

# Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JUDY BLUME

Though Judy Blume spent her childhood thinking up stories in her head, she didn't aspire to be a writer. Instead, she was raised to be a homemaker, and her mother insisted she get a degree in education just in case she ever had to work. Blume did just that and married a lawyer in 1959 before graduating with her education degree from New York University in 1961. In 1969, she published her first children's book and continued to write prolifically throughout the 1970s. During this period, she wrote some of her best-known books, including *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, and *Forever*. *Forever* has been frequently banned since its publication, as it was one of the first young adult novels to portray teen sex as normal. Since the 1980s, Blume's books have been challenged regularly, mostly due to her books' frank portrayals of such things as homosexuality, teen sex, masturbation, and in *Margaret's* case, menstruation and religion. This led Blume to become an activist against banning books. Blume has been married three times and has several children and grandchildren, several of whom have either inspired Blume's books or encouraged her to write about certain subjects. With her husband, she runs a nonprofit bookstore in Key West.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* deals primarily with two subjects: the role of religion in mid-20th century America, and puberty. Following World War II, families flocked to the suburbs (as *Margaret's* does) and many families became regular churchgoers. While mainstream Protestantism represented a large percentage of churchgoers during the postwar years (and the dominant religious voice in the country), other religions were also becoming more mainstream—for instance, the election of John F. Kennedy as president in 1960 represented a boost for many American Catholics, and in the 1970s, religions considered “alternative” (like Hinduism) were becoming more popular. This helps explain why *Margaret* feels such pressure to choose a religion once she moves to the suburbs—her parents, as people who don't identify as any one religion or attend religious services at all, would've been outliers. Schools first began teaching sex ed in the early 20th century, but it wasn't until World War II that the practice became widespread and seen as a social good (soldiers were regularly shown films warning of venereal disease and advising condom use). By 1970, it was common for companies that produce period products (like the fictional *Private Lady*

company in the novel) to produce educational films explaining puberty and menstruation—which, as *Margaret* is annoyed to discover in the novel, was one way for those companies to advertise their products.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Blume has said that she and her mother weren't especially close when she was a kid, but her mother did get her to read two books that would make an impression on her: Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Blume wrote prolifically through the 1970s and produced some of her most famous works then, including *Blubber*, *Forever*, *Deenie*, and *Then Again, Maybe I Won't* (a companion novel of sorts to *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* that focuses on male puberty). Since then, authors have published a number of novels targeted at preteen girls that deal specifically with puberty. These include *Finally* by Wendy Mass, *Anya's Ghost* by Vera Brosgol, and *Summer of Brave* by Amy Noelle Parks. Other teen novels—many of them intended for slightly older readers—focus on teens navigating their relationship to religion. These include novels like Madeleine L'Engle's *A Ring of Endless Light*, *The Names They Gave Us* by Emery Lord, and *Heretics Anonymous* by Katie Henry. *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* has regularly been banned in schools or libraries, along with books like Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. For a look into the history of sex education films in American schools and sex ed's changing focus over the years, Robert Eberwein's nonfiction work *Sex Ed: Film, Video, and the Framework of Desire* offers a deep dive into the subject.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*
- **When Written:** 1969
- **Where Written:** New Jersey, United States
- **When Published:** 1970
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel
- **Setting:** Farbrook, New Jersey, around 1970
- **Climax:** *Margaret* gets her first period
- **Antagonist:** *Margaret's* maternal grandparents, peer pressure
- **Point of View:** First-Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Just Margaret.** In interviews, Judy Blume has said that if she'd

known how popular *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* was going to get—and how often she'd have to say the title in full over the next 50 years—she would've shortened it to just *Margaret*.

**Training Bras.** Prior to the mid-20th century, girls Margaret's age generally didn't wear bras. The advent of training bras (bras designed to get girls used to wearing a bra, rather than provide support for breast tissue) reflected a societal shift to idealizing a curvier and bustier body type. Though a girl's first bra is now commonly seen as a rite of passage, training bras have faced opposition since their invention—especially as companies have created bras for increasingly younger girls, some as young as two years old.



## PLOT SUMMARY

It was a shock for 11-year-old Margaret when she got home from summer camp to discover that Mom and Dad rented out their New York City apartment and bought a house in Farbrook, New Jersey. Margaret figures this is because her parents think Margaret's Grandma, who lives in the city, has too much influence over Margaret.

Hours after moving in, a girl named Nancy invites Margaret to play in the sprinklers. She watches Margaret change into a swimsuit and remarks that Margaret's chest is still flat. The girls' fun in the sprinkler comes to an end when Nancy's older brother Evan and his friend, Moose, turn the sprinkler on full blast. As Nancy walks Margaret home, she invites her to join her secret club and tells Margaret not to wear socks on the first day of school—if she does, everyone will think she's a baby. That night, Margaret asks God to help her grow breasts. Her parents don't know she talks to God, so she only does so privately.

On the first day of school, Margaret and Nancy learn they have a first-year teacher, Mr. Benedict. After school, Margaret goes to Nancy's first secret club meeting. She meets the other two girls, Gretchen Potter and Janie Loomis. They decide they all have to wear bras, keep a Boy Book (a ranked list of boys they like), and share immediately if they start their period. Nancy also tells Margaret about Laura Danken, their classmate who is physically very mature. According to Nancy, Laura regularly lets Moose and Evan touch her. Margaret tells her friends about how her mom's parents disowned her mom when she married a Jewish man (Margaret's dad). This is why her parents are raising her without religion; she can choose a religion for herself when she gets older if she wants. Nancy is aghast, since everyone in Farbrook either joins the Y or the Jewish Community Center, depending on their religious affiliation. Over the weekend, both Janie and Margaret buy their first **bras**.

On Monday, Mr. Benedict assigns a yearlong personal project.

Students can study whatever they want, however they want. At the secret club meeting, the girls decide the project is silly. They check each other's bras, perform an exercise to help them grow breasts, and Nancy looks through the Boy Books. Except for Margaret, who put Jay Hassler first, they all put Philip Leroy first. Margaret actually has a crush on Moose, but she's not going to admit it because Nancy hates him.

Margaret decides to do her project for Mr. Benedict on religion—she'll study different religions and decide what she is at the end of the year. She asks Grandma if she can accompany her to temple and Grandma is ecstatic. They go for Rosh Hashanah. Margaret loves the music, but she doesn't understand much of the service—especially the bits in Hebrew. She doesn't feel God while she's in the temple, either, but she continues to talk to him at night.

As fall turns to winter, Margaret accompanies Janie to church (which seems the same as temple, except that the service is all in English) and the PTA puts on a square dance for the sixth graders. Margaret is excited to dance with Philip until she discovers that like most of the boys, he steps on the girls' feet. In December, Margaret and her friends look through an anatomy book and one of Margaret's dad's *Playboy* magazines—they think naked men look weird, and Nancy in particular wants to look like the women in *Playboy*. Margaret also discovers that Mom sent a Christmas card to her estranged parents.

Just after winter break starts, Margaret gets an invitation to a party at Norman Fishbein's house. Margaret spends the day of the party preparing for her big night. She stuffs her bra with six cotton balls and asks God to help her grow breasts. At the party, the kids play Spin the Bottle and Two Minutes in the Closet. Margaret kisses Philip and Norman during the games, and she thinks Laura seems oddly nervous for being so promiscuous. Over the break, Margaret also goes with Nancy's family to their Christmas Eve church service. Margaret loves the music, but she doesn't feel closer to God in the church.

In January, Grandma heads to Florida and Margaret and her female classmates see a movie in school on menstruation. Margaret already knows everything, and she resents that the movie is basically an advertisement for Secret Lady brand period products. A week later, Gretchen gets her first period. When Margaret tells Mom about Gretchen, Mom shares that she didn't start her period until she was 14. Margaret is terrified that she won't start her period and won't be normal. She's even more distraught when, a few weeks later, Nancy reveals that she started her period. Margaret begs God to help her be normal.

In March, Grandma invites Margaret to visit her in Florida over spring break, and Margaret accompanies Nancy's family and Moose on a day trip to New York City. Margaret is thrilled to be out with Moose, but it's a shock when Nancy starts her period—and Mrs. Wheeler reveals that it's Nancy's *first* period.

Apparently, she had lied before. It's Margaret's 12th birthday a week later. Mom agrees to buy Margaret deodorant to mark the occasion. The day seems to be going well until Mr. Benedict announces a group project—and reveals that he already chose students' groups. Margaret will be working with Laura, Philip, and Norman. She's in a bad mood for the entire three weeks of the project.

Things come to a head one afternoon when Margaret and Laura work after school in the library. Laura is planning to go to confession after she's done. Margaret is so busy wondering if Laura tells the priest about all her sexual exploits that she copies verbatim out of the encyclopedia. When Laura calls her out on this, Margaret insults her for being promiscuous. Laura leaves the library, angry and upset. She asks Margaret to consider how horrible it is to be picked on for being the most developed kid in class, and she implies that there's no truth to Margaret's accusations. Feeling awful, Margaret decides she'd better confess, too—but she doesn't know how, and she leaves the church in tears. She also realizes Moose might be lying about Laura to make himself look better.

A week before Margaret is set to visit Grandma in Florida, Mom gets a letter from her parents, Margaret's Grandmother and Grandfather. They're coming to visit over spring vacation, so Margaret can't go to Florida. Margaret is incensed; God must be punishing her for being mean to Laura. The visit is awful. When Grandmother and Grandfather try to insist that Margaret is a Christian and should go to church, Mom and Dad insist that Margaret can choose. To escape her grandparents, Margaret goes with Janie to the movies the next day. They decide to buy pads at a drugstore, just in case either of them starts their period. When Margaret gets home, Grandmother and Grandfather announce they're leaving early. Once they're gone, Margaret practices wearing a pad. That night, Grandma and her new boyfriend, Mr. Binamin, show up on the doorstep. Grandma explains that she came hoping to tell Mom's parents that Margaret is Jewish. Margaret snaps. She insists she doesn't believe in God. She and God aren't speaking anymore.

To finish her project for Mr. Benedict, Margaret writes him a letter detailing her experiences at church, temple, and confession. She admits that she doesn't know what religion she is—or if she wants to choose—but she does know that if she has kids, she's going to tell them what religion they are. Trying to figure it out later in life is too hard.

School lets out in June. Hearing Moose mowing the lawn outside, Margaret decides to confront him about telling lies about Laura. But as Margaret confronts him, she realizes *Nancy* probably started the lies about Laura. This makes Margaret feel better about her crush on Moose. She goes to the bathroom and discovers she started her period. Margaret thanks God for helping her.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Margaret Simon** – The novel's protagonist, Margaret, is an 11-year-old girl whose parents move their family to Farbrook, New Jersey from New York City. Margaret has good relationships with her parents, and she's very close with her paternal grandmother, Grandma. In Farbrook, Margaret's insecurities about starting puberty rise to the forefront when she meets a girl named Nancy and joins Nancy's secret club. To be in the club, Margaret has to dress a certain way—including not wearing socks and getting her first **bra**—and she also has to lie about which boys she likes or which girls in class she admires in order to remain Nancy's friend. Margaret also feels self-conscious when, for the first time ever, people take issue with the fact that she doesn't identify as any one religion. Though Margaret privately talks to God and asks him to help her grow breasts and start her period, she realizes that fitting in in Farbrook means joining a church or synagogue—and so she decides to use her teacher Mr. Benedict's personal project to explore different religions and decide which one she is. Throughout the school year, Margaret attends temple and church services, but she never feels as close to God in a house of worship as she does when she talks to him privately at night. She doesn't come to a firm conclusion on organized religion by the end of her project, aside from deciding that if she has kids, she'll tell them what religion they are. Over the course of the novel, Margaret is desperate to be "normal," which she defines as starting her period and growing into a 32AA bra. Though she starts her period at the end of the novel, it's unclear if she graduates from a training bra. Margaret also learns the importance of thinking for herself and not taking people at their word—though she initially believes everything Nancy says, Margaret eventually realizes that Nancy lies to make herself look better, and spreads mean rumors about other people. Coming to this realization is a mark of Margaret's growing maturity.

**Grandma** – Grandma is Margaret's paternal grandmother. She's Jewish, 60 years old, and lives in New York City. A fashionable woman, Grandma always wears nice clothes and dyes her hair different fashionable colors. She and Margaret have a close relationship and spend a lot of time together when given the option, something that Margaret believes her Mom and Dad resent. So Margaret concludes that moving to New Jersey is a ploy to separate her from Grandma, since Grandma thinks public transportation is dirty and doesn't own a car, and therefore she won't visit as much. But Grandma surprises Margaret and her parents with visits several times over the course of the novel. Through this, the novel offers clues that Mom and Dad take issue more with Grandma's unwillingness to respect their privacy and space (Grandma dropped in daily without notice when the family still lived in New York) than the

particulars of her relationship with Margaret—though they do seem to fear that Grandma might pressure Margaret into identifying as Jewish. Grandma is thrilled when Margaret asks to attend temple with her, and she sees this as proof that Margaret is actually Jewish. She's distraught when Margaret later insists she isn't and that she doesn't believe in God, and they don't make up before the end of the novel. Regardless, throughout the novel, Grandma is the one who takes Margaret to do fun things, like see concerts at Lincoln Center. She regularly compliments Margaret's maturity and is there to support Margaret through puberty. Grandma spends much of the novel on a cruise for the holidays and then wintering in Florida, insisting that there's nothing to do in New York without Margaret there.

**Mom** – Margaret's mom is a stay-at-home parent who paints still life paintings as a hobby. She's a practical, no-nonsense woman who enjoys gardening and has trouble making choices about her new house in the suburbs—she hasn't ordered living room furniture yet by the end of the novel, as she's still deciding what she wants. Mom is a major influence in Margaret's life. She regularly tells Margaret what's normal and what to expect in terms of puberty, and she never makes Margaret feel bad or awkward for things like wanting to wear a **bra** or use deodorant. Mom was raised Christian, but when she decided to marry Dad (who was raised Jewish) 14 years ago, her parents disowned her rather than accept their Jewish son-in-law. So Mom and Dad have very purposefully given up religion in their own lives, and they've raised Margaret with the expectation that she can choose a religion when she's an adult. Mom attempts to reconnect with her parents by sending them a holiday card, but it doesn't go as planned: Grandmother and Grandfather invite themselves for a visit, insult Mom and Dad's parenting and Margaret's lack of a religious upbringing, and ultimately leave early, thereby angering Mom.

**Dad** – Margaret's dad works in insurance in New York City. He was raised Jewish by his mom, Margaret's Grandma, but when he and Mom got married, they decided to not identify as any one religion. They've taught Margaret to do the same, insisting that she can choose her religion when she's an adult. Dad is thrilled with the move to the New Jersey suburbs—he's excited to be able to mow his own lawn, for instance. However, his dreams of mowing the lawn are dashed when, the first time he tries, Dad sticks his hand into the mower and injures himself. Dad is a somewhat distant presence in Margaret's life in Farbrook, given that he commutes to the city and is often at work. He seems to have a somewhat distant relationship with Grandma, too, seemingly because of his choice to give up Judaism and his desire for privacy (Grandma regularly dropped in on the family when they lived in New York, and he expresses anger when she does the same in Farbrook). Dad is fiercely protective of his family and hates Mom's parents, Margaret's Grandmother and Grandfather, for disowning her when they

got married 14 years ago—though he remains polite with them when they visit, he's extremely angry in the weeks leading up to their visit and has nothing nice to say about them.

**Mary Hutchins/Grandmother** – Grandmother is Margaret's maternal grandmother and Mom's mother, whom Margaret has never met before she visits at the end of the novel. Before Margaret was born, when Mom told her parents that she wanted to marry Dad, who's Jewish, Grandfather and Grandmother cut all contact with her—as Christians, they refused to accept their Jewish son-in-law. They haven't spoken in 14 years by the time the novel begins. This changes when Mom sends her parents a Christmas card, and they then decide to come visit over Margaret's spring vacation. They're still upset about Mom's choice to marry Dad, and they try to insist that Margaret is a Christian, despite her being vocal about not identifying with any religion.

**Paul Hutchins/Grandfather** – Grandfather is Margaret's maternal grandfather and Mom's father, whom Margaret has never met before he visits at the end of the novel. Before Margaret was born, when Mom told her parents that she wanted to marry Dad, who's Jewish, Grandfather and Grandmother cut all contact with her—as Christians, they refused to accept their Jewish son-in-law. They haven't spoken in 14 years by the time the novel begins. This changes when Mom sends her parents a Christmas card, and they then decide to come visit over Margaret's spring vacation. They're still upset about Mom's choice to marry Dad, and they try to insist that Margaret is a Christian—despite her being vocal about not identifying with any one religion.

**Nancy Wheeler** – Nancy is Margaret's first friend in Farbrook. She's 11 going on 12, just like Margaret, and is still in the early stages of puberty—though Nancy would like Margaret (and everyone else) to think she's far more mature. Nancy is taller than Margaret, with “bouncy” hair that Margaret admires, and she already wears a 32AA **bra** rather than a training bra. Immediately upon meeting Margaret, Nancy situates herself as a knowledgeable resource in the community—she tells Margaret about all the neighbors and says with authority that all 14-year-old boys are “disgusting.” Margaret soon learns that Nancy requires her friends to meet certain standards. Margaret joins Nancy's secret club (the Four PTS's) along with Gretchen and Janie, and Nancy insists that they all have to wear bras in order to attend. And though the Boy Books aren't her idea, she's nevertheless the one to go through them at every meeting and question the other girls' rankings. Since Nancy has a crush on Philip Leroy, the other girls claim to have crushes on him, too, just to please her—even though Margaret actually has a crush on another boy and suspects that Gretchen and Janie don't like Philip either. Nancy also regularly spreads rumors about their classmate Laura Danken, whom she insists is promiscuous and seems to resent for being so physically mature. As the novel progresses, Margaret notices that Nancy



is actually very self-conscious and concerned about being the last of her friends to start her period. Nancy is intent on figuring out what menstruation feels like before she starts her period, and she even lies about getting her first period. When Nancy does finally get her first period—during a daytrip to New York with Margaret—it’s a traumatic experience for her, and she’s terrified of menstruating and of the possibility that Margaret might tell the other girls that she lied about starting earlier. At the end of the novel, Margaret also realizes that Nancy lied about Laura’s supposed promiscuity.

**Gretchen Potter** – Gretchen is one of Margaret’s new friends in Farbrook and one of the PTS’s. It’s implied that Gretchen, like Nancy, is already wearing a **bra** by the time of the first club meeting. Like the other girls, Gretchen always lists Philip Leroy as number one in her Boy Book, though Margaret wonders if Gretchen also has a crush on someone else but doesn’t want to admit it. Since Gretchen’s father is Dr. Potter, she agrees to sneak one of her dad’s anatomy books out of his office so the girls can study the male anatomy. She’s also the first PTS to start her period, and she angers Nancy by insisting that it doesn’t feel like much (though it does make her feel older). The novel also implies that Gretchen may be heavier than her friends; Nancy polices Gretchen’s cookie intake and after Gretchen starts her period, she shares that her mom said that Gretchen will now have to watch what she eats closely.

**Janie Loomis** – Janie is one of the Four PTS’s and she eventually becomes one of Margaret’s closest friends. Like Margaret, Janie has to ask her mother to buy her a **bra** so she can attend the first PTS meeting; she’s physically immature still but isn’t willing to fight Nancy on the bra rule. She also consistently lists Philip Leroy as number one in her Boy Book, though Margaret wonders if Janie also likes someone else but is too afraid to tell the truth. Janie is physically very small and is the only PTS who hasn’t started her period by the end of the novel.

**Laura Danker** – Laura Danker is a girl in Margaret’s class. Though Laura is in sixth grade, like Margaret, she looks much older—Margaret mistakes her for the teacher at first. Laura already wears a bra, looks like an adult, and is taller than everyone, including the boys. Though Laura seems quiet and shy—and Margaret thinks she’s beautiful—Nancy insists that Laura is actually very promiscuous. She insists that Laura goes behind the A&P with Evan and Moose, apparently to let the boys touch her body. With these rumors, Nancy encourages Margaret, Janie, and Gretchen to look down on Laura, even though they all secretly want to look as physically mature as she does. Margaret finally starts to piece together that Laura isn’t at all promiscuous when she learns that Laura is a Catholic. When Margaret openly accuses Laura of letting boys touch her, Laura implies that the rumors aren’t true; kids just pick on her because she was the first kid in the class to visibly start going through puberty.

**Norman Fishbein** – Norman is a boy in Margaret’s class. She refers to him as a “drip” throughout the novel, which means that she sees him as uncool and unintelligent. However, she never really explains *why* she feels this way—indeed, she offers little insight into what kind of a person Norman is at all. Norman throws a party for his classmates over the winter holidays, and he ends up kissing Margaret during a game. They also work together on a group project, where Margaret finds him annoying because he works slowly and moves his lips while he reads.

**Philip Leroy** – Philip is the cutest boy in Margaret’s sixth grade class. All four of the PTS’s say they have a crush on him (but Margaret only *says* she has a crush on him to please Nancy, and she wonders if Janie and Gretchen are doing the same). As the year goes on, Margaret gradually learns that Philip isn’t such a great guy. Like many of the other boys in class, he steps on the girls’ feet when they learn to square dance. Though Margaret is thrilled that Philip is the first boy ever to kiss her, she later decides that he’s awful—when they end up working together on a group project, Philip doesn’t do any work.

**Moose Freed** – Moose is a 14-year-old boy who lives in Margaret’s neighborhood in Farbrook. He’s Evan’s best friend, which is how Margaret meets him. Margaret develops a crush on Moose instantly, so it’s convenient when Dad hires Moose to mow the lawn for the family. Though Nancy insists that Laura Danker goes behind the A&P with Moose and Evan, Margaret doesn’t see any issue with Moose’s behavior until she realizes that the rumor isn’t true—and she realizes Moose might have started it. But when Margaret calls him out on it, she suspects that Nancy actually started the rumor. Learning that Moose isn’t spreading lies about younger girls makes Margaret feel much better about having a crush on him.

**Mr. Benedict** – Mr. Benedict is Margaret’s sixth grade teacher. He’s a young, first-year teacher, and Margaret quickly realizes that Mr. Benedict is somewhat afraid of his students. However, when the students work together to pick on him, he’s able to shut them down and seems far more confident afterwards. Margaret and the PTS’s resent him for assigning a yearlong personal project on anything of their choice. They think the project is silly—though everyone in the class, aside from Margaret, turns in booklets that indicate they took the project seriously and did a lot of research. In comparison, Margaret feels horrible about only writing Mr. Benedict a letter detailing the research she did into different religions. Though Mr. Benedict seems supportive of Margaret’s quest to find a religion and work on her project the way she did, Margaret is unable to accept his kindness—she runs out of the room crying, and she doesn’t speak privately to Mr. Benedict again.

**Freddy Barnett** – Freddy is a troublemaker in Margaret’s class. Kids refer to him as a “lobster” because he comes to school on the first day sunburned. Freddy plays mean tricks on kids, like pulling their chairs back when they try to sit down. Margaret

tries to avoid him as best she can.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Dr. Potter** – In addition to being one of the local doctors in Farbrook, Dr. Potter is also Gretchen’s father. Gretchen steals his anatomy book at one point so the Four PTS’s can study the male anatomy.

**Mrs. Wheeler** – Mrs. Wheeler is Nancy’s mom. She’s heavily involved in the PTA and neighborhood women’s groups.

**Mrs. Fishbein** – Mrs. Fishbein is Norman Fishbein’s mother.

**Mr. Binamin** – Mr. Binamin is a man whom Grandma meets when she’s wintering in Florida. They have dinner together and see shows, and it’s implied that their relationship is romantic.

**Jay Hassler** – Jay is a boy in Margaret’s class. He’s attractive and is one of the few boys who doesn’t try to step on the girls’ feet when the class learns to square dance.

**Evan Wheeler** – Evan is Nancy’s 14-year-old brother. According to Nancy, he’s “disgusting” like all 14-year-old boys and just wants to look at pictures of naked women. Evan regularly picks on Nancy and her friends.

**Miss Abbott** – Miss Abbott is the gym teacher; she’s close to six feet tall and tells the girls to practice good posture, no matter their height.

**Rabbi Kellerman** – Rabbi Kellerman is the rabbi at Grandma’s temple.

The novel shows that a major stress of puberty comes from insecurity and self-consciousness about one’s changing body. From the beginning, Margaret is self-conscious about the way her body is (or isn’t) developing. On her first day in Farbrook, as she changes into a swimsuit in front of Nancy, Nancy comments on how flat Margaret’s chest still is—and Margaret insists that she’s just “small boned,” rather than admitting that she’s not as developed as Nancy expected her to be. Calling herself “small boned” is a way to cover up her embarrassment about feeling behind in her physical development. But Nancy’s behavior, too, reveals her own self-consciousness about puberty. In particular, lying about having started her period functions in much the same way that Margaret’s “small boned” comment did—it shows just how badly Nancy wants to start her period, and it reveals her anxiety that *not* having gotten it means that she isn’t developing “normally.”

In addition to the stress of feeling developmentally behind, the novel shows that it’s also stressful to develop normally. For example, even though Margaret wants to wear a bra—which makes her feel mature and feminine—she still finds it mortifying to buy one. Margaret is embarrassed when the saleslady measures her, and it’s unsettling when she needs Mom’s help to fasten the hooks on her bras in the dressing room. This normal developmental milestone is stressful and unpleasant, even though it’s something Margaret wants, simply because it has to do with her changing body. Similarly, Nancy’s emotional reaction when she finally does start her period is extreme. When she discovers in a public restroom that she’s started her period, Nancy is terrified and inconsolable. Of course, this is partially because Margaret has caught her in a lie about her period, but it’s nevertheless impossible to ignore that Nancy is extremely upset by and afraid of her period, even though she’s been longing for it to come. Again, this shows that normal developmental milestones—even ones that are desired—can be incredibly stressful.

Also, via Laura Danker, the novel shows that it can be terrible to be developmentally ahead of one’s peers. On her first day of school, Margaret initially mistakes Laura for the teacher, as Laura is tall, wears a bra, and already looks like an adult woman. It’s not until the spring that Margaret learns that Laura feels extremely self-conscious about her developing body. Though Margaret idealizes Laura’s body and wants to look like her, Laura implies that she’s constantly uncomfortable and unsettled as a result of her appearance; grown men stare at her, classmates spread salacious (and untrue) rumors about her, and she feels isolated from her peers. With this, Margaret starts to realize that everyone feels self-conscious about their bodies during puberty, no matter where they are in their development. Perceiving oneself to be behind or ahead is stressful, but so is feeling on track with one’s peers. After all, the four PTS’s are all at about the same place puberty-wise, and they still can’t stop comparing themselves to each other, lying



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### PUBERTY

*Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* follows 11-year-old Margaret over the course of her sixth-grade year, which she starts just after her parents

move the family from New York City to the New Jersey suburbs. When she arrives, Margaret is just beginning puberty, and she’s both anxious and excited about puberty’s physical changes. She constantly wonders if she’s going to develop “normally,” which she defines as growing into a 32AA bra and starting her period soon. But, as the novel shows, there is no “normal” with puberty; its physical and emotional changes happen differently for everyone and on different timelines. Perhaps, then, the only thing that’s “normal” when it comes to puberty is feeling anxious and unsatisfied, and comparing oneself to others.

about their development, and feeling insecure about how their friends perceive them. Overall, it seems, there's no way to go through puberty comfortably—what's "normal" is feeling anxious and insecure.



## FRIENDSHIP, FITTING IN, AND SOCIAL PRESSURE

On the day that 11-year-old Margaret and her parents move to Farbrook, Margaret meets her first new friend, Nancy. Within days, Margaret is drawn into Nancy's circle, becoming friends with Janie and Gretchen. The four of them form a secret club called the Four PTS's (Pre-Teen Sensations). As the year progresses, the girls' club meetings consistently revolve around boys and puberty, and Margaret finds that she often has to dress a certain way, or say that she likes boys she actually doesn't like, in order to fit in. Furthermore, she learns that other kids her age are *also* lying about who they are and what they've experienced in order to fit in or impress others—in fact, it seems like barely anyone is comfortable with who they actually are. But as the novel progresses, this social order begins to seem silly to Margaret, who is genuinely interested in figuring out who she is and what she truly wants. In this way, the book suggests that it's immature to change oneself to fit in with others—growing up isn't about conforming or being normal, it's about gaining the confidence to be true to oneself.

From the moment Margaret starts spending time with Nancy, she realizes that their friendship is contingent on embodying a certain ideal. At first, Margaret doesn't live up to Nancy's expectations—Nancy believes that "city girls develop faster," so she's disappointed when Margaret's chest proves to be just as flat and undeveloped as her own, and again when Margaret admits she's never kissed a boy. Following these revelations, Nancy begins dictating how Margaret and her other friends must dress and act in order to be a part of her secret club. Nancy mandates that the Four PTS's must all wear **bras** and can't wear socks with their loafers. For Margaret, this comes at a price: she has to go through the anxiety-inducing experience of asking Mom to buy her a bra so she can attend the first club meeting, and Margaret has blisters on her feet before she even gets to school on the first day. But apparently this is all worth it to Margaret, because she wants to belong to her friend group and feel "normal."

This peer pressure leads Margaret and her friends to try to change themselves or lie in order to fit in. When the girls decide they must keep Boy Books (ranked lists of the boys they like) and check each other's lists every meeting, Margaret has another conundrum: Nancy hates the boy Margaret likes (Moose), so to stay in Nancy's good graces, Margaret lies that she has a crush on Philip Leroy, rather than sharing her feelings for Moose. This shows that, at least subconsciously, Margaret believes that the only way to have friends is to hide her own

desires and be the kind of friend Nancy wants. But even without overt pressure from Nancy, Margaret still feels pressure to fit in with her classmates and look more mature. This is why, for instance, Margaret stuffs her bra in order to go to Norman Fishbein's Christmas party. And Nancy even caves to this pressure by lying to her friends about starting her period. Just as Margaret's stuffed bra makes Margaret feel more powerful and confident, Nancy's lie about starting her period turns her into an expert on the subject among her friends—something that ensures that Nancy can continue to dictate how the other PTS's act, since she seems older and more experienced.

However, as the school year passes, Margaret gradually realizes that she would rather be herself than pretend to be the person Nancy wants her to be. For instance, she grows tired of pretending to have a crush on Philip Leroy, since she can't ignore that he's an obnoxious and lazy person who isn't worthy of her affection. Though she never works up the courage to stop ranking him first in her Boy Book, she does end the novel feeling far more confident about her crush on Moose—showing that she's gaining the confidence to be herself. Similarly, Nancy spreads rumors that their classmate Laura is promiscuous, and she warns Margaret that Laura's reputation is contagious, thereby keeping Margaret from ever befriending Laura. But when Margaret finally speaks with Laura, Laura implies that none of Nancy's accusations are true—Nancy is simply targeting and bullying Laura because Laura is so much more developed than she is. Margaret's willingness to form her own opinion, rather than parroting Nancy's, again shows that Margaret is finally developing the confidence to be her own person and make choices that put her at odds with her peers. By the end of the novel, as Margaret is more and more willing to think for herself, she realizes that she can't take Nancy at her word about who Margaret should like, idolize, or vilify—she must make these decisions for herself. The book ends with a much more mature Margaret, someone with the confidence to discover who she is, what she thinks, and what she wants.



## RELIGION

When 11-year-old Margaret and her parents move from New York City to Farbrook, New Jersey, Margaret experiences a shock: unlike in New York, everyone in Farbrook classifies people by their religion. Margaret's Jewish Dad and Christian Mom have purposefully raised Margaret without religion, so this poses a problem for her: though she talks to God privately, she doesn't attend religious services. And part of fitting in and being "normal" in Farbrook, according to Margaret's friends, means either joining the Y (if one is Christian) or the Jewish Community Center (if one is Jewish). As part of her quest to fit in in her new home, Margaret embarks on a yearlong project to research different religions and figure out which religion she wants to be, a project

that doesn't go entirely to plan. Though Margaret isn't able to draw any conclusions about her religious identity by the end of her sixth-grade year, the novel ultimately suggests that attending religious services isn't necessarily the same as being religious or spiritual; it can, as Margaret discovers, be just another way to fit into a community. Rather, the novel proposes that a person's personal connection to God is far more important and meaningful than affiliation with a church or temple.

For Margaret's entire life before moving to Farbrook, religion hasn't been a big concern. In fact, from the beginning of the novel, she's dismissive of religion. When noting that her Jewish Grandma keeps asking if Margaret has Jewish boyfriends, Margaret explains that she doesn't date—and she asks readers why it should matter whether she dates someone who's Jewish or not. With this, Margaret makes it clear that she doesn't see religion as a defining factor in her own identity, and she doesn't see it as a defining factor for others, either. This is presumably the kind of outlook that Margaret's parents want for their daughter: Mom's Christian parents disowned her when she married a Jewish man, so they see religion as something nefarious that can tear families apart. They've therefore diminished the importance of religion to their family, raising Margaret without one, to spare Margaret the heartache of going through what Mom did. However, once Margaret gets to Farbrook, she learns that identifying as “nothing” will make it impossible to fit in. This is why she embarks on her personal project to decide which religion she is—in her mind, the purpose is to help her fit in by showing her whether she should join the Y or the Jewish Community Center.

Margaret thinks of being religious as simply attending services—something that doesn't feel meaningful for her. Margaret first attends temple with Grandma for Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year. Though she loves the music, she doesn't understand any of the rabbi's sermon, even the parts in English. Instead, she ends up counting different colored hats in the temple. Later, she's surprised that, when she accompanies Janie and Nancy to two different Christian churches, she has much the same experience—she loves the music, doesn't understand the service, and doesn't feel closer to God. This suggests that Margaret's insistence that being religious means attending services is, if not totally incorrect, at least overly simplistic. Especially since she's so concerned with fitting in, it's disorienting and confusing when none of the houses of worship feel like home to her—in her mind, this means she'll never be able to choose whether to join the Y or the Jewish Community Center, as she doesn't feel at home in either faith. And this becomes even more upsetting when, after her maternal grandparents' disastrous visit, Margaret declares that she doesn't believe in God—which, in Margaret's understanding, condemns her to *never* fitting in in Farbrook.

However, Margaret's attempt to find a church community, the

novel suggests, misses the point of religion—what's more important is her personal relationship to God. Indeed, Margaret has an intimate relationship with God. She talks to him regularly throughout the novel and implies that she's been doing so for some time—long before she begins her project to choose a religion. Her conversations with God help her unpack her fears and desires about puberty, friendship, and family. However, as Margaret researches and tries out religious communities, she essentially implies that she doesn't think her private relationship to God is legitimate or worthwhile—in her understanding, she has to seek God in a church to have a real relationship with him. But when Margaret stops giving God the silent treatment at the end of the novel and resumes her private conversations with him, it seems that she has learned an important lesson: that she doesn't have to go to a church to have a relationship with God, or to be sufficiently spiritual. Her relationship with God might not help her fit in with her peers, but it does offer Margaret a nonjudgmental, open place where she can voice her fears and say things she'd never say to any of the people in her life—something the novel suggests is a net good. Ultimately, the novel encourages readers to realize that spirituality doesn't have to be tied to a certain belief system or house of worship to be meaningful or legitimate.



### FAMILY CONFLICT

Margaret's parents have fraught relationships with their own parents, which creates a lot of tension in her family. Margaret's Mom, for instance, hasn't spoken to her parents for 14 years; they disowned her because she married a Jewish man (Margaret's Dad). Meanwhile, Margaret's paternal grandmother, Grandma, is also a source of friction, since Margaret's parents believe that Grandma has too much influence on Margaret. This, in Margaret's understanding, is one of their reasons for moving to New Jersey: they want to put some distance between Margaret and Grandma, which is not what Margaret wants. And finally, as Margaret enters puberty, her own relationship with her parents becomes rockier and less harmonious. As these relationships develop over the course of the novel, it becomes clear that much of the family's tension results from the adults in Margaret's life having competing ideas about what's best for her—usually without asking Margaret what she herself thinks. This suggests that family conflict often arises when parents don't accept or respect who their children have chosen to be. The novel shows that conflicts between parents and children often arise when children make choices their parents don't approve of. The most obvious and extreme example of this is Mom's relationship with her parents, Margaret's Grandmother and Grandfather. Mom was raised Christian in Ohio, and when she met Dad and expressed interest in marrying him, her parents disowned her rather than accept their Jewish son-in-law. The novel makes it clear that Grandmother and



Grandfather's refusal to accept Dad was rooted in bigotry, but it was also about trying to control their adult daughter's choices. Besides this, the novel contains many smaller instances of parents disapproving of who their children are or what they do. For example, Grandma is perplexed that Mom and Dad would choose to move out of New York City to the suburbs, which she considers the country. But by not trying to empathize with and understand this choice, Grandma further alienates her son and daughter-in-law, leading to more family conflict.

By contrast, Margaret's parents generally give her freedom to make her own choices, which helps Margaret stay close to them as she matures. Though Mom and Dad aren't pleased when Margaret expresses interest in going with Grandma to temple or attending church services with her friends, they nevertheless allow her to go without much fuss. This shows how important it is to Mom and Dad to allow Margaret to make her own choices and become her own person—things that Mom in particular wasn't allowed to do when she was young. This results in a trusting relationship between Margaret and her parents, where she feels comfortable making requests—such as going to religious services, wearing a **bra**, or using deodorant—without fear that she's going to get in trouble for asking. In essence, the way Margaret's parents handle her requests and her growing independence shows that they're there to support her as she grows and tries new things. They become supportive allies, rather than enemies who stand in the way of Margaret's development.

That said, none of the adults in Margaret's life are faultless—the novel shows that even the most supportive parents and grandparents can make assumptions, something that can be extremely hurtful. Things come to a head between Margaret, her parents, and Mom's parents when Grandmother and Grandfather come to visit for the first time in 14 years. When the conversation turns to religion, and Margaret's religion in particular, Mom and Dad insist to Mom's parents that Margaret is “nothing,” and that she can choose a religion when she's an adult. Though this may be true on the surface, Margaret nevertheless resents that her parents try to speak for her without asking her how she thinks of herself. Margaret sees this as a sign of disrespect, and as an unwillingness on Mom and Dad's part to actually support Margaret's religious experimentation. It's just as hurtful when Grandmother and Grandfather insist that Margaret can't escape being a Christian—and when, the next evening, Grandma declares that Margaret is Jewish. Though Margaret sees her parents' and grandparents' assertions as controlling and dehumanizing, it's also possible to see the adults' assertions about Margaret's religious affiliation as something less sinister: hope for Margaret's future. Mom and Dad want to save Margaret the pain of having to navigate an interfaith marriage and the resulting family politics, while Margaret's grandparents on both

sides want to make sure she's safe and cared for spiritually by identifying with the “correct” religion. But regardless of their good intentions, the outcome of their behavior—Margaret's further alienation, and renewed family conflict—suggests that it would've been more supportive to let Margaret figure out her own identity and assert it without interference.

The novel doesn't tie up its exploration of family conflict neatly. Margaret is still at odds with Grandma at the end of the novel, and it seems unlikely that Mom's relationship with her parents is going to improve. This in and of itself suggests that conflict between family members is normal and expected. Nevertheless, it implies that some conflict can be avoided or diminished when parents respect their children's choices and autonomy.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### BRAS

For Margaret and her friends, bras are some of the most overt symbols of adulthood and womanhood.

Wearing a bra, they believe, means that they're well on their way to becoming mature women—which is presumably why Nancy makes wearing a bra a condition of joining her secret club. This results in both Janie and Margaret having to ask their mothers to buy them bras so they can attend their first meeting; neither girl had been wearing one until that point. But for Margaret at least, Nancy's mandate creates a convenient excuse to ask for a bra—and once she gets her bra and starts wearing it, it has the desired effect of making her feel mature.

However, the novel also offers many indications that the bra itself doesn't make the wearer a woman—rather, the bras can also show how young and immature Margaret and her friends are. For instance, it's humorous when Margaret decides to stuff her bra with exactly six cotton balls, three on each side, to attend Norman Fishbein's Christmas party. Margaret might feel like she looks better and more adult with the cotton balls in her bra, but the fact that she has to create the illusion of breasts to feel adult only highlights how physically immature she still is. Similarly, at the first secret club meeting, Nancy refers to her friends' new Gro-Bras (presumably, training bras) as “baby bras,” insisting that they need to work hard to grow breasts so they can graduate to wearing 32AAs like her. Nancy, who's very insecure about her own body and development, means this as an insult—she believes she's better and more adult than her friends because she's wearing bras in a standard size (even a tiny one).



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Atheneum Books for Young Readers edition of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, published in 2014.

## Chapter 1 Quotes

Now some kids might think, who cares about seeing a grandmother? But Sylvia Simon is a lot of fun, considering her age, which I happen to know is sixty. The only problem is she's always asking me if I have boyfriends and if they're Jewish. Now that is ridiculous because number one I don't have boyfriends. And number two what would I care if they're Jewish or not?

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Grandma

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 3

## Explanation and Analysis

As Margaret tells readers about her move to the New Jersey suburbs from New York City with her parents, she explains that she and her paternal grandmother, Grandma, have a close relationship. Margaret already suggests that by enjoying spending time with a grandparent, she's something of an outlier—this isn't something that all, or maybe most, kids think would be fun. But in this situation, Margaret is okay standing out. Her relationship with Grandma is strong and fun enough to outweigh any issues it might cause for Margaret socially.

However, Margaret's relationship with Grandma isn't without its faults. Namely, Margaret thinks that Grandma is oddly concerned with whether Margaret is dating Jewish boys. Later, Margaret reveals that Grandma is Jewish (her Dad, Grandma's son, was raised Jewish) and is still very active in her temple community. To Grandma, religion is important because it will keep Margaret spiritually safe, and it will help Margaret belong. Though Margaret is years away from being old enough to get married, the implication seems to be that Grandma would like to keep Margaret in the Jewish faith when, in the future, she goes on to create her own family.

But for Margaret, religion isn't a big deal. She says as much when she asks why she should care if a boyfriend is Jewish. Religion—any religion—isn't important to how Margaret thinks of herself, and it's not something she considers when thinking about other people's identities, either. After all, it's not until much later in the novel that Margaret reveals that Grandma is Jewish; Grandma's religion doesn't matter as

much as her familial relationship does.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

“Oh, you're still flat.” Nancy laughed.


“Not exactly,” I said, pretending to be very cool. “I'm small boned, is all.”

“I'm growing already,” Nancy said, sticking her chest way out. “In a few years I'm going to look like one of those girls in *Playboy*.”

Well, I didn't think so, but I didn't say anything. My father gets *Playboy* and I've seen those girls in the middle. Nancy looks like she has a long way to go. Almost as far as me.

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon, Nancy Wheeler (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 7



## Explanation and Analysis

When Margaret changes into a swimsuit at Nancy's house, the girls discuss how developed (or not) their breasts are—and Nancy insists that she's going to look like a *Playboy* model. The fact that Nancy brings this up at all suggests that developing breasts is a big deal for her. It's something she's looking forward to, in part because she believes she's going to get much-wanted sexual attention for her adult body. For Margaret, things aren't quite so clear-cut. Her chest is still flat, and she seems well aware of this. But saying she's “small boned” rather than letting Nancy call her “flat” shows that Margaret is self-conscious about not developing faster, even if it might not be as big of a deal for her as it is for Nancy. Part of this, though, seems to be that Margaret wants to look cool and composed in front of Nancy, whom she wants to impress so she can make new friends in Farbrook.

Though Nancy makes it seem like she and Margaret are miles apart in terms of physical maturity, Margaret clues readers in to the possibility that they're actually in close to the same place. Neither of them look anything like a *Playboy* model; rather, they both still look like flat-chested children, even if Nancy is already “growing.” Margaret's unwillingness to call Nancy out, though, again shows that Margaret is trying to fit in and not rock the boat.

●● My parents don't know I actually talk to God. I mean, if I told them they'd think I was some kind of religious fanatic or something. So I keep it very private. I can talk to him without moving my lips if I have to. My mother says God is a nice idea. He belongs to everybody.

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Dad, Mom

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 16

### Explanation and Analysis

After Margaret speaks to God about her day, she explains to readers how her parents feel about God and religion more broadly. Though Margaret hasn't shared a ton about her parents' history with religion at this point, their experiences nevertheless influence how and why they'd characterize someone who talks to God as a "religious fanatic." Mom's parents disowned her when she expressed interest in marrying Dad, who's Jewish; and even Grandma, Dad's mom, wasn't pleased with the interfaith marriage. So with Margaret, they have very specifically decided to minimize the role of religion in her life.

However, this doesn't mean that Margaret isn't still spiritual. Indeed, she explains here that though she fears what her parents might think if they knew she spoke to God regularly, she nevertheless chooses to continue her relationship with him anyway. She shows throughout the novel that she gets a lot out of her relationship with God—she can talk about all her worries and fears, without being judged for what she's thinking. In this way, the novel frames Margaret's relationship with God as a net positive for her.


This passage also shows how Mom has, perhaps unwittingly, guided Margaret to making the decision to talk to God privately. Mom is willing to acknowledge that the idea of God and religion is fine—it can provide people a lot of comfort and community. Saying that God "belongs to everybody" also suggests that a person doesn't need to seek God through a church or other house of worship to have a valid relationship with him, or to be spiritual in some other form. So it's possible that Mom wouldn't be pleased to learn that Margaret talks to God, but Mom nevertheless paved the way for Margaret to form this kind of relationship with him.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

●● The teacher wasn't in the room when we got there. That is, the *real* teacher. There was this girl, who I thought was the teacher, but she turned out to be a kid in our class. She was very tall (that's why I thought she was the teacher) with eyes shaped like a cat's. You could see the outline of her bra through her blouse and you could also tell from the front that it wasn't the smallest size. She sat down alone and didn't talk to anyone. I wondered if maybe she was new too, because everybody else was busy talking and laughing about summer vacations and new hair styles and all that.

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Laura Danker

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 29

### Explanation and Analysis



On Margaret's first day of school, she initially thinks her classmate Laura Danker is the teacher. The novel implies that despite Margaret's fears that she's not developing normally, she's actually on more or less the same timeline as a lot of her peers. Laura, though, is far ahead of her classmates, male and female, as Margaret observes here. Laura already has an adult body and appears to wear a bra in standard sizing. Importantly, Margaret doesn't really make any judgments about Laura upon first seeing her. Though Margaret takes note of all the physical qualities that set Laura apart from the rest of the girls in class (her bra, sitting by herself, her seeming isolation), she doesn't assume anything bad about Laura because of these things. This shows that at least at this early point, Margaret isn't as judgmental as she becomes later in the novel, with Nancy's prodding. She is willing at this point to think for herself and come to her own conclusions about other people, even if she never has the opportunity to speak to Laura Danker.

Though Margaret doesn't speak to Laura and so never learns from Laura why she's so alone, Laura later reveals that she is ostracized because she's so physically mature. This shows that puberty is anxiety-inducing and can be difficult for everyone—no matter where they might be in their development.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ The others were already there. Janie Loomis, Gretchen Potter, and Nancy. That was it. We sat around on the porch and Nancy brought us cokes and cookies. When Gretchen helped herself to six Oreos at once Nancy asked her how much weight she'd gained over the summer. Gretchen put back four cookies and said, "Not much."

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Janie Loomis, Gretchen Potter, Nancy Wheeler

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 34

### Explanation and Analysis

When Margaret shows up at Nancy's for the first secret club meeting, one of the first things she observes is Nancy policing Gretchen's cookie intake.

First, Margaret seems to come to the meeting expecting there to be more members—her "That was it" expresses surprise that she's one of only four. The meeting is also surprisingly casual, taking place on Nancy's porch with normal refreshments. All of this shows Margaret that her expectations for the club might be a bit high—it seems like what Nancy wants are some friends, not necessarily to be the ringleader of a huge group of girls.

However, by taking it upon herself to shame Gretchen for taking six cookies, Nancy establishes herself as someone who regularly controls what her friends do, think, and say. This also suggests that Gretchen may be a bit bigger than her friends, and is therefore more likely to be a target of Nancy's controlling and shaming behavior. This functions as something of a warning for Margaret: if she doesn't manage to conform to what Nancy wants her to be (whether because of her size, when she starts her period, or which boy she likes), Nancy is going to call her out publicly and embarrass her into falling into line.

☞ "But if you aren't any religion, how are you going to know if you should join the Y or the Jewish Community Center?" Janie asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I never thought about it. Maybe we won't join either one."

"But *everybody* belongs to one or the other," Nancy said.

**Related Characters:** Nancy Wheeler, Margaret Simon, Janie Loomis (speaker), Dad, Mom

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 40-41

### Explanation and Analysis


At the first club meeting of the Four PTS's, Margaret tells her new friends about Mom and Dad's experiences with religion and their choice to raise her without a religion. Up until this point, Margaret's lack of religion hasn't been a big deal for her. She does, after all, have a very personal and fulfilling relationship with God, and it's never occurred to her that she'd need to legitimize her relationship by joining an organized religion.


Janie and Nancy, though, introduce Margaret to the idea that what's most important about religion isn't one's personal relationship with God. Rather, at least in Farbrook, religion is how people fit in. Joining a house of worship tells a person who they are: if they're Jewish, they attend the local temple, observe Jewish holidays, and attend the Jewish Community Center for extracurricular activities. If they're Christian, they attend one of the Christian churches, observe Christian holidays, and join the Y. To them, it's simple—religion is how people define themselves, and a person without religion simply isn't going to fit in. This presents a major dilemma to Margaret, as she desperately wants to fit in. This desire is what spurs her to begin her yearlong project to choose a religion. The project is less about Margaret deepening her relationship with God. Instead, it's totally about trying to fit in her new home.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ She got me out of the first bra and into the next one. I wondered how I'd ever learn to do it by myself. Maybe my mother would have to dress me every day.

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Nancy Wheeler, Mom

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 48

### Explanation and Analysis

Mom is helping Margaret try on bras at the local department store. For Margaret, getting a bra is something she wants and is looking forward to. It will allow her to attend the next Four PTS's meeting, since Nancy mandated



that all the girls have to wear bras—and furthermore, Margaret is becoming more interested in maturing and looking adult. Taking all of this into account, shopping for her first bra should be something exciting and wholly positive.

But as this passage shows, this isn't exactly the case. Margaret might be excited to have her bra, but the bra is still something foreign to her. She doesn't know exactly how to put it on, and it's especially unsettling when Mom has to help her with the back clasps. Mom having to help drives home just what an uncomfortable place Margaret's in: she's at a point where she wants to wear a bra, a symbol of adulthood and independence. But at the same time, she needs her mother's help to actually wear that symbolically significant garment—something that makes Margaret feel even more like a child. Taken together, Margaret's experience shows that meeting milestones isn't always going to be anxiety free or wholly positive. Rather, it's normal to feel anxious and to need help navigating them.



## Chapter 7 Quotes


“Not me,” Nancy said, proudly. “Mine’s a thirty-two double A.”

We were all impressed.

“If you ever want to get out of those baby bras you have to exercise,” she told us.

**Related Characters:** Nancy Wheeler (speaker), Janie Loomis, Gretchen Potter, Margaret Simon

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 53

### Explanation and Analysis

To begin the first Four PTS's meeting after Nancy mandates that everyone wear bras, the girls get their bras checked. Margaret, Gretchen, and Janie all sport Gro-Bras (training bras) while Nancy is the only girl big enough to fit into standard bra sizing.

This establishes Nancy as someone who likes to lord her maturity over her friends. She may have been the one to mandate that they all wear bras to meetings, but it's also important to her that she wear a bra that she considers just a little bit better than her friends'. And Nancy is no doubt thrilled when Janie, Margaret, and Gretchen are all

impressed by her 32AA bra. To them, this represents maturity—and it's something they all aspire to.

Especially since Nancy was the one to dictate that her friends have to wear bras to attend meetings, it's interesting that she refers to her friends' Gro-Bras as “baby bras.” This infantilizing term suggests that even though getting the bras represented a step into womanhood for her friends, Nancy isn't willing to let her friends feel at all mature. Rather, to continue making herself feel superior and keep control, Nancy instead insults her friends' bras and offers them the cure: bust exercises. Bust exercises, of course, don't do anything to help people grow breasts, but this is beside the point for Nancy. It's all too easy for her to prey on her friends' insecurities and lead them in questionable directions, all to keep herself powerful and in control.

But on the other side of me things were even worse. I was next to Laura Danker! I was afraid to even look her way. Nancy warned me that reputations were catching. Well, I didn't have to worry because Laura didn't look my way either. She looked straight ahead.

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Mr. Benedict, Nancy Wheeler, Laura Danker

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 56

### Explanation and Analysis

After Mr. Benedict rearranges the classroom, Margaret is distraught: she's sitting next to a troublemaker on one side, and Laura Danker on the other. Keep in mind that Laura has a reputation for being promiscuous—a reputation that the novel later reveals is entirely false and exists thanks to rumors that Nancy fueled (if she didn't create them outright).

With this in mind, Margaret's fear of even sitting next to Laura shows how much power Nancy has to control her friends' behavior and their opinions of their classmates. Margaret never bothers to question or verify anything that Nancy says about Laura; she takes it as fact that Laura lets boys touch her, just because she's already so developed. And encouraging Margaret to fear Laura means that there's absolutely no risk that Margaret will ever try to befriend Laura—something that would weaken Nancy's power and expose her as a liar.

Margaret's fear of Laura also shows how conflicted she is about growing up. At various points in the novel, she admits

that she'd like to look more like Laura—and yet, Margaret is terrified of her. Being adult, and looking adult as Laura does, is desirable for Margaret, but this doesn't mean that Margaret doesn't find that goal intimidating.

For her part, Laura's unwillingness to acknowledge Margaret illustrates how alone she is emotionally. Because she's so much more developed than any of her classmates, most of the kids follow along with Nancy and refuse to even acknowledge Laura—that is, when they're not teasing her for being so physically mature. So though Margaret doesn't realize it, Laura's silence exposes how isolated she feels.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

☛☛ At first I tried very hard to understand what he was talking about. But after a while I gave up and started counting different colored hats. I counted eight brown, six black, three red, a yellow and a leopard before the rabbi finished. Then we all stood up again and everyone sang a song in Hebrew that I didn't know. And that was it! I expected something else. I don't know what exactly. A feeling, maybe. But I suppose you have to go more than once to know what it's all about.

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Rabbi Kellerman, Grandma

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 67

### Explanation and Analysis

When Margaret accompanies Grandma to temple as part of her personal project for Mr. Benedict, she makes a good-faith effort to understand what the rabbi is talking about. Ultimately, though, she finds she can't. The fact that Margaret struggles to understand the rabbi's sermon speaks to how successful her parents have been in minimizing the role of religion in the family's day-to-day life. Margaret doesn't have the knowledge base to understand exactly what the rabbi's sermon is about, as she's never had any religious education before. This starts to cast doubt on whether Margaret will actually be able to complete her project and choose a religion by the end of the novel—indeed, it seems like Margaret is going to have to engage in a lot more research in order to make an informed decision. So she appears to be onto something when she supposes she'll have to attend multiple times in order to really understand.

Then, it's interesting to look at what Margaret says about how her expectations for temple didn't line up with what

actually happened. She expected to feel something meaningful in the temple and, presumably, to feel close to God in a house of worship. This reflects Margaret's relatively new insistence that her relationship with God isn't as legitimate as it could be; she needs to find a religious community in order to actually have a meaningful relationship with him. In reality, Margaret ultimately realizes this isn't true—her relationship with God is meaningful and helpful to her as-is, without a religious community.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☛☛ The funniest thing was it was just like temple. Except it was all in English. But we read from a prayer book that didn't make sense and the minister gave a sermon I couldn't follow and I counted eight black hats, four red ones, six blue and two fur. At the end of the service everyone sang a hymn. Then we stood on line to shake hands with the minister. By then I was a pro at it.

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Janie Loomis

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 71


### Explanation and Analysis

Not long after Margaret goes with Grandma to temple, she also tries out a Christian church with Janie. It's important to note just how surprised Margaret seems that church and temple are so much alike. She implies that she expected them to be wildly different—and yet, she finds that both services follow more or less the same pattern. And it doesn't matter whether she's observing a Christian service or a Jewish one; the two are equally unintelligible to her. Through this, Margaret starts to discover that the different faiths really aren't so different in terms of what their services are like, though the belief systems and specific rituals of course differ. This suggests that Margaret's quest to choose a specific religion isn't necessarily going to end how she thinks it should. She currently believes that she's going to experience an "aha" moment at one of these services and feel closer to God as a result; whichever faith or house of worship can give her that experience is the one she'll choose. But this of course fails to acknowledge how close and fulfilling a relationship Margaret has with God already—and that, the novel ultimately suggests, is far more important than whether, or where, she goes to church.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ Also, we just about gave up on our Boy Books. For one thing the names never changed. Nancy managed to shift hers around. It was easy for her—with eighteen boys. But Janie and Gretchen and I always listed Philip Leroy number one. There was no suspense about the whole thing. And I wondered, did they list Philip Leroy because they really liked him or were they doing what I did—making him number one because he was so good-looking. Maybe they were ashamed to write who they really liked too.

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Moose Freed, Philip Leroy, Janie Loomis, Gretchen Potter, Nancy Wheeler

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 78



### Explanation and Analysis


As time goes on, the Four PTS's stop going by their "sensational" secret club names and almost give up on keeping Boy Books. Margaret suggests that the idea of the Boy Books was that the girls would constantly be able to adjust their rankings—and this would reflect how they actually felt about the boys on their lists. But, after being part of the club for a few months now, Margaret is starting to see just how much power Nancy has over the other girls, as she suspects that she, Gretchen, and Janie are all listing Philip first because he's cute and Nancy approves of him. Questioning Nancy is a sign that Margaret is becoming a more critical thinker. Even suspecting such a thing shows that Nancy's power is starting to wane, though Margaret isn't yet ready to be truthful herself or encourage her friends to do the same. So while Margaret is starting to mature, the rules of the game remain the same for the Four PTS's: do what it takes to fit in, even if whatever that might be—like listing Philip first in a Boy Book—doesn't reflect how you actually feel.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ I tiptoed back to my room and closed the door. I stepped into my closet and stood in one corner. I shoved three cotton balls into each side of my bra. Well, so what if it was cheating! Probably other girls did it too. I'd look a lot better, wouldn't I? So why not!

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 94

### Explanation and Analysis

In preparation for Norman Fishbein's Christmas party, Margaret decides to stuff her bra with cotton balls. On the surface, this shows how desperate Margaret is to develop breasts, which she sees as a sign of maturity and "normalcy." She even characterizes having a tiny bit of breast tissue is "better" than being flat and childish. She doesn't want to be left behind her peers in terms of meeting puberty's physical milestones, and she's willing to "cheat" in order to appear that she's just as mature.

However, the novel makes it clear that Margaret isn't that far behind her friends, if she's behind at all. Indeed, she, Janie, and Gretchen all wear Gro-Bras, which are training bras (which don't provide any support, but still help the girls feel mature and fit in). So Margaret's belief that she's behind and needs to stuff her bra to look like her friends and classmates looks more like a reflection of Margaret's insecurities, and not like it's based at all in fact.

Then, Margaret also suggests that it's normal for girls to feel anxious about how their bodies are developing—or how their bodies *aren't* developing, as the case might be. Margaret justifies stuffing her own bra, for instance, by saying that she's not the only one to do so.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ *Are you there, God? It's me, Margaret. I just came home from church. I loved the choir—the songs were so beautiful. Still, I didn't really feel you God. I'm more confused than ever. I'm trying hard to understand but I wish you'd help me a little. If only you could give me a hint God. Which religion should I be? Sometimes I wish I'd been born one way or the other.*

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 108-109

### Explanation and Analysis

When Margaret gets home after attending a Christmas Eve service with Nancy and her family, she talks to God about the experience. This marks Margaret's third experiment with organized religion, after going to temple with Grandma and a Sunday service with Janie. And just as before,


Margaret likes the music more than anything else—but she still doesn't describe the music in religious terms. The music might be the most enjoyable part, but it's also not helping her feel any closer to God.

All of this is very confusing for Margaret, as she expected to suddenly feel at home in a house of worship and know that she belonged there. However, as she continues to experiment with religious services, the novel starts to suggest that a person's spirituality and relationship with a higher power doesn't need to be mediated by a house of worship to be legitimate and worthwhile. Margaret is privately very spiritual and regularly talks to God like this—and she hopes that she can fit in in Farbrook by making her private relationship with God public through joining a church. So her project is as much, if not more, about trying to fit in than it actually is an experiment in spirituality.

Margaret's final sentence ("Sometimes I wish I'd been born one way or another") gets at one of the big reasons why she's having so much trouble with her project. Unlike Grandma, Nancy, or Janie, Margaret hasn't been raised with religious beliefs and hasn't been attending Hebrew or Sunday school for her entire life. She doesn't have the literacy in religion that her friends have, and this is one of the reasons she doesn't understand the services. She realizes here that had her parents raised her with religious beliefs, she wouldn't be facing this particular problem.

☞ The film told us about the ovaries and explained why girls menstruate. But it didn't tell us how it feels, except to say that it is not painful, which we knew anyway. Also, it didn't really show a girl getting it. It just said how wonderful nature was and how we would soon become women and all that.

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Mom, Janie Loomis, Gretchen Potter, Nancy Wheeler

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 111

### Explanation and Analysis

Margaret and her female classmates are watching a film explaining female puberty; it pays particular attention to menstruation. Menstruation is a subject Margaret and her friends are very curious about—after all, one of the girls' initial rules when they were forming the Four PTS's is that whoever gets their period has to tell everyone else what it's

like. And this makes sense: as girls who have no way of knowing what menstruation feels like, menstruation seems like a huge deal and a big unknown.

But Margaret doesn't feel like this film does a good job of answering her questions. It might give a dry and scientific explanation of the ovaries' role in menstruation, for instance, and insist that having a period is wonderful, but for Margaret, that's not the point. Understanding what the ovaries do—while important—doesn't make menstruation real and understandable for her. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the only way to get the answers Margaret is looking for is to get one's first period—but at this point, Margaret doesn't understand this yet. So the film just frustrates her more.

When Margaret notes that she already knows menstruation doesn't hurt, it's an indirect reference to how open and trusting her relationship is with Mom. While Margaret never actually shares with readers how Mom framed these conversations about puberty and menstruation, she implies that Mom has spoken to her about it—and that Mom has done a pretty good job of doing at least as well as the film does at explaining what's going to happen.

☞ "Does it make you feel older?" I asked.

"Naturally," Gretchen answered. "My mother said now I'll really have to watch what I eat because I've gained too much weight this year. And she said to wash my face well from now on—with soap."

"And that's it?" Nancy said. "The whole story?"

"I'm sorry if I've disappointed you, Nancy. But really, that's all there is to tell. Oh, one thing I forgot. My mother said I may not get it every month yet. Sometimes it takes a while to get regular."

**Related Characters:** Nancy Wheeler, Gretchen Potter, Margaret Simon (speaker), Janie Loomis

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 114

### Explanation and Analysis

A week after Margaret and her friends see the educational film about menstruation in school, Gretchen starts her period and calls an emergency PTS meeting to tell everyone about it.

Most important here is that though Gretchen admits to



feeling older—and though this is an exciting, important moment for the PTS's—Gretchen generally suggests that there's not much to tell. Now that she has her period, it's not such a big deal. Of course, it comes with some other unwelcome changes, such as having to watch her weight (which the novel implies matters more to Gretchen's mom and to Nancy than to Gretchen herself) and wash her face regularly. And her period might be inconvenient for a while, since Gretchen's mom is correct that it can take a while for a person's period to regularize. But after anticipating her first period for so long, it doesn't seem nearly as meaningful as it once did.

This is hard for Nancy to fathom, as she's held up getting one's period as the pinnacle of maturity for the entire novel. It's something she aspires to, and it's no doubt unsettling for her when Gretchen (rather than Nancy herself) is the first of the group to get it. In this meeting, Gretchen is the authority and Nancy can only listen and ask questions—a position that doesn't give Nancy as much power over her friends as she's used to. This helps explain why Nancy eventually decides to lie that she started her period, as it gives her back the power that she was forced to cede to Gretchen in this passage.

☞ *Are you there God? It's me, Margaret. Gretchen, my friend, got her period. I'm so jealous God. I hate myself for being so jealous, but I am. I wish you'd help me just a little. Nancy's sure she's going to get it soon, too. And if I'm last I don't know what I'll do. Oh please God. I just want to be normal.*

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Nancy Wheeler, Gretchen Potter

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 111

### Explanation and Analysis

After Gretchen starts her period, Margaret is distraught. Margaret, like Nancy, holds starting one's period as the ultimate marker of maturity and of having really started puberty. And Margaret fears she's developing more slowly than her friends, so she fixates on the fact that she hasn't started her period yet as proof, essentially, that she's behind. However, the novel does imply that Margaret is more or less in the same place developmentally as her friends; she, Nancy, and Gretchen all get their periods within five of six months of each other. This shows that while Margaret may be putting undue stress on herself (since there's no way for her to control when she starts, and

she starts her period only a few months after this), her stress is still real and important to her. She wants to fit in and be "normal"—and starting her period will help her do that.

Then, Margaret brings this problem to God because of her close relationship with him. This, in and of itself, is proof that Margaret doesn't need to join a house of worship in order for her spirituality to be real and valid—she's getting exactly what she needs out of her relationship with him. God offers her a place to voice her fears and say things she'd never say to anyone else, which in turn helps Margaret make sense of her thoughts and feel okay with where she is in her development.


## Chapter 17 Quotes

☞☞ "Does she always act like that?"

"It's her first time," Mrs. Wheeler explained. "She's frightened." Nancy was still crying and there was a lot of whispering going on.

I couldn't believe it! Nancy, who knew everything! She'd lied to me about her period. She'd never had it before!

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Wheeler, Margaret Simon (speaker), Nancy Wheeler

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 123

### Explanation and Analysis

On the day the Wheelers invite Margaret along on a day trip to New York City, Nancy gets her first period. This is a shock for Margaret, as Nancy told her friends at least a month ago that she'd already started.

The revelation that Nancy lied helps Margaret see that she shouldn't take Nancy at her word. Nancy is willing to lie to get ahead and to keep power over the friend group by making herself seem more mature and knowledgeable about things. Margaret seems to clue into this when she talks about "Nancy, who knew everything!" This suggests that going forward, Margaret isn't going to take Nancy as seriously when Nancy positions herself as the expert—clearly, Nancy *doesn't* know everything.

Though Nancy's reasons for lying about starting her period may be rooted in wanting to have power over her friends, it's nevertheless important to acknowledge that Nancy legitimately wanted to start her period. Her belief that starting her period is a big deal that would confirm her



budding adult status isn't untrue just because she lied; rather, her lie drives home just how important starting her period was to her sense of self.

However much Nancy wanted to start her period, though, this doesn't diminish the fact that Nancy is genuinely scared now that her period has arrived. This mirrors how unsettling and embarrassing it was for Margaret to purchase her first bras—just as Margaret wanted a bra but struggled emotionally to get through the ordeal, Nancy is struggling emotionally to grasp what it means to have started her period. Some of this likely has to do with the fact that Margaret has now caught Nancy in a lie (something that can jeopardize Nancy's power over the friend group), but it also seems like Nancy is having a fairly normal reaction to such a milestone.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

☝ To make matters worse I had to sit facing Laura Danker. I hated her. I hated her for being so big and beautiful and having all the boys stare at her, including Mr. Benedict. Also, I hated her because she knew she was normal and I didn't know a thing about me!

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Laura Danker

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 129-130

### Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Benedict has just assigned group projects and put together the groups himself; Margaret is working with Norman Fishbein (whom she doesn't like), Philip Leroy (who she's realizing is a jerk), and Laura.

It's interesting to note how much Margaret's thoughts about Laura have changed over the course of the novel. For instance, on the first day of school and at Norman's Christmas party, Margaret described Laura for readers as being "pretty" and possibly lonely. But as Margaret has entered puberty herself, suddenly Laura seems to have everything—and Margaret is supremely jealous. She channels this jealousy into hatred, even as she admires Laura.

Margaret sees the way that Laura moves through the world as being superior to Margaret's. Margaret implies that while people still see her as a child, the same can't be said for

Laura. Laura is "big" (which Margaret uses to refer to Laura's developed breasts and her height), "beautiful" (which is a more adult word than something like "pretty" or "cute"), and men stare at her. This is the most interesting of Margaret's observations, as she implies that it's desirable to be stared at all the time. It's possible to trace this back to Nancy, who has previously said that she wants to look like a girl from *Playboy* magazine and who's asserted that she'll want everyone to look at her once she's physically mature. However, Laura ultimately shares that her classmates tease her incessantly for being so physically mature, and the attention she receives is totally unwanted. Similarly, Margaret believes Laura knows that she's "normal," unlike Margaret—but Laura makes it very clear that she's teased because she's the only physically mature student in the class. At least when compared to her classmates, Laura *isn't* normal, even though she's developed breasts and has (Margaret believes) started her period. So though Margaret's hatred of Laura, and the way she conceptualizes everything Laura has, may be understandable, it nevertheless betrays just how young and immature Margaret still is.

## Chapter 19 Quotes

☝ Now that really started me thinking. For one thing, I never knew she was Catholic. For another, I wondered what she said in Confession. I mean, did she talk about what she did with boys? And if she did, what did the priest say to her? Did she go to Confession every time she did something bad? Or did she save it all up and go once a month?

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Nancy Wheeler, Laura Danker

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 132

### Explanation and Analysis

Margaret is very interested to learn that Laura is a practicing Catholic and plans to attend Confession after working in the library after school. The fact that Margaret had no idea Laura was Catholic shows how one-dimensional Laura is to Margaret. Up until this point, Laura has just been physically developed and promiscuous in Margaret's mind. It's never occurred to Margaret that Laura might be religious, or might be anything other than beautiful, mature, and supposedly sexual.

Then, Margaret's questions about what Laura must do or

say during Confession betrays how little she knows about this practice. There's a pretty standard script for both the priest and the confessor, and churches typically offer Confession on a standard schedule. So if Laura's church, for instance, only offers Confession monthly, it's not that Laura is "saving up" all her supposed bad deeds and choosing to go infrequently—that's just what her church offers, and it doesn't reflect at all on how good or bad Laura is. Altogether, Margaret's assumptions about Laura's experiences at Confession are filtered through the rumors she's heard from Nancy and accepted at face value. They don't reflect a realistic view of Laura's character or her Catholic faith.

☞ “Don't you think I know all about *you* and your friends? Do you think it's any fun to be the biggest kid in the class?”

“I don't know,” I said. “I never thought about it.”



“Well, try thinking about it. Think about how you'd feel if you had to wear a bra in fourth grade and how everybody laughed and how you always had to cross your arms in front of you. And about how the boys called you dirty names just because of how you looked.”


I thought about it. “I'm sorry, Laura,” I said.

“I'll bet!”

“I really am. If you want to know the truth...well, I wish I looked more like you than like me.”

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon, Laura Danker (speaker), Nancy Wheeler

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 135

### Explanation and Analysis

Margaret has just accused Laura of being promiscuous; the two are walking toward Laura's Catholic church. Through this, Laura starts to let Margaret in on what her life is really like. Because Laura is the most developed girl in their class, she's been picked on for years—since she started wearing a bra two years ago out of necessity. She also makes it clear that she doesn't appreciate the attention from her male classmates; it doesn't make her feel mature and happy, as Nancy has insisted will be the case for her and her friends. Notably, Laura reveals that she doesn't feel “normal.”

Everyone makes her life miserable exactly because they see her as being *abnormal*—even though Margaret wants nothing more than to look like Laura.

This makes the case that puberty is anxiety-inducing for almost everyone, no matter how fast a person develops. Margaret is self-conscious because she's developing a bit more slowly than her friends; Laura's time at school is miserable because she's developing faster than anyone else. Developing on a “normal” schedule seems to be no guarantee that a person won't feel anxious and upset about puberty.

Finally, it's telling that Margaret has never thought about Laura's feelings. This reflects both Margaret's youth and self-centeredness, and Nancy's hold over Margaret and how Margaret sees the world. As Margaret matures, it becomes easier for her to think about what other people are feeling, but she's not there yet. And in this case, it's never occurred to her to try, because Nancy has consistently made Laura out to be promiscuous and unworthy of compassion or friendship.

☞ *I really hurt Laura's feelings. Why did you let me do that? I've been looking for you God. I looked in temple. I looked in church. And today, I looked for you when I wanted to confess. But you weren't there. I didn't feel you at all. Not the way I do when I talk to you at night. Why God? Why do I only feel you when I'm alone?*

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Laura Danker

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 138

### Explanation and Analysis

Margaret is talking to God the night after she's mean to Laura Danker, wondering why he allowed her to behave so meanly. This indicates that Margaret's relationship with God is meaningful, in that it does shape Margaret's behavior and encourage her to be nicer. She may be blaming God for her behavior in this moment, but it also appears she's learning that it's inappropriate to be cruel and rude to her classmates.

More pressing for Margaret, though, is the fact that her quest to choose a religion and find God in a house of worship isn't going well. In fact, in every house of worship she's visited, she hasn't felt God. Margaret is so intent on finding a church and fitting in that she's starting to downplay her private relationship with God—even though this

relationship is extremely meaningful for her. She even gets at one of the novel's main points when she asks why she only feels God when she's by herself. While certainly not universal, Margaret's experience is that she feels closer to God and gets more out of her spirituality when she engages with a higher power on her own, in private. This in and of itself is one of the novel's biggest indicators that religion and spirituality can be just as meaningful outside of churches as they are inside them. But Margaret isn't willing to accept this yet, as she still sees finding a religious community as her key to fitting in.

## Chapter 21 Quotes

☪☪ "Who needs religion? Who! Not me...I don't need it. I don't even need God!" I ran out of the den and up to my room.

[...]

I was never going to talk to God again. What did he want from me anyway? I was through with him and his religions! And I was never going to set foot in the Y or the Jewish Community Center—*never*.

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Paul Hutchins/Grandfather, Mary Hutchins/Grandmother, Dad, Mom

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 154

### Explanation and Analysis

When Mom, Dad, Grandmother, and Grandfather get into an argument about what religion (if any) Margaret is, Margaret snaps and decides that she's done with religion.



In this moment, Margaret starts to see religion the way her parents see it. Grandmother and Grandfather in particular are unwilling to accept that Margaret hasn't received a religious education, and they imply that their love and support are contingent upon Margaret and her parents changing this. This is, after all, the reason why Grandmother and Grandfather estranged themselves from Mom in the first place: they disagreed with her choice to marry a Jewish man and minimize the role of religion in her life. So here, Margaret not only gains a deeper understanding of what Mom went through—she also starts to believe that perhaps Mom and Dad had the right idea raising her without religion, as religion seems to divide people more than it brings them together. And in turn, she decides that it's not worth it to find a religion—even if finding one meant that she fit in Farbrook.

Some of Margaret's anger and upset, though, has to do with the fact that her parents and grandparents are talking about her as though she's not there. This is infantilizing, especially since even her parents—whom she's very close to—don't bother to ask her how she feels about the whole thing. So while this conflict is about Margaret's religion, it's also about her parents and grandparents' unwillingness to respect her autonomy and treat her like a person able to make her own decisions.

## Chapter 22 Quotes

☪☪ So I grabbed her box and headed for Max and the cash register. I plopped everything down in front of him and just stood there not looking at his face and not saying anything either. He added it all up and I motioned to Janie to give me her money. Then I said, "Two bags, please." Max took my money, gave me some change, which I didn't bother to count, and presented me with two brown bags. That was all there was to it! You'd think he sold that kind of stuff every day of the week.

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon (speaker), Janie Loomis

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 157

### Explanation and Analysis

When Margaret and Janie are early for a movie, they decide to buy pads at the nearby drugstore in preparation for hopefully starting their periods soon. The experience is anxiety-inducing for both Margaret and Janie. First, they're anxious because they haven't actually started their periods yet, so what they're doing feels somewhat taboo. But much of their anxiety stems from Max, the boy at the counter, who has to actually sell them their pads. Margaret and Janie see purchasing pads as essentially broadcasting to this strange boy that they're menstruating—which feels scary and like a big deal, and possibly inappropriate given that he's male.

However, Margaret isn't wrong when she notes that it seems like Max probably sells period products every day. As a cashier at a drugstore, this is exactly what he does—it's not nearly as big a deal for him to see packages of pads or tampons as it is for young female customers like Margaret and Janie. This speaks to the idea that Margaret and Janie see starting their periods and needing supplies as something frightening and embarrassing. But really, in the grand scheme of things, it's not that big a deal, and nobody is thinking about their periods as much as they are.



## Chapter 23 Quotes



☛☛ “Just remember, Margaret...no matter what they said...you’re a Jewish girl!”

“No I’m not!” I argued. “I’m nothing, and you know it! I don’t even believe in God!”

“Margaret!” Grandma said, “Don’t ever talk like that about God.”

“Why not?” I asked. “It’s true!” I wanted to ask God did he hear that! But I wasn’t speaking to him and I guess he knew it!

**Related Characters:** Margaret Simon, Grandma (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 162

### Explanation and Analysis

When Grandma and Mr. Binamin show up on Margaret’s doorstep to offer their support for Margaret during Grandmother and Grandfather’s visit, Grandma is sad to see that Mom’s parents have already left.

Though Margaret is initially thrilled to see Grandma, the moment becomes emotionally difficult— Grandma does much the same thing that Grandfather and Grandmother did by insisting that Margaret is Jewish. While Margaret’s maternal grandparents insisted she was Christian, Grandma

believes that there’s no way Margaret is anything but Jewish. This reflects Grandma’s hope for Margaret, and her desire to ensure Margaret is cared for spiritually. She sees Margaret being Jewish as a way to protect Margaret.

But for Margaret, the whole thing is ridiculous. She’s been raised to believe that she can choose what religion she wants to identify with when she’s older, so it’s annoying when all her grandparents insist on telling her who and what she is. This is made even more difficult by the fact that, at this point in the novel, Margaret’s project to choose a religion is going poorly, and she’s feeling more lost than ever (she and God aren’t even on speaking terms after what happened with Grandmother and Grandfather). It seems to her that her grandparents won’t respect Margaret’s autonomy by allowing her to find her own way spiritually.

Despite Margaret’s insistence that she doesn’t believe in God and isn’t on speaking terms with him, it’s nevertheless important (and humorous) that she asks if God heard her say that. She speaks as if she *does* still believe in him—but she wants him to feel bad for causing so much conflict in her life through her grandparents. This offers hope that Margaret will be able to return to her personal, fulfilling relationship with God once she cools down—and once she realizes how meaningful her relationship with God really is, no matter how her grandparents try to label her.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

Margaret asks God if he's there and then says her family is moving today. She's terrified, since she's never had to live anywhere else before. What happens if she hates her school, or if the other kids hate her? She begs God to help her and not let New Jersey be too awful.

*By opening with a conversation with God, the novel situates Margaret's relationship with God as a central theme. The relationship is clearly intimate, as Margaret feels comfortable sharing her fears and hopes with God.*



Margaret and her family move right before Labor Day. On moving day, she knows exactly how hot it is because Mom sniffs under her arms (she does this only when it's warm to check that her deodorant is working). Margaret doesn't use deodorant yet, since she's only 11.

*The implication here is that only adults or almost-adults use deodorant. Margaret shows that she still thinks of herself as a child, since she doesn't yet have to wear deodorant.*



It was a surprise for Margaret to get home from summer camp and learn that her parents had rented out their New York apartment and bought a house in Farbrook, New Jersey—a place Margaret had never heard of. Her parents explained that Dad could still work in Manhattan, Margaret could go to public school, and Mom could garden. Margaret had no idea Mom even *wanted* to garden.

*Margaret implies that she generally has a close and open relationship with her parents, so their decision to make this move without talking to her about it is unsettling. Margaret also has to confront the possibility that she doesn't know her parents as well as she thought, given that she didn't know about Mom's gardening aspirations.*



Margaret suspects that her family is leaving the city because of Grandma, Sylvia Simon. Mom thinks that Grandma has too much influence over Margaret—Grandma is the one who sends Margaret to summer camp and pays for Margaret's private school. She also knits Margaret sweaters, with labels sewn in that say “made expressly for you...by Grandma.” Grandma doesn't do this because Margaret's family is poor (they're not poor in part because Margaret is an only child, which wasn't the plan, but Margaret isn't complaining).

*Keep in mind that as a first-person narrator, Margaret isn't totally reliable—she tells readers her opinions, which aren't necessarily fact. So it's impossible to know how much Margaret's parents resent Grandma's influence over Margaret. Alternatively, they could simply dislike the fact that Grandma seems to control a lot of things about Margaret's life, such as where she goes to school and what she wears.*



Escaping Grandma's influence is the only reason Margaret can come up with for the move. Grandma doesn't have a car and hates buses and trains (she believes they're dirty), so she won't be able to see Margaret much. Grandma is fun—except for when she asks Margaret if she has a Jewish boyfriend. This line of questioning is ridiculous: Margaret doesn't have boyfriends, and she doesn't know why she should care if they're Jewish.

*Even though the novel opened with Margaret talking to God, Margaret shares here that a formal religious identity isn't important to her—her personal relationship with God is. She doesn't think it should matter whether a future partner identifies with a particular religion, either.*



## CHAPTER 2

An hour after Margaret and her parents get to their house in New Jersey, a girl in a bathing suit rings the doorbell. The girl introduces herself as Nancy Wheeler, a fellow sixth grader. Nancy is tall with bouncy hair like Margaret wants to have, and she invites Margaret to play in the sprinklers. Margaret asks Mom if she can go, and Mom says she can, but she has no idea where Margaret's bathing suit is. Nancy offers to let Margaret borrow one of hers.

Nancy leads Margaret six houses down Morningbird Lane to a house that looks much the same as Margaret's. In Nancy's room, the first thing Margaret notices is the dressing table with a mirror shaped like a heart—just like Margaret has always wanted. As Nancy fishes out a swimsuit, she asks for Margaret's birth month (March) and explains that since the school divides up the sixth graders into three classes based on their birthdays, they'll be in the same class. Nancy's birth month is April.

Nancy offers Margaret a yellow swimsuit, assures her it's clean, and tells her it's fine to change in the bedroom. Margaret starts to wiggle into the swimsuit. It's kind of creepy the way that Nancy watches Margaret struggle into the too-big swimsuit. Margaret leaves her shirt on as long as she can; she doesn't want Nancy to see that her chest isn't developing yet. Nancy laughs that Margaret is still "flat," but Margaret says she's just "small boned." Nancy insists that she's already growing and will look like a girl from *Playboy* soon. Margaret doesn't think this is true; Dad gets *Playboy* and Nancy doesn't look anything like the girls in the magazine. Nancy looks more like Margaret.

As Nancy adjusts Margaret's straps, she admits she thought Margaret would be more mature since she's from New York—city girls grow up faster. She asks if Margaret has ever kissed a boy. Margaret admits she hasn't, and Nancy sighs that she hasn't either. Margaret is thrilled; they seem to be on more equal footing now. But then, Nancy says she practices kissing a lot and demonstrates on her pillow. Margaret is aghast, especially when Nancy then opens her dressing table drawer to reveal makeup. Nancy explains that she experiments so that when she can start wearing makeup in eighth grade, she'll be ready. She puts on pink lipstick and asks Margaret's opinion.

*Nancy seems kind and generous for inviting the new kid on the block to play. This will help Margaret feel more at home and meet some kids before school starts. Margaret offers clues that she admires Nancy by noting Nancy's height and bouncy hair—Margaret has ideas about how she'd like to look, and Nancy embodies those ideals.*



*Nancy becomes even more appealing to Margaret because she has a dressing table in a coveted shape. Nancy also establishes herself as an expert life in Farbrook, since she knows so much about the sixth grade classes. In this way, Nancy is helping Margaret know what to expect and how to fit in.*



*Nancy is kind to welcome Margaret and lend her a swimsuit, but this passage implies that Nancy has an ulterior motive: she wants to compare Margaret's physical development to hers. This suggests that Nancy is somewhat self-conscious about her own development. At the same time, Nancy seems to think she's more mature than Margaret because her chest is just a tiny bit more developed—something Margaret suggests is wishful thinking. But Nancy isn't the only self-conscious one; saying she's just "small boned" is a way for Margaret to normalize how her body is (or isn't) changing.*



*Emotionally, Nancy has fully entered puberty: she's interested in romance, she wants to wear makeup and look more mature, and she also wants to develop physically. So it's a bit of a letdown that Margaret, a "city girl," isn't in the same place emotionally (even though Margaret implies that physically, she and Nancy aren't too different). Indeed, Margaret shows she's relatively immature by her shocked reaction to Nancy's kissing practice.*



Margaret notes that the lipstick is bright, so Nancy rubs it off and then brushes her long hair. Nancy asks if Margaret always wears her hair pinned up. Margaret insists she's growing her hair out and it's currently in an awkward stage, but Mom wants her to wear it down more so it hides that her ears stick out. Nancy says she noticed Margaret's ears, finds Margaret a towel, and then leads her outside.

First, Nancy introduces Margaret to her mother, Mrs. Wheeler. Margaret answers her questions about where she lived in New York and what her parents do. Mrs. Wheeler asks Margaret to tell Mom about the Morningbird Lane ladies' bowling team and bridge games, but Margaret explains that her mother paints. With a laugh, Mrs. Wheeler offers to help Mom arrange her carpool to Sunday school. Margaret says she doesn't go to Sunday school and, at this, Nancy drags Margaret away. Mrs. Wheeler calls after the girls that she wants to talk to Evan.

Nancy tells Margaret that Evan is her "disgusting" older brother. Fourteen-year-old boys are disgusting because they only want to look at pictures of naked girls. Margaret takes Nancy's word for it, since she doesn't know any 14-year-old boys. Then, Nancy adjusts the sprinkler and leads Margaret through. When they're standing under it, the water suddenly turns on full blast and drenches the girls. Nancy shrieks that she's going to tell and races away. Margaret finds herself alone with two boys.

Margaret introduces herself, and Evan introduces himself and his friend, Moose. Moose offers to cut the lawn for Dad, but Margaret can't help thinking of what Nancy said—the boys must be trying to look down her swimsuit. Mrs. Wheeler screams for Evan, and when Nancy returns, Moose teases her about not being able to take a joke. Nancy apologizes to Margaret for the boys' behavior, gives Margaret her clothes, and offers to walk her home.

At Margaret's house, Nancy tells Margaret to keep the suit, have Mom wash it, and then give it back—it's an old suit anyway. Margaret had guessed, but she thinks it's rude to say so. Then, Nancy tells Margaret to make sure she wears loafers without socks on the first day of school. She wants Margaret to join her secret club, and the other kids in it will think Margaret is a baby if she wears socks.

*Nancy seems to make all manner of observations about other people, possibly because she's comparing herself to them. Margaret's defensiveness about her hairstyle suggests that she's self-conscious about her more childish look. Though she admires Nancy's relatively mature style, taking care of a longer hairstyle is still not as important to Margaret.*



*Though Mrs. Wheeler's offers are friendly, they suggest that in the suburbs, there are specific ways of fitting in. Adult women can join the local ladies' groups, and kids can go to Sunday school. Both offers pose problems for Margaret. She implies that Mom won't fit in because she paints instead of bowls, and it seems that Margaret might have a harder time fitting in because she doesn't attend Sunday school.*



*Again, Margaret is more than happy to accept Nancy's expertise on unfamiliar subjects. Since she doesn't know any 14-year-old boys, it seems reasonable to her that she should believe Nancy—especially when the boys (one of whom is presumably Evan) are so willing to be mean to the girls.*



*Notice that when actually confronted with two 14-year-old boys, Margaret assumes that Nancy must be correct that the boys want to ogle her—she doesn't seem interested in making up her own mind about them. Margaret isn't yet willing to think for herself, a mark of her immaturity.*



*By saying the suit is old, Nancy is flexing her power over Margaret. To be polite, Margaret has no choice but to overlook Nancy's rudeness and act like she did Margaret a favor. Also, note that Nancy threatens Margaret with the other girls' disapproval. The no-socks rule might be Nancy's rule, and another way for Nancy to control Margaret.*





Mom and Dad take Margaret to a hamburger place for supper. Margaret tells Dad about Moose’s offer to mow the lawn, but Dad insists they moved out here so he can cut his own lawn. Later that night, Margaret wonders when she’ll get used to this house—the closets are as big as bathrooms. Once she’s in bed with the light off, there are shadows on the wall. She struggles to fall asleep.

Margaret tells God that she’s in her new bedroom, and it’s so quiet here—she’s afraid. She met Nancy today, and Nancy seemed disappointed that Margaret wasn’t more adult. Margaret asks God to help her start to grow breasts, and then she shares that Mom and Dad don’t know that she talks to God. They’d think she was weird, so Margaret talks to God privately, in her head. According to Mom, “God is a nice idea” and “belongs to everybody.”

*Again, Margaret is struggling to understand her parents. She thought they had an open and honest relationship before, but now, Margaret feels unmoored, as though she no longer understands who they are and what they want. The unfamiliar house reinforces that feeling, too.*



*When Margaret talks to God, she reveals what she really thinks about her day. Margaret took issue with some of Nancy’s behavior—but she shows here that regardless, she still wants to be mature enough to compete with Nancy. She also articulates more about her relationship with God. Mom’s view that God “belongs to everybody” suggests that Margaret’s family doesn’t think that one religion has a monopoly on God. At the same time, by keeping her relationship with God to herself, Margaret implies that her parents might find it strange that she addresses God personally.*



## CHAPTER 3

Dad buys a lawnmower at the hardware store the next day, and after supper, he goes out to mow the lawn. Suddenly, Dad yells that he’s had an accident, runs into the house, and wraps his hand in a towel. Margaret runs outside to look for the limb Dad cut off; she knows that sometimes doctors can sew them back on. When she doesn’t find anything, she heads back inside. The police are there, and Dad is lying with his head in Mom’s lap.

Margaret accompanies her parents to the hospital and in the car, she talks to God. She explains that Dad had an accident and that Dad is really nice—he’s a good father, even if he doesn’t have a relationship with God. She offers to do anything if God helps Dad’s hand. Fortunately, Dad didn’t cut anything off; Dr. Potter just has to give Dad eight stitches. When Dad is all fixed, Dr. Potter tells Margaret that he has a daughter who’s also almost 12, Gretchen. He promises to ask Gretchen to look for Margaret at school. When Margaret’s family gets home, Mom and Dad hire Moose to mow their lawn.

Margaret gets up early on Labor Day so she can arrange her desk before school starts. As she puts things away, she hears someone knocking at the door. Mom and Dad are still asleep, so she goes downstairs to answer the door (if it is a kidnapper, Margaret can just scream and Dad will save her). But it turns out to be Grandma and a bunch of shopping bags.

*This passage shows that Margaret can think for herself: rather than panic, she immediately runs outside to check for a missing limb. Yet in front of Nancy, Margaret seems reluctant to think for herself, suggesting that fitting in with her peers is important to her.*



*Here, Margaret’s relationship with God helps her process her fears about Dad’s injury. She also believes that she can bargain with God to prevent something worse from happening. Dr. Potter’s offer shows that Farbrook is a close-knit community; it’s not yet clear if that will be good or bad for Margaret.*



*Margaret is still a kid who fully trusts her parents, hence her belief that Dad will absolutely be able to save her if there’s a kidnapper at the door. This shows how beneficial Margaret’s relationship with her parents is: she’s comfortable taking risks because she trusts that they’ll support and protect her.*



Grandma comes inside, smiles at Margaret, and then unloads bags and bags of food into the fridge—she insists that there’s no food like New York delicatessen food. Margaret doesn’t argue. Then, as Grandma makes coffee, Margaret asks how she got here. Grandma explains she took a taxi and a train—she’s “washable.” Grandma asks for a tour of the house, so Margaret shows her around. But Grandma shakes her head; she doesn’t understand why Mom and Dad decided to move to the country. Margaret insists it’s not really the country, but Grandma disagrees.

Hearing water running upstairs, Margaret runs up to tell Mom and Dad about Grandma. Very excited, she asks her parents to guess who’s here, but Mom and Dad don’t sound excited when Margaret tells them. They come downstairs 10 minutes later, but they don’t seem angry and they praise Grandma for figuring out how to get to Farbrook.

Grandma follows Margaret upstairs after breakfast and comments that Margaret could use some new curtains and a bedspread. With a sigh, she says that Mom probably wants to design it herself. Sitting down, Grandma says that she and Margaret will be just as close as they’ve always been, even if she can’t visit every day anymore. She suggests that she’ll call every night, and she tells Margaret to answer the phone—Mom and Dad might not like all the calls. For the rest of the day, everyone lounges around the house. After supper, they drive Grandma back to the train station. Grandma promises that she’ll only come a couple times per month, just to check on Margaret.

## CHAPTER 4

On Wednesday night, Mom helps Margaret wash and put her hair in rollers. Margaret plans to sleep in them, but they hurt so much that she takes them out. On Thursday morning, Margaret has trouble eating breakfast. Mom insists she felt the same way as a girl, which Margaret knows is supposed to make her feel like Mom understands. When Margaret gets dressed in her loafers without socks, Mom notes that Margaret has to walk almost a mile to school. Margaret explains that, according to Nancy, no sixth graders wear socks on the first day of school. Mom sighs that Margaret is going to be quite the teenager. Mom always talks about what the teen years will be like for Margaret. Margaret thinks being a teen sounds “rotten.”

*It’s a mark of how much Grandma loves Margaret that she was willing to brave a taxi and a train (which she previously insisted were dirty) to come see her. However, this passage also suggests that Margaret doesn’t understand the issue between her parents and Grandma. Grandma didn’t ask to visit—and she also makes no effort to understand or respect Mom and Dad’s choice to move to Farbrook.*



*Mom and Dad’s reaction to Grandma’s arrival suggests that they don’t appreciate her dropping in like this—they may see it as an invasion of their privacy. And their relationship with Grandma seems to be more reserved than their relationship with Margaret, since they don’t tell Grandma how they feel.*



*Here, Grandma confirms that she was dropping in on Margaret and her parents regularly when the family lived in New York City. And her comments about Margaret’s room and daily calls suggest that she still wants to have a large role in Margaret’s life. Though Grandma doesn’t completely respect Mom and Dad’s desire for space, she also recognizes that she can’t take their place in parenting Margaret. Notably, Margaret doesn’t see a problem with Grandma’s behavior—or even suspect that her parents might be unhappy with the arrangement.*



*The hair rollers signify Margaret’s coming adulthood—but removing the rollers shows that Margaret isn’t willing to do anything to feel adult. Margaret confirms this at the end of the passage, when she expresses disgust about becoming a teenager. However, she’s conflicted—Margaret does want to fit in and not look like a “baby,” so it’s still important to her to not wear socks. Notably, Mom doesn’t seem willing to actually force the issue with Margaret, a mark of her respect for her daughter’s autonomy.*



Mom finally shoos Margaret out the door. Sure enough, by the time Margaret gets to school, her feet hurt—and half the girls are wearing knee socks. The teacher isn't in the classroom at first, though Margaret initially thinks that one tall girl wearing a **bra** is the teacher. Margaret wonders if the girl is new, since she doesn't talk to anyone. Finally, the teacher arrives and writes his name on the board: Miles J. Benedict Jr. He awkwardly introduces himself.

Mr. Benedict writes six phrases on the board and then tells the class that he's 24 and a first-year teacher. He asks the students to finish the statements he put on the board. Margaret easily finishes the first two (which ask her full name and preferred nickname), and then writes that she likes long hair and hates religious holidays. She writes that she wants to have fun this year. The final statement, though, is "*I think male teachers are...*" Margaret thinks it's silly, so she writes that male teachers are the opposite of female teachers. Later that day, Nancy slips Margaret a note reminding her of the secret club meeting.

After school, Margaret changes clothes and then tells Mom that she's going to Nancy's for a secret club meeting. She tells Mom about Mr. Benedict; Mom isn't impressed that he's a first-year teacher.

## CHAPTER 5

Margaret is the last to arrive at the club meeting. Janie Loomis, Gretchen Potter, and Nancy are already there. They eat cookies and drink soda, and when Gretchen snags six Oreos, Nancy asks Gretchen how much weight she gained over the summer. Gretchen puts most of the cookies back. Then, Janie asks if anyone saw Laura Danker today. The other girls giggle, and Nancy says that Laura is "the big blonde with the big you know whats." Margaret says Laura is pretty, but Nancy snorts that Laura has a horrible reputation. She goes behind the A&P with Evan and Moose and has been wearing a **bra** since fourth grade. She probably has her period already.

Nancy asks if Margaret has gotten her period yet, and Margaret says she hasn't. Nancy says that none of them have, either. Margaret is thrilled to not be behind the other girls. Then, Gretchen says it's time to get down to business. First, Nancy insists they have to come up with a name. Gretchen, Janie, and Nancy argue over a name and then discuss Mr. Benedict. He's cute, but Nancy notes that he stared at Laura, like all men do. Margaret asks if they really think Laura looks like she does on purpose. Nancy sighs, "Oh, Margaret," making Margaret feel horrible.

*Clearly, Nancy was wrong about socks not being cool or adult. But there's also the possibility that Nancy is the one who thinks socks are uncool, and getting her friends to go without is a way to control what they wear and judge their loyalty. Margaret shows her kindness and empathy when she seems curious about the tall girl and notes that the girl looks lonely.*



*Mr. Benedict's awkwardness suggests that he's just as self-conscious (if in a different way) as his students are. This is especially apparent when he asks students to give their thoughts on male teachers. When Margaret was published in 1970, lower-level teaching was female-dominated, and a teaching career was sometimes a last resort for men. This may explain Mr. Benedict's question and his seeming self-consciousness.*



*It's telling that Mom takes issue with Mr. Benedict because he's a first-year teacher, not because he's a man—she implies that a person's gender doesn't matter as much as their experience.*



*The fact that Nancy feels the need to police Gretchen's cookie intake suggests that Gretchen might be heavier than her friends—and that Nancy uses this fact to try to control Gretchen. Then, when Nancy goes on to talk disparagingly about Laura, Nancy looks even more concerned about other people's appearance and behavior. It may even seem threatening to her that Margaret insists Laura is pretty—what's more important to Nancy is that Laura is supposedly so popular with boys and so much more developed.*



*When the subject of periods comes up, Margaret's relief shows that she just wants to fit in with her friends and develop at the same rate. The fact that Nancy asked in the first place suggests that her concerns are similar. Then, note that Nancy is the one to claim that Mr. Benedict stared at Laura. Nobody backs her up, which makes it impossible to verify. Margaret shows some independence by suggesting that being more developed isn't Laura's fault; however, Nancy silences Margaret's pushback by making her feel bad.*



In response to Mr. Benedict's questions, Gretchen wrote that male teachers are strict, reasoning that if he thinks the kids are afraid of him, he'll make a point to be nice. Janie, though, says the questions are to judge if the students are normal. Margaret is afraid her answers won't make her look normal, but Nancy interrupts with the perfect name for their club: the Four PTS's. PTS stands for "Pre-Teen Sensation." Gretchen and Janie like the name, so they vote to make the name official. Nancy insists they all need "sensational" secret names, like Alexandra or Kimberly. She names Margaret Mavis.

Nancy reminds everyone that the club is secret and insists that everyone make up a rule. Her rule is that everyone has to wear a **bra**. Margaret blushes and notices that Janie looks down; Janie probably doesn't wear a bra yet, either. Gretchen decides that the first person to get her period has to tell the others everything—especially what it feels like. Janie decides they have to keep a "Boy Book," which is a ranked list of the boys they like. Margaret's rule isn't as good as the other girls' rules; she suggests that they meet on a certain day of the week.

Gretchen can't meet on Tuesdays or Thursdays, since she has Hebrew school. Janie asks if Margaret goes to Hebrew school—and Nancy says that Margaret doesn't even go to Sunday school. Margaret says that she isn't any religion since her parents don't have a religion. Feeling silly, Margaret explains that Dad was Jewish and Mom was Christian. Nancy's face lights up, and Margaret is thrilled that her friends are interested in anything she has to say. She tells them that Mom's parents didn't want her to marry a Jewish man, so they refused to accept Dad.

While Grandma wasn't thrilled about a Christian daughter-in-law, she accepted it. Mom and Dad eloped, and that's why they don't have a religion. Gretchen says it makes sense, but Janie asks how Margaret will know whether to join the Y or the Jewish Community Center. Margaret shrugs—her family might not join either—but Nancy insists that *everyone* in town chooses one. Margaret changes the subject and the girls decide to meet on Mondays. Next Monday, they'll bring their Boy Books and get their **bras** checked.

*Again, Margaret's biggest concern in Farbrook is seeming normal—to her teachers and to her peers. Now, she rethinks everything she's said and written in the hopes that nothing makes her stand out. Nancy shows how much power she has over her friends when she assigns Margaret a subpar name. Margaret seems resigned to being "Mavis," suggesting she wants to earn Nancy's approval.*



*Nancy values conformity, hence requiring her friends to wear bras to attend meetings. Also, she might be self-conscious about her own bra—and if everyone's in the same boat, she won't feel so alone. For Margaret, though, this poses a dilemma since she doesn't wear a bra yet. Nancy's rule means that if Margaret wants to stay in the club, she'll have to mature faster than necessary.*



*Finally, Margaret gives readers insight into why religion isn't a big deal for her: her parents have purposefully raised her to think that way. Tellingly, Margaret implies that she only shares her parents' story because her friends seem interested. To her, it's not a particularly interesting story because it's just normal—but if it earns her friends' approval, it's worth sharing.*



*Janie and Nancy make the case that in Farbrook, a person's religion is a huge part of their identity—it not only dictates whether they identify as Christian or Jewish, but it also dictates where a person spends their free time. To Margaret, declining to choose doesn't seem like a big deal, but her friends' insistence suggests that Margaret isn't going to fit in unless she chooses a recreation center—and a religion.*



Margaret spends all of supper wondering how to ask Mom if she can wear a **bra**. Finally, when Mom comes in to kiss Margaret goodnight, Margaret says she wants to wear one. Mom asks why, but Margaret hides her face and says she just does. With a sigh, Mom says they'll go shopping on Saturday. Once Mom leaves, Margaret tells God that she asked for a bra. She begs him to help her grow so she can look like everyone else. She also asks whether she's supposed to be Christian or Jewish; all her new friends belong to either the Y or the Jewish Community Center.

*It's a mark of Margaret's trusting relationship with Mom that she feels comfortable asking for a bra. At the same time, Margaret seems to feel embarrassed, suggesting that mature subjects bring new awkwardness into their close relationship. Mom nevertheless makes the conversation fairly painless by agreeing without pushing for an explanation. When Margaret talks to God, she shows that her priorities have suddenly shifted. She wants to fit in—and that means growing breasts, as well as knowing which religion she is.*



## CHAPTER 6

After school the next day, Mr. Benedict calls Margaret up to discuss her getting-to-know-you answers. He asks why she hates religious holidays. Margaret regrets writing that—now she's definitely not normal. She laughs and says she doesn't really hate them, but Mr. Benedict isn't convinced. Margaret raises her right eyebrow, which usually distracts people. It doesn't work. So Margaret says that since she doesn't belong to a religion, the holidays aren't special for her. She explains that her parents don't have a religion either; Margaret is supposed to choose when she grows up, if she wants to. Satisfied, Mr. Benedict dismisses her. Margaret hopes she seemed normal enough. She's not used to being asked about her religion.

*Now that Margaret knows how important religion is to people in Farbrook, it seems like a total faux pas to have written that she hates religious holidays. When she wrote that yesterday, Margaret didn't know how to fit in here. When Margaret nevertheless tells Mr. Benedict the truth, it shows that she isn't willing to tell lies in order to pretend to fit in. She wants to be normal, but not if she has to appear to be someone she isn't.*



When Grandma calls that night, she reveals that she got a subscription to the Lincoln Center for herself and Margaret. They'll see one concert per month—Mom and Dad won't be able to say no, since this is “culture.” Fortunately, the first concert isn't going to mess with “**Bra Day**.” On Saturday, Moose cuts the lawn while Dad sulks. Margaret watches Moose and thinks he has nice teeth and a nice smile. She pretends to read but watches him instead. He'd be the top entry in her Boy Book—if Nancy didn't hate him.

*Margaret understands that when it comes to her friendship with Nancy, the most important thing is to please Nancy. In this case, that means keeping her crush on Moose a secret. So in some cases, Margaret refuses to hide who she is, while in others, she hides her feelings in order to earn approval.*



After lunch, Mom tells Dad that she and Margaret are going shopping, and she mentions that they need a second car. They head for a Lord & Taylor, and Margaret makes sure to wear her loafers without socks. The saleslady in the ladies' lingerie department sends Mom and Margaret to the teen department. Margaret wants to die of shame. In the teen department, Margaret looks at the displays of **bras**, panties, and matching slippers—all she ever wears are white underpants.

*Getting a bra symbolizes a step into adulthood, so it's a big deal for Margaret—that's why she won't be caught dead wearing socks with her loafers on such a special occasion. However, the occasion turns mortifying when Margaret is sent away from the ladies' department and has to shop in the teens' department. It reminds Margaret that though she wants to feel grown-up, she's still small and undeveloped.*





Mom tells the saleslady that Margaret needs a **bra**. Margaret hates it when the saleslady calls her “dear” and asks her to step up to get measured. But the lady then puts a selection of bras on the counter. She suggests the Gro-Bra, which will “grow with” Margaret. She leads Margaret and Mom to a dressing room with several bras to try.

Margaret undresses and puts on the first **bra**, but she can’t fasten it herself. Mom fastens it for her and asks Margaret how it feels. Margaret doesn’t know, so Mom helps her out of it and into the second one. Margaret wonders how long it’ll take to learn to fasten her own bra. The second bra is softer and Margaret likes how it feels; the third is itchy lace and Mom deems it “impractical.” When the saleslady knocks, Mom tells her that they’ll take three of the soft bra.

At the counter, Margaret sees Janie Loomis and her mother. Janie turns red and tells Margaret that she’s here for winter pajamas. Margaret notices the **bras** laid out on the counter in front of Janie and says that she’s also here to buy winter pajamas.

## CHAPTER 7

Margaret takes her **bras** upstairs as soon as she gets home. She fastens one around her waist and then pulls it up. When she studies her reflection in the mirror, she doesn’t look any different. When Margaret stuffs socks into the bra, it’s too tight—but Margaret likes that she looks more like Laura Danker. At dinner that night, Dad congratulates Margaret, embarrassing her.

On Monday, Margaret studies her male classmates so she has names for her Boy Book. Philip Leroy is the best-looking boy, and she also decides to list Jay Hassler. Just before the bell rings, Mr. Benedict assigns a year-long project on something personal and meaningful. He’s not going to ask what their topics are, and he’s not going to dictate what exactly they do. The class groans, and Mr. Benedict looks disappointed. Margaret thinks that the students make him nervous. Nancy sometimes points out that he never calls on Laura Danker. As the students line up to leave, Mr. Benedict tells them to please be prepared for their test on Thursday. Teachers never say please.

*The Gro-Bra reads like a training bra, a type of bra designed to help people learn to wear bras, but that doesn’t offer support. So it represents an in-between stage of growing up: Margaret will get to feel mature for wearing a bra, but the bra also isn’t too adult for her.*



*It’s unsettling when Margaret can’t do the clasps on the bras herself—it makes her feel childish, even as she’s going through an experience designed to make her feel adult. It’s also important to note that Mom is very no-nonsense about this experience, which gives Margaret the space to come to her own conclusions and doesn’t heighten her embarrassment.*



*Margaret desperately wants to wear a bra, but she still found the shopping experience mortifying. Janie seems to feel the same way. Margaret shows she’s a good friend when she goes along with Janie’s excuse that she’s buying pajamas instead of bras.*



*It doesn’t take long for Margaret to figure out how to do her bra clasps herself—she’s already growing up. Then she experiments with looking more developed by stuffing her bra which, though uncomfortable, makes her feel more mature than most sixth-graders. And getting a bra continues to have its embarrassing side, thanks to Dad.*



*Margaret is picking boys for her Boy Book based solely on looks—presumably, this will help her please Nancy. Again, it’s not clear whether Nancy is right that Mr. Benedict never calls on Laura—Margaret hasn’t observed this herself. When it comes to Mr. Benedict, Margaret shows that she feels bad for him—with his open-ended assignments and courteous language, he doesn’t fit expectations for a teacher.*



Margaret, Janie, and Gretchen go straight to Nancy's after school. They all agree that Mr. Benedict's project is "crazy." After Nancy calls roll (with their fancy names), the girls feel each other's backs to check for **bras**. They're all wearing a bra, and Janie, Gretchen, and Margaret are all wearing Gro-Bras. Proudly, Nancy says that she's wearing a 32AA. She insists that to move up from the "baby bras," the girls have to exercise. She demonstrates the moves: she sticks out her chest and pumps her arms, chanting "*I must—I must—I must increase my bust.*" The other girls copy her, and Nancy says they need to do it 35 times per day for results.

Next, everyone pulls out their Boy Books. Nancy flips through each book first and then passes them around. Janie and Gretchen each listed a handful of boys, with Philip Leroy in the number one spot. Nancy listed 18 boys, and Philip was again number one. Margaret, however, has Philip in second and Jay Hassler in first. Margaret is annoyed when Nancy asks for her reasoning for putting Philip second; she didn't ask the other girls why they put him first. An eyebrow raise makes Nancy stop pushing, though. After the meeting, Nancy opens her bedroom door to find Evan and Moose outside. The boys follow the girls downstairs and then shout, "*We must—we must—we must increase our bust.*"

During math on Thursday, Margaret hears a bird peep. Mr. Benedict hears it too. He opens the window, but the peeps are coming from the classroom. The peeps continue every few minutes and when Nancy kicks Margaret, she knows she has to make a peep. Mr. Benedict says nothing, but the next morning, the students find that he rearranged their desks into a big U around the room. Margaret has to sit next to troublemaker Freddy Barnett on one side, and Laura Danker on the other. Margaret is terrified to "catch" Laura's reputation, but fortunately, Laura says nothing. The Four PTS's are all separated, but Nancy gets to sit next to Philip Leroy.

In gym that afternoon, the boys play baseball with Mr. Benedict while Miss Abbott, the gym teacher, takes the girls. She tells the girls to line up by size. Janie is on one end, while Laura is on the other. Miss Abbott tells the girls that they must stand up straight, no matter how tall they are (she's at least six feet tall). Then, Miss Abbot says that since the girls are all grown up, they're going to learn about "private subjects just for girls" later in the year. Margaret already knows everything.

*The fact that Janie, Gretchen, and Margaret are all in Gro-Bras suggests that they're all in roughly the same place developmentally. Nancy, though, is just big enough to move up into standard bra sizing, which she lords over her friends. Calling the Gro-Bras "baby bras" makes her friends feel inferior for not being able to fit into standard sizing and for being behind Nancy. The bust exercise allows the girls to feel in control of their development (though this exercise doesn't do anything for breasts, as Judy Blume has made clear in interviews).*



*Conventional wisdom is that Philip Leroy is the most popular boy in the class. The fact that Nancy put him first in her Boy Book makes the other girls feel justified in their choice; it's also why Nancy questions Margaret about making different choices. When Margaret shuts Nancy down with an eyebrow raise, though, it suggests it might not be so hard to stand up to Nancy—she can and will let her friends make their own choices, if only they work up the courage to assert themselves.*



*The peeping game in the classroom shows that Margaret is susceptible to peer pressure, just like her classmates—even though she likes Mr. Benedict. It's a mark of Nancy's power over Margaret that Margaret doesn't take the chance to get to know Laura now that they're sitting next to each other. Margaret is too afraid of "catching" Laura's reputation—even though it seems more likely that Nancy just doesn't want Margaret to befriend Laura.*



*Lining the girls up by size throws the girls' relative development into sharp relief: Laura is the most developed, while Janie still looks like a small child. (Nancy and Margaret are presumably somewhere in the middle.) Miss Abbot's remark about "private subjects" suggests that this is the year the girls will learn about puberty and menstruation—a mark of everyone's growing maturity, even if they're in different places developmentally.*



Margaret studies hard for her social studies test that night. When she's done, she does her bust exercises and gets into bed. She tells God she's been exercising and asks if he's thought about helping her grow—she has a **bra**, and she'd like “something to put in it.” She also asks him to help her get a good grade on her test tomorrow.

*These days, it seems even more important to Margaret to grow breasts and look mature than it does to fit in by finding a religion. As her comments to God suggest, puberty is constantly on her mind—and most of the time, Margaret seems unsettled and anxious about it.*



At school in the morning, Mr. Benedict passes out the tests and Freddy pokes Margaret. He whispers that nobody is putting their names on their tests to confuse Mr. Benedict. Margaret doesn't like it, since she studied so hard. But she doesn't want to be the odd one out. After Janie collects the papers, Margaret figures Mr. Benedict will be mad—but he can't expel them all, right?

*Again, Margaret is more concerned with fitting in with her classmates than she is in being truthful with Mr. Benedict—or true to herself. Telling herself that Mr. Benedict can't expel everyone is a way for Margaret to feel better about compromising in this way.*



## CHAPTER 8

Margaret and her classmates enter the classroom on Friday morning to find their test papers on their desks, marked and with their names added. Margaret is thrilled—she got a 98. Mr. Benedict says nothing, but he seems to know that he won. In the afternoon, he reminds the students of their projects and suggests that they should have a topic and some notes by the end of the week. Margaret struggles to think of a meaningful topic that she'd feel okay sharing with Mr. Benedict; **bras**, breasts, and Moose obviously aren't appropriate. Maybe she could do her project on religion, so she can know whether to join the Y or the Jewish Community Center. She asks God how he feels about it, and she promises to not make a decision without asking first. But she can't be nothing forever.

*Thanks to Mr. Benedict, Margaret gets to fit in and still do well on her test. And though Margaret notes that he “won,” she also doesn't seem sad about that—a clue that she doesn't share her classmates' desire to get the better of Mr. Benedict. It's telling that Margaret's “meaningful” topics include puberty, crushes, and religion. This highlights where she is developmentally: she's concerned about maturing physically, crushing on the wrong guy, and figuring out how to fit in in Farbrook.*



On Saturday, Mom drives Margaret to the bus station so she can bus to New York. Mom is nervous and gives Margaret advice on how to be safe, and then reminds her of where to meet Grandma. The ride is uneventful and Margaret finds Grandma easily. They have lunch first and Margaret asks Grandma, in a whisper, if she can tell that Margaret is wearing a **bra**. Grandma says she can; it makes Margaret look much older. During the concert, Margaret makes a point to pay attention to the music and not fidget like she used to.

*Riding the bus to New York by herself makes Margaret feel independent and adult, even though Mom ruins it a bit by talking to the bus driver. Grandma may or may not be able to tell whether Margaret is wearing a bra—but she still knows that saying yes can boost Margaret's confidence and help her feel more mature. This in turn encourages Margaret to focus on the music—something she characterizes as adult.*



In the taxi heading back to the bus terminal, Margaret decides that Grandma, who's Jewish, is the perfect person to help with Margaret's project. She asks Grandma if she can accompany her to temple sometime. Grandma's eyes open wide. She throws her arms around Margaret and says she always knew Margaret was "a Jewish girl at heart." Margaret insists she's nothing, but Grandma says this must be because Margaret has made Jewish friends in Farbrook. Margaret insists this isn't about her friends; she just wants to see what Judaism is like. She doesn't want to tell Grandma about Mr. Benedict.

Thrilled anyway, Grandma says that Margaret can come with her on Rosh Hashanah. Then, she asks if Mom and Dad know about this. They don't, so Grandma begs Margaret to make it clear to them that this isn't Grandma's idea. Later, when Margaret tells Mom about wanting to go with Grandma to temple, Mom insists it's ridiculous and Margaret isn't old enough to choose a religion. She's unimpressed when Margaret says she's going to try out church as well, but she says she won't stop Margaret from going.

On the morning of Rosh Hashanah, Margaret talks to God before she gets out of bed. She explains that she's going to temple with Grandma, and Mom and Dad think it's ridiculous. But Margaret is still sure that this will help her decide, and she promises to look for God inside the temple.

## CHAPTER 9

Mom insists that everyone wears new clothes on Jewish holidays, so Margaret wears a new suit and a velvet hat. She also has to wear white gloves, but since it's unseasonably warm in October, Margaret's hands sweat. She takes off the gloves before she gets to New York, and Grandma picks her up at the bus station. They head for the temple.

An usher shows Grandma and Margaret to their seats in the fifth row. When the rabbi steps up, beautiful organ music plays. The rabbi looks like a priest, except he wears a yarmulke instead of the "backwards collar." The rabbi says lots of things that Margaret doesn't understand, and then the congregation reads from a prayer book. Margaret likes it best when the organ plays and the choir sings. She's surprised that Grandma can speak Hebrew, like the rabbi.

*It's somewhat unclear why Margaret hesitates to tell Grandma about Mr. Benedict's project. Even though she seems to want to impress upon Grandma that she doesn't identify as Jewish (not yet, at least), she may not want to crush Grandma's hopes by admitting this is part of a school project. When Grandma suggests that this is about having Jewish friends in Farbrook, it shows that Grandma also sees religion as a way to fit into a community.*



*Judaism is very important to Grandma, but Grandma also knows very well that Mom and Dad won't be pleased about Margaret's temple visit—and may see it as Grandma overstepping. However, Mom shows again that she's here to support Margaret, even if she doesn't understand or like Margaret's choices. Saying Margaret isn't old enough to choose, though, is still somewhat infantilizing.*



*Margaret might be experimenting with organized religion, but this doesn't invalidate the meaningful personal relationship she has with God. She seems to expect organized religion to simply boost and improve the relationship with God that she already has.*



*Mom shows Margaret her support for this project by making sure Margaret is dressed appropriately and fits in at the temple. However, Margaret finds that fitting in isn't so comfortable for her, since she has to take off her sweaty gloves before she even gets to New York.*



*Because Margaret has little or no religious education, it's hard for her to understand what's going on during the service. It's common for people in the Jewish faith to learn Hebrew; it speaks to just how far removed Margaret is from Judaism that she's surprised that Grandma knows Hebrew. In this sense, Mom and Dad have been successful in minimizing religion in Margaret's life.*



Being in the fifth row, Margaret can't see much. The rabbi gives a sermon and Margaret tries to understand what he's saying. But she eventually gives up and counts hats. Then, everyone sings a song in Hebrew; this concludes the service. Margaret expected something different, but she wonders if she needs to go multiple times to feel something. After the service, Grandma insists on introducing Margaret to the rabbi. Rabbi Kellerman looks a bit like Mr. Benedict and he pumps Margaret's hand up and down. He invites her to come back any time.

When Margaret gets home, Mom and Dad question her about her experience. Dad asks if she learned anything, and Margaret says that she learned that there were eight brown hats in the first five rows. Dad laughs and says that when he was a kid, he counted feathers in hats. Later, Margaret tells God that she's on her way now—she'll know all about religion by the end of the school year, and she'll be able to start junior high knowing who she is. She'll then be able to join the Y or the Center.

## CHAPTER 10

During the first week of November, three things happen. First, Laura Danker wears a sweater to school, and according to Nancy, Mr. Benedict's "eyes almost popped out of his head." Freddy apparently noticed, too; he teased Margaret for not looking like Laura in her sweaters. Margaret wears sweaters all the time since Grandma makes her so many, but she knows she won't look like Laura even if she stuffs her **bra**. She also wonders if it's true that Laura goes behind the A&P with Evan and Moose, and she wonders why Laura would do that. Margaret thinks about Moose a lot. She watches him from her window.

Second, Margaret goes to church with Janie. She and Janie have gotten closer, especially since they often get to talk during gym class. Church is funny because it's exactly the same as temple, aside from being entirely in English. They read from a prayer book that makes little sense, the minister gives a sermon, and Margaret counts hats. At the end, everyone sings a hymn and then shakes the minister's hand. Margaret feels like a pro, but she feels ready to faint when Janie introduces her to the minister as having no religion. The minister gives Margaret a "maybe-I'll-win-her look" and invites her to come back again. After this, Margaret tells God that she didn't feel anything special and promises to try harder next time.

*Without the knowledge base to know what the rabbi is talking about, Margaret finds it hard to engage with the service—she's discovering that organized religion isn't about just showing up at a house of worship. She may be onto something with the insight that a single visit won't reveal much. Margaret seems to have expected to feel closer to God during the service, so it's no doubt unsettling that she didn't get much out of this experience.*



*Dad suggests that Margaret's experience wasn't so out of the ordinary—it's not uncommon, and might even be normal, to find oneself bored at a religious service, even if a person is raised in the faith. But this doesn't deter Margaret. Attending the service gives her important information and, she believes, is going to help her fit in in Farbrook.*



*Once again, Margaret parrots what Nancy says about Mr. Benedict staring at Laura—there's no way to corroborate this. It does seem to be a fact, though, that Laura's bust is obvious to most everyone—even Freddy. Though Margaret is willing to question whether Laura really goes behind the A&P with Moose, and why Laura might do that, it's also significant that she doesn't take this questioning any further. She seems content to accept Nancy's assessment of Laura.*



*Margaret seems to have gone into her religion project expecting something far more meaningful and dramatic to happen once she set foot in a house of worship. Instead, she finds that organized religion is mostly about sermons, singing, and being with other people who believe the same things. Though this can be meaningful to some people, it's not so meaningful to Margaret—her personal relationship to God is more important to her. However, Margaret seems to draw less comfort from that relationship as she struggles to choose a religion.*





Third, the principal announces that the PTA is putting on a square dance for the sixth graders, in honor of Thanksgiving. Mrs. Wheeler is involved in organizing it, so Nancy tells the Four PTS's to give her a list of the boys they'd like to dance with so she can try to help. When Margaret, Gretchen, and Janie all say they want to dance with Philip Leroy, Nancy rescinds the offer.

Mr. Benedict spends the next two weeks teaching the students to square dance. He always uses Laura Danker to demonstrate steps, supposedly because she's the only girl tall enough. Nancy, however, gives Margaret a look. None of the boys want to be Laura's partner since they're all much shorter than she is, even Philip Leroy. The lessons aren't much fun because most of the boys just want to step on the girls' feet.

On the morning of the square dance, Margaret gets dressed and tells God she can't wait for the dance. She wants to dance with Philip Leroy, who she thinks is handsome but doesn't like as a person. The PTA decorates the gym to look like a barn, and most of the chaperones are dressed as farmers. There's a real square-dance caller, and before every dance, the boys and girls line up separately so they can partner off. Margaret tries to figure out in advance who her partner is and tries her best to avoid dancing with Freddy Barnett and Norman Fishbein, who's a "big drip." Margaret notices that when Freddy dances with Laura, he blushes bright red.

All the girls want to dance with Philip Leroy, so they jostle around in line a lot. Margaret winds up dancing with Philip once, after dancing with nice, polite Jay Hassler. Nancy is angry and Margaret is thrilled—until it turns out that Philip is one of the boys who stomps on girls' feet. He also makes Margaret's hands sweat. Finally, the dance ends. Mom picks Margaret up in the family's new car (she finally won Dad over) and hurries home to finish the paintings she's hoping to give as Christmas gifts.

## CHAPTER 11

By December, the PTS's no longer use their secret names at meetings, and they're about ready to give up on the Boy Books. The rankings never change; Margaret, Janie, and Gretchen all keep Philip Leroy at the top of their lists. Margaret wonders if the other girls list Philip first because they like him, or if, like her, they're ashamed to write who they actually like.

*Keep in mind that Nancy hasn't given her friends any indication that it's okay to openly like other boys—so it makes perfect sense that they all want to dance with Philip, the one boy Nancy adores.*



*Nancy wants Margaret to think that there's something nefarious going on when Mr. Benedict dances with Laura—but it also seems like the height difference between Mr. Benedict and another female student would truly be too much. Keeping Margaret suspicious of Laura is another way Nancy ensures that Margaret won't try to befriend Laura.*



*In Margaret's conversation with God, it becomes even clearer that she has no interest in actually getting close to Philip—he's cute, but that's not enough to outweigh Margaret's dislike of him as a person. When Margaret refers to Norman as a "drip," she means that he's unintelligent and uncool. Noticing Freddy's blush when he dances with Laura suggests that Laura's developing body is embarrassing for everyone—especially since the boys, who are all shorter than Laura, are so much less developed than she is.*



*Having danced with Philip, Margaret has even more reason to dislike him: he's rude and makes her sweat. She begins to see the consequences of lying and pretending to be someone she isn't in order to fit in. This consequence is fairly minor, but it nevertheless shows Margaret that perhaps pretending isn't worth it.*



*Margaret is becoming more introspective as time goes on. When she wonders if the other girls are lying about their crushes on Philip, just like she is, it suggests that she's becoming more mature when. However, if Margaret's suspicions are correct, this also shows the hold Nancy has over her friends.*



One day, Gretchen sneaks out Dr. Potter's anatomy book. The girls meet in Margaret's room, barricade the door, and open the book to the male body. Janie wonders if Philip Leroy looks like that naked, and she says the veins are ugly. The next page is a picture of the male reproductive system. The girls study it silently until Nancy says that Evan looks like that; she knows because he used to walk around naked. Gretchen says that her dad recently stopped walking around naked, while Janie shares that her aunt spent last summer at a nudist colony. Her aunt insisted it's peaceful, but Janie declares that she's never going to walk around naked in front of anyone—even her future husband.

Nancy declares Janie a "prude" and insists that she'll change her mind. Eventually, when she looks like the girls in *Playboy*, she'll want everyone to look at her. Janie has never flipped through a *Playboy*, so Margaret says that Dad gets it. Nancy sends Margaret to find a copy. Margaret feels odd about it as she searches the house. She doesn't think showing her friends *Playboy* is wrong (Dad wouldn't get the magazine if it was), but she doesn't want to ask Mom where it is. She also realizes that Dad has recently started hiding them. Finally, Margaret finds a copy tucked in Dad's night table.

Once Margaret returns with the magazine, Nancy opens it up to the naked girl in the middle. The girl is only 18, and Nancy squeals that they only have six years to go before they're all that age. Janie notes that the girl's breasts are huge, and Gretchen asks if they'll really look like that when they're that age. Margaret insists the girl looks "out of proportion." Janie wonders if Laura looks like the girl in *Playboy*, and Nancy says probably not yet. They end the meeting with 50 rounds of "We must—we must—we must increase our bust!"

## CHAPTER 12

Early in December, Grandma goes on a three-week Caribbean cruise, which she does every year. Before she leaves, she holds a going-away party in her room on the ship. This is the first year that Margaret gets to attend. Mom gives Grandma a jewelry box, and Grandma makes sure to point out that her jewelry will all eventually go to Margaret. Margaret hates it when Grandma talks like this—Grandma likes to mention that she's already made her funeral arrangements. But after the party, Grandma promises to bring Margaret on the cruise with her one day.

*It's a normal part of puberty to be curious about the opposite sex—and to feel like this is somehow inappropriate or embarrassing (this is why the girls barricade the door). As Gretchen and Nancy talk about their male family members no longer walking around naked, they observe that their families are starting to treat them differently as they enter puberty. Suddenly, nakedness is becoming something taboo, rather than something normal.*



*Nancy seems to equate physical maturity with confidence. She suggests that while the girls are still immature, they can be protective of their bodies—but once they're mature, they'll want to show off. As Margaret searches for a copy of *Playboy*, she goes through much the same thought process as Gretchen and Nancy did about their male family members' nudity. Suddenly, something that once seemed normal is now taboo.*



*There is, of course, no way to tell how big the girls' breasts will be when they're adults. Gretchen's question implies she thinks there's some standard bust measurement for adult women, which isn't at all the case. And though everyone except Nancy seems skeptical about having breasts like the magazine girl's, this doesn't mean they don't want bigger breasts than they have now—hence the bust exercises.*



*It's a mark of Margaret's growing maturity that she's finally allowed to attend Grandma's going-away party. However much Margaret is happy to attend, though, she's still understandably uncomfortable confronting the fact that she and everyone around her is getting older. This is why she's so upset about Grandma mentioning her eventual death.*



The week after, Mom starts addressing her Christmas cards. She calls them “Holiday greetings” since the family doesn’t really celebrate Christmas; giving gifts, according to Mom and Dad, is just “a traditional American custom.” Dad says that the cards are about Mom’s childhood, since she sends them back to her childhood friends and her brother, who lives in California. This year, though, Margaret discovers something odd: Mom is sending a card to her parents in Ohio. Margaret doesn’t let on that she knows; she’s pretty sure she wasn’t supposed to find out.

The entire school is involved in a Christmas-Hanukkah pageant. The sixth-grade class is the choir, so they practice singing daily. They learn three Hanukkah songs and five Christmas carols, and the PTA decides to buy new green choir robes. The class practices walking down the halls singing “Adeste Fedelis” in two lines, one of girls and one of boys. Margaret walks behind Janie and next to Norman Fishbein, whom she ignores. A week before the pageant, several kids refuse to sing some of the songs because the songs are against their religion.

Margaret lets God know that she’s paying close attention to Christmas and Hanukkah this year, but so far, she hasn’t decided if one is more meaningful to her than the other. The new choir robes arrive the day before the pageant. The pageant is fun, especially since the sixth graders get to sit in the choir seats right behind the kindergarteners. One little boy wets himself in front of Janie, and Janie struggles to not laugh. Winter vacation begins right after the pageant—and when Margaret gets home after the pageant, Mom shares that Margaret has a letter.

## CHAPTER 13

Mom tells Margaret that the letter is on the table. Margaret never gets letters since she never writes anyone back, so this is a big deal. She runs to the letter, inspects the envelope, and wonders who sent it. She figures it’s an advertisement. But it turns out to be an invitation. Before opening it, she imagines who might want Margaret to come to a party. Finally, she opens it. It’s from Norman Fishbein. Margaret shouts. She and Norman never talk and he’s still a “drip,” but “a party is a party.”

*Mom and Dad seem to go to great lengths to make a traditionally religious holiday secular for Margaret’s sake. When Margaret discovers the card meant for Mom’s parents, it suggests that Mom is interested in trying to improve her relationship with them. In a mark of maturity, Margaret shows Mom respect and trust by not mentioning the card—she gives Mom some cover and keeps her secret.*



*The fact that some kids refuse to sing songs that are “against their religion” shows just how essential religion is to people’s identities in Farbrook. In particular, this suggests that it’s important for these kids to define themselves as being against religions that aren’t their own. This starts to cast religion as something exclusionary.*



*For Margaret, the winter holidays are a chance for her to engage in deep thought about her religious identity—what holidays a person celebrates can, after all, help explain who a person is and what they value. However, when Margaret has so much fun at the pageant, it implies that perhaps she doesn’t actually have to choose one holiday over the other—she’s clearly getting a lot out of both.*



*As far as Margaret is concerned, the prospect of going to a party is far more important than who’s throwing the party. So though she doesn’t like Norman much, it’s still exciting that she’s been invited to his party. This shows where Margaret’s priorities lie: in getting to do adult things, like go to parties, rather than making choices about where she goes based on who she wants to spend time with.*



Margaret races to Mom's studio to ask if she can go. Mom wants to know who Norman is and if Margaret likes him, then she agrees to let Margaret go. When the phone rings, Margaret races to get it. It's Nancy; she, Janie, and Gretchen have all been invited and are all going to go. The girls wonder if they should dress up, and Nancy says Mrs. Wheeler is going to call Mrs. Fishbein and find out. Ten minutes later, Nancy calls back and reveals that every kid in their class was invited—even Laura and Philip—and they should wear party clothes. Margaret runs to tell Mom the news, and they decide that Margaret should wear her best velvet dress.

Margaret spends the morning of the party on the phone with Nancy, Janie, and Gretchen discussing their outfits. Mom washes Margaret's hair and puts it up in rollers—and she files Margaret's nails instead of cutting them. Margaret has new nylon and lace underwear to wear. She spends the afternoon thinking that maybe Norman isn't so bad after all.

Mom sends Margaret to rest so she's fresh for the party, but Margaret doesn't feel like napping. Instead, she pushes a chair in front of her mirror and then stands naked on the chair. She's starting to grow some hair. Margaret studies herself from the side and then moves closer to the mirror. She doesn't look any different than normal, aside from the rollers. She asks God if she hasn't waited long enough to start growing and asks for some help.

Then, Margaret puts on her underwear and tights and tiptoes to the bathroom. Her heart pounds as she grabs a few cotton balls, even though she knows Mom wouldn't think anything of it—but *Margaret* knows what she's going to do with them. Back in her room, she stuffs three cotton balls into each side of her **bra**. It's cheating, but she looks better—and there are probably lots of other girls who stuff their bras. She admires her reflection and likes what she sees. Margaret tells God that her bra looks better now, she just needs a bit of help. She promises to help out more around the house in exchange for some help.

*Keep in mind that Margaret is no fan of Norman's. The party seems more like an excuse for her to spend time with her friends than it does to spend time with the host. Mom's willingness to support Margaret with minimal questioning and total support also shows how trusting their relationship is. Mom wants Margaret to have this fun experience and be dressed appropriately for it.*



*This party represents growing up for Margaret. It's not just her first dinner party; she also gets to prepare for it in a more adult way (having her nails filed) and wear adult undergarments (her new nylon underwear). This gives the party even more import in Margaret's mind.*



*The party is a big deal, as it seems like an adult event. So it makes sense that Margaret would be even more concerned with how her body is (or isn't) developing in the hours before the party. Though she's starting to develop body hair, it's still concerning for her that her chest hasn't developed much yet. But talking to God again makes Margaret feel better.*



*Three cotton balls in each side of her bra is a humorously small amount of padding—but this only shows how desperate Margaret is to see any change in her bustline. Her insistence that she's not the only girl stuffing her bra implies that in Margaret's understanding, at least, it's normal to want to develop faster—and to try to "cheat" in order to make it seem like one is further along in their development.*



## CHAPTER 14

Later in the evening, Mom brushes out Margaret's hair and smiles at her as they wait for Nancy's father. Margaret feels like she and her parents are all in on some secret—though her parents don't know Margaret's secret. Fortunately, they don't say Margaret looks sweet. Finally, Mr. Wheeler pulls up outside. He's annoyed that the Four PTS's insist on squeezing into the back. Janie got her hair cut without telling the other girls. The cut makes her look like an elf and, for a moment, Margaret considers getting the same cut. But then she decides she's been growing her hair too long to chop it off.

Mrs. Fishbein opens the door when the girls arrive. Nancy introduces Margaret to Mrs. Fishbein in a different voice than usual, and Mrs. Fishbein sends the girls downstairs. The furniture in the house is modern. The furniture at Nancy's house is colorful, while at Margaret's house there isn't much furniture—Mom is still picking stuff out. Most of the other kids are already downstairs. Laura looks lovely in a pink dress, and most of the boys are wearing sport jackets and ties. Philip Leroy is the first to take off his tie and jacket and soon, all the other boys copy him.

The girls stick to one side of the room and the boys stay on the other side. Soon, Mrs. Fishbein brings down sandwiches. Margaret, Janie, Nancy, and Gretchen choose a table as Mrs. Fishbein heads back upstairs. Before long, the boys start shooting mustard onto the ceiling with straws. When Mrs. Fishbein comes down next, she gives the kids a dirty look and tells them to behave. She says that the girls certainly haven't done anything.

Then, after Mrs. Fishbein serves dessert and heads back upstairs, Freddy mocks Nancy for being so good. Nancy shouts at him and Freddy grabs her. Nancy spins away—but Freddy keeps ahold of her pocket and pulls it right out of her dress. Nancy screams and runs to tell Mrs. Fishbein. Mrs. Fishbein threatens to call everyone's parents if they don't straighten up and then leaves the kids alone again.

*For Margaret, the party is all the more exciting and anxiety-inducing because of her stuffed bra. It's impossible to tell whether her parents have noticed—if they have, it's a mark of how much they respect Margaret's autonomy that they're not saying anything about it. The girls' behavior also confirms that the party is, for them, more about spending time together than anything else.*



*Margaret's willingness to concede that Laura looks beautiful shows that Margaret isn't totally sold on being mean to Laura, while Philip setting the example of ditching his tie and jacket for the other boys situates him as their ringleader.*



*The party might feel like a fancy, adult affair to Margaret, but that doesn't change the fact that she and her classmates are still children—particularly as evidenced by shooting mustard onto the ceiling. It's also possible to see the separation of the sexes as being part of their youth; the kids aren't yet comfortable spending time as a mixed-gender group.*



*This exchange between Freddy and Nancy shows how fraught the relationship between the boys and the girls can be. Readers know that the Four PTS's are already curious about the opposite sex; they're certainly not the only ones in their class. But in practice, actually being around boys and interacting with them is still uncomfortable.*





Norman suggests they play a game. He first suggests Guess Who, which is played by turning off the lights, lining up girls and boys on either side of the room, and then letting the boys try to guess which girl is who by touching them—only above the neck. Gretchen refuses and Margaret is glad; her cotton balls aren't far below her neck. Norman suggests Spin the Bottle next and pulls out a green bottle. He spins first and kisses Janie on the cheek. Janie spins next and kisses Jay on the cheek. Margaret is pleased she'll only have to kiss a boy on the cheek. Gretchen can barely bring herself to kiss Philip Leroy, and Philip kisses Laura.

Jay insists the game is silly; they should play Two Minutes in the Closet instead. They'll each get a number and take turns calling numbers. Those two people will go into the small bathroom for two minutes and "well, you know." Norman writes out numbers on small pieces of paper. The boys draw odd numbers and the girls draw even numbers. Margaret is number 12, and she's excited. She wishes she'd practiced like Nancy—she doesn't know what to do with a boy.

Norman goes first and calls for number 16. Gretchen leaps up. They go into the bathroom—but return a few seconds later. Norman insists that the rules only stipulate that you can't stay any longer than two minutes, but it's fine to come out before the time's up. Gretchen ends up with Freddy, and then Freddy goes in with Laura. Everyone giggles. When Freddy and Laura come out of the bathroom, Laura and Freddy are both bright red—this seems funny for a girl like Laura, who already has experience with boys. Laura calls Philip's number. When they return from the bathroom, Philip is smiling but Laura isn't. Nancy gives Margaret a look, and Margaret is too busy studying Laura to hear Philip call her number.

Philip calls for number 12 again and Margaret stands up. In a trance, she walks to the bathroom. Philip follows her in, closes the door, and says hi. Margaret giggles and Philip notes that he can't kiss her if she's giggling; her mouth will be open then. Margaret stops laughing as Philip tells her to stand still. Then, Philip leans forward and kisses her quickly, twice. He leaves the bathroom and Margaret follows him out. She wants to call Philip's number, but instead she calls number nine and gets Norman Fishbein. She asks him to kiss her quickly on the cheek, and he complies. Later, Nancy suggests that fate brought Margaret and Philip together. They discuss whether Philip is a good kisser and if they both still like him—they do.

*Suggesting Guess Who shows that the boys are just as interested in the girls' changing bodies as the girls are in the boys'. The boys might seem totally foreign and unknowable to the girls, but they're going through many of the same changes emotionally. Ultimately deciding on Spin the Bottle allows the kids a relatively low-stakes way to experiment with their burgeoning sexualities (even if it's only low-stakes physically, rather than emotionally).*



*For Margaret, this new game represents another opportunity to figure out how she feels about boys—and how it feels to experiment sexually with them (the "well, you know" seems to refer to kissing). It's also interesting to note that Margaret sees Nancy as more experienced just because Nancy has been kissing her pillow. For all readers know, Nancy could be just as nervous and excited as Margaret.*



*The full two minutes spent in the bathroom would allow for more kissing—but Norman implies here that he's just as nervous as his classmates by insisting that a couple doesn't have to spend the whole two minutes in there. This gives the kids a bit more control over their experiences. However, Laura's face when she comes out of the bathroom is a bit sinister. Margaret accepts the rumor that Laura is promiscuous, but Laura's reaction suggests not just that she's inexperienced like her classmates; it also seems possible that Philip did something Laura wasn't comfortable with.*



*Even if Margaret doesn't like Philip all that much, it's still exciting when she gets to kiss him. Her reaction suggests that she wants to kiss him because she's excited and because it's something all the other girls seem to want, not because she actually has feelings for him. And though Margaret doesn't care for Norman, it's also a sign that perhaps he's not so bad when he does exactly what Margaret asks him to (unlike, perhaps, Philip when he was in the bathroom with Laura).*



## CHAPTER 15

Margaret joins Nancy's family for the Christmas Eve service at the Methodist church. She relaxes and enjoys herself after Nancy says Margaret doesn't have to meet the minister. There isn't a sermon; the choir just sings. Margaret gets home near midnight, falls into bed, and tells God she loved the beautiful choir songs. But still, she didn't really feel God in the church and now she's really confused. She asks for a hint. She wishes she'd been born into a religion.

Grandma gets home from her cruise and immediately packs up for Florida, insisting that New York is no fun without Margaret. She sends Margaret two postcards every week and calls regularly. Their phone conversations always go exactly the same.

In January, Mr. Benedict tells the class that on Friday, the girls are going to see a movie while the boys are going to talk to a gym teacher from the junior high. Nancy passes Margaret a note noting that this is "the big deal sex movie." Later, Nancy shares that the PTA sponsors this movie, which is called *What Every Girl Should Know*. After school, Margaret tells Mom. Mom already knows and says the movie is about menstruation. Margaret already knows about menstruation, but Mom explains that some girls' mothers don't talk to them, and they need to know the facts, too.

On Friday afternoon, the girls file into the auditorium. A lady in a gray suit greets the girls and introduces the movie, which she says is a courtesy of the Private Lady Company. She dims the lights and the movie plays. The narrator pronounces menstruation "menstroo-ation," which makes Margaret, Gretchen, Nancy, and Janie giggle. It explains why girls menstruate, but it doesn't say how it feels (except that it's not painful). It insists that nature is wonderful and the girls are becoming women. After it's over, Nancy asks the lady about Tampax. The lady says she can't "advise internal protection" until the girls are older. She then passes out booklets recommending the girls use Private Lady products. It feels like a commercial, and Margaret vows to never use Private Lady products.

A week later, Gretchen has her first period. They have a special PTS meeting and Gretchen asks if the others can tell. Margaret asks how it happened. Gretchen says she was at dinner when she felt something dripping. She ran to the bathroom and called for her mother. Her mother came, and since she didn't have anything but Tampax, she had to call the drugstore to order pads. Gretchen kept a washcloth in her pants until the pads arrived, and then her mother showed her how to use them.

*Margaret's journey to find a religion isn't going well. She implies here that she expected to feel an "aha" moment at some point—and so far, that hasn't happened. She also suggests that her relationship with God is more complicated these days because she doesn't understand which religion she belongs to.*



*Grandma shows Margaret how much she cares for her with the regular postcards and phone calls. The predictability gives Margaret something to rely on and look forward to.*



*Again, Margaret makes it clear that she and Mom have a pretty open and trusting relationship, especially when it comes to talking about puberty. Mom implies that she was the one to teach Margaret about menstruation, and Margaret doesn't seem at all embarrassed about that. But Mom also points out that not all families discuss these things—there are girls who still need to know what's going to happen to their bodies, even if their parents didn't prepare them.*



*Margaret's description of the film suggests that at least for her, it wasn't helpful—it didn't answer any of her actual questions, like what menstruating feels like. And Nancy's question about Tampax (tampons) seems to bring the questioning to an end, so Margaret and her classmates don't even have the opportunity to get their questions answered. It's very common for companies that make period products to produce such films—so Margaret isn't far off when she insists this feels like a commercial. But she also seems to resent that the film's producers are treating viewers like consumers, not people in need of information.*



*As the first PTS to start her period, Gretchen is in a unique and powerful position: she's the first to get to tell her friends exactly what having her period is like. And though Gretchen's tone suggests it was somewhat emotional and anxiety-inducing, it also seems a bit anticlimactic. It's possible the girls have idealized something that, while a mark of growing older, isn't such a big deal after all.*



Nancy is mad and keeps pressing for more details. Finally, she asks how it feels. Gretchen says she doesn't feel much, though she had some cramps. She says it does make her feel older—and her mother says that Gretchen will now have to watch what she eats so she doesn't gain weight, and she'll have to wash her face with soap from now on. Nancy asks if that's it. The only other thing Gretchen has to share is that, according to her mother, it may take a while for her period to become regular. Margaret asks if she's using the Private Lady supplies, but Gretchen says she's using Teenage Softies. Nancy sighs that she'll be next. Privately, Janie and Margaret agree.

Margaret tells Mom about Gretchen when she gets home. Mom says that she was 14 when she had her first period, which Margaret deems "crazy"—she refuses to wait that long. Mom points out that Margaret can't control when she starts and promises to take Margaret to the doctor if she hasn't started by the time she's 14. Margaret asks how she'll know if she's going to be normal, and Mom promises that Margaret will be normal. Later, Margaret tells God that Gretchen got her period, and she's jealous. She's not sure what she'll do if she's the last of her friends, and she wants nothing more than to be normal.

Nancy's family goes to Washington in February. Margaret gets a postcard from Nancy, obviously sent the moment Nancy got there, reading "I GOT IT!!!" Margaret rips it up. She's certain there's something wrong with her and she cries. She doesn't want to listen to Nancy tell her all about her period next week. She tells God that life keeps getting worse. She's soon going to be the only one without a period, just like she's the only one without religion. She asks him to help her be like everyone else.

## CHAPTER 16

Mom takes Margaret to Lincoln Center twice with Grandma's subscription. Going with Mom isn't as much fun, since Margaret doesn't get to ride the bus alone—and Mom insists that the music is more important than watching people. So Margaret writes Grandma a letter telling her that everything is fine; she's only gotten sick a couple times. She thinks she got sick once because it was slushy at the Lincoln Center and Mom wouldn't let Margaret take her boots off during the concert like Grandma does. She does note that snow is more fun in New Jersey than New York—it's cleaner.

*Nancy seems to expect starting one's period to be a dramatic turning point. For Gretchen, this is kind of true: her mom frames Gretchen's first period as the real start of puberty, which means that Gretchen will have to pay more attention to things like skincare and weight. Still, Nancy expects more, which shows how Nancy idealizes starting one's period. She believes it's something far more transformative than Gretchen finds it to be.*



*Mom is right; people can't control when they start their periods. This, more than anything, is what upsets Margaret. Technically speaking, starting one's period at 14 isn't all that late—but for Margaret, when her friends are already starting at 11 or 12 years old, having to wait another two years seems like proof that she'll never fit in. Especially combined with her struggles to find a religion, this deepens Margaret's feeling of being abnormal.*



*Gretchen starting her period was one thing, but Nancy likes to lord her power and maturity over her friends—making her good news even harder for Margaret to bear. Again, Margaret shows that in every aspect of her life right now, her chief concern is fitting in. In her mind, her lack of a religion or a period means she's failing.*



*Margaret articulates some of the reasons that she and Grandma have such a good relationship. Grandma lets her do fun things, like take her boots off and focus on people instead of the music, which Mom won't stand for. So Margaret finds herself a little bit at odds with Mom, even as she's getting closer to Grandma. However, admitting that the snow is better in New Jersey also aligns Margaret with Mom and her choice to move to New Jersey.*



Grandma responds that she hopes Mom took Margaret to a good doctor—if she were at home, she would've tried to get recommendations for doctors in New Jersey. She agrees that Margaret got sick because Mom didn't let her take her boots off. She also shares that she met a man named Mr. Binamin. They eat dinner together and see shows. He's a widower with five married children. Mr. Binamin and his children think he should marry again—but Grandma is staying quiet on that front. Grandma also invites Margaret to come visit Florida during her spring vacation.

Margaret writes back that Mom and Dad will let her visit, but they're waiting to make concrete plans. Margaret is excited, since Florida sounds fun and she wants to meet Mr. Binamin. She says she's fine; the snow is melting and Mom is painting a new picture of apricots. She adds that Gretchen and Nancy got their periods.

## CHAPTER 17

At the beginning of March, Nancy invites Margaret to join her and her family for a day in New York. Evan brings Moose. Margaret is thrilled to be in the car with Moose, though she unfortunately can't look at him since he and Evan sit in the very back. They go to Radio City Music Hall, where the boys sit off by themselves. Then, they go to the Steak Place. After Nancy and Margaret order, they head to the restroom. As Margaret finishes, she hears Nancy moan and Nancy asks Margaret to get Mrs. Wheeler. Margaret asks what's wrong, but Nancy cries and begs again for Margaret to get Mrs. Wheeler.

Margaret races back to the table and fetches Mrs. Wheeler. Back in the bathroom, Nancy is sobbing that she's afraid and needs help. Margaret has to crawl under the door to unlock the stall for Mrs. Wheeler, and then she stands by the sink. A few minutes later, Mrs. Wheeler hands Margaret some change to buy a pad from the dispenser; Nancy has her period. Margaret asks if Nancy always acts like this and Mrs. Wheeler explains that this is Nancy's first time. Margaret is shocked—Nancy lied about getting her period.

Margaret purchases the pad and passes it to Mrs. Wheeler, who's trying to console Nancy. Margaret almost wishes she hadn't found out about Nancy's lie. After a bit, Nancy and Mrs. Wheeler come out of the stall. Mrs. Wheeler tells Nancy to freshen up and heads back to the table. Margaret asks Nancy if she's okay, and Nancy begs Margaret to not tell—she'd die if everyone else knew. She insists she thought she'd already had her period; she didn't make it up. Margaret promises not to tell.

*Grandma's return letter offers more insight into why she has a strained relationship with Mom and Dad. Hoping that Mom took Margaret to a "good" doctor calls Mom's choices into question and makes Grandma the supposed expert on Margaret and her medical care—something that Mom and Dad wouldn't appreciate.*



*To their credit, Mom and Dad seem unwilling to get in the way of Margaret's relationship with Grandma—a big reason that Margaret doesn't grasp the strain between the adults. They don't want to encourage Margaret to have problems with her, too.*



*Margaret's crush on Moose is getting more pronounced—but she still knows she has to act cool in front of Nancy, since Nancy dislikes Moose. It also seems imperative to her to look cool and mature in front of Moose. It's unclear what's happening to Nancy in the bathroom, but Nancy's reaction suggests that it's something pretty concerning.*



*The revelation that Nancy lied about starting her period shows just how much Nancy wanted to look mature and knowledgeable to her friends. And her reaction shows that wanting to start her period, doesn't make the actual event exciting—indeed, it seems pretty traumatic for Nancy.*



*It's a mark of Margaret's maturity that even though she's upset with Nancy for lying, she still asks if Nancy is okay. She recognizes how emotionally difficult this was for Nancy. For Nancy, though, Margaret finding out she lied poses a major threat to her power in the friend group. Now, Margaret has information that could damage Nancy's reputation.*



The steaks are being served just as Margaret and Nancy get back to the table. Margaret ends up sitting next to Moose. He smells nice and they touch hands a few times, since he's left-handed and Margaret is right-handed. Margaret knows he's number one in her Boy Book, even if it's a secret. Since Margaret can only finish half of her steak, the Wheelers take the rest home in a doggie bag (Margaret doesn't tell the waitress they don't have a dog). Then, at home, Margaret tells God that Nancy is a fake. Margaret isn't going to be able to trust her again, and she's going to let God tell her if she's normal or not. She'll wait for a sign—her only request is to not get her period at school, since she doesn't want to have to tell Mr. Benedict.

*Margaret starts to feel better about her crush on Moose as they have this positive experience sitting at the table together. It also helps that now, Margaret knows she doesn't need to trust Nancy's opinion on things—Nancy lies, after all. When Margaret turns to God and tells him about her evening, it shows again how fulfilling and meaningful her relationship with God is. It doesn't seem to matter that she doesn't attend a church; talking to God in this way gives Margaret a safe space to work through her hopes and fears.*



## CHAPTER 18

Margaret turns 12 on March eighth. She sniffs her armpits but still doesn't smell—but since she's 12 now, she figures she'd better use deodorant anyway. She uses Mom's and heads for the kitchen. Margaret tells Mom she used her deodorant, but Mom laughs and promises to get Margaret her own. Margaret gets a 100-dollar savings bond and three new sweaters from Grandma, as well as a plane ticket to Florida. At school, Mr. Benedict shakes Margaret's hand. Nancy, Janie, and Gretchen buy Margaret a record, and Nancy also gives Margaret a special card. Margaret figures Nancy is still afraid Margaret will spill her secret.

*It's significant that Mom and Margaret don't make a big deal about Margaret's deodorant use. This is a product of their trusting relationship. And Margaret might not technically need deodorant yet to control body odor, but she suggests she does need it to help her feel more adult—and Mom has no issue helping Margaret take this step. This mirrors the way Mom got Margaret a bra without any fuss; Margaret might not have needed a bra to support breasts, but she did need it to fit in.*



Then, in the afternoon, Mr. Benedict announces that they're going to spend three weeks working on group projects on different countries—and he's already put together the groups. Margaret is distraught, especially when she learns she's in a group with Norman Fishbein, Philip Leroy, and Laura Danker. Mr. Benedict asks everyone to rearrange their desks so they're sitting with their groups. Margaret is thrilled to work with Philip—until he sings a rude birthday song to her and pinches her so she grows an inch, insisting she needs the height. Margaret decides that Nancy and Philip deserve each other.

*Things take a turn for the worse when Mr. Benedict announces this project. As upsetting as this is, though, Margaret shows how mature she's becoming as she reevaluates how she feels about Philip. Now that she knows Nancy lies and she doesn't necessarily need to take Nancy's word, Margaret is better able to see Philip as he is—a rude boy who doesn't deserve her attentions.*



What's even worse, though, is that Margaret faces Laura Danker. Margaret hates Laura for being mature and beautiful, and because the boys stare at her. Laura also knows she's normal and Margaret doesn't know anything about herself. Margaret decides she hates Mr. Benedict for putting her in a group with Norman. So Margaret's birthday starts out amazing, but ends up horrible. She can't wait for her upcoming visit to Florida.

*Margaret thinks of herself as being behind in her development, and Laura as being "normal." So Margaret suddenly has an issue with Laura because Laura seems to have everything Margaret wants: breasts, attention, and her period. However, Margaret still has a pretty limited view: she seems unaware that the class ostracizes Laura for being so mature, for instance.*





## CHAPTER 19

Margaret is in a terrible mood for the duration of the group project. Her group decides to report on Belgium, which isn't an exciting country. Philip Leroy turns out to be a horrible worker; he reads comic books and draws funny things in his notebook. Norman Fishbein tries to work, but he's slow. Laura's a good worker, but Margaret certainly isn't going to tell her so.

In the third week, Laura and Margaret plan to work in the library after school. Mom is going to pick Margaret up, while Laura is going to walk to church for Confession. This makes Margaret think. She didn't know Laura was Catholic, and she wonders if Laura confesses the things she does with boys to the priest. Does Laura go every time she does something bad, or save all her bad deeds up and go once per month? Margaret is so caught up in thinking about Laura that she wouldn't have said anything under normal circumstances—but Laura started it, so what happened next is Laura's fault.

Laura whispers to Margaret that she's not supposed to copy out of the encyclopedia word for word; Mr. Benedict will know she's copying. Margaret knows the rules, but she's busy thinking—and who's Laura to tell her what to do? Margaret says that Laura thinks she's so great, and says she knows all about how Laura, Moose, and Evan go behind the A&P. Laura is confused, but Margaret says it's so the boys can touch Laura. Laura stands up and calls Margaret a "filthy liar" and a "little pig." She runs out of the library, and Margaret follows her. Margaret knows she sounds like Nancy—and suddenly, she realizes that Nancy, Moose, or Evan could have made up the story.

Margaret calls for Laura, but Laura doesn't stop. When she finally catches up, she says she doesn't mean that "those things" are wrong, but Laura sniffs that it's awful that everyone picks on her because she's developed. Margaret says she didn't mean to insult Laura, but Laura did start it. Laura says that making fun of her is a game for Margaret and her friends, and she asks if Margaret has ever thought of what it's like to be the biggest kid in class. Margaret has never considered it, so Laura tells her to think about what it's like to be laughed at for wearing a **bra**, or to have boys call her bad names. Margaret apologizes and says that, truthfully, she wishes she looked like Laura. Mumbling that "the wrong ones always confess," Laura heads for the church.

*Margaret is starting to become more emotional and less rational—which is normal as she fully enters puberty. However, this does mean that she's not treating Laura with the kindness that she seemed open to at the beginning of the novel, when she thought Laura was beautiful and seemed to admire her.*



*Suddenly, Laura starts to seem more like a real person to Margaret. She has a religion and, in Margaret's understanding, this means Laura has accountability for her rumored "bad deeds." Learning that Laura is Catholic also gives Margaret another religion to research, as up until this point Margaret has stuck to Judaism and Protestant Christianity.*



*Margaret's mean words to Laura seem to stem from feeling so inadequate next to Laura, in every way. Laura seems to have everything: religion, a mature body, and male attention, even if that attention is considered uncouth. When she realizes that the stories about Laura might be made up, Margaret learns an important lesson: that she can't take Nancy at her word. Nancy has already proven herself to be okay with lying, after all.*



*Finally, Laura lays everything out for Margaret. Laura makes the case that she's going through the same kind of emotional turmoil Margaret is—but where Margaret feels she's abnormal because she's not developing very fast, Laura feels abnormal because she's growing faster than everyone else. And she makes it clear that this has its downsides: she's teased, she's ostracized, and people don't see her as a kid anymore. Margaret hadn't considered any of this because she's been so caught up in her own experiences of puberty, but Laura suggests that feeling lost and anxious about puberty is normal.*



Margaret wonders if Laura is right—maybe she should confess, too. She follows Laura to the church since Mom won't come to pick her up for another half hour. Once Laura's inside, Margaret tiptoes into the church. It's silent inside. After a while, Margaret sees Laura come out of a small door. It didn't take her long to confess. Margaret feels weird. Once Laura is out of the church, Margaret goes to the door Laura just came out of. She wonders what's inside. It looks a bit like a phone booth, so Margaret steps in and sits. She's not sure what to do.

After a minute, a voice says, "Yes, my child." Margaret thinks it's God and she starts to sweat and feel dizzy—but then she realizes the priest is in a booth next to hers. He can't see her. He asks again, but Margaret apologizes and races out of the church. She walks back to school feeling ready to vomit and climbs into Mom's car. She tells Mom she feels ill and, because of this, she doesn't have to tell Mom what she did and how horrible she was.

Mom brings Margaret soup in bed later and tells Margaret she doesn't have to go to school tomorrow. Once Mom is gone, Margaret tells God that she did something horrible: she picked on Laura, just because she felt mean. She asks God why he let her do it and says that she's been looking for him everywhere—in temple, in church, and during confession. But he's never there; Margaret doesn't feel him like she does when she talks to him at night. She asks why she only feels him when she's by herself.

## CHAPTER 20

A week before spring vacation, a letter arrives from Mom's parents, Mary and Paul Hutchins. Dad doesn't like them, so he "hits the roof." He demands to know how they got their address and Mom whispers that she sent them a Christmas card. Incensed, Dad insists that they just want to make sure Margaret doesn't have horns. Margaret hates it when her parents fight, so she tells them they're both being ridiculous and runs to her room. She slams the door and puts on a loud record.

Minutes later, Dad comes into Margaret's room and shuts off the record player. Mom follows him in with the letter; her eyes are red. Dad says that this concerns Margaret too; she should read the letter. Margaret takes the letter and reads it. Grandmother writes that she and Grandfather have been thinking about Mom a lot—they want to see her after all these years and they know they made a mistake. They've been speaking with their reverend, and now they're coming for a week. They want to see Mom and meet Margaret. Margaret understands why Dad is mad; the letter doesn't mention him.

*The fact that it didn't take Laura long to confess suggests that Laura didn't have much to confess—more evidence that someone is lying about her sexual exploits with Moose and Evan. For Margaret, Confession offers her the opportunity to own up to her mistakes—but she doesn't have the training to know how the ritual is supposed to go.*



*Margaret's heightened emotional state, both now and over the last few weeks, is a normal part of puberty. But her emotions here also speak to her desperation to figure out where she stands in terms of religion. Being raised without religion means that Margaret doesn't have the knowledge to participate in rituals, making it even harder to choose a religion.*



*Margaret seems to get at the idea that her personal, fulfilling relationship to God is more important than church affiliation. But she can't quite get there yet, because she doesn't think her spirituality is valid without formal membership in a religion. Turning to God at this point, though, still allows Margaret to confess that she did something wrong and express her confusion to someone who won't judge her.*



*Dad's comment about Mary and Paul wanting to check if Margaret has horns shows that at least in his experience, his in-laws care only about a person's religion and judge them based on that. So it no doubt seems like a betrayal that Mom reached out to them at all. For Margaret, though, all of this seems silly and not worth fighting over.*



*At first glance, Grandmother and Grandfather seem to be ready to move past their differences with their daughter and prioritize family over religion. But as Margaret points out, they also don't mention Dad—and an apology is also conspicuously absent. Put simply, they don't actually seem ready or willing to reconcile; Dad might be correct in his assumption that they just want to check in on Margaret.*



Dad says that Grandmother and Grandfather are coming on April fifth. Brightening up, Margaret says she'll be in Florida and won't have to see them, but Mom and Dad exchange a look. Margaret realizes she's not going to Florida. She shouts that this isn't fair. She begs Mom to not do this to her. Mom is "stupid" and Margaret hates her. Mom tries to console Margaret as Dad says that someone should call Grandma and tell her. Mom says that Margaret can share the news, but Margaret refuses.

In Mom and Dad's room, Mom calls Grandma. She says that Margaret won't be able to come and then passes the phone to Margaret. Margaret refuses it, so Mom whispers that Margaret just needs to tell Grandma she's not sick. Margaret takes the phone, says she's not sick, and says she wants to come but can't. With Mom's prodding, Margaret says that Mom's parents are coming, and now Mom won't let her go to Florida. Margaret starts to sob. Mom takes the phone back, apologizes to Grandma, and says that everyone needs to try to understand.

Margaret tells God that everything is going wrong—this must be her punishment for being so horrible to Laura. She says she always tries to be good and begs for God to let her go to Florida instead of seeing her grandparents.

*Mom and Dad want Margaret to have a relationship with all her family members and not just Grandma. But for Margaret, this is the worst news she's had in a long time, and as a result, her relationship with her parents starts to get rockier. For most of the novel, Mom and Dad have been fine with letting Margaret make her own choices, but here they put a foot down, and she's not used to that.*



*Mom treats her parents' visit as a once in a lifetime opportunity. This is the first chance she'll get to try to patch things up with her parents, and it's important to her to show her parents how wonderful Margaret is. Again, for Margaret, this is the end of the world. Margaret isn't yet willing to try to understand Mom's point of view, and from her emotional perspective, it seems like Mom is treating her terribly.*



*Privately, Margaret believes she knows exactly why she can't go to Florida: it's payback for being mean to Laura. In other words, she believes that if she behaves well, God will reward her, and if she behaves badly, God will punish her. This shows that her spirituality does guide her behavior, even if she doesn't go to church.*



## CHAPTER 21

Mom spends the week frantically cleaning the house while Margaret hopes for a telegram announcing that Grandmother and Grandfather aren't coming. God can't really intend to punish her for the entirety of spring vacation. Over dinner, Mom tells Margaret to cheer up, and Margaret asks why she's excited that her parents are coming. Mom explains that she wants to show her parents that she's doing just fine. Dad notes that it's unfair to expect Margaret to be excited after having her Florida trip canceled. Mom admits that she hasn't forgiven her parents and never will, but she asks that both Dad and Margaret try to understand. Mom has never made this request before. Both Margaret and Dad agree.

On April fifth, Margaret accompanies Mom to the airport. On the drive there, Mom tells Margaret that 14 years ago, her parents did what they thought was right, even though it was actually cruel. Margaret recognizes Grandmother and Grandfather right away. Grandmother is wearing "old lady shoes." They soon recognize Mom and greet her with short hugs. Then, Grandmother leans down to hug Margaret, but Margaret notices a huge cross around her neck and recoils.

*Mom seems to want to show her parents that she didn't need their approval then, and she doesn't need it now, either—but the door is open if they're willing to treat her kindly. In particular, saying that she's never going to forgive her parents shows that there's always going to be conflict in this part of the family. It's a mark of Margaret's maturity that she recognizes that Mom is asking her to understand. She also agrees to try, something that will help her develop empathy.*



*With her "old lady shoes," Grandmother contrasts with fashionable Grandma in Margaret's view. When Margaret recoils at Grandmother's cross necklace, she seems to be responding to Grandmother's proudly secure religious beliefs (in contrast to her own lack of them). She also seems to associate the cross with the way Grandmother hurt Mom.*



Dad meets them at the door when they get home. Grandmother and Grandfather greet Dad politely, and seeing Dad's expression, Margaret realizes this is harder for him than it is for her. Mom makes a fancy dinner that night and hires a woman to wash dishes. She also wears a fancy dress. Grandmother puts on a new dress, too, but she keeps her cross necklace. Conversation is stilted at dinner, but Margaret still uses her best manners. Over dessert, Mom says she's ordering new living room furniture. Margaret knows this is a lie, but she doesn't say anything.

After dinner, everyone moves to the den. Grandfather and Dad discuss investing and the insurance business, while Grandmother tells Mom about Mom's brother in California. When Mom goes to pay the lady in the kitchen, Grandmother asks Margaret if she does well in school and Sunday school. Margaret says she doesn't go to Sunday school. Mom returns to the den and reminds her parents that they don't practice any religion. Margaret knows this isn't going to go well and wants to leave, but she feels stuck to her chair.

Grandfather says that he'd hoped Mom would've changed her mind about religion, and Grandmother says that Margaret needs religion. Dad suggests they not get into a "philosophical discussion," and Mom says they're letting Margaret choose a religion when she's an adult. Grandmother and Grandfather insist this is nonsense; people are born into religions. After a moment, Grandmother announces that Margaret is a Christian. Religion is passed through the maternal line. It's simple. Dad growls that Margaret is nothing.

Margaret hates that the adults are talking about her like she's not a real person. Grandmother turns to Margaret and offers to take her to church while she's visiting, but Margaret leaps up and tells everyone to stop. She says she doesn't need religion or God and then runs to her room. Margaret vows to never talk to God again. She's through with him, and she's never going to join the Y or the Jewish Community Center.

*Again, as Margaret realizes how hard this must be for Dad, she works on being empathetic and thinking of others rather than just herself. When Margaret notices that Mom hired help and put on a fancy dress, she sees that Mom is doing everything she can to impress her parents. When Margaret makes sure to use her best manners and also keeps Mom's secret about the furniture, it shows how loyal she is to Mom—she's not going to purposefully embarrass her or thwart Mom's efforts with her parents.*



*Margaret is well aware that her parents' issues with Grandmother and Grandfather have to do with religion. So in this passage, identifying with any one religion starts to seem unappealing—religion is, after all, why Mom and her parents haven't spoken in 14 years. Though Margaret doesn't think so far ahead, this suggests that choosing a religion might not yield the results Margaret wants. In fact, it might distance her from her parents.*



*This argument is about religion, but it's also about whether Grandmother and Grandfather are willing to accept their adult daughter's choices about her own daughter. Grandmother shows clearly that she isn't willing to respect Mom and Dad when she insists that Margaret is a Christian, without asking Mom or consulting Margaret.*



*The argument between Margaret's parents and grandparents is dehumanizing for Margaret. She knows she can make her own decisions, and she's been trying for months to do so. Now, it seems to Margaret like Mom and Dad had the right idea. Religion, from Margaret's perspective, drives wedges between people—and it doesn't seem worth it to choose one just to fit in. Even talking to God now feels painful instead of comforting.*



## CHAPTER 22

Margaret stays in her room in the morning. She starts to try to talk to God, but then remembers she's not talking to him anymore. She figures that if he wants to "strike [her] down," he can. But by afternoon, she's bored and asks Mom to let her go to a movie with Janie. Margaret meets Janie at a drugstore near the theater. They're early, so they go into the drugstore to check out the pad display. After a few minutes, Margaret suggests they buy some. She's wanted to do this for a while but has been too afraid. Today she feels brave—God might be mad at her, but also, nothing happened when she crossed the street against the light.

Janie is confused and is afraid her mother might be upset, but Margaret suggests they just don't tell. This decided, they choose boxes of Teenage Softies and Margaret grabs a comb so it looks like she's actually shopping. But when the girls see that there's a boy at the cash register, Janie insists she can't do it. As Janie is putting her box back, a saleslady asks if the girls need help. Margaret tells the lady they'd like to buy the pads, but the lady tells them to go buy them from the boy at the counter. Janie looks ready to cry, so Margaret picks up their boxes and dumps them in front of the boy. He says nothing as he takes her money and wraps the boxes up in two separate bags. Margaret is shocked; it's like he sells pads every day.

Mom asks about Margaret's package when Margaret gets home, but Margaret says it's school supplies. Margaret takes the bag to her room and stares at the box, hoping God is watching. She takes out a pad, stares at it, and goes to her closet. In her closet, she puts the pad in her underwear to see what it feels like. She likes the feeling and considers sleeping with the pad, but she decides it's too risky—if there's a fire, someone might find out. Margaret hides the pads in her desk drawer.

In the morning, Grandmother and Grandfather share that they're leaving for New York. Mom is aghast; they said they were coming for a week. Grandfather explains that they've decided to spend the rest of the week in the city. Margaret can see Dad smiling behind his newspaper, but she's angry that her grandparents aren't even staying when they ruined her trip to Florida. When Mom returns from dropping her parents at the bus station, Dad suggests that they probably always intended to go to New York but stopped in because "it was convenient." Margaret points out that they ruined her trip, but nobody acknowledges her.

*Even if Margaret is angry with God and with religion in general, she shows here that she's not ready to give it up altogether—her personal connection to God is still alive, even if she's not on the best of terms with him. It's also telling that in giving herself permission to not choose a religion, Margaret starts to feel braver and more in control. Now, she's making choices based on what she wants to do, rather than what she thinks she must do to fit in.*



*This is an excruciating experience for Margaret and Janie. They've never purchased period supplies before, and the thought of basically telling the boy at the register that they have periods is too embarrassing to fathom. But, the boy's reaction shows that Margaret is actually right: this boy probably does sell period products every day, and menstruating isn't as big a deal for many people as it is for Margaret and Janie right now, at this point in their lives. It's huge for them because it's new, unknown, and scary.*



*When Margaret notes that she hopes God is watching, it suggests that she sees trying out a pad as something she shouldn't be doing. Really, trying the pad is pretty innocuous—and it also seems to help Margaret feel more prepared for when she actually needs one. Still, Margaret is self-conscious about simply owning pads, and she's embarrassed at the thought of being found out (as unlikely as that is).*



*Mom and Dad weren't trying to be mean when they canceled Margaret's trip to Florida—they were trying to give her the opportunity to connect with her grandparents. But all Margaret can focus on is her canceled trip—showing that though she's growing up, she's far from mature. Margaret doesn't fully grasp how upsetting this must be for Mom—Mom planned to host her parents for a week, in the hopes of showing them that she's just fine. Now, the opportunity to prove them wrong is gone.*





## CHAPTER 23

At eight o'clock that night, the doorbell rings. Margaret rushes to get it and screams with joy when it turns out to be Grandma. Grandma has a man with her, whom she introduces as Morris Binamin. Grandma looks fantastic, as does Mr. Binamin. Grandma asks where "they" are, and says she wants to see Margaret's other grandparents. She's distraught when she realizes they're gone; Grandma wanted to come in case Margaret needed her support.

Margaret assures Grandma she was just fine, but Grandma asks if they tried any "church business." Margaret admits they did. Mr. Binamin shakes his head and Grandma reminds Margaret that no matter what, she's a Jewish girl. Margaret argues that she's not Jewish. She's nothing, and she doesn't believe in God. Grandma scolds her and Margaret wants to ask God if he heard her say she doesn't believe—but she's not speaking to God.

Mom and Dad invite Grandma and Mr. Binamin into the living room and serve coffee. Margaret pretends to be tired so she has an excuse to go to bed and leave the room. She thinks Grandma is just like everyone else in that she's too concerned about religion. If Margaret and Grandma love each other, Margaret can't figure out why religion should make any difference.

## CHAPTER 24

In school on Monday, Mr. Benedict announces that the students' reports on their projects will be due on Friday. He's not going to grade them, so the students don't need to worry about giving him what they think he wants—they should be completely honest.

Margaret writes Mr. Benedict a letter to conclude her project. She tells him that she's spent the year trying to figure out what religion she wants to be (or if she wants to affiliate with a religion at all) and she hasn't come to any conclusions. She lists the books she read on Judaism, Christianity, and Catholicism, and tells him about the services she attended. Margaret admits that she hasn't tried Buddhism or Islam, since she doesn't know any Buddhists or Muslims.

*At first, Grandma's arrival is welcome. After Margaret missed out on the trip to Florida, Grandma coming here is the next best thing. At this point, Grandma is vague about what kind of "support" she wanted to offer Margaret.*



*Grandma's insistence that Margaret is Jewish feels like a betrayal, especially after Mom's far less likeable parents insisted Margaret was Christian. To Margaret, it feels like everyone wants to tell her who she is. But Margaret wants to figure that out for herself.*



*Now, Margaret is starting to see that though religion is one way people can fit in, religion also doesn't guarantee that people will love or respect each other. With this realization, Margaret starts to abandon her project to pick a religion—it no longer seems like such an important thing to decide.*



*Mr. Benedict seems like he's trying to do his students a favor by letting them totally control their projects and not evaluating them on a grading scale. He wants them to have done something that's meaningful to them—which is exactly what Margaret did.*



*At first, it seems like Margaret ends the school year right where she started in terms of religion. But as she tells Mr. Benedict about the books she's read and the services she's attended, it's clear that Margaret has taken the project seriously and done some major soul-searching over the last year. And not coming to a final conclusion is a valid conclusion—this isn't something Margaret needs to decide now, or ever.*



Margaret writes that she hasn't enjoyed the project and doesn't think she's going to make up her mind soon, if ever. Now, she doesn't think people can decide what religion they are—that feels like being asked to choose one's name, in that you keep thinking about it and changing your mind. She's decided that if she has kids, she'll assign them a religion so they can start learning early—12 is late to learn about a religion.

*Again, Margaret's conclusions are all very valid and for her, it's true that she can't make a decision right now. However, when she talks about assigning her own kids a religion, it shows that she still values conformity over all else. Just as Mom and Dad thought they were doing the best thing by raising Margaret without religion, she believes she can help her kids by sparing them the same struggles she went through—and that way, they'll hopefully fit in better.*



On Friday, all of Margaret's classmates hand in booklets. Margaret is too embarrassed to hand in her letter with the booklets, since it looks like she hasn't done anything. So she waits until everyone leaves after school, explains the situation to Mr. Benedict, and offers him her letter. He reads it while she waits, and Margaret assures him that she tried. Ready to cry, Margaret races for the bathroom and ignores Mr. Benedict calling for her. After splashing water on her face, she walks home. Margaret figures something must be wrong with her, since she never used to cry when she was 11. Now she cries at everything. She wants to talk to God, but she's not willing to let God know—even if she misses him.

*Even though Mr. Benedict was very clear that the students' reports can look many different ways, Margaret still wants to look like everyone else. She may be even more self-conscious about her letter, though, because her project was so personal for her and because she's still not on speaking terms with God. Her admission that she misses God, leaves the door open for Margaret to realize that her approach to God isn't less valuable than going to church. Most importantly, it gives her the support she needs.*



## CHAPTER 25

In the middle of June, the PTA holds a farewell party for the sixth graders. None of the girls wear socks. Margaret wears her first pair of sheer stockings and promptly gets a run in them. She feels like she's growing up, even if her body doesn't know that yet. The class gives Mr. Benedict a pair of silver cufflinks. He thanks them and tells them that because of them, he'll be an experienced teacher next year. Then, Nancy, Gretchen, Janie, and Margaret have lunch downtown and discuss junior high.

*Noting that none of the girls wear socks to the party suggests that every girl in Margaret's class grew up over the course of the last year. Alternatively, it could also imply that the pressure to fit in is increasing, and that there's a narrow range of "acceptable" behavior. Interestingly, Margaret acknowledges that she's maturing emotionally, even if she's not quite there physically.*



That afternoon, Mom starts packing Margaret's trunk for camp. When Margaret hears the lawnmower outside, she realizes that Moose is back. She's excited at first—but then she remembers that he spread mean stories about Laura. Margaret runs downstairs to confront him and stands right in front of the mower. She tells him he's a liar; she doesn't think he's ever taken Laura Danker behind the A&P. Moose asks where Margaret heard that. Margaret starts to say that Nancy told her, but then realizes she sounds like an "idiot." Moose asks if Margaret always believes everything she hears and tells her to not believe things unless she has proof. Margaret apologizes, but Moose tells her to get out of his way.

*For Margaret, this passage represents a major coming-of-age moment. She now prioritizes telling the truth and being kind over her crush on Moose, which is why she feels compelled to confront him. And she realizes yet again that she can't take Nancy at her word. Going forward, Margaret is going to have to think for herself and make her own choices, relying on her own observations—not just Nancy's rumors.*



Margaret runs inside. She has to go to the bathroom and as she sits down, she thinks about Moose. She's happy that Moose isn't a liar. Then, she looks down and notices blood in her underwear. Margaret yells for Mom and Mom soon appears in the bathroom door. Margaret starts to laugh and sob that she started her period. Mom tears up too, and she says she already bought Margaret supplies to take to camp, just in case. Mom returns a moment later and assures Margaret she got Teenage Softies, not Private Lady. Mom starts to tell Margaret how to use a pad, but Margaret admits that she's been practicing for months. They laugh and Mom excuses herself.

Margaret sticks the pad into her underwear, gets dressed, and looks in the mirror. She wonders if anyone will know she's started her period—like Moose or Dad. She has to call Nancy, Gretchen, and Janie to share the news, and poor Janie will now be the last PTS to get her period. Margaret used to think she'd be the last to start, but now, she's growing up. She's almost a woman. Margaret asks God if he's still there. She knows he is—he wouldn't miss this. She thanks him for helping her start her period.

*It's exciting for Margaret to have proof that Moose isn't a liar—now, she can feel okay about having a crush on him. And then, finally, Margaret gets the one thing she wanted most: her period. This represents Margaret's final coming-of-age, as now she's physically mature in addition to being more emotionally mature. Her relationship with Mom means that it's no big deal for her to ask Mom for help—and then tell the truth about not actually needing help with the pad.*



*Now that Margaret has started her period, she realizes that it's not necessarily something other people will notice. With this, she starts to see that having periods isn't such a big deal, even if the anticipation was stressful. And finally, by talking to God again, Margaret also shows that she's satisfied with the personal relationship she has with God—it's enough for her, and she doesn't need a religion to legitimize it. What's more, God has been there all along.*





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