhile, has started a new business: a chain of hot dog restaurants called Hercules Hot Dogs. The décor of each location is a mix of Greek and American influences. Callie doesn't like these new restaurants and misses the diner. However, they make much more money than the Zebra Room ever did.

One night, Chapter Eleven goes down to the kitchen and get a snack. He decides to make hot dogs but doesn't want to wait for water to boil, and slices the hot dogs in different ways in order to create more "surface area" when he fries them. To his astonishment, one of the hot dogs stands on its end and then "blast[s] off into the air." Milton incorporates this innovation into the Hercules Hot Dogs experience. This made the chain famous, and Milton (unwisely) declined an offer to buy the rights so that his hot dogs could be sold in stores. At this point in his life, Chapter Eleven identifies as an "inventor" and hangs out with a group of boys who are nerdy and unpopular.

Callie, meanwhile, is undeniably beautiful, to the point that impacts the way people treat her. She feels like "the world ha[s] a million eyes," all staring at her. She has noticed that Chapter Eleven has started masturbating, which he does secretly in the bathroom. Years pass. During this time, Sourmelina's girlfriend, Mrs. Watson, dies, and Lina moves back to Detroit. Among the Stephanides' neighbors are an Orthodox Jewish family made up of Sam and Hettie Grossinger and their daughter Maxine. Tessie frequently has them over for dinner, although, despite her efforts, rarely manages to make a properly kosher meal.

When busing is starting to be discussed as a desegregation tactic, Milton disapproves. In 1972, candidate Coleman A. Young begin his campaign; he will soon become the first African American mayor of Detroit. Callie is 12 and in sixth grade. On the first day of school that year, she notices that several of her classmates have grown breasts over summer. Callie herself, however, remains completely flat-chested. She doesn't know much about what happens in puberty. Dr. Philobosian is at this point in his 80s and married to the nurse who helped deliver Callie. His medical practice is completely out of date, and when Callie goes to her yearly checkup with him he barely looks at her when he speaks, instead addressing Tessie.

*There is an interesting contrast here between Lefty and Desdemona's views of death. Lefty was convinced that death was an absolute end, rather than a shift or rebirth, and for this reason he feared it. Desdemona's belief that it is "only another kind of emigration" seems like a strange reason for her to crave it, considering she was not enthusiastic about her first emigration. At the same time, her love of Lefty appears to be overriding these fears.*



*Chapter Eleven's accidental dancing hot dog innovation is one of several surreal, absurdist elements of the novel. It is sometimes difficult to know how seriously the reader is supposed to take these, whether they are embellishments from Callie's childhood memory, or whether the world of the novel has slightly different rules and norms than the real world.*



*The Stephanides family may have moved to a remarkably WASP-y neighborhood, but they still manage to find some of the few other ethnically and religiously diverse residents there. The presence of both the Stephanides and Grossinger families in Grosse Pointe, as well as Sourmelina's return from her years spent living with her female lover, indicate that times are changing.*



*Puberty is obviously a difficult time for all 12-year-olds, but a number of factors make it especially tough for Callie. Of course, the primary reason why is that she is intersex (although she doesn't know it yet), which makes her develop differently from the girls around her. However, just as problematic is the fact that she doesn't have access to transparent and clear information. Everything that is happening (and supposed to happen) to her is a mystery.*



Tessie is prudish and thus avoids discussing anything related to sex or the body. Thanks to Aunt Zo, Callie has a very vague understanding of what menstruation is, but doesn't think it's going to happen to her anytime soon. One day at Callie's summer camp, Camp Ponshevaing, Callie watches as a girl from South Carolina gets a dark red stain on her white shorts while performing in a talent show. When the girl realizes what has happened, she runs offstage screaming. Callie remains terrified that something like that will happen to her, but it doesn't. Over time, her fears about going through puberty transform into fears about *not* going through it.

Callie notices other changes in the kids around her, like armpit hair. The boys' voices begin to drop, and some of them get the beginnings of facial hair. Desdemona, meanwhile, suffers from a series of health ailments but remains alive. A doctor enrolls her in a study on the relation between the Mediterranean diet and longevity. However, the doctor's investigations are based on misperceptions; he thinks that Desdemona is 91 when in fact she is only 71, and ignores the fact that despite eating the same diet, Lefty died fairly young after suffering several strokes.

Callie and Tessie's relationship undergoes a tense period. When Callie asks if she can get a bra, Tessie laughs, which infuriates Callie. Meanwhile, Callie protests Tessie's cooking, saying she wants "normal food" and then clarifying this means "American food." Callie's complaints are based in her fear that the same Mediterranean diet that is keeping Desdemona alive has also stopped Callie herself from developing properly. Growing upset, Tessie explains that American food is terrible for people's digestion, which is why Americans buy so many laxatives. Chapter Eleven joins in the fight, teasing Callie for her lack of breasts while Callie retorts by calling him "zithead." At that moment, Milton exclaims in horror as the news reveals that busing is being instituted in Detroit—and will extend to Grosse Point.

*It is unsurprising that Callie would be terrified of puberty, particularly considering how little she knows about it. At the same time, her competing fear that she will not go through puberty at all illustrates the particular pain of adolescence. Adolescence itself is, of course, a kind of middle, a transition period in which becoming an adult can seem scary, but staying a child is perhaps even worse.*



*In this passage, the reader can sense that Callie's undiagnosed intersex condition is leaving her feeling alienated from her peers, since they are all undergoing the physical transformations of puberty while she is staying the same. The book also appears to be taking a jab at popular scientific wisdom about the health benefits of a Mediterranean diet. It suggests that such wisdom, while possibly valid, should perhaps not be taken too seriously. In this sense, the novel challenges stereotypical American perceptions of Greek culture.*



*Although Callie and Tessie's interactions are infected with the particular issues Callie faces—her undiagnosed intersex condition, her hybrid Greek-American identity—the tension in Callie and Tessie's relationship is extremely normal for a mother and daughter. Indeed, this is one aspect of puberty that Callie is going through, although this is a fact that likely doesn't bring her much comfort.*



## BOOK 3: THE WOLVERETTE

During a game of field hockey, Callie is whacked in the face with the ball, and her life flashes before her eyes. By now, she is attending Baker & Inglis, a private girls' school. She carools to school, driven by a lady named Mrs. Drexel. Baker & Inglis was founded in 1911 and is very traditional. In field hockey, Callie plays goalie due to her lack of athletic talent. This is partly due to her physical condition; the testicles that remain inside her abdomen give her terrible cramps, which are dismissed by adults as mere period pains. She also now has braces and at night must sleep wearing "medieval headgear." Now, in seventh grade, Callie still doesn't have any breasts or a period. At school, she is terrified of the locker room.

The "rulers" of Baker & Inglis are a group of girls named the Charm Bracelets. They have been at the school since pre-kindergarten, and strongly identify as "Easterners" rather than Midwesterners. They are the descendants of industrialists, including auto magnates. The girls themselves, however, are neither talented nor hardworking. The majority of the girls at school belong to a different group, the Kilt Pins, named after the pins that hold the girls' uniform skirts together. Callie is not in this group either, but rather the group of "ethnic" girls who are treated as outsiders despite the fact that, as Callie points out, everyone is "ethnic." For the first time, Callie realizes that there are people who don't consider who fully American.

The other misfits and newcomers adopt Callie as one of their own. However, she still waits until they have all left the locker room before undressing. She now wears a bra, which is padded and size 30AA. She is alone in the locker room; her only company is a poster displaying the school mascot, the Wolverette. The year that Callie starts at Baker & Inglis is the same year that Chapter Eleven begins college. The previous spring, Chapter Eleven gained admission to the University of Michigan and learned that he was eligible to be drafted. He became fixated on watching the news, and planned to escape to Canada if he was called to serve.

This whole episode makes Callie reflect on gender discrimination. Although she is highly aware of the sexist treatment that women receive, she also thinks it's unjust that men are sent to war. In the end, Chapter Eleven's draft number is not called, and he moves to Ann Arbor in the fall. Milton is horrified by the antiwar movement, and takes to reading the Great Books series on the recommendation of Uncle Pete. Chapter Eleven majors in engineering, and at Baker & Inglis, Callie is taking classes in Latin. Every evening, Milton reads to Tessie from the Great Books series. However, many of the texts in the series bore them, and they eventually abandon the endeavor.

*Again, the issues Callie faces are a combination of totally normal challenges for a teenage girl (unwanted athletic participation, self-consciousness of her body, "medieval headgear") and problems that are more unique to her. Many people feel isolated during puberty, like no one is experiencing the same issues as them. In Callie's case, however, this is more well-founded than it is for others.*



*Upon enrolling at Baker & Inglis, Callie is brought face to face with the existence of the American class hierarchy. Moreover, she realizes that there are also gradations of whiteness and Americanness, and that compared to the Charm Bracelets and even the Kilt Pins, she is rather low-ranking.*



*Chapter Eleven's possible drafting to serve in the Vietnam War is not the first time that the novel has explored how gender roles negatively affect men as well as women. (Recall the period when Milton was terrified about the Zebra Room failing yet felt that he had to put on a brave face for his family—an example of how expectations of masculinity can stifle a man emotionally.) Perhaps because Cal ends up having seen both sides of the gender binary, he is a particularly good guide to the way in which gender norms harm both men and women.*



*This represents something of a utopian moment for the Stephanides family, when each member is engaged in learning in very different ways. Indeed, this passage illustrates how education does not lead to a single outcome, but can actually end up leading people in wildly different directions.*



Between January of seventh grade and the August before eighth, Callie experiences a tremendous growth spurt. Hair appears in the “required places,” and her voice starts to change. Callie is tall and skinny with a deep voice, but not in a way that is perceived as unusual; unlike some intersex boys who are raised as girls, Callie continues to pass as a girl. At the same time, her androgyny has a powerful effect on some of the girls around her, who develop obvious crushes on her. However, this changes as well, and by the time she is 13 Callie looks more obviously unusual, and this makes her stoop out of self-consciousness.

Tessie and Milton have a profound, unconditional love for Callie, but worry that she will turn into a “wallflower” like Aunt Zo. Callie insists on growing her hair out long even after this ceases to be fashionable. Unlike Desdemona’s smooth and sleek hair, Callie’s hair is incredibly thick and brittle, and shows up all over the house. Tessie still brushes Callie’s hair, and complains that she won’t cut it. Yet Callie refuses, because she wants something to hide behind.

### BOOK 3: WAXING LYRICAL

In Berlin, Cal has returned to his solitary way of life. Back in 1973, Sophie Sassoon pulls Callie aside after church and tells her that she is getting a mustache. She tells her to get Tessie to bring her in to have it waxed. Callie is horrified, but not surprised. She is from the “Hair Belt,” the part of the world where it is common for women to get facial hair. All her female relatives have experienced hair growing in unwanted places. Callie asks Tessie to book her an appointment at Sophie’s salon, the Golden Fleece. Sophie is popular because she gives each patron “individual attention.” Everyone knows that Sophie herself takes an hour and 45 minutes to get ready every morning.

Sophie greets Tessie and Callie. There is a curtain that runs through the salon; in front of it, women get their hair cut, and behind it, they get it removed. On seeing women getting their bikini lines waxed, Callie announces that she is “only getting [her] face done.” While a Hungarian woman rips off Callie’s mustache, Tessie says that Chapter Eleven will be coming home for Christmas and bringing his new girlfriend, Meg. Ever since Chapter Eleven left for college, Callie has had the bathroom to herself, and it is filled with feminine products. At the back of the products, the sanitary pads Tessie bought for her sit unused.

*This passage makes the interesting point that for a while, Callie’s androgyny is perceived as attractive, just as her previous cherubic and feminine looks were perceived as attractive when she was younger. As the book indicates, society is willing to accept certain levels of androgyny in certain situations. However, anything that exceeds these strict parameters is treated as freakish and unappealing.*



*Again, Callie’s horrific self-consciousness and desperation to hide herself do not set her apart from other pubescent teenagers; in fact, they make her exceedingly normal. This actually helps hide the fact that Callie is undergoing a different experience from the girls her age.*



*Again, the line between normal and abnormal becomes hard to differentiate. This passage’s mention of the “Hair Belt” provides a further reminder that gender does not exist in a vacuum, but rather varies across ethnic and racial difference. While mustaches are broadly considered to be male traits, in reality this is due to the imposition of Northern European beauty norms on the rest of the world. In reality, plenty of women have facial hair.*



*While Chapter Eleven is undergoing a happier rite of passage—returning home from college with his first girlfriend—Callie is forced to endure the far more traumatic rite of passage of hair removal. Meanwhile, she remains haunted by the ways in which she has failed to develop, such as by not getting her period.*



When Chapter Eleven came home for the last Christmas vacation, he was a “different person.” His hair was long, he had started playing guitar, and he drove a motorcycle and meditated. For the first time in his life, he beat Milton at ping pong. Later, he told Callie that he was on acid. Milton was horrified to hear that Chapter Eleven is considering dropping out of his engineering major. After returning to college, Chapter Eleven does not come back for Thanksgiving the following year, 1973. When Christmas comes, he informs his family that he has switched his major to anthropology, and that he will be conducting fieldwork on them during the vacation.

For the first time in their lives, Chapter Eleven pays attention to Callie, asking her questions about her life. At one point, he observes that she no longer looks like his “little sister,” although he doesn’t explain what this means. Meg arrives. She tells the Stephanides family that she is majoring in political science and that she is a vegetarian and a Marxist. She and Milton have an argument about the exploitation of workers. She explains that she and Chapter Eleven met when he was sitting on top of an elevator, which is now one of his habits. Meg gives Callie a copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and Chapter Eleven, who is “swept up in the sexual revolution,” asks Callie if she masturbates. Callie is horrified.

Chapter Eleven no longer wears deodorant, and Callie complains about his smell. During New Year’s, Meg and Chapter Eleven secretly sneak outside to smoke a joint. Milton announces that he has been considering going back to the “old country” but Chapter Eleven refuses to come, claiming that “Tourism is just another form of colonialism.” A huge argument ensues. Cal wonders if part of the reason why Chapter Eleven underwent such a drastic transformation is because he was shaken by his experience of almost being drafted—an experience that highlighted the randomness of fate.

### BOOK 3: THE OBSCURE OBJECT

Cal says that the intimacy between writer and reader is “the only kind of intimacy [he’s] comfortable with.” In college, he has a girlfriend named Olivia who had been attacked and almost raped when she was 13. The event stunted her emotional development, and this is what drew Cal to her, because he felt he was stunted as well. After college Cal travels around the world, and then, nine months later, takes the Foreign Service exam. Working for the State Department is his ideal job because it allows him to constantly move around, never forming lasting attachments. Explaining his intersex condition to women he dates remains a problem. However, back when he met the Obscure Object, he was still in “blissful ignorance.”

*On some level, Chapter Eleven’s transformation from ordinary suburban science nerd to countercultural hippie is less dramatic than a gender transition. On the other hand, there are actually ways in which it is more dramatic. Chapter Eleven’s entire self has changed—his appearance, habits, and value systems—such that it is difficult to trace any continuity with his former self at all.*



*This passage again combines familiar realism (so familiar that it is actually full of stereotypes and clichés) with the surreal element of Chapter Eleven sitting on top of an elevator. It is very difficult—although, crucially, not quite impossible—to imagine someone developing this hobby. The fact that it is just about believable perpetuates the novel’s elastic sense of realism.*



*While many of the points Chapter Eleven makes are not necessarily inaccurate or wrong, the way in which he expresses them leave them looking rather comic. Indeed, it seems clear that the motivation behind his self-reinvention is at least as much to rebel against his parents (and authority more broadly) as it is because he actually believes in what he’s doing.*



*This passage helps contextualize why the main narrative is interspersed with short snippets from Cal’s life in the present in Berlin. In a way, it prevents the reader from imagining that Cal has a too straightforwardly happy ending. Although Cal is evidently still alive, reasonably successful, and living as a man, he still faces fundamental issues, including his unwillingness to reveal the truth of his intersex condition and his fear of intimacy.*



After Chapter Eleven goes back to college, a “silence” descends over the Stephanides house. Milton and Tessie are distraught. In spring semester of eighth grade, Callie is in Mr. da Silva’s advanced English class, which consists of her and four other students, including Maxine. Maxine is the only Jewish student at Baker & Inglis and socially isolated. Mr. da Silva, who is Brazilian, is a fantastic teacher, treating his students with true respect. He once visited Greece, where he had a profound conversation with an olive tree. In class, he asks Callie to read aloud from *The Iliad*, because she comes from “Homer’s own land.”

While Callie is reading, there is a knock at the door. A redheaded girl is standing in the doorway, enshrined in light (or at least she appears that way to Callie). The girl sits down, and Callie keeps reading, hiding behind her hair. She gazes at the girl, who has more freckles than anyone she’s seen. As soon as class is over the girl disappears, and Callie is left wondering about her. She isn’t a new student, and is “thin, austere, Protestant,” thus fitting right in. She is uninterested in class and always puts in the bare minimum of effort. She is friends with the Charm Bracelets.

Even though it hasn’t yet come out when they meet, Cal later associates the girl with Luis Buñel’s 1977 film *That Obscure of Object of Desire*. From now on, Cal will refer to the girl as the Obscure Object both out of sentimentality and to protect her privacy. One day, when Mr. da Silva asks the Obscure Object to read and she says she forgot her book, he asks her to share with Callie. This intimate proximity is unprecedented, and Callie is enchanted both by the Obscure Object’s presence and her reading voice, which is commanding and mature.

Callie finds her feelings about the Obscure Object to be both normal and not. It is considered “perfectly acceptable” for girls to have crushes on each other at Baker & Inglis. The school has several rituals that encourage romantic bonding between students. At the same time, there is also an overall sense that everyone there is “militantly heterosexual.” Callie spends time in the basement bathroom at school, trying to figure out if what she feels for the Obscure Object is anything unusual. She feels safe in the bathroom, both from everyone at school and from her parents’ concerns about the fact that at 14, she still hasn’t gotten her period.

*Although Baker & Inglis is a psychologically difficult environment for Callie to be in, one advantage it provides is an excellent education in which her talents are recognized, and she can explore her love of literature. While in the broader social context of the school Callie is ostracized for being Greek, in English class, Mr. da Silva celebrates this fact about her.*



*Here Callie fulfils the truism that “opposites attract.” She seems to be drawn to the girl because of all the ways in which she is different from Callie herself. At the same time, Callie’s attraction also speaks to the randomness of erotic attachment. Baker & Inglis is full of girls who aren’t like Callie, so it comes off as fated and mysterious that this one in particular appeals so much to her.*



*In interviews, Jeffrey Eugenides has stated that he used the name “the Obscure Object” because this was what he used to call a crush he once had in real life. Of course, one could argue that the name is rather objectifying—literally—but perhaps this is imposing too harsh a judgment considering that, like her crush, Callie herself is a teenage girl.*



*Like androgyny, homosexuality (and homosociality) are permitted within the environment of Baker & Inglis under strict conditions. In a way, this increases the level of social control surrounding non-heterosexuality even more than if anything remotely homosexual was socially forbidden outright.*



Callie also spends time in the bathroom because recently, she has noticed something growing between her legs, which she refers to as a “crocus.” Her feelings about this aren’t entirely negative, but she worries that it might be abnormal, and wants to keep it a secret. At Baker & Inglis, it is tradition that every year, the eighth graders put on a play, and this year Mr. da Silva decides that the production will be on the hockey field, Greek amphitheater-style. The play is [Antigone](#); everyone in Advanced English gets a major role, where the rest are in the chorus. The Obscure Object is cast as Antigone, and Callie plays Tiresias. Callie is thrilled by the chance to spend more time around her crush.

The Obscure Object becomes surprisingly enthusiastic about the play, suggesting that the actors memorize their lines instead of reading from the script. Callie suggests that they rehearse together, and the Obscure Object agrees. At the Object’s house, Callie is surprised to see that she is smoking; the Obscure Object explains that her parents smoke themselves, so it would be hypocritical of them to ban her from doing so. The Object says that she doesn’t believe that Callie has any bad habits, but Callie replies that she does—she chews her hair. The girls talk in a way they would never be able to at school. At one point Callie mentions vibrators, then quotes from *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The Object is impressed by her knowledge.

Callie goes back to the Obscure Object’s house to rehearse lines again. They lie in sun room while the Object smokes and the maid, Beulah, brings them snacks. At one point, the Object says that she’s glad they’re both in [Antigone](#), because otherwise she would never have found out that Callie is “such a cool kid.” The Object then critiques Callie’s performance of blindness, saying that in reality blind people don’t “stumble around” like Callie does. As she is explaining, the Object holds Callie’s hand and whispers in her ear.

On the day of the play, the actors assemble in an improvised backstage and talk about how nervous they are. Maxine waves happily to her parents, and Callie spots Milton—looking like “the captain of a cruise ship”—and Tessie. Before the play begins, Callie tells the Obscure Object not to worry, assuring her that she’s a good actress. The Object snaps in return and Callie is left feeling mortified. Callie watches the Object preparing, immersed in deep thought. She has discovered her talent for performing, and is taking it seriously.

[Antigone](#) is an Ancient Greek tragedy by Sophocles, based on a famous myth. It is about a woman named Antigone who wants to violate the law by burying her brother, who died in battle, and ends up killing herself. The character Callie plays, Tiresias, is a blind prophet, which is significant considering that in some cultures, intersex people are considered to have prophetic powers.



The scene of Callie and the Obscure Object bonding over the play—and being able to become close away from the claustrophobic social hierarchy of school—is something of a cliché, although this doesn’t make it seem any less powerful and true.



The Obscure Object’s criticism regarding Callie’s performance reveals two new facets of her personality that might not have been immediately obvious. Firstly, she is sensitive to stereotyping and resistant to a group of people (in this case blind people) being misrepresented. Secondly, it’s possible she wants an excuse to be physically intimate with Callie.



Callie is deep in the torment of a first crush, experiencing all the major signs: oversensitivity to rejection, overreading of emotions, and desperation for signs of affirmation. However, much like Cal is hesitant to be open with his romantic partners later in life, it seems that Callie is too timid to admit her feelings to the Obscure Object.



When the play begins, Callie watches from the sidelines; she does not have to appear for a while. Maxine's first line comes, but she doesn't say it. The Object repeats her line, and Maxine still says nothing. She has had an aneurysm. Hettie Grossinger is the first in the audience to realize something is wrong, and runs to her daughter, screaming "No!" Maxine falls to the floor, already dead. The Obscure Object runs offstage and straight into Callie's arms, and—despite the tragedy of the situation—Callie is thrilled.

*In a sense, a tragedy is performed onstage that day—yet it is not the tragedy of [Antigone](#). Indeed, the major difference between the heart-wrenching death of Maxine and Greek tragedy is that while Greek tragedy heavily emphasizes ideas of inevitability and fate, Maxine's death is horrifyingly random.*



### BOOK 3: TIRESIAS IN LOVE

Tessie tells Callie that she has made her a doctor's appointment with a "ladies' doctor," Dr. Bauer. Callie protests. It is summer, and Tessie is driving her to the Obscure Object's house. Two weeks have passed since Maxine's sudden death. Milton and Tessie are preparing for the family's upcoming trip to Turkey, but Callie remains totally uninterested. She doesn't want to spend her summer painting the church in Bithynios. When she gets to the Object's house, Beulah points her upstairs. Callie has never been to the second floor before. The Object is lying in bed with the blinds closed. They have breakfast, and the Object's mother Mrs. Object tells them that she and Mr. Object will be out that night, and that Beulah will leave dinner for them in the fridge.

*While the name "The Obscure Object" could potentially be seen as controversial, the names Mr. Object and Mrs. Object keep the whole situation purely in the realm of the farcical. In a sense, by calling the Object's parents by these names, Callie extends the feelings of desire and fantasy she has toward her crush onto them as well. After all, although Callie has no erotic attachment to them, they are also figures of fantasy—the wealthy, WASP parents that are so different from Callie's own.*



The Object suffers from chronic heartburn, and is surprised to learn that Callie has never had it. Every day in June and July, she and Callie go to the Grosse Pointe Club, which is nicknamed the Little Club, and lie by the pool. The Object wears a bikini, whereas Callie wears an old-fashioned one-piece. They order as much food and drink as they want, putting it on Mr. Object's tab. The Object invites Callie to her summer house in Petoskey in August, but Callie says she can't come because she'll be in Turkey.

*With the Obscure Object, Callie experiences a life totally unlike anything she has known before—a life of limitless wealth, opulence, and leisure. At the same time, it is also obvious that this wealth doesn't mean anything to Callie in comparison to her obsession with the Object herself.*



A boy comes over and shakes his wet hair so that Callie and the Obscure Object are covered in cold droplets. The Object introduces him as her brother, Jerome. He has dyed dark hair, and asks if the girls want to be in a vampire movie he is making, *Vampire in Prep School*. It is based on his own experience of being unable to fit in at school. The Object explains that Jerome has already been kicked out of two boarding schools. He jumps in the water. At the time, Callie is too young to realize that part of the reason for the Object's interest in her is that she is profoundly lonely. Her parents are always absent, and Jerome doesn't help because he is "a brother and therefore useless."

*In contrast to Callie's enchanted description of the Obscure Object, Jerome is depicted as a little ridiculous and pathetic (note that he is the only member of the Object family who gets a real name). In both cases, Callie begins her description of the siblings by noticing their hair—but where the Object's hair was a crown of light, Jerome is irritatingly shaking his hair like a dog.*



The Obscure Object invites Callie to sleep over. Callie pretends to be unsure because she doesn't have her toothbrush; in reality, she is of course happy to share the Object's toothbrush. The Object gives Callie one of Jerome's shirts to wear because her own ones are too small. She mentions that Mr. Object fought in France during World War II, but that Mrs. Object doesn't like when he talks about this. The Object asks Callie to give her a back rub.

While Callie does so, she asks if the Object has ever been to the gynecologist; the Object says she has, and that it's horrible. She then comments that Dr. Bauer, who is the father of a friend, is a "total perv." When Callie asks for a backrub in return, the Object doesn't answer, as she is already asleep. At another point during the summer, the Object points out that Callie never gets completely naked. Callie denies this and then denies being afraid. The Object tells Callie that she shouldn't worry, because she's her best friend.

Callie is terrified of her appointment with Dr. Bauer, which is due to take place on July 22nd. In the midst of this emotional turmoil, she decides to start going to church again. In April, Chapter Eleven told them that he was dropping out of college to "live off the land." Callie notes that Father Mike has a regal, commanding presence during church services. This is the opposite of Aunt Zoë, who becomes "meek." Being a priest's wife has been "even worse than Aunt Zo had expected." She hated the period they spent living in Greece, during which she had four children. Father Mike had the opposite experience. He enjoyed living in Greece, where he was able to recover some of the dignity he lost after Tessie jilted him.

Zoë and Mike's children are named Aristotle, Socrates, Cleopatra, and Plato. Callie has always been fond of Aunt Zo, who now asks why Tessie would possibly come to church considering she doesn't have to. Back in Grosse Pointe, Callie and the Obscure Object go to a party. On the way, the Object asks Callie to check if her breath smells, and Callie assures her it's fine. It is Callie's first party, and on seeing the state of the house she feels pity for the parents who own the house. Someone puts their hands over Callie's eyes, asking her to guess who it is before revealing it's Jerome.

*As teenage girls, the Obscure Object and Callie are "permitted" to have a very physically intimate relationship without raising eyebrows. The flipside to this, however, is the erasure of the possibility of lesbian sexual experience.*



*What begins as a terrifying and potentially violating encounter—the Object is the first person depicted in the novel as noticing Callie's fear of being naked—turns into a moving and thrilling moment for Callie, in which the Object confirms that they are best friends.*



*Although times have changed significantly since Lefty and Desdemona were young, Aunt Zo's experience shows how much women's lives are controlled by their husbands, and how miserable this can end up being. Having married Father Mike, Zoë remains trapped in a life she would never have chosen for herself.*



*One motif that recurs throughout the novel is the idea that girls are forced to mature more quickly than boys. Here, this manifests in Callie's responsible sensitivity and concern for the parents of the party hosts. This is a contrast to the way that Lefty, Milton, and Chapter Eleven behave as teenagers, which is rather reckless and self-centered.*



Jerome is standing with Rex Reese, a boy who accidentally killed his girlfriend in a drunk driving accident. He gazes at the Obscure Object, then moves toward her, leaving Callie alone with Jerome. Jerome says that he is going to start filming his movie the next day, but Callie says she will soon be going away to Turkey with her parents. In the darkness, Jerome looks a fair amount like his sister. He leans in to kiss Callie, but at this moment Callie walks over to the Obscure Object and pulls her aside. The Object is annoyed. Outside, she asks Callie about her opinion of Rex, and Callie points out that he is guilty of manslaughter. The Object puts her head on Callie's shoulder, saying it's good she's going away, "Because this is too weird."

*Part of what makes the intimacy that occurs between Callie and the Obscure Object so painful is that although it is socially permitted, it is not recognized as serious or binding. Callie is not "allowed" to feel jealous or entitled to the Object's attention, which is why the Object is initially annoyed when Callie pulls her away from Rex. At the same time, the Object sends mixed signals—there is clearly an extent to which she craves intimacy with Callie, too.*



The next day, in church, Callie prays that Dr. Bauer doesn't find anything wrong with her, that she remains "just friends" with the Obscure Object, and that Chapter Eleven returns to college. Tessie notices that Callie looks pale. At this moment, Callie decides to take matters into her own hands. She breathes in as much incense as possible in order to try and feel sick. She then grips her stomach, claiming to feel a "twisting" pain. Delighted, Tessie assures Callie that she isn't sick, and takes her to the bathroom.

*In a sense, this passage proves that prayer "works" for Callie. However, rather than experiencing a divine intervention from God, Callie's time spent reflecting in church inspires her to take action in shaping her own fate.*



When Tessie and Callie get back home, they find a group of men shouting about the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, news of which has just reached the U.S. Everyone is shouting; Milton argues that the U.S. isn't siding with the Turks, but others disagree. Cal says that he still doesn't know who or what jammed the Cypriot radar, which led to the success of the invasion. Callie isn't very interested in the war. While the men continue to fight, she calls the Object, telling her that the war means her vacation is cancelled. Callie also informs the Object that she has cramps, and that she is coming over.

*In typical teenage fashion, major world events that put many people's lives at risk in her homeland don't interest Callie much. Instead, she is so consumed by her crush on the Obscure Object that the Turkish invasion of Cyprus is only meaningful to her for one reason: it allows her to spend more time with the Object.*



### BOOK 3: FLESH AND BLOOD

Cal is approaching the moment at which the truth of his intersex condition reveals itself. Back in the summer of 1974, Callie reassures both Tessie and herself with her fake periods. With the vacation to Turkey out of the way, she is able to join the Object's family in Petoskey. Milton is consumed by the Watergate Scandal, as well as the ongoing situation in Cyprus. His friends accuse the U.S. of "betraying the Greeks," but Milton insists that the U.S. has the right to act in its own interests. Eventually he exclaims, "To hell with the Greeks." The other men are horrified and leave in a storm of fury. They don't come back.

*Just as Lefty and Desdemona performed a fake courtship onboard the ship that brought them to the U.S. in order to assuage their own concerns about their incestuous relationship, so does Callie now calm herself through her fake periods. Both examples show that it is easier than it might appear to believe one's own delusions.*



Only Father Mike, Aunt Zo, and their children remain. Tessie is angry with Milton, and a fight erupts between the two of them. Father Mike goes to comfort Tessie, who is crying, and holds her hand. Aunt Zo comes out with alcohol, telling Mike to avert his eyes. The following Friday, Mr. Object drives Callie to Petoskey, drinking canned Smirnoff cocktails on the way. Mrs. Object, Jerome, and the Obscure Object are already there—as is Rex Reese, whose parents also have a house in the area. Jerome is delighted that the cancellation of Callie’s vacation means she can be in his film.

Downstairs, Rex is telling a story about his friends throwing up from drinking—“It was like the Niagara Falls of puke”—while the Obscure Object giggles enthusiastically. When she sees Callie, she greets her mildly. Rex suggests that they grab some beers and go to the cabin in the woods. In a moment alone with the Object, Callie accuses her of wanting Rex to “molest” her. The Object replies that Jerome wants to molest Callie, then asks Callie to check her breath. Callie decides to seek revenge against the Object by imitating her and flirting with Jerome. Walking through the woods to the cabin, they have to go through a swamp. When they finally arrive, they find that the cabin is locked.

Rex and Jerome disappear behind the cabin. There is a crash, and Rex emerges through the door, dangling a mouse in front of the Object, who screams and grabs ahold of Callie. Callie suggests that they go back to the house, and for a moment the Object considers it. However, when Rex calls her into the house, she follows. Jerome is staring at Callie, entranced. Although she doesn’t return his feelings, she goes down to sit beside him. The four of them share a joint. It is Callie’s first time smoking weed, and Rex explains that she has to hold the smoke in her lungs. Then Rex and the Object do a “shotgun”: Callie watches closely as they blow smoke in each other’s mouths.

After, Jerome and Callie shotgun as well. Rex whispers something to the Obscure Object, then kisses her. Callie pretends not to see. She and Jerome talk about how high they are and what they can see. Like the Oracle of Delphi, Callie is a teenage virgin breathing in hallucinogens. She begins to feel strange, and suddenly finds that Jerome is kissing her. She is overwhelmed by the sensation. In the background, she can hear the Object laughing, and with one eye watches Rex taking off her shirt. Jerome is rubbing against Callie, but she is no longer in her body. She is experiencing ecstasy, not in the sense of euphoria, but its original meaning: a kind of displacement. Callie leaves her own body and enters the body of Rex.

*In this passage, a surprising similarity emerges between the two families, which both turn out to be somewhat dysfunctional in their own right. It’s clear that although the Object family embodies the stereotypical American Dream from the outside, behind closed doors they also engage in problematic behavior like drunk driving.*



*It is striking that Callie uses a criminal (and also rather clinical) word to describe what she accuses the Object of wanting to do to her. Of course, this is a product of Callie’s jealousy, and her feeling that Rex’s interest in the Object is a violation. At the same time, it is also arguably a product of a social world in which teenage girls do not have a solid framework to articulate their own sexuality and desires.*



*Here Callie has another rather typical teenage experience: engaging in drug use and flirtation in a situation that she doesn’t quite want to be in due to peer pressure and a desire to fit in. Again, it becomes clear how little control teenage girls are expected to have over their own actions and desires. The boys decide for the Object and Callie, and the girls simply comply with what has been chosen for them.*



*This passage is crucial, because it is the first moment in which Callie actively pictures herself inhabiting the body of a boy. Crucially, this is not because she necessarily feels more like a boy, but rather because it is Rex’s male body that allows him to hook up with the Obscure Object. In this sense, Callie’s gender identity is driven more by her sexual orientation than other factors (at least at this point in her life).*



While on one hand telling Jerome not to touch her breasts (in case he feels the tissues she stuffed in her bra), Callie experiences herself touching the Obscure Object's breasts as Rex is doing. Just as Callie is becoming aware of how drunk she is, she realizes that Jerome is penetrating her. She experiences a searing pain, and gasps. She and Jerome look at each other, and simultaneously have the same realization that Callie is "not a girl but something in between." Jerome pulls away and falls off the bed. Callie suddenly feels horrified by the certainty that Jerome is going to tell Rex her secret. For a brief moment, she considers stealing the Object's parents' car and fleeing to Canada. However, she then sees that Jerome is smiling. He is delighted to have "gone all the way."

*The fact that Callie and Jerome have such wildly different interpretations of what happens between them here is remarkable. Callie has an intense dissociative episode, projecting herself into Rex's body so that she experiences the pleasure of having sex with the Object at the same time as the painful awkwardness of her sexual encounter with Jerome. Jerome, meanwhile, does not even seem to register this encounter as negative. He sees Callie as something to be conquered, not a person with whom to share intimacy and pleasure.*



### BOOK 3: THE GUN ON THE WALL

Callie wakes up back at the house, feeling nauseous and disturbed by the previous night's events. She finds the Obscure Object in the kitchen, eating breakfast. Before long, the Object accuses Callie of being a "slut" the night before, and Callie replies by accusing her of the same. Furious, the Object tells Callie to go back to Jerome and runs away, clearly on the verge of tears. Upset, Callie gets back into bed, and before long Jerome comes to find her, greeting her in a smug manner. He promises to "respect [her] and all that shit."

*This passage provides an important twist. Although it may have seemed as if Callie was the only one disturbed and jealous regarding last night's events, it seems that the Obscure Object was, too. Perhaps she was having the exact same dissociative experience as Callie without admitting it.*



Callie says nothing. Jerome gets on top of her, kissing her and feeling her up. He tells her that he really likes her, but Callie tells him to stop, explaining that she doesn't feel the same way. Jerome immediately gets up and leaves. For the rest of the day, Callie feels sad. At one point, she stands gazing at the lake and watches as Rex drives past on a speedboat, with the Obscure Object standing beside him. They do not come back for dinner, and neither does Jerome, so Callie eats alone with the Object's parents. As soon as she gets into bed, she continues to cry, whispering angrily as if the Object were there to hear her.

*Jerome's claim to really like Callie is obviously fake, considering as soon as she shows signs of being upset he simply walks away, rather than asking her what's wrong. The isolation Callie experiences in this scene is almost unbearable to witness—yet given the Object's previous behavior, Callie is arguably not as alone in her feelings as she thinks.*



Eventually, Callie hears the Object arrive back in the bedroom and climb into the other side of the bed. Callie turns around looks at her while she sleeps. The Object's coloring—"her pumpkin hair, her apple cider skin"—fits naturally with "the American landscape." Very carefully, Callie inches toward the Object, and eventually puts her arm around her waist. Terrified to wake her, Callie remains completely still until her arm goes numb. Eventually, she lifts the Object's t shirt up and kisses her stomach, then her breasts. Callie puts her hands on the Object's hips and slides off her underpants. At this moment, the Object raises her hips a little, to "make it easier" for Callie. Apart from this, she doesn't move.

*This is the kind of physical intimacy that is certainly not sanctioned by the social world in which Callie and the Obscure Object live, although it is arguably far more common than either of them probably realize. Indeed, because of the profound secrecy surrounding sex between women, Callie and the Obscure Object may not even be able to know recognize or acknowledge what they are doing in the first place.*



Neither Callie nor the Obscure Object talk about what happened the next day. As talented an actress as ever, the Object treats Callie with nonchalance, as if nothing occurred between them. However, later, when they attempt to spy on Jerome filming and must both peer through a small window to do so, the Object places Callie's hands on her stomach, holding her wrists. Eventually Jerome notices them watching and shoos them away. In the evening, Rex calls. Callie hears the Object telling him that she can't see him, and is overcome with happiness. That night, the Object pretends to fall asleep, which is a signal to Callie that they can have sex again.

In the dark with the Obscure Object, Callie finds herself in a "fugue state." She points out that this isn't uncommon, particularly during adolescence when sex is about learning and experimentation. Sometimes the Object almost seems like she is going to open her eyes and admit that she's awake, but she never does. Callie's "crocus" is part of their sex life, and the Object clearly enjoys its presence. Sometimes, either before or after they have sex, Callie turns the light on, takes off the Object's clothes, and gazes at her naked body. Although she notices obvious differences between the Object's body and her own, she doesn't necessarily know what to make of this. Loving the Object doesn't make her feel like less of a girl.

The following Thursday, Callie and the Obscure Object lie on the porch swing together. The Object observes that Callie understands her completely, and asks why Callie can't "be a guy." She then tells Callie, "You have the most amazing eyes." While they lie intertwined in one another, staring into each other's eyes, Callie slowly shifts, slipping her hand inside the Object's pants. They don't look away. However, after a while the porch creaks, and Callie looks over to see Jerome. He repeats the phrase, "Carpet munchers," then comes over and directs the insult to the Object alone. She tries to hit him, but he holds her arms. Suddenly, the Object bursts into tears and runs into the house.

Jerome assures Callie that he won't tell anyone, and then says she should consider himself lucky that he's "such a liberal and freethinking type of guy." He tells Callie to leave and never touch his sister again. Fuming, Callie hits Jerome in the face. She pins him down, and does something Chapter Eleven used to do to her—spits in his face. Immediately, Callie knows she has to run. Sprinting away, Callie reaches a road, and hears Jerome shouting something inaudible. It is a warning—there is a tractor right in front of her, but when she sees it, it is too late. She collides with it.

*Although the Obscure Object ostensibly acts like nothing has happened, in reality her and Callie having sex has enacted a profound shift between them. The Object seems to have lost interest in Rex, and is happy to be more open about her attraction to Callie—even if this is in an entirely nonverbal manner.*



*Because Callie's first proper sexual experience is with another girl, she doesn't register this as abnormal or a sign that she is actually not a girl herself. Even the fact that her genitals are different from the Object's doesn't necessarily register as something strange, because she has so little to compare it to. Callie is unaware of what bodies are like in general, and thus is in a state of blissful—if confused—ignorance.*



*Here, a repeat of a previous scene occurs. Recall that when Callie and Clementine Stark were playing sexual games in the bathtub, they were interrupted by the surprise presence of Lefty. This time, Callie is once again interrupted by the unwanted presence of a male family member, although this time this family member actively seeks to stop what is going on between the two girls.*



*The moment of Callie hitting Jerome and spitting in his face is symbolically significant. Contrary to the expectation that she behaves in a passive, compliant, "feminine" manner, Callie instigates violence in defense of herself and her female lover. This could be interpreted as male behavior, although of course there are many lesbians throughout history who have done similar things themselves.*



Callie wakes up in the back of a car. She is lying in the Obscure Object's lap; the Object keeps urging the driver to "hurry." The driver is the same man who was driving the tractor. Callie tells the Object that she beat up Jerome, and the Object immediately starts crying out of relief to hear Callie speak. She and Callie kiss for the first time, and the Object apologizes for her snotty face. At this moment, they arrive at the hospital, and Callie is put onto a stretcher. The Object holds her hand, walking alongside her even after she is told that she can't come any further. It is as if the girls know that after this point, they will never see each other again. Eventually, the Object lets go.

A doctor asks Callie questions, then explains that he's going to examine places in her body where bones might be broken. As the doctor touches her, she feels a searing pain around her pelvis. A nurse helps to remove Callie's clothes, and Callie lifts her hips just like the Object would always do. On seeing Callie's genitals, the nurse is so shocked that she raises a hand to her mouth, although she then pretends that she was just fixing her collar. A week later, Callie is back home in Grosse Pointe, eating mulberries. In an hour, she and her parents will leave for New York City to see "a famous doctor." She doesn't yet know much about her condition, only that she is not "like other girls."

## BOOK 4: THE ORACULAR VULVA

Cal reflects that while some people inherit material goods or a "famous name" from their ancestors, he inherited a recessive gene that prompted him to have particularly unusual genitalia. When the doctors in the emergency room tell Milton and Tessie about Cal's condition, they don't believe them, and insist on getting a second opinion from Dr. Philobosian, who is by now 88 years old. When Callie takes off her underwear she is initially embarrassed and covers herself, but in his old age Dr. Philobosian has little patience for this. Having briefly examined Callie, he tells her she can put her pants back on. He refers her to an endocrinologist.

The endocrinologist tests Callie's blood, and shortly after she and her parents head to New York. Milton has booked them into a shabby hotel in the East Thirties that he once stayed in back when he was in the Navy. Their room is small; Callie will be sleeping in a cot in the corner. Callie unpacks her suitcase, taking out the perfume and lip gloss she has brought with her. She can tell that they are in the midst of some kind of "crisis." Later, Milton asks what Broadway show Callie wants to see, and she replies that she doesn't care. Her parents continue their attempt to seem upbeat.

*The desperately romantic moment in which the Obscure Object rushes Callie to the hospital recalls the moment when Lefty and Desdemona admit their love for each other while surrounded by the destruction of Smyrna. In both instances, it takes an incident of terrible violence for the couple in question to admit to their forbidden love out loud.*



*Callie's collision with the tractor ends up triggering the second major rebirth of her life. Although in a way this rebirth truly takes place when she learns the full scope of her condition, in a way it also takes place the moment she wakes up in the Object's lap. It is in this moment that Callie comes back from (what the Object feared) was serious injury or death, and is greeted by romantic affirmation for the first time, which enables a kind of self-reinvention.*



*In a sense, Milton and Tessie's faith in Dr. Philobosian is in itself a kind of superstition. The reader knows it is not a very wise one considering it was Dr. Philobosian's lack of attention that caused Callie's intersex condition to go undiagnosed at the moment of her birth.*



*Perhaps due to all the emotional turmoil that Callie has undergone lately, she has no patience for her parents' falsely cheery disposition. Moreover, she may feel insulted by her parents' disingenuous behavior in a moment where she is not even able to access the truth about her own body.*



The next morning, they go to see the specialist, whose office is marked with a sign that reads: “Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic.” Milton and Tessie act as if they don’t see it. The clinic is elegant, with a view of the East River. While Milton, Tessie, and Callie sit in the waiting room, they suddenly become aware of all the sexual books and imagery surrounding them. Milton comments, “Sort of unusual décor.” At this moment, Dr. Luce appears. Introducing himself, he asks if he’s right in recalling that Calliope was one of the muses. Callie confirms this, saying that Calliope was in charge of epic poetry.

Dr. Luce is a famous sexologist who is trying to play down how excited he is to meet Callie. When he invites Callie into his office for an examination, Milton and Tessie assure her that they will be right outside, waiting. Dr. Luce is “the world’s leading authority on human hermaphroditism” and the author of *The Oracular Vulva*. He also used to write a popular column in *Playboy* in which he impersonated the eponymous vulva. For a long time, medical knowledge about intersex people remained poor. Doctors assumed that a person’s sex could be determined purely by the external physical appearance of their genitalia.

This all changed in 1955, when Dr. Luce published an article in which he argued that gender is determined in a large variety of factors, and that a person’s reproductive glands do not necessarily “determine his or her gender identity.” Following the success of the article, Luce was invited to open a Psychohormonal Unit at New York Hospital, where he treated young intersex patients. During this time, he developed another argument: that gender identity develops in infancy, like a “native tongue.” He published this second theory in 1967, which was a booming period for sexology. The following year, he opened the Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic. The many patients he treats there serve as a giant array of test subjects.

Dr. Luce asks Callie to change into a paper gown, then takes her blood. He then examines her genitalia, and rather than looking shocked, has an expression of “awe or admiration.” During the internal examination, Callie has an intense flash of pain, and he apologizes. After this initial examination, Dr. Luce is not yet able to determine what Callie’s “prevailing gender” is. Speaking in hindsight, Cal explains that later, Luce establishes that he is broadly genetically male, yet maintains that this does not mean Cal’s gender identity is necessarily male.

*On first glance, Dr. Luce’s clinic might seem like a liberated, free, and open place in which the truth of Callie’s condition will be revealed in an accurate, nonjudgmental manner. Of course, Milton and Tessie are somewhat prudish and don’t feel comforted by this possibility.*



*Dr. Luce is not only an expert in Callie’s condition, but is famous for his expertise. Indeed, the fact that he wrote a column for Playboy indicates that there is public curiosity in the research that he produces, even if Dr. Luce does not necessarily frame this research in a salacious manner himself.*



*This passage confirms that, within the medical community, Dr. Luce is something of a celebrity. Yet this is not necessarily reassuring news to Callie. Indeed, the attention and fame that surrounds Luce is the exact opposite of what she—a shy teenager who wants to be normal—is seeking in a doctor.*



*Callie’s very existence disproves the idea that there are two biological sexes that are always completely distinct from each other. Yet while challenging this misconception is important, it is also challenging for Callie to be an example of the exception that undoes the rule. It is a frightening and isolating experience.*



Dr. Luce brings Milton and Tessie into his office to talk to them. Tessie notices that he doesn't refer to Callie using her name or any pronouns. Luce says he wants to perform a range of psychological tests, which will involve seeing Callie every day for 1-2 weeks. He also asks that they supply photographs from Callie's childhood, as well as home movies. He says that he will be able to explain more about Callie's condition once he has more information. On Tuesday, Milton flies to Florida on business, and leaves behind some money for Callie and her mother to go out to a "fancy dinner." Tessie and Callie go to Bloomingdale's, to High Tea at the Plaza, and to dinner at an ordinary Italian restaurant.

Every night, Tessie and Callie go back to the Italian restaurant together, and every day, they go to the clinic. Dr. Luce interviews Callie about herself, asking whether she has hobbies and whether she is sexually attracted to boys or girls. When she hesitates, he assures her that everything she says will remain private. He notes that Tessie has mentioned that Callie is very close to her best friend, and asks if Callie is attracted to her. Callie tells him that she had sex with the Obscure Object's brother. Every day, Luce asks more questions, making note not only of Callie's answers but also her body language and mannerisms. On Luce's request, she also starts writing her own "Psychological Narrative."

As soon as she realizes how fun it is, Callie begins to lie. She realizes that whatever she writes, Luce will lap it up. She pretends to be "the all-American daughter my parents wanted [her] to be," and recounts her early sexual fantasies and experiences while pretending that they involved boys instead of girls. One day, Dr. Luce plays a pornographic film for Callie, and asks which one of the actors turns her on—the boy or the girl. Lying, she says it is the boy. Callie feels extremely uncomfortable. One day, Luce introduces Callie to two other doctors. While she undresses, the doctors discuss the Sambia people of Papua New Guinea, who have a high rate of the same intersex condition that Callie has.

The three doctors examine Callie's genitals and make comments. Dr. Luce tells the others that although Callie's condition is extremely rare, it will nonetheless prove highly significant to the medical community. At another point, a photographer takes photographs of Callie for a medical textbook. In the published version, her face will not be shown. At night, Callie speaks with Milton on the phone and asks when she can come home. Milton replies, "Soon as you're better," although Callie doesn't know what this means. In bed, Tessie has dreams that recall Desdemona's own terrors about deformed children. Tessie is terrified that she might be to blame for Callie's condition and that she should have rejected Milton all those years ago.

*Overtime, intersex advocates and activists have worked to make significant changes to the way in which intersex people are treated by the medical community—work that still goes on today. Although Dr. Luce may not appear to be outwardly malicious, he does not properly inform Callie about the knowledge he has, the knowledge he wants, and how he plans to get it. In other words, he does not secure her informed consent before proceeding with the evaluation.*



*Recall that although Dr. Luce is known to be an expert and innovative sexologist, the year is still 1975, and the understanding of the relationship between sexuality and gender identity is not yet very advanced. Dr. Luce places heavy emphasis on Callie's sexual orientation as a measure of her gender identity, when most people would argue today that the two are quite separate matters.*



*Here Dr. Luce violates medical ethics in many different ways, from showing pornography to a minor and pressuring her to articulate her sexual desires to inviting other doctors to examine her without her informed consent. It's no wonder that Callie is so distrusting of Luce and wants to lie to him. The fact that she uses these lies to fantasize about being the "all-American daughter" she believes her parents want is moving and quite sad.*



*Unfortunately, the way that Callie is treated by Dr. Luce and the other doctors is not an anomaly. Intersex people have faced a long and ongoing battle to have their rights recognized, including on very foundational matters such as the right to choose whether they undergo invasive surgery to adjust their gender.*



## BOOK 4: LOOKING MYSELF UP IN WEBSTER'S

Callie has trouble sleeping, consumed by grief over her separation from the Obscure Object. The period she spends in New York is traumatic, and will impact her for the rest of her life. After two weeks of evaluating her, Dr. Luce has finally come to a conclusion. Callie can tell by the way that Milton has dressed that he is bracing himself for bad news. Tessie is also clearly miserable, yet in hindsight Cal finds that there is something strangely amusing about her parents' distressed state. At the clinic, Tessie immediately notices that Dr. Luce refers to Callie as her "daughter."

Dr. Luce begins by explaining how as babies, everyone carries "potential boy parts and girl parts," and that the development of one or the other depends on a person's hormones and enzymes. He then explains that in childhood, Callie developed largely as a girl, and that this was obviously intensified by the fact that she was being raised as a girl. However, during puberty, an influx of testosterone began to have a significant impact on her. He summarizes Callie's condition by saying, "Callie is a girl who has a little too much male hormone," and adds that he will try to fix this. On hearing this, Milton and Tessie feel optimistic. Dr. Luce asks if they know of any other family members who have similar genital ambiguity. Tessie and Milton say they don't.

Dr. Luce explains that he is recommending a treatment combining hormone injections and surgery, which will mean that Callie will "look like a normal girl." However, when Tessie asks, Luce admits that unfortunately, Callie will always be infertile. Tessie points out that Callie has a period, but Luce replies that this is "impossible." He assures them that for now there will only be one surgery and that Callie will not have to stay longer than overnight. It doesn't take much more to persuade Milton and Tessie to agree to it, tempted by the realization that after the surgery, "No one [will] ever know" the truth about Callie.

Callie herself is in the New York Public Library, reading about her condition. Holding Webster's Dictionary, she looks up the words *hypospadias*, then *eunuch*, then *hermaphrodite*. The entry for hermaphrodite contains a note at the bottom that reads, "See synonyms at MONSTER." Callie immediately stops reading, overcome by fear. The word "monster" taunts her. Callie goes down to meet her parents, who pull up in a cab, and is initially relieved to see that Milton is smiling. However, she then becomes convinced that "Her parents kn[o]w she [i]s a monster." Milton informs Callie about the surgery, assuring her that it will be over quickly and that she can come home to Detroit within a week.

*Again, it might seem outlandish from a contemporary perspective (although given ongoing challenges faced by transgender and intersex people, maybe not), but Dr. Luce believes it is his job to determine Callie's gender identity. He does not seem to consider presenting her with the information about her body and letting her decide how to identify.*



*Given the way that Dr. Luce presents this information to Milton and Tessie, it is little wonder that they are happy for him to go ahead and "fix" her. Due to their own lack of information, they perceive Callie's intersex condition as a pathology (illness) that needs to be cured, rather than something that is just who Callie is. As a result, they are happy and relieved by the prospect of treatment.*



*Again, Tessie and Milton could be accused of having prejudiced views here, but it is also clear that their opinion has been informed by lack of information. They believe it is important that Callie is "normal" in her gender and sexual identity, without really reflecting on what this means or why they think it is automatically a good thing.*



*Just as Milton and Tessie are struggling with misinformation, so too is Callie—in the worst possible way. Taking it into her own hands to investigate her condition, Callie is confronted face-to-face with the degrading misperceptions people have about intersex people. Because she is not receiving proper guidance and support, no one is there to tell her that the idea that intersex people are akin to monsters is an outdated, bigoted, and unfounded view.*



Callie starts crying, asking Milton what's wrong with her. Milton explains that it's "a hormonal thing," adding that it's "no big deal." When Callie goes to see Dr. Luce herself that evening, he speaks plainly, without oversimplifying or sugarcoating his words. He frankly informs Callie that she won't be able to have biological children, which doesn't trouble her greatly. There is a knock at the door, and Dr. Luce briefly excuses himself. Left alone, Callie looks out at the New York skyline and cries. She then gazes at a Mughal painting on the wall which depicts a naked man and woman, and realizes that she identifies with both figures equally.

Turning to Dr. Luce's desk, Callie sees that he has left her file open and immediately starts to read it. Luce has written that when Callie was born, she had a penis so small it was mistaken for a clitoris. During puberty, the penis began to "virilize." Callie has XY chromosomes, but 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome. The file describes Callie's mannerisms as "pleasant" and "feminine." It describes Milton and Tessie as "fairly typical Midwesterners of the World War II generation," noting that Milton is a Republican and Tessie is kind and nurturing, though perhaps somewhat neurotic. He notes that although they appear rather "all-American," their Greek ethnicity still plays a significant part in their lives.

Dr. Luce concludes that pretty much everything about Callie is female, even if she is chromosomally male, which proves that environmental factors are more important than biology in determining gender. He notes that there is a chance Callie will lose the ability to feel sexual pleasure during the surgery, but that this risk is worth in it in order to ensure that she can get married and pass as a "normal woman."

That night, Milton surprises Callie with tickets to a Broadway show, but Callie claims she's too tired to go. Before Tessie and Milton reluctantly go without her, Callie hugs Tessie tight. After they go, she takes Milton's suitcase and fills it with darker clothes, leaving her feminine clothes behind. She takes \$300 in cash from Milton and writes a note to her parents saying that Dr. Luce is a "big liar" and that she is actually a boy, not a girl. She urges them not to worry about her and signs her name as Callie, which is the last time she will ever identify as such.

*Callie's identification with each of the figures in the Mughal painting is significant. Dr. Luce wants to "correct" her so that she suits society's standards of a female body. However, this does not reflect how Callie actually feels. In truth, Callie feels intersex—connected to both genders, rather than only one.*



*Dr. Luce's examination has been extensive, but it is also clear from the file that it is heavily biased, inflected with Dr. Luce's own beliefs about the way that the world does and should work. This is particularly shown by the use of the word "pleasant," which is entirely subjective and has no natural connection to either gender.*



*Again, Dr. Luce has decided Callie's identity, desire, and priorities for her, rather than properly informing Callie about her condition and letting her decide for herself. It is particularly alarming that he has decided that the risk of losing sexual pleasure is worth it.*



*In a way, Callie's decision to run away is rather childlike, recalling the actions of toddlers who threaten to run away as revenge for supposed mistreatment by their parents. This childlike mindset emerges in the phrase "big liar." At the same time, by fleeing Milton and Tessie, Callie makes a sudden and very drastic leap into adulthood.*



## BOOK 4: GO WEST, YOUNG MAN

Cal's neighborhood of Schöneberg in Berlin has a large Turkish population, and he feels at home there despite the historic tensions between his ancestors and the Turks. He has requested to be transferred to the American embassy in Istanbul, and thinks that moving there would be coming "full circle." Watching a German-Turkish baker making bread, Cal reflects that every person consists of "many parts, other halves."

In the past, a scrawny kid with long, hippie hair rings the bell of Ed's Barber Shop in Scranton. The kid announces that he's done with the long hair trend, and Ed concurs. The kid is "Cal Stephanides, teen runaway." Cal has been teaching himself to move like a boy. As Cal sits down, Ed complains that he doesn't understand young people's preference for "unisex" hair, and expresses horror that boys want to be "shampooed." Cutting off Cal's long hair, Ed assures him that women will prefer him this way. Cal comments that just as Lefty and Desdemona fled home and reinvented themselves, so is he. He explains that from New York, he took a bus to Scranton, Pennsylvania. Frightened, he considered turning back, but the thought of the surgery kept him going.

Cal buys himself clothes at the Salvation Army in Scranton, though he feels that his haircut is by far the most important part of his transformation. When Ed shows Cal his new look in the mirror, Cal is stunned by how masculine he looks. The first thing he thinks of is the *Obscure Object*, and he is briefly overcome with heartbreak. Leaving the barbershop, Cal reasons that he looks like an arty prep school kid who could be 17 or 18. Cal wants to go to California, but the bus fare is more than he can afford. At a diner, he drinks coffee for the first time, with two packets of creamer and four sugars.

Although Milton and Tessie have warned him against it, Cal decides to hitchhike. He doesn't blame his parents for wanting him to undergo surgery, as they just want what they think is best for him. A truck stops and the driver invites Cal into the Cab, which is grimy and strewn with garbage. The driver asks Cal to keep him awake by talking to him. However, it is the man himself who talks the most, while Cal listens. Cal gets out at a motel in Ohio. After spending the night there he continues to hitchhike through Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska. Cal's mustache begins to grow out, and he lets his voice get deeper. He tells the people he meets that he's on the way to begin college at Stanford.

*Unlike other members of his family, who carry prejudice against Turkish people as if it is a family heirloom, Cal does not feel any sense of inherited antipathy toward Turkish people. In fact, it makes him happy to come "full circle" and live among Turks like his grandparents did.*



*Ed's throwaway comment about young people's preferences for "unisex" style is actually very significant. It situates Cal's androgyny as being something that is not necessarily undesirable, even as there are still ways in which intersex people are seen as freakish and abnormal. Moreover, it is also interesting from a contemporary perspective, considering that similar statements about young people's preference for androgyny are often made today.*



*Cal is becoming a new person, and in the process of his gender transition, he is growing up fast. At the same time, remnants of his childhood cling to him, such as his heartbroken thoughts about the *Obscure Object* and his preference for extremely sweet coffee. Even amidst rebirth, there is continuity—Cal is still the same person on the inside.*



*It might escape notice because it takes place within the same country, but Cal is also migrating in this passage. For Cal, like for his grandparents, migration is an opportunity for reinvention. Meeting strangers on the open road, he is able to craft a fictional identity for himself, which in turn allows him to get used to identifying as a boy.*



At first, Cal goes overboard with his performance of masculinity, but eventually scales back. In Iowa, he is picked up by a couple who drive an RV. He is pleased when he feels like they treat him as an adopted son, although he can also tell that there are still traces of the personality of a daughter within him. Cal buys men's hygiene products and starts using the men's bathroom. He is disgusted by the dirtiness of the bathroom and remains somewhat horrified of penises. He is afraid of being caught looking too closely, and his anatomy means that he needs to use a stall and sit to urinate, which he still does to this day.

Meanwhile, in the various motel rooms in which he sleeps, Cal learns about his "new body," including how to make himself feel pleasure. In Nebraska, Cal is picked up by a man named Ben Scheer, who talks to him about existentialism, Andy Warhol, and the Theater of the Absurd. Cal likes Scheer, and thinks that he is the kind of man Cal himself would like to be. At one point, Scheer stops to buy wine, cheese, and olives, which they consume while they drive. That night, Scheer treats Cal to dinner, sneakily buying him a drink even when the waitress refuses to serve Cal alcohol because of his lack of ID.

After leaving the restaurant and getting back on the road, they drink more beer, until Scheer announces that he is too tired to keep driving and that he will get them both motel rooms. At this point Cal is very drunk, and collapses on the bed. Scheer tries to embrace Cal, but Cal pushes him away. When Cal wakes up in the morning, his shirt is undone, and Scheer's pants are off. Cal showers and gets changed, then sneaks out of the motel. On the verge of tears, he considers calling his parents, but ultimately ends up continuing his journey, this time getting into a car that is going all the way to California.

*For Cal, transitioning to male gender identity isn't an instant experience of affirmation and rightness. Indeed, Cal remains unsure about many aspects of masculinity. Rather than a role Cal happily slips into, male identity is more like a landscape he is exploring.*



*Like many young people before him, Cal is seduced by an older person who seems sophisticated, intelligent, and worldly, thereby representing the kind of person Cal himself hopes to become. Of course, from an outside perspective it is easy to see how such figures can end up being dangerous, manipulative, and predatory.*



*The sad truth is that Cal is very fortunate in this scene that he doesn't end up being raped. Rates of sexual violence against homeless trans youth like him are extremely high, and Cal's narrative shows why this is. Forced to depend on other people's kindness and still trusting enough to believe that adults won't hurt him, Cal ends up in risky situations.*



## BOOK 4: GENDER DYSPHORIA IN SAN FRANCISCO

The man who picks up Cal is named Bob Presto. Presto is surprised when Cal doesn't know the name of the city where Stanford is located. He offers Cal an abundance of snacks and soft drinks, and Cal is "too hungry to refuse." Presto reflects that college was the best time of his life, and adds that he hopes Cal is ready for all the action with girls he is about to get. Presto used to work for his college radio station, and advises Cal that "Voice is a big turn-on for women." He advises Cal that he should learn to sing. Presto then asks Cal his age, and says that he initially took Cal for a girl. He then saw Cal with "that queer," and asks if Cal is gay.

*At first, it is difficult to tell if Bob Presto is another predator. His interest in Cal's sex life and questions about his sexuality seem to indicate that this might be the case. Again, however, Cal's vulnerable position means that he ends up trusting people even when there are signs they might have shady intentions.*



Panicking, Cal asks to get out, but Presto apologizes and assures him that he'll stop talking, which he does. After they stop and Presto buys Cal lunch, Cal relaxes. Back on the road, Presto asks Cal to hand him a variety of pill bottles, explaining that he contracted hepatitis while in Thailand, which badly damaged his liver. When they get to San Francisco, Presto drops Cal off in the Haight. He notes that Stanford is in Palo Alto, and that Cal should probably remember this fact. He then asks Cal if he is a "tranny," adding, "I'm in the business." Cal quickly goes to leave, but Presto gives him his number, advising him to call him if he wants any work.

*Presto is certainly something of a sketchy character, if not an outright sinister one. The problem that Cal now faces is that it might be hard for him to find people who aren't sketchy in some way. As Presto points out, Cal's claim to be a Stanford student is pretty hard to believe considering he doesn't even know where the school is. His naïveté leaves him vulnerable, especially now he has reached San Francisco.*



Tessie feels a profound, spiritual attachment to Callie, and senses that she is alive but hungry. After Callie's disappearance, Tessie and Milton remained in New York for a week before being advised by an NYPD detective to go home in case Callie showed up there. Before they go, Dr. Luce informs them that Callie may have read and misunderstood her file. When Milton demands to see it for himself, Dr. Luce refuses. Furious, Milton says he blames Dr. Luce for Callie running away. After, Tessie vows that she would never let Dr. Luce near Callie again. The couple go back to Detroit, and Tessie begins taking tranquilizers to calm her nerves.

*Dr. Luce's patronizing attitude—both in characterizing Cal as having "misunderstood" in his file and in refusing to let Milton see the file for himself—is another example of medical doctors mistreating intersex people and their families by failing to keep them properly informed. As is obvious now, this can have disastrous results.*



Tessie thinks about Callie, wondering how her daughter could possibly be a boy. She begins to reevaluate her entire impression of her child, and wonders if Callie's sudden insistence on being a boy could be correct. Milton, meanwhile, throws himself into participating in the police search for Callie. He makes sure photographs of Callie are circulated so far and wide that the San Francisco police station receives them, although Cal looks so wildly different from this picture that there is no chance of anyone recognizing him from it. The friends and relatives who previously deserted Milton and Tessie start coming over again to offer support. Father Mike holds Tessie's hand and offers his prayers.

*Even though Cal has told his parents that he identifies as a boy, they struggle to perceive him that way. (Thus, in this part of the novel when Cal is depicted as he is understood by his parents, it is with the name Callie and she/her pronouns). Of course, it is extra difficult for Milton and Tessie to process the fact that Cal identifies as a boy because as soon as he begins to identify that way, he also disappears from their lives.*



San Francisco is famously shrouded in fog. Following World War II, the city was "the main point of reentry for sailors returning from the Pacific." Homosexual relations among these sailors was common, and before long San Francisco became the center of gay life in the U.S. Now, the fog hides Cal and his new friends. On his third day in the Haight, Cal is eating a banana split when a scrawny teenager asks him for money. Cal points out that he himself could ask the same thing. The kid offers to show Cal the safe places to stay in the park if Cal buys him a hamburger, and Cal eventually agrees.

*At least in San Francisco, Cal is not only at the mercy of adults but also finds other young people with whom he can build relationships of mutual support and solidarity. As Matt indicates, homeless young people must stick together—they can't harbor any selfishness but must share what they have in order to survive.*



The kid's name is Matt; he came to San Francisco while following the Grateful Dead and never went home. Now he lives in the park and sells Grateful Dead T-shirts and, occasionally, drugs. Cal becomes close to Matt's group of homeless friends, and learns how to survive in the park from them. When one of them gets a girlfriend, Cal distances himself, worried that girls will be able to perceive his secret. The Deadheads Cal befriends look after each other, taking turns to guard everyone's belongings so that they don't get stolen. Along with the others, Cal reads about Buddhism. One kid claims that the Buddha dropped acid, and that this was how he reached enlightenment.

Cal is running out of money. Every day he buys burgers for the group of kids, which cost 75 cents each. He chooses not to deal drugs or start begging, but starts feeling increasingly desperate. Meanwhile, Milton calls Chapter Eleven and asks him to come home, explaining that Tessie is going through a terrible time with Callie being missing. In response, Chapter Eleven starts coming to visit on weekends. Milton offers Chapter Eleven the chance to take over Hercules Hot Dogs one day, an offer Chapter Eleven neither accepts nor refuses, although he does point out that he doesn't eat meat. Jokingly, Milton suggests that his son can be in charge of developing a salad bar.

Milton drives Chapter Eleven to a Hercules Hot Dogs branch and introduces him to the manager, Gus, as the "future boss." Gus is extra friendly, and Chapter Eleven soon realizes it is because he assumes the worst about Callie's disappearance. On Sunday, Milton asks Tessie to light a candle for Callie at church, saying, "Couldn't hurt." After, he curses himself for this lapse into superstition.

The Grateful Dead come to play a show in Berkeley, and while the rest of the group are gone, Cal is charged with watching over of the camp. While he is sleeping, he is attacked by two homeless men who rob him looking for drugs. They search his wallet and finds his ID, and suddenly declare that Cal is a woman. Pinning Cal down, they wrestle off his jeans, but on seeing Cal's genitals back away in horror. One says, "It's a fucking freak [...] I'm gonna puke." One of them kicks Cal in the head before running off. Cal gathers his things in his suitcase. Using his remaining 75 cents, he calls Bob Presto.

*During this period, many young people are flocking to San Francisco and living a life that revolves around music, drugs, and sex. Many of them live on the streets, like Cal, Matt, and their friends. While this does not necessarily make Cal much safer, it does give him access to a community, as well as knowledge about how to take care of himself. The random group of Deadheads thus end up being facilitators of his rebirth as a male.*



*Milton's softened attitude toward his eldest son is no doubt caused by his distress over Cal's disappearance. Realizing that he needs to make an effort to keep his children close, Milton reaches out to Chapter Eleven—even if this means attempting to cross the gigantic ideological and cultural chasm that has formed between them.*



*Milton's desperation is here underlined by his request that Tessie light a candle at church, despite the fact that Milton has spent his entire adult life vehemently opposed to religion. Yet he now realizes getting Cal back is more important than his pride.*



*The brutal violence that Cal is subjected to here is again an all too prevalent issue for intersex and transgender young people. Yet notice the similarity between the homeless men's morbid curiosity about Cal's gender and the invasive voyeurism of Dr. Luce and his peers. One may be less overtly violent, but is it ultimately any less painful and damaging?*



## BOOK 4: HERMAPHRODITUS

In the early 1970s, “everyone want[s] to be unisex.” People are coming around to the idea that gender is socially constructed, and the rigidity of gender roles is falling away. However, then things take another turn with the rise in popularity of evolutionary biology. This school of thought analyzes all human behavior as a series of adaptations for evolutionary purposes. Under this influence of this thinking, Dr. Luce’s ideas face fierce opposition in the 1990s. When Cal disappears, Luce is initially crushed. However, he then begins to hope that Cal remains gone forever so that he can publish anything he wants about Cal’s life.

The truth is that Cal’s story doesn’t totally cohere with the evolutionary biologist’s view of gender or with Luce’s. He did not feel “out of place” as a girl and now doesn’t feel entirely comfortable around men. Cal perceives the 20th-century obsession with genetics as a renewed interest in the Ancient Greek idea of fate.

A performer sits on the lap of Mr. Go, who smells like chlorine. Mr. Go is a patron of a theater with different rooms. He has been coming here for some time, and has noticed that the upstairs level—which requires a separate admission fee of \$5—is becoming increasingly popular, however he hasn’t been there himself yet. After receiving his lap dance, Mr. Go stares at the sign advertising the show on the second floor. It is called “Octopussy’s Garden,” and features a mermaid, an eel, and “the god Hermaphroditus! Half woman, half man!” Overwhelmed by curiosity, Mr. Go buys a bunch of tokens and goes upstairs.

After Mr. Go enters his token in the slot, a screen is removed to reveal a body of water. A narrator describes the ancient Greek myth of Hermaphroditus, a “beautiful boy” who one day went swimming in the pool of Salmacis, a water nymph. At this moment, Hermaphroditus emerges, and Mr. Go is astonished. He has never seen someone like this before, and immediately puts another token in the slot to keep watching.

*This passage contains the final proof that Dr. Luce is an unethical researcher. Although he arguably wants to use the research he conducted on Cal toward a noble final cause—a more accurate and expansive concept of gender identity—this does not justify the way in which he violates both medical and general ethics in how he treats Cal.*



*This passage is important, as it emphasizes that Cal didn’t transition to male gender identity because he felt like a boy, but because he felt like both. One can imagine that if the book was written today, Cal may have chosen to identify as nonbinary.*



*The sudden switch that occurs in this passage has a disorientating effect on the reader. The last image provided of Cal was him beaten and desperate, with only 75 cents left to his name. Now the narrative has switched to an entirely new and rather strange location, with none of the familiar characters present. The only clue linking this back to the rest of the story is the word “Hermaphroditus.”*



*By this point, the reader probably realizes that the person playing Hermaphroditus is Cal, and that the establishment meaning described is a sex club, where workers perform erotic acts for audiences.*



The theater is a club owned by Bob Presto called Sixty-Niners. It is in North Beach, on a strip filled with establishments featuring erotic shows. Sixty-Niners is open from nine p.m. to three a.m., and is Cal's new place of work. Having been subject to such intense and invasive scrutiny at Dr. Luce's clinic, Cal doesn't mind performing. He works with two other women, "so called," named Carmen and Zora. After Cal called Bob from the park, Bob immediately picked him up and took him home, where Bob's girlfriend, Wilhelmina, tended to Cal's wounds. Wilhelmina expressed fear that Cal wasn't actually 18 and implored Bob to call Cal's parents, but Bob pointed out that Cal made the decision to flee his home.

*Crucially, this passage establishes a connection between the invasive voyeurism of the doctors and the voyeurism of the Sixty-Niners patrons, suggesting that they are not necessarily as different as one might assume. Although Presto is arguably wrong to let Cal work in the club considering he is a minor (as Wilhelmina points out), working there gives Cal much-needed financial security.*



In Octopussy's Garden, Cal submerges his body in water while his head remains afloat and out of sight of the audience, allowing him to talk to Zora and Carmen while he works. Sometimes Zora gives Cal tokes of a joint to smoke while he works. Zora performs as a mermaid, "half woman, half fish." Although Sixty-Niners is a "smut pavilion," the atmosphere in Octopussy's garden is more gentle and "exotic" than overtly pornographic. Among the audience are straight men, gay men, and lesbians, all of whom are entranced by the androgyny of the performers.

*Again, although it is not ideal for Cal to be working in a sex club, this is far from the biggest violation that has happened to him in life. Indeed, the fact that he receives support from Carmen and Zora while working there is vital. Unlike most other people in his life, they do not judge him because of his intersex condition.*



Carmen, who performs as an "electrifying eel," is a trans woman with a small, slender body. Unlike Cal, Carmen always felt like "she had been born into the wrong body." She is saving up money to have bottom surgery. Zora, meanwhile, is intersex, with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome. She is more physically feminine than Cal ever was, with enormous, "milkmaid" breasts. However, she doesn't identify as a woman, but as a hermaphrodite. Zora uses the word "intersexual," which is still uncommon in 1974. She is a "pioneer" who looks after "strays" like Cal. Cal moves in with Zora before he starts working at the club.

*Through juxtaposing the three different stories and identities of Carmen, Zora, and Cal, Eugenides illustrates just some of the huge range of experiences that fall under the transgender and intersex umbrella. Despite their differences, the three performers become vital means of support to one another.*



Zora tells Cal that intersex people have always existed, and that Plato said the first human was intersex. Moreover, in cultures such as that of the Navajo, intersex people are treated as special and believed to be "artists" and "healers." Cal is thrilled to feel less alone through his friendship with Zora. She is writing a book called *The Sacred Hermaphrodite*, which combines writing on genetics, cellular biology, and various Eastern religions. She tells Cal that she wants people to know she's intersex because "We're what's next." When Cal gets into the pool at the club, he pretends that he is in the bathtub at the old house on Middlesex. Losing himself in this daydream is made easier by being stoned.

*Although she only appears briefly at the very end of the novel, Zora is a pivotal character. She represents a level of self-acceptance and self-love that even the present-day Cal living in Berlin still has not reached. Through meeting Zora, Cal is able to see a completely new range of horizons for his own life. Moreover, he begins to see that his intersex condition is not pathological, but instead might even be something to be celebrated.*



Cal mostly spends his days at home with Zora while she works on her book. Men adore Zora, but she only dates lesbians. She has a “dark side” which includes heavy drinking and outbursts of anger. Milton and Tessie remain on edge, waiting for news of Callie. Their shared fear brings them closer, and they start having more sex than they’ve had in years. One day, Tessie realizes with a start that her connection to Callie has been “cut.” She is convinced that something awful has happened to her. It is January 1975; Callie, now 15, has been missing for four months. One Sunday, while Tessie is at church, the phone rings and an anonymous voice tells Milton that he bets he wishes he had his daughter back, then hangs up.

Cal, meanwhile, opens his eyes for the first time while he is performing in the tank. He finds it strangely cathartic to see the eyes of the audience staring back at him in awe. In Cal’s final weeks in San Francisco, he reads as much as he can of Zora’s texts about hermaphroditism. He meditates and attempts to get his soul to leave his body, but is not able to do so, and concludes he has no “special powers.” On Friday night, while Cal is at work, the club is raided by the police, and Cal is arrested. From jail, he calls Chapter Eleven and begs him not to tell Tessie and Milton. Chapter Eleven replies that he can’t tell Milton, because Milton is dead.

*Tessie’s realization that her metaphysical connection to Cal has been severed could be interpreted in several ways. Perhaps once Cal has fully been “reborn,” Tessie no longer feels attached to him because she no longer knows exactly who he is. On the other hand, maybe the moment of severing actually just represents Cal growing up and being able to successfully take care of himself for the first time, such that he no longer needs his mother the same way he used to.*



*Just as everything appears to have momentarily settle down in Cal’s life, chaos ensues again. The police raid serves as a reminder that during this time (and still in the present), many transgender and intersex people find that their livelihoods are threatened due to laws against the sex industry. The shock of Milton’s death, meanwhile, is likely to be unexpected and traumatic for Cal.*



## BOOK 4: AIR-RIDE

In Berlin, Cal goes to the opening of an Andy Warhol exhibition at the Neue Nationalgalerie. He is hoping to see Julie there, and is disappointed when he can’t find her in the crowd. However, before long, she taps him on the shoulder. They smoke a cigar together, and lean in to kiss. However, before they do, Cal says there’s something he needs to tell her about himself.

In 1975, the U.S. is gripped by an oil crisis and an economic recession. Yet Milton still drives a “gas-guzzling” Cadillac. It is two a.m., and Milton is experiencing a last surge of hope long after Tessie has given up. After receiving the first phone call, he’d gotten a second. This time, the voice told him that Callie was with him. To test if this is true, Milton asks the name of the village his family comes from; after pausing to ask Callie, the voice replies, “Bithynios.” The voice demands a ransom of \$25,000, but strangely, after Milton agrees to pay it immediately, the voice then insists on haggling. They land on \$18,500, but the voice then goes back to the original amount.

*This represents a major twist in the way that Cal relates to Julie, suggesting that he is finally ready to be truthful about himself and, in doing so, open himself up to intimacy.*



*The kidnapper certainly sounds both legitimate and sinister, although of course, because the reader knows that Cal is in jail in San Francisco, it is obvious that whoever is on the other line is actually lying. Furthermore, the request to haggle is so strange that it seems to suggest the person on the other end is something of an amateur.*



The next time the voice calls, he asks Milton to meet him the following night, explaining where to leave the money. Now, on the night itself, Milton pulls up to an old, dilapidated train station that is barely in use anymore. He stops the car and gets out the briefcase full of cash. He would never admit that he was afraid, although his body is showing signs of fear. He avoids any thought that hurts him, and this is what has led him to make the foolish decision of coming out to the train platform alone at night, without telling anyone.

Milton easily finds the trash can marked with chalk where he is supposed to leave the money. However, as he goes to put the briefcase in it, he hesitates. Repressing his own doubts, he drops the briefcase in there, then runs back to his car. Yet once he is in there, Milton is suddenly seized with a refusal to cooperate. He decides to insist on only paying half the money now, and half later. Milton heads back to the trash can, yet when he does so he sees there is a person standing by it, retrieving the briefcase. To his astonishment, it is Father Mike. Milton is in a state of disbelief. He thinks about all the years when Zoë has asked why Father Mike wasn't more like Milton, investing and saving money as Milton did.

The more Milton thinks about it, the more it makes sense that Father Mike is there. Beaten by Milton all those years ago, Mike is seeking revenge. Milton shouts at him, but Mike only smiles and backs away into his car. Milton gets into the Cadillac and begins to follow him. Cal reminds the reader that this is “a car chase between a Greek Orthodox priest and a middle-aged Republican.” As Milton chases his brother-in-law, he feels sure of himself, and even turns on the radio. However, when Milton arrives at the Ambassador Bridge, his heart sinks. He realizes that Mike is planning on fleeing to Canada. Despondent, Milton falls into traffic and loses sight of Mike's car.

Waiting in line at border control, Milton tries to get the attention of the officers, shouting that Mike has stolen his money. However, he then sees Mike being waved through the barrier. He is furious, imagining Mike disappearing into the unknown, “foreign” world of Canada. He is especially horrified on Zoë's behalf, fuming at Mike for abandoning his sister. When Milton himself finally gets to the border, he tries to explain what has happened to the officers, but they tell him to pull over. Milton starts doing so, but then accelerates. Now a real car chase begins, with Milton driving so fast that before long Father Mike is back in view. Looking into Mike's eyes, Milton feels as if he is asking for forgiveness.

*Again, for a final time the novel shows how Milton has struggled to live up to the masculine ideal of fearless toughness. Indeed, in this moment that toughness verges on recklessness. Perhaps if Milton allowed himself to be more vulnerable, he would have taken better steps to ensure his own safety.*



*The passive, timid character of Father Mike is probably the last person the reader would expect to be pretending to be Callie's kidnapper in order to rob Milton. Not only are Milton and Mike brothers-in-law, but Mike is a priest with a sweet, unassuming manner.*



*At this moment, the novel almost shifts into the crime fiction genre, as the reader is left figuring out why the unlikely figure of Father Mike would carry out such a terrible crime. Of course, as Milton identifies, Mike has a very clear motive in the form of his own dissatisfaction and desire for revenge against Milton. It seems that all the years that Mike seemed to be providing kindness and support for Milton and Tessie, he was secretly seething with rage.*



*Even though this is a strange and in some ways tragic twist in the novel, it is also darkly humorous. The fact that Milton, a patriotic Republican, ends up in a long border control line to enter Canada, is deeply comic. Without intending to, Father Mike has placed Milton in his own personal hell. However, this ends up having serious consequences—Milton loses his sense of reason and embarks on a car chase in a highly securitized area.*



In reality, Father Mike was never the man he seemed. He is a frightened, greedy, and desperate person who never felt close to God. Tormented by his own low social status, he decided to run away from his marriage. Lost in thought, Mike suddenly realizes that there is a red brake light ahead of him, and slams the brakes, but it is too late—he crashes into the car in front. Milton expects to smash into Mike’s car, but instead, the Cadillac flies right over Mike and into the air, then begins to fall into the Detroit River. However, in that moment, Milton feels the Cadillac leveling itself—it’s flying! He says to himself, “Now, this is what I call an Air-Ride.”

Cruising along, Milton gradually learns to gain control of the flying car. He gazes over the parts of the city he knows, including those that used to exist but no longer do. (Cal notes that at this point, Milton no longer has any “brain waves.”) Suddenly, Milton starts to cry, not over his imminent death, but over the fact that he didn’t manage to get Callie back. Now the car tips, and begins to nosedive toward the water. Milton suddenly realizes how foolish he’s been, and uses his last word to call himself a “Birdbrain.” Although Milton meets a tragic end, in a way it was fortunate that he dies before he can see Chapter Eleven run Hercules Hotdogs into bankruptcy and Tessie sell Middlesex. In a way, Cal is also grateful that Milton never saw him again, so that in Milton’s mind, Cal remained Callie—his little girl.

## BOOK 4: LAST STOP

After learning that Cal is intersex, Julie jokes that she might still be considered his “last stop.” They go back to his apartment, have drinks, and dance. When she turns off the lights before they have sex, she claims it is because she herself is shy. Embracing her, Cal suggests that he might be her “last stop,” too.

Back in 1975, Chapter Eleven comes to San Francisco and collects Cal from jail. When Chapter Eleven sees his brother for the first time, he stares at him placidly. Thanks to taking so much acid, Chapter Eleven is very open-minded. Like Cal, he also looks different, with shorter hair and a wide-lapel shirt. The brothers hug, and Chapter Eleven says, “Dad’s dead.” He explains the story, saying that Father Mike confessed everything, and that all the money was found in his car. Cal asks how Tessie is doing, and Chapter Eleven explains that she’s angry at Milton for having gone to the train station without telling her.

*Despite the dramatic climax provided by this moment, Father Mike’s story cannot be said to be particularly important within the novel overall. It is only a small, minor part of the overall tapestry that makes up Cal’s story. At the same time, it serves as a reminder that everyone is hiding secrets, and that people are often not what they seem to be on the surface.*



*Like several other passages in the novel, it is difficult to know how literally one should interpret this passage. In some ways it seems like a dream sequences, although whose dream it is unclear. Cal’s mention of the fact that Milton no longer has brain waves indicates that he has perhaps already been killed, and that this is his body or soul’s final, fantastical impression of the world before death.*



*Despite the tragedy of Father Mike’s crime and Milton’s death, Cal’s personal story ends on a happy note, as he is embraced for the first time for who he truly is by a woman he loves.*



*As has been indicated several times in the book so far, death often provokes complicated and unexpected emotions. For example, when Jimmy Zizmo died, Sourmelina shocked everyone by how upset she was, whereas when Desdemona thought Lefty had died, she felt both happiness and sorrow. Here, Chapter Eleven explains that Tessie feels anger toward Milton—another common emotion prompted by death.*



Chapter Eleven takes care of the bureaucracy of Milton's death, and doesn't ask Cal anything about the Sixty-Niners or his arrest. He admits that it's "pretty weird" to know about Cal's condition and everything he went through at the clinic, and Cal says he finds it weird, too. Once they land in Detroit, Cal requests that Chapter Eleven drive them through downtown so he can see it. The city is less bustling than it once was; Greektown is at the beginning of a long decline. As they are driving, a man in a leather coat and "space funk goggles" catches Cal's eye. When the man gives an angry look back, Cal realizes that he has become not just a man, but "The Man."

When they pull up on Middlesex, Cal feels profoundly moved. Chapter Eleven starts carrying Cal's suitcase for him, but then, jokingly, hands it over and says Cal can carry it himself. When Tessie sees Cal, she cannot help but feel disturbed, feeling that there is a "criminal aspect" to his new look. However, when they embrace each other, Tessie gently strokes Cal's hair while he cries. She asks if it wouldn't have been simpler for Cal to stay as he was, but Cal explains that this is how he was. In the end, Cal's gender transition is less "dramatic" than he could have ever expected. Although he is a man, there are ways in which he remains "Tessie's daughter." He'll take care of Tessie when she gets old, and they still go to Sophie's salon together for haircuts.

Just as Tessie, Cal, and Chapter Eleven are finally ready to go to Milton's funeral, a voice comes through the intercom, calling for Tessie. It is Desdemona, who has remained bedridden for all these years. During this time, Desdemona largely faded from Cal's mind. Now, she asks Tessie for her Epsom salts, and complains that since everyone else is dead, it's unfair that she's still alive. After speaking with her, Tessie explains that Desdemona is not doing well, and has begun to lose her mental faculties. When Tessie told her that Milton was dead, she sobbed wildly, but within a few hours had forgotten and asked for him as if he was still alive.

Cal asks if he can go and see her, and though Tessie is initially hesitant, she agrees, pointing out that whatever happens, Desdemona will forget. Cal brings his grandmother her Epsom salts, along with a piece of baklava. Her room is dark, and the TV is on. The **silkworm box** remains sitting near her bed, overflowing with "mementos." Seeing Desdemona, Cal is enchanted by her long, fine, grey hair. When Desdemona sees him, she exclaims, "Lefty!" But Cal explains that it is him, her grandson. Apologetically, Desdemona admits that she doesn't remember him. Cal talks about Bithynios, saying that he's going to go and fix the church there one day.

*From a contemporary perspective, "The Man" might seem like an outdated phrase (if not an outdated concept). The phrase became popular among countercultural groups in the 1960s to refer to those in a position of authority, especially white men. In this moment, Cal suddenly realizes that he himself is a white man, and will forever be associated (whether negatively or positively) with a kind of authority for that reason.*



*It is interesting that Cal claims that his current male state represents how he always was, given that when he was raised as a girl, he didn't express dissatisfaction or discomfort with this identity, nor did he long to be male (except when it would have given him access to the Obscure Object). At the same time, as Cal indicated earlier, not all trans and intersex people feel that they were "born in the wrong body." For some, the desire to transition can arrive at much later points in life, but still end up representing the truth of who a person is.*



*Considering that Desdemona and Lefty are a paired set of characters in multiple ways, it is perhaps unsurprising that Desdemona begins to experience the same mental unravelling as Lefty at the end of her (albeit much longer) life. As with Lefty, this unspooling is a kind of reversal of the epic story that constitutes Desdemona's life and the life of the entire Stephanides family.*



*Desdemona's misperception that Cal is Lefty is both alarming and quite moving. Not only does this brief moment bring Desdemona some joy, it confirms the idea that there was a special connection between Cal and his grandfather, and that part of Lefty lives on in Cal.*



Desdemona asks Cal to prepare her Epsom salts and help her out of bed. Once Cal helps her get into the chair and soak her feet in the salts, she closes her eyes in contentment. After a few minutes, she opens her eyes again and, staring right at Cal, shouts, "Calliope!" Desdemona's impaired cognizance actually helps her to process the fact that Cal is now a boy. She explains to Cal that there used to be girls who turned into boys back in Bithynios, and Cal explains that it's genetic. Desdemona then says, "It's all my fault." She explains that she thought incest was outlawed for religious reasons, and didn't realize it could affect babies. She says she was "just stupid girl from village."

When Cal asks, Desdemona explains that Lefty was her third cousin, but also her brother. Cal is stunned. At this moment, Tessie calls out to Cal, saying it's time to go. Cal says he's going to say with Desdemona. Imitating Milton, he says he refuses to go into a church that charges such outrageous prices for candles. Laughing, Tessie agrees to let Cal stay. Looking at him, Desdemona says, "My spoon was right." Cal promises not to tell Desdemona's secret, but Desdemona says he can tell people after she dies.

Milton receives the full Greek Orthodox Funeral he would have hated. Father Mike does not officiate; he has been sentenced to two years in prison. Aunt Zo divorces him and moves to New Smyrna Beach, Florida, with Desdemona. Before long, Tessie joins them. Desdemona dies in 1980. During Milton's funeral, Tessie places his wedding crown inside the casket. Cal remains at Middlesex, performing the ritual of guarding the door so that Milton's spirit doesn't reenter. This is a man's job, which Cal can now do. Although it is bitterly cold, he stays resolutely still in the doorway. He cries, thinking about Milton and the future.

*The idea that Desdemona's reduced mental faculties actually help her understand Cal's gender transition is significant. In a way, this is the opposite of the brutal and invasive "expertise" that Dr. Luce wields against Cal. Desdemona is naïve, not only now in her cognitively impaired state, but also, as she points out, in the past. She didn't realize that incest could lead to intersex children, yet now that she is free of the constricting power of shame, she finally puts it all together.*



*The fact that Desdemona gives consent for Cal to tell the truth about her after her death is significant. It not only reiterates the idea that all secrets eventually come out, it also suggests that there may be part of Desdemona that wanted people to know the truth about her and Lefty. However, she is happy for this to be revealed after she no longer has to deal with the consequences.*



*By performing the ritual of standing outside the house to stop Milton's spirit reentering, Cal symbolically informs Milton's spirit that he is now a man. Put in another light, Cal's performance of this ritual—like Lefty and Desdemona's fake courtship—is mostly a way for Cal to confirm this fact to himself.*





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