

Tender



INTRODUCTION

Christine undergoes the kind of spiritual journey described by Transcendentalist authors.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Cate Kennedy was born in England, where her father was stationed through the Air Force, but grew up living in several different states in Australia. As a young adult, she attended the University of Canberra and the Australian National University. After college, she had jobs in various career fields, but notably taught creative writing and served as a community arts worker in Victoria, Australia. In her 30s, Kennedy moved to Mexico for two years to teach literacy in underserved communities through an Australian volunteer organization. She also worked as a freelance writer and for the Australian Customs Service, an experience which would later inspire her short story “Habit.” Though Kennedy is primarily known for her short stories, she wrote nonfiction and poetry throughout her young adulthood. In 2002, she won the Vincent Buckley Poetry Prize, a literary award that provided her with the opportunity to teach in Ireland. Today, Kennedy lives in a remote region of northern Australia, and continues to write, publish, and participate in speaking engagements.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Among other topics, “Tender” addresses the movement to maintain a more natural lifestyle in a contemporary environment filled with disposable products and technological advances. In the story, Christine and Al’s beliefs on sustainability reflect increasing uncertainty about the long-term effects of plastics and various other chemicals that abound in daily life. Growing concerns over pollution and climate change in recent years have pushed the balance between convenience and environmentalism into public consciousness, a conflict that Christine experiences intensely as she struggles to reconcile her principles with the chaotic reality of raising children and getting treatment for a tumor.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The emphasis on resisting modern technology and embracing nature in “Tender” harkens back to 19th-century Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Transcendentalism encouraged appreciation for nature and natural beauty, as well as rejection of industrialization and capitalism. Literary works such as Emerson’s *Nature* and Thoreau’s *Walden* highlighted nature’s spiritual power and humans’ inability to fully accept nature because of temptations and pressures from society and civilization. In her appreciation of natural beauty as well as her struggle to accept some of nature’s unpleasant elements,

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** “Tender”
- **When Written:** 2012
- **Where Written:** Victoria, Australia
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Rural Australia
- **Climax:** After completing the diorama, Christine unsets the mousetraps while waiting for the train.
- **Antagonist:** There is no traditional antagonist, but the lump under Christine’s arm is a potential threat to her health and the stability of her family’s life.
- **Point of View:** First Person (Christine)

EXTRA CREDIT

Award-winning. “Tender” is one of the short stories in Kennedy’s anthology *Like a House on Fire*, which won the Steele Rudd Award in 2013.

Mousetraps. Christine places several spring-loaded mousetraps, which are considered more humane than glue traps, around her home in “Tender.” In Kennedy’s home province of Victoria, Australia, glue traps are heavily regulated and only professional pest control companies are allowed to utilize them.



PLOT SUMMARY

While preparing dinner for her family, Christine dwells on a biopsy appointment she has scheduled for the next morning to examine a lump that has recently developed under her arm. Her husband, Al, enters the kitchen to confirm the time of her appointment and tells her that he’s also informed their two children that she’ll be getting some tests done, despite her efforts to keep the hospital visits hidden from them. Christine’s thoughts wander to her daughter Hannah’s past obsession with the story of the princess and the pea, in which a lump—a small pea buried under several thick mattresses—keeps the princess from falling asleep at night. Her train of thought then shifts to her son, Jamie, and how she and Al have compromised on the natural, eco-friendly, sustainable way of life they once upheld. Meanwhile, Al gives the children a bath, causing Hannah and

Jamie to splash each other and fight over bath toys. Back in the kitchen, the screaming and crying irritates Christine as she anxiously recalls her previous appointment for an ultrasound on the lump. She spots a mouse running through the kitchen and sets up some **mousetraps**, before calling the rest of the family to dinner. While Al sorts through the basket of clean laundry for the children's pajamas, Christine grumbles to herself about her laid-back, easygoing husband, whose absentmindedness leaves much of the household chores and organizing to her. Despite her mounting concern about the biopsy, she prepares the next day's lunches and dinner for her family, in case she cannot be home in time.

After dinner, Jamie nonchalantly announces that he needs to make a diorama for a school project. While explaining the assignment, he reveals that it is due the next day, prompting Christine to compare him to his similarly dreamy and forgetful father. However, Christine's love for her son overcomes her annoyance, and she helps him assemble materials from around the house and get to work on the project. When his bedtime arrives, Jamie is still working steadily, not wanting to feel embarrassed next to other students with completed dioramas—students who likely started the project long before he did.

After Jamie goes to bed, Christine impulsively takes over and continues working late into the night, intending to surprise Jamie with a finished diorama in the morning. As she works, she frets anxiously about the next morning's appointment. She glances at her sleeping children while collecting materials from their rooms, taking pride in their health and development in contrast to the tumor she imagines growing in her body.

Early the next morning, Christine wakes up well ahead of her scheduled train into the city, still feeling unsatisfied with the diorama. She wanders out into the garden and allows the surroundings to calm her, before gathering some branches and moss for the finishing touches on Jamie's project. The memory of Al fishing out Hannah's pajamas from the clean laundry the previous night comforts her as she waits for the train. Just before heading out, Christine retrieves and unsets all of the mousetraps she placed around the house.

compromised on some matters since having children, such as owning a television and computer. Christine plans her day-to-day life meticulously to take care of her family's needs, addressing details such as cleaning up mousetraps to conceal dead mice from her children and stocking ingredients so that Al can make dinner without her. Both in the present and in flashbacks, Christine spends much of her time and effort attempting to maintain control of not only her own life but also the family's, especially in regards to her children's development. As a result, she becomes anxious and frustrated when unexpected events throw the family off course, such as the emergence of her possibly cancerous lump or Jamie's last-minute scramble to finish a school assignment. Hannah and Jamie have not grown into the well-behaved children that Christine expected, even with strict bedtimes and limits on TV time. Christine inevitably reacts to these events by trying to regain control over another part of her life in response. For example, she refuses Al's help with preparing dinner, wanting to assert her self-reliance in the face of uncertainty about the lump. Similarly, she takes over Jamie's school project after he goes to bed, determined to gain some control over the chaos his procrastination produced—and perhaps to demonstrate her worth as a mother. By the end of the story, Christine comes to terms with the illusory nature of control, embracing the rush of love that drives her to complete Jamie's diorama and removing the mousetraps in a symbolic acceptance of life's unpredictability.

Al – Al is Christine's easygoing and absentminded husband, who works at a community center. While Christine values order and fights to control everything in their lives, Al lets life unfold naturally around him, irritating her with his tendency to neglect his chores and home improvement projects. However, he demonstrates focus and competence when it is needed, leading his coworkers to trust that he can take care of responsibilities in the end, even if he takes somewhat of a meandering path to get there. At home, he forgets to close drawers and his unfinished bookshelves lie around the garage, but he remembers Christine's appointment time and quietly takes over washing dishes while she works on Jamie's diorama. He only knows how to cook one dish—tuna and pasta casserole—but like most things he does, it gets the job done. Christine's memory of him skillfully shaking out a pair of inside-out pajamas for Hannah comforts her, reassuring her that Al can keep the household running while she is gone for the day.

Jamie – Jamie is Christine and Al's seven-year-old son. He seems to have inherited his father's laid-back and absentminded personality, forgetting about his school project—or simply putting it off—until the night before it is due. His presence disrupts Christine's need for order and control, as he leaves bike tracks all over the garden and action figures scattered across the floor—a sharp contrast from her earlier hopes of him developing into a responsible older brother who



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Christine – Christine, the protagonist of the story, is married to Al, with whom she has two young children, Hannah and Jamie. She has recently discovered a tender lump under her arm, leading to a series of worrisome visits to the hospital for various examinations and tests to determine if the lump is cancerous. Throughout the story, she hints at a desire she and Al share for adhering to a natural, eco-friendly, technology-free way of life whenever possible. However, they have

would read calmly to his sister. However, Jamie's focus on his project once he starts working on it triggers Christine's intense parental love. She works late into the night to complete the project, not wanting him to feel disappointed or embarrassed by bringing an unfinished diorama to school.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hannah – Christine and Al's four-year-old daughter and Jamie's younger sister.



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.



THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL

Cate Kennedy's "Tender" portrays one night and morning in the life of the story's protagonist, Christine. In anticipation of an appointment for a

biopsy, she attempts to exercise control over her home and her family, which consists of her husband, Al, and two young children, Hannah and Jamie. However, Christine finds that, in spite of her efforts, their lives are inevitably full of uncertainty. Through Christine's actions, Kennedy suggests that the urge to maintain control of one's life is a natural human impulse, but also that any sense of control is only an illusion in the face of unexpected events.

Throughout the story, Christine is constantly planning ahead and taking responsibility for the family's wellbeing. She has avoided putting her biopsy appointment on their calendar so that the children won't see it and fret about it, even though Al has already told them. She also tells Al that she'll leave the car at the station for him and plans to be back for dinner, but later expresses concern that she might not make it home in time, wondering if she should leave some tuna and pasta so that he can make the only dish he knows how to cook. Even though she is going to the hospital for an operation, her focus is on ensuring the day will go smoothly for the rest of the family—not for herself. When Christine sees mice in the kitchen, she immediately places mousetraps out and notes that Al will need to check them in the morning, since the children would want a funeral and burial for any dead mice, making them late for school. Once again, her train of thought reveals a thoroughly planned sequence of events in her family's best interests. After Jamie goes to bed with his school project unfinished, Christine cannot help completing the diorama for him. She stays up for several hours decorating the diorama and collecting items from around the house, despite needing to catch a train early in the

morning. And later, she remembers to unset and collect the traps even with only half an hour to catch the train.

Because she is such a careful planner, Christine expresses frustration when events and people do not follow her plans. She feels "a familiar mix of guilt and resentment" about how her home does not match the "grand theory of sustainability" she and Al once wanted to uphold. Instead, their lives have been "modified [for] a more prosaic reality," in which she dreams of having an electric oven, Al entertains himself by going on the Internet, and "one hour of sanctioned TV a night" keeps the children occupied. Christine is annoyed with Al when he plays with the children while bathing them, well past their scheduled dinnertime. Unlike her, he does not address responsibilities in an organized manner, instead handling them as they come. His unfinished bookshelves lie around the house, and Christine is often frustrated with how nonchalant and relaxed he is towards his responsibilities at home. Jamie also defies Christine's expectations; she fantasizes about him reading peacefully to his little sister, but this dream does not materialize. Instead, the two children fight over bath toys and scream across the house. Jamie leaves action figures strewn across the floor and Hannah demands to play with nail polish, leaving Christine anxious about their behavior and her influence on them. To add to Christine's mounting anxiety, the lump that triggered her hospital visits worries her throughout the story, even though she cannot do anything about it beyond the biopsy she has scheduled for the following morning. She thinks of her own body as no longer trustworthy, despite the lack of a certain diagnosis, and understandably considers the worst-case scenario of the tumor being cancerous.

In the end, Christine accepts that her sense of control is only an illusion, and that she must trust that her family can take care of themselves without her. While she prepares to finish Jamie's diorama and catch the train, her mind wanders to a memory of Al competently shaking out the children's inside out pajamas, which reassures her that he can manage responsibilities when he needs to. Even though he only cooks one dish, that dish feeds the family, and even though his coworkers at the community center aren't quite sure how he does his work, "it all comes together in the end" somehow. Christine takes a look at both Jamie and Hannah before departing, describing them as healthy and full of life, "flawless" and "perfect" children. Despite her earlier frustrations with Jamie's forgotten homework and action figures, or Hannah's desire to do her nails like "a miniature Paris Hilton," she accepts her children as they are, and implicitly acknowledges that they don't need her micromanaging them in order to grow up successfully.

At the end of the story, Christine releases the springs on all the mousetraps she set out and collects them, implying none of them were successful in catching the mice. Though the mice are pests, they are essentially out of Christine's control, and setting out traps is not guaranteed to catch any. In the same vein, her

adherence to a healthy, natural lifestyle did not prevent her from developing what might be a malignant tumor, nor did her strict parenting style produce perfectly well-behaved children. By calmly picking the traps up before leaving for the hospital, she accepts that her sense of control over her environment is only an illusion; in reality, her best efforts can sometimes fail anyway.



NATURE VS. TECHNOLOGY

Throughout “Tender,” Kennedy hints at Christine and Al’s desire to keep their home relatively free of modern technology, even at the cost of

inconvenience. Although they are still drawn to the natural way of life they once prioritized, having children has pushed Christine and Al to give in to some of the temptations provided by modern technology, such as a television and computer. The lump under Christine’s arm has highlighted that compromise, sending her to the hospital for advanced medical treatments like an ultrasound and biopsy. However, Christine’s experiences with the lump and with her daily family life also indicate that people cannot separate themselves totally from nature, even when they embrace modern lives. Through Christine and Al’s struggle to balance natural and technological ways of life, Kennedy proposes that modern technology, though alluring and sometimes necessary, cannot truly overcome nature.

Christine originally planned to live a simple lifestyle with Al, avoiding modern technology where possible. She claims that nobody could have told her “seven years ago,” presumably before Hannah and Jamie were born, that she and Al would own a television or electric heaters. Although they do have these comforts now—including a computer, on which Al surfs the Internet nightly—she and Al clearly intended to do without them but changed course once they had children. She remembers arguing with Al over building their house with mud walls, in order to avoid any toxic chemicals involved in using cement or other materials. Although mud walls would have been less convenient, she and Al tried to consider “pure environments” and “every bloody thing” about sustainability when planning their future lives. To cook dinner, Christine loads wood into a firebox attached to a wood-burning oven. Although she dreams of owning an electric oven, she and Al must have committed to minimizing their electricity use when constructing the house. She also mentions solar panels installed to provide some electricity, as part of an effort to build a sustainable home. She and Al still keep mostly herbal medicines in their pantry and prefer not to go to the pharmacy or doctor for treatments. Christine is even proud of not having visited a hospital since Hannah’s birth, at least until her recent appointments.

However, after their children were born, Christine and Al accepted more modern technology into their lives. While they had debated mud walls when building their house, she

acknowledges that this was only part of a “grand theory of sustainability” that had to be adapted to a more “prosaic reality.” In other words, their idealistic dreams had to make way for the day-to-day demands of family life. And although they have solar panels, their home is now fitted with “an electric system like everyone else’s” and any power from the panels is “just a booster.” Christine sees herbal medicines in the pantry and scoffs at how she and Al would never have imagined giving store-bought medicine to their children, even if that medicine is still natural and homeopathic. Similarly, prior to discovering the lump in her arm, she hadn’t been to the hospital since Hannah was born. Especially when medical care is involved, Christine and Al have accepted modern medicine in addition to using herbal remedies.

Eventually, Al and particularly Christine learn that relying on technology doesn’t actually prevent nature from running its course. Though Christine clearly values the natural world, the lump under her arm shows how nature can act in unpredictable ways. Christine turns to technology—specifically, modern medicine—to try and understand it, but even after the initial ultrasound, the doctor is unable to tell whether the lump is benign or malignant. It remains unclear at the end of the story what treatments she might need after the biopsy. The lump is naturally occurring, but that doesn’t make it good; it’s simply something that the family has to confront.

Although the lump is an example of nature causing pain and uncertainty in Christine’s life, she also experiences the persistent beauty and wonder of nature throughout the story. She describes her daughter as a “healthy, respiring” child with “cells [that are] a blur of miraculously multiply and flowering growth.” Essentially, the same kind of biological process that is behind Christine’s tumor is also responsible for the wonder of her children growing healthy and strong. Similarly, when Christine collects materials for Jamie’s diorama from the garden, she becomes calm when she “paus[es] to inhale the deep spicy smell of the lemon-scented gum” and “feel[s] the dew drench her ankles” and compares a “little patch of bush” growing beneath the kitchen window to “a healing scar.” She takes solace in the beauty of the raw wilderness and how it fights to grow and survive regardless of human intervention.

At the end of the story, Christine’s **mousetraps** do not catch any mice, even though she sets up several around the kitchen. By collecting the mousetraps and resetting them each “with a benign and harmless snap,” Christine symbolically accepts that she cannot use technology to pick and choose which parts of nature to experience. In order to appreciate its beauty, she must also deal with its challenges—both small ones like pests and bigger ones like the lump under her arm. By ending the story on this note, Kennedy conveys that technology can’t fully suppress nature, and that nature must be accepted as a whole, including both ugly and beautiful elements.



THE POWER OF LOVE

Kennedy depicts Christine as a loving mother and wife in “Tender,” even while Christine struggles with the possibility of having a malignant tumor.

Although her family often causes her disappointment, anxiety, and frustration with their antics, her unconditional love for them keeps her committed to caring for them. Through Christine’s point of view, Kennedy demonstrates that love often stirs up negative emotions but is nevertheless powerful enough to inspire selfless action.

Despite her anxiety over the lump in her arm and a biopsy in the morning, Christine’s love for her family pushes her to look after their needs rather than her own. At the beginning of the story, Christine attempts to hide the appointment from her children, even at the risk of forgetting the time by not writing it down on the calendar, in order to save them worry about their mother. While Al reveals that he has already informed Hannah and Jamie, who do not seem to behave any differently, Christine’s concern for even this small detail highlights how meticulously she tries to ensure a smooth day for them without her. She completes Jamie’s diorama project on his behalf, working on it for several hours and staying up past midnight, before waking up early the next morning to complete her “unfinished vision” for it. Although the last-minute rush was entirely Jamie’s fault for forgetting about the assignment until the night before it is due, his unhappiness at the idea of showing up to school and seeing other kids’ completed projects drives Christine to go above and beyond to surprise her son with a high-quality diorama in the morning. She also sets out **mousetraps** and makes sure to collect them in the morning, wanting to catch the mice scurrying around the kitchen yet trying to avoid the children’s clamor for a funeral if they find any dead mice. Even though she is already up late in the middle of completing Jamie’s diorama, another selfless task, she immediately takes the time to address another problem as she notices it and again prioritizes her family’s needs.

However, Christine is often frustrated and annoyed with the rest of her family, who are not as organized or responsible as she is. Al’s relaxed and absentminded personality often annoys Christine, who notes that he “can’t seem to shut a drawer once he’s opened it.” She appreciates the “same amiable mood” he is always in but complains about his inability to complete his many half-done tasks, such as the unfinished bookshelves, the compost pile, or the unaddressed weeds. When the children are fighting in the bath, she is irritated at his delayed intervention. Even though his coworkers assure her that whatever Al does “all comes together in the end,” she expresses frustration at his ignorance towards “how much organizing she has to do around him.” Christine also describes Jamie as “so like Al it scares her” when he casually brings up starting his diorama project after dinner, to be completed for the next day. Like his father, Jamie is disorganized and ignorant of how much work

Christine does behind the scenes to compensate for it, in this case finishing the diorama after he goes to bed. With a comparison to Al, Christine expresses much of the same disappointment and frustration towards her son as she does towards her husband.

In the end, Christine gives in to her love for her family in spite of their shortcomings. At the beginning of the story, Al remembers Christine’s appointment, even though it is not on the calendar, and knows which train she should take. While she is working on Jamie’s diorama, Al quietly takes over washing dishes to relieve her of that responsibility. Christine takes comfort in the image of him shaking out Hannah’s pajamas to turn them right side out, surprising her with how he can take care of their household despite his relaxed attitude. Although Al is generally absentminded, she knows that he is there to support Christine when it matters, and she loves him for what he does, rather than what he doesn’t do. When Jamie tells Christine that the diorama needs to be done by tomorrow, she feels “the ardent rush of helpless, terrible love” drive her to help. When Jamie is not done by bedtime, the “warmth bloom[ing] briefly in her chest, tight and aching like tears” forces her to take over and finish it for him. Even though she could reasonably tell Jamie he should have started earlier or allow him to bring his unfinished work to school, she cannot help giving in to her love for her son and doing all the work for him. Kennedy’s words choices in these phrases emphasize that genuine love isn’t always simple or pleasant; instead, it can be “terrible” or painful in a way that makes people feel “helpless” against its power. But most importantly, the positive side of love wins out—it may not be easy to love others as much as Christine loves her family, but her ongoing devotion to them shows that it’s still a worthwhile effort.



SYMBOLS

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



MOUSETRAPS

The five mousetraps Christine places around the house in the midst of a mice infestation symbolize her futile attempts to control her environment and exert her will on nature. While waiting to eat dinner, she puts out two more traps, in addition to the three that were already set up, after she sees “the familiar tiny dark shape of a mouse run the length of the skirting” in the kitchen—clearly, Christine’s efforts haven’t been enough to eradicate the infestation. Although she and Al believe in living a natural way of life, she is not willing to accept the natural intrusion of mice into their home. As she prepares the traps, she glances at store-bought herbal medicines in the pantry, “her mouth twisting into a humourless,

cynical curl” when she recognizes how she has given in to the convenience of buying medicine at the store, even though she still opts for herbal and homeopathic remedies. Similarly, Christine relies on mousetraps but still chooses spring-loaded ones over glue traps or poison, which are more convenient but less humane and environmentally friendly.

Since having children, Christine and Al have made many such compromises between their idealistic worldview and the practical concerns of daily life. They address many needs with old-fashioned methods, such as a wood-fired oven and a bathtub that needs to be emptied manually, but embrace technology for others, like owning a television and computer for entertainment. However, neither compromise nor sticking to principles brings satisfaction for Christine—she is irritated by television’s influence on her children yet dreams of owning an electric oven. Just before heading to her biopsy appointment, she unsets all five mousetraps, none of which have caught mice. In doing so, she symbolically gives up trying to control her life and surroundings, instead allowing nature to run its course. By the end of the story, Christine accepts that neither technology nor a natural lifestyle can grant her power over nature, whether it takes the form of mice in her home or the mysterious—and possibly malignant—lump in her body.

Related Characters: Christine (speaker), Al

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

In a flashback while preparing dinner, Christine remembers her life with Al before children, when they were highly idealistic about living an environmentally friendly and natural way of life. However, since then they have had children and compromised on many of their ideals, such as a house powered entirely by solar panels. Other commitments, such as the wood-fired oven and hand-watered trees, have remained in place despite their inconvenience and ineffectiveness, most likely because they are difficult and expensive to replace. Despite making all of these other compromises, Christine feels both guilty and resentful about her wish for an electric oven. She feels guilt over further giving up on her vision for a natural lifestyle, but also resents the inconvenience of loading wood into the oven every night to cook. Jamie’s BMX track through the landscaping, which prevents Christine from executing her plan to build terraces in the yard, is also symbolic of how Christine and Al’s children have disrupted their careful plans for their life.



QUOTES

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

Tender Quotes

☝ She remembers Al and her arguing over whether to render the walls with mud and cement or just mud—statistics about toxicity, about pure environments, about every bloody thing, things that buckled in the face of practicality and time. Now the solar panels are just a booster for an electric system like everyone else’s, and to Christine that seems to sum up the whole experiment: it’s a bonus, a gesture, a grand theory of sustainability modified to a more prosaic reality. The trees outside, which she’d imagined sprouting into a shady arbour, are taller and stalkier now but still unmistakably seedlings, painstakingly hand-watered from the dam and the bath. The piles of clay turned over by digging the house site still glint exposed through the thin groundcovers, and Jamie’s BMX track has worn a looping circuit through the landscaping, turning her plans for terracing into an assortment of jumps and scrambles. Christine puts more wood in the firebox and, with a familiar mix of guilt and resentment, dreams her nightly dream of an electric oven.

☝ Then the doctor, finally, looking through the ultrasound films as he made a point of giving her the reassuring statistics of how many lumps turn out to be benign. She’d hated the way he’d stared off over her head as his fingers had coolly explored the lump, gazing into the distance like someone solving a mental equation.

[...]

Him writing something on her card, like his final answer in a quiz, before meeting her eyes again. Briskness and neutrality finetuned, as he said, ‘Best to take that out and have a good look at it, I think.’

Related Characters: Christine (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

While listening to Hannah and Jamie splash around in the bath, Christine revisits her memory of the first appointment to address the lump under her arm. After getting an

ultrasound, she first watches the radiographer turn quiet while looking at the images, before seeing a doctor for the diagnosis. The doctor acts aloof and professional throughout the appointment, not providing Christine with any kind of compassion. She hates how he treats her as just another patient, presenting her with only statistics and a terse, objective outlook on the lump. He stares over her head as if not even acknowledging she is another person, only deliberately meeting her eyes when prescribing the biopsy. The doctor's actions and tone represent the detached, impersonal attitudes of the modern, technological world that Christine and Al try to resist. Even though the doctor wants to "have a good look" at the lump, Christine feels as if he is unconcerned about her, only doing so because it is the correct answer to some equation on a test.

☛ She gets up and finds two traps in the pantry, in behind the jars and plastic containers and the box full of herbal cough and cold remedies, valerian tea and rescue remedy. Back when the kids were born, she and Al would never have dreamed of treating them with any commercial preparations from the chemist.

[...]

Rescue remedy, she thinks as she replaces the little bottle on the shelf. And can't stop her mouth twisting into a humourless, cynical curl as she dabs some peanut butter onto the mousetraps and sets them, pushing them cautiously back into shadowy corners with the tip of her finger.

Related Characters: Christine (speaker), Al

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

While waiting for her family to join her at dinner, Christine spots a mouse scampering through the kitchen and goes to look for mousetraps in the pantry. Although the mice infestation is a natural phenomenon, Christine rejects it as part of a natural way of life, instead buying mousetraps to deal with the problem. The traps symbolize her desire to control nature's presence in her life, using technology as needed. Even though she has already placed traps around the house, they have not been effective, just like her

attempts to moderate nature's other effects on her life—like trying to strong-arm her children into being quiet, cerebral kids by limiting how much television they watch. She continues to add more traps as she sees mice, misguidedly still trying to exert her will over nature.

She finds the traps next to store-bought herbal medicines and looks at a bottle of "rescue remedy" cynically, recognizing the lukewarm compromise she has made in sticking to herbal remedies but buying them instead of making them at home. Similarly, the spring-loaded mousetraps are a compromise between a natural lifestyle and the convenience of technology—spring-loaded traps are more humane than other, more technologically advanced, means for removing pests, but spring-loaded traps of course aren't as "natural" as sitting back and letting the outdoors in.

☛ She finds herself watching him, sometimes, still a little incredulous at the dreamy way he handles life, how everything seems to flow around him. Once at a barbecue held at the community centre where he works, she'd impulsively asked a colleague how he managed everything there at the office.

'Oh, fine,' the woman had said, surprised. 'Al just does his own thing, you know? It all comes together in the end.'

Here at home, she never sees it coming together. Everything, on the contrary, seems to be teetering on the verge of coming apart. That, or just sinking into neglect, like the wheelbarrow half-full of compost and the shovel which has been buried in weeds for over a fortnight, outside the kitchen window.

[...]

Christine supposes she should be grateful he's so laid-back—relaxed with the kids, always in the same amiable mood. But he's so vague, that's the trouble, so blind to how much organising she has to do around him to keep it all running. It's like she has three kids, not two.

Related Characters: Christine (speaker), Al

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

When Al keeps the children in the bath well after dinnertime, Christine needs to call out to him to get the family together for dinner. She cannot understand how he approaches life in such a relaxed manner and recalls asking one of his coworkers how he managed his duties at work.

Christine might have believed that Al was similarly disorganized and irresponsible at work, but instead his coworker was surprised to even entertain her question, telling her that Al consistently figures everything out and makes results happen. Al's coworkers don't worry about him the way Christine does, instead trusting him to take care of his responsibilities in his own way.

Christine's personality requires her to always be in control and organized, which is at odds with Al's laid-back attitude. She expresses frustration with his half-finished tasks around the house and how she needs to make up for his absentmindedness by working harder herself. However, this is all self-inflicted and a half-hour delay on dinnertime is ultimately unimportant, reflecting Christine's unnecessary anxiety about schedules and organization.

☛ God, sometimes he's so like Al it scares her.

[...]

She watches his serious seven-year-old face consider this, and wants to take his arm and plant a kiss on the faded temporary tattoo of Buzz Lightyear there on his skinny bicep.

[...]

She feels the ardent rush of helpless, terrible love. 'Let's do it.'

Related Characters: Christine (speaker), Jamie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

After dinner, Jamie announces that he needs to make a diorama for school, before he calmly mentions that it is due the next day. This prompts Christine to compare him to Al with exasperation—in Christine's eyes, both are disorganized, forgetful, and generally frustrating. She begins to help him gather materials and asks him how he would like to go about the project, which Jamie ponders in earnest. Upon seeing him take the assignment seriously, she feels her love for him come over her. Christine views her love for Jamie as both "helpless" and "terrible," acknowledging its power over her and how it drives her to do irresponsible things. The rational part of her knows that she should not be encouraging Jamie to procrastinate on his homework or helping him with the diorama, let alone complete it for him, as she does later. However, she knows that she is powerless against her love for him. Similarly, she implies that she loves Al in the same way by comparing

father and son, overlooking their flaws.

☛ She creeps into her daughter's room, and stands listening to the rhythmic steadiness of Hannah's breathing, gazes at her sprawled sideways on the bed as if she's just landed from a great height. Hannah: healthy, respiring, her cells a blur of miraculously multiplying and flowering growth, life coursing through her, flawless, down to the last crescent-moon fingernail.

Christine, who once slept with a hand cupped around that tiny kicking foot, praying for a safe delivery, now stands holding scissors and a page of silver stars, making impossible bargains at the speed of light. Her own heart knocking in her chest and something else, something dark and airless, trickling through her bloodstream, that black, dense shadow on the ultrasound searching for somewhere to colonise. Her feet take her into Jamie's room and she stands gazing at him too. Her children, perfect, made with her own once-trustworthy body.

Related Characters: Christine (speaker), Jamie, Hannah

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Christine has been working on Jamie's diorama for several hours when she goes to Hannah's room around midnight, looking for materials. She takes in the sight of her daughter sleeping, rejoicing in the sounds of healthy breathing and the knowledge that Hannah is growing healthily. Although Christine had been irritated with Hannah's crying in the bath and her tantrums regarding wearing nail polish to kindergarten, she still considers her daughter a perfect miracle of life. When Christine wanders into Jamie's room and sees him sleeping, she experiences the same feelings.

Although the same process of growing and multiplying cells is behind the possibly malignant lump in her own body, Christine recognizes it has brought her two healthy, "perfect" children. She begins to accept that this process is a fundamental part of nature, one that lies squarely outside of her control. Christine realizes that she cannot have the "tiny kicking foot" in her body that eventually emerged as Hannah, without also accepting something else flowing through her bloodstream looking for "somewhere to colonize" in the present.

●● She gets up, silently, at five, nagged by an unfinished vision and the sensation of the night draining away. Out in the garden she's calm again, feeling the dew drench her ankles and the bottom of her white cotton nightdress. She can sleep on the train, anyway. She walks slowly through the hillocks and raised beds, seeing her nightdress billow like a faintly luminous ghost, pausing to inhale the deep spicy smell of the lemon-scented gum.

Related Characters: Christine (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Christine's desire for control appears once more, causing her to wake up well ahead of her scheduled train to the city for the biopsy, in order to complete her "unfinished vision" for Jamie's diorama. Although she has so far been unable to fulfill her visions for the house or her children, the combination of her love for Jamie and her ingrained need to finish things she's started—and to finish them not just to completion, but to perfection—drives her to put some finishing touches on the diorama. She goes to the garden to collect some final materials for the project.

In the garden, Christine is calmed by the sensation of dew on her ankles and the smell of wood. Like she did when observing her children sleeping, she quietly appreciates the beauty and wonder of nature in her garden. Since the rest of the family is asleep, the noise and chaos of daily life cannot infringe on her experience, allowing her to take in the beauty of nature and quell her anxiety about the lumpectomy and all her household responsibilities.

●● Then, cold but wide awake and ready, she locates each of the five mousetraps she's set and kneels down in front of each of them in turn. Carefully, with the flat of her hand, she releases the springs so that the small metal trays of bait slip from the jagged hook holding them in place. She's humming to herself as she grasps each straining metal bar and guides it back to let it settle, with a benign and harmless snap, against the small rectangle of wood.

Related Characters: Christine (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

Just before she leaves for the biopsy, Christine finds and releases all the mousetraps she has set around the house. None of them have caught any mice, symbolizing her failed efforts to exert control over nature using technology. However, since seeing her sleeping children and experiencing the beauty of nature in the garden, Christine has accepted the futility of trying to control nature's presence in her life, instead choosing to take nature as it is. The uncertainty of nature, such as the development of both her children and the possibly malignant lump under her arm, is inseparable from the beauty of it.

In a similar vein, Christine gives up the need to keep a tight grip on all parts of her life, instead recognizing that some things, like a mouse problem, are ultimately "benign and harmless" compared to the larger ones such as the lump, which may very well be malignant rather than "benign and harmless." Like the "straining metal bar" on each trap, she releases herself from the need to worry about everything, understanding that her efforts to control her circumstances are ineffective.



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.

TENDER

While preparing dinner, Christine worries about an upcoming biopsy in the morning for a lump under her arm. Al, her husband, enters the kitchen, noting that she didn't write the appointment on their calendar. They discuss the next day's schedule, and Christine reveals she was trying to keep the biopsy a secret from their children. However, Al admits that he already told the kids and that "they're fine about it." Thinking of her lumpectomy reminds Christine of reading the story of the princess and the pea to Hannah, their four-year-old daughter, likening the lump in her arm to the bothersome pea. She refuses Al's help with dinner and puts a dish in the oven.

Christine's thoughts continue wandering to Hannah and Jamie, her seven-year-old brother. She recalls her past fantasies of having a clean house and well-behaved children, but none of that has come to fruition. Jamie loves to re-enact battles with action figures, leaving them strewn across the floor for everyone to step on, while Hannah throws loud tantrums and demands to wear nail polish "like some miniature Paris Hilton." Christine limits her children to "one hour of sanctioned TV a night," yet has been unable to keep them from engaging in their stereotypically boyish and girlish activities, much to her chagrin.

Christine's memories then turn to life before children, when she and Al were adamant about living a natural way of life and adhering to "a grand theory of sustainability." However, she laments that their once idealistic environmentalism "buckled in the face of practicality and time" after having children. Although she and Al had considered building their house with mud walls and only using electricity from solar panels, their home is now fitted with "an electric system like everyone else's," powering a television and electric heaters—the solar panels are just a "bonus." Their trees are "painstakingly hand-watered from the dam and the bath" but have not grown into the "shady arbour" she imagined. Back in the present, she feels "a familiar mix of guilt and resentment" when she "dreams her nightly dream of an electric oven" while loading timber into their wood-fired one.

Christine is immediately presented as a character who needs control—she has planned out the next day around her biopsy appointment and carefully tried to withhold the information from her children. Although she could be resting ahead of the biopsy, she refuses Al's help with dinner, wanting to take care of everything herself.



Christine continues demonstrating her desire to be in control of her circumstances, expressing frustration at how her children's development has defied her efforts. Even if Christine's expectations were somewhat unrealistic, she believed that her actions, such as limiting the children's exposure to television, would provide some guarantee of good behavior. Raising children is a complicated and messy process, yet Christine views it as something that can be managed straightforwardly.



Christine and Al have compromised on their idealistic worldview once the practical needs of daily life began to force compromises. Moreover, some of their efforts to maintain a natural lifestyle, such as watering the trees by hand, have brought about disappointing results. Although she feels guilty about doing so, Christine cannot help dreaming of an easier life if she had simply given in to modern conveniences like an electric oven. She resents her situation, feeling trapped between the inconvenient commitments they made to a natural way of life, like the oven, and their compromises, such as owning a television.



Meanwhile, Al is bathing Hannah and Jamie but takes too long to find Hannah's shower cap. When her hair gets wet, she begins the "whiny crying that always sets Christine's teeth on edge." Christine grows irritated at her husband, whose "ineffectual protestations" cannot prevent the children from fighting and screaming. Christine flashes back to the night she discovered the lump, when Al "had been the first one she'd told, of course."

Christine continues recollecting her first appointment, when the radiographer had quickly stopped making small talk while looking at the ultrasound films. Christine remembers how "she'd hated the way [the doctor had] stared off over her head as his fingers had coolly explored the lump," before prescribing a biopsy with "briskness and neutrality."

Christine's thoughts are interrupted when she notices "the familiar tiny dark shape of a mouse" scamper across the kitchen. She gets up to find **mousetraps**, remarking that she'll need to remind Al to check the traps in the morning—if their kids "find[] a dead mouse," they'll surely "demand[] a funeral and burial," disrupting the family's whole morning routine.

While baiting and setting a couple of traps, Christine glances at the assorted herbal medicines in the pantry, scoffing at a store-bought bottle of "rescue remedy" that she would never have purchased before having children.

After placing the traps, Christine calls the family to dinner, annoyed again at Al for letting the children stay in the bath well past dinnertime. Her frustration with "the dreamy way he handles life," disregarding schedules, reminds her of the time that she met his coworkers at a barbecue and asked one of them how Al managed his responsibilities at work. The coworker had been surprised by the question, and assured Christine that Al "does his own thing," but "it all comes together in the end."

While Christine is preparing dinner, she continues demonstrating her inability to accept events outside her control, especially when it comes to her children. In this case, Hannah's crying sets her off, and Christine grows angry at Al for not putting a stop to it, even though the crying is a normal behavior for a toddler. However, she quickly acknowledges that she relies on Al in her flashback, even if he does not always live up to her expectations.



The doctor's detached, professional attitude angers Christine, who is just another patient to him. She views her health as an utmost priority, just as she sees most things in her life requiring constant and total attention. In contrast, the doctor represents the modern and technological approach, providing only impersonal statistics and objectivity.



Although the presence of mice is part of a natural way of life, Christine turns to a technological solution—mouse traps—to stop the infestation, thus embodying the theme of nature versus technology that runs throughout the story. That Christine sees the mice as a problem to be solved also highlights her desire to control every aspect of her environment, including what critters come inside the house. However, she has raised the children to appreciate the sanctity of life, so they will want a funeral even for mice. In contrast, the modern, objective perspective associated with the doctor would not view mice as worthy of a funeral.



Another compromise in Christine and Al's life presents itself in the form of store-bought herbal remedies. Although they have not completely turned to pharmaceutical drugs, they still embrace the convenience of buying medicine at the store instead of making it at home.



Christine goes into detail about Al's personality, unable to understand his approach to life. Her need for control and organization is at odds with his relaxed attitude. His coworker expresses that others place trust in Al to make results happen, suggesting that he is capable of taking responsibility when it matters.



Christine, though, can only think of how Al's laid-back attitude drives her crazy when he inevitably forgets or neglects his responsibilities at home. She watches as he dumps a basket of folded laundry onto the floor, looking for Hannah's pajamas, taking his time and ignoring the children continuing to fight. He eventually finds a pair and turns it right side out with a "distracted but surprisingly adept movement." Meanwhile, Christine continues to worry about the lump and repeats the word "malignant" to herself, wondering if she should stock the kitchen with tuna and pasta in case she stays at the hospital past dinnertime.

After dinner, Jamie asks for a cardboard box to make a diorama for a school project. Christine finds one for him before he "calmly" mentions that the project is due the next day, prompting her to compare him to Al. Nevertheless, she experiences "the ardent rush of helpless, terrible love" come over her when she sees "his serious seven-year-old face" and helps him collect materials. While Christine prepares lunches, Jamie works diligently on his diorama, "his tongue jerk[ing] across his bottom lip in concentration."

When Jamie's bedtime arrives, Al chides him for not starting the project earlier, but Christine notes her husband's hypocrisy—he's the one who leaves "half-finished bookshelves" laying around and "can't seem to shut a drawer once he's opened it." Jamie looks sadly at his work, unwilling to show up at school in front of the other students "who always have their things ready on time." Al, who wants the kids to go to bed so he can go on the computer, orders Jamie to finish up within the next 10 minutes.

After Jamie goes to bed, Christine takes over his project, intent on surprising her son with a completed diorama in the morning. She stays up late into the night anyway, gathering things from around the house, only pausing briefly to set another **mousetrap**. She recognizes she's going a little bit overboard, and jokes with Al about how she's turned into one of those overbearing parents who commandeer their kids' homework. He is amused at her determination but quietly washes the dishes while she works.

Christine is surprised by Al's competence in shaking out a pair of pajamas effortlessly, even though this seems to be a small task, highlighting her tendency to worry about even trivial, daily matters such as laundry. Her anxiety over the lumpectomy—though understandable—festers during dinner, prompting her to worry about preparing for the next day's dinner. Her need for planning and control prevents her from enjoying even a small moment like family dinnertime and takes her directly to organizing a day ahead.



Although Jamie is entirely at fault for putting off the project until the last minute, Christine's strong motherly love for him—not to mention her controlling instincts—compel her to help him with the project instead of becoming angry. Just as Christine feels both exasperation and admiration for Al, she is both frustrated with and enamored of her son. In both cases, Christine's frustrations stem from her inability to accept that other people have different ways of doing things. That Jamie dedicates himself so fervently to the project once he finally starts is reminiscent of when Al's coworker assured Christine that Al's work always comes together in the end, even if he goes about it in his own way—something Christine, a meticulous and careful planner, can hardly fathom.



Jamie's sadness about showing up to school with an unfinished diorama and being embarrassed in front of other students who have completed ones triggers more motherly love in Christine, even as Al prompts him to go to bed soon. Even though Al is right, Christine cannot help being slightly annoyed by his hypocrisy, as he also does things on his own timeline—which usually means procrastinating or abandoning a project altogether.



Christine's love for her son further overwhelms her, now pushing her to take over the project entirely. Her desire for control is presented as somewhat of a positive force here, as it's rooted in her love for her son and not wanting him to be disappointed. And even though Al doesn't always meet her expectations, he shows his love for Christine in his own way in this passage as he takes care of washing the dishes so that she can keep working on the diorama.



Around midnight, Christine passes through Hannah and Jamie's rooms, where she lovingly takes in the sight of her healthy, growing children even as she acknowledges the feeling of her own body and health deteriorating.

The next morning, Christine rises early, eager to put a few finishing touches on Jamie's diorama. She wanders out into the garden, where the sensation of "dew drench[ing] her ankles" and "the deep spicy smell of the lemon-scented gum" calm her. She collects a sprig and some moss to finish off the diorama before heading back inside. The memory of Al effortlessly shaking out the pajamas comforts her as she waits for the train to her appointment. Just before she leaves, Christine finds each **mousetrap** in the house and "kneels down in front of [it]" to release the spring "with a benign harmless snap."

Even though nature has brought about the development of Christine's lump, it has also provided her with the gift of children. While she observes Hannah and Jamie sleeping, she also sees the irony in her situation.



Christine appreciates beauty and wonder of nature in the garden, allowing them to calm her. She removes the mousetraps when she realizes they have failed and are a futile attempt to exert her control over nature. Instead of trying to control her interactions with it, Christine finally embraces nature as it is, including both the beauty of morning dew and garden scents and the ugliness of mice and her lump.





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