
READING GROUP GUIDE

1. “They pretend to share, pulling out the old albums at Christmastime, but under their breath, they are saying, *This is what I had before I had you...*” How does the title capture the essence of the novel?
2. In the beginning of the novel, Olivia compares her relationships with her children to her relationship with her mother. How are they similar? What makes them different?
3. Whether or not Olivia and her children are aware, their family’s past affects their present. What kinds of inheritances are in the novel? How does that idea of inheritance influence the story?
4. One of the focuses of the book is the idea of knowing and accepting your parents. How well does Olivia know Myla? Do Olivia’s children know her any better? Is it possible to truly know and understand our parents?
5. Olivia’s adolescent angst is hard to distinguish from the onset of her first bipolar symptoms. How much of Olivia’s rebellion do you attribute to bipolar disorder, and how much to other forces in her life? Do you sympathize with Myla’s reactions to her rebellious behavior?
6. “There are those people in your life who matter instantly, on another plane, and you have to marry them or kill them or run the hell away, you can’t do it halfway. I hope her house is full of paintings. I hope somebody loves her.” How does Olivia realize that her effect on Pam is different than she first perceived?
7. Adolescent Olivia doesn’t always understand how her actions impact others, and that short-sightedness affects her relationships with Pam, Kandy, and Jake. Have you ever unwittingly taken friendship for granted? Does understanding the value of friendship require maturity?
8. “When something broke in our house, a lamp or a glass, I would take it to my workbench and try to glue it back together. But if Sam found it before I did, he would drop it in the trash without a thought. This is why I left him in the end.” This quote reveals Olivia’s feelings about Sam in the immediate aftermath of their divorce. Do you find her judgment reliable? What would the story be like from Sam’s point of view?
9. Over the course of Olivia’s search for Daniel, what does she realize about herself and her family?
10. “What if all the transcendent moments of your life, the sound-track moments, the radiant detail, the gleaming thing at the center of life that loves you, that loves beauty—God or whatever you call it—what if all this were part of your illness? Would you seek treatment? I have, and sometimes I wonder if the greatest passions are just out of my reach. And sometimes I am so grateful.” This passage helps us understand Myla’s motivation for avoiding treatment. In the end, do you forgive her?
11. “In me there is only me. So what I must do, I can do alone, and I do it silently and completely: I forgive us both.” Do you think Myla had forgiven Olivia before her passing? How was Olivia able to come to terms with their troubled relationship?

WHAT I HAD BEFORE I HAD YOU

SARAH CORNWELL

