

A Small, Good Thing



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAYMOND CARVER

Raymond Carver was born in Clatskanie, Oregon, before his family moved to Yakima, Washington. In 1957, when he was 19, he married 16-year-old Maryann Burk. The couple had two children by the time Carver was 20. Carver and his wife worked a variety of low-paying jobs to support their family, which gave Carver insight on working class life. Carver attended Chico State University and later Humboldt State College, from which he received his BA in 1963. He then attended the prestigious Iowa Writer's Workshop. Carver eventually released the short story collections *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, [What We Talk About When We Talk About Love](#), and [Cathedral](#). Carver's writing tends to focus on working-class and lower-middle class people, featuring characters who worked low-paying jobs and encounter the mundane difficulties in American life. He also wrote poems, many of which appear in the collection *A New Path to the Waterfall*. Carver struggled with alcoholism throughout most of his adult life, until he quit drinking in the late 1970s. He eventually separated from his first wife and lived with the poet Tess Gallagher from the late 1970s until he died of lung cancer in 1988.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although "A Small, Good Thing" was written in 1980, it seems to be set earlier in the 20th century. The story focuses on social connections that a white couple makes with various people, including a Black family that's referred to as a "Negro family" in the story. "Negro" is now considered an outdated and offensive term, so this language indicates that the story is set in a past time period—perhaps when racial segregation was still commonplace. Most of "A Small, Good Thing" takes place in a hospital, where the effects of segregation would have been especially pronounced and even life-threatening. Under Jim Crow (segregation) laws in the U.S., hospitals serving Black communities tended to be understaffed and underfunded. Furthermore, segregation within hospitals themselves (with entirely separate wings for white and Black patients) led to subpar health outcomes for Black Americans. Even after the civil rights movement made overt segregation illegal, racial discrimination continued to negatively affect Black Americans' health, as they were often still sent to lower-quality hospitals than white people were. It's possible that these issues played a role in the death of Franklin, the son of the Black family that Ann meets in the hospital waiting room.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"A Small, Good Thing" was published in Carver's short story collection [Cathedral](#), which was similar in its realistic style to Carver's other story collections, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and [What We Talk About When We Talk About Love](#). Carver wrote in his essay "Fires" that he admired the British writer Lawrence Durrell, whose books include *Justine*, *Balthazar*, *Mountolive*, and *Clea*. Carver also acknowledged reading novels and short stories by Ernest Hemingway, whose terse prose Carver's work has been compared to. Hemingway's most prominent works include books like [A Farewell to Arms](#) and [The Sun Also Rises](#), but he also wrote short stories and published the short-story collections *Men Without Women*, *Winner Take Nothing*, and *In Our Time*. Because of his poignant short stories, Carver has also been compared to Anton Chekhov. Chekhov was a Russian playwright and fiction writer who was famous for his short stories, including those in the collection *The Wife and Other Stories*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Small, Good Thing
- **When Written:** 1980
- **When Published:** The story was initially published in an edited form as "The Bath" in 1981. It later appeared in the short story collection [Cathedral](#) as "A Small, Good Thing" in 1983.
- **Literary Period:** Minimalism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Mid-20th-century U.S.
- **Climax:** Scotty dies suddenly after being in a coma for days.
- **Point of View:** Third-Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Unedited. After Carver's death, his wife published the collection *Beginners*, which presented many of his stories in their original, unedited form. These versions show how Carver's editor, Gordon Lish, made significant changes to Carver's stories, converting them from much longer and more verbose pieces to the famously minimal style of Carver's earlier collections.

For Tess. Carver married the poet Tess Gallagher only six weeks before he died in 1988. Carver's poem "For Tess," presumably about Gallagher, appeared in *Poetry* in 1985.



PLOT SUMMARY

“A Small, Good Thing” opens with Ann Weiss ordering a **cake** for her son Scotty’s birthday party—he’s turning eight years old on Monday. She tries to strike up a conversation with the baker, assuming he must have kids of his own and understand the excitement of birthday parties and cakes, but he seems disinterested, which offends Ann.

On the morning of Scotty’s birthday, Scotty is hit by a car while walking to school. The driver waits until Scotty gets up and then drives away. Though he seems fine, Scotty walks home instead of going on to school, and he soon slips into unconsciousness. Ann can’t wake him, so she calls her husband, Howard, who calls an ambulance. At the hospital, the doctor, Dr. Francis, insists he that Scotty is in a deep, restorative sleep, not a coma, and that he’s bound to wake up soon.

After spending the whole day in the hospital at Scotty’s bedside, Howard decides to go home for an hour to bathe and change clothes. The phone rings as he’s walking in the door, and he thinks it must be the hospital calling to say that Scotty’s condition has worsened. But the **phone call** is from the baker about the cake, which hasn’t been picked up. Howard says he doesn’t know anything about a cake and hangs up. While Howard is in the bath, he gets another call, but the caller doesn’t say anything.

Scotty is still asleep when Howard gets back to the hospital, so he encourages Ann to go home to rest—though he warns her to not talk to the “creep” who’s calling the house. Ann, however, refuses to leave Scotty’s side. When Dr. Francis does his rounds, he informs the parents that Scotty has a concussion but that he should wake up soon.

By the next afternoon, Scotty still hasn’t woken up. Ann and Howard realize they need to feed the dog, so Ann begrudgingly agrees to go home to do it. On her way out of the hospital, Ann meets a Black family who are also waiting to hear whether their son, Franklin, will live. When Ann gets home, the baker calls again, though he’s vague and threatening, and Ann doesn’t know who the call is from or what it’s about. She asks if he’s calling about Scotty, and the baker says it “has to do with Scotty.” Panicked, Ann calls Howard, who affirms that Scotty’s condition hasn’t changed since Ann left, and that the caller is probably a psychopath who heard about Scotty’s accident.

When Ann returns to the hospital, the family she met earlier is gone. She asks the nurses what happened to Franklin and is saddened to learn that he has died. When Ann gets to Scotty’s room, Howard tells her that the doctors are going to operate on Scotty. Suddenly, Scotty wakes up, howls, and dies.

The doctors are shocked at Scotty’s sudden death, but Dr. Francis tries to comfort Ann and Howard. When Howard and Ann get home that night, they get another call. The caller (whom they still don’t realize is the baker) says, “Your Scotty, I

got him ready for you.” He calls again after midnight, and Ann suddenly realizes that it’s been the baker calling all along. Even though it’s the middle of the night, Ann and Howard rush to the bakery to confront the baker about the phone calls.

The baker is angry at them because of the wasted money and time he spent on the cake, but Ann is furious and tells him her son is dead. The baker immediately softens and apologizes. He sits down with couple, and they talk through the night. The baker gives them hot rolls, and tells them that “eating is a small, good thing in a time like this.”



CHARACTERS

Ann Weiss – Ann, Howard’s wife, is a 33-year-old mother to an eight-year-old boy, Scotty. At the beginning of the story, Ann is a cheerful woman who seems fulfilled by motherhood and overjoyed about her son’s upcoming birthday. When she goes to order a **birthday cake**, she tells the baker about Scotty and the party, and his dismissive attitude offends her. She assumes that the baker must have a wife and kids of his own, so she can’t understand why he wouldn’t be interested in hearing about her son. But, unbeknownst to her, the baker is lonely and childless, and hearing about Scotty upsets him. This misunderstanding shows Ann’s idealism: she’s been lucky in her life thus far, and she’s seemingly unable to empathize with other people’s experiences. This idealism comes crashing down when Scotty is hit by a car on the morning of his birthday, falls into a coma, and dies a few days later. Amid this trauma, Ann is so paralyzed by worry and grief that she has little energy to consider Howard’s feelings, and she becomes so cynical that she no longer believes having children is worth it. Her experience speaks to the fact that life can change from joyful to tragic in an instant, as well as the idea that deep familial bonds can be just as devastating as they are satisfying. At the end of the story, Ann is able to find a small but significant respite from her grief when she and Howard return to the bakery: she ends up confiding in the baker about Scotty’s death and bonding with him over their mutual loneliness. Her newfound connection with someone she previously disliked shows how the tragedy of her son’s death has made her more empathetic to others, as well as how simple kindness from strangers can be deeply meaningful for people who are coping with tragedy.

Howard Weiss – Howard is Ann’s husband and eight-year-old Scotty’s father. Prior to Scotty’s accident, he leads a life that he recognizes is happy and “lucky,” in the sense that nothing particularly traumatic has happened to him. However, when Scotty is hit by a car and falls into a coma on the morning of his eighth birthday, Howard is forced to recognize that life is chaotic and uncontrollable in its ability to quickly shift from joyous to tragic. The stress that he experiences after the accident is exacerbated by mysterious **calls** that the Weisses begin receiving at the house while they wait for news about

Scotty's condition, leading Howard to believe that a "psychopath" is targeting them. (Unbeknownst to the couple, the calls are from a baker reminding them to pick up Scotty's **birthday cake**.) Howard tries to remain stoic so as not to upset Ann, but when Scotty still hasn't woken up after several days in the hospital, he begins to panic. Whereas, at first, he and Ann struggle to communicate openly and confide in each other, their growing worry over Scotty brings them together and allows them to connect more deeply. When Scotty ends up dying unexpectedly, Howard openly weeps and grieves his son, seemingly unable to accept that his formerly easy, happy life has been turned on its head in such a short time. At the end of the story, when he and Ann return to the bakery to confront the baker about his relentless calls, they spark an unexpected friendship with the man. They tell the baker about Scotty's death, and he, in turn, confides in them about being childless and lonely. Howard's ability to bond with and feel comforted by a stranger in this way speaks to the importance of human connection and small kindnesses in the wake of tragedy.

Scotty Weiss – Scotty is Ann and Howard Weiss's eight-year-old son. At the beginning of the story, he's still seven and will be turning eight the following Monday. On the morning of his birthday, however, he gets hit by a car on his way to school and suffers brain trauma. Although Scotty feels okay at first, he soon falls into a coma and is hospitalized. His parents are distraught, though his doctor, Dr. Francis, believes that Scotty is fine and will wake up at any time. Scotty remains in the coma for a few days and then suddenly dies. This disorienting turn of events drives home the fragility and cyclical nature of life: opposing forces like life and death or joy and tragedy are in a delicate balance that can change in an instant. Losing Scotty devastates his parents; their grief in the wake of his death is a testament to how deep family bonds can be just as heartbreaking as they are fulfilling.

The Baker – Ann Weiss orders her son Scotty's **birthday cake** from the baker. He is an older man, and he's polite yet abrupt and uninterested in small talk when taking Ann's order. When Ann fails to pick up the cake on the morning of Scotty's birthday, the baker begins to **call** the Weisses' home repeatedly, becoming increasingly rude and cryptic on the phone. This odd behavior is a result of the baker's anger and loneliness. Unbeknownst to him, though, Ann and Howard are also angry and lonely, having just lost their son in a tragic car accident on the morning of his birthday. The baker is ultimately able to sympathize with the couple when they come to the bakery and tell him about Scotty's death, and he's surprisingly compassionate despite his earlier behavior. He explains that he's childless and lonely, having spent decades baking wedding and birthday cakes for other people without hitting certain life milestones himself. Through sharing their mutual sadness, the Weisses and the baker come to understand each other, and the three of them spend the night talking and eating fresh bread in

the bakery. Eating, the baker tells the couple, is "a small, good thing" to appreciate during trying times. The baker's character is a testament to how tragedy can bring people together, as well as how meaningful small gestures of kindness can be in the midst of tragedy.

Dr. Francis – After Scotty is hit by a car and falls into a coma, Dr. Francis is his doctor in the hospital. When Scotty is first admitted, Dr. Francis assures Howard and Ann that their son will be fine, insisting that Scotty's deep sleep is not a coma. He's a well-dressed, handsome man with a trustworthy demeanor, so the Weisses are eager to believe him and lean on him as a source of comfort as they anxiously wait for their son to wake up. Yet Dr. Francis gradually sounds less and less sure about what's wrong with Scotty, as he hesitates to make a formal diagnosis and often contradicts himself when he shares news with the Weisses. He and another doctor eventually decide to operate on Scotty, but before they can, Scotty suddenly dies. Dr. Francis is very upset about losing a young patient, and he comforts Ann and Howard as they take in the tragedy of their son's death. He's very sympathetic to the grieving parents, and even after all of his miscommunication with them during Scotty's coma, Ann perceives Dr. Francis as being "full of some goodness she didn't understand." Dr. Francis's character arc thus speaks to tragedy's ability to bring people together and empathize with one another.

Franklin – Franklin is a teenage boy who's hospitalized at the same time Scotty is in his coma. He was stabbed while watching a fight at a party, even though he wasn't participating in the fight. Ann runs into Franklin's family in a waiting room as they anxiously await news of his condition, much like Scotty's parents are waiting for him to wake up. Franklin eventually dies in surgery, and his death is similar to Scotty's in its suddenness and cruelty.

Franklin's Family – Ann meets a family in the hospital waiting room when she's looking for the elevator. The family is waiting for news about their son, Franklin, who is in surgery after being stabbed in a fight at a party. Franklin wasn't participating in the fight, only watching, but he was stabbed anyway. When Ann enters the waiting room on her way out of the hospital, his mother, father, and teenaged sister want to know if she has news about their son. She apologizes and tells them that she's also waiting for news about her own son. Ann feels an immediate connection to the family and longs to talk with them more, because they're coping with the same uncertainty and fear that she is. But when Ann returns to the hospital soon after this, the family is gone. She asks the nurses what happened to Franklin and learns that he has died. Although Frank's family's presence in the story is brief, the instant bond that Ann feels with them speaks to the importance of human connection and understanding during difficult times.

The Driver – The driver who hits Scotty with his car knows that he has hit a child. He waits until Scotty gets up to drive away

from the scene of the accident. The driver never appears again in the story, but this cruel act is a testament to how life can change from stable and happy to chaotic and tragic in an instant.



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.



JOY AND TRAGEDY

“A Small, Good Thing” is a story that focuses on the joy of birth and the tragedy of death: Ann and Howard’s son, Scotty, is hit by a car on his eighth

birthday, and he dies suddenly after a period of unconsciousness. Ann had ordered a **birthday cake** for her son the day before, and throughout the story the parents receive **calls** from the baker about picking up the cake—painful and constant reminders that what was supposed to be a day of celebration has instead become a day of mourning. The contrast of birth and death in the story show that joy and tragedy are both an inevitable part of life that can strike at any time, and that there’s very little way to control or avoid either.

Prior to their son’s sudden death, the couple lived an easy, happy life, which they come to realize was just a matter of luck. As Ann orders her son’s birthday cake in the story’s opening scene, she feels glad to be in “this special time of cakes and birthday parties.” The plural of “cakes and birthday parties” suggests that Ann isn’t just looking forward to her son’s birthday the following day—she’s excited about the stage of life her son is in, in which he attends birthday parties and has his own. That Ann characterizes this stage of life as one of lighthearted celebration (and particularly the celebration of life) suggests that it’s been a joyful, exciting time for the whole family. Ann’s husband, Howard, also emphasizes that their life has been idyllic until now. After his son’s accident, Howard thinks about how he’d been “happy and, so far, lucky [...] So far, he had kept away from [...] those forces he knew existed and that could cripple or bring down a man if the luck went bad, if things suddenly turned.” Howard frames tragedy as a reality he always knew about in the back of his mind but never had to grapple with personally. Now that “things [have] suddenly turned” in his own life, though, he has a firsthand understanding that life is indeed fickle and fleeting. Just as he couldn’t control his son’s tragic accident—it was the result of “the luck [going] bad”—he didn’t control his previously happy circumstances, either.

The couple also comes to terms with the idea that, like

happiness, tragedy is arbitrary and uncontrollable—they can’t undo it, nor can they do much to improve the outcome. Scotty is killed in a random hit-and-run car accident while he’s walking to school, which harks back to Howard’s suggestion that life can “cripple or bring down a man.” At this point in the story, it’s unclear if the accident will leave Scotty literally “cripple[d]” or will “bring [him] down” by killing him, but tragedy nevertheless descends unexpectedly and irreversibly. While Scotty is in the hospital, Ann meets a couple in the waiting room whose son has also endured a tragic, meaningless accident. The boy, Franklin, was attacked during a fight at a party, but he hadn’t been participating in the fight, only watching. Like Scotty, Franklin is suddenly and needlessly pulled into a random, tragic accident and eventually dies in the hospital. The parallelism between the two boys’ fates emphasizes that tragedy can strike unexpectedly and for no real reason. In addition, neither Scotty’s nor Franklin’s parents are able to save their sons. Both families stake out in the hospital, as if going home to rest would somehow negatively affect their sons’ recovery. But waiting around with bated breath for news of their sons doesn’t help, as both boys die in the hospital. And while the hospital staff *does* actively work to save the boys, even they are powerless in the end. The story suggests that while it’s a parent’s job to protect and care for their kids, and it’s a healthcare worker’s job to do the same for their patients, neither can have that kind of full control over their circumstances.

Birth and death are contrasted throughout the story, just like joy and tragedy: the sadness of Scotty’s death is bookended by moments of happiness, like his birthday, which speaks to the idea that life is a combination of both. When the doctor brings Ann and Howard into a hospital room after Scotty’s death, a doctor in a “green delivery room outfit” is also in the room. His uniform draws attention to the fact that births were occurring in the hospital while Scotty was dying—and that Scotty himself was born on the day of the accident, eight years before. The simultaneous unfolding of both birth and death in the hospital is like a microcosm of life itself. There are moments of joy, represented by births, and tragedies, like illnesses and death, happening at any given moment, and humans can only do so much to stave off or control birth and death. At the end of the story, the baker opens up to Ann and Howard about his own experience with life and death, joy and tragedy. As a baker, his job is to help people celebrate these different life events—like weddings and birthdays—with his cakes, while simultaneously grieving his own childlessness and loneliness. Just like how his “ovens [are] endlessly full and endlessly empty” as he works through the orders each day, his life as a baker reflects the idea that life is a combination of life and death, fullness and emptiness, joy and tragedy.

At the end of the story, the baker shares food with the grieving couple and tells them that “eating is a small, good thing in a time like this.” This small but significant exchange embodies the

story's core idea that life is a constant, uncontrollable ebb and flow of joy and tragedy. Both the couple and the baker are knee-deep in their own grief, but they nevertheless experience a moment of joy in connecting with one another and experiencing a small, simple pleasure.



FAMILY, ISOLATION, AND LOSS

In Raymond Carver's "A Small, Good Thing," Ann and Howard Weiss's son, Scotty, slips into a coma after being hit by a car on his birthday and dies soon after. When Ann goes to pick up what was supposed to be Scotty's **birthday cake** and tells the baker about her son's tragic death, he tells her about the loneliness of baking cakes for birthdays and weddings without having children of his own. In her grief, Ann thinks about how she and Howard are alone now, too, even though they once had a child. Through Ann, Howard, and the baker, the story suggests that while family can be a source of deep satisfaction and support—which is why not having it can be so painful—it's not a perfect balm against feelings of loneliness and grief.

At the beginning of the story, Ann is clearly happy and fulfilled by her family ties and assumes that other people must enjoy this kind of satisfying connection with family, too. When she orders a birthday cake from a baker, she is confused by his disinterest in her son's birthday, because she thinks that he "must have children who'd gone through this special time of cakes and birthday parties." She can't understand why he wouldn't feel the same interest and excitement she does when discussing a child's birthday party, because she assumes everyone must have the benefit of having a family and watching one's children grow up. The family of another boy in the hospital also provides an example of the deep sense of connection and support that family can give. While waiting for updates on their son Franklin's surgery, Franklin's family comes together for a long vigil in the waiting room. The table before them is littered with food wrappers and cigarette butts, implying that they've been there a long time. They wait with bated breath for updates about Franklin, and when Ann walks through the waiting room, they hound her for information about how their son is doing, mistaking her for a nurse. The family's deep anxiety about their son's well-being, as well as their commitment to being there for him through his surgery, speaks to the idea that family can be a powerful source of support and connection.

However, since family can be such an important source of connection, satisfaction, and belonging, the story underscores that losing a family member—or not having family to begin with, like the baker—means painfully losing access to these things. After her son's death, Ann becomes more cynical about the value of having children. She looks at Franklin's teenage sister and thinks, "don't have children [...] for God's sake, don't," as if she believes that having children—and possibly losing them one

day—will cause only suffering for the girl.

Once, family was a source of fulfillment for Ann, but now that she's lost Scotty, she thinks of family as just a different way to end up lonely. This is shown when, after Scotty's death, Ann thinks about how she and Howard are going to be alone from now on. She realizes that she is just as lonely after Scotty's death as someone who doesn't have children—like the baker—would be. When the couple gets home from the hospital without their son, she tells Howard that Scotty's "gone and now we'll have to get used to that. To being alone." This is similar to the "empty nest" many parents face when they are left alone in the house after their children grow up and move out. Howard and Ann are empty nesters now because their child is gone, but while most parents have to adjust to being empty nesters after their children have grown up, Ann and Howard lose the experience of watching this process unfold and lose their connection with their child entirely.

The story suggests that this experience of a lack of connection is similar to that of having no children in the first place. After Ann tells the baker about Scotty's death, the baker "began to speak of loneliness, and of the sense of doubt and limitation that had come to him in his middle years. He told them what it was like to be childless all these years." He describes the loneliness of baking cakes for birthdays and weddings without having children of his own to share those same experiences with. And just as the baker bakes cakes for other people's weddings and birthdays but never gets to enjoy them himself, the cake Ann ordered for Scotty also goes uneaten. Ann now experiences the same loneliness as the childless baker does, even though she once had a child of her own.

Although the story frames family as a key source of support and connection, it also shows that family is not some perfect shield against loneliness: even when the characters still have family ties, they can still feel isolated. For instance, even after Ann and Howard have lost their son, they still have part of their family left in each other. However, neither of them seems to consider this a real protection from loneliness. When Ann and Howard get home from the hospital and Ann declares they'll be alone from this point on, they aren't actually alone. They still have each other, so they have some semblance of family, but this doesn't protect them from the deep loneliness that comes from losing a child. Likewise, Ann notes that while Scotty was in the hospital, it hardly occurred to her that the accident was affecting her husband, too. She thought of it as a tragedy encompassing only her and her son, even though her husband had been at the hospital all along—and Scotty was his son, too. This disconnection underscores that having family, though often a critical source of support and connection, doesn't always mean protection from loneliness.



CONNECTION, UNDERSTANDING, AND ADVERSITY

Before the start of “A Small, Good Thing,” Ann and Howard Weiss and their son, Scotty, lived a fairly idyllic life. But on his eighth birthday, Scotty is hit by a car and eventually dies after being comatose in the hospital for days. During and after their time waiting in the hospital, Ann and Howard connect with strangers who are also experiencing hardship or uncertainty. Scotty’s death causes Ann and Howard to connect with others over their shared pain in a way they couldn’t in the past, suggesting that tragedy allows people to understand each other on a deeper level than they can during better times.

In the story, Ann and Howard don’t connect deeply with others or see other people’s pain prior to experiencing tragedy themselves. For instance, at the beginning of the story, Ann orders a **birthday cake** for Scotty from a baker, who dodges her attempts at conversation. The baker’s “abrupt” way of talking to Ann makes her uncomfortable, and she immediately brands him as unfriendly and disinterested. She can’t understand why he doesn’t make an effort to connect with her about her son’s birthday. She assumes that a man his age must have children of his own and should be able to understand how she feels about Scotty’s birthday. Later, when Ann fails to pick up the cake because she’s with Scotty in the hospital, the baker **calls** her repeatedly. After Scotty dies, Ann finally realizes that these phone calls must be from the baker. Both parties are angry—Ann and Howard because of the incessant phone calls and painful reminders of their son’s death, and the baker because the couple didn’t pick up the cake. But when Ann and Howard open up to the baker about their son’s death, the baker opens up, too. Before this conversation, Ann thought that the baker was unfriendly—but what he tells her about his own struggles gives her insight into his behavior. She’s learned that the baker likely didn’t want to chat about her son’s birthday during their first meeting because his own childlessness grieves him deeply. Now that Howard and Ann have experienced tragedy themselves, they’re able to listen to what the baker has gone through and connect with him over their shared struggles.

Dealing with her son’s accident also makes Ann more empathetic towards other people who are dealing with tragedy, like another family she meets in the hospital’s waiting room, who are also waiting to see if their son, Franklin, will survive. When Ann first comes into the waiting room, Franklin’s mother immediately asks her if she has any news about Franklin’s condition, and Franklin’s father explains that his son was stabbed during a fight at a party. Ann wants to talk more with Franklin’s family but feels unable to say anything else. She recognizes the connection in their situation: they “were in the same kind of waiting she was in. She was afraid, and they were afraid. They had that in common.” Her son hasn’t yet died at this point, so Ann hasn’t been fully transformed by her tragedy. She

still struggles to communicate her pain with the family (an issue she doesn’t have when talking to the baker after Scotty’s death). But she nevertheless feels connected to them and wants to share with them in a way she perhaps wouldn’t have before the accident. It’s possible that Ann wouldn’t have felt the same connection with this family in a normal time, because they’re Black and Ann is implied to be white—her last name, Weiss, literally means “white” in German and Yiddish. This racial difference is magnified because the story is set in an indeterminate past era, which is signaled by Ann referring to the family’s race using language that is currently considered offensive. The family’s tragedy, then, is what bridges the gap between their experiences. Both Ann and Franklin’s family are struggling with waiting to hear news about a son, and then both families must grapple with terrible loss. The story implies that without this shared experience of tragedy, these two families likely wouldn’t have the same level of connection and empathy for one another.

The story suggests that in times of tragedy, people are often more vulnerable with one another—and, by extension, more empathetic—compared to in good or neutral times. At first, Scotty’s doctor in the hospital, Dr. Francis, is vague about Scotty’s condition and continually assures Howard and Ann that Scotty will wake up. Howard and Ann don’t understand what’s happening and are increasingly frustrated by Dr. Francis’s lack of communication. The couple is left out of the doctors’ conversations, and no one at the hospital attempts to connect or empathize with them while they are in this waiting period. Only when Scotty has died does Dr. Francis fully describe his own confusion about what has happened and express his compassion for the grieving parents. Dr. Francis can freely communicate his empathy for the couple now because he is going through a version of the couple’s traumatic experience as well by losing such a young patient unexpectedly. It’s this shared experience of sudden loss that breaks down the usually stiff, formal patient-doctor dynamic and allows the doctor to see and treat the family as humans.

Throughout the story, Ann and Howard go from being unable to connect with strangers to having emotional conversations with them. The limbo state while Scotty is asleep is a transitional phase, in which Ann and Howard begin to connect with people (like the family in the waiting room) over their shared pain but are unable to fully communicate their feelings, because they haven’t yet been entirely opened up to the empathy that Scotty’s death triggers in them. At the end of the story, they manage to empathize even with the baker, because their personal tragedy has allowed them to share their sadness, and understand other people’s sadness better in turn.



COMPASSION AND COMFORT

In their deep grief, Ann and Howard search for comfort and compassion after their son, Scotty,

dies on his eighth birthday after being hit by a car while walking to school. As they grapple with this loss, Ann and Howard don't glean much comfort from the people they initially reach out to, like their families, Scotty's friendly doctor, or even each other. Instead, they find comfort from unlikely strangers and experiences—most notably, sharing hot rolls with an irritable baker in the middle of the night. With this, the story suggests that “small, good things”—like having conversation with strangers, or sharing a meal—are simple but significant sources of comfort in times of sadness and shouldn't be overlooked.

Throughout the story, the people Ann expects to get comfort from often fall short of her expectations. For instance, Ann and Howard stay with Scotty by themselves in the hospital, without anyone else in their family to support them. After they leave the hospital, Ann calls her relatives to tell them Scotty has died, but these conversations are brief. In other words, Ann doesn't turn to her family, who seem to be the most natural choice, for comfort. Ann and Howard are also unable to share their emotions with each other throughout the ordeal. They deal with the situation together, talking to doctors and determining who will feed the dog, but they never really confide in each other. Ann admits that she hadn't even thought of Howard as part of the tragedy at first—she thought only of how it was affecting herself and Scotty. Doctors, too, prove unable to give the comfort Ann and Howard crave. When they first get to the hospital, Ann and Howard turn Scotty's doctor, Dr. Francis, whom they initially judge as competent and friendly, as someone who can bring them compassion and guidance. But throughout the story, he continually makes empty promises that Scotty will be alright and that there's nothing to worry about, even as the parents become increasingly frightened.

Ann and Howard soon find that small kindnesses and conversations with strangers bring them the most comfort. For instance, Ann expected to connect most with Dr. Francis, but instead, it's the baker who made Scotty's **birthday cake**—a person whom Ann initially disliked, considering him cold, disinterested, and unfriendly—who ends up giving them the most compassion and comfort. At the end of the story, when Ann and Howard confront the baker about continually **calling** them because they failed to pick up their son's birthday cake, what started as a conflict becomes a moment of connection. When they tell the baker that their son is dead, he immediately softens and has compassion for them, and offers them food and sympathy. Though they came to the bakery to angrily confront the baker, Ann and Howard spend most of the night after Scotty's death grieving and eating with the baker. He makes a space for them in his shop, shares his own struggles with them, and gives them homemade food, doing for them what a family would often do in a time of grief.

That the parents' presuppositions of the doctor and baker are swiftly dismantled (and even inverted) in the story suggests that support and compassion can be found in unlikely places

and people. Ultimately, Ann and Howard discover throughout their ordeal that it's hard to tell which people will provide comfort and compassion from their outward appearances.



SYMBOLS

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



BIRTHDAY CAKE

A birthday cake marks a milestone in a child's life, as well as the passage of time, so Scotty's birthday cake initially symbolizes Howard and Ann's certainty that he will have a future. At the beginning of the story, Ann orders the cake for Scotty's birthday party. At this point in the story, Ann and Howard have lived a fairly privileged, happy life devoid of major tragedies. So as she orders the cake, Ann feels certain that Scotty's birthday party will take place and doesn't doubt that she will continue to live her happy life as a mother. In other words, Ann buys the cake believing that her son has endless birthdays stretching before him in his childhood.

But after Scotty is hit by a car on his birthday, Ann quickly forgets about the cake, which comes to symbolize the frivolity of the family's old, easy life, and how the things they used to care about are no longer important—or even accessible—to them. Over the course of the three days that Scotty is in the hospital, Ann doesn't think about the cake at all, and even the incessant **phone calls** she and Howard receive (from the baker, unbeknownst to the couple) don't jog her memory. Now that she's experienced such profound tragedy, Ann isn't worried about making her son's birthday special anymore; instead, she's worried about whether or not he'll live through his birthday.

Near the end of the story, Ann and Howard go to the bakery to confront the baker about the phone calls. There, they find Scotty's cake sitting out, now stale after three days on the counter. It's old and useless, and the baker offers to give it to the couple for half price. That the cake is old and unappetizing mirrors how the family's previous sweet, idyllic life is now irreversibly a thing of the past, and the things they once cared about—like space ship-themed birthday cakes—are unimportant and inaccessible to them now that Scotty has died.



PHONE CALLS

The baker's incessant, and somewhat threatening phone calls to Ann and Howard symbolize the miscommunication and lack of connection that can occur when people are wrapped up in their own worries. After Ann forgets to pick up her son Scotty's **birthday cake**, the baker calls the Weiss' home to remind them to pick it up. Howard is the first one to pick up the phone, and he tells the baker he doesn't

know anything about a cake, which the baker responds to with hostility. They are unable to communicate with each other because they are both distracted by their own personal states of mind. Howard is distressed by the accident and concerned about his son, so he is immediately worried about getting a phone call (thinking it's from the hospital and about Scotty's condition) and doesn't think about whether his wife might've ordered a cake for Scotty's birthday. By contrast, the baker is angry about the time and expense of the cake. He never clarifies what he means on the phone because he's assuming the worst of Howard—that he's failed to pick up the cake and is refusing to pay for it because he's lazy, or a bad person, rather than because of extenuating circumstances.

When Ann gets phone calls from the baker, she's similarly confused. Having already told Howard about the cake—and thus assuming he doesn't have to explain again what he's calling about—the baker becomes increasingly vague and hostile. And when he asks Ann if she's forgotten about Scotty, Ann is immediately frightened, because she assumes it must have something to do with Scotty's condition in the hospital. The phone calls, with their strangeness and their escalating misunderstandings, thus show how easy it is to misconstrue what someone is trying to say, especially when one is distracted by their own concerns.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Library of America edition of *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories* published in 2009.

A Small, Good Thing Quotes

☝ She was a mother and thirty-three years old, and it seemed to her that everyone, especially someone the baker's age—a man old enough to be her father—must have children who'd gone through this special time of cakes and birthday parties. There must be that between them, she thought. But he was abrupt with her—not rude, just abrupt. She gave up trying to make friends with him.

Related Characters: Scotty Weiss, The Baker, Ann Weiss

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 402

Explanation and Analysis

This description appears in the story's opening scene, when

Ann is ordering a birthday cake for her son Scotty, who is turning eight the following Monday. She's upset that the baker she's talking to seems disinterested in her small talk about her son's birthday.

The passage describes Ann as “a mother and thirty-three years old,” so readers can infer that she's led a conventional and (judging by how excited about Scotty's birthday she seems) happy life thus far. She doesn't seem able to conceive of or empathize with other people's unique experiences, instead assuming that anyone as old as her parents *must* have children as well. Rather than stopping to consider that the baker may have a deeper reason for reacting this way to her talking about Scotty, Ann instead assumes that he's a cold and unfriendly person. In this way, just as Ann believes that the baker is cutting off a potential connection between the two of them, she, too, “[gives] up” after allowing her presumptions about the man to color her opinion of him.

With this, the story immediately characterizes Ann as someone whose lack of struggle in life has made her unable to fully empathize with others. Having not experienced a major tragedy herself, she's unable to sense others' pain or to imagine that other people's lives are very different from her own. At the end of the story, once Ann *has* gone through a traumatic experience, she's able to connect with the baker, communicate openly with him, and understand his emotional pain in a way that she's unable to here. Her character development, then, speaks to the idea that shared adversity can bring people together.

☝ Until now, his life had gone smoothly and to his satisfaction—college, marriage, another year of college for the advanced degree in business, a junior partnership in an investment firm. Fatherhood. He was happy and, so far, lucky—he knew that. His parents were still living, his brothers and his sister were established, his friends from college had gone out to take their places in the world. So far, he had kept away from any real harm, from those forces he knew existed and that could cripple or bring down a man if the luck went bad, if things suddenly turned.

Related Characters: Howard Weiss (speaker), Scotty Weiss

Related Themes:

Page Number: 404

Explanation and Analysis

After Scotty gets hit by a car, falls into a coma, and is hospitalized, Howard drives home from the hospital to bathe and change. As he drives, he becomes uncharacteristically reckless; he's anxious about his son's condition but is trying to convince himself that everything will be fine. Howard begins to think about all of the good fortune he's had in his life so far and realizes that he's been lucky.

Howard's revelation that he's been "lucky" to avoid "those forces [...] that could cripple or bring down a man" so far foreshadows that he will soon face one of those "forces." His thought of what happen to someone if "the luck went bad" is a good description of the events that await him when he returns to the hospital, as Scotty remains comatose for days before suddenly dying. Howard's description of his previously smooth and simple life illustrates the shocking contrast of that life with the one he begins leading immediately after hearing about Scotty's accident. This massive change of fortune is something that Howard couldn't have anticipated or controlled, emphasizing how unpredictable life is and how easily circumstances can shift from joyous to tragic.

☝ "He's all right," the doctor said. "Nothing to shout about, he could be better, I think. But he's all right. Still, I wish he'd wake up. He should wake up pretty soon." The doctor looked at the boy again. "We'll know some more in a couple of hours, after the results of a few more tests are in. But he's all right, believe me, except for the hairline fracture of the skull. He does have that."

Related Characters: Dr. Francis (speaker), The Baker, Howard Weiss, Ann Weiss, Scotty Weiss

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 407

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dr. Francis comes into the hospital room to explain Scotty's condition to his parents. The previous day, Scotty was hit by a car and suffered head trauma, and he has since fallen into a deep sleep that he can't be awoken out of. In response to this situation, Ann and Howard are becoming increasingly concerned.

Dr. Francis is unable to communicate with Ann and Howard in a way that satisfies them—both parents question him about what Scotty's long period of sleep really means for his

health. As a medical professional, Dr. Francis should presumably be an authority figure whom the Weisses can count on for expertise and comfort amid their confusion—yet here, his language indicates that he's uncertain about his diagnosis of Scotty. He hedges repeatedly, saying "I wish he'd wake up" and then "he should wake up pretty soon." And, just after assuring the Weisses that Scotty is "all right, believe me," he walks back this certainty by admitting that Scotty has a "hairline fracture of the skull." So, while Dr. Francis is trying to be helpful and reassuring, he's unable to give Ann and Howard the level of certainty or comfort that they're looking for.

Dr. Francis continues to communicate in a vague way throughout the story, attempting to project certainty even though he doesn't know exactly what's wrong with Scotty. It isn't until after the tragedy of Scotty's unexpected death that Dr. Francis connects with Ann and Howard freely, comforting them as they grieve. Dr. Francis experiences the trauma of losing a young patient as well, and this shared experience of suffering allows him to be open with Ann and Howard for the first time. Like Ann's newfound ability to connect with the baker at the end of the story, the Weisses' connection with Dr. Francis after Scotty's death speaks to the idea that shared tragedy can bring people together.

☝ "...I've been praying," he said.

"That's good," she said. For the first time, she felt they were together in it, this trouble. She realized with a start that, until now, it had only been happening to her and to Scotty. She hadn't let Howard into it, though he was there and needed all along. She felt glad to be his wife.

Related Characters: Ann Weiss, Howard Weiss (speaker), Scotty Weiss

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 409

Explanation and Analysis


This quote is an exchange between Ann and Howard Weiss about praying for their son's recovery. Ann tells Howard that she's started praying for Scotty, which is the first time she's prayed in years. Then, she's surprised when Howard says that he's already prayed, because she hadn't previously considered Howard's feelings about the accident.

Ann is intensely focused on her injured child throughout this story, to the point that her husband is often left out of

her concerns. Ann previously felt as though that the accident “had only been happening to her and Scotty,” as if Howard isn’t just as upset about their son as she is. Here, though, she realizes for the first time that Howard has been “there and needed all along”—he’s the only person who understands exactly what she’s going through and understands the sort of comfort she needs. This speaks to the idea that shared pain over a tragedy can enable people to connect and comfort each other in a unique way that those who aren’t directly affected by the tragedy may not understand. Ann also feels “glad to be [Howard’s] wife” in this moment, which suggests that familial bonds (whether husband and wife or parent and child) are unique in the sense of connection, fulfillment, and belonging that they provide.

●● She stood at the window with her hands gripping the sill, and knew in her heart that they were into something now, something hard. She was afraid, and her teeth began to chatter until she tightened her jaws. She saw a big car stop in front of the hospital and someone, a woman in a long coat, get into the car. She wished she were that woman and somebody, anybody, was driving her away from here to somewhere else, a place where she would find Scotty waiting for her when she stepped out of the car, ready to say *Mom* and let her gather him in her arms.

Related Characters: Ann Weiss (speaker), Scotty Weiss

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 411

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Ann looks out the window of Scotty’s hospital room while Scotty continues to sleep. The severity of her son’s condition is beginning to sink in for Ann in a way it hasn’t before, which makes her teeth chatter with fear.

Out the window, Ann sees a woman getting into a car, and she projects all of her wishes onto that stranger. She wishes that she could be the woman getting into her car and driving away—yet, notably, she doesn’t know anything about the woman’s life or the problems she may have. Her theoretical life seems easy and enviable to Ann, but in reality, the stranger could be suffering just as badly as she is. Ann’s failure to imagine this woman fully, as a person with flaws and her own challenges, blinds her to the fact that the woman (having just left a hospital) could be dealing with the trauma of a sick or deceased loved one as well. This failure

to understand and empathize with others is the cause of many of the misunderstandings between characters in the story—and, as a result, characters like Ann miss out on the connection and comfort that they’re seeking.

●● They both stared out at the parking lot. They didn’t say anything. But they seemed to feel each other’s insides now, as though the worry had made them transparent in a perfectly natural way.

Related Characters: Howard Weiss, Ann Weiss (speaker), Dr. Francis, Scotty Weiss

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 411



Explanation and Analysis

As Ann stares out the window after Dr. Francis tells her that Scotty is in a coma, Howard comes to stand beside her. The couple has been divided for most of the story, as they’ve reacted to Scotty’s accident in different ways. Howard has tried to stay calm and practical, while Ann has openly voiced her anxieties. Ann also didn’t consider Howard’s feelings about the accident at first, so she hasn’t consoled him the way that he comforts her here.

In this case, however, the Weisses suddenly feel that they’re in perfect harmony with each other. Their shared tragedy has made them “transparent” to each other, to the point that they can “feel each other’s insides” and communicate nonverbally. Up until this point, Howard and Ann have been continually disappointed in their search for connection with and comfort from other people. Here, they finally seem to realize that they are the only ones capable of fully understanding what the other is going through, since no one else is sharing their unique experience. Howard and Ann are both Scotty’s parents, so they both know exactly how the other person feels. Howard, in particular, seems to understand his wife’s desire to be someone else as she stares out the window, rather than a helpless mother who is unable to control her son’s life or death.

She wanted to talk more with these people who were in the same kind of waiting she was in. She was afraid, and they were afraid. They had that in common. She would have liked to have said something else about the accident, told them more about Scotty, that it had happened on the day of his birthday, Monday, and that he was still unconscious. Yet she didn't know how to begin. She stood looking at them without saying anything more.

Related Characters: Ann Weiss (speaker), The Baker, Scotty Weiss, Franklin's Family, Franklin

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 414

Explanation and Analysis

This passage contains Ann's thoughts as she looks at another family in the waiting room. They, like her, are waiting for news of their son's condition. Ann feels a connection to them instantly, because they are in "the same kind of waiting" as she is. But she's unable to connect meaningfully with Franklin's family, perhaps in part because neither of their personal tragedies have fully played out yet. Both Ann's son, Scotty, and the family's son, Franklin, are still alive, so neither the family nor Ann have been completely broken down yet by loss.

Still, Ann feels more of a connection with the family in the waiting room than she perhaps ordinarily would. Just before this, the story introduced them as a "Negro family," "negro" being a term for a Black person that's now considered outdated and offensive. From this, the reader can infer that the story takes place in an indeterminate past era (likely the mid-20th century) when racial segregation and overt racial discrimination were more common. The Weisses, in contrast to Franklin's family, are implied to be white, and it's possible that this difference would normally drive a wedge between them given the historical context of the story.

Yet here, Ann can see the similarities in their situations so clearly that any divides this racial difference may have placed between them are broken down in her mind completely. This reaction is very different than the one she had to the baker earlier in the story, and the change in her has come from experiencing Scotty's accident. In this way, tragedy is shown to be an equalizer and a point of connection between people going through similar hardships.

"They said they're going to take him down and run more tests on him, Ann. They think they're going to operate, honey. Honey, they *are* going to operate. They can't figure out why he won't wake up. It's more than just shock or concussion, they know that much now. It's in his skull, the fracture, it has something, something to do with that, they think. So they're going to operate. I tried to call you, but I guess you'd already left the house."

Related Characters: Howard Weiss (speaker), Dr. Francis, Scotty Weiss, Ann Weiss

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 417



Explanation and Analysis

Howard says this quote to Ann when she returns to this hospital after going home briefly to feed the dog. The doctors told Howard that they were going to operate on Scotty, but the situation is still so confusing that he has to correct himself from saying "they think they're going to operate" to "they *are* going to operate." The doctors haven't told Howard enough for him to really explain what's happening to Ann.

This uncertainty underscores not only how little Howard and Ann know about what's happening to their son, but also how little Scotty's doctors know. Throughout the story, Dr. Francis and his colleagues have tried to assure the Weisses that Scotty is okay and that he'll wake up in no time. But as they've done so, they've been vague with their language, often contradicting their assurances with details about Scotty's injuries that suggest he *isn't* okay. As a result, Howard and Ann are left feeling confused and helpless rather than comforted. This is a testament to the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of life, as the doctors have no more influence over Scotty's outcome than his parents do, because his case is so mysterious and difficult to properly treat.

He began to weep. She pulled his head over into her lap and patted his shoulder. "He's gone," she said. She kept patting his shoulder. Over his sobs, she could hear the coffee-maker hissing in the kitchen. "There, there," she said tenderly. "Howard, he's gone. He's gone and now we'll have to get used to that. To being alone."

Related Characters: Ann Weiss (speaker), Scotty Weiss, Howard Weiss

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 420

Explanation and Analysis

After Scotty unexpectedly dies in the hospital, his parents return home, and Ann comforts Howard as he cries. Howard is hysterical, while Ann seems more shocked and resigned as she says that “[Scotty is] gone and we’ll have to get used to that.”

The tragedy of Scotty’s death has completely broken down the barriers between husband and wife. At the beginning of the story, the couple seemed disconnected and unwilling to confide in each other—Ann even overlooked the fact that Howard was just as upset about Scotty’s accident as she was, as she felt that the situation was happening only to her and Scotty. Now, Ann is able to understand Howard’s grief and attempt to sooth it. Thus, their shared tragedy actually brings them closer together as a couple, enabling them to connect in a way that they previously couldn’t.

However, Ann also tells Howard that they’ll “have to get used to [...] being alone” now that Scotty is gone. With this, Ann is essentially telling Howard that they’re “empty nesters,” similar to how parents whose adult children move out have an “empty nest.” But instead of accepting their loneliness as a result of their child naturally growing up, Howard and Ann are lonely because their child has died at a tragically young age. In this way, although family has been a great source of happiness and fulfillment for the couple up until this point, it’s now a source of immense pain. Even though the Weisses still have each other, Ann still thinks of them as “alone,” isolated and incomplete without their son to round out their family unit.

☝☝ Then he began to talk. They listened carefully. Although they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say. They nodded when the baker began to speak of loneliness, and of the sense of doubt and limitation that had come to him in his middle years. He told them what it was like to be childless all these years. To repeat the days with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty. The party food, the celebrations he’d worked over. Icing knuckle-deep. The tiny wedding couples stuck into cakes. Hundreds of them, no, thousands by now. Birthdays. Just imagine all those candles burning.

Related Characters: Dr. Francis, Scotty Weiss, Ann Weiss, Howard Weiss, The Baker

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 425

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, Howard and Ann drive to the bakery to confront the baker about his cryptic phone calls and tell him that their son has died. The baker’s sympathy for the couple leads him to share his own sadness, telling them about his dissatisfying life as an unmarried, childless man. In his career as a baker, he has observed countless other people’s life milestones (like getting married and having children) without getting to have those experiences for himself. The baker’s story of “ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty” characterizes him as a sort of observer of the ceaseless cycle of life and death, joy and tragedy, that occur outside of a person’s control. Scotty’s birth and death are put into perspective alongside hundreds or thousands of other births and deaths, signified by “all those candles burning.”

Howard and Ann manage to listen to the baker even though they’ve just lost their son and are “tired and in anguish.” Ann makes an effort to understand the baker, whereas at the beginning of the story, she made assumptions about him and judged him as unfriendly. In turn, he is genuinely sympathetic to her, where before, he was only polite. The tragedy that Ann and Howard have experienced has broken through any barriers between them and the baker—and, as such, it’s clear that Ann’s initial judgement of the baker was misguided. He’s the last person she’d expect compassion from, but he offers more understanding and comfort than Dr. Francis or Ann’s own relatives. With this, the story suggests that the titular “small, good thing”—that is, a simple gesture of kindness from a stranger—can be incredibly meaningful in times of crises.



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.

A SMALL, GOOD THING

It's Saturday afternoon, and a woman flips through pictures of cakes at the local bakery. She settles on a chocolate **birthday cake** decorated in an outer space theme, with the birthday boy's name, Scotty, written in green frosting. The baker, an older man, listens in silence as the woman rattles off these instructions and informs him that the birthday boy will be turning eight on Monday. Since the baker will be at the shop all night baking, he isn't in a hurry, so he lets the woman talk.

The woman, Ann Weiss, gives her name and **phone** number, and the baker informs her that the **birthday cake** will be ready for pickup on Monday morning, before Scotty's birthday party in the afternoon. It makes Ann uneasy that the baker isn't "jolly" and warm—he doesn't reciprocate her attempts at small talk, and even his facial features look gruff and unfriendly.

Ann is 33 years old and a mother, and she assumes that everyone has experienced this "special time of **cakes** and birthday parties" in their children's lives. She thinks that the baker, who looks old enough to be her father, must have been through this stage of life with his own kids, and that Ann and the baker have that in common. But nevertheless, the baker continues to be short with her—"not rude, just abrupt." Eventually, Ann stops trying to be friendly with him. He finishes logging the order and reminds her again that pickup is Monday morning, and she leaves.

The woman is clearly excited about her son's birthday—she takes care in choosing a special cake for her son and having his name written on it. She tells the baker that her son is turning eight because it feels like an important milestone to her, and she wants to share it. The baker, on the other hand, is treating this interaction as being only about business. He lets her talk about her son only because he has time for her at this point in his workday, not because he's interested in getting to know her and her son. Right away, this hints that the woman may not have a lot of social connection or support in her life, as she's sharing news with a complete stranger rather than a close friend or family member.



Ann dislikes being rebuffed by the baker because she feels that strangers like him should be friendly and even "jolly." She assumes that other people should have the same desire to communicate that she does, and she fails to consider what else might be going on in the baker's life. In this way, Ann and the baker are unable to connect with each other because of Ann's presumptions about how people should act. This failure, combined with the baker's gruff appearance, leads Ann to hastily (and perhaps unfairly) judge the baker as being unfriendly.



Again, Ann has a preconceived image of what adult life should look like, which includes children and a happy home life. She seems to live a relatively conventional life: she is a mother in her thirties going through the expected rite of passage of this "special time of cakes and birthday parties," and she's excited to celebrate her son's milestones. Ann can't imagine anyone not having these life experiences, so she assumes that the baker must've had them with his children as well—although, in reality, she has no reason to assume this. Nevertheless, Ann is offended by the baker's "abrupt" manner without considering why he might be acting that way.



On Monday morning, Scotty is walking to school with a friend. The boys are passing a bag of potato chips back and forth, and Scotty steps off the curb without looking. He's immediately hit by a car, and he falls with his head in the gutter and his legs in the street. The driver looks back and waits until Scotty gets up to drive away. Scotty seems to be alright but is slightly dazed by the fall.

Scotty doesn't cry, but he doesn't say much, either. Instead of going on to school, he walks home and tells his mother what happened. Ann is sitting with him on the sofa, asking him if he's alright and thinking she'll call the doctor anyway, when Scotty suddenly lies back and goes limp. When Ann can't wake Scotty up, she calls her husband, Howard, at work, who tells her to stay calm. Howard quickly calls an ambulance and leaves work for the hospital.

Scotty is in the hospital with a mild concussion and shock, so his birthday party is cancelled. Earlier, he vomited and had his lungs pumped out, and now he's in a very deep sleep—though his doctor, Dr. Francis, is adamant that it's not a coma. At 11:00 p.m., Howard decides to go home to bathe and change clothes, and he assures Ann that he'll be back in an hour. Meanwhile, Ann continues to watch Scotty and feels like she can't relax until he wakes up.

Scotty's accident is especially disturbing because it happens on Monday, which the reader knows is his eighth birthday. The innocence of two children walking to school, discussing what Scotty's friend is giving him for his birthday, is contrasted with the senselessness and cruelty of the hit-and-run. This speaks to the idea that life is unpredictable, peppered with both joyous events (like Scotty's birthday) and tragedy (like the accident). Although Scotty is able to get up and didn't sustain any superficial injuries, he may have suffered a concussion (or more serious brain damage) when his head hit the gutter.



When Scotty gets home, he seems fine to Ann at first, which makes his sudden lapse into unconsciousness even more surprising than it would otherwise be. This further points to life's unpredictability, as tragedy can strike in an instant. That Ann calls her husband instead of immediately calling an ambulance shows that she's in a state of shock and confusion, as she's not yet treating this as an emergency.



Notably, the detail that Scotty's birthday party has been cancelled is mentioned before Scotty's condition. This suggests that (at this stage) his parents and doctor consider the accident a minor disruption in an otherwise happy time for Scotty and his family, rather than a tragedy worthy of more attention. But while Howard is still able to focus on practical concerns like bathing and changing his clothes, Ann is entirely focused on Scotty—perhaps to the point that she's unconcerned with how Howard is feeling. Readers know from Ann's previous conversation with the baker that motherhood is extremely important to her, so much so that she couldn't understand why a stranger wouldn't be interested in hearing about her son's birthday. Thus, even though it's unclear how serious Scotty's condition is at this point, Ann's worry speaks to the idea that family is a crucial source of fulfillment and comfort in her life—one that would be traumatizing to lose.



Howard drives recklessly on the way home, but he forces himself to slow down. He thinks about how easy his life has been so far. His parents are still alive, and his siblings are doing well. He has a family, an advanced business degree, and a junior partnership in an investment firm. He is content, and he knows he's "lucky." He's avoided the kinds of tragedies that could "cripple or bring down a man." Howard pulls into the driveway and his leg begins to tremble. Trying to be logical, he tells himself that Scotty will be alright.

Howard's thoughts on the drive home foreshadow a tragedy awaiting him. He thinks about how "lucky" he has been not to have experienced any real suffering in his life. Although he's never experienced the kind of suffering that he thinks of, he dreads even the idea of hardships that can "cripple or bring down a man." Howard is aware of how painful suffering can be, and how it could utterly change his life, which has so far been mainly a joyful experience. He reminds himself that Scotty will be fine, but his uncharacteristically reckless driving and trembling show that he's afraid.



The **telephone** is ringing as Howard unlocks the door to the house. He thinks the call must be about Scotty's condition, and he regrets leaving the hospital. But the call isn't from the hospital—the voice on the other end says there's a \$16 **cake** that hasn't been picked up. Frazzled and confused, Howard says that he doesn't know anything about a cake, but the voice snaps, "Don't hand me that," and hangs up.

The phone call Howard receives about the cake is disorienting for him because it's about something so mundane. After his son is hit by a car, Scotty's birthday cake is the furthest thing from Howard's mind; it doesn't occur to him why someone might be calling about cake, even though he was likely thinking about Scotty's birthday party earlier in the day. Howard's stress in this moment creates a gap in understanding between him and the caller (presumably the baker Ann spoke to earlier in the story), as neither of them are able to connect or empathize with what the other is saying.



Howard then pours a glass of whiskey and calls the hospital, but Scotty's condition hasn't changed. After shaving, Howard sinks into the bathtub, but the **phone** rings again. Waddling through the house in a towel, Howard berates himself for leaving the hospital, again assuming that the call is about Scotty. But when he answers the phone, the caller immediately hangs up.

Howard is very concerned about his son's condition, calling the hospital to check on Scotty even though it's unlikely that anything changed in the short time since Howard left his bedside. The continual tension and miscommunication between Howard and the person who keeps calling the house speaks to how alienated and disconnected Howard likely feels in this moment. Rather than family or friends calling him to ask about Scotty, the only person contacting him is a stranger who has no idea about what's going on. The calls also represent a huge gap between what the Weiss family's concerns were this morning (the cake that the caller is asking about) and what they are now: namely, whether their son will survive. This again shows how unpredictable life can be, as the entire tone of the Weiss's day (and, perhaps, the rest of their lives) has rapidly changed.



When Howard gets back to the hospital after midnight, Ann is still sitting by Scotty's bedside. There's a bottle of glucose running into Scotty's arm through a tube, and Ann explains that the doctor said Scotty needed nourishment. Ann doesn't understand why Scotty won't wake up, but Howard assures her that their son will be okay, and that Dr. Francis knows what he's doing.

Howard arrives back at the hospital to find his son looking sicker than before. The glucose bottle running to Scotty's arm is a sign that something is very wrong, as he's unable to eat or drink on his own. Nevertheless, Howard reassures his wife that Scotty will be alright, because they're both eager to believe Dr. Francis' assertion that Scotty will be fine. This situation has completely disrupted the couple's formerly happy, easygoing life, and they want to cling onto whatever semblance of normalcy they can.



Howard encourages Ann to go home and rest, but he warns her about "this creep" who keeps **calling** the house. Ann asks who it is, but Howard doesn't know—it's probably someone with nothing else to do. Ann refuses to go home, but Howard continues to say that she should, reminding her that Dr. Francis has everything under control.

Despite her husband's efforts, Ann isn't as able to believe that Scotty will be fine. She's more outwardly concerned than Howard is, and seems less trusting of Dr. Francis. Meanwhile, Howard tells her that the person calling the house is a "creep," which makes Ann suspicious of the caller before she's even heard his voice. She doesn't realize that the caller is likely the same baker she spoke to the other day, which adds another layer to the miscommunication Howard has already had with the caller.



A nurse comes in and checks on Scotty. She says that he's stable, and that the doctor will be in to see him soon. Howard tells the nurse that he's been encouraging Ann to go home and rest after Dr. Francis makes his rounds, and the nurse says that they should feel free to do so. Ann explains that she's anxious to speak with the doctor, because she doesn't think that Scotty should be sleeping like this. As the nurse leaves the room, Howard massages Ann's neck to comfort her. But as he watches Scotty breathe, he begins to feel really afraid for the first time since he got the call from Ann about the accident. He sternly tells himself that Scotty is going to be fine.

Here, both Howard and Ann are struggling to accept that they can't change what's going on—just as they couldn't predict or prevent Scotty's accident, nothing they can say or do will make Scotty wake up. The couple has different ways of coping with this lack of control: while Howard tries to stay positive and reassure his wife, Ann openly expresses her worries. Clearly, though, both parents are distraught at the idea that something is seriously wrong with their son. Whereas their bond with him was once something comforting and fulfilling in their lives, now it's a source of pain.



Dr. Francis comes in and greets Ann and Howard. He checks Scotty and writes on the chart. Howard asks what's the matter with Scotty, and Ann asks why he won't wake up. The doctor is handsome and wearing a suit. He says that Scotty will be fine, but he could be better—he wishes Scotty would wake up and then says that Scotty "should wake up pretty soon." Scotty is fine, except for a hairline fracture on his skull and a mild concussion. This kind of sleeping sometimes happens in shock cases.

The description of Dr. Francis's suit and handsome looks characterize him as professional and even charming. His appearance would suggest that he's a trustworthy authority figure in the hospital, someone whom the Weisses can believe in and rely on for comfort during this traumatic time. His reassurances, however, are gradually becoming less clear. His sentences contradict one another: Scotty is fine and "should wake up pretty soon," but he also has a concussion and fractured skull. As a result, Dr. Francis's medical advice is more confusing and stressful than it is reassuring. Ann and Howard want certainty about their son's condition one way or the other, but Dr. Francis is unable to give this to them.



Howard asks if this is a coma, but Dr. Francis says that he wouldn't call it that—it's more of a restorative sleep. When Ann suggests that "It's a coma [...] Of sorts," the doctor explains that a coma is prolonged over days or weeks, and Scotty isn't in that condition, or at least not yet. He says he's "certain" and "betting" that Scotty will wake up soon, and Ann shouldn't worry. She and Howard should both feel free to leave the hospital if they need to.

Dr. Francis continues his attempts to reassure Ann and Howard, but his words become more confused. He says he's "certain" Scotty will wake up soon, but he immediately walks this back by saying that he's "betting" Scotty will wake. He's also reluctant to diagnose Scotty's condition as a coma, yet he doesn't give the Weisses any alternative explanation for why their son has been asleep for so long. As a doctor, Dr. Francis can't have full certainty about or control over anything that happens to his patients, any more than Scotty or his parents had control over the accident. However, Dr. Francis fails to fully empathize with Ann and Howard about their fears or to comfort them, perhaps because he's trying to conceal his own uncertainty about Scotty's condition.



Ann feels Scotty's forehead and is concerned that he's so cold. Howard says that Scotty is just in shock, and Dr. Francis would've said something if he wasn't okay. Howard holds Ann's hand for a while. Ann tells him she's been praying for Scotty, and that she hadn't prayed in so long she'd nearly forgotten how. She suggests that Howard should pray, too, but he says that he already has. Ann feels for the first time that she and her husband are in this together—up until now, she felt like this situation was only affecting her and Scotty.

Ann's concern over how cool Scotty's forehead is foreshadows a greater problem with his health—it's almost as if the warmth and vitality of life has been drained out of him. This is a stark contrast to the way Scotty was before the accident: a healthy little boy walking to school and sharing a bag of potato chips with his friend. The rapid change in Scotty's condition speaks to life's unpredictable and chaotic nature. Meanwhile, Ann admits to herself that she hadn't even considered Howard's feelings before this moment, which perhaps hints at a gap in communication and understanding in the couple's relationship. Rather than turning to each other for comfort, they've both felt isolated in their trauma and fear.



A radiologist comes in to take Scotty for another scan. Ann protests—she thought they'd done all the X-rays they needed to. But the radiologist says that they need to do more, and they also need to do a brain scan. Ann is worried, but the radiologist assures her that "it's perfectly normal procedure in cases like this." Ann and Howard accompany the orderlies, who've put Scotty on a gurney, to the scan. When it's over, Ann and Howard take the elevator back up and return to Scotty's bedside.

Here, the radiologist's call for more in-depth tests contradicts with Dr. Francis's continued assurances that Scotty is fine. Though the radiologist tells Ann that a brain scan is a "perfectly normal procedure in cases like this," he doesn't specify what "cases like this" means. In reality, Scotty's case seems to be mystifying the doctors as well as his parents, and the radiologist's words don't comfort Ann and Howard any more than Dr. Francis's have.



Ann and Howard wait all day, and Scotty still doesn't wake up. When Dr. Francis does his rounds, he affirms again that Scotty will wake up at any time. A woman from the lab comes to take some of Scotty's blood. Ann doesn't understand why they're doing tests, but the woman says that she just does what she's told. She asks what happened to Scotty, and Howard explains that he was hit by a car. When the woman is gone, Ann says, "I want some answers from these people." Howard says nothing and closes his eyes to take a nap.

Ann and Howard's interaction with the woman who comes to take Scotty's blood is another example of their failure to connect with the hospital staff. Ann is becoming increasingly frustrated that no one they talk to has any answers for them about Scotty's condition—either because they don't know, or because, like Dr. Francis, they're trying to draw conclusions about a situation that they don't completely understand. Either way, the lack of clarity makes Ann and Howard feel powerless, confused, and isolated.



Meanwhile, Ann goes to the window and looks out at the parking lot. She sees a woman getting into a car and wishes she was that woman—that she could drive away and find Scotty waiting for her someplace else. Later, Howard wakes and joins Ann at the window. They understand each other without saying anything, because “the worry [has] made them transparent.”

Ann's wish to be the woman getting into the car in the parking lot shows her desire to escape her situation—but it's also another failure to empathize with other people's lives. Given that this woman was also at the hospital, it's possible that she's struggling with something just as traumatic as Scotty's accident. Meanwhile, Howard and Ann are able to nonverbally connect and understand each other for the first time in the story. Their shared worry over Scotty has caused them to become “transparent” with each other—and in this way, tragedy has actually brought them closer together.



When Dr. Francis returns—this time wearing a different suit—he says that Scotty should've woken by now, and he doesn't know why he's still unconscious. He says that all of Scotty's vital signs are fine, so he still thinks that Scotty will wake up soon. This time, when Ann says that it's a coma, the doctor says that they'll call it that until Scotty wakes up. When Dr. Francis offers to have a nurse stationed in the room so that Howard and Ann can go get something to eat, Ann replies that she can't eat anything. As the doctor leaves, he says that Scotty will be “over the hill” once he wakes up.

This time, when Dr. Francis returns, he seems much less authoritative than before. He's still wearing a suit, but this is no longer enough to project a façade of competence and trustworthiness. He can't tell Ann and Howard that their son is going to be alright as confidently as he once did, yet he still doesn't give the Weisses any straight answers about Scotty's condition. In fact, Ann is the one to declare that her son is in a coma—Dr. Francis merely agrees to call it that, rather than giving his own formal diagnosis. He can't offer comfort or clarity to Ann and Howard, so he tries to offer them practical help instead, assigning a nurse to Scotty's room so that they can get something to eat. In addition, his word choice of “over the hill” is a bit unsettling in this context: although he likely means that Scotty will already have overcome the worst of his injuries when he wakes up from coma, the term “over the hill” is often used to describe someone who is elderly and past their prime. In this way, Dr. Francis's words subtly (and perhaps unintentionally) hint that Scotty is no longer the same little boy he used to be, and that he'll never be the same.



Howard suggests that one of them should go to the house and feed the dog. Ann says that they can call the neighbors and tell them to feed the dog, but Howard insists that she should go. Finally, she agrees, hoping that Scotty will finally wake up if she stops watching him. Ann understands that Howard wants to be alone for a while and not have to talk about his worries.

Ann doesn't want to leave Scotty to go home and feed the dog, but she finally agrees because she knows that Howard needs to be alone. This is another sign that her connection with Howard has been strengthened since the beginning of this ordeal: she's gone from not considering how this situation affects Howard at all, to understanding him better and realizing when he needs space.



After some more hesitation, Ann finally leaves Scotty's hospital room, but she gets lost while looking for the elevator. She ends up in a small waiting room, where a "Negro family"—a woman, a man, and a teenaged girl—is sitting. The mother quickly gets up when she sees Ann and asks if there's news about Franklin. Ann explains that she was just looking for the elevator, and the man gives her directions. Feeling compelled to explain herself, Ann tells the man that her son was hit by a car. He has a "little skull fracture" and there "might be some kind of coma," Ann explains, but he'll be fine.

When Ann sees the family in the waiting room, they immediately press her for answers about Franklin's condition, which mirrors Ann's desperation for answers about Scotty's health. She feels bad that she's interrupted them and shares her own struggle with the family, as if trying to comfort them by letting them know that they aren't alone. She downplays her concerns about Scotty, saying that there "might be some kind of coma," despite her concerns in the hospital room earlier, showing her need to believe Dr. Francis' reassurances. It could even be the case that she's minimizing Scotty's injuries to make the family feel better about Franklin, as though her own feigned calmness will make them feel calm as well. Notably, the language that the story uses to describe Franklin's family (a "Negro family") indicates that this story is set in a past era, as "negro" is now considered an outdated and offensive term for a Black person. Ann and Howard, meanwhile, are implied to be white (their surname, Weiss, means "white" in German). Thus, given the implied historical context of the story, the divide between Ann and this family is magnified by racial differences.



The man tells Ann that his son, Franklin, is in surgery after being stabbed during a fight that he was watching at a party, and now the family is hoping and praying. Ann wants to talk more to these people, who are "in the same kind of waiting she was in," but she doesn't know how to begin. She leaves.

Ann recognizes that she and Franklin's family are "in the same kind of waiting"—that is, they're both stuck in a kind of limbo where they're fearing for their sons' lives and unsure of what the future holds. Her desire to connect with these strangers in the hospital is much more intense than her need for small talk with the baker was—her desire to talk with them is informed by her understanding of their mutual struggles, rather than by politeness.



When Ann gets home, she feeds the dog and makes tea. The **phone** rings, and she asks if it's about Scotty. The caller says it "has to do with Scotty" and asks Ann if she's forgotten, then hangs up. Ann calls the hospital and demands to know how her son is, and then she asks to speak to Howard. She tells Howard that someone called and said it was about Scotty, but Howard says there's been no change in Scotty's condition.

Here, Ann performs everyday tasks like feeding the dog and making tea—yet going about her routine doesn't seem to give her any sense of stability or normalcy. She is immediately on-edge and incredulous when the caller mentions her son, assuming that there's been a development in Scotty's condition. Readers can infer that this caller is the same one who Howard spoke to earlier, meaning that this is the baker calling to remind the Weisses about Scotty's birthday cake. But the immense stress that Ann is under creates a gap in communication between her and the baker, as she's lost the ability to process information that isn't related to Scotty's accident. In this way, the accident forced Ann to completely disconnect from her old life in a matter of days, again reflecting the lack of control that people have over their circumstances.



Howard then advises Ann to ignore the **call** and come back to the hospital when she's rested. Then, they can speak with the doctor, who's coming at eight that morning. Ann says that there was a noise in the background on the phone call she got, but Howard can't remember if there was a sound in the background of his call. He says that the caller must be a psychopath who found out about Scotty somehow. He advises Ann to take a bath and come back.

The miscommunication between the caller and the couple has escalated to the point that Howard now thinks the caller must be a psychopath—the Weisses have progressed from being frustrated with the caller to being furious and even afraid. Ann is even trying to figure out details about the caller by deciphering noises in the background of the call. Rather than communicating openly with each other, the two parties misunderstand each other (the Weisses are too distracted to remember the birthday cake, and the baker has no idea that Scotty was in an accident). As a result, they're unable to connect or empathize with one another.



When Ann drives back to the hospital later that morning, she thinks about Franklin's family. She pictures the teenaged girl and thinks of telling her not to have children. But when Ann gets to the hospital, the family is gone—the only traces of them are the fast-food wrappers and cigarette butts they left behind. Ann asks the nurse about Franklin, and the nurse says tells her that he died. The nurse asks if Ann is a friend of the family, and Ann says no, she'd just met them and wondered, because her own son is in the hospital.

When Ann learns that Franklin has died, it foreshadows a tragedy to come for her. It's unsettling for her to see that the family, whose pain reminded her of her own struggles, has left the hospital with bad news. Furthermore, Ann's thought about telling Franklin's teenaged sister not to have children shows how disillusioned and cynical she's become over the course of the story. Mere days ago, she seemed to assume that everyone has a family whom they value, the same way she values hers. But now, she is frightened by the idea of a young woman having kids, because she is beginning to associate family with loss rather than togetherness and fulfillment.



In the hospital room, Howard is standing at the window and turns when Ann comes in. Ann asks how Scotty is, and Howard says that Dr. Francis came by early in the morning with a neurologist. When Ann demands to know what they said, Howard explains that they think they're going to operate, but he then corrects himself, affirming that "they *are* going to operate." They can't figure out what's wrong with Scotty, but it's something to do with his skull fracture. Howard tried to call Ann earlier about it, but she'd already left the house. "Oh God," Ann says.

Howard's uncertain words about whether the doctors will operate (he switches from saying that the doctors think they're going to operate to saying "they are going to operate") reflect Dr. Francis's lack of clarity in explaining Scotty's case to the Weisses. Even now that they've decided to operate, the doctors aren't sure what's wrong with Scotty, so Ann and Howard have no more certainty than they did before. They are left in confusion and are totally out of control of the situation—a state that would've been unthinkable to them in the easy life that they lived before Monday morning.



Suddenly, Howard notices that Scotty has opened his eyes, then closed them. When Scotty opens them again, he stares straight ahead for a moment, then looks at his parents, then away again. Ann and Howard move to the bed and speak to Scotty, squeezing his hand and kissing his forehead. Scotty stares blankly back at them without recognition. Then, his eyes scrunch closed, and he howls until he's completely out of breath. His face relaxes, and he dies.

The moment of Scotty's death is sudden and shocking, just as the rest of the events of the story have been for Ann and Howard. Although they've been in limbo in the hospital for quite some time now, Dr. Francis and the rest of the hospital staff have failed to inform them of the seriousness of Scotty's condition—indeed, they may not have known themselves. And now, as a result, the Weisses are likely blindsided by Scotty's unexpected death. There's no way for them to control the situation or even understand what's happening until their son has taken his last breath.



The doctors say that Scotty suffered from a hidden occlusion, and that it's a rare circumstance. Maybe they could've saved him if they'd operated immediately, but probably not, since all of Scotty's tests looked normal and the doctors wouldn't have known what to look for. Dr. Francis, shaken, tells Ann and Howard how sorry he is. He takes them into a doctor's lounge, where another doctor is sitting in delivery room scrubs, but the doctor leaves when he sees them enter. Dr. Francis embraces Ann while Howard weeps in the bathroom with the door open. When Howard stops crying, he makes some calls. Dr. Francis asks if there's anything else he can do, and Howard shakes his head.

Dr. Francis walks Ann and Howard out of the hospital. Ann says that she doesn't want to leave Scotty there—it feels wrong. Hearing how this statement sounds, she thinks it's unfair that it seems like something a character on television show would say after a death. She wants to use her own words. "For some reason," Ann thinks of Franklin's mother's head falling onto her shoulder. Dr. Francis says that there are still some questions to clear up, and Howard asks if they're doing an autopsy. Dr. Francis nods. Howard says he understands, but then says, "Oh, Jesus. No, I don't understand, doctor." Dr. Francis says that he's very sorry. He holds Ann, and she thinks that he's full of goodness.

When the couple gets home, Howard begins to put some of Scotty's things in a box, but he breaks down and cries. Ann puts his head in her lap and says, "He's gone and now we'll have to get used to that. To being alone." Later, Ann calls her family. During each call she speaks quickly, then cries for a minute, then explains what happened and the arrangements. Howard goes out to the garage with the box of Scotty's things and sees Scotty's bicycle. He kneels beside it in grief.

Only after Scotty's death is Dr. Francis able to really connect with Ann and Howard and sympathize with them. After being uncommunicative and overly optimistic with the couple during Scotty's coma, Dr. Francis finally apologizes and is able to provide a small amount of comfort for the couple. Indeed, Dr. Francis is visibly shaken by what's just happened, suggesting that losing a young patient was traumatic for him as well. When Dr. Francis takes the couple into the lounge, the other doctor wearing delivery room scrubs is a reminder that births are occurring in the hospital at the same time as Scotty's death. This underscores the fact that Scotty was killed on his birthday, and it's also a reminder of the cycle of life—and the delicate balance of joy and tragedy—that Scotty's birth and death were a part of.



Ann's reaction to leaving the hospital without Scotty is one of total shock and horror. But in this moment, rather than thinking of herself, she thinks of Franklin's mother's head falling to her shoulder. Despite the fact that Franklin's mother is a total stranger, Ann feels connected to her now that she, too, has experienced the tragedy of losing a child. In this way, even vaguely knowing of someone else who's gone through the same hardship is comforting for Ann, as it makes her feel less alone. Howard is initially more composed, but he breaks down when Dr. Francis brings up an autopsy. Howard's horror at the idea of this causes him to say that he doesn't understand what's happening—it's difficult for him to even process this kind of tragedy, as losing his young son probably seemed impossible to him before the accident.



Ann tells Howard that they'll have to get used to "being alone" now that Scotty has died—they must now adjust their identities and lifestyles to reflect the fact that they went from being parents to being childless in a matter of days. Meanwhile, Ann's conversations with her family members are short, and they don't seem to afford her the kind of comfort she's looking for amid her grief—nor does it solve her problem of "being alone." In the meantime, seeing Scotty's possessions seems to make his death feel more real for Howard, as though being reminded of the very different life they led only days earlier makes the tragedy of losing Scotty all the more poignant.



The **phone** rings, and Ann answers. The voice says, “Your Scotty, I got him ready for you,” and then asks Ann if she’s forgotten. She calls him an “evil bastard.” After midnight, the phone rings again. Howard answers it, but the caller hangs up. Ann says she’d like to shoot the caller, to which Howard says, “Ann, my God.” Ann asks again if there was noise in the background, and Howard says that there was a radio playing. Ann suddenly realizes that it was the baker calling about the **cake** this whole time. She asks Howard to drive her to the bakery so that she can confront the baker.

Ann’s rage at the baker is a way for her to express her rage at the situation in general—prior to the accident, when life was going smoothly, she would have never forgotten to pick up her son’s birthday cake. She forgot because her son was dying, and the shock of the accident removed everything else from her mind. Now that she realizes who the caller is, she wants to confront him for making their past days even more stressful with his cryptic messages. She hasn’t been able to control anything about Scotty’s death, but she feels as though she can do something about the baker’s hostility.



When Ann and Howard get to the shopping center, it’s dark, but the lights are still on in the back room of the bakery. They knock on the front door, but the baker doesn’t seem to hear. Then, they drive around the back and knock on the back door, and the baker lets them in. He says that they’re closed for business and asks what the couple wants. Given that it’s midnight, he asks if they’re drunk, but then he recognizes Ann. She reminds him that she’s Scotty’s mother.

When Ann and Howard arrive at the bakery, they have trouble getting in because it’s the middle of the night and the doors are locked, obstacles that underscore how out-of-the-ordinary Ann’s behavior is. When Ann introduces herself as Scotty’s mother, she’s making a statement about still being a mother even after her son’s death, as she seemingly wants to hold onto the sense of meaning and identity that being a parent gave her. But this isn’t a statement that the baker can understand, as the miscommunication and subsequent gap in understanding between the couple and the baker prevents him from empathizing with what they’re going through.



The baker asks Ann if she wants the **cake** now, since it’s been sitting here for three days. Ann is very angry, and her anger makes her feel bigger than the men in the room with her. The baker says that he doesn’t want to argue, and he’ll give the cake to her at half price. He busy, and he spent time and money on that cake. The baker works 16 hours a day, and at night. Ann points out that he makes **phone calls** at night too, and she calls him a “bastard.” The baker looks at Howard and says, “careful, careful.”

Initially, the encounter between Ann and the baker is hostile. The baker is angry because he assumes that Ann’s failure to pick up the cake was due to sheer carelessness, and making the cake cost him time and money. At the same time, Ann is angry because the phone calls the baker made to her and Howard brought them even more stress and uncertainty in a moment of crisis. Their hostility toward each other results from them being unable to connect, because both the couple and the baker have made assumptions and misunderstood each other’s perspectives.



Ann tells the baker that her son is dead, and that they’ve been at his bedside this whole time. She’s angry, and she says spitefully that the baker couldn’t have known that her son was dying. Suddenly, her anger goes away, and she begins to cry, saying that it isn’t fair. Howard looks at the baker and says, “Shame on you.”

Ann and Howard seem to view the baker as a hostile outsider, so they don’t feel guilty taking their anger out on him. The couple’s vulnerability in the face of their tragedy may allow the baker to understand and empathize with them better, as the circumstance behind Ann’s failure to pick up the cake is a piece of information that he didn’t have before.



The baker comes out from behind the counter and gets chairs for Ann and Howard, inviting them to sit down. Ann tells the baker that she wanted to kill him when he was calling. Joining the couple at the table, the baker apologizes. He explains that he's just a baker, and maybe once he was a different kind of person, but he's forgotten how to be that person. He has no children of his own, so he can't imagine what Ann and Howard are going through. He asks them to forgive him. He tells the couple that he's not a bad person, but he no longer knows how to act.

The baker then gets up to make coffee for Ann and Howard, and he gives them hot buttered cinnamon rolls. He says they have to eat and go on, explaining that "eating is a small, good thing in a time like this." Ann is suddenly hungry, and she eats three rolls. Sitting with the couple, the baker tells them about his loneliness, doubts, and limitations. Ann and Howard are tired, but they listen. He tells them about the endless weddings and birthdays he's baked for, and how he appreciates being able to feed people. The baker then gives the couple a loaf of delicious dark bread, and they eat what they can. Ann and Howard stay at the bakery until the morning, talking and eating with the baker.

Now that Ann and Howard have explained their tragedy, the baker is able to connect with them over his own struggles. His decision to share his personal challenges with them, instead of just listening to theirs, helps Ann and Howard understand why the baker was calling them the way he did—he wasn't a psychopath, but a lonely, angry man. The baker, like the Weisses, is childless, so he can understand their newfound loneliness perhaps better than anyone else in their lives can. In this way, even though the baker is a relative stranger to Ann and Howard, his small gesture of kindness in relating to them goes a long way.



The baker tells Ann and Howard about the difficulty of growing older without children and constantly baking for other people's birthday parties and weddings without experiencing these milestones himself. He's watched the cycle of life for many other people through his career as a baker, yet he's never been able to experience marriage or parenthood for himself. Given Ann's initial negative judgement of him, the baker is an unlikely figure to comfort Ann and Howard, but he gives them the greatest compassion they've received in the story by feeding them and talking with them through the night. The baker suggestion that "a small, good thing"—whether a comforting sentiment from a stranger or a warm meal—can become exceptionally meaningful during a trying time seems to prove true for the Weisses. And even though Ann and Howard's tragedy has plunged them into despair and loneliness, the story ends on an optimistic note. The couple's connection with the baker suggests that tragedy doesn't have to tear people apart—it can just as easily bring them together.





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