

Boy Swallows Universe



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TRENT DALTON

Boy Swallows Universe is partially autobiographical. Raised in the Brisbane suburb of Bracken Ridge, Dalton's mother moved in with a man who, in interviews, Dalton has said had "more than one foot in the criminal underworld"—but that man was an important father figure to Dalton and his three older brothers. In addition to briefly being babysat by Arthur "Slim" Halliday, Dalton and his brothers also discovered a secret underground room with only a red telephone in it. Though Dalton never discovered what the telephone was for or who was on the other end, that mystery and his memories of Halliday ultimately became *Boy Swallows Universe*. But before beginning to write fiction (*Boy Swallows Universe* was Dalton's first novel), Dalton worked as a journalist, first for *The Courier-Mail* and then as a staff writer for *The Weekend Australian Magazine*. He's married and has two daughters. In 2020, Dalton published his second novel, *All Our Shimmering Skies*. He's also written several nonfiction works, including a book about the First Fleet (the first English ships to travel to and colonize Australia).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Boy Swallows Universe focuses on the drug trade in Australia, and specifically the import of heroin from the Golden Triangle. The Golden Triangle refers to an area in Southeast Asia where Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos's borders meet. It includes the junction of two major rivers and is a mountainous jungle region. For decades, the area has been a major source of opiates and other drugs, which are smuggled across borders and then transported either by sea or post to various countries, including Australia. Though Eli doesn't touch on it in his narration, this became a huge concern for the Australian government in the 1980s, in part because intravenous drug use—which is how heroin is commonly taken—was a contributing factor to the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Law enforcement and government offices in Australia came out with several plans to try to quell usage, but the plans were often criticized for further stigmatizing drug use and not getting people the help they needed. Another historical detail in the novel is Arthur "Slim" Halliday, who was a real person. The book records his exploits mostly accurately: he was first imprisoned in the Boggo Road prison (formally the Brisbane Prison) in 1939 and made two successful escape attempts from "Halliday's Leap" in 1940 and 1946. He was briefly released but was imprisoned again in 1953 for killing a taxi driver. Halliday consistently maintained that he was framed until his death from cancer in 1987.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Boy Swallows Universe was Trent Dalton's first novel. His second, *All Our Shimmering Skies*, features a protagonist who, like Eli, is interested in good and evil; the novel also similarly features magical realism. While *Boy Swallows Universe* was written too late to formally be a part of the Australian grunge literature genre, it shares some characteristics with novels in the genre and the subgenre of drug literature. The genre often features young protagonists, like Eli, who grow up in low-income circumstances and focus their attention on urban drug use in Australian cities. Important novels in the genre include Helen Garner's 1977 novel *Monkey Grip* and Luke Davies's 1998 novel *Candy: A Novel of Love and Addiction*. Within the novel, Eli and Dad are interested in classic works like Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Henry Charrière's *Papillon*. Eli also thinks often about Herman Melville's famous novel *Moby-Dick*. Eli, Slim, and Alex all love a poem from *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, which is a translated collection of quatrains attributed to Omar Khayyám, a 11th- and 12th-century Persian astronomer and mathematician.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Boy Swallows Universe*
- **When Written:** 2017
- **Where Written:** Brisbane, Australia
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Bildungsroman, Crime Novel, Magical Realism
- **Setting:** The suburbs of Brisbane, Australia in the 1980s
- **Climax:** Eli hits Iwan Krol with the specimen jar containing his lucky finger.
- **Antagonist:** Tytus Broz, Iwan Krol
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Boggo Road Prison. The Boggo Road prison opened in 1883. A working prison for over a century, it was the execution site for 42 prisoners. It was ultimately closed due in part to the fact that even into the 1970s and 80s, it still didn't have adequate sanitation and was built and run using prison principles that were more than 100 years out of date. Today, it's a national heritage site, offering educational tours and venue space for events like weddings and corporate functions.



PLOT SUMMARY

Twelve-year-old Eli's older brother, August, doesn't speak. Instead, he writes words in the air with his finger. One afternoon, while the boys' babysitter, convicted killer Slim Halliday, is teaching Eli to drive, August writes a phrase in the air that will haunt Eli: "your end is a dead blue wren." August's other odd habit is filling the street with water so he can look at the moon's reflection in the water; he and Eli call the puddles "**moon pools**." Eli adores Slim and the stories Slim tells about his criminal exploits, how he survived his years in prison, and his two successful escapes from prison.

Eli and August have recently discovered that Mum and her boyfriend, Lyle, have started selling heroin. One afternoon, August shows Eli a secret room in Lyle's house that he found. It's accessed through a hole in a built-in wardrobe. In the room is a **red telephone**, and when it rings, August and Eli answer it. A mysterious man is on the line.

One night, Eli sees a firework go off and sneakily follows Lyle when he sets off after the firework. Lyle heads for "Back Off" Bich Dang's house. Bich's son, Darren, is a classmate of Eli's, and he finds Eli lurking in the yard. Darren likes Eli because he didn't get him in trouble at school once when he had the opportunity to, so Darren leads Eli inside to meet his mother. There, Bich Dang tells Eli that Lyle is dealing drugs for him.

Several weeks later, the family heads to Bich Dang's restaurant to celebrate Lyle's drug boss, Tytus Broz's, 80th birthday. Eli is afraid of Tytus—he manufactures prosthetic limbs and is generally disturbing. Eli lays eyes on Tytus's evil henchman, Iwan Krol, for the first time, and Darren tells Eli that Iwan runs a llama farm by day, and that by night he murders and chops up people who cross Tytus. After the dinner, Eli begs Lyle to let him help sell drugs. Lyle initially refuses. But when Mum joins a school committee that meets on Saturdays, Lyle and his best friend, Teddy, begin taking Eli and August with them on their drug runs.

In the middle of dinner one evening, Tytus Broz and Iwan Krol burst into Lyle's house. Before they drag Lyle away, Lyle writes something in the air to August. Iwan knocks Mum unconscious and then holds a knife to Eli's pointer finger, his **lucky finger**. When August won't tell Tytus Broz what Lyle wrote and instead says, "your end is a dead blue wren," Iwan cuts Eli's finger off.

While Eli is in the hospital, he learns from Slim that Mum has been incarcerated, and that he and August are going to go live with Dad. Lyle has also disappeared. Distraught, Eli escapes the hospital, goes to Lyle's house, and answers the red phone when it rings. The man on the phone tells Eli that Mum isn't going to live past Christmas. Eli then goes to the offices of a local newspaper where a reporter named Caitlyn Spies works. August has been writing her name in the air for no apparent reason, and Eli immediately falls in love with her. He runs away,

though, before he can tell her about Tytus Broz.

The first several weeks of living with Dad are eventful. Dad spends his nights drinking and vomiting and his days reading. Eli speaks often to the guidance counselor, Mrs. Birkbeck. She tries to talk to Eli about trauma, and she asks Eli to describe for her what's going on in a painting August did in art class of a car on the bottom of the ocean; Eli and August are in the backseat and Dad is driving. It is, apparently, a depiction of the moon pool and of Eli's recurring dream. Finally, Mrs. Birkbeck comes to speak to Dad. She insists the dream isn't a dream—it's a memory. Dad admits that just before Mum left him, he took the boys camping and had a panic attack while driving. He lost control of the car and it went into a farmer's dam, and it's a miracle the boys survived. Hearing this conversation is transformative for Eli. He begins to reject August's insistence that they died in the dam and came back to life, and he doesn't think there's anyone on the other end of the red phone. August insists the man on the phone is an older version of him. But August also tells Eli what Lyle's last words to him were: where Lyle's heroin stash was. The heroin is now hidden in Dad's backyard.

As Christmas approaches, Eli asks Slim for help: he has to break into Boggo Road women's prison and see Mum. Slim gives Eli a contact and, on Christmas Day, a man named George smuggles Eli into the prison in a watermelon crate. Eli is able to briefly see Mum, and he nearly escapes the prison the same way that Slim did decades ago. The guards take Eli home without getting him in trouble when they catch him.

Slim dies six months later. Soon after, Dad learns that Mum is getting out of prison early. Eli decides he and August must get jobs so that when Mum gets out, they can get her a nice place to live. The obvious choice for Eli is to sell Lyle's heroin stash back to the Dangs. Darren purchases the heroin for \$50,000 and shares that Teddy was the one who told Tytus about Lyle's side dealing.

When Eli and August go visit Mum just after her release, they're excited to tell her about their money—but Mum says she's moving in with Teddy. Eli is enraged. Grudgingly, Eli and August agree to spend a week with Mum and Teddy. On the fourth night, Eli asks Teddy why he sold Lyle to Tytus. The next night, when he's high and drunk, Teddy drags Mum outside by her hair and shoves her face into his dogs' food bowl. Eli, August, and Mum spend the night at a halfway house. In the morning, Eli offers to buy Mum a place with Lyle's heroin money. But Mum insists she's going back to Teddy. While Eli is drinking away his sorrows the following night, August gives the remaining \$49,500 to the family of a classmate with muscular dystrophy.

From Mum, Eli learns that *The Courier-Mail*—the paper he's wanted to work for since he was little—offers internships. Finally, he works up the courage to go there and ask for a job. The boss, Brian Robertson, laughs at Eli, but Eli runs into

Caitlyn Spies again. She's even more alluring now that she's the lead crime reporter.

One morning, Mum calls: she's leaving Teddy and has nowhere to go. Dad grudgingly agrees that she can stay at his house. But hours after she arrives, Teddy and his cronies show up—as well as a mysterious man in a suit. The man, who turns out to be Alex Bermudez, Eli's childhood pen pal and the leader of a prominent motorcycle gang, punches Teddy and tells him to leave Mum alone. Then he gives Eli a Dictaphone and sits for a four-hour interview to help Eli break into journalism. Eli sends the resulting story to Brian, who thinks Eli's writing is ridiculous because Eli focuses on describing small details instead of just getting the story down. But he gives Eli a job anyway.

With Alex's help, August starts a charity organization. For this, August is notified that he's going to receive an award at a Queensland Day celebration. At work at *The Courier-Mail*, Eli gets his first real assignment—to write about recipients of the Queensland Day awards—at the same time as the office is in an uproar over the fact that the Penns, a family of supposed drug dealers, have gone missing. Eli suspects that Tytus Broz is involved. He's certain of it when he sees a crime reporter's notes and notices that the police found llama hair at the family's home, a sure sign that Iwan Krol took the family. He tells Caitlyn to look into Iwan Krol.

On the day of the awards ceremony, Eli is supposed to interview Tytus Broz, who's receiving an award for his prosthetics work. Caitlyn drives Eli to the interview and on the way, Eli tells her about how he lost his finger and his suspicions about the Penn family's disappearance.

Caitlyn poses as Eli's photographer for the interview. During the interview, a bird hits Tytus Broz's window and dies—it's a blue wren. But when Eli picks the bird up, it comes back to life again and flies to land on a bunker in the backyard. Eli and Caitlyn sneak back onto Tytus's property later, after he's left for the awards ceremony, and they break into the bunker with an axe. In it, they find a gruesome laboratory of preserved body parts. Eli discovers his finger in a specimen jar and Lyle's preserved head; he packages both up to take with him. They also find the Penns' son Bevan, alive and holding a red telephone out to Eli. The man on the phone warns Eli that Iwan is coming. Caitlyn blinds Iwan with the camera flash, while Eli cuts his foot off with the axe. Caitlyn, Eli, and Bevan escape and drive to the award ceremony in Brisbane.

Caitlyn stays outside with Bevan while Eli goes inside with Lyle's head in a bag. Once August has received his award, Eli slips backstage. He and August replace a model of a prosthetic hand that Tytus plans to show onstage with Lyle's head, and then they hurry Mum and Dad out of the auditorium. Caitlyn joins the family in the lobby as Tytus takes the stage and unwittingly reveals Lyle's head. Police arrest Tytus, and Eli is thrilled.

Things seem fine—until Iwan appears and stabs Eli in the belly. Nobody at the awards ceremony really notices, and Eli flees by climbing to the top of the clock tower. Iwan catches up to Eli just as the police arrive on the scene. As the clock strikes nine, Eli smashes the jar with his finger in it over Iwan's head and passes out. He dreams that he's in prison with Slim, and Slim ushers him over the prison wall to a beach. Caitlyn is on the beach, and beyond the beach is the entire universe.

Six weeks later, Eli and Caitlyn visit Lyle's old house; they're working together on a five-part feature on Tytus Broz's downfall. They enter the underground room, and the red telephone rings. As Eli moves to answer it, Caitlyn tells him not to and kisses him. When he kisses her back, the phone stops ringing.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Eli Bell – The novel's protagonist, Eli grows from age 12 to age 19 over the course of the novel. When readers meet him, he's a mostly happy kid living with Mum, her boyfriend Lyle, and his older brother, August. Eli adores his family and his babysitter, Slim. Slim has taught Eli to remember things by linking events to physical objects, so Eli has a sharp memory. He also loves language and wants to be a crime journalist for *The Courier-Mail* one day. His shorter-term goal is for Mum and Lyle to stop selling drugs so the family can move to a wealthier suburb. It seems likely that this could happen—but then, Tytus Broz and Iwan Krol make Lyle disappear and cut Eli's **lucky finger** off. Mum also goes to prison. Following this, Eli becomes obsessed with figuring out what makes a good man, and with finding a way to bring Tytus Broz down. Since Mum is in prison, Eli and August have to move in with Dad, whom Eli hasn't seen since he was five. During this time, Eli speaks regularly with the guidance counselor, Mrs. Birkbeck, at school. She encourages Eli to accept that his recurring dream of a car diving into the ocean isn't actually a dream—it's a memory, and he's trying to recover from trauma. She also suggests that the fact that Eli hears a voice, ostensibly August's, on the other end of a mysterious **red telephone** in a hidden room in Lyle's house is another manifestation of Eli's trauma. Eli chooses to believe Mrs. Birkbeck (Dad did drive the boys into a dam just before Mum left him), and he begins stepping back from August and August's insistences that he can see the future. However, once Eli gets a job at *The Courier-Mail* and is tasked with interviewing Tytus, he decides that August is actually prophetic. Eli and his longtime crush, crime reporter Caitlyn Spies, discover Tytus's underground bunker—and in it, Lyle's head and Eli's missing finger in a jar. This helps them expose Tytus, and Eli hits Iwan with his finger in a jar to escape Iwan's attempt to murder him. Eli ends the novel by choosing to kiss Caitlyn instead of picking up the ringing red telephone one last time—a sign that Eli is

finally leaving his traumatic past behind.

August Bell – August is Eli’s older brother by one year. He’s selectively mute and has been for the last seven years when the novel begins. Instead of speaking, he writes words in the air with his pointer finger. Not everything he writes is straightforward; much of it is cryptic, such as the phrase “your end is a dead blue wren,” the name “Caitlyn Spies,” and the phrase “boy swallows universe.” Eli and August are extremely close, and they both love Mum and Lyle. So it’s traumatic for both of them when Tytus Broz and Iwan Krol barge in to abduct Lyle. August won’t tell Tytus what Lyle’s final air-written words were, but he does speak for the first time in years and says again, “your end is a dead blue wren.” Iwan cuts Eli’s finger off in retaliation. After this night, August speaks selectively, mostly to Eli. He sees Dad as a sympathetic figure from the moment he and Eli go to live with Dad. As both boys start at a new school and attract the guidance counselor, Mrs. Birkbeck’s, attention, their relationship becomes strained. Eli tells Mrs. Birkbeck that August has been painting pictures of the “**moon pool**,” a recurring dream Eli has about a car diving into the ocean. But he also tells her that August believes that Eli and August died in the pool and came back to life. August also believes there are multiple versions of himself, one of which exists on the other end of the **red telephone**. August maintains that all of this is true, even when Eli starts to reject it. When it becomes clear that Mum doesn’t want her sons’ help securing a place to live, August gives the \$49,500 of Lyle’s drug money the boys had stashed to a classmate with muscular dystrophy. This leads August to start a charity that helps wealthy criminals give back to their communities. August ultimately helps Eli bring Tytus down when Eli, after deciding to take August’s cryptic phrases seriously, discovers the bunker where Tytus hid his victims’ bodies, including Lyle’s. Following this, Eli acknowledges that his brother does know more about the world than he does.

Mum – Eli adores his and August’s mother. She left Dad when Eli and August were five and six, and she met Lyle while she was living with a friend she met at a halfway house. Eli thinks she’s the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen, and he believes she’s far too good to be with Lyle—or to be dealing drugs. She’s off drugs in the present because several years ago, Lyle got clean himself and then forced Mum to do the same. Mum has a smile that makes everyone she smiles at feel warm, and Eli wants nothing more than to make her happy. Eli believes that he can make Mum happy if Lyle stops dealing, and if the family can move to The Gap, a wealthy suburb. This is because Mum craves what Eli terms “normal,” which he defines as being involved with things local the school parent club and running school events. But before Mum can experience too much “normal,” Tytus Broz discovers that Lyle has been selling heroin behind his back to fund “normal” life for Mum. He drags Lyle away to murder him, knocks Mum unconscious, and leaves Mum to be arrested by the police for her involvement in Lyle’s

dealing. Mum spends two and a half years in prison, which is an extremely difficult sentence for her. Eli only sees her once, on her first Christmas—and only because the man on the **red telephone** tells Eli that Mum is at risk of dying on Christmas, and Slim arranges for Eli to be snuck into the prison. When Mum gets out of prison, she first moves in with Teddy, who was formerly Lyle’s best friend—and who told Tytus about Teddy’s side dealing. She puts up with verbal and physical abuse until Teddy knocks her front teeth out, at which point she moves in with Dad. At the end of the novel, it’s implied that Mum and Dad might get back together.

Dad – Eli and August’s dad doesn’t appear until midway through the novel, as Mum left him when Eli and August were five and six. Eli thinks Dad is evil for messing up his relationship with Mum, and he has no interest in forming a relationship with his biological father. But when Lyle disappears and Mum is incarcerated, Eli has no choice but to join August at Dad’s house. Dad, Eli discovers, is unstable. He suffers from clinical anxiety that prevents him from getting and keeping a job—and sometimes even from leaving the house—and he’s an alcoholic who spends most of his drunken nights vomiting and urinating all over his house. When he’s drunk, he’s also violent: when Eli first enters Dad’s home, Dad drunkenly rushes at Eli with an axe handle, cursing. The boys often torment Dad while he’s drunk, such as by tying his shoelaces together. But as time passes, Eli starts to feel more sympathetic toward Dad. This is especially true after Dad has a panic attack that necessitates calling an ambulance, as Eli finally realizes just how serious Dad’s anxiety is. Things improve even more between Dad and Eli when Dad tells the origin story of August’s “**moon pool**” to the school counselor, Mrs. Birkbeck. He explains that he was taking the boys camping one night, had a panic attack while driving, and drove into a farmer’s dam—and Eli and August nearly died when the car sank. Eli eventually decides it doesn’t really matter whether Dad drove them into the dam on purpose—Dad has, by this point, begun taking better care of his sons, and Eli sees him as deserving of love and care. Dad never stops loving Mum, but it’s hard for him to allow Mum to come stay at his house when she needs to escape her abusive boyfriend Teddy. But after a year or so of living together, at the end of the novel, it’s implied that Mum and Dad might get back together.

Arthur “Slim” Halliday – Slim is Eli and August’s babysitter, and Eli’s mentor. He’s in his eighties and is an unconventional choice for a babysitter, as he’s only been out of prison less than a decade after being sentenced to life for killing a taxi driver. Slim maintains he’s innocent and was framed, but the novel never reveals whether Slim is actually innocent. Eli adores Slim because he sees Eli as an old soul who’s mature enough to hear disturbing or gruesome stories about life in prison. So, Eli laps up Slim’s stories of escaping Boggo Road prison—twice—and Slim’s account of spending two weeks in Black Peter, the

underground isolation cell. Slim teaches Eli to remember things by linking memories to everyday objects or body parts. This method is how Slim kept himself entertained in prison: he could look at his knuckles, for instance, and be carried away by a memory of rolling hills. Slim also used this method to manipulate time: by making time seem to go faster with happy memories when things were bad, and then by letting time seem to slow down when his actual experiences were happier. Eli uses all of these lessons from Slim throughout the novel, and in Slim's opinion, Eli takes them all a bit too seriously. Slim suggests at one point that Eli is too busy thinking about criminals and whether or not Slim is innocent, or a good man—Eli should, Slim suggests, worry about living his own life and telling his own story instead. But Slim is nevertheless extremely supportive of Eli. He sets up a contact to sneak Eli into the Boggo Road women's prison on Christmas to see Mum, against his better judgment, and encourages Eli to make the most of his life. Slim dies when Eli is about 14 after fighting cancer for six months. Once Slim is dead, Eli addresses some of his narration to Slim.

Lyle Orlik – Lyle is Mum's boyfriend and a father figure to Eli and August. He's kind, generous, and present for the nine years that he's with Mum; he's such a positive force in Eli's life that at one point, when Eli was little, he called Lyle "Dad." For the most part, Eli idolizes Lyle. But Eli also realizes that Lyle isn't a saint: he got Mum onto drugs (though he also got her off drugs again after getting clean himself), and he's currently dealing heroin for Tytus Broz with his best friend, Teddy. Eli tries to get Lyle to let him help sell drugs. Lyle refuses until he ends up needing to supervise Eli and August on the weekends for a month, so he begins taking the boys with him on his drug runs. Eli makes several useful observations, but the most useful is that Teddy is falling in love with Mum. Lyle promises Eli that he just needs six more months to sell for Tytus Broz, and then he can stop selling for good. But Lyle is never able to follow through on this promise, as Tytus Broz and Iwan Krol drag Lyle away and murder him as punishment for Lyle selling drugs on his own. Following this, Lyle becomes a martyr in Eli's mind—he was a good man, a man Eli loved, whom terrible men made disappear. Eli is able to get revenge six years after Lyle's disappearance, when he's tasked with interviewing Tytus Broz for the paper. Eli discovers that Tytus has an underground bunker where he keeps the preserved body parts of "small-time criminals," and Eli finds Lyle's head there. Using Lyle's preserved head, Eli and August expose Tytus as the monster he is at the Queensland Day awards ceremony, thereby getting justice for Lyle.

Teddy – Teddy was once Lyle's best friend, but over the course of the novel, he becomes Eli's nemesis. Early in the novel, Teddy and Lyle work together for Tytus Broz, selling and delivering heroin all over the Brisbane suburbs. Teddy looks like Elvis, and he's kind to Eli and August. But Eli's relationship with Teddy starts to get complicated when it becomes obvious that Teddy

is falling in love with Mum. Eli eventually comes to see Teddy as cowardly and selfish. Teddy is the one to tell Tytus that Lyle is dealing heroin behind his back, and Teddy doesn't try to help Mum, Eli, or August when Tytus and Iwan Krol come to take Lyle away and cut Eli's **lucky finger** off. But while Eli and August openly detest Teddy, this doesn't change the fact that Teddy is the only one to visit Mum in prison—so upon her release, Mum moves in with him. Teddy, however, is verbally and physically abusive. By this point, he's driving fruit trucks up and down the coast, a career move Eli figures necessary since Tytus no doubt refused to work with a "rat." This career change brings different drugs with it, which Eli thinks contribute to Teddy's violence. Mum leaves Teddy's house once due to the abuse and returns, and she leaves him for good after Teddy knocks her front teeth out.

Tytus Broz – The elderly antagonist of the novel, Eli often refers to Tytus Broz as "the lord of the limbs." This is because Tytus's day job is running a factory that produces prosthetic limbs, a business he started when his daughter, Hanna, was born without hands or forearms. He often talks about changing the world and helping other people, and he's considered a major force for good in his community. However, by night, Tytus is the leader of the regional drug circuit and pays people like Lyle and Teddy to sell heroin for him. He also, according to Darren Dang, employs Iwan Krol to cut up and kill the people who cross him. All of this, combined with Tytus's appearance (he's pale with white hair and wears white suits, which makes Eli think of bones) makes him terrifying in Eli's mind. His mere presence makes Eli shiver. But Tytus establishes himself as truly evil when he, Iwan, and another henchman come to Lyle's house one night. They drag Lyle away and knock Mum unconscious, and Tytus tells Iwan to cut Eli's **lucky finger** off when August refuses to tell Tytus what Lyle's last "words" (which were written in the air to August) were. Tytus physically disappears from the story for a while after this point, but Eli thinks of him often and wants nothing more than to figure out how to bring Tytus Broz down and expose him for what he is. Years after losing his finger, Eli gets the opportunity: Tytus, now 86, will receive an award for his work in prosthetics, and Eli is tasked with interviewing him for the paper. With Caitlyn's help, Eli discovers Tytus's secret underground bunker, which is full of the preserved body parts of "small-time criminals" like Lyle. Eli discovers Lyle's preserved head there, and he and August replace a model of a prosthetic hand with Lyle's head so that during the awards ceremony, Tytus reveals the head instead of the hand. Tytus is ultimately arrested.

Iwan Krol – Iwan Krol is one of the novel's antagonists; he's Tytus Broz's henchman. The first time Eli meets him, he thinks that Iwan looks like he's made of stone, as he seems like a hard and cold man. Eli learns that night that his assessment is probably correct. According to Darren Dang, Iwan runs a llama farm by day, and by night his job is to look disturbing for Tytus.

When people get on Tytus's bad side, Darren insists, Iwan is the one to dismember them while they're still alive and take the pieces to Tytus. The rumors about what *other* terrible things he's done to people are so wild that it's impossible to tell what one should believe about him. Eli leaves this conversation with Darren with a healthy fear of Iwan. Months later, Iwan helps Tytus drag Lyle away and then, at Tytus's signal, cuts Eli's **lucky finger** off. Iwan continues to haunt Eli's dreams for years after this. But it's not until Eli is 19 that he gets proof that Iwan is just as terrifying as Darren said he was. Eli and Caitlyn discover an underground bunker on Tytus's property, filled with the preserved body parts of "small-time criminals" that Iwan seems to have dismembered for his boss. Eli discovers Lyle's head there, in addition to his own finger. Iwan stabs Eli later at the Queensland Day awards ceremony, but Eli survives the ordeal by hitting Iwan over the head with the specimen jar containing his lucky finger.

Caitlyn Spies – Caitlyn Spies is Eli's love interest; she's a crime reporter for local and regional newspapers and is eight years older than Eli. She has long brown hair and wears thick round glasses. She first appears in the novel when August begins writing her name in the air, seemingly for no reason. Eli then starts to think he and Caitlyn are supposed to be together after he discovers that Caitlyn wrote a sweeping story about Slim's time in and out of prison. Because of this, after Eli escapes from the hospital after losing his finger, he seeks out Caitlyn. He believes if anyone can tell Tytus Broz's story and bring him down, Caitlyn can. While Eli falls madly in love with her during this first meeting, Caitlyn treats Eli like a self-important child. However, she's not at all surprised or upset to see him several years later, when she's moved to a bigger paper, *The Courier-Mail*. She gives Eli tips on how to deal with the editor-in-chief and get a job at the paper, and she also tells Eli about why she puts so much effort into her journalism. Caitlyn explains she was born prematurely, and her mother died, so she's spent her life trying to make her mother's sacrifice worth it. This conversation deepens Eli's conviction that he and Caitlyn are supposed to be together. Ultimately, Eli does get a job at *The Courier-Mail*, and he and Caitlyn begin working together when Eli is assigned to write a brief piece on Tytus Broz in preparation for the Queensland Day awards. Caitlyn accompanies Eli to interview Tytus and then helps Eli sneak back onto Tytus's property to investigate a suspicious-looking bunker, where they find preserved human body parts as well as Bevan Penn, a missing boy. Following this experience (and their reveal to the authorities that Tytus is a criminal), Caitlyn and Eli are assigned to co-write a five-part story on Tytus's downfall. While poking around Lyle's house and when they encounter the **red telephone**, Caitlyn is the one to convince Eli he doesn't need to answer it. By kissing him, Caitlyn helps Eli come of age and leave his traumatic past behind.

Alex Bermudez – Alex is the former sergeant-at-arms of a

prominent motorcycle gang. At the beginning of the novel, when he's in prison, he's Eli's pen pal. In his letters, Alex tells Eli about prison life, counsels Eli to stay in school and get good grades (so Eli doesn't end up in prison himself), and encourages Eli to work toward becoming a journalist. Eli ends their correspondence when he's 13, when he moves in with Dad. Years later, Eli notices a strange man watching him from a yellow Mustang—and on the day that Mum comes to live with Dad, Alex arrives at Dad's house at the same time as Teddy comes to take Mum away with him. Alex stands up for Mum and threatens to send gang members after Teddy if he approaches Mum again. This is the first time that Eli has actually gotten to meet Alex in the flesh. Alex is a tall, handsome man who wears tailored suits. He brings Eli a Dictaphone, as he wants to help Eli achieve his childhood dream of becoming a journalist. When Eli says breaking into the field is difficult, Alex gives a four-hour interview so that Eli can write a story and present it to Brian Robertson, the editor-in-chief of *The Courier-Mail*. Alex also helps August start a charity that allows wealthy criminals—like himself—give back to their communities.

Darren Dang – Darren Dang is a classmate at Eli's school in Darra and Bich Dang's son. He's a known bully; he regularly torments Eli, and once, he forces Eli to hold onto a rat so Darren can cut its tail off. (Eli lets the rat go before Darren can do so.) Darren has a flair for drama, which often shows up in his use of ostentatious and absurdly large weapons—he uses a machete to try to cut the rat's tail off, and when he catches Eli snooping outside his house, he sneaks up on Eli with a samurai sword. But Darren starts to look a little more human to Eli when he shares that he doesn't believe any adult men are good; this causes Eli to take on the task of figuring out which men are good, and how men become bad or good. Darren also plants the idea in Eli's head that Lyle should buy up heroin and wait for its value to appreciate for a few years and then sell it. He'd like to think of himself as a savvy businessman, and he believes he'll take over Bich Dang's business one day. In this way, he's right. When Bich Dang develops cataracts, Darren takes over her drug business and starts a gang called 5T. Darren's rule is dramatic and theatrical: gang members all wear matching tracksuits, and they fight their rival gang with machetes.

"Back Off" Bich Dang – Darren Dang's mother, Bich Dang, is an extremely successful Vietnamese businesswoman in Darra. She owns and runs an Asian grocery store and a Vietnamese restaurant, and she gives generously to various causes and organizations in the community. Because of this, she's influential and respected. But when Eli learns that Bich Dang is Lyle's heroin importer and supplier, he comes to see that Bich Dang is powerful for more reasons than for her business success. She earned her nickname when she stabbed a girl in the eye for teasing her daughter, and she never suffered consequences for this, which makes Eli think that Bich Dang is so prominent in the community because she is one of the

people who makes the rules. Bich Dang's power wanes in the years after Lyle is killed, mostly because she develops cataracts. Darren takes over the drug business, though the family stops importing at this point.

Mrs. Birkbeck – Mrs. Birkbeck is the guidance counselor at Nashville State High School. She speaks regularly to both Eli and August, though only Eli seems willing to speak honestly with her. Eli understands that Mrs. Birkbeck means well and is just trying to help, so he tells her about the **moon pool** and the **red telephone**. She ultimately comes to visit and speak with Dad because she's concerned that August especially might be at risk of hurting himself or committing suicide. But as Eli listens to Mrs. Birkbeck insist that it's important for Eli to realize that his supposed dreams about the moon pool aren't dreams at all—they're memories—it becomes a profound moment for him. So though Eli sees Mrs. Birkbeck as being well-meaning but overstepping into something that isn't her business, he also appreciates how she helps him make sense of his traumatic past and start to heal.

Shelly Huffman – Shelly Huffman is a student in Eli's year at Nashville State High School. She was recently diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, and the school is fundraising to buy her family a wheelchair-friendly van and outfit their home with ramps and other mobility aids. Shelly has a cutting sense of humor about everything, particularly about her diagnosis: when the school's fundraising efforts stall at a couple thousand dollars, she jokes that they've raised "half a ramp." She also acts unbothered when, for instance, her family goes places without her, like the beach. Both Eli and August like Shelly, possibly in romantic ways. August shares with Shelly Eli's plan to sneak into prison and see Mum, and Eli considers staying with Shelly for an afternoon instead of carrying out that plan. Eli thinks often of Shelly when he considers how unfair life is. Ultimately, when it becomes clear that Mum doesn't want to use Lyle's drug money to buy a nice house, August donates the money to Shelly's family, which allows the school to meet its fundraising goal. It's unclear if Shelly ever discovers who donated the money.

Brian Robertson – Brian Robertson is the caustic editor in chief of *The Courier-Mail* newspaper, where Eli dreams of working. Eli expects Brian to love words and stories as much as he does—but when Eli first meets Brian, he learns that Brian detests words and cares only for "the scoop." He regularly asks his journalists to distill complex, difficult stories down into three words, which reflects his belief that journalism shouldn't use any words that don't clearly and succinctly convey the story. Because of this, he finds Eli trying and terms him a "color writer" because Eli loves describing small details using flowery language. Brian initially refuses to even consider hiring Eli, but he eventually agrees once Eli sends him an interview with renowned gang leader Alex Bermudez. This earns Eli the role of the back-up to the back-up horseracing

writer. Brian only allows Eli to write for the crime desk after Eli and Caitlyn bring about the downfall of Tytus Broz.

Hanna Broz – Hanna Broz is Tytus Broz's adult daughter. She was born without forearms or hands, and this inspired Tytus to start his prosthetics business. Hanna has long, white-blond hair and seems quiet and kind. She always wears prosthetics presumably made by Tytus, though Eli recognizes that hers are more for looks than for function. It's not entirely clear what her relationship with her father is like. Eli notices that at Tytus's 80th birthday party, he keeps his hand on her thigh most of the evening, and she barely eats.

Raymond Leary – Raymond Leary has been harassing the staff at the *South-West Star* newspaper, where Caitlyn Spies works. The state took his house to build a road and his wife committed suicide, but the paper won't tell his story, and he takes this as a personal affront. Eli meets him when he goes to see Caitlyn Spies, and Raymond punches and then runs headfirst into the building's glass front.

Irene – Irene was Slim's wife. She doesn't appear in person in the novel; she's only mentioned in Slim's stories and in a newspaper article by Caitlyn Spies. In Slim's stories, his memories of Irene kept him sane and hopeful when he was imprisoned in Black Peter. According to Caitlyn's article, Irene said she'd stay faithful to Slim when he was incarcerated a second time, but she wasn't. Slim, however, insists to Eli that she was.

Lena Orlik – Lena, Lyle's mother, is deceased in the novel's present. She died eight years after her husband, Aureli, died of cancer. Her bedroom in Lyle's house remains untouched, and Eli thinks of it as the "room of true love" because of how Lena cared for Aureli until his death. She and Aureli were Jewish and, following World War II, immigrated to Australia from Europe.

Aureli Orlik – Aureli, Lyle's father and Lena's husband, is deceased in the novel's present. He died of cancer in Lena's bedroom in Lyle's house. Aureli built the house on the weekends while he and Lena were still living in a refugee camp; he and Lena were Jewish and immigrated to Australia from Europe after World War II.

Bevan Penn – Bevan Penn is Glenn and Regina Penn's eight-year-old son. He goes missing from a Brisbane suburb, along with his parents. Bevan's disappearance is traumatic for Eli, as he realizes how easily he and August could've ended up in Bevan's place due to Mum and Lyle's involvement in Tytus Broz's drug empire. Eli and Caitlyn ultimately find Bevan alive in Tytus Broz's underground bunker, holding a **red telephone**.

Christopher – Christopher is a cancer patient in the pediatric unit of the Brisbane Hospital. His brain cancer is most likely terminal, but this doesn't bother Christopher—being sick means that for the most part, he gets whatever he wants from his parents. Christopher helps Eli escape the hospital by creating a diversion in the common area.

Officer Dale – Officer Dale, a prison guard at Boggo Road, only appears in Slim’s stories of being in prison. Slim describes Officer Dale as one of the few decent men working in the prison system. Slim admired Dale so much that when Slim was let out of prison in the late 1940s, he began going by Arthur Dale in honor of the officer.

Bernie – Bernie is an inmate at Boggo Road women’s prison, and she’s Slim’s contact inside when Eli sneaks in to see Mum. Bernie is an older woman who’s kind and generous to Eli, but she also goes out of her way to make Eli realize that Mum isn’t well and that Eli is doing something extremely dangerous by sneaking in.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Glenn Penn – Glenn Penn is a man who disappears from a suburb neighboring Darra. He’s believed to be involved in drug trafficking. Eli and Caitlyn discover his body and that of his wife, Regina, dismembered in the bunker in Tytus Broz’s backyard.

Regina Penn – Regina Penn goes missing from a Brisbane suburb, along with her husband, Glenn, and her son, Bevan. She and Glenn are abducted because of their involvement in the drug trade. Eli and Caitlyn discover her and Glenn’s dismembered bodies in Tytus Broz’s bunker.

Father Monroe – Father Monroe is a priest in Darra. Eli believes there’s nothing wrong with Father Monroe, but Darren Dang insists that Father Monroe pays a boy to expose his penis while Father Monroe masturbates.

Eric Voight – Eric is Darren Dang’s crony.

Mr. McKinnon – Mr. McKinnon is the Scottish and perpetually drunk groundskeeper at Eli and Darren’s school.

Quan Nguyen – Quan Nguyen is Bich Dang’s second husband. Eli describes him as more of a servant than a husband.

Ezra – Ezra is an Aboriginal man whom Lyle and Teddy sell heroin to. He’s a third-tier drug dealer.

Eloise – Eloise is a woman who lives with Ezra. She’s tasked with checking Lyle’s block of heroin, and Eli witnesses Eloise shave a gram off the block behind Lyle’s back.

Dustin Vang – Dustin Vang is a drug dealer and importer in Darra. He eventually becomes part of the BTK gang, the rival gang to Darren’s 5T.

Bobby Linyette – Bobby Linyette is a bully at Nashville State High School. He torments Eli about his missing finger until Eli hits him in the knee with gym weights.

Pamela Waters – Pamela is Dad’s nosy next-door neighbor.

George – George is an old friend of Slim’s. He drives a fruit truck that makes deliveries to the Boggo Road prisons, and he agrees to smuggle Eli in to see Mum.

Debbie – Debbie is an inmate at Boggo Road women’s prison. She tries to help Eli see Mum.

Sister Patricia – Sister Patricia is a nun who runs a halfway house for women getting out of prison. She houses Mum for a short period of time when Mum is first released, and then takes Mum in a few times when Mum flees Teddy’s house.

Amos Webster – Amos is the elderly crossword puzzle editor at *The Courier-Mail*. Eli sits next to him, and Amos gives advice for how to survive in Brian Robertson’s office.

Veronica Holt – Veronica Holt is a crime reporter at *The Courier-Mail*’s rival newspaper. Brian detests her, as she breaks the story about the missing Penn family before the crime writers at *The Courier-Mail* can.

Dave Cullen – Dave is the rude and pompous journalist at *The Courier-Mail* who works at the crime desk with Caitlyn.

Dr. Caroline Brennan – Dr. Brennan is the Irish doctor in charge of the pediatric ward at the Brisbane hospital. She unsuccessfully tries to get Eli to tell her the truth about how he lost his finger by appealing to his love of *Star Wars*.



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.



GOODNESS, MASCULINITY, AND COMING OF AGE

Boy Swallows Universe follows 12-year-old Eli Bell for seven years, as he starts to come of age in various suburbs of Brisbane, Australia in the mid- to late 1980s. As Eli gradually becomes aware of the fact that his idyllic life isn’t as idyllic as he initially thought (his mum’s boyfriend Lyle, whom Eli adores, is selling heroin, and Eli’s regular babysitter is convicted killer and prison escape artist Slim Halliday), Eli starts to question what it means for a man to be good. Is Lyle good because he’s kind and respectful to Mum, Eli, and Eli’s brother August, even if he’s also selling heroin? Is Slim—whom Eli admires for his many prison escapes, knack for telling stories, and sage advice—only good if it’s true that he didn’t commit the murder that put him in prison? And is Tytus Broz, who is by all accounts an upstanding member of society for his work in developing prosthetic limbs and donating to charity, wholly evil since he’s also the man running most of the drug trade in the Brisbane suburbs? (Eli never considers this sort of thing in regards to the women in his life, as he tends to see women as wholly good, and/or as victims of terrible men.) Much of Eli’s coming-of-age process happens as he considers how and why men become good or evil, and thinks about the kind of man he wants to be when he grows up.

The men in Eli's life seem to divide up neatly between good and evil when Tytus Broz discovers that Lyle is running his own drug business behind his boss's back, and Tytus has his evil henchman Iwan Krol take Lyle away to be murdered—and has Iwan cut Eli's **finger** off. After this, to Eli, Lyle begins to look saintlier than he ever has, and Tytus Broz and Iwan Krol look more evil than ever. But as Eli comes of age, he realizes that there are few, if any, clear distinctions between good and evil. For instance, Eli spent most of his life believing that Dad was evil—but during the years that Eli and August live with Dad when Mum is in prison, Eli gradually comes to see that Dad isn't evil. Rather, Dad is simply a man plagued by clinical anxiety and alcoholism, both of which cause him to sometimes behave in frightening ways. But when Dad isn't anxious or drunk, he's "extremely pleasant," and both Eli and August come to adore him. And not long before Slim dies, he tells Eli that there aren't actually any good or bad men in the world: people make choices that are good or bad. The mark of a good man, Slim insists, is that he makes choices that are good and help others—and takes responsibility for his actions.



TRAUMA, COPING, AND HEALING

Boy Swallows Universe is very concerned with how trauma manifests and affects people's lives, particularly when the sufferers are children. Early in the novel, many things in Eli and August's lives seem magical, fantastical, or simply the products of young boys' wild imaginations. August and Eli both hear a mysterious, wise voice supposedly belonging to an adult version of August on the other end of a **red telephone**—but that telephone supposedly can't receive calls. And Eli consistently dreams about being in the backseat of a car that Dad is driving to the bottom of the ocean, a dream that begins happily and ends making him feel horrified. It's not until Eli and August move in with Dad and begin seeing their new school counselor, Mrs. Birkbeck, that it's revealed that both of these fantastical things are the product of trauma: when Eli was five and August six, Dad was taking them camping and drove off a country road and into a farmer's deep dammed river. Eli and August almost died—and August believes, on some level, that he did die and come back to life. The dream is actually a memory, according to Mrs. Birkbeck, and perhaps the voice on the telephone is another manifestation of the trauma they experienced. Having Mrs. Birkbeck refer to the dream as a memory is profound for Eli—it allows him, for the first time, to begin processing the trauma. This entails rejecting August's fantastical stories about dying, coming back, and the voice on the red phone, as well as deciding that it's okay to forgive Dad for what happened. Healing from such trauma, the novel suggests, is possible if one is willing to accept the truth and discard coping mechanisms that are no longer helpful.

Eli must undergo a similar healing process as he suffers other

traumatic experiences, ranging in severity from watching Mum put up with her boyfriend Teddy's constant physical abuse, to managing Dad's drunken rages, to coming to terms with the fact that the unsuspecting leader of the Queensland heroin business, Tytus Broz, had Mum's former boyfriend, Lyle, murdered and dismembered. Ultimately, Eli only moves on from all of this trauma when, as a young adult, he's confronted with the ringing red telephone once again—and he chooses to not answer it. Instead of picking up, Eli kisses his coworker and longtime crush. This represents Eli's choice to let go of coping mechanisms and stories that were holding him back and hindering his ability to enjoy new experiences, such as kissing the girl of his dreams.



FAMILY, LOVE, AND MENTORSHIP

Australian teenagers Eli and August come from a fractured family. Mum left Dad when the boys were five and six, and she met Lyle, her boyfriend at the beginning of the novel, not long after she left the women's shelter. Eli isn't entirely clear on why Mum left Dad, but since he doesn't remember much of what happened before moving in with Lyle, he decides that Dad is evil and not someone he should waste any time thinking about. The fractured nature of Eli's family, though, doesn't mean that he's not supported—indeed, the novel makes it very clear that whether a person shares blood with their family members is no indicator of how supportive a family is. For instance, Eli adores Lyle. He describes Lyle as "the first man [he] ever loved" because of how supportive and important of a father figure Lyle is to Eli. At one point, Eli even relates a story about calling Lyle "Dad," a name that seems to slip out because of how fond Eli is of Lyle. It doesn't matter at all that Lyle isn't his real dad, or isn't married to Mum. Lyle is present, supportive, and honest with Eli, so he earns Eli's respect in full. And Eli feels similarly about Slim, his babysitter. Slim is in no way related to Eli's family by blood; he's a formerly convicted criminal who met Lyle in a prison work program. But because Slim loves Eli unconditionally and makes Eli feel mature by telling him stories about prison with dark or disturbing content, Eli happily accepts Slim's mentorship. It's support, trust, and unconditional love, the novel suggests, that make someone a family member.

Boy Swallows Universe also leaves room for family dynamics to change over time, and for family members to redeem themselves. When Lyle is murdered and Mum is imprisoned, Eli and August have no choice but to live with Dad—something Eli doesn't want to do, since he sees Dad as someone wholly evil. And while Eli and Dad's first meeting is terrifying (Dad drunkenly rushes at Eli, cursing, and tries to hit him with an axe handle), Eli eventually comes to see Dad as someone who's not so bad, and then as someone who's actually an important and beloved ally. Having his sons around after years without contact gradually inspires Dad to cut back on his drinking and

seek help for his clinical anxiety, and Eli ultimately decides to forgive Dad for terrible things Dad did in the past (like drive Eli and August into a dam, possibly on purpose). And the novel ends with the hope that Mum and Dad might get back together, after almost 15 years apart. Who one considers family, and why, the novel suggests, is something that naturally shifts over time as people grow, make mistakes, or make amends for things they've done in the past.



STORYTELLING AND JUSTICE

From the very beginning of *Boy Swallows Universe*, when protagonist Eli is only 12 years old, Eli's goal in life is to be a crime reporter for *The Courier-Mail*.

This goal is inspired by Eli's love of words and storytelling, as well as his close friendship with his babysitter, the elderly convicted murder Slim Halliday. For the last few years that Slim has been babysitting Eli and Eli's older brother, August, Slim has regaled Eli with stories of his time in prison—and his numerous successful escapes, which turned him into a celebrity.

Whenever stories about Slim run in the paper, Eli eagerly consumes them and dreams of one day writing his own stories about Slim or other convicted criminals. Early in the novel, this stems from the fact that Eli adores Slim and wants everyone to hear the man's stories the way Eli has. Telling Slim's stories to the reader and to other characters is a way for Eli to humanize his babysitter—whom many believe is either dead or a callous, hardened criminal.

However, after Eli's life turns upside-down when his mum's boyfriend, Lyle, is dragged away and presumably murdered by his drug boss, Tytus Broz—and when Tytus commands his henchman to cut Eli's **finger** off—Eli's reason for wanting to write crime stories shifts somewhat. Rather than wanting to humanize people like Slim, Eli yearns to use the story of losing his finger and seeing Lyle dragged away to bring Tytus Broz down—which he knows will be no small feat, given that Tytus is a respected figure in the community and gives generously to charity. In a world where the police are well aware of who's at the top of the drug trade and therefore aren't willing to arrest or convict someone like Tytus, it comes down to Eli's ability to tell a believable story to bring Tytus down. Storytelling, in this sense, allows Eli to simultaneously tell his own story, which is cathartic for him; as well as to finally serve justice to the person who took away Lyle, the "first man [Eli] ever loved."



MONEY, SUBURBIA, AND CRIMINALITY

Eli's coming-of-age story exposes the fact that the Brisbane suburbs of the mid-to-late 1980s are in no way as idyllic as one might expect—indeed, Eli

indicates that the various suburbs where he lives and hangs out are full of "small-time criminals" who turn to crime because it provides people in difficult financial situations a way to support their families. This doesn't mean, though, that Eli's family and

neighbors don't strive for boring, idyllic, stereotypically suburban lives. Eli, for instance, spends most of his teen years aspiring to one day have enough money to live in The Gap, a more affluent suburb. Mum and her boyfriend, Lyle, insist that Eli and August eat their vegetables, use their table manners, and do their homework, demands that Eli knows reflect Mum's desire to look "normal." And Mum's happiness reaches an all-time high when she joins a school parent club to help put on a fundraising carnival. But this kind of normalcy, Eli implies, is out of reach for many. Indeed, Mum and Lyle have, at the beginning of the novel, recently begun selling heroin to help make ends meet. Further, as Eli begins accompanying Lyle on his runs to deliver drugs, Eli begins to see that many of the people Lyle sells to are just as normal and unassuming as Lyle is. There's no one way, Eli realizes, for people involved in illegal enterprises to look.

Over the course of the novel, Eli comes to realize that various criminal activities are often the best and easiest way for people of all economic levels to earn money, though these activities are also inherently risky. Many of the people Eli knows, from Lyle and Mum all the way to the wealthier school bully Darren Dang and his mother, Bich Dang (Lyle's drug importer and supplier), are somehow involved in the local drug trade. Indeed, when Eli sits down at one point to try to figure out how to earn money, he ultimately decides not to pursue food service work in favor of selling Lyle's (who's now deceased and missing) stash of heroin back to Darren Dang for \$50,000. But while Eli gets through this experience unscathed, many people—from Lyle, who's murdered for selling heroin behind his boss's back; to Mum, who ends up in prison essentially for being Lyle's partner—suffer due to their involvement in the drug trade. Until the very end of the novel, it's only the very wealthiest and most powerful in the drug trade, like Bich Dang and Tytus Broz (the leader of the regional drug circuit whose day job entails running a plant that manufactures prosthetics), who seem capable of surviving and even thriving in the cutthroat criminal world. And with Tytus Broz's ultimate arrest for various crimes, the novel suggests that even the wealthiest in the drug scene aren't guaranteed success and safety. Ultimately, *Boy Swallows Universe* presents criminality and drug dealing as an attractive option for many—though it's a dangerous gamble whether, and for how long, it will bring someone success.



SYMBOLS

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



ELI'S LUCKY FINGER

Eli's lucky finger represents his childhood innocence and his coming-of-age process. Early in

the novel, Eli shares with readers an anecdote about the moment he became conscious of his own existence. He was about four years old, and he became suddenly aware of the freckle on his right forefinger. The freckle and the finger came to represent Eli's sense of self. And Eli also shares how later, after Slim began babysitting him, Slim listened to the anecdote and observed that the freckle and the finger represent "home." This conveys that the finger represents Eli's feelings of happiness, security, and belonging.

Those happy and secure feelings disappear, though, when Iwan Krol cuts off Eli's lucky finger on the night that he and Tytus Broz drag away Lyle to murder him and Mum ends up going to prison. Eli's childhood effectively ends at this point: suddenly, Eli realizes that the adults he trusted to care for him can't actually protect him from evil men like Tytus Broz. This is particularly true of Lyle but also of Slim, who won't make it so Eli doesn't have to go live with Dad. For much of the novel, then, Eli mourns the loss of his finger and of the innocence and security the finger represented for him. It's cathartic, then, to discover his finger in Tytus's underground bunker, and to use the specimen jar holding the finger to hit Iwan over the head. This represents Eli reclaiming his right to his own body, at the same time as he helps bring about the arrest and downfall of the two men who stole his innocence so many years ago.



THE RED TELEPHONE

The red telephone symbolizes the strength of Eli and August's relationship, as well as Eli's path to healing from trauma. August and Eli first discover the red phone in the secret underground room that Lyle dug. According to Lyle, the phone connects directly to an identical phone at Tytus Broz's mansion, and the phone doesn't accept calls like a normal phone. This gives the phone a sinister air, and it suggests that the boys' home is somehow intimately connected to Tytus Broz, the man who destroys their relatively happy life in Darra with Mum and Lyle.

Though the phone ostensibly can't take calls, Eli and August regularly hear the phone ring. When they pick it up, they hear an adult version of August talking to them. The fact that the person on the phone when Eli takes calls is a mature August who gives sage advice—such as that Lyle is capable of lying, or that Mum is having a hard time mentally and emotionally in prison—speaks to how much Eli trusts his brother. It's later implied that the voice on the phone is just a figment of Eli's imagination. If that explanation is true, it's significant that when Eli picks up the phone confused and in need of guidance, the voice he hears is that of his older brother. August is the one whom Eli *wants* to hear from, and Eli trusts his brother to tell him difficult truths that he won't accept hearing from anyone else.

After Mrs. Birkbeck visits Dad to discuss what she perceives as

the boys' dangerous ideas about the red telephone and the **moon pool**, Eli—who's 16 at the time—begins to forcefully reject August's insistence that there's a voice on the telephone, and that the voice belongs to an older August. This represents the beginning of Eli's journey of healing from traumatic experiences in his past, such as Dad driving him and August into a dam years ago and of Iwan Krol cutting off his finger. Rejecting August's story is a way for Eli to assert his independence. And while Eli accepts August's (or his own) guidance from the red phone in Tytus Broz's underground bunker as a young adult, it's a mark of Eli's maturity when, mere weeks later while visiting Lyle's old house for work, he chooses not to answer the ringing phone and to kiss Caitlyn Spies instead. As an adult whose adversaries (Tytus Broz and Iwan Krol) have been successfully vanquished, Eli doesn't need to rely on his imagination or necessarily on his brother to keep himself safe. Instead, he can choose to symbolically move forward into adulthood.



THE MOON POOL

The moon pool symbolizes Eli and August's trauma. It refers to August's habit of filling the street with water from the hose in the middle of the night, and then staring at the moon's reflection in the pool he's created. At first, it seems as though August is just very interested in looking at the moon in this way, without any explanation as to why. And the way the boys talk about the moon pool—and about Eli's dream of being in a car that dives into the ocean under a full moon—seem fully fantastical. This represents the boys' inability to put into words what happened to them, to articulate the trauma they experienced. Turning the moon pool into a fantastical story means they can ignore the truth and not have to ever confront their trauma.

Eventually, though, it comes out that when they were small boys, Dad was taking Eli and August camping. He had a panic attack while driving on a windy country road—and when he lost control of the car, the car flew into a farmer's dam and sank. Upon hearing his guidance counselor insist that the stories or dreams about the moon pool are memories, Eli suddenly realizes she's right. Suddenly, he remembers what happened, and he spends the next year or so wondering himself what happened, and asking Dad if he drove into the dam on purpose. In addition, Eli starts refusing to play along when August insists that he and Eli died in the dam and came back to life. Accepting a seemingly normal (if traumatic) explanation of what happened allows Eli to start healing from his trauma.

Ultimately, Eli comes to realize that it doesn't actually matter whether August is right or wrong about them dying in the moon pool. Eli remarks that "[August] keeps telling me he's come back from somewhere. We both have. And he means the moon pool. We've come back from the moon pool." When Eli

says that, “com[ing] back” starts to take on a slightly different meaning than August saying they came back to life. Rather, Eli is alluding to the fact that he and August have “come back” from a place where the trauma they experienced ruled their lives—they’ve healed.

way.

Boy Makes Rainbow Quotes

☝☝ Mum’s love came hard. There was pain in it, there was blood and screams and fists against plasterboard walls, because the worst thing Lyle ever did was get my mum on drugs. I guess the best thing Lyle ever did was get her off drugs, but he knows I know that the latter could never make up for the former.

Related Characters: Eli Bell (speaker), Mum, Lyle Orlik, Arthur “Slim” Halliday

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Eli is telling readers about how Mum and Lyle fell in love, and how Lyle got Mum into using heroin. The way that Eli describes Mum and Lyle’s early love—with violent and even destructive imagery—helps explain why he remains so distant and disinterested in using or selling drugs throughout the novel. He’s seen firsthand how painful drugs can make his life, and especially because of how much he idolizes Mum, he blames the drugs (and Lyle) for leading Mum down the wrong path.

However, this passage is also interesting because it shows that while Eli might say he thinks people are good and evil, he’s capable of seeing people as much more nuanced than that. He can see that Lyle did a terrible thing to Mum by getting her into drugs. But Eli also recognizes that Lyle did something very good by helping Mum get off drugs again—even if Eli doesn’t think this makes up for getting her addicted in the first place. It’s not until much later that Slim says outright that people aren’t good and bad, they just make choices that are good and bad. But Eli essentially sees and accepts that Slim is right in this passage.

Boy Follows Footsteps Quotes

☝☝ Bich is famous in my town as much for her selfless sponsorship of Darra community events [...] as she is for the time she stabbed a Year 5 Darra State School girl, Cheryl Vardy, in the left eye with a steel ruler for teasing Karen Dang about having steamed rice every day for school lunch. Cheryl Vardy needed surgery after the incident. She nearly went blind and Bich Dang didn’t go to prison. That’s when I realized Darra had its own rules and laws and codes and maybe it was ‘Back Off’ Bich Dang who had selflessly drafted them into existence.



QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *Boy Swallows Universe* published in 2019.

Boy Writes Words Quotes

☝☝ So the freckle is always consciousness. My personal big bang. The lounge. The yellow and brown shirt. And I arrive. I am here. I told Slim I thought the rest was questionable, that the four years before that moment might as well have never happened. Slim smiled when I told him that. He said that freckle on my right forefinger knuckle is home.

Related Characters: Eli Bell (speaker), Arthur “Slim” Halliday, Iwan Krol

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Eli shares with readers a story he once shared with Slim, about the moment that he realized at four years old that he was a conscious person by noticing a freckle on his right forefinger. It’s a major developmental milestone for a child to have the realization Eli describes here. Realizing he’s conscious because he notices the freckle on his finger essentially marks Eli’s transformation from baby to conscious child, the developmental state he’s in for the first few chapters of the novel. His finger becomes, in many ways, a symbol for Eli’s childhood. To him, it holds his identity and his consciousness. This is why Slim declares that the freckle and the forefinger are “home”: it’s that finger that makes Eli feel at home in his world. And when Iwan Krol later cuts Eli’s finger off, depriving him of the very thing that symbolized Eli’s childhood, Eli symbolically passes into young adulthood.

The fact that Eli told Slim about this moment also highlights how much Eli trusts Slim. He says earlier in this passage that he thinks his thoughts about his finger are silly, but that Slim makes him feel like he’s mature and smart for thinking this

Related Characters: Eli Bell (speaker), “Back Off” Bich Dang, Tytus Broz, Darren Dang, Lyle Orlik

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

When Eli sees Lyle heading for “Back Off” Bich Dang’s house in the middle of the night, he explains that Bich is a powerful, respected person in the Darra community—but not necessarily just because she’s a nice person. Bich is powerful in Darra in part because she’s hugely successful in her various business ventures (she owns and runs an Asian grocery as well as a Vietnamese restaurant, and she’s also the biggest heroin importer in the area), so she has the money to give generously to the community. This, Eli realizes, buys her respect: in a town where money is tight for people, having a benefactor like Bich means community events that cost money to put on can actually happen.



But while Eli recognizes that Bich might be respected and powerful for that honorable reason, she might also have gained some power through decidedly less honorable means. Money, Eli is beginning to understand, may have bought Bich immunity—nobody wants to take on or even annoy the biggest community benefactor, so she can essentially get away with whatever she wants. This is another way that the novel shows how dysfunctional the suburbs are: normal codes of right and wrong don’t exist, because corrupt people like Bich are able to write the rules they want to see.

What Eli explains in this passage later helps him put into words why nobody wants to investigate Tytus Broz for making people disappear. Tytus, like Bich, is a huge benefactor in the Brisbane metro area, and it seems as though he, too, has had a hand in writing rules in his favor.

☝ “What’s with you and men being good?”

“Never met a good one, that’s all,” he says. “Adult men, Tink. Most fucked-up creatures on the planet. Don’t ever trust ‘em.”

Related Characters: Eli Bell, Darren Dang (speaker), Tytus Broz, Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Eli and Darren are sitting outside, and Darren is asking Eli if his dad is a good man. This is a confusing line of questioning for Eli, mostly because he’s not sure why it matters. Dad isn’t in Eli’s life and at this point, and Eli is pretty sure he never will be. But Darren explains that he is essentially on a quest to find a good man, since there seem to be so few (and perhaps none) in the world.


Though Eli is dismissive of Darren’s line of questioning now, Darren’s insistence that there are no good men inspires Eli to engage in much the same quest: he goes on to spend much of the novel trying to figure out what makes a good man, and if good men exist at all. The way that Eli’s thinking on this question changes over the course of the novel highlights where he is in his coming-of-age process: he begins the novel deciding that good and evil are two entirely different things, and by the end, he comes to realize that good and bad exist on a continuum and are actually the result of the choices a person makes.

Darren’s assertion that there are no good adult men also casts a shadow over the fact that both he and Eli are growing up—soon, they’re going to be men, whether they like it or not. This realization is part of what makes this question so compelling for Eli: is he going to become a good man? How does he make sure that happens, especially if it’s true that good men don’t really exist? This adds tension and anxiety to Eli’s coming-of-age journey, as he’s not entirely sure growing up is going to be a good thing.

Boy Receives Letter Quotes

☝☝ *I’ve been thinking lately, Alex, that every problem in the world, every crime ever committed, can be traced back to someone’s dad. Robbery, rape, terrorism [...] it all goes back to dads. Mums maybe too, I guess, but there ain’t no shit mum in this world that wasn’t first the daughter of a shit dad. Don’t tell me if you don’t want to, but I’d love to hear about your dad, Alex. Was he good? Was he decent? Was he there?*

Related Characters: Eli Bell (speaker), Alex Bermudez, Mum, Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

In a letter to Alex Bermudez (the incarcerated sergeant-at-arms of a notorious Queensland motorcycle gang), Eli proposes a theory: that people do bad things mostly because they didn’t have good support from their fathers

when they were young. The fact that Eli is coming up with theories like this at all shows where he is in his development: he's trying to figure out how the world works, and how he fits into it. Proposing that dads are the root of all evil helps Eli explain why his family is the way it is (Mum ended up dating a drug dealer, Eli believes, essentially because her dad left when she was a teenager). But moreover, it also helps Eli formulate questions about who he is. Eli isn't sure what his dad is all about, since Mum left Dad years ago and Eli doesn't remember Dad. So, part of Eli's musing is him essentially wondering what his dad is like, because in this system, Eli's relative goodness or badness will depend on his dad.

Though Eli's system proposes that good and bad are two entirely separate states of being (rather than existing on a continuum), Eli nevertheless shows that he doesn't entirely believe this. Indeed, he's reaching out to Alex—a convicted criminal who committed a crime the novel never explains—to essentially ask if Alex is in prison because he has a terrible dad (which would support Eli's theory), or if he's wrong, and Alex is in prison because of something else. Put another way, Eli leaves room to be wrong and seems willing to consider other alternatives—and he also doesn't seem to think Alex is bad, though Alex has done something illegal.

Finally, Eli also shows here how he separates women out when he thinks about good and evil. The way he talks about Mum throughout the novel shows that he thinks of her as wholly good, and here he suggests that even bad women aren't really responsible for their actions: their "shit dad[s]" make them who they are.

Eli has just cursed in front of Mum and is upset that she asked him to watch his language. This request is absurd, he insists, when Mum and Lyle are dealing drugs. Eli's outburst shows, first of all, that he craves consistency and honesty. Mum and Lyle aren't being honest about what's actually going on in their lives, he suggests, when they tell Eli to do perfectly normal things like eat his vegetables and do his homework even though they're not living a typical suburban life. Eli brings up the 1980s sitcom *The Brady Bunch* to illustrate this; *The Brady Bunch* features a suburban American family, and Eli thinks of the Bradys as normal. His family, on the other hand, isn't normal—they're just pretending, and Eli finds this extremely shameful. This is why he refers to his family as "a dirty bunch of smack pushers"; in particular, referring to the family as "dirty" highlights how ashamed Eli is of what Mum and Lyle are doing to make ends meet.

In some ways, Eli demonstrates here that he's more mature than Mum and Lyle give him credit for. He's aware that they're selling drugs and hasn't childishly bought into their excuses. But his shame and his outburst also suggest that he's not entirely aware of *why* Mum and Lyle have turned to drugs. Lyle is, in fact, saving up the money he's earning through dealing drugs to try to move the family out of this suburb to somewhere nicer, where he won't have to sell drugs anymore. Eli isn't mature enough yet to look at the whole picture and consider why his caregivers are doing something he finds so unsavory and shameful.

☝ “When I was a kid these streets were clean as a whistle. People gave a shit about these streets. This place was just as pretty as your precious Gap. I tell ya, that’s how it starts, mums and dads in Darra start dropping used nappies in the street, next thing you know they’re lightin’ tyres up outside the Sydney Opera House. That’s how Australia turns to shit, with you just kicking that Solo can into the middle of the street.”
“I reckon widespread suburban heroin use might be a quicker road to ruin,” I suggest.

Boy Kills Bull Quotes

☝ “Who are we kidding?” I shout. “Watch my language? Watch my language? We’re fucking drug dealers. Drug dealers fucking swear. I’m sick of all these bullshit airs and graces you and Lyle go on with. Do your homework, Eli. Eat your fuckin’ broccoli, Eli. Tidy this kitchen, Eli. Study hard, Eli. Like we’re the fucking Brady Bunch or something’ and not just a dirty bunch of smack pushers. Give me a fucking bre—”


Related Characters: Eli Bell (speaker), Mum, Lyle Orlik

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Related Characters: Lyle Orlik, Eli Bell (speaker), Tytus Broz

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Eli is walking home with his family from Tytus Broz's birthday party, and he and Lyle are discussing the state of



Darra and how drug use and dealing has contributed to the suburb's "ruin." Lyle begins by trying to convince Eli that Darra's unsavoriness perhaps has nothing to do with drugs. It's a matter of its residents no longer caring about keeping the suburb looking nice—and this, Lyle insists, creates an easy path to a suburb's destruction. He suggests that this process starts with kids like Eli deciding they don't care (Eli had just kicked an empty soda can across the road, which Lyle snapped was part of the problem). Eli, on the other hand, sees drugs as the culprit. Drugs, he's seen, cause users to stop caring about many things, from their families to their homes and their neighborhoods.

What Eli and Lyle are missing, however, is that they're both right in some ways. The drug problem plaguing Darra is, the novel suggests, a symptom of how many people in suburbs like Darra can't afford to live on what they make at legitimate jobs or with government assistance. Eli mentions at several points that his family receives government assistance, and yet Lyle is selling drugs because that money isn't enough—he has to supplement somewhere, and drug money seems easy and accessible in his situation. But selling drugs, as Eli points out, puts those drugs in the community and contributes to people no longer caring as much about how their neighborhoods look. All of this highlights that the suburbs aren't as clean and perfect as Eli would like them to be, though he's not mature enough yet to think critically about why the suburbs are the way they are.

Boy Loses Luck Quotes

💬 I don't know what I expected from drug dealing. More romance, perhaps. A sense of danger and suspense. I realise now that the average street grunt suburban drug dealer is not too far removed from the common pizza delivery boy. Half these deals Lyle and Teddy are making I could make in half the time riding through the south-west Brisbane suburbs on my Mongoose BMX with the gear in my backpack. August could probably do it even faster because he rides faster than me and he's got a ten-speed Malvern Star racer.

Related Characters: Eli Bell (speaker), August Bell, Lyle Orlik, Teddy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

Eli and August have been accompanying Lyle and Teddy on their weekend drug runs for a few weeks, and drug-dealing has lost its charm for Eli. The fact that Eli seems to have

thought drug-dealing was romantic and suspenseful in the first place speaks to how young and naïve he is—he seems to have thought it would be more dramatic, like in a movie, than it actually is. Similarly, his insistence that he and August could do the same thing even faster on their bikes highlights his age. Dealing drugs is dangerous—Eli just hasn't seen that yet—so the thought of two young boys doing Lyle and Teddy's job on their bikes is humorously naïve.

By accompanying Lyle and Teddy, Eli also learns that the drug dealers in the suburbs don't look different from any other normal person, or the "common pizza delivery boy." This implies that initially, Eli thought drug dealers would look obviously different (which is shortsighted of him, given that Lyle is a drug dealer and Eli has given no indication that Lyle looks markedly different from anyone else in the neighborhood). This helps complicate Eli's understanding of what makes a person good or bad, and how to recognize good or bad people. At least when it comes to those involved in the drug trade, Eli discovers, it's impossible to pick out who's good or bad just by looking at them.

Boy Busts Out Quotes

💬 "You can't stay with me, kid."

"Why not?"

This is Slim losing patience. It's not loud what he says but it's pointed.

"Because you're not my fucking kid, mate."

Unplanned. Unwished. Unwilled. Untested. Underdeveloped. Undernourished. Undone. Unwanted. Unloved. Undead. Shoulda coulda woulda never been here in the first place if that creep hadn't dragged Mum into his car way back in the way back when. If she hadn't run away from home. If her old man hadn't run away from her.

Related Characters: Arthur "Slim" Halliday, Eli Bell (speaker), Dad, Mum, Lyle Orlik

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Eli is in the hospital not long after Lyle disappears and Mum is incarcerated. Slim has just informed him that he and August will live with Dad now, and Eli is distraught at this prospect. Hearing Slim refuse to take him in is difficult for Eli, because Eli fully believes that family doesn't have to be related by blood to be supportive. Eli sees Slim as

family—and as a closer family member than Dad, despite not being related—because Slim has been there for Eli for the last several years. He’s established himself as an important mentor and friend to Eli and August, and to Eli, this counts for a lot. So, it’s almost offensive for Eli to hear that the law doesn’t necessarily agree with him, and that he’ll have to go live with a man he doesn’t know just because that man is a blood relative.

This sends Eli into a spiral, where he feels unloved and unwanted. Eli’s current theory is that people do bad things all because they have unsupportive or downright abusive fathers, so he immediately decides that he’s found himself in this position because of Mum’s abusive father. It’s easier for him to blame a man he doesn’t know for his misery than to accept that the world is an unfair and confusing place. This reflects Eli’s youth: he’s just now starting his coming-of-age journey, and he’s not ready to maturely look at how the world works and accept that it’s often impossible to understand.

Boy Stirs Monster Quotes

“You know what I realised in all that time with my mouth shut?”



“What?”


“Most things people say don’t need to be said,” he says.

He taps the moon pool.

“I’ve been thinking about all the things Lyle said to me,” August says. “He said so many things, and I reckon all those things put together wouldn’t say as much as he said when he’d wrap his arm around my shoulder.”

Related Characters: August Bell (speaker), Eli Bell, Lyle Orlik

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

After escaping from the hospital a few days ago, Eli has just reunited with August in the middle of the night outside of Dad’s house. August has decided to start talking a bit after years of silence. He makes the case that not much of what people say is actually meaningful, and words don’t mean nearly as much as demonstrated support and love. This highlights one of the novel’s main messages: that family is

defined by people showing one another support, not by blood relation. August felt connected to and supported by Lyle, for instance, not because of the things Lyle told him, but because of Lyle’s affection, care, and support.

The fact that August is voicing this next to a moon pool—a symbol for his and Eli’s trauma—suggests that familial support that will help them heal from the trauma they’ve experienced. Being with Lyle helped Eli and August begin to heal by making them feel safe, and as though they didn’t have to fear their father figure doing something that would cause them pain and suffering. And all it took for Lyle to do that was being there for his surrogate sons; he didn’t have to say anything.

Boy Seeks Help Quotes

“What if that’s not enough, kid?” he asks. “Two and a half years is a long time.”

You said it yourself, a lag gets a little bit easier every time you wake up.”

“I didn’t have two kids on the outside,” he says. “Her two and a half years will feel like twenty of mine. That men’s prison is filled with a hundred blokes who think they’re bad to the bone because they’ve done fifteen years. But those blokes don’t love nothin’ and nothin’ loves them back and that makes things easy for ‘em. It’s all those mums across the road who are true hard nuts. They wake each day knowing there’s some lost little shit like you out there waiting to love them back.”

Related Characters: Arthur “Slim” Halliday, Eli Bell (speaker), Mum

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

Slim is trying to convince Eli to not follow through with his plan to break into the Boggo Road women’s prison on Christmas Day to see Mum, suggesting that a single visit won’t be enough to help Mum when she’s feeling so down. Eli wants to break in because he believes what the man on the red telephone said: Mum won’t live to see Christmas Day if Eli doesn’t visit her.

As Eli’s mentor, Slim is trying to get Eli to think critically about what he’s going to do—and ideally, convince Eli to make a different decision. He’s not convinced that a single

visit is going to save Mum, and he seems to see Eli as almost offensively naïve in his belief that he can save Mum with a visit. The fact that Eli responds with some of Slim's own advice—that a prison sentence gets easier every day—highlights how much Eli idolizes Slim. He's soaked up everything Slim has ever said to him, and now he feels like he's an expert and can give Slim's advice back to him.

Slim, however, then goes out of his way to explain to Eli how having a loving family, particularly children, on the outside changes how a prison sentence feels. Being in prison is easy enough for single men, he suggests, because they don't have supportive family outside waiting for them to return or missing them too badly. But women, particularly if they're mothers, are fighting a very different battle when they're incarcerated, because they have to live with the fact that they're in prison and their children are on the outside without them. With this, Slim suggests that Mum may feel like she's let Eli down by being incarcerated.

☞ “You asked me that day in the hospital about the good and the bad, Eli,” he says. [...] “I should have told you then that it's nothing but a choice. There's no past in it, there's no mums and dads and no where you came from. It's just a choice. [...]”

“But you didn't always have a choice,” I say. “When you were a kid. You had no choice then. You had to do what you had to do and then you got on a road that gave you no choice.”

“I always had a choice,” he says.

Related Characters: Arthur “Slim” Halliday (speaker), Eli Bell (speaker), Mum

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 232-233

Explanation and Analysis

Slim has the contact information of a man who can sneak Eli into Boggo Road to see Mum, but before he hands the information over, Slim gives Eli his thoughts on good and bad. Before this point, Slim had mostly agreed with Eli (at least when Eli was delirious in the hospital) that people are innately good or bad, and Slim has also humored Eli's theory that a person's parents and circumstances push them toward being good or bad.

Slim seems to recognize that Eli is using these theories to justify doing something illegal, like breaking into prison to see Mum. Eli essentially doesn't want to take responsibility for what he's about to do by insisting that his circumstances

are pushing him to do things, and that he doesn't have any control over his actions. This gives him some degree of comfort, since it's not as though he's *choosing* to do something morally wrong and illegal—outside forces are making him do it. Similarly, Eli seems to find it comforting to think that Slim's life of crime came about because Slim didn't have a choice and was instead forced to turn to crime. Feeling powerless is, in this sense, comforting.

But as Eli's mentor, Slim forces Eli to realize that he can't just go through life blaming outside circumstances for how he (and his loved ones) turn out. It's important, Slim suggests, that Eli see breaking into the prison as a conscious choice he's making. In the same vein, Slim suggests that Eli must understand that Slim had a choice about whether to turn to crime. He's not the product of bad circumstances, though they may have contributed to his choice to become a criminal. Rather, Slim insists he was a criminal in his youth because he made the choice to do things that put him in prison. This is extremely hard for Eli to hear, as he doesn't want to have to take responsibility for what he's planning to do—or consider that Slim might not be the entirely good person Eli thinks he is.

☞ “Stop tellin' everybody else's story and start tellin' your own for once.”

Related Characters: Arthur “Slim” Halliday (speaker), Eli Bell, Mum

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

Slim has agreed to put Eli in contact with someone who can help him sneak into Boggo Road prison to see Mum—but he then told Eli that they shouldn't spend time together anymore, and that Eli should focus on his own life rather than on thinking about Slim's past crimes. This is a huge turning point for Eli. Up to this point, his narration has suggested that he's much more interested in thinking about and telling readers about Slim's exploits rather than his own—Eli introduced Slim and spent several pages describing Slim before even giving his own name, for instance. In many ways, then, the first half of the novel is Slim's story rather than Eli's, given where Eli's focus is.

Slim saying this to Eli then marks the point where Eli's focus begins to shift. Part of this has to do with Eli coming of age—as he grows up, he becomes more interested in his



own life and his family, rather than talking about Slim. Indeed, Eli shifts to talking to Slim in his head (Slim dies six months after this passage) soon after this conversation takes place. The fact that Eli takes Slim's advice, however, still shows how close Eli is to his mentor. He trusts Slim, and even if this is hard to hear right now, he nevertheless takes the advice to heart.


Boy Steals Ocean Quotes

☝️ “Eli said you drove them into the moon pool, Robert.”

And the dream feels so different when she says it like that. You drove them into the moon pool. Nobody else did. It had to be him.

Related Characters: Mrs. Birkbeck, Eli Bell (speaker), Dad, August Bell

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 278-279

Explanation and Analysis

Eli and August are hiding in the crawl space under the kitchen, listening to their guidance counselor, Mrs. Birkbeck, talk to Dad about August's paintings of the moon pool and her belief that the boys are afraid of Dad. Up to this point, Eli has led readers to believe that the moon pool is part of a dream in which Dad drives a flying car into the ocean. But Mrs. Birkbeck insists here that this isn't actually true: this is a memory, it's something that happened to Eli in real life.

Hearing Mrs. Birkbeck say that the moon pool is a memory and not a dream is transformative for Eli. For the first time, he seems to start to accept the truth of what happened. This suggests that saying it was a dream was mostly a coping mechanism. Framing the memory as a dream was a way for Eli to ignore the fact that Dad seriously frightened him, and that driving into the moon pool traumatized Eli and August. Now that Eli has had this spelled out for him, he begins to heal and come to terms with this trauma. In doing so, he also lets go of the idea that the moon pool was a dream—thereby letting go of a coping mechanism that was no longer helping him.

Boy Tightens Noose Quotes

☝️ *But you heard them, Eli. You heard them on the phone, too.*

“I was playing along, Gus,” I say. “I bought into the bullshit because I felt sorry for you being such a nutter.”

I'm sorry, Gus. I'm sorry.

“Well, here's the reality, Gus,” I say. I point at Dad. “He's so fuckin' crazy he tried to drive us into a dam. And you're just as crazy as him and maybe I'm just as crazy as you.”

[...]

“Did you mean to do it?”

Related Characters: Eli Bell, August Bell (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 327

Explanation and Analysis

August has just revealed that he gave Lyle's drug money to a classmate with muscular dystrophy, and Eli is losing his temper at both August and Dad because of this. As Eli lashes out, he specifically takes issue with the fact that, as he understands it, August has been telling him lies about the man on the other end of the red telephone. August begins this passage by reminding Eli (by writing in the air) that Eli has heard voices on the other end of the phone, something that Eli would likely agree with if he weren't so angry right now. But because his goal is to hurt August, Eli accuses August of being a “nutter” and refuses to believe his big brother. This ties into Eli's process of growing up: as Eli grows, he does begin to reject August's stories about how the world works. Specifically, Eli insists he no longer believes that he and August came back to life after Dad drove them into the dam (the moon pool), and he insists that there's no one on the end of the phone. So, even though Eli is being cruel here, he's also asserting his independence and coming up with his own way of seeing the world.


Eli is also angry with Dad, but this anger has been bubbling in Eli for a while now. Dad drove Eli and August into a dam when the boys were little, and Eli is now intent on figuring out if Dad meant to do this or not. That, Eli believes, will tell him whether Dad is a good man or not—and whether Dad is “crazy,” as Eli suggests he is in this passage. So, Eli reads as both immature (in that he's trying his hardest to hurt August and Dad on purpose) and mature (in that he knows what he's doing is wrong, and he's trying to assert his view of the world rather than taking August's stories at face value).

Boy Takes Flight Quotes

☝☝ Ultimately, in these embraces, to my surprise, hugging Dad back feels like the good thing to do and my hope is to grow into a good man, so I do it.

Related Characters: Eli Bell (speaker), Dad, Arthur “Slim” Halliday

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 348

Explanation and Analysis

Eli is explaining to readers that while Dad isn't a perfect father like on American sitcoms, Eli is gradually coming to love Dad and accept his vague, drunken apologies. The fact that Eli decides that to hug Dad back suggests that he has begun to move on from seeing Dad as a villain. Instead, he's focusing on what Dad is doing to try to make up for his past misdeeds, specifically for driving Eli and August into a farmer's dam when they were small children. The experience almost killed the boys, and Dad has spent his life since then regretting his decision to drive that night. Eli realizes that since he doesn't see Dad as a bad person now, it's kindest to accept Dad's apology and hug his father back. This choice, Eli knows, is going to make him a better, more generous man, which is exactly what Eli wants.

It's also significant that Eli characterizes hugging Dad back as an active choice that he's making. This shows that these days, Eli is taking Slim's earlier advice to heart: that people aren't innately good or bad but that they make *choices* that are either good or bad. Right now, Eli seems to understand that he's making a choice that pushes him in the direction of being good.

☝☝ August and I wait for her smile because her smile is the sun and the sky and it makes us warm. We smile at her as we rush closer to the phone booth. She has nothing. No bags. No shoes. No purse. But she will still have her smile, that brief celestial event, when her lips open from right to left and she curls her upper lip and she tells us in that smile that we're not crazy, we are correct about everything, and it's just the universe that is wrong. And she sees us and she beams that smile and it turns out the universe is right and it's the smile that is wrong because Mum is missing her two front teeth.

Related Characters: Eli Bell (speaker), Mum, August Bell,

Teddy, Dad

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 353

Explanation and Analysis

Dad, Eli, and August have gone to pick Mum up at a train station; she's running away from Teddy after a particularly violent episode of domestic abuse. As Eli describes what he expects to see in Mum's smile, it highlights how much Eli loves and idolizes his mother. She has the power to make things better for her sons just by smiling at them, because with her smile, she can make them feel like they're smart, powerful, and safe.

Even though Eli and August are the ones rescuing Mum in this situation, they still expect Mum to rescue them from the horror of this situation with her smile. But instead, Eli and August are forced to confront just how bad things are right now when they discover that Teddy knocked out Mum's front teeth. Now that Teddy has knocked out Mum's teeth, Eli feels like he can't trust her (at least in this isolated situation) to comfort him and make things better with her smile. He has to accept that Mum isn't all-powerful—instead, she's been a victim of terrible violence. This is earth-shattering for Eli and helps him step into a more adult role going forward, particularly as he organizes his, August, and Dad's fight to protect Mum from Teddy later in the afternoon.

Boy Drowns Sea Quotes


☝☝ I know, Slim. I know I haven't asked Dad about the moon pool. I know this happiness depends on me and August and Mum forgetting the bad old days. We lie to ourselves, I know, but isn't there a little white lie in all acts of forgiveness?

Maybe he didn't mean to drive us into that dam that night. But maybe he did. Maybe you didn't kill that taxi driver. But maybe you did.

You did your time for it. You did your time and then some. Maybe Dad has too.

Related Characters: Eli Bell (speaker), Arthur “Slim” Halliday, Dad, Mum, August Bell

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 364

Explanation and Analysis


It's been weeks or months since Mum came to live with Dad, and Eli is telling Slim (who's deceased) about all the positive changes that have happened since Mum arrived. Eli suggests that he, Mum, and August are all figuring out how to forgive Dad for driving the boys into the dam years ago. Part of moving on and forgiving, Eli suspects, happens when victims—in this case him, August, and Mum—agree to if not forget, then to look past people's crimes. This, Eli believes, is the only way his family will be able to move on and move forward.

Eli is also continuing to develop how he thinks about good and bad. While he previously thought his dad might be a bad person for driving his sons into the dam, now he's decided that it doesn't really matter. What matters instead is that Dad has made choices that have helped make up for his past mistakes. In the same vein, Eli now believes it's not so important to fixate on whether Slim actually killed a taxi driver. Either way, Slim served time in prison and then went on to make choices that made him a good man, such as when he agreed to babysit Eli and August and became their mentor.

☝ He keeps telling me he's come back from somewhere. We both have. And he means the moon pool. We've come back from the moon pool.

Related Characters: Eli Bell (speaker), Dad, August Bell, Mum, Arthur "Slim" Halliday

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 365

Explanation and Analysis

It's been weeks or months since Mum came to live with Dad, and things are looking up for Eli. He's telling Slim (who's deceased) about all the changes that have taken place, one of which is that Eli has come to terms with August's insistence that the boys have "come back." In the past, Eli has taken this to mean that he and August have returned from the dead when Dad drove them into a farmer's dam years ago, and the boys nearly died. Part of Eli's coming of age happened, though, as he decided to break with August and insist that such a fantastical event was ridiculous.

Now, though, Eli has been able to reconcile August's fantastical beliefs with something that makes more sense to him: that he and August have actually just "come back," or healed, from the trauma they experienced when Dad drove them into the moon pool. This allows Eli to reinforce that he's loyal to August by taking August's words seriously. But it also signals how mature and independent Eli is becoming as he comes of age, because this is his interpretation of August's words.

Boy Conquers Moon Quotes

☝ I miss him. I gave up on him because I was scared. Because I was gutless. Because I was angry at him. Fuck him, right. His fault for hopping in bed with Tytus Broz. Not my fault. Cut him out of my mind along with the Lord of the Limbs. Cut them off like the ibis cut off its own leg because the fishing line was killing it.

Related Characters: Eli Bell (speaker), Lyle Orlik, Tytus Broz

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 383

Explanation and Analysis

On the night before Eli is going to interview Tytus Broz for *The Courier-Mail*, he reflects on his relationship to Lyle's memory. Eli has spent the last few years grieving for Lyle, but he's also done his best to stop thinking about Lyle and Tytus Broz entirely. This is what he's referring to when he mentions cutting Lyle and Tytus out of his mind in much the same way the ibis in the backyard may have cut off its own leg. The ibis had fishing line wrapped around its leg and limped with an injured leg for some time before the hurt leg and the fishing line finally disappeared—Eli doesn't know for sure that the bird cut its own leg off, but it seems a likely explanation to him in this circumstance. More importantly, it helps Eli understand the coping mechanisms he's been using for the last few years. Not thinking about Lyle or Tytus Broz has been a coping mechanism that allows Eli to focus on other aspects of his life. Forgetting has allowed Eli to move on, grow up, and learn important information that he'll need when he confronts Tytus tomorrow.

Eli also realizes that he stopped thinking about Lyle because, on some level, he blamed Lyle for what happened to him (Tytus drug him away, and Eli suspects that Lyle has been dismembered). This, Eli thought at one point, is what happens when someone gets involved with a man as

dangerous and ruthless as Tytus Broz. Eli doesn't say so outright, but his tone in this passage suggests that he's developing more compassion and understanding of Lyle's situation. Lyle made a choice that in retrospect was a bad one. But Eli also knows that Lyle was trying to help and protect him, and at the time, dealing drugs for Tytus seemed like the only way to give Eli a better life.


☝ “Bevan Penn,” I say. “They pixelated his face in all the photos but, I swear, Gus, he’s us. He’s you and me.”

“What do you mean, he’s you and me?”

“I mean, that coulda been us. I mean, his mum and dad look like Mum and Lyle looked when I was eight years old, you know. And I been thinkin’ how Slim used to talk about cycles and time and things always coming back around again.”

Related Characters: Eli Bell, August Bell (speaker), Bevan Penn, Arthur “Slim” Halliday, Mum, Lyle Orlik, Tytus Broz

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 386

Explanation and Analysis

The night before Eli is going to interview Tytus Broz, he tries to explain to August why he feels so compelled to try to bring Tytus down. Bevan is an eight-year-old boy who has disappeared with his parents, who many believe were involved in the suburban drug trade. Eli feels like it's his responsibility because for one, he has firsthand experience with Tytus and knows how evil Tytus is. Tytus cut Eli's lucky finger off, and Eli knows Tytus won't have any problem doing something equally terrible or worse to young Bevan Penn. Bevan is just an innocent kid, Eli realizes, and this means that he definitely doesn't deserve to be hurt by Tytus.

Eli also sees himself in Bevan Penn. Now that Eli is almost an adult, he can appreciate how much danger he and August were in when they were little kids and Mum and Lyle were dealing drugs for Tytus Broz. Just like Bevan has disappeared now, Eli realizes that he and August could've disappeared alongside Lyle. In a way, this is the moment when Eli realizes how lucky he is to have escaped Tytus after just losing his finger and not his life. Part of Eli growing up is realizing that he and Bevan are both part of a cycle, in which their parents get involved with drugs and put their children in danger. Eli hopes now to break that cycle by

hopefully figuring out what happened to Bevan and his parents tomorrow during the interview.

☝ “Yeah, it’s dead,” I say.

“Stupid bird seemed so determined to kill itself,” he says.


Caitlyn slaps her hands.

“Wren!” she says. “I remember now! That’s a wren.”

And with that, the dead blue wren comes back. Like it was just waiting for Caitlyn Spies to recognise it, because, like all living things—like me, me, me—it lives and dies on her breath and her attention.

Related Characters: Eli Bell, Tytus Broz, Caitlyn Spies (speaker), August Bell, Dad, Iwan Krol

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 405

Explanation and Analysis

During Eli and Caitlyn's interview with Tytus Broz, a blue bird flies into Tytus's window and seems to die—but it comes back to life when Eli picks it up and when Caitlyn realizes it's a wren. Eli realizes immediately that August's cryptic phrase from years ago, “your end is a dead blue wren,” is somehow coming to life before his eyes.

This passage begins to suggest that the blue wren is actually a symbol for Eli. Like Eli, the wren seems to magically “come back” to life, just as Eli supposedly did when Dad drove Eli and August into a dam years ago. And when Tytus notes that the bird seems intent on killing itself, it's a wry (and unwitting) observation that Eli is doing something very dangerous by agreeing to interview Tytus at all. Tytus is the man who turned Eli's life upside down and gave the okay for Iwan Krol to cut Eli's finger off; he'd have no issue hurting Eli again if he felt he needed to. But the fact that the bird lives also suggests that Eli will survive the coming ordeal as he discovers just how evil Tytus is. He'll do so in part because of his relationship with Caitlyn. With her support, and with the prospect of a relationship with her on the horizon, Eli is more motivated than usual to stay alive and come back, just as the wren does in this passage.

“I know you’re just the voice in my head,” I say. “You’re a figment of my imagination. I use you to escape from moments of great trauma.”

“Escape?” the man echoes. “What, like Slim over the Boggo Road walls? Escape from yourself, Eli, do ya, like the Houdini of your own mind?”

“773 8173,” I say. “That’s just the number we’d tap into the calculator when we were kids. That’s just ‘Eli Bell’ upside down and back to front.”


“Brilliant!” the man says. “Upside down and back to front, like the universe, hey Eli? You still got the axe?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” the man says. “He’s coming, Eli.”

Related Characters: Eli Bell (speaker), Caitlyn Spies, Bevan Penn, Arthur “Slim” Halliday, August Bell, Tytus Broz, Iwan Krol

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 423

Explanation and Analysis

In Tytus Broz’s bunker, Eli has just accepted the red telephone from Bevan Penn and is now ostensibly speaking to August—though Eli insists he’s actually making August’s voice up in his mind. When Eli is able to say calmly and specifically that he uses August’s imagined voice on the red telephone to “escape from moments of great trauma,” it’s a sign of how much work Eli has done to confront his trauma and try to heal from it. Hearing August’s voice in particular indicates how much Eli trusts his older brother—he’s using the comfort August can provide to help himself feel better when he pretends to hear August’s voice. And the number here, which August’s voice suggests is a sort of a personal number for Eli, is another nod to August: August was a huge fan of spelling things on the calculator upside down and backwards. So what Eli is hearing also highlights how close Eli is to August.

It’s also clear in this passage how much Eli idolizes Slim. If readers take Eli’s word for it, and he is talking to a figment of his own imagination, Eli acknowledges that he’s using all the lessons and stories Slim shared with him years ago to try to make sense of the world around him. When that includes trying to understand past trauma, Eli uses some of Slim’s escape methods to mentally avoid the pain of having to confront his memories head-on.

Still, though Eli spends much of this exchange arguing with himself about whether the August on the other end of the phone is real, it’s inarguable that Eli—or a magical version of August—is still trying to protect him. Wherever the voice comes from, it gives Eli the information he needs (that Iwan Krol is coming), which gives Eli time to come up with a plan to outsmart Iwan and get out of the bunker alive. In this sense, the voice helps Eli avoid even more trauma.


“I thought they’d look different, your mum and dad,” she says.

I laugh. “You did?”

“They’re so nice,” she says. “They just look like any normal mum and dad.”

“They’ve been working on normal for quite some time now.”

Related Characters: Caitlyn Spies, Eli Bell (speaker), Mum, Dad, Lyle Orlik

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 437

Explanation and Analysis

Eli and Caitlyn are talking in the lobby during the Queensland Day awards ceremony; Caitlyn has just met Mum and Dad. Eli has told Caitlyn the entire story of Mum and Dad’s relationship, Mum’s relationship with Lyle, and what’s happened since Mum got out of prison. So, Caitlyn goes into this conversation expecting Eli’s parents to look different somehow—but instead, they look like any normal suburban parents of older teenagers. This reinforces something that Eli learned some time ago: that criminals don’t necessarily look any different from anyone else, especially when it comes to those involved in the suburban drug trade (as Mum was). Drug dealers look like anyone else, because they’re people too.

This is likely comforting for Eli to hear, as he knows Mum has been striving to live a “normal” life for years. Mum’s happiest days were when she was on a school committee, something that made her feel normal and suburban. Now, she looks the part of a suburban woman, which suggests that Mum, at least, is getting a happy ending to her story.

Girl Saves Boy Quotes



“Just let it ring out, Eli,” she says softly. “What’s he going to tell you”—she puts her other hand behind my head, her perfect and gentle hand sliding down to the back of my neck—“that you don’t already know?”

And the phone rings again as she moves into me and the phone rings again as she closes her eyes and presses her lips against mine and I will remember this moment through the stars I see on the ceiling of this secret room and the spinning planets those stars surround and the dust of a million galaxies scattered across her bottom lip. I will remember this kiss through the big bang. I will remember the end through the beginning.

And the phone stops ringing.

Related Characters: Caitlyn Spies, Eli Bell (speaker), Lyle Orlik

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 450

Explanation and Analysis

Caitlyn and Eli have come to visit Lyle’s secret room as part of a writing assignment for work. The red telephone is still there, and it starts to ring, but Caitlyn urges Eli to leave it

alone and kisses him. At this point, Caitlyn is aware that Eli hears the red telephone ring as part of a trauma response. She also knows that the man Eli hears on the phone is ostensibly August, but more accurately, it’s Eli’s own mind telling him what he needs to hear in order to protect himself from further trauma. This is what Caitlyn refers to when she asks what the man on the phone could possibly tell Eli that he doesn’t already know. The man *is* Eli, so Eli already knows what he’s going to say, even if he only knows subconsciously.

Then, perhaps without intending to, Caitlyn helps Eli move on from his trauma for good by kissing him. This kiss signifies Eli’s transition to adulthood—he’s finally adult enough for Caitlyn, who’s nearly a decade older, to take a romantic interest in him. In Eli’s mind, this kiss signals a beginning—a “big bang”—in much the same way that he described noticing the freckle on his lucky finger as a “big bang” that signaled the beginning of consciousness for him as a young child. This is the end of the novel and of Eli’s story, but he acknowledges that his life is going to continue after the last page. When it comes to the rest of his life, this kiss is just the beginning.

Reorienting himself to Caitlyn allows Eli to finally go of his trauma. When the phone stops ringing, it suggests that Eli has moved on—he’s now focused on Caitlyn, not on continually asking questions about the past that he can’t answer to his satisfaction.



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.

BOY WRITES WORDS

The narrator asks Slim if he saw “that”: “Your end is a dead blue wren.” Slim didn’t.

There’s a crack in Slim’s windshield that looks like a stick man, and even a bit like Slim himself. Slim encourages the narrator to remember things this way: by mentally linking memories to everyday objects. This method helped Slim survive two weeks in “Black Peter,” Boggo Road Prison’s underground isolation cell. For instance, Slim’s knuckles reminded him of the hills of the Gold Coast, and his legs curled against his chest became Irene’s naked body—he “held” her for days. Since Slim believes the narrator has an “adult mind” despite being only 12 years old, he tells the narrator all sorts of prison stories. It’s essential, Slim suggests, to hear both good and bad stories.

The narrator, Eli Bell, is going to remember learning to drive Slim’s car by linking the memory to his left thumbnail. Slim, or Arthur Halliday, who’s known as the Houdini of Boggo Road, was sentenced to life for killing a taxi driver. As Slim walks Eli through putting in the clutch, Eli’s mind wanders. Eli’s brother, August, is sitting on the fence, writing in the air with his finger. When Slim snaps and asks if Eli is listening, Eli lies that he is—but he’s too busy thinking about August, Mum, Mum’s boyfriend Lyle, and Slim. Slim is the only person who took Eli seriously when he told Slim about the lucky freckle on his right **forefinger** years ago. Slim nodded and said the freckle was “home.”

Slim snaps at Eli again and accuses him of not listening, and he’s right—Eli is thinking about August instead of listening. August doesn’t talk. He communicates through body language and has since Mum ran away from Dad when August was six. Since then, August has also been obsessed with reflective surfaces and staring at the moon. At night sometimes, he slips outside, creates a puddle in the street with the hose, and stares at the moon’s reflection in it. Eli once called it “the **moon pool**,” which made August smile. Then, August wrote “boy swallows universe” in the air.

This cryptic opening introduces the idea that the narrator is perhaps more observant than other people, such as Slim.



It’s significant that the narrator opens his story not by introducing themselves, but by talking about Slim. The narrator seems to idolize Slim and adore Slim’s stories of finding ways to mentally survive his incarceration. These stories are, perhaps, more interesting or important to the narrator than their own life and experiences. Hearing these stories and learning the techniques makes the narrator feel mature and competent.



Eli’s narration is scattered, shifting quickly from talking about his present experiences in the car with Slim to talking about the past. This suggests Eli is struggling to stay in the present and not get so caught up in the past—a sign that for now, the past and Slim’s stories are more important to Eli. But relating this anecdote about his lucky freckle shows readers how Eli grounds himself. His freckle makes him feel real, and Slim’s analysis (that the freckle is “home”) shows that it’s through the freckle that Eli feels like he belongs.



Again, Eli shows that he’s much more interested in telling readers everything about the people he lives with than he is in telling them about what he’s doing in the present with Slim (presumably, learning to drive a manual transmission). This passage establishes August as difficult, if not impossible, to figure out. He seems to do things that make little or no sense, but he and Eli are still close. Eli also confirms that his parents aren’t together (Mum currently has a boyfriend named Lyle).



Back in the present, Slim and Eli watch August writing some more. Eli translates: August is writing “Your end is a dead blue wren” over and over again. Slim says that August has the answer to everything and says that Mum and Lyle will be back soon. He insists they’re seeing a movie, but Eli knows better: they’re dealing drugs. Slim and Eli trade spots and Slim coaches Eli through driving around the block. When they get back to where they started, Eli asks August if he saw Eli drive in a screech, but August is busy writing the same name again and again: Caitlyn Spies. Eli doesn’t know anyone by that name, but he knows August’s phrases—“Your end is a dead blue wren,” “Boy swallows universe,” and “Caitlyn Spies”—are the answers to all the questions.

Slim and Eli might have no idea what exactly August is up to, but Slim encourages Eli to take August seriously. It’s not clear if Slim actually thinks August is particularly wise, or if his goal is to make sure that August always feels like his family members love him and take him seriously. But whatever Slim’s goal, Eli still shows that he takes everything that August says very seriously. These phrases will haunt Eli throughout the novel, which in and of itself shows how important paying attention to his brother is to Eli.



BOY MAKES RAINBOW

Eli and August creep into Lena’s room, which is off-limits to everyone but Lyle. It’s the “room of true love” and “true companionship,” where Lyle’s father, Aureli Orlik, died in 1968. Lyle’s mother, Lena, lasted another eight years after losing her husband. They met in a German displaced persons camp in 1945; Lyle was born there in 1949. Then, they immigrated to Australia in 1951. Aureli built this house room by room on the weekends.

Eli doesn’t share why, exactly, this room connotes “true love” and “true companionship” to him. He may see Lena and Aureli’s relationship as particularly romantic, or there may be more to it than that. But what is clear is that once again, Eli is focused on stories from the past that inform how he sees things unfold in the present.



August leads Eli to the built-in wardrobe, which Lyle built. At August’s nod, Eli opens the door. Aureli died quietly—his last word was “Sorry.” Lena died when her car hit a semi-truck. Lyle knew it wasn’t an accident, but he was too high to say anything to the police officers. Back in the present, August pushes back clothes in the wardrobe to reveal a black void. Eli, though, can’t stop remembering how Mum met Lyle through a mutual friend at the women’s refuge. Lyle came to visit the woman and soon started visiting Mum. Their relationship was tumultuous, as Lyle got Mum into drugs and then got her off drugs again. When they were using heavily, August cleaned up needles and took care of Eli. During that time, Eli thought Mum was beautiful—she looked like an angel.

Again, the focus of this passage isn’t whatever Eli and August are up to—it’s these stories about Lena and Aureli’s deaths, and about the early days of Mum and Lyle’s relationship. Recalling how August cleaned up after Mum and Lyle characterizes August as a responsible older brother, and even as responsible beyond his years. Eli, on the other hand, seems very young. He clearly idolizes Mum and doesn’t seem to grasp what was actually going on when Mum was using drugs so heavily. Describing her as an “angel” suggests that Eli didn’t really see a problem with the drugs—they made Mum beautiful in his eyes.



Back in the present, August climbs through the hole in the wardrobe, and Eli follows. The hole leads to a dark room with a **red telephone** that rings. August picks it up, ignoring Eli’s warnings to leave it alone. He then passes the phone to Eli. A man’s voice refuses to give his name but says that Eli knows who he is. They discuss that Lyle is dealing Golden Triangle heroin, and they talk about Slim. Eli says he believes everything Lyle says because Lyle says he can’t lie—but the man on the phone says that’s nonsense. Just as the man calls Eli by name and asks if Eli wants the full story, Lyle slides open the door from the wardrobe and shouts at Eli and August.

Readers and Eli seem equally in the dark about who’s on the other end of the line; the novel revisits this mystery later. But whoever is on the phone seems very knowledgeable about Eli, August, and Lyle, since this man knows so much about the particular type of heroin Lyle is selling. Eli demonstrates his loyalty to Lyle—and his youth—by insisting that if Lyle says he can’t lie, that must be true. The man on the phone, though, suggests that Eli shouldn’t take Lyle at his word; Lyle can lie, just like any other person.



Eli drops the phone and follows August into a tunnel leading out of the room. The tunnel reminds Eli of a story a Vietnamese friend at school told about exploring Viet Cong tunnels when he visited Vietnam. But then, as Eli starts to smell human waste, he and August emerge in what they realize is the old outhouse's pit. Lyle is looking down at them from the hole. Lyle reaches a hand down to pull the boys out, but Eli refuses. He demands Lyle tell him about the man on the **red telephone** and accuses Lyle of using drugs again, but Lyle insists the phone doesn't get calls. Lyle leaves the boys alone.

Four years ago, Eli thought Lyle was going to leave forever when Lyle insisted he needed to "get better." But Lyle did return, and when he got home, Eli called him Dad. Lyle gently reminded Eli he wasn't Eli's dad. Five days later, Lyle locked Mum in Lena's room. Mum screamed and beat the walls for days. Through the door, she asked Eli to call the police, but August wouldn't let him. Eli played Mum's favorite song, "Ruby Tuesday," on repeat and after seven days, Lyle let Mum out. They went into their bedroom and August and Eli went into Lena's room. They took in the bedpan and the holes in the bloody walls, and they knew Mum had won her battle.

BOY FOLLOWS FOOTSTEPS

Eli wakes up in the middle of the night to August wiping sweat off his face; Eli was having the "magic car" dream again. In it, Eli and August are in the backseat of a car, having a great time, until the car dives to the bottom of the ocean. Dad is driving. Now Eli is hungry, since they went to bed early and without dinner after Lyle silently pulled them out of the outhouse. Eli and August sneak to the kitchen to make sandwiches. Sandwiches in hand, they go to the window and crouch instantly. Lyle is outside by the fence, smoking. When a firework goes off nearby, Lyle walks away. August writes that he already knows where Lyle is going, so Eli follows on his own.

Eli often follows people, and he's good at it because he knows he must believe he's invisible. He follows Lyle barefoot, in his pajamas with a hole in the butt. They cross the park and then from a mango tree, Eli watches Lyle turn into Darren Dang's driveway. Darren is in Eli's grade at school and he's a known bully and troublemaker. Once, he made Eli meet him and his crony Eric Voight by the bins and then forced Eli to hold an obese brown rat while Darren tried to cut the rat's tail off. Eli let the rat get away, so Darren tried to cut off Eli's finger in retaliation. The drunken groundsman, Mr. McKinnon, found the boys before Darren could swing the machete, but Darren and Eric got away.

Given how angry Lyle seems, it makes sense that Eli doesn't want to get too close—he's done something that angered his caregiver. But Eli trusts Lyle, so from his relatively safe spot in the outhouse pit, he feels okay asking Lyle for answers. It complicates things when Lyle says the phone doesn't get calls—this means either that Eli and August were imagining things in the previous passage, or that the phone can do things Lyle isn't aware of.



Given what happens once Lyle returns, "get[ting] better" refers to detoxing from drugs. Eli's innocence shines through in this passage when he's so distraught about Lyle leaving, as he seems not to understand why this is happening. Then, calling Lyle "Dad" when he gets back illustrates how close Eli is to Lyle. The fact that Lyle isn't related doesn't matter—this is the man Eli sees as his father, which hints that Eli probably doesn't have a particularly close or healthy relationship with his biological dad. Lyle then forces Mum to get off drugs too, which is another way that Lyle cares for his chosen family; he gives Eli and August two functional, caring parents.



Eli and August's close relationship shines through here. August takes his role as Eli's big brother seriously, and he makes sure that when Eli doesn't feel alone when he's having a bad dream. The fact that Dad is the one driving the car into the ocean is ominous, and it suggests that Eli is afraid of or doesn't trust his biological father. When it comes to Lyle walking off after this firework, August shows that he's a bit older, more mature, and more observant than Eli, since he knows where Lyle is going.



Eli's holey pajamas are suggestive of his family's low economic status, something Eli doesn't seem fully aware of. Bringing up this horrifying story about Darren trying to cut the rat's tail off suggests that Eli might be afraid of seeing Lyle going to the Dangs' house—one of the Dangs, at least, is known to be violent and cruel. Eli, though, shows that he's more compassionate when he lets the rat escape with its tail.



Darren's house is one of the biggest in Darra. Eli scurries around the plastic princess castles and the trampoline in the yard until he catches sight of Lyle sitting with Darren's mum and stepdad, "Back Off" Bich Dang and Quan Nguyen, through the living room windows. Bich got her nickname when she stabbed a girl in the eye for teasing one of her daughters. She never went to prison, and this made Eli realize that Darra has its own rules, and that Bich probably drafted many of them herself. She's very important in town, as she owns the biggest Vietnamese supermarket, a Vietnamese restaurant, and sponsors community events.

Eli watches Bich direct Quan (who's more of a servant than a husband) to bring a Styrofoam box to Lyle, just as Darren puts a knife to Eli's neck. The knife is actually a samurai sword, and Darren laughs as he jokes about cutting Eli's head off. Once Darren gets Eli to say that Lyle isn't his dad but is good to Mum, Darren sits next to Eli on the trampoline. Darren offers Eli a cigarette, which just makes Eli cough. Then, Darren confirms that Bich is selling heroin to Lyle, and that the firework is her notification system. Eli and Darren note that Lyle is working for Tytus Broz. Then, Darren asks if Eli feels like stabbing something. Eli does.

Darren leads Eli to a small green car a few blocks away, and then offers Eli a stocking to put over his head. Eli refuses and notes that this is Father Monroe's car as Darren climbs on top. Darren explains that Father Monroe pays a boy to expose his penis while Father Monroe masturbates. Eli insists that's nonsense, but Darren stabs his sword through the car's roof anyway. The boys race away when Father Monroe comes outside and yells.

As Darren and Eli sit on a roof, smoking, Darren observes that it's awful to think you're hanging with the good guys, when you're actually with the bad guys. Darren describes the terrifying night he learned Bich was dealing—the cops stripped her and frightened Darren so bad that he pooped his pants. Now, Darren knows his mother is a key player in "the game." He says they aren't the "baddest." Those guys are hard to identify, as they're "suburban psychopaths" who kill people with the same knives they use in the kitchen. Then, Darren asks if Eli's real dad is "good." He explains that he asks because he's never met a good adult man—they're the "most fucked-up creatures on the planet."

The size of Darren's house, combined with how successful Bich Dang is in her various business ventures, suggests that the Dangs are far wealthier than Eli's family is. But Eli is also starting to suspect that people don't become well-off just because they follow the rules. Perhaps people achieve Bich Dang's level of success because they make the rules to suit themselves. This starts to expose a possible imbalance, where Eli and perhaps Lyle are far less powerful than families like the Dangs, who have money and power.



Darren appears to enjoy frightening people and feeling powerful, especially when he gets to do so with outlandishly large weapons (like the samurai sword and the machete in the earlier anecdote about the rat). But Darren himself doesn't seem to frighten Eli too much. Rather, here, Darren establishes himself as an important source of information. Eli is able to confirm that Lyle is getting heroin to sell from Bich Dang, and that both Lyle and Bich Dang are working for Tytus Broz. Who Tytus is, though, remains a mystery for now.



If Darren is right about Father Monroe (and the novel never confirms who's right), this shows Eli again that he can't assume he knows everything about people in his community. Just as Bich Dang is more than a businesswoman, figures like Father Monroe might be more than a religious leader—he could be an abuser.



It seems like Darren is trying hard to be cool as he tells Eli about the night he learned Bich was involved in the drug trade. His story sounds like a terrifying experience, but he's far more interested in impressing Eli than acknowledging that it was traumatic seeing his mother stripped. But now, he thinks of his mother as being powerful and in-control. Generally, Darren is interested in figuring out how to identify who's good and evil. Unfortunately for him, he's realizing it's hard to identify a good or bad person just by looking at them—the "suburban psychopaths" seem to look like normal people, not like stereotypical villains.



Wandering back to the trampoline, Darren explains that Eli is in a great place. According to Bich, Australians are naturally miserable people, drugs will always help that misery, and so drugs will always be in demand. Darren explains that he'll own a drug empire soon and, citing Eli's supposed loyalty (since Eli didn't tell the school about Darren's involvement in the rat incident), invites Eli to be part of his empire. Eli declines. He'd like to be a journalist writing crime stories for *The Courier-Mail* and he wants to live in The Gap, a wealthy suburb. Eli explains that Lyle bought an Atari game console there, and Eli fell in love with the cul-de-sacs. Darren laughs and says Eli could buy a house there tomorrow if he joined. Then Darren says they should go up, since Bich wants to meet Eli.

Darren leads Eli into the living room. Lyle is enraged and tells Eli to go home, but Bich asks Eli to explain why he's here. Eli tells her about the firework and following Lyle, and then Bich draws Eli close and tells him to ask his questions. She warns Lyle to answer truthfully. Eli asks why Lyle is dealing. Lyle says he does it for Tytus Broz and refuses to give an answer that pleases Bich. Lyle then gets up to lead Eli out, but Bich calls Eli back again. She asks why he didn't tell the school about the rat, and Eli says Darren is his friend, and that Lyle taught him loyalty. At this, Bich suggests to Lyle that they talk later about new "opportunities." Then, she says that Lyle deals drugs for Eli.

Especially given Darren's youth, his knowledge of and interest in the local drug trade is almost humorous—he's a 12-year-old kid with a samurai sword, and he seems more interested in theatrics than anything else. But Darren also seems to see the drug trade as the only way to get by. Eli, on the other hand, wants to write about people like Darren from the safety of a wealthier suburb, like The Gap. To Eli, The Gap represents safety and security; cul-de-sacs signal to him that he could play in the street without worrying about through traffic.



Lyle's anger at Eli seems to stem from his desire to protect Eli's innocence: he perhaps doesn't want Eli knowing he deals heroin. Bich, on the other hand, has no issue with children knowing what the adults who care for them are up to (this is perhaps why Darren is so well-versed in the local drug trade). Again, it's clear that Eli idolizes Lyle, when he mentions that Lyle was the one who taught him to be loyal. Bich tries to convey that Lyle is just as loyal to Eli when she insists Lyle deals for Eli. This suggests that Lyle is trying to help his family by making money in this way.



BOY RECEIVES LETTER

In a letter to Eli, a current prisoner in Boggo Road, Alex, thanks Eli for his last letter and says it was the best thing to happen to him last month. Inmates have been fighting, and one fight resulted in the guards taking away everyone's TV privileges—so if Eli can share anything about *Days of Our Lives*, that would be much appreciated. The inmates have collectively adopted a cat they've named Tripod. Alex counsels Eli to keep up on his studies so he doesn't end up being drugged and raped in prison—that's what happens to kids who slack off. Then, Alex explains that you can tell a man wants to knife you by their eyes. He also sends his regards to Slim and suggests that Eli call Dad.

It's Saturday morning. Slim is watching August and Eli while Mum and Lyle are supposedly seeing a movie. Since Slim spent 39 years in Boggo Road and couldn't receive letters for most of them, he understands how important letters can be to inmates. He and Lyle met when Slim was in a "release-to-work" program in a car shop. They'd work together during the day and chat, and sometimes, Lyle would slip letters into Slim's pack. Then, two years ago, Eli found Slim writing letters to inmates and asked if he could write one. He's been corresponding with Alex Bermudez, a former sergeant-at-arms of a motorcycle gang, ever since.

This letter from Alex builds on the idea Darren introduced in the last chapter: that it's impossible to identify a whether someone is good or bad just by looking at them. It's not clear yet what Alex is in prison for, but he and his fellow prisoners read as perfectly normal people who are interested in television shows and keeping pets. His advice to stay in school might be overdramatic, but it nevertheless shows that he's interested in helping Eli stay on the right path.



The implication is that Lyle and Mum aren't seeing a movie; they're dealing drugs, but Eli isn't willing to bring this up with Slim yet. Letters, Eli and Slim show, can be an important way to connect with another person. Letters were the foundation of Lyle and Slim's relationship years ago, and now, Eli is building a relationship with Alex through their correspondence. Alex seems like a very nice person in his letter, which seems at odds with his role as a high-ranking member of a motorcycle gang.



Eli interrupts Slim's writing and asks if Slim actually killed the taxi driver. Slim trembles, and Eli knows he hurt Slim's feelings, so he apologizes. But he explains that they did a feature of Slim in the *South-West Star* today, and the paper suggested that Slim didn't do it. Slim asks if Eli thinks he did it. Eli doesn't know; all he knows is that somehow, Slim survived prison. Eli says that he doesn't think Slim is capable of murder since he's a good man. Slim warns Eli not to underestimate people and asks to see the article.

The article introduces Slim as formerly the most dangerous prisoner in the country. He was orphaned at 12 and was a seasoned criminal by the time he first escaped Boggo Road at age 30 in 1940. He scaled a section of wall that the guards couldn't see—now, that spot is known as “Halliday's Leap.” He was released in 1949, married Irene, and was convicted of murdering a taxi driver in 1952. Supposedly, Slim confessed to the murder while hospitalized for shooting himself in the leg, but Slim refuted this during the trial. He was sentenced to life in prison. Irene swore she'd “stand by her man.”

The article continues that after another escape attempt, Slim was put in Black Peter for two weeks. This turned him into an urban legend. Slim spent the next 11 years in maximum security. By 1968, news outlets were reporting that Slim had become a “vegetable”—but this wasn't true. Slim mellowed as he hit his 60s, and he became interested in literature and poetry. Finally, Slim was released after 24 years and has maintained his innocence ever since. His cell in Boggo Road is still empty. When Slim finishes reading, Eli notes that Irene really didn't stand by him, but Slim insists that she did.

Eli returns to his letter to Alex. He asks what Alex thinks of the current prime minister, and shares that Slim thinks the current prime minister is a lot like a prisoner whom Slim knew in the 1960s. That prisoner ran a betting pool and figured out how to use cockroaches to deliver inmates' winnings—cigarettes—to their cells. Then, Eli writes that he's decided all the world's problems can be traced back to someone's dad, and the terrible things that dad did. He'd love to hear about Alex's dad. Eli offers a quick recap of *Days of Our Lives* and includes a copy of Slim's favorite poem in a postscript.

His letter finished, Eli asks about the name Slim took after he got out of prison, Arthur Dale. Dale, Slim confirms, came from an Officer Dale, who was gentlemanly and kind to him in prison. Slim explains that most of the guards in prison are terrible people, but Officer Dale was different. Once, as officers were spraying Slim with a pressure hose, dumping hot water on him, and poking him with a hot poker, Slim pulled a knife. Officer Dale told the officers to stand down.

It's interesting that Slim doesn't answer Eli's direct question, but his explanation suggests that he thinks it's more important for Eli to decide for himself than to just take whatever Slim says at face value. Eli's response shows that for now, he thinks the world is divided up neatly into good men and bad men. A man like Slim, who shows Eli such care and compassion, can't possibly be capable of something as terrible as murder.



In addition to giving readers more background information on who Slim is, his story turns him into a larger-than-life character for Eli. It's significant that Slim's life of crime seemed to begin when he was orphaned at 12 years old—the age that Eli is right now. Slim may have turned to crime because unlike Eli, he didn't have the support of parents or chosen family members like Mum and Lyle.



Eli told readers about Slim's experience in Black Peter at the very beginning of the novel. Black Peter is where Slim developed his coping mechanism of being able to retreat into memories to make time go faster, and at least one of those memories was of Irene. Slim and Eli don't elaborate on what Irene did, but it seems likely she and Slim divorced at some point. Nevertheless, her memory may have helped comfort Slim throughout his 24 years in prison.



By telling Alex this anecdote about Slim's prison buddy, Eli shows again how important Slim is to him. Eli offers none of his own opinions about the prime minister—Slim's opinions matter to him more than his own, at least in this context. However, Eli is starting to think for himself—his theory that everything bad in the world can be traced back to fathers seems to be something Eli came up with himself. This also offers another clue that Eli's dad isn't someone Eli likes or thinks he can rely on.



Like Eli, Slim is interested in identifying the good people in the world, and in figuring out how exactly they differ from those he considers bad. Officer Dale seemed to believe that it was cruel to torment Slim in this way, while the other guards didn't seem to care that they were treating another person so inhumanely. This had a profound effect on Slim.



Slim says Officer Dale's kindness touched him so much that he nearly cried. That's when they put him in Black Peter again. It was cold then, and Slim got through it by figuring that if Officer Dale was a good person still after working among "bastards," maybe Slim would still be a good person after he got out. As Eli studies the article, he asks how Slim survived without committing suicide. Slim says he did work a kind of magic: he figured out how to manipulate time. He sped up time by keeping busy and imagining happier things, and slowed time down when he was outside smelling flowers. Then, Slim gives Eli and August his favorite piece of advice: "Do your time before it does you."

The first time Eli heard Slim dispense this advice, they were in the engine room of Brisbane City Hall's clock tower. An old friend was the lift operator and he snuck them up the stairs to admire the view. Slim jerks Eli back to the present by asking if Eli is still catching all the details of his life. Eli says he is—but Slim says Eli missed the most important part of the article, the byline. Eli looks and then curses at August. The reporter's name is Caitlyn Spies.

BOY KILLS BULL

Eli looks through Mum's half-open bedroom door as she puts on a necklace. She's dressed up in her fancy red dress, and she's so beautiful. How could any man—namely Dad—mess this up? It makes Eli so mad. He slips in and tries to ask why she left Dad, but as usual, she refuses to talk about it. She does say that Dad is a good man. Then, Eli asks if August ever scares Mum. He admits August scares *him*, and he tells Mum about finding Caitlyn Spies's name in the paper after August was writing her name in the air weeks ago. Mum insists that August just loves how words sound, even if he doesn't speak.

Mum asks Eli how she looks. She's gorgeous, and Eli tells her so—but Mum says she's "Mutton dressed up as a lamb." This makes Eli angry, and he tells Mum she's too good for this house and for Lyle. He insists that "arseholes" keep getting the lamb because the lamb thought she was mutton. Mum tells Eli to stop, but he says she should've been a lawyer, not a drug dealer.

Slim's advice can be distilled down into a couple simple ideas: that it's important to strive to be a good person, and that it's also important to slow down and try to enjoy happy things. Doing these two things, Slim implies, is what kept him from wanting to die. Telling the boys to "do their time before it does them" is another way of saying that people have a choice in how they experience their lives. They can choose to focus on the good parts, and if they don't, it's all too easy to feel powerless and pessimistic about life. At this point, it's hard to tell whether Eli is internalizing these ideas, or whether he's too busy idolizing Slim to grasp his meaning.



Giving out the advice to "do your time before it does you" at the top of a clock tower—a location that makes time into something physical, rather than just an idea—is significant. Time becomes something real that Eli can look at and control, rather than something more intangible and ephemeral. Learning that Caitlyn Spies is a crime reporter is a revelation for Eli. She's a real person, not just a figment of August's imagination.



The way Eli talks about Mum suggests that he sees her as wholly good. Men Eli considers bad, like Dad, have wronged her. Mum insisting that Dad is a good man complicates this, though, as it suggests there's more to the story than Eli realizes. With what Eli says about August, it seems as though he thinks of his brother as a prophet, which is frightening for him. Mum, though, has a perfectly logical explanation that doesn't include August being magical or able to see the future.



Again, it's clear that Eli adores Mum and is extremely disappointed in how her life has turned out. Part of this is because, as Eli sees it, Mum's low self-esteem (which may be real, or may just be for show) makes her an easy victim for men Eli doesn't think are good enough for her.



Mum slaps Eli and screams at him to get out. Eli screams back that it's absurd for her to make him eat his vegetables when she and Lyle are dealing drugs. Then, Lyle appears behind Eli and tosses him into the doorframe. Lyle kicks Eli as Eli shouts curses. August tries to get between them, but Lyle grabs Eli by his collar and marches him out the front door.

Lyle walks Eli to the cricket pitch. He asks what got into Eli, but Eli starts to cry. Lyle asks if Eli knows why he cries so easily. Eli insists he's just a "pussy," but Lyle says that isn't true: Eli just cares, and he's not afraid to show it. Lyle then says that Eli is right; Mum is too good for him. They look at the stars and Lyle says that he wants to get out of here; that's why he works for Tytus Broz. He suggests they make a deal. He needs six months, and then, they can move wherever Eli wants. Eli says he wants to move to The Gap because of the cul-de-sacs, and he agrees to the deal—provided Lyle lets Eli work for him.

Soon after, Eli follows his family to Bich Dang's Vietnamese restaurant. The restaurant's interior is huge, as big as a cinema. A woman in a sequined dress sings on a stage as Eli follows his family past fish tanks and up to the balcony. This is where Tytus Broz's 80th birthday party is taking place. Tytus always makes Eli think of bones. He's wearing a bone-white suit and tie, and his hair is also white. He's bony and thin. Eli also thinks of bones because Tytus made his fortune creating prosthetics and orthotics at Human Touch, the plant where Lyle works as a mechanic. Teddy, the friend who got Lyle the job, is also at the party. Eli also thinks of bones when he sees Tytus because just seeing Tytus makes Eli shiver.

Eli first met Tytus two years ago, when Lyle had to take Eli and August into work with him. The plant was just a warehouse then, and all the prosthetic limbs terrified Eli. Lyle ushered the boys into Tytus's office. Behind Tytus's desk was a painting of Moby Dick, the white whale. (Since learning what [Moby-Dick](#) is about, Eli now thinks of the crazy Captain Ahab when he sees Tytus.) Tytus took August's hand and said there was strength there. Lyle explained August doesn't talk, and when Tytus laughed about autism, Eli interjected that there was nothing wrong with August. Tytus then felt Eli's arm and deemed Eli "weak-boned." Tytus told Eli about the real, plastinated hand on his desk, and Eli told a story proving that August can see the future. Tytus said he'd keep an eye on August.

Eli is acting out because he's still processing that Mum and Lyle are dealing drugs, and Eli sees this as morally wrong. In his mind, being asked behave himself (by eating his vegetables at dinner) is absurd and hypocritical if Mum and Lyle are doing something as reprehensible as dealing drugs.



In the last passage, Eli made it seem like Lyle is a terrible person. But in this passage, it becomes clear that Eli was just angry and lashing out: Lyle wants to support Eli and Mum, and ideally, he'd do that without the help of drug money. Lyle also makes it clear that he doesn't like dealing drugs. It's something he's doing out of necessity, which speaks to how low-income the family is. Drugs are an attractive choice when it seems like there's no other way to make money.



Tytus is also Lyle's drug boss, which means he's living two different lives: one in which he's the owner of Human Touch, and the other where he's running a major drug operation. Eli seems to dislike Tytus more for his work with prosthetics. The fact that Tytus manufactures prosthetics is, at face value, a good thing, since he's helping people with this work. Eli can't seem to get past his knee-jerk reaction that Tytus is a frightening person, though.



Eli was only 10 years old when he met Tytus, which may have contributed to how frightened he was (and still is) of Lyle's boss. Likening Tytus to Captain Ahab from [Moby-Dick](#) suggests that Tytus is in search of something elusive, and that whatever that thing is, it might bring him down (the whale Moby Dick ultimately drags Captain Ahab into the ocean in the novel). When Eli is confronted with Tytus, though, what really bothers him is the fact that Tytus speaks rudely and dismissively about August. This is unacceptable to Eli, since he loves his brother; he'll use his words to defend him, since August can't use words to defend himself.



Back in the present, Tytus kisses Mum on both cheeks and then introduces his daughter, Hanna, to his guests. According to Lyle, Hanna inspired Tytus's prosthetics business, as she was born without forearms and hands. Hanna shakes Mum's hand with her plastic one and smiles warmly. Then, Eli sees another man, who seems to be made of stone rather than bones. The man is staring at Eli, and Eli feels like he's seeing things from many vantage points. Tytus calls the man Iwan and jokes that August doesn't talk, just like Iwan. Iwan says he talks and then picks up a beer. Bich Dang and Darren appear moments later and announce the start of dinner.

Eli looks around at everyone at the table, but Darren hisses at him to stop staring at Iwan Krol. Darren refuses to look at Iwan and says it's Iwan's job to look disturbing. He apparently owns a llama farm by day, and by night, he "gives people the creeps." Doing his best to make it sound scary, Darren says Iwan has killed people, but what makes him scary are the rumors. Darren sings a song and laughs, but stops suddenly when Iwan looks his way. Eli begs for more information and says he has to know, since he's going to start helping Lyle by watching for "details."

To demonstrate what this means, Eli looks around. He doesn't mention seeing Teddy staring at Mum, but he tells Darren all the little things he notices about their party, such as how Tytus keeps his hand on Hanna's thigh and how Hanna has barely eaten. Darren admits he didn't notice a lot of those things and agrees to tell Eli about Iwan. Darren says that Iwan murdered his own brother 30 years ago, and the body disappeared. Iwan is brilliant because his targets just disappear. Darren says Iwan dismembers his targets—and takes them to Tytus Broz, "the Lord of the Limbs."

On the walk home, Eli hangs back with Lyle as Mum and August pretend to be Olympic gymnasts on some log edging. Eli asks Lyle if he's thought about the proposition. Lyle just sighs, but Eli insists that the federal police are trying to stop the drug trade by stopping drug importers before they reach Australia. Soon, there won't be enough drugs—so Lyle and Eli should buy up as much as they can now, bury it, and sell it in a few years when it's worth more. Lyle tells Eli to stop spending time with Darren. Eli says he can't drop Darren, since Bich will sell them more heroin if the boys are friends. Soon, they'll be able to afford two houses in The Gap.

It's not entirely clear what kind of a boss or person Tytus is. On the surface, he doesn't seem like a bad or frightening person yet: he's trying to help people like Hanna by running Human Touch. Eli, though, seems not to trust anyone involved with Tytus, so Iwan seems just as frightening as his boss. Eli's note that he's seeing things from many vantage points suggests he's having an out-of-body experience, which hints that this dinner is going to be life-changing for him.



Darren gives some credence to Eli's gut reaction when he says that Iwan's entire job is to "give[] people the creeps." Noting that Iwan runs a llama farm by day also adds more evidence to the idea that criminals don't have to look a certain way. Iwan's day job is ordinary to the point of being humorous, but that doesn't preclude him from also being a scary murderer (if Darren is to be believed).



The fact that Tytus keeps his hand on his daughter's leg makes him seem more menacing, as reads as though he's trying to control her and possibly touching her in an inappropriate way. Darren continues to establish himself as a valuable source of information when he tells Eli about Iwan's past criminal activity. He also confirms that Eli is right to be afraid of Tytus Broz, as the nickname "the Lord of the Limbs" sounds sinister.



It's clear that Lyle doesn't want to involve Eli in his work dealing drugs. He is, perhaps, trying to protect Eli by making sure Eli doesn't ever have to do illegal work, but this doesn't sway Eli. Lyle is, after all, doing just fine, so dealing drugs might not seem so dangerous to Eli. Eli's plan—and Lyle's wry advice to stop hanging out with Darren—suggest that Lyle knows how dramatic Darren can be, and that he doesn't take anything Darren says seriously. But it's impossible for him to ignore how serious Eli is, and how badly Eli wants to move to The Gap.



Eli has no answer when Lyle asks what happens when Tytus finds out and sends Iwan after them. Eli kicks a soft drink can, and Lyle scolds Eli to pick it up. Lyle says this neighborhood was once as nice as The Gap until people stopped taking care of it. Eli insists heroin is to blame, but he picks the can up and says, “The drop in the lake.” Seeing Lyle’s confused expression, Eli explains his theory.

Eli says for Mum, the drop in the lake happened when her dad left when she was a teen. This caused Mum to drop out of school, hitchhike around the country, and get kidnapped. She met Dad when she escaped her kidnapper’s car and asked road workers for help. Lyle sighs and insists that Eli can’t help him, and that he should stop asking questions about Iwan, too. But Eli says he can see things Lyle can’t see, like Teddy falling in love with Mum.

BOY LOSES LUCK

It’s another drop in the lake when someone asks Mum to be on a committee to organize a school party, which meets every Saturday for the next month. She usually hates the kind of parents who join those committees, but she also wants to feel like them sometimes. Then Slim comes down with pneumonia—and Eli, now 13 and desperate to accompany Lyle on heroin runs, reminds Mum how much he and August like burning things when they’re unsupervised. Lyle offers to drop the boys at the pool while he and Teddy deliver the heroin, and Mum agrees.

The pool, however, is closed when they get there, so Lyle curses and ushers August and Eli back into Teddy’s car. Teddy drives to a house in the Jamboree Heights neighborhood. He and Lyle get out and grab a cooler from the trunk, and then Lyle tells Eli and August to stay in the car. Eli protests—it’s too hot—and finally, Lyle allows the boys to follow him and Teddy to the front door. Two Maori men call for Lyle and Teddy to come in. The bigger one, whom Lyle calls Ezra, laughs when he sees the boys and sarcastically compliments Lyle’s parenting. Lyle snaps that the boys aren’t his, but a woman—Eloise—enters and says that since Lyle has been caring for the boys for nine years, they’re effectively his. August and Eli agree.

Lyle as much as confirms Darren’s story about Iwan’s murderous side job. This suggests that Lyle’s job dealing drugs for Tytus might not be as secure as Eli thinks it is. As Lyle and Eli argue over the can, Eli misses the fact that heroin use is likely a symptom of the financial struggles and hopelessness that pervade this suburb.



Eli is trying to make himself sound smart so he can impress Lyle, but he’s also trying to explain things he doesn’t understand in a way that makes sense to him. He’s very concerned with figuring out how his family ended up the way it did. Blaming Mum’s dad is a way for Eli to not have to blame Mum, as Eli adores Mum too much to even consider blaming her for anything.



It’s ominous that this chapter begins by noting that joining the committee is a “drop in the lake,” as this suggests something bad is going to happen soon. Mum might be involved in the illegal drug trade, but this doesn’t mean she doesn’t also want to feel like a normal suburban mom. Eli is making achieving “normal” difficult for Mum, though, since he desperately wants to help Lyle with the drug runs.



Things seem to be working out well for Eli: the pool’s closure means he gets to accompany Lyle and Teddy to people’s homes, and the scorching weather means Lyle can’t make him wait in the car. This is embarrassing for Lyle, however—he seems to agree with Ezra that he’s not doing a great job as a parent if he’s bringing Eli and August along. Lyle tries to distance himself from this perceived crime by insisting the boys aren’t his sons. But Eloise, Eli, and August all agree: his support for the last decade means he’s their dad, whether he likes it or not.



Eli turns his attention to the movie that Ezra and his friend are watching. Ezra says it's called *Conan the Barbarian*, and the actor is Arnold Schwarzenegger. Then, Eli and August notice the Sony Betamax and drop to examine the machine and all the Betamax tapes on the shelf. Eli is thrilled to see every *Star Wars* movie and *Excalibur*. Ezra asks Eli his favorite part of *Empire*, and Eli says it's the cave bit—Luke is clearly already aware of who his dad is and is afraid of what's in his blood. The adults exchange looks and the thin man, Rua, opens the cooler and passes a huge block to Eloise. Ezra motions for Eloise to check the block. She's clearly angry, but she invites Eli and August to come to the kitchen with her for soft drinks.

Several hours later, Lyle, Teddy, Eli, and August are eating at a snack bar. As Eli sips his soda, he notes that Eloise had a huge range of soft drinks. Lyle rolls his eyes. Eli details every item in Eloise's fridge, and then tells Lyle about the Maori weapon hanging on the wall. According to Eloise, it belonged to some ancient grandfather. As Eloise weighed the block of heroin, she described how her grandfather murdered a rival chief with this unassumingly small weapon. Eli says he pretended to be engrossed in the story and in the sodas—but really, he watched Eloise shave off a gram of heroin and hide it. Eli rattles off names he saw on a list, and when he mentions Dustin Vang, Lyle says that's great news—he's healthy competition.

Eli learns that what really connects Brisbane is heroin. He and August spend the month of Saturdays accompanying Lyle and Teddy all over town. Surprisingly, it's not very romantic, and Eli realizes that he and August could conduct the same deals faster on their bikes. The boys often do their math homework in the backseat (August writes words on his calculator) while Lyle conducts the deals. Eli now knows that Lyle is a second-tier dealer; his clients on Saturdays are the third-tier dealers, and Bich Dang is the first-tier supplier. Lyle is a masterful dealer and diplomat—he treats every client like he treats Mum when she's angry.

On their final Saturday run, Lyle tells Eli and August about the underground room and the **red telephone**. Lyle explains that he dug the room himself, initially to store boxes of marijuana in his and Mum's early days. The phone connects directly to one at Tytus Broz's house. But when Eli asks who he was speaking to when he picked up the phone, Lyle says Eli wasn't speaking to anyone.

*It's unclear what Eli expected when he asked to accompany Lyle on these runs, but it doesn't seem like he expected to come face to face with coveted technology like the Sony Betamax (a VHS competitor). What Eli says about his favorite part of *Empire* is interesting, as it suggests that, like Luke Skywalker, Eli is afraid of who his own dad is and what that might mean for his prospects. But he also sounds far more mature and insightful than the adults seem to expect, hence their quiet looks and the choice to move the transaction along.*



As Eli starts to tell Lyle about all the things he saw, it seems like Lyle was right to want to leave Eli out of this, since Eli is very observant and interested in what others are doing. Eli is also good at burying important information—in this case, seeing Eloise steal a gram of heroin—in stories that seem to have little to do with his actual point. This seems to impress upon Lyle that Eli may be useful to have around, so long as Lyle is okay with listening to Eli's rambling stories and waiting for the point.



*Drug dealing is losing its allure for Eli. It no longer seems all that dramatic now that he knows he could do the same thing faster, and now that he sees that Lyle treats Mum the exact same way that he treats his clients. Eli is also learning how prevalent drugs are in the Brisbane suburbs. He never mentions *The Gap*, but he also seems to imply that heroin is common in all parts of the Brisbane metro area—those that are well-off, and those that aren't.*



It's confusing when Lyle insists that Eli and August weren't speaking to anyone on the red telephone, as this opens up the possibility that the voice on the phone may have just been the boys' imaginations. But Lyle's choice to tell the boys about the room and the phone shows that he's decided he can trust them with this information, which is how he demonstrates his care and loyalty.



Mum is in a good mood over dinner the night after the school event. She spent all day running three carnival games, only one of which was popular. Mum spoons spaghetti on everyone's plates and says she felt like she belonged. Lyle stares lovingly at Mum as Teddy—who seems to always be over for dinner these days—fetches beers from the kitchen. When Teddy returns to the table, he puts an arm around Mum's shoulder and rubs Mum's cheekbone. Lyle, Eli, and August all share incredulous and angry looks. But when Mum says it felt good to do something so normal, Eli tells her genuinely that normal suits her.

Teddy seems to be getting more and more enamored with Mum, and he acts like he no longer thinks he should hide this. This is disrespectful to Lyle, Eli, and August, as it undermines their family. Mum, on the other hand, seems oblivious to Teddy's advances. Despite Teddy's behavior, though, it's still important to Eli to show Mum his support by saying nice things about her carnival games and about her desire to be normal. Eli seems to want Mum to be more "normal" (by which he means not involved in the drug trade), if that's what makes her happy.



Out of nowhere, Tytus Broz walks into the living room. Eli's spine immediately shivers, especially when Iwan Krol strolls in behind his boss. Mum hops up, but Iwan puts a hand on her shoulder to keep her down. Everything is silent for a minute. Then, Lyle turns to August and starts writing something in the air. August nods as Tytus screams for Lyle to stop. Lyle only stops when a third man punches Lyle onto the floor. Eli throws himself on Lyle, screaming. Teddy stays still when Iwan puts a knife to his throat, and Lyle tells Mum he's sorry and he loves her.

The reasonably happy family dinner instantly turns into a nightmare when Tytus and Iwan walk in. Lyle seems to know at once that he's their target, as his words to August seem frantic, though what he's writing is a mystery. Eli demonstrates his loyalty to Lyle by leaping onto Lyle to try to protect him. Teddy, on the other hand, seems all too willing to protect himself and not try to stand up for his friend.



Mum brings a bowl of spaghetti down on the head of the man holding Lyle down. Then, screaming, she digs her fingernails into the man's face. The man barely responds as he drags Lyle down the hallway and out the door. At Tytus's signal, Iwan rushes to grab Mum, pushing August aside. Iwan hits Mum in the temple and then drags August and Eli, who followed, back to the table.

Mum, August, and Eli continue to show their loyalty to Lyle by attacking the man dragging him away. Their behavior seems to be expected, though, given that the man barely notices that he has three people trying to stop him. Dragging August and Eli back to the table is ominous, as it suggests the boys may suffer just like the adults have.



Eli sobs as Iwan ties August (who's shockingly calm) to his chair. Tytus tells Teddy to leave, and Teddy only makes one attempt to insist the boys are innocent before running away, right past Mum's unconscious body. Eli knows in this moment that Teddy is a "gutless prick." Then, Tytus tells the boys to listen: Lyle has vanished, and in 10 minutes, Mum will be arrested for her role in Lyle's drug operation. Eli threatens to tell the police and says Tytus is evil. Tytus says Eli won't speak to the police, but he acknowledges that he is evil. However, he says he's not as evil as Lyle, who brought kids into "the works of evil men."

Tytus adds some nuance to Eli's belief that he's totally evil, though Eli doesn't seem to fully grasp what Tytus is saying. He acknowledges that he's evil, but he suggests that Lyle's choice to let the boys get involved in dealing drugs was a worse offense than anything he's done. This is, however, a way for Tytus to absolve himself of some responsibility. It means that it's not his fault that the boys know what's going on; it's Lyle's fault for letting the boys lose their innocence about his work for Tytus.



Tytus tells Eli and August to think carefully about whether they want to be loyal to Lyle or to themselves as Iwan puts Eli's right hand on the table and holds his knife to Eli's lucky **forefinger**. Then, Tytus asks August what Lyle wrote in the air. August feigns ignorance and Eli, ready to vomit, screeches that August doesn't talk. Iwan presses the knife into Eli's finger bone—and then August gives Eli an apologetic look. August turns to Tytus and says, "Your end is a dead blue wren." Tytus laughs, and Iwan cuts off Eli's lucky forefinger. Before Eli passes out, he watches Tytus pick up the finger in a handkerchief.

It's traumatizing to lose a finger in any circumstance, but losing his lucky finger will no doubt be particularly traumatic for Eli. Particularly since Slim earlier referred to this finger as "home," losing it suggests that Eli has been forced to grow up. It also implies that everything that made Eli feel at home has disappeared: now Tytus is even more menacing than he was before, and Lyle is gone. The meaning of "your end is a dead blue wren" remains as cryptic as ever, though August's willingness to say the phrase out loud reinforces that it's important.



BOY BUSTS OUT

Eli is dreaming the magic car dream again. This time, the car is flying, and he and August are in the backseat. Eli says he doesn't want to be in this dream anymore as the car hits the water, which reflects the full **moon**. August, unconcerned about breathing water, writes "Boy swallows universe" in the air. Eli picks up a hand to write back—but his **finger** is gone and bleeding. Eli comes to in a hospital room, his hand aching and heavily bandaged. Slim leans over him and helps Eli drink.

Eli seems to be processing losing his finger through this dream. It's a variation on his usual flying car dream, and in this situation, dreaming may be a way for his mind to try to help him cope with his recent trauma. The fact that Slim is in the hospital with Eli when he wakes up is comforting, as it suggests that not everything is changing. Eli still has this person who makes him feel safe and secure.



Slim tells Eli he's in the hospital, and that Mum is with the police—and Eli won't see her for a long time. When Eli asks what happened, Slim quietly says Eli knows what happened. Soon, a doctor will come in and want to know if what Mum told the ambulance crew is true: that Eli and August were messing with a Star Wars figurine and an axe, and August accidentally chopped Eli's **finger** off. August, as usual, said nothing to the police.

Slim implies that Mum is going to be incarcerated, as Tytus said she would. He also suggests that Eli must keep the truth of how he lost his finger to himself. Eli doesn't give readers much indication as to how he feels about this, which reflects how confused and unmoored he is. Right now, even trustworthy adults like Slim make little sense.



Eli begs to know why Lyle was taken away. Sighing, Slim says Lyle was making side deals with Bich Dang; he was building up a stash to save for a few years. This is going to create chaos in Darra's streets. Eli is crushed: this is his fault. He sobs that it was his idea to hide drugs to sell later. Slim, though, says Lyle has been doing that since well before Eli mentioned it. At this, Eli sobs again—Lyle lied to him. Eli sobs that he's going to tell the police everything so supposed saints like Tytus Broz and Bich Dang are arrested and can't run the world anymore. Slim suggests that Eli not worry about that. Instead, Eli should consider *why* Mum lied to the police.

At first, hearing that Lyle followed Eli's advice is devastating for Eli, because it makes him feel like he's responsible for Lyle's disappearance. But Slim's revelation—that Lyle was already stockpiling heroin long before Eli suggested it—is devastating for another reason: Lyle didn't always tell Eli the truth. Eli's first reaction is to turn to the police, to try to ensure that other kids in his position won't lose their parents because of people like Tytus Broz. Slim, though, insists that Eli must be careful. Mum, Slim implies, is trying to protect Eli—and Eli should let her.



Eli is distraught, and he feels even worse when Slim says he and August are going to go live with Dad now. Eli imagines Mum's dad, Mum's kidnapper, and Dad all with Tytus Broz's face. After a minute, Slim tells Eli that things will only get better from here. Eli asks if Slim is a good man. Slim says he's good, but he's also bad—and all men are like that. Then, Eli asks if he's a good kid, and if he'll grow into a good man. He lists evidence for why he isn't good, though Slim insists Eli is good and just on a lot of painkillers. Slim says that today, Eli can do a good deed by supporting Mum's story, even though it means implicating August.

Tytus Broz is the evilest person Eli can think of right now, so all the people he considers awful (such as Mum's dad and kidnapper, and Eli's dad) all have his face in Eli's mind. Having established who the real "bad guy" is in Darra, Eli turns to figuring out what makes a man good—that is, what differentiates people from Tytus. Slim suggests that this isn't such a simple thing. People are both good and bad, and it's a person's choices that make them good. Indeed, it's even possible to see that Tytus is doing good in the world, since his prosthetics business helps many people.



Just as Eli starts to share what August said, the doctor comes around the curtain. The doctor introduces herself as Caroline Brennan. She checks Eli's **finger** and shocks him by saying she already knows his lost finger was special—it's his pointer finger. She then explains that finger reattachment surgery is tricky at the best of times, but it's impossible if there's no finger to reattach. Dr. Brennan asks Eli to put up his middle finger and stick it in his nose. Eli smiles. She then asks to speak to Eli alone. Slim gives Eli a \$20 bill, tells him there are fresh clothes in the closet, and leaves a phone number to contact him.

Dr. Brennan doesn't seem to fully grasp how important Eli's lucky finger was to him. It was "home," in that it represented Eli's childhood and made him feel secure. Eli is never going to get back the innocence he lost when Iwan Krol cut the finger off. Still, Eli's smile suggests that he likes the doctor and sees her as an ally, if only because she asks Eli to flip her off and pick his nose.



Once they're alone, Dr. Brennan takes Eli's blood pressure and quizzes him about *Star Wars*. The doctor says Darth Vader is her favorite character—terrible villains are the only way stories can have wonderful heroes. Eli can see where this is going. Just then, a boy with an IV drip appears in the doorway. He whines that the Tang is weak today and slouches away. Dr. Brennan explains that Christopher has a tumor in his head and then returns the conversation to Darth Vader. She says she's seen a lot of terrible things as a doctor, but nothing as dangerous as the "bullshit" Eli is spewing now. She assures him there are heroes willing to help.

Unlike Slim, Dr. Brennan encourages Eli to see that good and bad people are totally different. In her view, good and bad is a binary, not a spectrum (which is what Slim has been pointing to when he talks to Eli about good and evil). Dr. Brennan clearly wants to know the truth about who cut Eli's finger off, and she doesn't believe that August did it. Telling her the truth, she implies, is the only way that Eli can be a hero in this scenario. But although Eli does seem to agree with her that good and evil are a binary, his loyalty to Mum and Slim means that he doesn't deviate from Mum's story.



In a letter to Alex, Eli apologizes for his handwriting—he just lost his **finger**, and Dr. Brennan wants him to practice writing. He says the food in the hospital is pretty good. He's been thinking about heroes and has decided that all it takes to be a hero is to follow one's heart. Eli writes that he might not write for a while, since he has a quest to go on.

Eli is very cryptic about what his quest might entail. He may simply be trying to process all the changes he's experiencing, from losing Mum and Lyle to having to move in with Dad once he's out of the hospital. However, he writes as though he knows Alex will support him in this endeavor: Alex, Eli knows, wants Eli to be a hero and help people.



According to Slim, the way to escape prison is to truly believe the guards can't see you. Eli describes Slim's first escape from Boggo Road, which he did by believing he could do impossible things—like scale fences and be invisible—and then doing them. Now, Eli is prepared to emulate Slim and escape the hospital. All the kids in the children's ward are in the play area, and Eli is sitting with Christopher. Christopher is annoyed the nurses won't play his favorite TV show, but he listens wide-eyed as Eli tells him how he lost his **finger**.

Christopher is engaged, so Eli says he needs help creating a diversion. Eli tells Christopher what a diversion is and remembers how, to escape Boggo Road in 1953, Slim set a fire. Excited to help, Christopher pulls out his IV, walks to the TV, and screams that he wants a different show. As Christopher flips the TV over, Eli makes his escape, thinking the whole time of Slim. He thinks of how Slim made himself an escape kit and used a rope and grappling hook to scale the prison wall. Slim spent weeks practicing throwing matchsticks so he could be accurate with the grappling hook. The first thing he did out of prison was change clothes, so in the elevator, Eli pulls off his hospital gown to reveal street clothes underneath.

Two doctors join Eli in the elevator. Eli tells them he was visiting his brother, and now he's meeting his parents outside. Eli confidently walks out the hospital doors and starts running, just as a security guard starts to pursue him. He's only vaguely familiar with the area, so he hides until the security guard runs in a different direction. Eli crosses the street and approaches a homeless man to ask directions to the train station. The man just says "Batman" and points to a bat bite on his neck. He says he doesn't need help, which confirms Eli's suspicion that adult men are all awful. Eli shakes the man's hand and follows his directions to the station.

As Eli runs, he passes a building with "The Courier-Mail" on the front. Slim has told Eli about this place: this is where people make the paper. Eli knows he'll be part of it someday and file his own crime stories. As he hurries along, he thinks again of Slim and how in 1940, Slim was captured after stealing gas for his stolen car. Slim always told Eli he smiled when he was captured because his escape taught him that he was born so tall and lanky to be able to jump over walls.

Even as most things about Eli's life are changing, his love for and admiration of Slim remains constant. Slim shows Eli what's possible, and now, Eli is able to use all the things Slim has taught him to create change in his own life. He talks to Christopher in much the same way Slim spoke to him (Christopher seems just as taken with Eli as Eli is with Slim). In this way, Eli is stepping into a more adult as a wise storyteller.



Eli is escaping from a hospital, not a prison, so his escape plan is necessarily different than Slim's was. (He doesn't have to worry about a grappling hook, for instance.) But changing his clothes shows again that Eli is starting to look at Slim's stories more critically and use them as lessons, not just as entertainment. Christopher seems extremely happy to have an excuse to make a scene, especially if it's in service of someone he admires. Again, Eli is starting to step into Slim's role as a storyteller and idol.



Eli is only somewhat successful in escaping from the hospital: the security guard is presumably after him, which means Eli is going to have to hide for a while. It's interesting that Eli parrots Darren's earlier assessment that adult men are terrible when he meets the homeless man. Eli has had several men in his life (like Slim and Lyle) who aren't terrible, so it seems as though Eli is just exasperated with this man who he thinks clearly needs help.



Passing The Courier-Mail's building is inspiring for Eli. One day, Eli believes, he'll be able to write about criminals like Tytus Broz and Iwan Krol—not just lie to protect them, or run from them. Thinking about Slim insisting he was born tall to be able to climb walls suggests that Eli is learning something similar about himself, though Eli doesn't share with readers what that is.



Eli bounds down the stairs toward the train platform—and falls on his face down the bottom steps. But he gets on the train, hoping it'll stop at Darra. Fortunately, it does. Eli wanders toward home, wondering if he's losing his mind or if the pain drugs are just wearing off. When he gets there, Eli realizes he doesn't have a key. He'll have to break in. However, before Eli can smash a window, the neighbor asks Eli if he's okay and passes over an extra key. Inside, someone—probably Slim—cleaned up after the spaghetti. Eli finds something to eat and heads for Lena's room.

Eli's hand throbs as he opens the passage in the wardrobe. The heroin has to be here—but it isn't. Eli even crawls down the tunnel to the outhouse cavity, where there's a Styrofoam box. But the box is empty. Tytus Broz got the heroin first. Enraged, Eli smashes the box and sobs. He decides he'll cry himself to death here, and Caitlyn Spies can write the story about his death for the paper. Eli sits down, falls asleep, and dreams of Caitlyn Spies on a beach. She's playing with crabs and beckons for Eli to come closer. She tells him, "Your end is a dead blue wren" and asks if he's going to answer the phone.

Eli wakes up and hears Lyle's **red telephone** ringing. He crawls back through the tunnel and picks up the phone. The man's voice is the same as last time. The man tells Eli that he calls the number for Eli—773 8137—on this phone multiple times per day, even though Lyle said this phone doesn't take calls. Then, the man asks if it's close to Christmas, and asks Eli to tell him what happened. Eli gives a brief account and says he won't be able to try to offer Tytus Broz the heroin in exchange for Lyle, because the heroin is gone. The man says Mum won't survive Christmas Day. She's at risk for suicide. Eli puts the phone down as the man starts to sing "Walking in a Winter Wonderland" and curls up on the floor, pretending he's holding Irene—who turns into Caitlyn Spies.

BOY MEETS GIRL

Eli is standing in front of the office of the *South-West Star*, which is in an industrial suburb. He studies his reflection in the mirrored glass. Then, he presses the buzzer and asks to speak to Caitlyn Spies; he has a story for her but won't say what it's about. He finally tells the receptionist he has a love story, and that his best friend is Slim Halliday. While he waits, he watches an ant trail dig into a forgotten sausage roll and remembers Slim telling him about how ants use pheromones, and how scents can have meaning.

The fact that Eli is wondering about his own mental state signals to readers that he might not be a totally reliable narrator in this passage—this is a stressful situation, and he's without much-needed pain medication. Though Eli is acting independently as he escapes, the neighbor reminds him that he can't do all of this alone. The fact that Slim cleaned up in the house reinforces this: Eli has lots of people looking out for him like he is a kid, even if he feels more mature now than he ever has.



Eli is exhausted and in pain, and his plans aren't working out. Falling asleep is as much of a coping mechanism as anything else. Thinking about Caitlyn Spies writing about Eli crying himself to death reads as immature and as a product of all the trauma Eli has experienced—he's not thinking entirely straight. On another note, thinking about the "dead blue wren" phrase suggests that Eli is still struggling to understand what August meant by this.



If Lyle is to be believed, everything Eli hears from the man on the telephone exists only in his mind—it may be something Eli has invented to cope with trauma. The fact that the man shifts Eli's attention away from Lyle and toward Mum instead suggests that he may be wasting time trying to get Lyle back. On some level, Eli may know that Lyle is gone. Mum, on the other hand, is still alive—and if the man is to be believed, she needs help. Eli's loyalty to his family members means that while the man's words are hard to hear in this moment, he'll likely step up and try to help Mum.



After spending so much time around people like Slim and Lyle, Eli isn't used to adults (like the receptionist) not taking him seriously when he says he has something important to talk about. Slim and Lyle treated Eli more like an adult, while the receptionist is treating Eli more like a naughty child who certainly doesn't have anything useful or interesting to say.



The receptionist finally buzzes Eli in and invites him to sit. She asks about his bandaged hand and sweaty face. With prodding, Eli shares that he's 13 and lies that his parents know he's here. Then, Caitlyn Spies walks in. She's gorgeous, with brown hair and thick glasses. She flatly asks if Eli knows Slim. Too shocked to speak, Eli writes in the air that Slim is his best friend. Finding his voice, Eli explains that August writes like that and says that Slim was his babysitter. Caitlyn is unconvinced—Slim is probably dead, and having a killer babysit kids is “classy parenting.” Eli decides she's being funny. He'd like to dive into her eyes.

Caitlyn waves a hand in Eli's face and says he looks like a giraffe farting quietly. Eli thinks she's hilarious and asks if they can sit down and talk. He tries to give a fake name, but Caitlyn reminds him he already told the receptionist his name. Eli starts by complimenting her on her story about Slim, but says she left out an important part: Slim was a good man who never got a chance to be good, because good men die in prison. Caitlyn suggests Eli should be playing with action figures and shares that she's 21. Eli's chest hurts. He starts to say that they're meant to be, and he knows August would have the answer as to *what* exactly they're supposed to be.

Eli says he's actually here to talk about Tytus Broz and how he lost his **finger**, but before he can say anything more, a fist bashes into the glass. Caitlyn curses and tells the receptionist to call the police—it's Raymond Leary. Raymond looks like any middle-aged man, but he's enraged. Caitlyn explains to Eli that the government took his house to build a highway and his wife committed suicide, and now he's upset because the paper won't tell his story. They can't tell it because the paper supported the new road.

Just then, Raymond stops hitting the glass with his fists and runs headfirst into it. He does it twice more, and then Eli hurries out the door. Raymond wobbles as his face bleeds and as he notices Eli. Eli asks him to stop, and the man starts to breathe. Raymond says they don't want to hear his story, so Eli offers to listen. But instead, Raymond runs into the glass again and knocks himself out. Caitlyn walks out of the office and tells Eli he's “stupid, but stupid brave.” Eli has never felt better. Police officers arrive, so Eli says he has to go see Mum. He tells Caitlyn the timing isn't right to tell his story and asks her to wait.

Eli's stunned reaction suggests he's falling in love with Caitlyn Spies on the spot. The romance, however, seems one-sided. Caitlyn probably isn't being funny when she speaks so sarcastically; she's just trying to figure out who this kid is who's interrupting her workday. Eli is too awed by Caitlyn to even register that he could take her assessment of Slim as an insult. Slim has been a mentor to Eli, and Eli historically hasn't taken it well when people have suggested that his loved ones aren't as great as he thinks they are.



Speaking coherently to Caitlyn is difficult for Eli, in part because he believes that August can see the future—and in that future, Eli believes, he and Caitlyn are somehow together. Because he believes this so strongly, it hurts to learn that Caitlyn is almost a decade older than he is. At Eli's age, that seems like too much of an age gap for them to ever be romantically involved. While Eli came here expecting to feel powerful, instead this experience just makes him feel young and lost.



Caitlyn introduces Eli to the idea that newspapers aren't always able to tell people's stories, because they're not entirely neutral. In this case, the paper doesn't want to share Raymond's story, as it might imply that the paper was wrong to support the road. Eli doesn't seem to grasp it, but this means Caitlyn might not be able to share Eli's story about Tytus—there may be political reasons she'd need to stay quiet.



Eli doesn't seem to be in any hurry to tell his story, but he can still empathize with someone like Raymond, who is in a hurry to tell the world about what happened to him. Eli also shows his naïveté, though, as he seems to overestimate the power of just listening to someone tell their story. Raymond wants the world to hear about what happened, not tell a random kid about it. So, Eli reads as kind but somewhat misguided here.



BOY STIRS MONSTER

From behind a van, Eli watches August fill the street outside Number 5 Lancelot Street—Dad’s house—with water to create a **moon pool**. When it’s full, August grabs an old golf club and taps the middle of the pool with it. He then notices Eli and, in the air, writes that he’s sorry. Eli asks him to say it instead. August says cryptically that he doesn’t talk because he’d say things that would scare people, and then he’d be taken away and couldn’t protect Eli. Confused, Eli says he feels like he’s going crazy. August says Eli isn’t crazy, he’s just special.

Then, August says he might start talking now. He’ll start by talking to Eli, but he realizes that people say unnecessary things. For instance, Lyle said a lot of useless things; Lyle’s arm around August’s shoulders said more than anything. He also says that before Tytus took Lyle away, Lyle wrote to August where the drugs were. But August isn’t going to tell Eli where they are, since Lyle also told August to protect Eli. Eli tells August about his adventures and what the man on the **red telephone** said about Mum. Just then, a howl comes from the house. August says it’s Dad singing to Mum—he curses her during his first four drinks and sings to her during the next four. Eli says Dad will take them to see Mum, but August looks unconvinced.

The howling continues as August leads Eli into the house. The living room walls are riddled with holes, some of them patched. Dad doesn’t notice the boys; he’s in the corner in a cloud of cigarette smoke, singing along with The Doors. There’s an empty plastic cup and a wine bladder next to him. Dad is thin with a beer belly; he looks 50, though he’s probably only 40. Finally, Dad notices Eli. Eli says hi, and then before he knows what’s going on, Dad grabs an axe handle and runs at Eli, cursing. August punches Dad before he can hit Eli, knocking Dad unconscious. Then, August says Dad is pleasant when he’s sober.

Eli isn’t hungry, so August leads his brother to his bedroom. August points out Dad’s room, the bathroom, and the library, which is a room filled with a mountain of paperbacks. Eli is shocked, but August says Dad doesn’t do anything but read and drink. Eli deems this “fucked up,” and August agrees. August shows Eli to the bathroom, but they both recoil when they open the door and see a puddle of Dad’s urine on the floor. Eli urinates in the toilet from the hall.

Eli isn’t terribly angry with August, but he does feel like his brother betrayed him. Getting August to voice his apology rather than write it is how Eli asks August to make things right. However, now that August is speaking—and saying more than he ever did with his finger—it becomes even harder for Eli to understand his brother. The significance of the moon pool is still a mystery to everyone but August, and it’s not yet clear what August would say that would result in him being taken away.



Eli and August start to strengthen their relationship when August suggests that he might speak, but only to Eli. This helps Eli feel special and cared for. However, August also makes Eli feel childish and immature when he insists that he won’t tell Eli where Lyle’s drug stash is. Lyle trusted August with important adult information, and August is being vigilant about ensuring that Eli stays an innocent kid for as long as possible. Dad’s entry into the story is concerning: he’s clearly still not over Mum after a decade or so apart, though August’s unconvinced look suggests that Dad is also in no hurry to see Mum.



August’s nonchalant attitude about Dad’s behavior suggests that Dad’s angry, drunken outburst is normal. August hasn’t been living with Dad long, but he’s already familiar with Dad’s habits while drunk. This suggests that Eli and August may not experience the support and stability at Dad’s house that they had with Mum and Lyle. And even though Dad doesn’t seem to be using illegal drugs, this doesn’t guarantee that his home is “normal” as Eli has defined it—perhaps, Eli is learning, nobody is as normal as he expects them to be.



Neither Eli nor August are used to an adult like Dad, who seems to do little with his life aside from getting drunk and making a mess of his own home. It’s not entirely clear what Eli expected, either: he’s thought that Dad isn’t a good person for some time now, and everything August is saying seems to confirm Eli’s initial assessment.



When Eli is finished in the bathroom, August grabs a sheet and towel and rolls the towel up into a pillow for Eli. August tells Eli that everything will be alright; “It gets good.” The man on the **phone** said so. Eli thinks he’s not crazy, he’s just tired, as August turns the light off. Eli thinks of how Slim always said that the darkness in Black Peter wasn’t actually darkness; it was just “deep space.” Eli asks if August thinks Lyle is still alive. August asks Eli what he thinks. Eli asks if August remembers what Lyle always said when his favorite rugby team was going to lose but he didn’t want to say so. August says he remembers and says he wrote it in the air. Eli says that’s perfect—he doesn’t want to hear it or say it.

Then, August asks if Eli remembers when they ate too many mulberries. Eli remembers: Slim was watching them and didn’t realize the boys had eaten too many mulberries until Eli vomited purple. Then, as he watched the boys pick mulberries for a pie, he told them a story about a boy who had the universe in his mouth. The boy had been picking mulberries off the ground and stuffing them into his mouth—and then he started eating dirt as well. Other boys fetched the boy’s mother, and she made him open his mouth. Inside, she saw whole worlds. Slim said that was “the boy with all the answers.”

Eli observes that the boy in the story had a world inside him, and August says the boy swallowed the universe. Then, Eli asks who the man is on the **red telephone**. August pauses, writes it in the air, and then with prodding, says it out loud: *he is the man on the phone.*

BOY LOSES BALANCE

Eli is in a meeting with Mrs. Birkbeck, the Nashville State High School guidance counselor. He’s going to remember her by the Santa Claus figure on her desk, and he’s in this meeting because six weeks ago, when Eli first started at school, a bully named Bobby Linyette teased Eli about his missing **finger**. In Eli’s third week, Bobby’s friends held Eli down as Bobby squirted tomato sauce in Eli’s hair. Eli had turned down August’s offer to stab Bobby on the day that Bobby burned Eli’s backpack, which was full of his plans and maps of the Boggo Road women’s prison.

Mrs. Birkbeck says Eli’s behavior was inappropriate, and Eli agrees—he says it’s something you’d see in a prison yard. This is true. Earlier in the day, Eli stole a pillowcase and filled it with gym weights. Then, following Alex’s instructions on how to sneak up on someone from behind and knife them, Eli swung his weapon at Bobby’s kidney and stomped on his knee. He begged Bobby to stop tormenting him while holding the weighty pillowcase over the bully’s head.

August expects Eli to believe him and take him seriously when he parrots what the man on the phone told him about things getting good. This is his power as a big brother: he can tell Eli things like this, and Eli mostly believes him. As the boys discuss Lyle, it becomes clear that although they’re not willing to say it outright, they believe Lyle is dead. Darren’s stories about Iwan Krol seem to support their assessment. And mentioning (but not quoting) what Lyle would say about his losing rugby team is a fitting way for Eli and August to memorialize the man they loved.



Mulberries have long been associated with wisdom. The fact that Eli vomits the mulberries suggests, perhaps, that he’s not the wise one here—August is. August is more like the boy in the story, who’s able to take mulberries and other things in, and then somehow make those things beautiful and meaningful. Slim seems to make this connection when he calls this boy the one “with all the answers,” which is something he’s also called August before.



August’s insistence that he’s the man on the telephone suggests August is either imagining things, or that there’s a supernatural element to the novel. Eli doesn’t make any judgments about it now, though, so August’s meaning remains a mystery.



When Bobby bullies Eli and draws attention to his missing finger, he’s essentially drawing attention to Eli’s loss of innocence. Eli had no choice in losing his finger, so it’s especially hurtful to have Bobby target him and prolong the pain. But Eli is also starting to grow up, since refuses August’s help in dealing with the bully. It’s also ominous that Eli has plans of the women’s prison in his backpack, as he may be fixating on trying to see Mum.



Eli is, interestingly, not acting like he’s afraid of suffering any consequences for his actions. He may just feel secure that Bobby committed the bigger crime by causing Eli so much emotional pain. The fact that Eli followed Alex’s advice as he planned his attack on Bobby, though, suggests that Eli is capable of making bad decisions—he might not be as virtuous as he’d like to think.



Eli looks around Mrs. Birkbeck's office. He hopes she takes the motivational poster down when Shelly Huffman is in here. Shelly was recently diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, and the school is fundraising to buy her family a van and outfit their house with ramps. They've only raised \$6,000 of their \$70,000 goal, or in Shelly's words, "half a ramp." Mrs. Birkbeck calls Eli to attention and asks why Dad never answers the phone when she calls. Eli explains that Dad doesn't answer the phone or leave the house—unless it's to buy more alcohol.

Mrs. Birkbeck asks if Dad has taken Eli to see Mum yet. Eli has been asking Dad to see Mum since his first day in Dad's house, and Dad refuses every time. Mrs. Birkbeck suggests that perhaps Dad is trying to shield Eli and August from the pain of seeing Mum in prison, something Eli hadn't considered. Mrs. Birkbeck asks about Eli's **finger** and then asks him about his writing. Eli tells her about writing true crime stories and that he's interested in writing about how criminals decide to be bad instead of good.

After a moment, Mrs. Birkbeck asks if Eli knows what trauma is and if he knows it can show up in many ways. Eli reminds himself to stick to his plan as Mrs. Birkbeck asks if Eli and August have experienced trauma. Eli nods and says he hasn't experienced anything like Shelly has, but Mrs. Birkbeck says trauma can make people do and believe things they normally wouldn't. She says she needs Eli's help. She has to convince the heads of school that Eli and August belong in school. She pulls out a painting that August did in art class. It's of him and Eli in the back of the car on the bottom of the ocean; Dad is driving. Eli dutifully points out who each figure is, but then Mrs. Birkbeck asks why everyone in the painting is sleeping.

BOY SEEKS HELP

It's five days until Christmas. Eli can't sleep because his secondhand mattress smells like urine and Dad is groaning in the other room. Dad didn't drink today because he's coming off of a three-day bender. On the first night he got so drunk that Eli and August were able to tie his shoelaces together and trip him. On the second day, Dad went out and menacingly wrapped a dog chain around his hand when he got home. Eli and August didn't sleep that night. On the morning of the third day, Dad played the cassette of Mum's favorite song, "Ruby Tuesday," on repeat until he destroyed the tape. He eventually passed out next to a puddle of bloody vomit. Eli used Dad's finger to write "SEEK HELP DAD" in the mess.

Eli is, again, not fully able to stay in the present, as thinking about Shelly is far more interesting to him than giving Mrs. Birkbeck his full attention. Shelly's sarcasm about how much money the school has raised is humorous, and it presents another coping mechanism for dealing with trauma: humor. As Eli tells Mrs. Birkbeck about Dad, he implies that his living situations hasn't improved.



Even though Mrs. Birkbeck doesn't seem fully on board with Dad's parenting style, she's trying to give him the benefit of the doubt. Suggesting that he's trying to protect the boys by not taking them to see Mum would mean that Dad is thinking about his sons' welfare. Given Eli's surprise at the suggestion, he doesn't think this is what's going on. Eli is still, however, considering what makes men good and bad.



The fact that Eli has to remind himself to "stick to his plan" as Mrs. Birkbeck asks him about trauma suggests that he knows Mrs. Birkbeck has made some connection between his plan and the trauma he's experienced. Given that Bobby recently burned a notebook of plans and maps of the prison where Mum is, Eli may be planning to sneak in. But things get more confusing when Mrs. Birkbeck pulls out the painting of Eli's dream. She seems to imply that the dream is a product of trauma, something that Eli has given no indication of up to this point. For now, this remains a mystery.



Living with Dad is stressful, even if Eli doesn't say so outright. Dad's benders are frightening and destructive, and Eli believes Dad needs to get help for his drinking. At this point, then, Eli isn't getting support at home from his parent, though he is getting some from August, since they're in this together. But since Eli is seeing Mrs. Birkbeck regularly, it seems that he's turning more to adults outside his family for help.



Eli hears Dad making noise again. Dad is calling for August, but August doesn't stir. Eli goes to Dad's doorway—and Dad can't breathe. He asks Eli to call an ambulance. When the ambulance arrives, the neighbor, Pamela Waters, watches and knowingly says "another turn" to Eli. The paramedics also seem to know what's happening as they carry Dad out of the house and give him an oxygen mask. Terrified, Eli asks Dad if he's alright. In a tender tone that Eli remembers from another time that Dad was on a gurney, Dad says that he's alright and that he's going to fix himself. The ambulance takes Dad away.

In the morning, Eli and August watch an ibis with fishing line wound around its leg limp through their yard. Then, Eli grabs Dad's ancient, rusting bike and rides down the street. Everyone's life on this street has been tragic: one woman didn't accept that her baby had died until it had been dead six days, and a man tried to kill himself by running his lawnmower in the garage. Kids don't notice their moms covering bruises with concealer.

Shelly Huffman calls to Eli from her window, interrupting his reverie. She offers Eli her cigarette, acts nonchalant about the fact that her family went to the beach without her (she can't walk on the sand anymore), and then observes that Dad had a panic attack last night. Shelly says her mum used to get panic attacks, but she was cured when Shelly was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. Perspective, Shelly says, cured her mum. She invites Eli to play cricket, but Eli refuses. Knowingly, Shelly says August told her about "the plan" by writing it in the air, which annoys Eli. She says Eli is "nuts," but he's sweet, too. Eli considers staying with Shelly. Maybe they'll kiss. But it's so unfair that Iwan Krol is strong and violent, while Shelly can't even walk across the sand.

Eli thinks of Lyle's stories about the Hornibrook Bridge as he bikes onto the bridge and it starts to rain. In the middle of the bridge, Slim is fishing. As rain picks up, they discuss how the fishing is going and then, Slim asks if Eli is sure he wants to go through with it. "This" might not work. The men in Boggo Road have it easy since nobody loves them—it's the female prisoners whose comparatively short sentences, like Mum's two and a half years, feel like forever, all because they have kids on the outside. Eli asks if Slim believes what he says about the man on the **red telephone**, since Dad doesn't. Slim does, but he also thinks Dad isn't right not to let Eli see Mum in prison.

Everyone except for Eli seems to know exactly what's going on—and aside from Eli and Dad, nobody else is acting very concerned. This again highlights Eli's youth and innocence. It also drives home how little Eli knows about his father, since he doesn't have a clue what it means that Dad is experiencing "another turn." But Eli is also growing closer to his father, as evidenced by his concern for Dad.



Right now, Eli thinks of the suburbs as the site of tragedy. His own tragic drama of living with an alcoholic father seems, to him, to fit right in with the sadness and desperation that plagues the whole neighborhood. The hurt ibis highlights that this tragedy is widespread; it's just a part of living in this part of town.



Shelly, like Darren in Darra, helps Eli make sense of the confusing things happening to him. She explains that Dad suffers from panic attacks (which means that he's suffering from mental illness but was physically fine last night). Readers still aren't in on what "the plan" is, but to take Shelly at her word, whatever Eli is up to is going to allow him to show someone how much he loves and cares about them. And Eli shows that he's motivated to do whatever this is because he doesn't think it's okay that Iwan Krol is out there ruining people's lives by doing to others what he did to Lyle.



It's seeming more and more likely that Eli is trying to sneak into the prison and see Mum. Slim is willing to respect that Eli is intent on getting in, but he also levels with Eli and insists that sneaking in isn't a good idea. Mum might not be happy to see Eli, and Slim even seems to imply that seeing Mum might be frightening for Eli. What matters to Eli, though, is that he follow the instructions that the man on the red telephone gave him.



Sighing, Slim says his man, George, has agreed to help in exchange for Slim helping his brother years ago. George runs a fruit wholesale business and delivers fruit to the Boggo Road prisons, in addition to contraband that the guards are paid to ignore. However, he's never smuggled in a 13-year-old who childishly wants to see his mother on Christmas Day. Slim warns Eli that when he gets caught, he must insist he knows nothing about George. The guards will want to smuggle Eli back out quickly, since they won't want it to get out that a kid broke in.

Slim lights a cigarette and pulls out a slip of paper. He says he's been thinking about good and bad, and when Eli asked about it in the hospital, Slim should've told him it's just a choice. When Eli objects, Slim says that even *he* had a choice. And now Eli has a choice: he can take this paper, or he can enjoy Christmas with Dad and stop trying to do Mum's time for her. Eli asks if Slim will be angry if he takes the paper. When Slim shakes his head, Eli pockets the paper.

Flatly, Slim says they can't see each other anymore. Eli has to leave "this crook bullshit" behind. Crying now, Eli says that Slim is his only friend, but Slim says that Eli will get to go on and live his life. Suddenly angry, Eli says that Slim probably killed the cab driver, since he's so cruel. When Eli starts to scream, Slim shouts back for Eli to stop—and then a coughing fit grips him. When it passes, Slim says he deserved to be in prison, even if he didn't kill that man. In any case, he says, Eli should be thinking about girls, not Slim's innocence. Eli needs to tell his own story, not others' stories.

Slim's fishing rod bends. The strain of holding on sends him into a coughing fit again, so he passes the rod to Eli. As he coughs up blood, he coaches Eli through reeling in the fish. Eli feels panicky as he fights with the fish and notices how emaciated Slim looks these days. Slim tells Eli to keep fighting, and Eli realizes he's winning. But as Eli shouts to Slim that he got the fish, he realizes Slim is lying on his back with blood on his lips. Eli lets the fish go and sobs over Slim's body, apologizing.

As Eli's mentor, Slim does his best to make sure Eli understands how ridiculous he's being and exactly what's going to happen. Eli isn't going to get away with his plan, and he's silly for even wanting to get into the prison. But Slim still believes it's important to let Eli make his own choices, as this helps Eli feel mature and valued.



It's shocking for Eli to hear from Slim that good and evil aren't just innate states of being. Every person, Slim suggests, makes choices that make them better or worse. And a person's circumstances might make some choices seem better or easier, but he implies that Eli's desire to blame circumstances really misses the point. Eli's main concern is staying in Slim's good graces, not taking this advice seriously. This is why he asks if Slim will be angry if Eli takes the paper.



It's devastating for Eli when Slim insists they can't see each other anymore. Slim is someone Eli thought he'd always be able to count on to love him and be honest with him, and losing Slim would mean losing the only adult he trusts entirely. So, Eli lashes out and says what he knows will be hurtful: that Slim did murder the taxi driver. But Slim continues to dispense advice through Eli's tantrum. Telling Eli to tell his own story is a way of telling him to grow up and figure out who he wants to be.



The fact that Eli so willingly takes the rod from Slim and then pays such close attention to Slim's health confirms that Eli was just lashing out in the last passage because he was afraid; he has no real intention of pushing Slim away. However, Eli might not get the chance to repair his relationship with Slim, given that Slim's health is worsening.



BOY PARTS SEA

Instead of a Christmas tree, Dad, Eli, and August decorate Dad's potted weeping fig. The fig, Dad explains, is named Henry Bath, and Henry is extremely sensitive to changes in location—it makes him cry, just like Eli did as a baby. Eli is shocked by the reminder that Dad was around when he was a baby. Once Henry is decorated, Dad suggests that tomorrow, they each choose a book from the book room for someone (August and Eli have both been enjoying the mountain of books) and then enjoy the treats in the charity box from St. Vincent's. August claps, but Eli rolls his eyes and asks how the day will be different than any other. Dad says they can read together in the living room, and then they all draw names out of a hat. Eli lies that he'll be here to celebrate tomorrow.

Early on Christmas morning, Eli puts a copy of *Papillon* under the tree for August and walks to the train station in a nearby suburb. A man at the racetrack reminds Eli of Slim—but Slim is in the hospital. Eli passes a cannery and then reaches the old red truck Slim's note told him about. The man in the front seat, presumably George, ignores Eli's words of thanks and promises to be quiet. He simply opens up a false bottom in a crate and motions Eli into the space. George says "Merry Christmas" as he closes Eli in. Eli feels like he's finally living and doing something as the truck roars to life. He thinks of Irene and Caitlyn Spies as the truck stops again and a forklift moves Eli's crate. Watermelons crash in above him.

Eli tries to imagine Irene and Caitlyn on the beach, but instead he sees Slim, bloody and unmoving, and Iwan Krol dragging Lyle away. Eli can't see Lyle's head and, suddenly, he accepts that he's known the truth since Lyle disappeared. Eli is jolted back to the present when the truck stops and he hears George joking with a man. Men look at the fruit and observe that the inmates eat better than they do. The truck drives through a gate, and another forklift lifts Eli's crate down. Before he leaves, George whispers good luck to Eli through an air hole.

While he waits, Eli uses how afraid he is to make time speed up. He thinks about Mum, the man on the **red telephone**, and what Mrs. Birkbeck said about kids and trauma. He thinks about getting a butterfly tattoo on his chest so he can tell people he got it after breaking into the Boggo Road women's prison to save Mum. This experience, he thinks, will turn him from a larva in a watermelon cocoon into a butterfly.

Eli doesn't remember much of his early years spent with Mum and Dad, so it's shocking when Dad confirms that he knew Eli when Eli was little. These memories are intimate, and this intimacy seems to be what shocks Eli and makes him nervous. Dad seems to be doing his best to make Christmas happy for his sons. August is willing to play along, but Eli isn't—he doesn't seem ready to forgive or accept Dad's peace offerings yet. Noting the charity box and the plan to gift books from the book room highlights how poor Dad is—changing suburbs hasn't changed much in that regard for Eli and August.



Eli might be doing exactly what Slim told him not to do (by sneaking out to go to the prison), but he's not willing to totally disregard Dad's wishes for the holiday. This is why Eli leaves the book for August under the tree before he goes: it's a peace offering of sorts. But it's much more important to Eli to see Mum today than it is for him to not disappoint August and Dad. This highlights where Eli's loyalties lie—with Mum—and shows that Eli doesn't yet trust or love Dad the same way that August does.



Imagining Irene and Caitlyn is Eli's way of trying to escape his mental anguish, as well as build a better support network for himself (even if just in his mind). Eli is also forced to face the fact that he's lost (or is in the process of losing) his most important mentors, now that he's accepted that Lyle is gone and that Slim's health is in decline.



Eli is certain that sneaking into the prison is going to be transformative, especially given what Slim said (that Eli won't be able to turn back once he's broken into a prison). Still, though, this isn't a bad thing for Eli. This experience, he believes, is what's going to turn him from a boy into a man on his terms (as opposed to when Eli was forced to grow up when Iwan cut his finger off).



After what seems like hours, someone unloads the watermelons and opens the false bottom. The woman is Aboriginal, with graying hair, and she smiles warmly and wishes Eli a merry Christmas. She helps him out and introduces herself as Bernie. Eli gives her an update on Slim, and then Bernie says everyone in the prison is talking about Eli. Every woman who's ever had a baby, she says, will want to hold him. Bernie offers Eli an apple, but when Eli asks how Mum is and if he can go see her, Bernie points out that Eli is in a women's prison—he can't just ask a guard to show him to Mum's cell. Eli needs to convince her why she should help him.

Before Eli can answer, he hears a choir singing "Walking in a Winter Wonderland," the same song the man on the **red telephone** was singing. A young woman knocks and lets herself in. Introducing herself as Debbie, she says that Mum is "vacant" and won't respond to anything. Sighing, Bernie says Mum is in tough shape. She's not eating, and she hasn't left her cell in a long time. Eli says he's aware; that's why he's here. But Bernie says Mum doesn't want Eli to see her like this. Eli doesn't care—whenever he tells Mum things will be alright, things work out. Bernie teases Eli for being magic, but Eli says Mum was right when she said he and August are special.

From his hiding spot in a wheeled trash can, Eli listens to the prisoners' Christmas musical, which is a mashup of the Nativity and the musical *Grease*. Bernie wheels him past the loud rec room, makes several turns, and stops. After reminding Eli he doesn't know her, Bernie helps him out and points to Mum's cell. Eli can't see into Mum's tall window, so he pulls himself up the wall. Mum looks small, fragile, and unkempt. She's so thin, and her eyes are blank. Eli realizes she's staring blankly at a photo of him and August. He taps on the window and starts to whisper to her, but she doesn't hear. She finally notices him and looks happy for a moment, but then she shakes her head. She won't open the door.

Crying, Eli lets himself down and imagines the **red telephone** and Lena's room. He thinks of Mum and he sings her favorite song, "Ruby Tuesday." Eli decides he doesn't care about anything anymore, but then Mum opens the door and falls to the ground next to Eli. They hug, and Eli says that August said things will get better after this. Eli makes Mum say that she believes him.

Eli's youth and naïveté shine through here. Bernie is kind and helpful, but she has to remind Eli that they're doing something very dangerous. He can't just expect to waltz over to Mum's cell and have a pleasant visit, because he's not supposed to be here. Bernie essentially asks Eli to come up with a reason why he should see Mum, other than the simple fact that he wants to. Bernie implies that a selfish and childish reason; she'd like to hear something more adult and compelling than that.



As far as Eli is concerned, Debbie and Bernie are missing the point. Mum is clearly not doing well, and what the women say about Mum seems to support the man on the red telephone's assessment (that Mum is at risk of hurting or killing herself). Eli believes that all it'll take to help her is him being able to tell her that things will be fine. Bernie and Debbie, though, imply that Mum's issues go deeper than that and won't be an easy fix. It's hard to tell who's right, given that the novel is somewhat fantastical—Eli may well save Mum just by seeing her.



It's possible that Bernie is simply swayed by the fact that Eli is so intent on seeing his mother, and she thinks this is admirable. It's shocking for Eli to see Mum in such poor shape. But when Eli realizes that Mum is staring at a photo of him and August, it seems to only reinforce Eli's belief that what will help Mum is seeing her sons in person. Mum's initial reaction seems to support this, too. But Mum also can't ignore that she's in an impossible situation—it may be harder for her to take pleasure in seeing Eli when he could get in huge trouble for being here.



If Eli can't help Mum, life doesn't seem worth living anymore. So, it's transformative for him when Mum opens the door and is willing to see him. This shows him that he can make a difference, but also that he should continue to trust the man on the red telephone, as well as August's premonitions.



From the end of the hallway, a woman curses—why does Mum get a visitor today when no one else does? Eli tells Mum she’s strong and then runs away from the other woman. Pretending he’s a rugby player, Eli dodges guards and races over tables in the dining room. Inmates cheer him on as he reaches an exterior door and as Bernie—feigning ignorance—holds up the guards by pushing a trash can slowly in front of them. As he crosses the lawn, Eli opens his backpack. Inside is a grappling hook (like Slim did, Eli has been practicing with it). Eli reaches the exterior wall and throws the grappling hook just as a guard comes around the corner.

Ignoring the guard’s shouts, Eli climbs the rope. He feels like Batman, and this is working. Guards tell Eli to come down and insist his rope will snap, but Eli feels on top of the world. He wonders if Slim’s escape was this thrilling. A meter from the top of the wall, Eli pauses to rest and gallantly waves at the guards. As he starts to call himself the Wizard of Boggo Road, the garden rake that makes up the grappling hook snaps. As Eli falls, he squeaks, “Dad.”

BOY STEALS OCEAN

It’s the winter of 1987, and Eli is studying memorial plaques in the graveyard. Now, Eli knows that Slim was right: “It’s all just time.” Eli is getting better at manipulating time, just like Slim taught him to do. Slim just died at age 77, after battling cancer for the last six months. During Slim’s funeral service, Eli holds tight to the note that Slim gave him on the bridge, which reads “Do your time, before it does you.”

When the service is over, an old man approaches Eli and August. They discuss Slim—both Eli and the man say Slim was their best friend. When Eli asks if the man thinks Slim killed the cab driver, the man says he never asked. He says he respected Slim too much to ask, and if Slim did it, he certainly rehabilitated himself. Eli likes this answer and watches the man walk away. Then, he turns to August and says he needs to get a job—they’ll need to have a place ready for Mum to live when she gets out.

That Eli thinks of dodging the guards as playing rugby highlights his youth and immaturity, since this is a serious situation. But in Eli’s mind, this is all just a game. And thanks to the man on the phone and to August, Eli is certain in his belief that everything is going to be okay. Once again, Eli uses what he learned from Slim’s stories to plan his own escape from the prison. This allows him to show his loyalty to his mentor and make Slim’s stories his own.



Again, feeling like Batman and being thrilled that the escape seems to be going well highlight how young and naïve Eli is. This is just an exciting romp for him; he’s not at all concerned what the consequences might be for breaking into a prison. When Eli falls and says “Dad,” it shows that Eli is starting to see Dad as a mentor and protector.



Now that Slim has died, Eli is trying even harder to internalize Slim’s various lessons. Here, Eli uses Slim’s advice about how to manipulate time to get through the service without dwelling on how sad and difficult this is. That Eli is clinging to Slim’s note suggests that this phrase is going to become another one that guides Eli’s behavior and thoughts going forward.



It’s a bit shocking for Eli to discover that he and August weren’t Slim’s world. Slim had friends aside from the boys, and those friends can now offer Eli a new perspective on his best friend. The man suggests that Slim was right earlier, when he suggested being good or bad is about making choices. Whatever bad choices Slim might have made, he went on to make better ones—and in the end, those better choices redeemed him.



Six months ago, when Eli fell off the wall in the Boggo Road prison, he landed in the guards' arms. They were, fortunately, more concerned for his mental health than they were angry. The guards decided they'd say nothing, and one guard drove Eli home. Once Eli got in the house, he opened his gift from Dad. It wasn't a book; it was a ream of paper to use to write on—or burn the house down. On a piece of that paper, Eli wrote a list of possible occupations that would allow him to put a down payment on a house in The Gap. He listed things like chip fryer, shelf stacker, paperboy—and drug dealer.

Back at Dad's house in the present, someone knocks on the door. This never happens. August opens the door for Mrs. Birkbeck, who asks for Dad. Eli refuses to fetch him at first but finally does. He tells Dad Mrs. Birkbeck means well, so Dad comes to the door and tells her that the boys have told him she's giving them "wonderful guidance." Annoyed, Eli watches as Dad—who is constantly drunk, panicky, and never leaves the house—somehow manages to be complimentary and even flirty. He explains that the boys were at a funeral today, which is why they weren't in school.

Mrs. Birkbeck asks to come in, and Dad sends Eli and August outside. They crawl under the house so they can listen in. Above them, Mrs. Birkbeck is saying that August is an exceptional artist, but both boys "trouble" her. She shows Dad multiple paintings August did of the car underwater and says he refuses to paint anything else. Then, Mrs. Birkbeck says she's concerned that August might hurt himself. She says Eli called the scene "the **moon pool**," and August shoots an angry glance at Eli. She suggests the boys might be suffering from PTSD, and she's considering calling the Department of Child Safety. August shoots another scathing look at Eli for talking honestly with Mrs. Birkbeck. Above, Dad is losing his patience.

Mrs. Birkbeck asks Dad if August and Eli have ever exhibited suicidal behaviors. The boys laugh silently as above them, Mrs. Birkbeck says that Eli has told her that August is painting Eli's dream. Eli, she says, can recall all sorts of things about his dream, like smells, violence, and sounds. But she's told Eli he must call the dreams what they are: memories. Mrs. Birkbeck says that according to Eli, Dad drove his sons into the **moon pool** days before Mum left him. Dad bursts out that the boys won't heal if "bleeding hearts" like Mrs. Birkbeck won't let this stuff go.

Just as Slim predicted, the guards were more interested in making themselves look good (by smuggling Eli out of the prison and not admitting he broke in in the first place) than in punishing Eli. The paper from Dad is probably a coincidence, but Dad is unwittingly helping Eli do what Slim told him to do: write his own story and not just tell others' stories. As Eli writes a list of possible jobs, he's essentially brainstorming what he'd like his story to be about.



Dad takes Eli's assessment of the situation into account before going to the door and speaking so nicely to Mrs. Birkbeck. It seems likely that had Eli said Mrs. Birkbeck was just a busybody, Dad would've behaved very differently. In this way, he's showing his sons that he cares about them, and that he'll play nice with the people they like. Still, it's upsetting for Eli to see that Dad can act like a functional person when Dad doesn't show his sons that side of himself most of the time.



In Eli's recurring car dream, Dad is driving. Mrs. Birkbeck is presumably implying that she's concerned that Eli and August don't feel safe at home, since in August's paintings, Dad is the one driving them to the bottom of the ocean. Eli gets in trouble with August because he's opened up to Mrs. Birkbeck. At this point, it's unclear what, exactly, Eli has told her. But the fact that Mrs. Birkbeck mentions PTSD suggests that Eli is, perhaps, healing from some sort of trauma that readers don't yet know about.



Finally, the novel reveals where the moon pool came from, and what August and Eli's past trauma is: Dad drove the boys into a body of water, and Eli is still processing those memories. When Eli insists it's just a dream and not actually a memory, he may be trying to protect himself—that way, he doesn't have to acknowledge that Dad put him in danger in real life.



Hearing Mrs. Birkbeck describe the memory in this way makes it feel different. As Mrs. Birkbeck and Dad talk about Dad's panic attack and Eli thinking Dad drove them into the pool on purpose, Eli remembers. He and August were playing in the backseat, and he remembers the car bouncing on gravel. Dad hisses that Mrs. Birkbeck must love how much power she has—she can take his sons away. But she'll regret it if she does, because the boys will burn her house down someday. Eli closes his eyes and sees the car hitting the edge of a dam and taking off.

Mrs. Birkbeck asks a few more questions and then slowly, haltingly, Dad says they were going camping. He and Mum were having some trouble; she'd run away. He shouldn't have been driving. He started shaking and lost control. It was lucky that Eli and August had their windows down. A nearby farmer helped Dad pull the boys out of the car, and at first, they weren't breathing. Then, suddenly, they were both alive. When Mrs. Birkbeck asks Dad his opinion on that seemingly magical event, Dad says he doesn't think about it. He had a panic attack, and he's been regretting his actions ever since.

Changing tack, Mrs. Birkbeck says she believes August is still thinking about it. Dad insists August is a smart kid who just doesn't like talking, but Mrs. Birkbeck says that according to Eli, August doesn't speak so that his "secret" doesn't come out. The secret, she says, is that August is convinced he died in the **moon pool** and came back—and has come back many times. Eli, she says, believes there are other Augusts out there, in places at the other end of a **red telephone**. Dad has never heard of the telephone and is getting frustrated. Then, suddenly, he breaks out laughing.

Mrs. Birkbeck insists this isn't funny—the boys have suffered major trauma, and perhaps these beliefs help them process. Or maybe they do hear things, and talking about the **red telephone** is the only way they can make sense of it. But no matter the truth, she says, she believes August's thoughts are dangerous. Dad says this is nonsense. August is being a normal big brother and telling his little brother lies, and Eli is a born storyteller who's using these stories to get attention. At this, August crawls out from under the house. Eli follows August to one of Dad's dead washing machines in the yard—which August opens to reveal Lyle's heroin stash. Then, walking back into the house, August tells Mrs. Birkbeck that he isn't going to kill himself, and that he and Eli love Dad more than Dad loves them.

It's becoming clear that Dad is doing what he thinks is best to protect his sons. In his opinion, reminding August and Eli of this memory and threatening to remove them from Dad's care isn't helping the boys. Dad may have a point, but something is also shifting for Eli as he starts to accept that this is a memory and not just a dream. It suggests that Eli will be able to start to heal, and perhaps that the recurring dream will stop haunting him.



Dad finally runs out of steam, stops fighting, and tells Mrs. Birkbeck what happened. Driving into the dam hasn't only affected Eli and August. It's had a huge effect on Dad's life, as he's lived with the regret of almost killing his sons since that day. So, perhaps telling his story is cathartic for him too, just as hearing it said out loud is cathartic and healing for Eli.



All of what Mrs. Birkbeck says here is presumably what Eli has been telling her during their counseling sessions. Eli's stories suggest that he and August have, perhaps, come up with ways to deal with the trauma they experienced when Dad drove them into the dam. And given the realistic nature of the novel, it seems likely that there is no voice on the other end of the telephone. But this doesn't mean the voice isn't real for Eli: it helps him cope, even if it is just in his head.



Mrs. Birkbeck is more than willing to acknowledge that Eli and August may be coming up with all sorts of ways to process the trauma they experienced. But Dad thinks that the boys—Eli especially—just want attention, and that these stories are certainly working to get Eli that attention. Then, things take an interesting turn when August shows Eli Lyle's heroin stash. It's unclear why August decides now is a good time to reveal it—perhaps now that Eli is starting to recover from former trauma, August believes he's ready to move forward and address the trauma that Lyle's disappearance caused.



BOY MASTERS TIME

Eli thinks often of Slim telling him to do his time before it does him. August enters his final year of school, and Dad becomes a reasonable cook. Sometimes Dad walks halfway to the supermarket and comes home with nothing, having had a panic attack halfway there. Eli rides the bus with Dad sometimes and tells him stories until the panic gets to be too much. Not long after weaker beer arrives in Queensland, Dad gets a job. For three weeks, he's happy and even purchases a Toyota. But then he loses his temper at work, gets fired, and gets drunk. A judge takes his license away, and he's sentenced to community service at Eli and August's school. Then, one day, Dad picks up the ringing phone and says Mum is getting out a month early.

Walking through the Darra suburbs, Eli is shocked to see a dry and brown lawn that was once teeming with colorful roses. As he turns the corner onto Darren Dang's street, he stops: Vietnamese men in navy tracksuits are sitting at the top of Darren's driveway. They approach Eli, holding machetes, and ask what's in the bag. Eli says he has a business proposal for Darren but has no idea what's going on when the men ask if he's with BTK. Finally, Eli passes over the bag and explains that Bich Dang sold it to Lyle long ago, and Eli wants to sell it back. After patting Eli down, one of the men leads Eli up the drive.

Rather than heading for the living room, the man leads Eli across the lawn—which is now fenced with barbed wire—to a bunker in the backyard. Inside, there are more men dressed in navy tracksuits, and one in red. It's Darren. Darren doesn't seem to recognize Eli and puts a knife to Eli's eye—and then howls with laughter. Darren says what happened to Lyle was awful, and he insists that Bich Dang didn't out Lyle to Tytus Broz. Teddy did. Then, Darren explains that his mum has cataracts now, so Dustin Vang and BTK—the gang, Born to Kill—do all the importing. Darren and Bich Dang are part of 5T (Love, Money, Prison, Sin, and Revenge in Vietnamese).

A young boy in a navy tracksuit knocks on the door and says BTK is outside. Darren turns to Eli and asks what he wants for the heroin in the bag. Eli asks for \$80,000, but Darren says he'll give Eli \$50,000. Another gang member fetches Eli the cash, and Darren puts it back in Eli's bag. Darren also gives Eli a machete and says it's Eli's responsibility to help defend Darra from the newcomers. Eli dutifully follows Darren and listens to the gang leaders exchange insults in the street. Then, Eli raises his voice and shouts that Australia is everyone's home; there's no need to fight. He puts his machete down. A moment later, the armies clash. Eli hurries away.

It's not clear exactly how much time has passed between this chapter and the last one. But what is clear is that Dad is starting to get a handle on his clinical anxiety, and this makes him a more reliable and involved parent. Eli's tone is far more understanding of his dad's struggles with anxiety; he never expresses anger or annoyance, for instance, that Dad is sometimes not able to make it all the way to the grocery store. Learning that Mum is getting out early is a bombshell for everyone, it seems—her reentry into their lives will change everything.



Things have changed a lot in Darra since Eli left a few years ago. Darren's mark is visible as Eli encounters what seems to be members of Darren's gang: Darren was fond of machetes and theatricality, hence his gang members' matching tracksuits. This is all just confusing and worrying for Eli, however. He no longer knows how to be a part of Darra's drug scene, since things have changed so much since Lyle bought the heroin.



Darren doesn't seem to have changed a bit, which is both disturbing and comforting for Eli. He still enjoys threatening others with weapons for amusement, and he's still a valuable source of insider information. It's perhaps not surprising for Eli to learn that Teddy was the one to reveal Lyle's extra dealings to Tytus Broz, since Eli decided Teddy was a selfish coward long ago. However, this does start to turn Teddy into an even more villainous character for Eli, even if Teddy isn't on the same level as Tytus Broz.



Seeing the young boy dressed like the other gang members shows Eli how entrenched the drug business is in Darra. Not even kids can escape it—in fact, they're perhaps being drawn in even earlier now than they were just a few years ago. In Eli's opinion, the gang warfare is a bit ridiculous, though his main issue seems to be with how dramatic Darren makes everything—the machetes seem to be too much for Eli. But Eli is now an outsider, so his opinions don't matter much to the gangs.



BOY SEES VISION

On the bus heading to see Mum, Eli imagines their reunion. She's beautiful, and she'll cry when Eli hands her the money. They'll go straight to The Gap and put a deposit on a cottage. As Eli and August get off the bus in a northern Brisbane suburb, Eli realizes he's going to miss Dad's house—and Dad, when he's sober. When the boys get to the right house, a nun, Sister Patricia, ushers them in. In the sunroom, Eli looks at a portrait of Jesus and thanks Jesus for forgiving him—he's been wishing terrible things on the men who landed Mum in this place. Sister Patricia points them upstairs, and August walks right into Mum's arms.

For three hours, Mum, Eli, and August sit in her room. Eli and August tell Mum about school and their favorite music, and then Mum introduces them to friends of hers from prison. The women tell stories about their time on the inside. Their best story is the one about Eli breaking in on Christmas. Then, just before Eli and August snuggle in to spend the night on Mum's floor, Eli says he has something to share—and Mum says she has something to tell the boys, too. She goes first. Taking a deep breath and smiling, Mum says she's moving in with Teddy.

Beginning this chapter with Eli's dreams of his reunion with Mum sets up tension, as his dreams likely won't align with reality. Eli also assumes that with Mum now free, he won't live with Dad anymore. Dad isn't a villain in Eli's mind these days; in fact, he's pretty great sometimes. But he's still nothing compared to Mum, and Eli is more than willing to leave him behind.



Eli and August's revelation is presumably that they've turned Lyle's drugs into cash and can buy Mum a house. But that dream seems to shatter when Mum announces that she's moving in with Teddy. For now, her reasons are a mystery. But this is no doubt a huge insult to Eli and August, since Eli acted as though he believed Darren that Teddy outed Lyle to Tytus Broz. Mum might not know it, but her relationship with Teddy is a betrayal of her sons and Lyle.



BOY BITES SPIDER

In Dad's suburb, there's currently a redback spider infestation. One even bit Pamela Waters while she was on the toilet. Mum wants Eli and August to spend a week with her and Teddy over the summer holidays, but Eli would prefer to stay with the spiders and Dad. Eli is watching a trivia show with Dad. Even very drunk, Dad is better than all the contestants. Then, the host addresses Eli directly with a celebrity identification question: what is the last name of the Eli whose father drove him into a dam at age six, whose brother stopped talking, who watched the man he saw as a father dragged away by an evil man, and whose mother is now moving in with the man who killed the father figure?

August is painting in his and Eli's bedroom. He's been painting suburban scenes with outer space backgrounds. Now, August is painting a portrait of Eli looking out a classroom window at space. As August paints, Eli says he doesn't want to go to Teddy's. August says he doesn't want to go either, but with a shrug, he communicates that they're going anyway.

Redback spiders are Australian cousins to black widows that are extremely poisonous. Eli is so upset with Teddy and Mum that the possibility of being bitten by a poisonous spider is far preferable to spending a week with two people who seem not to care at all about Lyle anymore. Whether the TV host addressing Eli is magical realism or Eli's imagination is less important than the fact that it shows how much Eli still fixates on the crime Tytus Broz committed. That man—with Teddy's help—upended Eli's life, and Eli isn't ready to forgive and forget.



August looks like he's moving on from his trauma, since he's not just painting the moon pool anymore. Something seemed to shift for both him and Eli after Mrs. Birkbeck's visit—now, the boys can focus on other things, since they're not consumed by thinking about past traumas.



Teddy's eyes are more sunken, and he's developed a beer belly since Eli last saw him. Teddy greets Eli and August with one arm around Mum. August tries a loquat from the tree growing by the front steps, but Eli refuses—he doesn't want anything from Teddy except to kill him. He keeps quiet though and agrees to go look at Teddy's work truck. Now, Teddy is working as a fruit hauler. He turns on the truck's radio and checks in with all his trucker buddies.

Eli liked Teddy when he first met him. He looked like Elvis, and Teddy and Lyle were friends. Now, though, Teddy is pathetic. He told Tytus Broz about Lyle, hoping to woo Mum and earn Tytus's favor. But Tytus refused to work with Teddy because "rats [can't] be trusted," so Teddy got a real job driving a fruit truck. He was the only one who saw Mum while she was in prison, and he was kind to her. Eli and August listen dutifully as Teddy says that when he's on the road, he talks to Lyle. Teddy then shows the boys his two German Shepherds, Beau and Arrow, who are his only family now. Their kennel is lavish and cushioned. August and Eli exchange a look: Teddy is a "loser."

Everything is fine for the first three days of Eli and August's visit. But then, after seeing *Rain Man* on the fourth night, Teddy asks if August has any special powers like Dustin Hoffman's character in the film. Eli snaps that August is just quiet, not "autistic." Then, Eli asks why Teddy exposed Lyle. Teddy looks like the devil now and nothing like Elvis. For the next two days, Teddy doesn't acknowledge anything Mum says. On the sixth day, Mum asks Eli to help her slow-cook lamb shanks—Teddy's favorite—and August gives Eli a look that says Eli has no choice. At midday, Teddy leaves the house, ignoring Mum's request that he come home at six for lamb shanks.

Teddy gets home around eight, after Mum, Eli, and August have started eating. He's drunk and has clearly taken something else, possibly meth, because he's drooling and can't focus. Mum fetches him his plate as Teddy leans over to August and theatrically asks August what he said. Teddy shovels some food in his mouth and says that Mum indulged August, and now that's why August is "crazy" like Dad. Teddy says it's brave of August and Eli to share a home with a man who tried to kill them. Mum screams at Teddy to stop, but Teddy screams back that this is his house, and his dad built the dining table, so he'll say what he wants.

Just as when Eli and August first moved in with Dad, August is the one to make an effort to play along, while Eli outright refuses to pretend things are fine. Eli's anger at Teddy is palpable, which shows how loyal Eli still is to Lyle, or to Lyle's memory. Teddy is totally irredeemable in Eli's eyes.



Eli's hatred of Teddy is coloring how he thinks about Teddy's new career as a fruit truck driver. Eli didn't have anything against George, the man who snuck him into prison to see Mum, who also drove a fruit truck. But while George helped Eli do something Eli thinks was noble, Eli sees Teddy as nothing more than a pathetic "rat." Eli is so unwilling to give Teddy the benefit of the doubt that it's hard to tell if readers should take Eli's assessment at face value, or believe Darren.



Lyle's abrupt shift to being cruel and aloof after Eli calls him out suggests that Eli was right to believe Darren. Teddy seems to have gone into his relationship with Mum believing everyone would just forget what he did to his best friend—but now, Eli shows him that that's not going to happen. This means, however, that Eli and August can focus their attention even more on making Mum happy, since Teddy won't even let them pretend to like him now. This is why they help with the lamb shanks so dutifully.



Teddy is intoxicated and isn't being reasonable. He seems to decide that if nobody is going to play along and let him pretend to be a good guy, he's going to point fingers at other people to deflect attention from himself (such as by suggesting that Dad tried to kill Eli and August). This is insulting to Mum, however, so she starts to verbally fight back. But for Teddy, it's essential that he assert his power over Mum, Eli, and August, simply because they refused to pretend that Teddy is good.



Teddy says Mum, Eli, and August can leave. They're not worthy of sitting at his table. Mum picks up her plate to take it to the kitchen, but Teddy slaps it onto the floor and calls Beau and Arrow to finish Eli and August's plates. Mum stands for a moment—and then punches a set of Teddy's grandmother's plates. She smashes more dishes as Eli and August stare, stunned. When she throws a mug at Teddy's head, Teddy rushes Mum. He pushes Eli and August aside and drags her out of the house by her hair. She isn't screaming, which is terrifying. Then, he drags her into the dog kennel and shoves her face into the dogs' food bowl. He only stops when August knocks him out with the cooking pot. Minutes later, Mum and the boys have packed their things and left the house.

An hour later, Mum, Eli, and August catch a train to Sister Patricia's house. In the morning, over breakfast, Eli asks Mum what she's going to do now. Before she can answer, Eli suggests she spend the night with them and Dad. Then he asks where she wants to move. Wherever she wants to go, he'll make it happen—maybe they could move to The Gap. August shoots Eli a warning look as Eli says there are great culs-de-sac there. Mum has to yell to cut Eli off. With tears in her eyes, she says she's not leaving Teddy.

The way that Teddy drags Mum out of his home mirrors the way Tytus Broz's crony drug Lyle out of his house years ago. Eli and August are terrified to see Mum not screaming, in part because it makes it seem like she's putting on a good face so she doesn't worry them. This implies that Teddy may be violent like this on a regular basis, as Teddy's abuse doesn't seem nearly as surprising to her as it does to the boys.



As far as Eli is concerned, the next steps here are obvious: Mum leaves her abuser, and they all use Lyle's drug money to live happily ever after in The Gap. But August's warning look suggests that he knows this is naïve of Eli. And Mum refusing to leave Teddy introduces Eli to an uncomfortable fact: that it is often very difficult for victims of domestic abuse to leave their abusers. Mum has her reasons for staying, but they don't matter to Eli. What's more important to him is that he feels blindsided and betrayed.



BOY TIGHTENS NOOSE

Eli is ready to give up. Dad is currently asleep by the toilet bowl after vomiting, and Eli wants to be just like Dad. August doesn't agree with Eli that they should use Lyle's drug money to splurge on food and rum, so Eli drinks alone on the pier with \$400 in his pocket. He passes out and wakes up in the morning. After a quick swim, Eli heads home and finds August sitting on the couch. Just as Eli sits and puts his head back to nap, August snaps his fingers—it's a midday news bulletin. The newscaster says that "Christmas has come early" for Shelly Huffman's family because someone left a box with \$49,500 in cash on their porch. August is beaming while, on the TV, Shelly says she loves whoever gave the money.

Eli tackles August, who in turn throws Eli into the TV. Just then, Dad walks in and tells Eli to stop. August writes calming things to Eli in the air, but Eli screeches for August to talk. The phone rings, but everyone ignores it as Eli insists that Mrs. Birkbeck was right—August made up the stuff about voices on the **red telephone** because he's so damaged. August writes that Eli heard the voices too, but Eli snaps that he was playing along because he felt sorry for August. Eli is sorry for saying this, but he can't verbally apologize. Then, he turns to Dad and says maybe they're all as "crazy" as Dad—and he asks if Dad meant to drive them into the dam. According to Teddy, Dad tried to kill his sons.

Eli is starting to accept that life isn't going to work out how he'd like it to. Mum isn't going to leave Teddy, so as far as he's concerned, he and August should use Lyle's money and live it up while they have the chance. The fact that Eli decides to turn to alcohol (and that he wants to be like Dad, even in jest) shows how much Eli has come to love and appreciate his father. Dad isn't an evil villain in his mind anymore. August, meanwhile, has decided to take the initiative and give away Lyle's money to someone he and Eli like and want to help, a sign of his growing maturity.



Learning that August donated the money is so difficult for Eli in part because it means he has to give up on his dream of being able to provide for Mum. The money that could buy a nice house in The Gap is gone—now, Eli has to confront life as it is. In his anger, he lashes out at August and says the most hurtful things he can come up with. He confirms in this passage that whether or not the voice on the phone is real, he did hear it. And suddenly, it's essential that Eli learn whether Dad wanted to harm him or not.



Dad is furious, but he tells Eli to answer the phone—he knows it’s Mum since she called earlier. Eli picks up the phone, lies that he’s okay, and refuses Mum’s request that he and August stop by so Teddy can apologize. Eli insists that men like Teddy don’t change and asks Mum to share exactly what Teddy said when he apologized—Eli is tired of his parents never telling him a complete story about anything. Mum apologizes, but then Eli asks if Iwan Krol killed and cut up Lyle. Mum says she has something to share: she’s started a social work program, and a classmate told her that *The Courier-Mail* is always looking for young people for cadetships. Eli should go ask the editor, Brian Robertson, for one. Eli says he doesn’t feel well and passes the phone to August.

Eli goes to the bedroom and grabs a piece of paper. Then, he starts to write a story called “A Noose of Eli Bells.” He writes that if he dies, he wants to share what happened to Lyle. Teddy had Lyle killed because he was in love with Mum. Lyle was decent, even if he was a drug dealer, and Eli is certain Iwan Krol cut Lyle’s body up. Iwan is the “psychopathic muscle” for Tytus Broz, whose artificial limb factory hides that he’s trafficking heroin. If Eli dies, any questions as to why should go to Teddy, as should any bills. And for the record, Eli and August aren’t special—they’re “crazy,” like Teddy said.

August knocks on the door, and when Eli tells him to go away, he slides an open copy of *The Courier-Mail* under the door. It’s open to an investigation of the gang warfare between the 5T and BTK gangs, and it details how upstanding members of suburban communities are profiting from widespread drug trade. When Eli sees who wrote the piece, he lies back and writes Caitlyn Spies’s name in the air with his middle finger, thinking of the lucky pointer **finger** he lost to one of those upstanding community members.

BOY DIGS DEEP

While Eli is waiting for a train, a hulking man with dark hair and a moustache seems to watch him from a yellow Ford Mustang. Fortunately, Eli’s train arrives just as the man gets out of his car. Eli gets off near *The Courier-Mail* offices and walks to the door. It’s taken him three months to get up the courage to come here. Caitlyn Spies works here now; she must be their star crime writer. Eli asks the woman at the front desk to see Brian Robertson and fiddles with the tie Dad got him at a thrift shop. It reads, “WORDS.” When Eli says he doesn’t have an appointment but he’s special, the secretary snaps that cadetship positions won’t open again until November. She says she won’t let him in, but he can sit by the hedge outside and try to catch Brian when he goes home.

Dad is slowly but surely becoming a more understanding parent; he ignores Eli’s cruel questions and insists that Eli speak to Mum. But Eli isn’t done with the difficult questions, since he demands to know what Teddy said and wants to know what happened to Lyle. The fact that Mum won’t answer suggests that she’s maybe trying to protect Eli, if she knows at all. It seems more likely she’s trying to protect him, since she mentions the cadetship. She’s trying to show him that she’s still here for him, even if it doesn’t always seem like it.



Because he’s so upset, Eli is done thinking that he and August are special. What matters now is to get the truth on paper; this is the first time that Eli seems to be able to put into words what happened. This suggests that Eli is starting to heal, and also to finally do what Slim told him to do and write his own story. Eli is growing up, even if the process is difficult.



Caitlyn’s article shows that what Eli had started to suspect years ago is correct: the Brisbane suburbs are in no way perfect. Rather, the people in charge—like Tytus Broz and Bich Dang—have created a system where they profit. People lower down the ladder, like Lyle, can profit too, but it’s far more dangerous for them. And with Caitlyn’s help, this is becoming a better-known issue.



After his experiences with Tytus Broz and Iwan Krol, Eli is unwilling to take chances with any intimidating-looking men, so for now, this man in the Mustang remains mysterious and menacing. At The Courier-Mail, Eli continues to read as young and naïve. He’s willing to accept Dad’s help, since the tie was Dad’s idea, but it doesn’t seem like anyone has prepared Eli for the possibility that getting a cadetship isn’t as easy as showing up and asking for it.



Brian Robertson finally exits the building more than an hour after the secretary said he would. Eli leaps up, introduces himself, and says he's been sitting for six hours. Brian continues walking and describes a horrifying massacre he saw firsthand in 1957—but he says the massacre wasn't as disturbing as Eli's tie is. Eli says he hoped it'd appeal to his "love of words," but Brian says he despises words. Eli asks for a cadetship and says he can offer a page-one story. When he says it's a complicated story, Brian says that's too bad—complex stories can always become three-word headlines, so Eli should give him the headline. Eli can't, so Brian walks away.

Eli feels like a failure as he studies the graffiti in the train station. But then, Caitlyn Spies walks onto the platform and says Eli's name. She remembers him. Eli follows her onto the train and asks to sit with her. He tells her about meeting Brian outside, and she laughs; Brian is as rude and callous as he seems. They discuss Eli's desire to be a crime reporter, and Caitlyn says she looked up Tytus Broz. He is, apparently, a "pillar of the community." Eli says it's not true, and he hasn't told anyone his story yet. He was going to tell Brian but got tripped up on the three-word headline.

Caitlyn says Brian asks everyone for three-word headlines. In her interview, she was asked to create a headline for her life, and she came up with "Spies Digs Deep." Caitlyn explains how she was born premature and her mother died in childbirth, so she's spent her life trying to make her mother's sacrifice worth it by "digging deep." Eli insists he can't come up with a headline for himself. As Caitlyn's stop approaches, Eli confesses he just got on this train to speak with her. This makes Caitlyn laugh, and she agrees to look into Tytus Broz again. Then, she tells Eli to just start writing for the paper. Eli says he knows his three words: "Caitlyn and Eli."

BOY TAKES FLIGHT

The backyard ibis has finally lost its leg. Eli feels bad for it, so he tosses it some of his sandwich. Dad tells Eli not to. These days, Dad seems different. He's drinking less, and Eli wonders if losing his sons destroyed Dad's life. Though Dad isn't as great as dads from American sitcoms, he sometimes tells Eli he loves him by making Eli laugh. Or sometimes, when Dad is drunk, he asks Eli for a hug and says he's sorry. During those hugs, Eli realizes that Dad probably hasn't been touched for years. He also realizes that he's a very forgiving person. It feels good to hug Dad back. It feels like the sort of thing that will make Eli a good man.

Brian's sense of humor and general outlook is darker and more cutting than Eli is used to. Eli thinks journalism is glamorous and is for people like him and August, who adore words and language. Brian, though, is far more interested in getting to the point than in describing it using moving imagery or interesting words.



Eli's meeting with Brian was disappointing, but being able to have this conversation with Caitlyn is heartening for him. She's more helpful to Eli than she was years ago; now, she's willing to give him advice about dealing with Brian, and she's clearly taking the hints he gave about his story seriously. But Eli also suggests that it's not surprising Caitlyn can't find out more about Tytus Broz. He's made a name for himself as a good man, and shaking that reputation will be hard.



In a way, Caitlyn is living her life for her deceased mother similarly to how Eli is living for Lyle. Both of them want to make another person proud and make that person's sacrifice worth it. Caitlyn has already figured out how to do that by throwing herself into her career. Eli is still young and he hasn't quite gotten there yet, but he now knows that he and Caitlyn have more of a connection than he previously thought. This makes him believe that they belong together—another sign of how much Eli trusts August's premonitions.



Eli has had enough time with Dad to now see that Dad isn't a bad person. He's plagued by clinical anxiety and drinks too much, but Eli can't argue with the fact that Dad loves his sons. And love, Eli is learning, doesn't have to look a certain way to be valid and meaningful. He's even deciding that what matters most is forgiving Dad for his previous misdeeds. Dad is doing the best he can right now, and that's enough for Eli. Choosing not to punish Dad when Dad shows he's capable of change is how Eli chooses to be a good person.



August is a good man. Giving Shelly Huffman's family the money led August to decide that what's missing in people's lives is giving to others. (Not long ago he told Eli that maybe this is what he was "brought back" for, but Eli insisted August never left.) Now, August spends his days walking around the suburbs with a donation bucket. Possibly because he never speaks to people he asks for money, he's wildly successful at fundraising.

It's a sign of how much Eli is growing up that he continues to reject August's stories that he and Eli died and came back to life. This is how Eli asserts his independence from his brother, even as he continues to idolize August. And referring to August as a "good man" here also indicates that to Eli, at least, August has grown up—he's an adult now.



Back in the present, Eli asks why he can't feed the birds. Dad insists it'll upset the ecological balance of the area and might cause a salmonella outbreak. Then, Eli asks Dad if he's a good man. Dad doesn't think he is, but Eli insists Dad is a good man—like Slim was at the end of his life. The yellow Ford Mustang passes by outside. Later that afternoon, the phone rings. It's Mum—she has nowhere to go because Teddy will find her. Eli puts the phone down and tells Dad that Mum needs their help. Dad begs Eli to not ask this of him, but Eli reminds Dad that people are supposed to do the right thing, not the easy thing.

Even as Eli matures and develops a more nuanced view about good and bad, he's still interested in asking this very simplistic question. The difference is that now, Eli realizes that being good and bad are choices. Dad made bad choices, but these days, he's making good ones. And Eli is going to help Dad be an even better man by encouraging him to allow Mum to come stay—something that's kind and generous, but by no means easy.



Dad drives Eli and August to pick up Mum at the train station. Eli can't wait to see Mum's smile, because it'll mean everything is alright—but when Mum smiles, things aren't okay. Her front teeth are gone. Mum doesn't speak until Dad pulls into the driveway, and then she thanks him. Promptly, Eli and August clear out the book room, and August suggests they hold a book sale. As the boys cart books outside, Mum and Dad drink tea and talk—and Eli realizes that at one point, these two were lovers. It's both gross and exciting to realize this.

Eli loses more of his innocence when he notices that Teddy knocked Mum's teeth out. The world is full of violence, he's realizing, and not even someone as good as Mum is safe from it. Realizing that his parents were once lovers is also a sign of his growing maturity. Essentially, he's starting to see them as fellow people, not as one-dimensional parents. They had a life before him and are still living their lives, which are connected to but also separate from Eli's.



The phone rings. Ignoring Mum's warning, Eli picks it up. Sure enough, it's Teddy. Teddy demands to speak to Mum, and Dad whispers to Eli to say that they've called the cops. Eli relays the message, but Teddy says Mum won't call the cops. He's on his way to get her. Eli says he's going to stab Teddy's eyes out, and Dad is going to break Teddy's neck. Eli screams that they'll be waiting for Teddy and puts the phone down. Dad says he fights better drunk, gets up to down some rum, and tells August to get the axe handle.

Eli's wish has finally come true: Mum doesn't want to return to Teddy, and now Eli can finally protect her. Eli draws Dad into this and insists that Dad also stand up for Mum. This may be an attempt to intimidate Teddy, but it shows that Eli sees Dad as an ally and someone who will step up to do the right thing when needed. Sure enough, Dad does just that—though his fighting skills are called humorously into question.



According to Slim, time doesn't really exist. It's a construct. If it was a real thing, Eli could strangle it and hold it until he was the same age as Caitlyn Spies. Eli has always felt like he's in the wrong place at the wrong time, but he doesn't feel like that now. He feels ready to take out Teddy with Dad, August, and their cricket bats. But as the three wait on the porch, the yellow Mustang pulls into the drive and a man in a tailored gray suit gets out of the car with a gift box. Dad snarls at the man to back off if he's with Teddy, but the man just looks confused.

As he prepares to defend Mum against Teddy, Eli feels like he finally knows who he is—and for one of the first times in his life, he feels powerful and useful. This is in part because Eli is growing up. He's no longer a child that adults feel like they must protect; rather, he's old enough to stand with the adults. This passage becomes confusing and perhaps even absurd, though, when the man in the yellow Mustang arrives, seemingly for no reason.



Just then, a van pulls up on the street. Teddy and three cronies get out with baseball bats, and Teddy shouts for Mum to come out. Mum appears behind Dad and tells Teddy they're done, but Teddy says he's the one who gets to say when things are done. Terrified, Eli tells Teddy to go away. As Teddy approaches, the man in the gray suit steps up and tells Teddy to listen to Mum and go away. Eli already loves this man—especially when he punches Teddy and smashes Teddy's nose. The man is Alex. Alex pulls a gun on Teddy and tells Teddy's driver that he's memorized the license plate. Teddy is not to come for Mum ever again, and if he does, Alex's gang will get involved. As the van drives away, Alex says he hates bullies.

As Eli and Alex sit sipping tea with Mum and Dad, Alex says many people assumed he was getting lots of letters in prison, as the head of a major gang. But he wasn't, and Eli's letters were a lifeline. Alex thanks Mum and Dad for teaching Eli to be so nonjudgmental and kind. Then, Alex pushes the gift toward Eli. It's a Dictaphone. Eli sobs. Alex asks if Eli is still going to be a journalist. Eli says he is, but breaking into the field is more difficult than he thought it'd be. Alex asks if he can help, and Eli says he needs a story worthy of the first page. Alex presses the "record" button and suggests an interview with the sergeant-at-arms of the Rebels outlaw motorcycle gang.

BOY DROWNS SEA

Eli asks if Slim can see August and Mum smiling as they read August's invitation to receive an award for his work raising money for muscular dystrophy. Eli acknowledges that he hasn't asked Dad about the **moon pool**, but maybe everyone's happiness depends on forgetting the bad parts of the past. Who knows if he meant to drive them into the dam, and who knows if Slim killed the taxi driver. But Slim did his time, and maybe Dad did too. And Slim was right about August: August does have all the answers. August keeps saying both he and Eli came back from the moon pool, and he's right.

Stepping back, Eli says Alex Bermudez spent four hours with Eli, giving the interview. He then turned to August and asked if August needed any help. In that moment, August came up with the idea for Criminal Enterprises, which would allow wealthy criminals like Alex to give back to their communities. It'd be like Robin Hood. A week later, a box arrived addressed to August, filled with \$10,000 in random bills. Back in the present, Mum insists they're all going to go to the award ceremony, even Dad.

Alex was Eli's pen pal until a few years ago. Because of the kindness and compassion that Eli showed Alex through his letters when Alex was in prison, Alex steps into a protective role for Eli and his family. And while Alex has been imprisoned (for a crime the novel never explains), Eli doesn't hold this against Alex. Alex is, to Eli, a good and kind person because he stands up to "bullies" like Teddy. He's making choices that make him a better man, just as Slim advised Eli to do before Slim died.



As Alex talks about relying on Eli's letters in prison, Eli gets more proof that Slim knew exactly what he was doing when he encouraged Eli to write to Alex. In a way, Alex has stepped into Slim's shoes as Eli's protector and mentor. Now, Alex is going to push Eli to chase his dreams of becoming a journalist—and he's willing to donate his time and his story to help Eli succeed.



Things are starting to look up for Eli's family, and this makes it easier for him to decide that past events don't matter quite as much as they did before. What matters is that Dad is now involved and doing his best to make up for the past. And similarly, Eli has decided that Slim was a fantastic mentor, and the possibility that he killed someone doesn't actually change that fact. Saying that August was right that they came back from the moon pool shows how far Eli has come. He seems to imply not that he and August literally died and came back, but that they've recovered from past trauma.



Criminal Enterprises allows August to put Slim's advice about what makes a good man (making good choices, rather than goodness being innate) into practice. Criminals, or former criminals, can give to August's charity, and this will help push them further toward being good people.



Eli asks Slim if he can see Eli working. Eli is now the back-up to the back-up horseracing writer at *The Courier-Mail*. He basically does whatever Brian Robertson tells him to. He works in the same room as Caitlyn Spies, though she sits at the front and he sits in the back by the crossword editor, Amos Webster. Eli thanks Slim for the job—as Eli explained to Brian after he sent in his article about Alex Bermudez, *Slim* encouraged Eli to write to Alex. Brian agreed to run Eli's article, but he changed most of it. He refused to open it with Alex's favorite poem, the one Eli sent Alex in a letter; and he insisted Eli wasn't a crime writer because Eli writes about details, not "the scoop." Whenever he can, Eli notices details about Caitlyn.

One afternoon, in a scream, Brian asks where the pens are. Eli stands up to see what's going on, but Amos tells him to sit down so he doesn't get hurt. Amos then explains that Brian isn't looking for writing utensils; he's looking for the Penn family, who disappeared in Oxley, a suburb near Darra. He's mostly upset because Veronica Holt, a ruthless reporter at the *Sunday Mail*, got the story first. Eli snags a copy of the *Sunday Mail* from the stationery cabinet. The story implies that husband and wife Glenn Penn and Regina Penn were likely involved in the local drug trade. The photo, though, includes their eight-year-old son, Bevan. All three have vanished.

Eli studies Bevan's photo. Does Bevan have a nonspeaking older brother? Is the gardener a prison escapee? Is the family actually hiding in a secret room, where Bevan takes calls from a mysterious man on a **red telephone**? Addressing Slim, Eli says things keep changing, but the cycles keep repeating. Ignoring Brian Robertson's rule that Eli can't hang out at the crime desk, Eli approaches Caitlyn Spies. She's on the phone, but her colleague, Dave Cullen, tells Eli to go away. Eli says he's familiar with the Penns' suburb. Dave mocks Eli, but Eli ignores him and studies Dave's notes. He sees words like Golden Triangle and heroin, and then one phrase that makes him shiver: "llama hair?"

Eli blurts "Iwan Krol" so loud that Caitlyn spins around and stares. Just then, Brian opens his door and shouts at Eli to leave the crime desk alone. Brian then calls Eli into his office. He needs Eli to write about the Queensland Day awards. Eli says August is getting an award, and then Brian gives Eli a list of others who are getting awards. Eli should write about each person on the list, and he can be "flowery." Eli is thrilled to have a real assignment. He studies the list and stops at the last name. It's Tytus Broz. Brian calls to Eli—Eli went all white and clenched his fist. Eli says he's fine, and Brian realizes Eli is missing a **finger**. He asks how he lost it. Eli doesn't answer. A ghost took it.

The details Eli gives about his job at The Courier-Mail make it clear that his role is very low-level. Eli also highlights that he has a lot to learn about journalism—he's passionate, but at least in Brian's opinion, Eli doesn't understand how to write in the style that's appropriate for the newspaper. With this advice, Brian starts to step into a mentoring role to Eli. Finally, thanking Slim's memory, and asking if Slim can see all of these good things happening, shows how much Eli still relies on his former mentor. Slim is still the most important person in Eli's mind.



Noting that Brian is upset mostly because a different paper broke the story highlights the differences between Eli and his boss. Eli cares about people: he wants to tell relatable stories and humanize people who are supposedly unsympathetic. Brian, on the other hand, seems to just want to be able to say that he reported the Penn family's disappearance first. The fact that it's only implied that Glenn and Regina are involved in the drug trade speaks to how little outsiders know about the suburban drug trade—nobody knows for sure what's going on if they don't live in the area.



Eli sees himself in Bevan, which is why he wonders if Bevan has a brother like August or a mentor like Slim. Mentioning the repeating cycles suggests that Eli fears that the drug trade in the suburbs will hurt Bevan, just like Eli was hurt when he lost Lyle, Mum went to jail, and Iwan cut his finger off. So, it may seem like Eli is approaching the crime desk out of curiosity and because he's obsessed with crime writing, especially given Dave's response. But Eli is really stepping up because he feels responsible to Bevan.



The note about mysterious llama hair helps things click into place for Eli: Iwan Krol (who runs a llama farm by day) has abducted the Penns. Because everyone underestimates Eli, though, he can't tell Brian or Dave what he knows. So, getting this assignment to write about the Queensland Day award recipients is a huge boon for Eli. It's an important writing assignment on its own, but he'll also get the opportunity to interview Tytus Broz—and, perhaps, get revenge.



BOY CONQUERS MOON

The world feels simultaneously too small and too big when Eli wakes up in the middle of the night. It's a full moon tonight, and Eli stands in the living room window and stares at it. He imagines Lyle in Darra. Eli misses Lyle. He realizes he gave up on Lyle because he was scared and angry at him for getting involved with Tytus Broz. Eli cut Lyle and Tytus out of his mind, just like the ibis might have cut its own leg off when it got tangled in fishing line.

Eli goes outside and starts to fill a **moon pool** in the street. Moments later, August appears. August assures Eli he doesn't need to worry; everything is going to be okay. He also confirms that tomorrow will be the most meaningful day of Eli's life. Eli admits he feels out of control, like he's in the car and can't stop it from crashing into the dam. August asks if that's what Eli sees in the pool. Eli sees nothing, but August says he sees "tomorrow." Annoyed, Eli snaps that August's cryptically vague insights into the future are pretty useless—all Eli wants to know is whether Tytus Broz is going to recognize him tomorrow.

When August asks if Eli called the police, Eli details how they wouldn't listen because Eli wouldn't give his name. But he told the officer to investigate Iwan Krol, who works for Tytus Broz and runs a llama farm. August shrugs; the police probably don't care if the local criminals are killing each other. Eli says they have to care now that Bevan Penn is missing. August or Eli could've ended up like Bevan, and Slim always talked about "things always coming back around again." August agrees that he and Eli always come back, but Eli tells him to stop with the whole coming back nonsense. The voices they heard on the **red telephone** were just in their head. Then, August tells Eli to talk to Caitlyn Spies, just before Mum appears and hisses at the boys to go to bed.

The next morning, Eli sits across from Dad and reads the front-page story in *The Courier-Mail*. The story, by Dave and Caitlyn, is about Glenn Penn and his "misspent youth." As expected, Glenn's dad was abusive. But Eli can tell Caitlyn wrote most of it, because the writing is compassionate. She interviewed several of Bevan's teachers who said the kid is a quiet, geeky boy. Mum interrupts Eli's reading to ask what he's wearing later. When he says he's wearing his work clothes, Mum says he looks like a child molester—but Eli says he doesn't have time to change because he has a busy day. When Mum bursts into tears, Eli says he'll borrow a nice jacket from work.

In this passage, Eli starts to think more critically about how he's helped himself heal from the trauma of losing Lyle. Eli implies that just like the ibis cut off its own leg to save its life, he's done something extremely painful (trying to forget about Lyle and Tytus), which has allowed him to move on. With an interview with Tytus on the horizon, though, Eli is going to have to revisit this trauma.



Eli doesn't entirely understand what August sees in the moon pools he makes, but the act of creating one is still comforting. This may be because of how much Eli still idolizes his brother, even as he snaps angrily at August in this passage. In general, August speaks as though he's looking at the big picture, while Eli is focused on specifics (whether Tytus will recognize him). This reflects August's maturity in relation to Eli.



Interestingly, August doesn't seem very concerned about Bevan's safety, or about bringing Tytus and Iwan to justice. Eli shows how concerned he is when he mentions calling the police—he wants to save Bevan somehow, even if he can't do so by writing a gripping story at work. August does, however, start to elude to how the small-time suburban criminals ultimately get hurt because of their low economic statuses. He implies that the police might see the Penns' disappearance as a good thing, since they don't have to enforce drug laws themselves if the people they'd otherwise arrest just disappear. Eli can't ignore the human cost of this, though: he fixates on the fact that people are still getting hurt.



Eli doesn't fixate on Glenn's abusive father and just mentions him in passing, which shows how much he's grown up over the last few years. Eli seems to still think that bad men emerge when they've had bad fathers, but that belief doesn't take his attention away from Eli's main focus on how innocent and young Bevan is. Mum, however, pulls Eli out of his reverie and demands he show August respect tonight by dressing up. Eli instead shows Mum how much he cares for her by agreeing to borrow a coat.



At 2:15, the public relations person from Queensland Champions calls Eli and asks why he isn't interviewing Tytus Broz yet. She asks what questions Eli is going to ask him. Eli thinks he'll ask about his **finger** and Lyle, but gives rote answers to the woman. He hangs up when Brian marches over to tell Eli to hurry up. Brian compliments what Eli is currently writing and brushes Eli off when Eli says he has a good, but difficult, story to tell about Tytus Broz.

As Eli waits for a taxi outside the office, he studies his reflection and wonders if he looks different enough from his 13-year-old self. Tytus Broz will definitely notice the missing **finger**, and Iwan Krol will slice Eli up. It breaks Eli's reverie when Caitlyn Spies stops her car in front of him, tells him to get in, and then passes him a folder containing files and a picture of Iwan Krol. She tells Eli to share everything. It takes Eli 27 minutes to tell her the entire story. Caitlyn then says that it all fits. She asked an old friend who's now a police officer for help, and he's been to Iwan's llama farm five times to look for missing persons. He told her to leave Iwan alone. Caitlyn is enraged, since there's a kid missing now.

Caitlyn stops her car at Tytus Broz's gate, and someone buzzes them in. The house is white, and it sits on a vast manicured lawn. Once Caitlyn parks, she pulls a camera with a faulty flash out of the trunk so she can pose as the photographer. As Eli and Caitlyn wait for someone to answer the doorbell, Eli realizes he's terrified. The house doesn't match the landscape—something is off about this place. A maid opens the door, but Hanna Broz is behind the maid and greets Eli and Caitlyn. She's older now, and she doesn't recognize Eli. Her prosthetic hands look disturbingly real. She invites them to follow her.

When Caitlyn compliments the artwork in the house, Hanna notes that Tytus hasn't always lived like this—he started in Australia at the Wacol immigration camp. Eli says he's not familiar, since he's from Bracken Ridge. Leading them on, Hanna says that Tytus isn't as well or alert as he used to be. She shows Eli and Caitlyn into a room lined with bookshelves and filled with plush carpets and chairs. Tytus Broz sits at a writing desk in front of a glass wall looking out onto the landscaping. Hanna calls to Tytus twice, but he finally looks up and invites Eli and Caitlyn closer. He taps a box on his desk excitedly.

Describing his inner monologue alongside what he's voicing aloud shows how hard Eli is working to be professional while also embarking on a very personal quest to figure out what happened to Lyle and his finger. But it's not obvious to everyone else how preoccupied Eli is, as evidenced by Brian brushing Eli off.



Eli has grown up a lot in the last few years, but he's still just as afraid of Tytus and Iwan as he was when he was a helpless kid. Caitlyn's arrival (and the folder about Iwan) helps Eli focus and feel more mature. He's not a kid anymore, and he's working with a lot more information now than he was back then. What Caitlyn's friend says about Iwan reinforces what August said earlier about the police not caring about the smaller criminals killing one another. The police don't see the Penn family as worthy of their help, even if Bevan is just a kid.



It's not entirely clear what Eli means when he says that Tytus's house doesn't match the landscape. But judging by the extensive landscaping and the huge house, the house is meant to convey how powerful and wealthy Tytus is: if he can afford this huge house and the water to keep his lawn green, he can afford all sorts of other things. Hanna's prosthetic hands disturb Eli mostly because of the rumors surrounding Tytus and Iwan. He no doubt wonders if the hands aren't actually prosthetics and are instead real.



Lyle's parents also started their lives in Australia at an immigration camp. But Tytus and Lyle's parents have clearly ended up living very different lives: while Tytus grew powerful, Lyle's parents died poor, and Lyle is probably also dead. The fact that Tytus isn't as mentally sound as he was years ago suggests that Eli might have an edge in this encounter: he's dealing with an elderly man who seems to not have all his faculties anymore.



Keeping his right hand hidden in his pocket, Eli asks Tytus if he can record the conversation and then interviews Tytus. Tytus explains how, when Hanna was born, he was inspired to make sure no other babies born without arms, like her, had to suffer. Feeling sick, Eli asks Tytus if he's a good man—and then snaps back to himself and asks what advice Tytus would give to others. Tytus says people should change the world and not ask permission. Then, he says he has a surprise and invites Caitlyn to open the box. Inside is a prosthetic hand that looks real. Somehow, it seems sinister—as though Eli's missing **finger** somehow built it.

Tytus Broz explains that this prototype allows amputees to control it with electric currents. It'll change the world and create "Life without limits." Then, he says he's seen the future and in it, kids like Hanna will control their prosthetic limbs directly from their brains. Just then, a blue bird outside the window flies straight for the glass, hits it four times, and falls to the ground. Eli gets up, opens the glass door, and gently picks up the bird. Caitlyn follows and asks if it's dead, and what kind of bird it is. Caitlyn remembers—it's a wren. Suddenly, the "dead blue wren" returns to life. It flies across to the yard to a concrete bunker. Eli is so busy watching that he doesn't notice Tytus noticing his missing **finger** until it's too late.

After getting a quick photograph of Tytus Broz that blinds him with the faulty flash, Caitlyn and Eli rush to the car and drive away. Caitlyn says that there's something horrible going on, and Tytus is the most disturbing person she's ever met. Eli thinks of Lyle and says he has to go back. He refuses to say why until Caitlyn says she already thinks Eli is "crazy," but in a good way. Then, Eli tells Caitlyn about August writing "your end is a dead blue wren" on that day that Slim taught Eli to drive, and how August told the phrase to Tytus. It must mean that Tytus is reaching the end. Caitlyn points out that the wren wasn't dead, but Eli says it came back, just like he and August do.

Eli admits that he never really believed that August was special, but since he met Caitlyn, he's started believing in things. Caitlyn says it's sweet how Eli looks at her, but Eli assures her she doesn't have to say that he's too young. As she turns the car around, Caitlyn says she wasn't going to say that. But they have to go back to the bunker. Caitlyn parks away from the gate and she and Eli watch as a line of cars and then a Mercedes leave the house. She asks Eli to grab her flashlight (which is absurdly tiny) and then leads Eli in climbing a tree over the fence.

To listen to Tytus talk about his work in prosthetics, he sounds like someone Eli would consider a good man. He's motivated by love for his family, and he talks about wanting to help every child born with problems like Hanna's. This is why Eli slips and asks Tytus if he's good: Tytus isn't good, according to Eli, but Eli wants to know how Tytus thinks of himself. Eli is struggling to present himself as a cool, collected journalist and is instead exposing himself as a kid seeking justice.



Tytus is essentially talking about how his new prosthetics will give amputees agency they don't currently have. But Eli knows that Tytus can do this, because he's taking away agency from the many people involved in the drug trade with him—and some of those people, like Lyle and perhaps the Penns, have even lost their lives to support Tytus's goal. Discovering the "dead blue wren" here snaps things into place for Eli. It seems as though August's cryptic phrases from earlier in the novel are coming to life. Given how much Eli trusts August, he may take this as a sign.



Though Eli is upset and nervous, it's no doubt comforting to hear that Caitlyn is just as disturbed by Tytus as Eli is—he doesn't have to convince her that they shouldn't trust Tytus. Eli also shows how much he's starting to trust Caitlyn when he tells her about August's premonition about the dead blue wren. As Eli and Caitlyn argue about what the phrase might mean, Eli starts to fully trust August again. After what happened today, it seems obvious to him that the wren died and came back—and that long ago, he and August did the same.



It's important to Eli to acknowledge that not everything he's saying makes sense. But this shows how much he trusts both Caitlyn and August: he's willing to admit that he doesn't know everything for sure, and that that's okay. The fact that Caitlyn and Eli decide to go back to the house together highlights how mature Eli is now. He's confronting his nemesis with the girl of his dreams by his side, a sign of his maturity.



Once they're over, Caitlyn leads Eli around the house to the bunker. Its door is locked. Eli suggests Caitlyn go back while they're only trespassing—he's going to move on to breaking and entering. Eli finds an axe in a nearby garden shed. Before he can bring it down on the door, Caitlyn asks if the dead blue wren's end actually refers to *Eli's* end, and not Tytus Broz's. Eli is terrified, but he chops the door open anyway. It reveals a concrete staircase leading into the ground. As Caitlyn and Eli reach the bottom of it, it starts to smell like a hospital.

With Caitlyn's flashlight, she and Eli notice two doors directly across from each other, and then two more matching doors further down. At the end of the hallway is one more door. They're all locked. Eli breaks through the first door with the axe. The room is garage-sized and full of workbenches, power tools, and artificial limbs. In the room across the way, Caitlyn's flashlight illuminates three workbenches surrounding an operating table. On the table is a headless body made of artificial limbs. Terrified, Eli opens the third door. Inside are glass specimen jars, presumably with animals in them. There's another artificial body on the table. But then Caitlyn pulls out the camera and snaps pictures. The flash reveals that the jars are filled with human limbs—and the body on the table is real, composed of epoxied human body parts. The head is Regina Penn's.

Eli is too shocked to stop, even when Caitlyn vomits and asks him to stop. Eli opens the fourth door. Inside are more workbenches with medical tools, and shelves holding smaller jars. Eli studies the labels—and finds his **lucky finger**. Caitlyn says they have to get out as Eli points her flashlight up. On the top shelf are the preserved heads of “small-time criminals.” Seeing one face, Eli dumps out a black bag and reaches for the head. He needs it “For the end of Tytus Broz.”

Axe and black bag in hand, Eli says they have to open the last door in case Bevan is there. As Eli hacks into the door, he tells Slim that this is his chance to do what's right, not what's easy. Lyle, Dad, and August would do this, and those men are helping Eli swing the axe. When the door swings open, Caitlyn's flashlight finds Bevan. The boy is alive and holding a **red telephone** to his ear. Bevan holds the phone out to Eli, and Eli takes it. The man on the phone says he's August, and Eli should stop talking—Caitlyn thinks he's “crazy” enough. August asks if Eli still has the axe. He's going to need it: Iwan Krol is coming.

Eli is well aware that he's breaking the law by forcing his way into the bunker. This shows how comfortable he is seeing good and bad in shades of gray, as he's doing something illegal but for a good cause. Caitlyn's suggestion that August might be referring to Eli's end is frightening, but not enough to stop Eli—perhaps because Eli believes he has a responsibility to Bevan, or because he believes that he'll “come back” if he does die.



Tension builds throughout this passage as Eli and Caitlyn discover increasingly more disturbing things behind each door. The horrifying contents in the third room highlight how evil Tytus Broz and Iwan Krol are, as they're presumably responsible for this carnage. The sterile, hospital-like feel of the bunker makes it seem like they don't care about the lives they're taking or the trauma they're inflicting on other people, like Eli. As Dr. Brennan reminded Eli early in the novel, it's villains like Tytus and Iwan who make good people—in this case, Eli—look righteous.



This experience is traumatizing for both Eli and Caitlyn. But Eli has had a lot longer to think about what he might find than Caitlyn has, and he also has a more personal stake in exposing Tytus as a villain. The head Eli decides he needs presumably belongs to Lyle. Eli seems to have a plan to bring Tytus down by reminding him of his past crimes.



Eli conceives of what he's doing as the difficult but correct thing to do—he's saving Bevan from a terrible fate. As Eli accepts the phone from Bevan, it doesn't really matter whether August is really on the other end. Either way, Eli is getting the information he needs—that Iwan is coming—and he can use that to make a plan and hopefully get out of this alive. Even if the voice is just a figment of his imagination, it's still helpful.



Eli and Caitlyn listen to Iwan’s flip flops as he traces their steps through the bunker. Finally, Iwan reaches the door to the end room and says there’s only one way out. He approaches Eli and Caitlyn, who are in front of Bevan and the axe. At Eli’s signal, Caitlyn snaps the camera, blinding Iwan with the flash, and Eli takes the axe from Bevan. He’s blinded by the flash too, so instead of sinking it into Iwan’s torso, Eli chops off half of Iwan’s foot. Eli leads Caitlyn and Bevan out of the bunker at a run.

Not everything goes to plan in this passage—Eli clearly meant to kill Iwan, not just injure him. But Eli still successfully rescues Caitlyn and Bevan from Iwan, establishing himself as a competent hero. Eli’s willingness to consider killing Iwan also shows how Eli’s thoughts on morality have changed. Killing, in this case, doesn’t seem to register as a bad thing for Eli.



Not long after, Caitlyn reaches Brisbane City Hall. Eli thinks she looks traumatized. There’s nowhere to park, so Caitlyn parks in the middle of the square. When a security guard runs up and tells her to move, she asks him to call the police. She has Bevan Penn in her car. Caitlyn wishes Eli luck as Eli slips out of the car with the black bag. He checks in with a lady at a desk and then creeps down the center aisle. He finds Mum and Dad and joins them just as August steps onstage to accept his award.

Though Eli is still reeling from his experience at Tytus’s bunker, he still has to play the part of a supportive brother and show up for August, Mum, and Dad. The fact that it’s presumably Lyle’s head in the black bag also brings the family back together: Eli is supporting the family he has now, but he’s also trying to get justice for family members he once loved and lost.



Once August walks off the stage, Eli ignores Mum and hurries backstage, remembering Slim’s advice to be casual and confident. Eli finds August and says he found “him.” He shows August the contents of the bag. August says nothing but leads Eli to a greenroom where there’s a tray with a box on it. Inside is Tytus Broz’s prototype hand. August motions for the bag. Then, he and Eli slip out of the backstage area just as Tytus seems to notice Eli. When the MC starts to announce the final award, Eli reaches Mum. He says she should leave—she doesn’t want to see the final award. She follows when the MC announces Tytus Broz’s name.

Slim is still an important figure in Eli’s mind, as his advice still guides Eli’s behavior. August immediately understands what’s going on when he sees Lyle’s head, and like the all-knowing older brother he is, he comes up with a plan to expose Tytus Broz. Then, Eli and August know what they must do: get Mum out of the auditorium before she has to see Lyle’s head flashed in front of her by the man who murdered Lyle. This is how the boys show Mum they care.



Just as Eli, August, Mum, and Dad reach the entry doors, they notice two police cars by Caitlyn’s. Caitlyn leads officers in and points through the auditorium to Tytus Broz, onstage and accepting his award. She then joins Eli’s family. Eli introduces her to his parents and August, and then Caitlyn turns back toward the auditorium. Tytus Broz announces that he has a surprise. Eli can’t see the stage, but he imagines the view from his seat in the auditorium. People gasp in horror, and a woman starts sobbing. Mum asks Eli what’s going on. Eli says he found “him” as police officers surround Tytus. Tytus stares with confusion at the head of “the first man [Eli] ever loved.”

Eli has finally accomplished his goal of bringing Tytus Broz down. With what he found in the bunker, the police can no longer insist that Tytus is an upstanding community member and ignore that he’s murdering people. This is extremely cathartic for Eli. He can now put into words how much Lyle meant to him: Lyle was the person who showed Eli it was possible to love and have a good relationship with a father figure.



Eli reminds Slim to do your time before it does you. Time seems to slow as Eli watches the police lights and as August nods to Eli. August ushers Mum and Dad away so Eli can have a moment with Caitlyn. She asks if he was really talking to someone on the **red telephone**. Eli asks what she thinks, but she doesn't answer. She asks if she can drive Eli to the police station. When Eli says his parents will, she says his parents seem surprisingly normal. Then, Caitlyn says Brian will want her to write about this tomorrow—and maybe they can share the byline. She heads back toward the police. Eli looks around. He feels like he can see August writing “your end is a dead blue wren.”

As Eli turns for the exit, he notices too late that Iwan Krol is standing in front of him. Iwan stabs Eli in the belly. Eli knows Iwan is going to stab him again—so through the pain, Eli staggers away. The police haven't noticed him yet. Eli holds his belly and moves up the stairs. Iwan is limping—he clearly bandaged his foot and stuffed it into a dress shoe—but he follows Eli slowly. Eli gets a man's attention, and the man steps in front of Iwan. But Iwan stabs the man and a woman screams. Eli continues to stagger up the stairs. He recognizes where he is: he's on the way up to the clock tower, where Slim took him years ago.

Eli can't breathe, but he finds the secret staircase and starts to climb. He tells Slim he'll do this until he dies. But Eli doesn't want to die. He wants to ask more questions of Mum, Dad, August, and Caitlyn. Eli starts moving again when he hears Iwan enter the stairwell below him. He tells Slim he's ready to die as he reaches the clock tower. Standing inside the clock tower on the platform, Eli leans against the north clock face. Hearing Iwan enter the engine room, Eli realizes he isn't afraid. He's furious. Eli can't move. Iwan inspects Eli's body, and Eli wants to ask Iwan if he thinks he's a good man. Just as Iwan prepares to slit Eli's throat, officers burst through the door.

Gunshots ring out, but Iwan pulls Eli to his feet and puts the knife to Eli's throat. As Iwan pushes Eli forward, Eli realizes he has something cylindrical and glass in his pocket. Time seems to stop—until the clock starts to strike nine, a deafening sound. Eli brings the specimen jar holding his lucky **finger** down on Iwan's head. He doesn't see if the officers shoot Iwan, he just sees August. August whispers that Eli is going to be okay. Just before Eli passes out, he scribbles “Boy swallows universe” in the air.

When Caitlyn asks if there was anyone on the other end of the red telephone, it suggests that there probably wasn't—the August on the phone likely only existed in Eli's head. But this doesn't mean the voice Eli heard wasn't meaningful; indeed, it's what allowed him to formulate an effective escape plan. Caitlyn noting that Mum and Dad seem normal is no doubt a huge compliment for Eli, given that he wants Mum to be happy and that Mum has been happiest when she's leading a “normal” suburban life.



Caitlyn and Eli might have brought Tytus Broz down, but Iwan is still at large and clearly dangerous. Eli being stabbed calls into question whether he is actually going to get any justice, or whether he's going to have to die as well. It seems comforting to him to realize that he's following footsteps from years ago as he climbs up the clock tower. It helps him feel close to Slim and will hopefully help him remember Slim's advice.



Initially, Eli can only focus on the fact that he has so much life left to live. He wants to hear Mum, for instance, tell him the stories he's always wanted to hear, and this is motivating for a while. But the pain starts to get to Eli, and this causes him to begin to accept his death. As Eli's fear shifts to anger, though, he again seems to reaffirm his desire to live. He wants to continue his lifelong project of figuring out which men are good and bad.



It's satisfying when Eli comes out on top of this situation by using his lucky finger to disarm Iwan. Eli is essentially retaking control of his body, which—if he survives the ordeal—may help him heal emotionally. It seems likely that Eli will survive when August insists he'll be fine; Eli, at least, believes in August's premonitions. They bring Eli comfort, especially now, when he doesn't want to think about dying.



BOY SWALLOWS UNIVERSE

Eli isn't in heaven or hell. He's in the Boggo Road prison yard—and Slim is here, tending a garden. Eli compliments the garden, and Slim says they need to get Eli out. Slim leads Eli to the corner, where there's a rope dangling from a grappling hook. Slim says this is Eli's "great escape." Eli recognizes it: it's Halliday's Leap. At the top of the wall, Eli asks what's on the other side. Slim says the answers "To the questions" are. Eli sees a beach on the other side, running down to the universe. There's a girl on the beach, and she invites Eli to jump down. He obeys.

Though this passage seems like a figment of Eli's imagination, it's framed as though Eli is briefly in some sort of afterlife. By offering Eli the rope, Slim is essentially offering Eli a way to "escape" death that allows Eli to experience for himself a part of Slim's life that he's always admired. The girl on the beach, meanwhile, shows that Eli will only continue maturing if he chooses to leave this afterlife and continue to live.



GIRL SAVES BOY

Caitlyn and Eli are in the car, and Caitlyn asks if it was really her on the beach. Eli says it seemed like it, but he opened his eyes in the hospital to his family instead. Mum cried and pulled everyone—even Dad—into a hug. That's when Caitlyn walked in. Caitlyn says that she had nothing to do with saving Eli—that was all the doctors. The doctors insisted Eli is a miracle for surviving, but August didn't seem surprised to hear this. August knew Eli would come back, because he's a year older than Eli and a year older than the universe.

It's possible to read Eli's dream as an indication that he's actually starting to turn away from Slim and toward people like Caitlyn instead. The fact that Eli wakes up to his whole family in the hospital room highlights how close and loving they're becoming. And Mum pulling Dad into the hug offers hope that going forward, they might repair their relationship and get back together.



Back in the present, Caitlyn pulls up in front of Lyle's house. She and Eli are supposed to be working on a five-part story about Tytus Broz's downfall, with firsthand accounts from Eli. Eli said nothing when Brian asked for the three-word headline. Eli gets out and knocks on the door. The current residents are a Black dad and two kids, and the man allows Eli to enter Lena's room. It's now a girl's bedroom. Eli opens up the wardrobe door to reveal the secret room and leads Caitlyn into it. The **red telephone** is still there, and Caitlyn recoils from it.

The three-word headline is presumably the words Eli wrote just before he passed out after Iwan let him go: "boy swallows universe." Eli isn't yet really to share all of his story, which is why he keeps it a secret from Brian. Making it clear that a new family lives in Lyle's house highlights how much time has passed since Eli left. The red telephone might still be here, but Eli is a different person now, and his life isn't at all the same as it was when he lived here.



Eli moves closer to it, and then the **red telephone** starts to ring. Caitlyn doesn't react, so Eli asks if she hears it. Caitlyn tells him to leave it alone. Just as Eli is about to put the phone to his ear, Caitlyn puts her hand on his. She asks what the man on the phone is going to tell Eli that he doesn't already know. As the phone rings again, Caitlyn kisses Eli. It feels like being in the middle of the galaxy during the Big Bang—and the phone stops ringing.

It seems like Caitlyn doesn't hear the phone ringing, but she recognizes that Eli does. She implies that Eli doesn't need to pretend August is speaking to know what the truth is; Eli can instead trust himself and listen to what he believes is true. When Caitlyn kisses Eli and this makes the phone stop ringing, Eli symbolically lets go of all the past trauma he linked to the red phone. Just like the Big Bang ushered in life, Eli's life is beginning again—and now, Caitlyn is a part of it.





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