

## The Lost Family

Harper

By Jenna Blum

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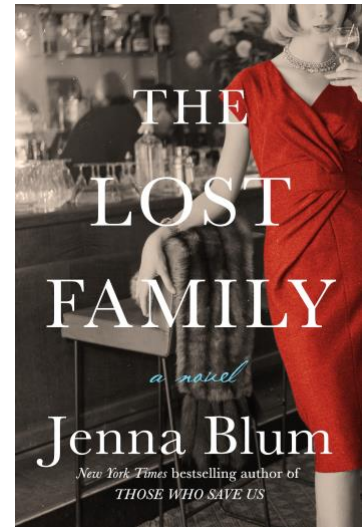
### Introduction

The *New York Times* bestselling author of *Those Who Save Us* creates a vivid portrait of marriage, family, and the haunting grief of World War II in this emotionally charged, beautifully rendered story that spans a generation, from the 1960s to the 1980s.

In 1965 Manhattan, patrons flock to Masha's to savor its brisket bourguignon and impeccable service and to admire its dashing owner and head chef Peter Rashkin. With his movie-star good looks and tragic past, Peter, a survivor of Auschwitz, is the most eligible bachelor in town. But Peter does not care for the parade of eligible women who come to the restaurant hoping to catch his eye. He has resigned himself to a solitary life. Running Masha's consumes him, as does his terrible guilt over surviving the horrors of the Nazi death camp while his wife, Masha—the restaurant's namesake—and two young daughters perished.

Then exquisitely beautiful June Bouquet, an up-and-coming young model, appears at the restaurant, piercing Peter's guard. Though she is twenty years his junior, the two begin a passionate, whirlwind courtship. When June unexpectedly becomes pregnant, Peter proposes, believing that beginning a new family with the woman he loves will allow him to let go of the horror of the past. But over the next twenty years, the indelible sadness of those memories will overshadow Peter, June, and their daughter Elsbeth, transforming them in shocking, heartbreaking, and unexpected ways.

Jenna Blum artfully brings to the page a husband devastated by a grief he cannot name, a frustrated wife struggling to compete with a ghost she cannot banish, and a daughter sensitive to the pain of both her own family and another lost before she was born. Spanning three cinematic decades, *The Lost Family* is a charming, funny, and elegantly bittersweet study of the repercussions of loss and love.



### Questions for Discussion

1. Consider Masha's restaurant. How is running the restaurant important to Peter? In what ways does it help or hinder his attempt to bear his loss and grief and live a fuller life?
2. When Peter and June first meet at Masha's, what draws them to each other? Despite their very different personal experiences, what do they have in common?

3. Consider the various relationships different characters have with food. What's revealed by what and how each person eats? Which approach seems particularly healthy or not?
  4. To "blot out unwelcome thoughts," Peter "took inventory, cataloging what the restaurant had in its storeroom." What are these thoughts? How does this activity help him? To what extent can work or distraction help with emotional difficulty? What are the limits of such an approach?
  5. Note the many allusions to art and music throughout the novel. What does each add to the layers of meaning in the story? What's the value of art and music in one's personal life? How, in particular, might it serve in times of grief and suffering? Why did Peter try "not to listen to music at all"?
  6. "If Peter's insides had matched his outsides, he would have looked like a Picasso. Like *Guernica*." What does this mean? In what other ways does Peter conceal elements of himself? To what extent is this normal and when might it become unhealthy?
  7. Compare and contrast how Peter and June each feel about and present their physical selves, their bodies. In what ways does each change or not as they age? What factors determine how a person feels about his or her body? How is Elsbeth's relationship to her body influenced by her parents?
  8. In what ways have Sol and Ruth been good for Peter or not?
  9. In what ways do the memories of Masha and Vivian and Ginger influence Peter, for better or worse? Is his adamant decision to never speak of them helpful or hurtful? What are the best ways to heal from such profound grief and loss?
  10. When June had finally seen Peter's scars, "the braille of [his] humiliation and helplessness," he thinks that "happiness...had made him careless." What does he mean? What is "the blessing of scars"?
  11. After talking to June of his scars and the suffering that caused them, Peter's "heartened" that "she had handled it well." What is it in her response that is so effective and helpful? How is it that she could understand some of his profound experience? What's important in any response to another's suffering or grief?
  12. Peter becomes concerned that his growing love for June "had punctured the sealed chamber into which [he] had put Masha and the girls." What is he afraid of? To what extent should these two loves be kept separate or not?
  13. Sitting in Carl Schurz Park, Peter experiences the "calming effects of being near water." His daughter Elsbeth also "loved the water." What is it for each of them that is so valuable about water? Where else in the novel does water seem significant?
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14. Peter realizes that “his worst, most damning trait...that defined him, the secret at his core...was his inability to act, his paralysis in crucial situations.” Where has this demonstrated itself in his life? What might explain this behavior?
  15. What is the “magnitude of discrepancy” June experiences with Peter as their relationship progresses? Consider her various responses to frustrations and unhappiness, from rearranging the furniture to being unfaithful. What does each reveal about what she wants and needs?
  16. June believes herself to lack “natural maternal instinct” for Elsbeth and to simply “want other things.” What does she desire in her life? Is this incompatible with having a child?
  17. Regarding food—its preparation, presentation, flavor, etc.—Peter’s “passion *consumed* him.” Why is this? What might this reveal about his profound emotional experiences and burdens?
  18. What kinds of difficulties does Elsbeth struggle with as she becomes a teenager? What particular emotional difficulties does she have with her mother? What is attractive to her about Julian? For what various reasons might she be so drawn to being photographed by him?
  19. Are Julian’s photographs justified as art? How does such subject matter connect to the theme of the body—in injury and health, shame and pride, ugliness and beauty—throughout the novel? To what extent is the body personal or public? Where do these lines blur?
  20. How is it that Peter is eventually able to open emotionally to Elsbeth, to begin to share the story of his deep love and loss of Masha and the girls? What are the risks of such sharing? How does it work to heal?
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