1. When Sephy and her honorary aunt Sharon follow the same unhealthy eating patterns, Sephy feels “the guilt of knowing they were like two drowning people clinging together, each too weak to let go and save herself, each trying to mitigate her own failure by pulling the other down with her.” Have you ever found yourself in a similar relationship? How do the dynamics between Sephy and Sharon shift when Sephy decides to change her life? In her position, how would you have dealt with Sharon?

2. Laura goes to church looking for “a place where she belonged. A fundamental sense of roots. Maybe . . . okay, she would admit it: family. And with all its imperfections and potential for disappointment, church had always been a second family for her.” What has your experience with church—and the people in it—been like? Did it surprise you that Laura would look for community in a church when she’s not very interested in matters of faith?

3. In their first counseling session, Carl asks Sephy to envision who “the girl inside the fat suit” would be. Do you ever daydream about changing some part of yourself? If so, what would you change? What would your imagined self be able to do that you can’t now?

4. When Amy brags to Mitch, “Give yourself a break is not part of my vocabulary,” he responds, “You say it like it’s something admirable, but it’s not. You know what’s admirable? Balance. That’s what’s not in your vocabulary.” Do you think our culture puts too high a value on overwork or perfectionism? Do you, like Amy, struggle to reach your own high standard, or are you able to give yourself a break when needed?

5. Both Laura and Sephy feel at times that they need to stay away from their family. What are their reasons for doing so? Do you think they’re justified in their feelings?

6. Laura observes, “Mom’s highest aspiration for any of us is that we’ll be nice and well-behaved and never make a scene,” and Rob counters that his mother “always encouraged us to be ourselves no matter what.” Which do you think is the better approach to parenting? Are there dangers in either strategy?

7. Moments of tension, like the clash over playing in the band for David’s wedding, bring out the very different personalities of the Darling women. In your own family, what role do you play during a conflict? Are you a combatant, a peacemaker, a mediator, an avoider, or something else?

8. As she struggles to find her own voice, Sephy realizes that “she was always going to be a person who valued tact and kindness. But didn’t she have a right, maybe even a responsibility, to say what she wanted to say? Surely both were possible.” Do you struggle with either extreme—either speaking your mind too bluntly or keeping silent out of fear of what others will think? By the end of the story, has Sephy found the balance she’s striving for?

9. When she realizes that Mitch has started drinking again, Amy wonders, “What did you say to one of the strongest people you knew when his strength was not enough to keep him from sliding into the pit again?” Is there anything helpful she could say to Mitch in this situation? How would you advise her?
10. Laura admits to Rob, “I know that if I were to have a relationship with God, I would have to let Him be in charge of my life. And right now, I’m not interested in that. I like things the way they are.” Can you—or could you, at some point in the past—relate to her reluctance toward a relationship with God? What does Rob mean by his response: “If God wants your attention, He’s going to get it, one way or another. I wouldn’t want it to be harder for you than it has to be”?

11. As she looks back over her life, Sephy acknowledges that “maybe it was all grace. Because even the hardest things had shaped her for the good.” What past pain or difficulty has shaped you in a positive way? Do you agree with Sephy’s conclusion that these things are “all grace,” and that “grace—if you accepted it—was the only thing that could heal your soul”?

12. Jane and Leander decide to postpone telling their children about his illness, though Jane confesses to herself that she has mixed motives for waiting. Do you agree with their decision? If you were in the place of the Darling children, would you appreciate the delay or wish you’d been told sooner?

13. Jane comments that “next year might be very different for all of us.” What do you think is ahead for Sephy and Justice? For Amy and Mitch? For Laura?