



In Case We're Separated

By Alice Mattison
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Introduction

In 1950s Brooklyn, the single mother of a six-year-old boy learns something about her boyfriend and herself through a Sunbeam Mixmaster. Years earlier, a young Jewish girl in Eastern Europe is made to give up her baby daughter, who comes back to her in time for them to grow old together in Florida. A New York woman in her fifties finds love while helping her son move in with a woman she doesn't like. A gay writer in Boston plays detective when his nephew's girlfriend is the victim of a crime. *In Case We're Separated* chronicles a Jewish-American family, following multiple generations through emotionally turbulent lives lived against the background of political assassinations, the Vietnam War, and the AIDS epidemic.

Questions for Discussion

1. In the title story, "In Case We're Separated," Bobbie realizes that Edwin is married. Why isn't she more upset?
2. "Maybe life required secrets. What an idea." (page 18 HC). How does this last sentence of the first story look forward to the remaining stories? Who keeps secrets, and why?
3. All the stories are interrelated by familial ties, as well as by Mattison's use of six repeated images in a pattern that imitates the repetition of words in a poetic form, the sestina. At what point did you notice the repeated use of images throughout each story? Did you want to go back and find the images in each story?
4. In "Boy in Winter," why is Bradley so determined to find out the identity of Jo's attacker? Do you think he acts ethically at the end?
5. In "In the Dark, Who Pats the Air" Jo claims to believe in a ghost and lives much of the time in her imagination. Do you think her boyfriend, Josh, understands her? Do you think they will stay together?
6. We see Bradley at six, afraid of being separated from his mother; as a teenager, when she's diagnosed with breast cancer; in his late twenties, lost on a lake with her when she's dying; and in his fifties, not getting along with his partner, Warren. At the end of "Boy in Winter" he says that anger has waited for him all his life. What does he mean?
7. After Sylvia collapses in Joan's office, she wakes up and dismisses everyone's concerns. How is this typical of her?
8. In "The Bad Jew," what does Ruth want the Passover Seder to accomplish for her and can it give her what she needs?
9. "Brooklyn Sestina" opens with the line, "Crates of Live Chickens," as an example of what makes Lillian wish to die. With whom do you sympathize in this story? Is Ruth doing her best or is she annoyingly clumsy in her attempts to help her sister? Is Lillian authentically in need or a little self-involved?
10. Balancing a busy career and taking care of her elderly parents, Joan feels angry at her mother, and then is angry at herself for feeling this way. Why is Joan—a philanthropic director of a nonprofit organization offering mental health services to poor women—conflicted by these emotions about her own mother?
11. Laura takes delight in being Jewish. Ruth, her mother, is ambivalent about it. Which of the two takes religion more seriously?

About the Author

Alice Mattison grew up in Brooklyn and studied at Queens College and Harvard. She is the author of four novels, three previous collections of short stories, and a volume of poetry. She teaches fiction in the Bennington Writing Seminars. Her work has appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, *The New Yorker*, *Ms. magazine*, *Glimmer Train*, *Ploughshares*, *Agni*, *The Threepenny Review*, *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Shenandoah*, and *The Pushcart Prize*. Mattison lives in New Haven, Connecticut.