

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

# WATCHING YOU WITHOUT ME

Written by Lynn Coady

1. At moments throughout the text, Karen directly addresses the reader. At the end of the first chapter, she reflects, “When I tell this story now and people ask what I was thinking, it’s this feeling of incongruous peace that I remember” (p. 10). What does Karen convey through these moments of self-reflection? To whom is she speaking?
2. The role of the caregiver is central to the novel. At what point does Trevor’s caregiving cross the line and turn sinister? How do Kelli’s and Irene’s different needs necessitate different kinds of care? What does the novel suggest a good caregiver would look like?
3. Trevor is blunt in his suggestion that Karen’s job as a lawyer should allow her to afford the best care for Kelli. “Good money in that, I imagine,” he says (p. 23). Considering Karen’s decision not to send her sister to Barnbarroch Manor, as well as her choice not to go back to work, how does money function within the novel? Is providing financial support a sufficient form of caregiving?
4. While cutting Kelli’s steak, Karen is reminded of being twenty years old and fighting with her mother about Kelli’s needs, insisting that caring for her sister is not her responsibility (p. 36). Has Karen’s attitude changed since then? If so, what has brought that change about?
5. Grief manifests unpredictably in the novel. Karen packs up her mother’s belongings after her death with a dry eye, but becomes emotional when she hears a life-insurance advertisement on the radio (p. 37). Where else in the novel are emotions expressed unpredictably, bursting through the seams in uncanny moments?
6. Irene has died before the novel begins, but we learn about her through Karen’s narration. How is our idea of Irene influenced by Karen’s telling? How might Kelli’s version of her mom be different?
7. When Jessica meets Trevor, she is immediately suspicious of him; she “turns her vivacity switch in the off position” (p. 144). In part, Karen begins to see Trevor in a new light after he meets Jessica. Why does Jessica have such an adverse reaction to Trevor? Why doesn’t Karen?
8. When Arun Gill tells Karen that he thought Trevor was her brother, Karen thinks, “For lack of a daughter, then . . . Irene had managed to recruit herself a son” (p. 183). Is Karen right to feel that Trevor’s involvement in her family’s life is her fault?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

# WATCHING YOU WITHOUT ME

Written by Lynn Coady

9. Finding a bottle of No Name barbecue sauce in the fridge, Karen compares it with her mother's other condiments. She says that "The No Name barbecue sauce loomed over my mother's dainty jars and bottles like a giant yellow gorilla had lumbered into a village of unassuming pygmies" (p. 175). Later, she refers to this scene as the "Revelation of the Barbecue Sauce" (p. 194). What is the significance of the barbecue sauce?
10. Comparing Trevor's angry outbursts with those of her father, Karen says that she was "trying to come up with a reason for [her] unease that was anything but the most obvious reason of all" (p. 277). What is the reason that Karen is thinking of? What is the role of anger in the novel, and how does anger as an emotion connect with gender roles through the characters in Karen's life?
11. Karen describes the afternoon trapped in the house with Trevor as being "dominated by a terror so low-key it was downright monotonous" (p. 343). Does this description hold true for other passages of the novel, or perhaps the novel as a whole? How does Coady build suspense subtly through her storytelling?
12. In the last chapter, Karen describes feeling a compulsion to repeat her story over and over again. She says, "I've never told it this thoroughly or ruthlessly before, which I think means I'll be done with it for good once you and I are finished here" (p. 360). Do traumatic experiences need to be shared to be relieved? What is it about Karen's story that compels her to relay it to us in such painstaking detail?
13. Karen says, "when [Trevor's abuse] finally stopped I knew it was because he'd found another. Someone who needed what he had to give. So, really, it didn't stop at all" (p. 362). Why is this fact important to acknowledge? How might these cycles of harm be truly intercepted and ended?
14. The novel ends with an ambiguous word from Kelli: "Leave" (p. 364). Karen first interprets this as an order for Trevor to leave the house, but later realizes it may be Kelli's interpretation of Trevor's repetition of the phrase "I believe in you." What is Trevor trying to communicate so urgently to Kelli? How did you interpret Kelli's response?