

# The Leap Study Guide



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# Summary

## Summary

The narrator begins by describing her mother, one half of a former blindfolded trapeze act called the Flying Avalons. Though her mother, Anna, is now blind and never even talks about her days working for the circus with her first husband, Harold Avalon, she retains much of the grace she must have possessed then. The narrator says that she owes her mother her existence three times over. First, during Anna's act one day long ago, a huge thunderstorm formed, and lightning struck the main tent pole at the circus. The trapeze Harry (her husband) was swinging on fell down, and he plummeted into the crowd and died, along with two others. Anna might have been able to grasp his ankle, potentially following him down, but she made a split-second decision to save herself and her unborn child (she was seven months pregnant). Despite her efforts, however, the child was stillborn a month or two later.

The second time is when Anna fell in love with the doctor who set her arm in the hospital after the accident. This doctor taught her to read and write, even buying her first book. Though the pair of them could have moved anywhere, Anna wanted to remain there because her child had died and was buried there, so they moved into his family's farmhouse and stayed.

The third time occurred when the narrator was seven years old. Their house caught fire, and the one set of steps up to the narrator's room was in flames. The narrator did as she'd been taught, rolling up a rug to place under her door, and waited for rescue. But it was clear to Anna that no rescue would be possible. So she stripped off her dress, climbed a tree, shimmied out onto a too-small limb, leaped the distance from its tip to her daughter's window, and saved the little girl herself.

## Summary

The narrator's mother, the surviving half of a blindfold trapeze act, has lost her sight to cataracts. She navigates her home so gracefully, never upsetting anything or losing her balance, that the narrator realizes that the catlike precision of her movements may be the product of her early training. The narrator rarely thinks about her mother's career in the Flying Avalons, however, because her mother preserves no keepsakes from that period of her life.

The narrator owes her mother her own existence three times. The first occurred well before she was born, when her mother, then Anna of the Flying Avalons, was performing with her first husband, Harold Avalon, in the same New Hampshire town in which she still lives. The narrator got the story from old newspapers. In contrast to the West, where the narrator has lived, New Hampshire weather can change dramatically without warning. On that pleasant June day, the local people came to the circus and enjoyed the various acts while awaiting the Flying Avalons, who gracefully dropped from nowhere, like sparkling birds. Unbeknownst to the audience that day, Anna was seven months pregnant.

The finale of the Avalons' blindfold trapeze act always had them kiss in midair. On that fateful day, however, a powerful electrical storm arose at the very moment that they began their finale. While they were in midair, their hands about to meet, lightning struck the main tent pole and sizzled down its guy wires. As the tent buckled, Harry fell, empty-handed. Realizing that something was wrong, Anna tore off her blindfold. She had time to seize her husband's ankle and fall with him, but she instead grabbed a guy wire, superheated by the lightning.

Anna burned her palms so badly on the wire that there were no lines on them after they healed; she was not otherwise injured until a rescuer broke her arm while pulling her from the wreckage. She was then confined to the town hospital for a month and a half, until her baby, a daughter, was born dead. Although her husband was, at his own request, buried at the place from which the family came, Anna had her child buried in the New Hampshire town. When the narrator herself was a child, she often visited the grave of her stillborn sister, whom she considered not so much a separate person, but a less-finished version of herself.

The second debt that the narrator owes to her mother goes back to her mother's hospital time, when she met her second husband—a doctor, who became the narrator's father. While he taught Anna how to read, they fell in love. In learning to read, Anna exchanged one form of flight for another; since then, she has never been without a book. After her husband's recent death, no one remains to read to the blind woman, which is why the narrator—whose own life has failed—has returned home to her.

After marrying, the narrator's parents settled on a local farm that her father had inherited. It was her mother who insisted on living there.

The narrator owes her existence to her mother, a third time, because of an event that occurred when she was seven. The farmhouse caught fire—probably from standing ashes—while she was home under a babysitter's care. The sitter telephoned the alarm, but the narrator was already trapped by flames in her upstairs bedroom. When her parents arrived, volunteer firefighters were surrounding the house, but because an extension ladder was broken, there appeared to be no hope of reaching the narrator's bedroom. A tall elm tree near the house had a branch that brushed its roof, but it appeared too slender to support even a squirrel. Nevertheless, the narrator's mother stripped off her outer clothes and used the broken extension ladder to climb the tree, into whose branches she vanished. She reappeared, inching her way along a bough above the branch touching the roof. After standing on the branch momentarily, she leapt toward the edge of the roof, breaking off the branch with a loud crack.

On hearing a thump, the narrator looked out her window and saw her mother hanging from the rain gutter by her heels, calmly smiling. After entering the room, her mother clutched her daughter tightly against her stomach and jumped to the safety net below.

# Themes

## Themes

### **Even in Old Age, We Retain Qualities from Youth**

Despite the fact that Anna never discusses the time she spent as part of a blindfolded trapeze act in her youth, the native grace she possessed then remains part of her even in her old age. Anna has gone blind, and yet, her daughter (the narrator) says, she never loses her balance, knocks anything over, or even bumps into anything as she moves around in total darkness. She has not lost her poise, even though she is quite advanced in years and has lost the sense of sight.

### **Overcoming Personal Tragedy to Live a Happy, Fulfilling Life**

Though Anna lost her husband and her unborn child as a result of the terrible accident at the circus, she still grew to love another, even after her personal tragedy. She accepted the tutelage of the doctor in the hospital so that she could learn how to read and write, and then she fell in love with him. They married and moved into his family's farmhouse, building a life together and even having a daughter of their own: the narrator herself.

### **A Mother's Love for Her Child Transcends All Danger**

As part of the Flying Avalons, Anna tries to save herself and her unborn child even after she realizes that her husband will die as a result of his fall. Later, she puts herself in grave danger to save her daughter from the fire that rages within their home and blocks all passage to the girl. Anna ignores the fact that people are watching, strips off her dress (so that it will not hinder her movements or catch fire, one imagines), shimmies out onto a too-small branch that snaps when she leaps from it, and saves her daughter. Anna appears to give no thought to her own personal safety and cares only for her daughter's.

## **Themes: Themes and Meanings**

The clearest theme in "The Leap" is presented by the title itself, that of bridging gaps, making connections between things. Physical, temporal, and emotional connections provide a thread that runs through the story. The most obvious are the two physical leaps made by Anna, as a trapeze artist, to save herself and her children from fire. In each leap she bridged a physical gap, but she also made an emotional leap. When lightning struck and her first husband fell, she clearly chose where her loyalties lay. Instead of grasping his ankle and going down clutching him, she chose to save her own life and that of her unborn child.

Anna's final leap also involved an emotional jump, a leap of faith. The narrator says that her mother saw that there was no rescue for her, yet she stripped off her clothes to make the attempt. Anna's again choosing life for her child manifested her continued connectedness with the future.

Another temporal bridge to which the narrator refers is that of her feeling of oneness with her mother's stillborn child, whom she considered a "less finished version" of herself. In her youth she sat at the child's grave, watching her tombstone, which seemed to grow larger with time, "the edge drawing near, the edge of everything," closing, then, the gap between her and the child.

This theme can also be seen in the various circular implications that permeate the story, such as the narrator's own return from her "failed life, where the land is flat," to her childhood home, and in her mother's return to a

more dependent state. Anna's blindness in old age is reminiscent of her blindfold trapeze act of her earlier years, as well as her leap onto the burning house. In an act of redemption, perhaps for the first child who had died, she provided onlookers with the kind of spectacle that she had once performed for crowds—an impossible feat that she made look easy by hanging by her heels from the rain gutter and smiling after she landed. This time she succeeded where earlier she had failed, and she saved her child.

A more pervasive but less obvious theme is that of preparation and anticipation. Throughout the story the narrator is preoccupied with harbingers, ignored warnings, and signs of impending doom, as well as with the choices that people make to prepare for the future. She couples this theme with that of acceptance of fate, recognizing that individual choices are often lesser evils, and bring with them negative consequences that must be endured.

During the fateful circus performance, the images of the approaching storm, unperceived but deadly, are vivid. The narrator contrasts the way that New England storms can come without warning to those in the West, where one can see the weather coming for miles. She also emphasizes the circus crowd's ignorance of the signs that could have been seen—"the clouds gathered outside, unnoticed." The thunder rolled, but it was drowned out by the circus drums.

During the trapeze leap and the fall itself it is clear that Anna had time to think, consciously to decide what her future would contain. Her grasp on the hot metal wire burned all the lines off her palms, leaving her with "only the blank scar tissue of a quieter future."

The other idea that runs through the story is that of gratitude. The narrator is clearly grateful for what her mother has given her: Saving her own life to allow her later to bear another child; life itself through birth; and life again, through her rescue from the fire. It is her gratitude that pulls the narrator home to read books to her mother, "to read out loud, to read long into the dark if I must, to read all night." Although it is implied that her return comes at a crucial juncture in her own life (implied by her reference to her failed life), it is a rare child to show a parent such self-sacrificing gratitude. She returns to fulfill the function that her father initiated in the hospital, that of reading aloud.

# Characters

## Characters

### The Narrator

The unnamed narrator is the story's main character. She is the daughter of a woman who used to be a circus performer, along with her husband, as part of the blindfolded trapeze duo known as the Flying Avalons. The narrator says that she owes her mother her existence three times over: first when her mother chose her own life over her emotional connection to her first husband; second, when her mother fell in love with her father in the hospital; and third, when her mother saved her from a house fire when the narrator was seven years old. She recognizes the truth of her mother's statement that there is time to think even as one is falling. It is possible to think critically even as one faces one's apparent doom, though it may require going against one's instincts.

### Anna

The narrator's mother, Anna, seems to be a pretty remarkable woman. Not only did she perform in the circus as a blindfolded trapeze artist, but she also once heroically saved her daughter from a house fire by climbing a tree, shimmying out on a limb, and leaping into the girl's window. In her old age, she has gone blind, but even the total darkness does not seem to bother her. She retains her poise and grace, never even bumping into anything or losing her balance. She is, as the narrator says, comfortable with extremes. Just as she was comfortable with the risk of falling, she is apparently comfortable with the risks associated with blindness, and this comfort seems to make her more sure of herself and steady on her feet.

### Anna's Husbands

In this story, readers learn that Anna has had two husbands in her lifetime: the first was Harold Avalon, her trapeze artist counterpart, who died in the freak accident; and the second is the narrator's father, a doctor. The narrator's father has recently died, and this is what brought the narrator back to live at home with her blind mother. The narrator's father helped to mend Anna's arm after the terrible trapeze accident that killed Harry, and he taught Anna to read and write.

# Analysis

## Analysis

One might wonder which "Leap" the title refers to, because there are, in fact, several leaps in the text. The narrator's mother, Anna, as one of the Flying Avalons in the circus, made several blindfolded leaps, always sure that her husband, Harold Avalon, would be there to catch her. Later, Anna makes a different kind of leap, after Harold's death in a tragic accident, when she falls in love again with her doctor, the narrator's father. Rather than returning to the life she knows, Anna chooses to stay in the town where the accident occurred and where her first daughter was stillborn and buried. She chooses to marry her doctor and live on a farm. Anna leaps again when her second daughter, the narrator, is seven years old, in order to save her helpless child from a house fire. She climbs a broken ladder and a tree, crawling on a dangerously slim branch, and leaps to her daughter's bedroom window. Anna and the narrator leap together, from the little girl's window, to the firefighters' net below.

There are several leaps, which we might call leaps of faith, in the story; it becomes clear that the act of leaping is symbolic of the chances we take while hoping that things will go right for us when we land. We simply have to have faith that someone else will catch us or that we will catch ourselves. However, this does not mean that we do not have the opportunity to assess our risks or weigh the benefits of leaping. Even as we leap, hoping to be caught—whether physically or emotionally—there is actually quite a bit of time to be rational and thoughtful in the free fall, according to Anna.

## Analysis: Style and Technique

Louise Erdrich's smooth-flowing narrative makes for deceptively easy reading. The story can be read on several different levels. On its most basic level, it is a pleasant story of a daughter doing her duty by an aging parent whom she loves and respects. On a deeper level, it is a commentary on to what one owes one's existence and what one makes of it. On yet another level, it speaks of the moments of decision in each person's life, and the ways in which one uses these moments to change the courses of one's own and others' lives.

Such multiple-depth interpretation is typical of short stories in general, but the simplicity of Erdrich's prose makes her story both more accessible and more obscure. The cleanness of language and vivid beauty of her images make the deeper meanings easier to understand once they are perceived, but the romantic voice relating the tale belies the more profound messages.

Similarly, the repetitive use of key words such as "preparation" and "anticipation" makes her themes easy to follow, but her matter-of-fact storytelling seems to imply a naïveté that is not the case. The addition of prosaic detail and conjecture on the events being told lends credence to the fantastic.

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# Quotes

## Quotes

The narrator describes her mother's first marriage and her former profession, as a blindfolded trapeze performer in a circus, with a kind of fairy-tale quality. Her beautiful mother would fly through the air with incredible grace and poise, even after she learned she was pregnant. The narrator says,

It seems incredible that she would work high above the ground when any fall could be so dangerous, but the explanation . . . is that my mother lives comfortably in extreme elements. She is one with the constant dark now, just as the air was her home, familiar to her, safe, before the storm that afternoon.

It is because her mother is so comfortable with living in extremes that she has adapted to her blindness so easily. The narrator says that Anna has never knocked anything over or even bumped into anything, despite the fact that she now lives in total darkness. Anna is just one of those people who is unfazed by the extremes that would paralyze others. The narrator explains,

My mother once said that I'd be amazed at how many things a person can do within the act of falling. . . . [S]he meant that even in that awful doomed second one could think, for she certainly did.

The narrator recalls her mother teaching her how to dive from the high dive at the pool. Even in the most frightening of moments, her mother suggests, as one is falling through the air, it is still possible to think clearly and rationally and to make a thoughtful decision. Anna made a thoughtful and critical decision to not reach out to grab for her husband, Harry Avalon, as he fell after the lightning struck the tent pole. Rather than responding emotionally, the pregnant Anna thought critically and changed her own direction, grabbing for wires that would burn her palms, so that she could attempt to save the life of her unborn child.

Later, the narrator recounts the third time her mother made a choice that enabled the narrator's life to be possible: when her mother saved her from a fire that was consuming their home. Anna climbed a tree, shimmied out onto a branch, quite precariously, and leaped from the limb to her daughter's bedroom window. As they sailed from the window to the firefighters' net below, the narrator realized that her mother was correct. The narrator says,

I know that she's right. I knew it even then. As you fall there is time to think.

While the pair fell from the window, the narrator had time to consider what would happen if they missed the net, but she chose to wrap her little hands around her mother's and to snuggle into her mother's warm body. That trust transcended her fear of falling, and the narrator learned to embrace what is possible even when doom seems imminent.