

QUARTER ONE

TENDER IS THE FLESH

THE COST OF
Freedom

T E N D E R I S T H E F L E S H

Chapter One Commentary

Tender is the Flesh is the kind of book that let's you know from page one that it has not come to play any games. We are not introduced to our main character on the worst day of his life. Neither are we introduced to him during the calm before the storm. In fact, there is nothing extraordinary about his circumstances at all. Instead, the author prioritizes giving us intimate access to him as a person. Within just a few pages, we are given all of the information we need to see him clearly and completely. Not hints, not ideas, not foreshadowing. A real vision of his personhood.

The very first thing she [the author] does is tell us that our main character is both *complicit* in the evil she intends to explore throughout his story, and *aware* of that complicity. He lives in a world that has fallen into moral bankruptcy. And his continued comfort requires him to play his part.

Here is what we know [or at least, what our main character believes *he* knows]:

The world was in crisis and primed for disaster. Overpopulation and crippling poverty were plaguing developed nations, leading to riots, crime rates rising, and a host of other issues. People saw disaster on the horizon. So when a virus began spreading rapidly around the world, most people were not predisposed to ask any questions. Not even when that virus somehow rendered animals inedible globally. Or when one of the world's largest industries began telling the world that they could not survive without meat and lobbying world governments for a solution. Or even when that eventual solution also somehow solved their issues with overpopulation and poverty.

T E N D E R I S T H E F L E S H

Chapter One Commentary

This chapter is only five and a half pages long, but it manages to tell us quite a bit about our main character. For instance, we know:

- *He is not convinced this virus ever existed*
- *He believes his government is capable of committing horrible evils against humanity in service of its goals*
- *He does not believe eating humans is either necessary or right*
- *He is overwhelmed with guilt and shame over his part in this system*
- *He also does not believe resistance serves him*

We, readers, have no idea if he is right about any of this. Maybe the virus is real, maybe it isn't. Maybe the government invented it all in order to kill the poor, maybe they took advantage of a horrific situation in order to push through agendas that never would have worked otherwise. Who knows. And ultimately, it doesn't matter for the purpose of this story. Because we are not examining the government. We are examining our main character. And these five simple pages did a masterful job of helping us to understand the core beliefs that shape his perspective on the world.

He is not just a bystander of the moral decline of humanity. He is an active participant. He works as not only a butcher, but as someone who trains and prepares other butchers. It is literally his job to help other people set aside their moral center so that they can strip other people of their humanity and literally butcher them.

T E N D E R I S T H E F L E S H

Chapter One Commentary

It is no wonder that this story opens with him waking in terror over the idea of another day in his life. He is a monster and he knows it. And yet... *because there certainly is an **and yet** here...* he has no intention of doing anything about it. Because, at the end of the day, he watched people resist throughout the entire process of the world ending...and he watched them lose. For him, the only resistance that holds any weight is in his refusal to see "special meat" as anything other than human beings, deserving of his respect. His only resistance is his refusal to look away. While he is complicit, he is determined to witness.

We see that even in the way he reminisces about what his job was like before the "transition". When thinking about a pig that bit him in his youth, he doesn't resent the pig. He recognizes that it only happened because "the meat needed to be respected." He has never been capable of approaching the act of taking life callously. Which only serves to make him more aware of just how complicit he is in the evil he helps facilitate every single time he goes to work.

So what is our takeaway?

Our main character is completely aware that everything he does is a conscious choice to commit evil. Which leaves us, the readers, with the responsibility of figuring out *why*.

That is the question the author is preparing us to explore in this book.

T E N D E R I S T H E F L E S H

Chapter One Commentary

Why is he complicit?

Why doesn't he resist?

Why doesn't he just accept things the way they are if he refuses to do something to change them?

Why does he feel guilty if he genuinely feels he has no power to do anything?

Why, why, why, why?!

I also think it is worth noting that his complicity has come at a cost. He reflects on being alone. More specifically, on the fact that his wife left him and has not even bothered to stay in contact since. We don't necessarily know why. We don't know if it is because she resents his complicity, or worse, resents him feeling guilty over his complicity. We don't know if his work has changed him and made him hard to live with. We don't know any of the circumstances. Likely because, for him, the circumstances don't matter. Whatever the details look like, his new reality has cost him something precious. Yet he can't walk away

Why?

I propose the answer is in his resistance. He makes it clear that he sees no value in fighting back. People much more resourceful and passionate than himself fought back when the world was much better positioned for resistance. Before everything fell apart. Human rights organizations fought. Marginalized people fought. They all failed. The world fell into evil anyway. Now even acknowledging the humanity of their "special meat" can end with him losing everything. *Even his life.* Yet he continues to witness. Within himself, he

T E N D E R I S T H E F L E S H

Chapter One Commentary

refuses to accept that his victims are without humanity. In his witnessing, he resists. Simultaneously proving that he is, in fact, still human...**and that he is better than everyone who has believed the lies.**

Even as his guilt terrorizes him in his dreams, his reflection is never about his own complicity. But rather, the ways in which he has held onto more of his humanity than he should have been able to.

*Other people don't see that they've been lied to. **He does.***

*Other people accepted the transition as necessary. **He didn't.***

*Other people let their humanity slip away. **Not him.***

For this man, survival doesn't mean justifying his complicity, but rather holding onto his humanity just a little bit more than everyone who has joined him in complying with the rules of their new fallen world. And yet, even in his own reflections, he has no name. *Something to think about.*

Things to reflect on

- This chapter prepares us for a conversation about examining our own complicity in the systems of oppression that harm people around us. Consider your own identity and social positioning and begin thinking about where this conversation holds weight for you.
- Are there things happening around you that you recognize as evil but have chosen not to openly resist? Ask yourself why.
- What evidence of your humanity are you holding onto in order to excuse the areas where you know you fall short?