The Diving Bell and the Butterfly

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JEAN-DOMINIQUE BAUBY

In 1995, Jean-Dominique Bauby was the charismatic, worldly, and wealthy editor-in-chief of French *Elle*. In December of that year, however, on an ordinary Friday evening, while driving through Paris to pick his son up for a weekend of fun and bonding, he suffered a massive stroke. The stroke severed Bauby's brain stem from his spinal cord, leaving him fully paralyzed—but conscious, with all of his memories and mental faculties intact. Throughout his experience of "locked-in syndrome," Bauby could communicate with those around him only by blinking his left eyelid. Over several months of physical and speech therapy Bauby was able to turn his head and make rudimentary sounds—but his life had been cleaved in two. While gossips in the fashion industry spread rumors around the streets of Paris that Bauby had become a "vegetable," Bauby, in a hospital north of Paris, near the sea, began to navigate his new world. With the help of a speech therapist and an interlocutor, and with the support of his ex-lover Sylvie, his partner Florence, and his two young children, Bauby found the strength to share his story by painstakingly blinking out a memoir of extraordinary beauty. Though Bauby died suddenly of pneumonia mere days after the 1997 publication of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, the book has become a bestseller around the world and was adapted, in 2007, into a major motion picture staring French film actors Mathieu Amalric and Emmanuelle Seigner.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Bauby references many touchstones of French history and culture throughout the book: he imagines being a part of the coterie of Empress Eugénie, the patroness of the Berck-sur-Mer hospital and the wife of Napoleon III. The hospital itself was founded in the 19th century, and was used for many years "principally for crippled children." Bauby recalls visiting the Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes, a major Catholic pilgrimage site (and, in Bauby's estimation, a gaudy tourist trap) where a vision of the Virgin Mary, or the Madonna, had appeared to a woman in the middle of a grotto. Bauby also has a unique place in history himself; as the world-renowned editor-in-chief of French *Elle*, he held an internationally-recognized role in the fashion community, and his stroke, departure, and death changed the course of the magazine, though he left his indelible fingerprint of charm, charisma, style, and grace on *Elle* forever.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly is a revolutionary book, both a memoir of illness and a captivating, lyrical piece of literature. Other lyrical memoirs of loss, disease, and alienation include Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Ana Lyndsey's *Girl in the Dark*. The book has also drawn critical comparisons to Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, a surrealist 1915 novel in which the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, awakens in the body of a massive insect and must go about his day—unable to communicate with those around him, hyperaware of how simultaneously feared and frightened he is.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*
- **When Written:** 1996-1997
- **Where Written:** Berck-sur-Mer, France
- **When Published:** March 7th, 1997
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Berck-sur-Mer, France
- **Climax:** Jean-Dominique Bauby recounts in detail the events of December 8th, 1995, the day of his stroke
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Love Triangle. Bauby never married, but enjoyed a longtime partnership with Sylvie de la Rochefoucauld, the mother of his children—and, for the years before and after his stroke, embarked on an affair and then a relationship with Florence Ben Sadoun, a journalist. In the film adaptation of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, and indeed in much of the press surrounding the memoir itself, Florence's frequent drives from Paris to visit and sit with Bauby in his time of need were hushed-up or overlooked in favor of a neater narrative which framed Sylvie as a grieving, devoted wife, and ignored the nuanced reality of Bauby's love life.

PLOT SUMMARY

On December 8th of 1995, the editor-in-chief of the French fashion magazine *Elle*, Jean-Dominique Bauby, suffered a massive stroke which severed his brain stem from his spinal cord and rendered the worldly, charismatic, fashionable man nearly completely paralyzed. After awakening from a coma in January of 1996, Bauby found that the only way he could communicate with the outside world was by blinking his left eyelid—the single part of his body over which he had any

remaining control. Over the summer of 1996, with the help of his speech therapist at the Berck-sur-Mer hospital in the north of France, Sandrine, and an interpreter, Claude, Bauby composed, letter by painstaking letter, a memoir of his experiences in the hospital, his memories of his life before the stroke, and his deepest, most vulnerable fantasies of returning to a normal existence.

As Bauby spends the summer of 1996 blinking out the sentences of his memoir, he reflects on his "locked-in syndrome" which has left him feeling like he is encased in a heavy **diving bell**, and provides an account of his monotonous, tiresome, but occasionally illuminating life in the hospital. He describes the "tourist" patients whose prognoses will allow them to depart the hospital in just a few short months; he entertains visits from his former partner Sylvie and their children Céleste and Théophile, whom he worries his remoteness and paralysis frightens, as well as old friends and coworkers; by sending a monthly bulletin to his rivals at *Elle*, he attempts to quell rumors on the streets of Paris that the once-powerful editor has become a "vegetable;" he gets through sponge baths and tube feedings by imagining luxurious soaks in his tub at home in Paris and delicious meals from his childhood. He imagines being a movie director at Cinecittá studios in Rome and a member of the royal coterie of Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III; he endures physical therapy and speech therapy; he wrestles with terrible nightmares and the fear that his loved ones are slipping away from him. He recounts humorous and ironic anecdotes from his past, divulges dreams of writing a play based on his experiences as a paraplegic, and imagines himself accompanying his former *Elle* coworkers on luxurious trips to exotic locations for conferences and fashion expos.

Bauby's swirling anecdotes, expressed through short chapters which reflect the fleeting, carousel-like nature of his overactive thoughts—his only refuge—unfold quickly and come to a halting stop after Bauby, in the book's penultimate pages, recounts in detail the fateful day of his stroke. Bauby concludes that he has composed his memoir as a way of searching for a "key" that will allow him to free himself from the diving bell, but admits that he feels he must "keep looking" throughout the "cosmos" for the magical object, spell, or miracle that will ferry him to freedom.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jean-Dominique Bauby – The narrator and protagonist of the book, Jean-Dominique Bauby was the real-life editor of the French fashion magazine *Elle* throughout the 1990s. Bauby was a worldly, charismatic, wealthy man whose life was forever changed when he suffered a stroke on December 8th, 1995. The stroke severed his brain stem from his spinal cord and left him fully paralyzed—but kept his brain, memories, and imagination fully intact. Able to blink only his left eye to communicate with the outside world, Bauby fascinated his doctors as a case of the rare "locked-in syndrome," in which a patient's mental faculties are untouched but they are physically unable to show emotion, speak, or otherwise communicate. Armed with a sharp sense of humor about his situation, a wry wit, and a potent lyricism, Bauby, with the help of a speech therapist named Sandrine and an interlocutor named Claude, began transcribing his memoir several months after the stroke. Bauby composed sentences in his head, sometimes repeating them ten times over in order to sharpen his language and ready himself for the task of blinking in order to "type," letter by letter, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* over the course of the summer of 1996. Bauby's deep understanding of irony and humor, profound sense of wonder for the "small tasks" that make up a life, and conscious examination of the two distinct parts of his own life have made *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* famous around the world and cemented Bauby as an important figure of French journalism and literature, even decades after his death in 1997—just two days after the publication of his book. Resilient, witty, emotional, rakish, and overwhelmed with love for his family, Bauby is a mess of contradictions whose memory and imagination sustain him even as he faces imprisonment within the heavy metaphorical "**diving bell**" his body has become.

Vincent – Vincent is an old friend and former coworker of Bauby's who visits him frequently in the hospital and makes him feel less monstrous and alone. Bauby also remembers Vincent accompanying him to the racetrack on the day that the two friends failed to make a bet on **Mithra-Grandchamp**, a racehorse who could have made them a lot of money.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sylvie – Sylvie is the mother of Bauby's children. An emotional woman whose real-life relationship with Bauby seems to have turned cold before his stroke, Sylvie nonetheless cares deeply for Bauby and brings their two children, Céleste and Théophile, to visit.

Théophile – Théophile is Bauby's son. He is a somewhat shy, reserved boy.

Céleste – Céleste is Bauby's daughter. She is an energetic, ebullient girl who loves to entertain.

Sandrine – Sandrine is Bauby's speech therapist at Berck-sur-Mer. He sees her as a "guardian angel" because she created the communication code that allows him to participate in the world. He feels that Sandrine opened up his "**diving bell,**" even if just a little.

Claude – Claude is an interlocutor and interpreter who helps Bauby compose his memoirs using the alphabetic communication code devised by Sandrine.

Florence – Florence is Bauby's current partner.

Olivier – Olivier is a school friend of Bauby's who used to make up wild, improbable stories and insist on their truth, even when confronted with his own obvious lies and inconsistencies.

Joséphine – Joséphine is an old girlfriend of Bauby's who once brought him along with her to make a pilgrimage to pray to the Madonna at Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes, even though they were on the verge of breaking up.

Diane – Diane is Sylvie's sister. She is a nurse and the first person who realized Bauby might be having a stroke on the fateful December day his life changed forever.

Brigitte – Brigitte is Bauby's physical therapist at Berck-sur-Mer.

Brice – Brice is one of Bauby's old friends.

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.

MEMORY, IMAGINATION, AND FREEDOM

Throughout Jean-Dominique Bauby's memoir of "locked-in syndrome," the only resource at his disposal in the face of paralysis, isolation, and the end of his days as a wealthy, powerful Paris magazine editor is his mind. Through the power of his memories and the bravery of his imagination, Bauby manages to find freedom even in the confines of the "**diving bell**" he feels his body has become—and argues, through the memories, dreams, and fantasies he recounts in his memoir, that people can find freedom, relief, and indeed escape through their minds.

Though much of the memoir concerns Bauby's day-to-day life as a stroke victim and "locked-in" patient at the Berck-sur-Mer hospital in France, its most detailed, joyous, and profound sections involve his memories and his imagination. Through these short chapters, Bauby demonstrates the power of the human mind and suggests that he is not only finding escape or distraction through his memories and flights of fancy—he is truly healing himself from the inside out and finding shelter in revisiting his memories, learning lessons from his past, and using a combination of memory, historical knowledge, and whimsy to envision an alternate present (and future). Bauby looks back on his memories of the most beautiful and painful parts of his life to fill the void of experience which faces him each day—and to try to make sense of the man he has been and the man he is. For example, he revisits a painful series of mean fights with an ex-girlfriend, Joséphine; thinks longingly about botching a lucrative tip about a horse race alongside one of his old friends and coworkers, Vincent; and he even recounts in great detail the ordinary December day that became the most fateful of his life—the day of his stroke. By retreading old memories, even the difficult ones, he engages in a form of entertainment and escapism—but he is also doing the difficult, necessary work of understanding his life in retrospect and confronting the sum of his experience on earth. With hours on end and no way to entertain himself other than through his own memories, Bauby decides to use the power of his mind for good rather than idleness—and uses his memories to seek out moral lessons, to reexamine what kind of friend and lover he's been, and to find symbolism and meaning in events that previously seemed mundane or quotidian.

Bauby also uses memory and historical knowledge to invent alternate presents for himself. When he's being fed through a tube daily, he imagines what it would be like to eat something off a real seasonal "menu" that he curates and rotates with the changes in weather. Depending on the season and his mood, he pictures juicy melons, decadent oysters, warm beef stews, or the succulent sausages he loved as a boy, allowing his memories of taste and texture to elevate his drab present moment. When he's being perfunctorily sponged down each Sunday, he luxuriates in recollections of long, lazy soaks in the tub, a glass of Scotch or a good book in hand. While sitting outside on a lonely terrace, he imagines himself at Cinecittà, one of Europe's largest and most lively movie studios, directing his dream pictures. Bauby's imagination—symbolized by the fluttering wings of **butterflies**—allows him to pass the long hours that define his dreariest days. These flights of fancy show that Bauby yearns to have his old life back and is wistful for all he's lost, but they also create a larger existential question about felt experiences versus imagined ones. When he looks at a calendar one day and realizes that all of his *Elle* magazine colleagues are at a global fashion conference in Hong Kong, it isn't difficult for him to imagine the things they're doing, the sights they're seeing, and the people they're interacting with—even though Bauby himself has never been to Hong Kong. The rote routines of his past—a work trip which might have been seen as more of a hassle than an opportunity, a drive through the streets of Paris in heavy traffic, a meal at a seedy luncheonette above a racing track—are suddenly brilliant in texture, color, and scope, and Bauby's longing to be part of the world is at least somewhat sated by his intense imaginings.

Given that his inner world is really all he is able to count on after his stroke, Bauby dedicates an enormous amount of time to reliving memories, getting lost in fantasies, and thinking through difficult existential questions. Bauby's day-to-day challenges are enormous and his circumstances are extraordinary to say the least—and yet his journey through his own mind says a lot about the power of any human to find

refuge, clarity, and strength in the power of their own experiences, their own thoughts, and their own deepest dreams.

ISOLATION VS. COMMUNICATION

Though Jean-Dominique Bauby suggests that freedom can be found in the power of the mind and the imagination even when all hope seems lost, he also uses *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* to comment on the dual nature of "locked-in" syndrome. His mind is his only refuge, and it is frequently a pleasant one—but at the end of the day, Bauby is indeed locked into his own body, and the isolation that fact begets is threaded through the entire narrative. Bauby's ability to communicate with the outside world is limited to the blinking of his left eyelid, and he uses that miniscule amount of control to unlock himself from his prison, tell his story, and communicate with his caretakers and loved ones. As Bauby vacillates between the pain of isolation and the gratitude he feels at being able to communicate in at least one small way, he sheds light on the larger battle all humans face against the desire to give up when reaching out feels too tough—and ultimately argues that the ability to share our thoughts, our feelings, and our stories is worth any struggle.

Bauby's "locked-in syndrome" threatens to cut him off from the world, but the discovery that he can still blink his left eyelid after a life-threatening stroke, which renders him almost entirely paralyzed, means that Bauby's isolation is not as deep as it could be. The only way he can communicate with the outside world is by blinking, but rather than be daunted by the effort, Bauby chooses not to shut down and further isolate himself, but instead tell his story to his friends, family, and indeed the world. Bauby sees those who help him communicate with others—his speech therapist Sandrine and his interlocutor Claude—as "guardian angel[s.]" Bauby, a journalist and newsman his entire career, knows that words are everything, and that the only way to ease his isolation is to seek out communication no matter how difficult it is to do so.

With the help of Sandrine and Claude, Bauby is able to tell his story—and escape the weight of his metaphorical **diving bell** in doing so. The book's most profound example of the importance of communication in order to stave off isolation occurs when Bauby hears from some visiting friends that gossip at his old magazine, *Elle*, is spreading—and people on the streets of Paris are calling Bauby a "vegetable." Soon thereafter, he begins sending out a monthly bulletin to his former coworkers to update them on his progress. Sure, there's a little bit of Bauby's ironic and confrontational humor in the gesture—but there's also something deeper. Bauby knows that he will never be seen as the man he once was, but he refuses to retreat into shame and isolation. He wants to show his coworkers that he is not a "vegetable"—the core of who he is has not changed, and his belief in the power of communication has not wavered. The newsletter has an incredible effect. His old coworkers begin sending letters that pour into the hospital in Berck-sur-Mer: letters that range from simple, quotidian updates about their own lives to long, profound missives about the meaning of life, the nature of friendship, and the value of the human spirit. Bauby regards these letters as "treasure[s,]" and indeed admits that they are, on many days, the only thing that staves off the "vultures" of doubt that threaten to push him further into isolation.

Bauby admits throughout the memoir that he struggles with the desire to retreat into himself, to surrender to the "vultures" that claw at his mind, and to abandon the immense effort it takes just to complete a single sentence. However, he ultimately realizes that the only way to get out of his "diving bell" is to reach out to those around him—to uphold his long-held belief in the value of communication and community, the written word, and the search for ways to connect across the vast chasms that separate even healthy, normal people from one another each and every day.

RESILIENCE AND DETERMINATION

Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* has become an inspirational book for many in the twenty-plus years since its initial publication. A story of humor, grace, and resilience in the face of immense loss and isolation, Bauby's account of his herculean fight to communicate, connect, examine his own past, and push against his new limits ultimately argues that the human spirit, in times of need, can persevere through extraordinary (and extraordinarily difficult) circumstances. Bauby also argues that the more impossible the task, the more impossible feats the person facing that task has the potential to accomplish.

Though Bauby's memoir is not technically an illness memoir or an in-depth look at medicine, the level of resilience, determination, and indeed courage Bauby shows after his stroke is incredible given the poor prognosis he's given. Bauby's circumstances are extreme—and the measures he must take and the methods he must develop to overcome them are similarly intense. When Bauby's brain stem was severed from his spinal cord after a massive stroke, he fell into a coma for over a month. Upon waking, he found himself paralyzed—breathing, urinating, and eating through tubes, with his right eyelid stitched shut and his left the only part of his body he could move. Bauby drew strength for a while from his doctors' refusal to answer definitively whether he'd ever regain any real control of his body—but as the months passed and Bauby struggled through intensive physical and speech therapy, he realized that he'd never have a normal life again. By the time he began composing *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, he had regained some control over his neck muscles and the ability to puff out—without any real sound quality—the letters of the alphabet. His resilience was only just beginning to be

tested, and yet he continued to push himself to the limit by deciding to begin composing a memoir.

The extraordinary story of how Bauby composed his memoir is relayed modestly and minimally. He explains that with the help of his speech therapist Sandrine and interpreter Claude, he was able to blink in response to someone uttering the correct letter of the alphabet, as whoever was "conversing" with Bauby or transcribing his sentences recited, over and over, the letters of the French alphabet in order from most to least common. Bauby writes that he would often spend hours each night composing sentences in his head, getting them ready to be relayed the following day. His determination and resilience—even in the face of a physical task which, given his extremely limited range of motion, had to be boring at best and exhausting at worst—seem almost superhuman, but are eventually revealed to have roots in the most human impulse of them all: not just to endure, but to truly live. Bauby does not expressly state why he was so determined to push himself to the limits of his capabilities until the very last pages of the book. He writes then that he has been trying to find a "key" that will allow him to open up his **diving bell**. Unable to see one in the world around him, he has had to manufacture his own. With no way *out* of his situation, the only way, he posited all along, was *through* it: by making the most of his time, his unique experience and viewpoint, and the resources at his disposal.

Bauby's desire not to escape his circumstances, but rather to make the most of them—and to attempt to push through them and find a new way of being—speaks to his own extraordinary determination. If he can do it, the memoir ultimately suggests, others struggling with illness, isolation, or adversity can, too. There may not be miracles or even cures for the things that ail humanity—but through determined resilience and conscious, steady work, there may be "keys" that unlock unknown and extraordinary potential.

IRONY AND HUMOR

In spite of its grave subject matter and sprawling lyricism, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is in many ways a deeply funny book. The irony of Jean-Dominique Bauby's situation is not lost on him—once a wealthy, charismatic man with the world at his fingertips, Bauby is now confined not just within a hospital, but within his own body. As Bauby uses humor and irony throughout the book to stave off pain, anger, and hopelessness, he suggests that even in the bleakest of situations, there is light to be found.

Bauby is a gifted writer and a witty, canny thinker. These natural proclivities served him well in his life before his stroke, allowing him to rise to the position of editor-in-chief of the French fashion magazine *Elle*, sustain several romantic relationships with a series of women, and enjoy a bustling social life. Once "locked-in" after his stroke, though, Bauby needed to be able to deploy his wit, humor, and keen observational eye not just to advance his career or further his social and romantic life—but literally to save himself from misery and revive his will to live. Throughout the book, Bauby uses both humor and irony at key points in the narrative in order to bring levity into the pain of his situation and draw readers' attention to the fine line between cruelty and comedy, in everyday life and extraordinary circumstances alike.

Throughout, he feels a profound sense of loss that he can no longer make people laugh through conversation—for example, while spending a day with his former partner Sylvie and their children, Céleste and Théophile, he wishes he could laugh at their jokes and deliver some of his own. In order to combat this loss, perhaps, Bauby doubles down on finding the humor in the more cruelly ironic aspects of his memoir, hoping not to lose his relationship to his sense of humor entirely. He states in the vignette "Bathtime" that he has lost sixty-six pounds in just twenty weeks in Berck-sur-Mer; ironically, he'd gone on a diet in an attempt to lose a few pounds just a week before his stroke. Bauby is forced to confront how small the problems of his old life seemed—and examine how cruelly his own wishes have been twisted in the wake of his terrible accident. In "The Empress," Bauby catches sight of his face in a reflective surface covering a bust of Empress Eugénie (the patroness of the hospital and the wife of Napoleon III), seeing himself for the first time in weeks. He is amused rather than repulsed by his own foreign, ruined face—he sees the superficial deformities which have resulted from his stroke as a cruel "joke." He begins to laugh, and imagines Eugenie laughing alongside him. He is trying to make light of his own situation—but it is too much to bear without the help of an imaginary friend sharing the burden alongside him. Bauby also notices several other strange ironic coincidences throughout his stay in the hospital. Bauby's father sends to the hospital a picture of the young Jean-Dominique, healthy and lithe and playing at the beach at Berck-sur-Mer; Bauby begins to feels his stroke may have been a "punishment" for having been considering writing a novel which reimagined the paralytic Noirtier de Villefort from *The Count of Monte Cristo* in a modern context; he is forced to watch a commercial for a personal computer in which an offscreen voice asks "Were you born lucky?" as he lies inert in bed, drenched in his own urine after his catheter breaks. As these cruel—and sometimes deeply comic—ironies pile up, Bauby finds a sardonic kind of light in each of them. He's unable to change his fate or his circumstances, so he might as well laugh at the twists his life has taken and revel in the paradoxes that surround him.

Jean-Dominique Bauby uses humor and irony to cope with his seriously unlucky situation. In moments when he finds himself in physical or emotional turmoil, facing down the deep well of sorrow he could plunge into at any moment, the only thing that pulls him back from the brink is the almost comical horror of what has befallen him. Bauby doesn't shy away from those

uncomfortable, frightening moments—instead, he chooses to lean into them and use them to challenge his reader's conceptions of the line that exists between tragedy and comedy.

SYMBOLS

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

THE DIVING BELL

The central, titular, and most potent symbol throughout the book is that of a diving bell, which symbolizes the protagonist's life inside his paralyzed body. After his stroke, which renders him paralyzed but fully intact mentally—thus suffering from "locked-in syndrome," able to communicate with the outside world only by blinking his left eye—Jean-Dominique Bauby feels he is encased in a massive and heavy diving bell, a rigid and often human-shaped chamber or suit used throughout the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries (and as early, perhaps, as the 4th century BCE) in order to facilitate dives into the sea. Bauby feels submerged and isolated, unable to see, hear, or feel the environment around him very well at all, and yet he is perfectly "normal" on the inside, with all of his memories intact and his imagination his only tool in his strange new world. As Bauby looks for ways "out" of his diving bell, he finds help from his speech therapist Sandrine, his interpreter Claude, and his friends and family, who visit and write letters and allow Bauby glimpses of the world as it spins on around him. The image of a diving bell is invoked frequently throughout the text, and it comes to serve as an acute and devastating symbol of Bauby's isolation and uncertainty—though, in time, the diving bell also begins to represent a kind of solo adventure into the depths of human consciousness and the extremes of human experience, as Bauby begins to recognize himself as an explorer in uncharted waters.

BUTTERFLIES

Though not invoked as frequently as the titular symbol of the **diving bell**, butterflies nonetheless emerge as an important symbol of Jean-Dominique Bauby's imagination and inner life. Bauby imagines hearing invisible butterflies beating their wings softly in the corners of his mind; over the course of the summer, they come to symbolize the literalization of his imagination taking flight as he dictates his memoir. Bauby's ability to imagine things and lose himself in reverie is one of the only things keeping him afloat. At mealtimes, when he's fed through a tube, he envisions eating delicious meats and fresh vegetables; during his demoralizing weekly sponge baths, he remembers the long and luxurious soaks he used to take in the tub in his Paris home. He imagines himself on trips to Hong Kong with his *Elle* coworkers, seeing new sights and feeling like the center of the fashion world; he imagines being a member of the coterie of Empress Eugénie, the patroness of the Berck-sur-Mer hospital and wife of Napoleon III. The "butterflies" symbolize these various flights of fancy, which sustain Bauby as he reckons with the weight of the "diving bell" his body has become.

MITHRA-GRANDCHAMP

Mithra-Grandchamp is a racehorse who symbolizes the idea of missed opportunity and fateful chances. The horse was, according to a racetrack contact of Bauby and his fellow newsman Vincent, slated to win an upcoming race despite being the underdog—at odds of twenty-to-one. Eager to take advantage of the tip and earn a great payout, Bauby and Vincent collected a pot of cash from their coworkers and headed down to the racetrack, only to get sidetracked by a long, luxurious lunch and miss the chance to place their bets. Bauby and Vincent were forced to watch the race unfold—and to see Mithra-Grandchamp, as predicted, finish first by a five-length lead. In the years since the race, Mithra-Grandchamp has come to symbolize, to Bauby and Vincent, all the "lost opportunities" in their lives. Mithra-Grandchamp is a bittersweet symbol of "those small near misses" that one day amount to the shape a life takes.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* published in 1998.

Prologue Quotes

Through the frayed curtain at my window, a wan glow announces the break of day. My heels hurt, my head weighs a ton, and something like a giant invisible diving bell holds my whole body prisoner. My room emerges slowly from the gloom. I linger over every item: photos of loved ones, my children's drawings, posters, the little tin cyclist sent by a friend the day before the Paris-Roubaix bike race, and the IV pole hanging over the bed where I have been confined these past six months, like a hermit crab dug into his rock.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening lines of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, Jean-Dominique Bauby offers a decidedly glum view of his hospital room—the room where he's been "confined" for over six months, since the stroke that robbed him of nearly all motor function while leaving his brain intact, rendering him "locked-in." The subtle attention to detail, as well as the twinned gratitude for the small tokens of goodwill offered by loved ones and family and resentment towards the unchanging, cyclical days ahead of him will come to define Bauby's memoir of life in the hospital at Berck-sur-Mer. In this opening passage, he makes evident how dependent he is on memory and imagination to escape the routine of daily life, and also demonstrates how isolated his days often are.

> My diving bell becomes less oppressive, and my mind takes flight like a butterfly. There is so much to do. You can wander off in space or in time, set out for Tierra del Fuego or for King Midas's court.
>
> You can visit the woman you love, slide down beside her and stroke her still-sleeping face. You can build castles in Spain, steal the Golden Fleece, discover Atlantis, realize your childhood dreams and adult ambitions.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

As light fills Jean-Dominique Bauby's room and a new day begins, he feels the "diving bell" which encases him lift a bit, and his mind, "like a butterfly," is free to soar. Bauby's only escape from his rigid, immovable body, which has locked him into himself, is through his mind. In his dreams and fantasies, he is able to experience things both quotidian and remarkable, to dart between the past and the present, and to ponder the existential questions and "ambitions" that gnaw at him. Bauby's only refuge is his mind—and he puts it to good use as he daily retreats into fantasy and allows his imagination to illuminate his dim, often grim present circumstances. Bauby does not give up on life—rather he decides to take a new, unconventional approach to living.

Bathtime Quotes

> One day, for example, I can find it amusing, in my forty-fifth year, to be cleaned up and turned over, to have my bottom wiped and swaddled like a newborn's. I even derive a guilty pleasure from this total lapse into infancy. But the next day, the same procedure seems to me unbearably sad, and a tear rolls down through the lather a nurse's aide spreads over my cheeks. And my weekly bath plunges me simultaneously into distress and happiness. The delectable moment when I sink into the tub is quickly followed by nostalgia for the protracted immersions that were the joy of my previous life.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16-17

Explanation and Analysis

As Jean-Dominique Bauby recounts the elements of his daily routine, he finds himself vacillating between amusement and despair. He fully recognizes the humor and irony of his situation—at forty-five, he is back to infancy in many ways—but he is pained some days more than others by what his life has been reduced to. In order to stave off the pain and isolation, Bauby retreats into "nostalgia" and memory and re-creates his favorite rituals and most peaceful times in his mind. This allows him to gather the strength to carry on in the face of fear and sadness, and keeps him from forgetting the "joy[s] of [his] previous life."

The Empress Quotes

> A strange euphoria came over me. Not only was I exiled, paralyzed, mute, half deaf, deprived of all pleasures, and reduced to the existence of a jellyfish, but I was also horrible to behold. There comes a time when the heaping up of calamities brings on uncontrollable nervous laughter—when, after a final blow from fate, we decide to treat it all as a joke. My jovial cackling at first disconcerted [the Empress] Eugénie, until she herself was infected by mirth. We laughed until we cried.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

While sitting in his wheelchair in front of a glass-encased marble bust of Empress Eugénie of France, Bauby imagines himself as a member of her coterie, following her and a cadre of giggling women around the grounds of the hospital in Berck-sur-Mer of which Eugénie was the patroness. His pleasant fantasy is interrupted, however, when Bauby catches sight of himself in the glass and feels the "strange euphoria" of revulsion and misery at what his face has become in the months since his stroke. Unable to bear the pain, Bauby descends into "uncontrollable nervous laughter." He recognizes that there is nothing he can do about the misery of his life—nothing, that is, but laugh and let it wash over him. He begins to imagine Eugénie laughing along with him, perhaps as yet another attempt to stave off the loneliness, sadness, and deep despair he feels in this moment.

Tourists Quotes

A niche must be found for us, broken-winged birds, voiceless parrots, ravens of doom, who have made our nest in a dead-end corridor of the neurology department. Of course, we spoil the view. I am all too conscious of the slight uneasiness we cause as, rigid and mute, we make our way through a group of more fortunate patients.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

As Bauby describes the different wings of the Berck-sur-Mer hospital and the patients who are housed in each one, he finds himself somewhat bitterly categorizing himself and his fellow paraplegics as "broken-winged birds" who "ruin the view" for "more fortunate patients." Bauby condescendingly—and slightly enviously—refers to these patients as tourists. He is jealous of their short stays and sunny prognoses, and almost wants to wear the fear and discomfort he inspires in them like a badge. Bauby will never have a normal life again—and in spite of his resilience, determination, and valiant attempts at sustained optimism, there are moments when jealousy, anger, and spite nevertheless creep in.

The Sausage Quotes

By means of a tube threaded into my stomach, two or three bags of a brownish fluid provide my daily caloric needs. For pleasure, I have to turn to the vivid memory of tastes and smells, an inexhaustible reservoir of sensations. Once, I was a master at recycling leftovers. Now I cultivate the art of simmering memories.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

One of the major themes throughout the book is that of memory, imagination, and freedom—Bauby is able to find freedom and relief from his difficult present circumstances by relying on his memories of the past, as well as his fantasies about alternate presents and futures. Each day, at feeding time, after a nurse inevitably wishes him a nearly cruelly optimistic "Bon apetit!", Bauby begins his ritual of making mealtime more palatable by "simmering [his] memories" and indulging dreamy, luxurious fantasies of the greatest meals of his life. Bauby uses the deep recesses of his mind and his fanciful imagination to cope with the dullness and monotony of life as an invalid, strengthening his resolve and his will to live in the face of crushing despair.

Guardian Angel Quotes

Quite apart from the practical drawbacks, [my] inability to communicate is somewhat wearing. Which explains the gratification I feel twice daily when Sandrine knocks, pokes her small chipmunk face through the door, and at once sends all gloomy thoughts packing. The invisible and eternally imprisoning diving bell seems less oppressive.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker), Sandrine

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

In the brief chapter called Guardian Angel, Jean-Dominique Bauby talks about the woman he feels has come to be his guardian angel: Sandrine, his speech therapist. Sandrine is

the woman who has come up with the alphabetized communication code that allows Bauby to communicate with the outside world. His visits from Sandrine feel like a godsend, or a literal visit with an angel—with Sandrine, whose patience with and interest in Bauby never falter, he feels like himself, and he senses his diving bell lifting even if just for a short while. Bauby's retreats into memory and imagination allow him to feel distracted, yes, and occasionally less isolated—but the ability to communicate with another living person in near-real-time is a gift he has come to truly appreciate in the months since his incapacitation.

My Lucky Day Quotes

For half an hour, the alarm on the machine that regulates my feeding tube has been beeping [...] I cannot imagine anything so inane or nerveracking as this piercing *beep beep beep* pecking away at my brain. As a bonus, my sweat has unglued the tape that keeps my right eyelid closed, and the [...] lashes are tickling my pupil unbearably. And to crown it all, the end of my catheter has become detached and I am drenched. [...] Here comes the nurse. Automatically, she turns on the TV. A commercial, with a personal computer spelling out the question: "Were you born lucky?"

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

In this very brief chapter, Jean-Dominique Bauby recalls a decidedly unlucky morning in the Berck-sur-Mer hospital—but ironically titles the passage "My Lucky Day." As he recounts lying inert in bed, soaked in his own urine and sweat, assaulted by the noisome beeping of machines all around him, he paints a picture of abject, almost comical misery. When the nurse arrives to attend to his morning checks, she turns on the TV without even examining him first. The commercial that plays—a slice of life from the outside world, an ad for a product Bauby will never have use or need for—asks those watching if they were "born lucky." There is a painful yet almost delicious irony in this question—for the first forty-five years of his life, Bauby might have said yes. Now, in moments like this one, his luck seems to have so cruelly reversed itself so that he could not be called lucky even as a joke. His ability to see the humor and irony in difficult moments such as this one is what keeps Bauby resilient in the face of debilitating pain and humiliating discomfort.

Our Very Own Madonna Quotes

"Listen, there's no way I'm going to wait in this!"

"Pity," Joséphine snapped. "It would do a sinner like you a lot of good!"

"Not at all. It could even be dangerous. What if someone in perfect health happened to be here when the Madonna appeared? One miracle, and we'd end up paralyzed."

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker), Joséphine

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

As Bauby recalls a trip to a tourist trap—or holy pilgrimage site, depending on one's point of view—alongside an old girlfriend, Joséphine, he looks back on their arrival at the holy grotto rumored to be the site of a Virgin Mary sighting in the mid-1800s. As Bauby and Joséphine—whose relationship is already decidedly on the rocks—approach the long line to enter the grotto, Bauby expresses his distaste for waiting in line for such a ripoff. Joséphine, though, is determined to stay. As Bauby recalls what he said to try to dissuade her—that a "miracle" from the Virgin might cruelly reverse their luck and turn them into paraplegics—he lays bare the cruelty he showed in that moment. In the line, Bauby notes, there were many paralytics and paraplegics hoping to receive grace and healing from the Virgin—his cruel mockery of their wish for restoration to wholeness has come back to bite him. This is just one of the many painfully ironic anecdotes Bauby shares throughout the book—and though this one is not as humorous as the others, it does show how one should always be careful of thoughtless, spiteful speech.

Through a Glass, Darkly Quotes

"How do you feel, Pop?" asks Théophile.

His pop's throat is tight, his hands are sunburned, and his bottom hurts from sitting on it too long, but he has had a wonderful day. And what about you kids, what will you carry back from this field trip into my endless solitude?

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby, Théophile

(speaker), Sylvie, Céleste

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74-75

Explanation and Analysis

After a Father's Day visit from his former partner Sylvie and their young children, Céleste and Théophile, Jean-Dominique Bauby finds himself grateful but saddened. He has loved spending such a "wonderful day" with his family, and the experiences they've had together walking down to the shore and playing hangman are memories which will continue to sustain him in his deepest solitude. However, there is a part of Bauby that feels guilty for dragging his family—especially his children—onto a "field trip into [his] endless solitude. He worries that his appearance and demeanor frighten him, and that his inability to communicate normally with them is changing their relationships forever. Even in moments when Bauby is surrounded by those who love him, there's a part of him that will always be alone and unknowable to his closest family members and companions.

The Vegetable Quotes

At the Café de Flore, one of those camps of Parisian snobbery that send up rumors like flights of carrier pigeons, some close friends of mine overheard a conversation at the next table.

"Did you know that Bauby is now a total vegetable?" said one [gossiper.]

"Yes, I heard, a complete vegetable," came the reply. [...] The tone of voice left no doubt that henceforth I belonged on a vegetable stall and not to the human race. [...] I would have to rely on myself if I wanted to prove that my IQ was still higher than a turnip's.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

When one of Jean-Dominique Bauby's friends reports that gossip about him has begun to spread through Paris, he feels miffed and slightly vindictive. He does not want to be thought of as a "vegetable"—once the editor in chief of French *Elle*, Bauby has enjoyed a life of privilege and luxury, and does not want to be fodder for the gossip mill. He becomes determined to "prove" to all his coworkers that he is not what their snide, mean gossip says he is—and his decision to send out a monthly news bulletin to his former friends and coworkers is a delightfully petty move for someone in so serious a predicament. This shows that Bauby has not lost touch with the person he once was—he is just as charismatic, funny, and indeed well-connected, well-informed, and powerful as he once was; his circumstances have merely changed.

Thus was born a collective correspondence that keeps me in touch with those I love. And my hubris has had gratifying results. Apart from the irrevocable few who maintain a stubborn silence, everybody now understands that he can join me in my diving bell, even if sometimes the diving bell takes me into unexplored territory. I receive remarkable letters. [...] I carefully read each [one] myself. [...] I hoard all these letters like treasure.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 82-84

Explanation and Analysis

As Jean-Dominique Bauby begins sending out monthly bulletins to old friends and coworkers, his exercise in "hubris"—his desire to quell gossip in Paris that he had become a "vegetable"—actually becomes a community-building endeavor as letters pour in to Berck-sur-Mer. Bauby is touched and gratified by the letters from old friends and associates, and amazed by even the most casual, quotidian notes about the lives of these people he misses. Though Bauby spends many of his days confined to his metaphorical "diving bell," the letters allow him to feel as if he's not alone in the device—he sees that there are many who want to go along for the ride because of their love for him, even if they're unaware of exactly where the diving device might take them.

Outing Quotes

❝ This afternoon, Claude (the young woman to whom I am dictating this book) and Brice are with me. I have known Claude for two weeks, Brice for twenty-five years. It is strange to hear my old partner in crime telling Claude about me. My quick temper, my love of books, my immoderate taste for good food, my red convertible—nothing is left out. Like a storyteller exhuming the legends of a lost civilization.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker), Brice, Claude

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

On an outing down to the Berck-sur-Mer beach boardwalk, Jean-Dominique Bauby marvels at the rapport between his interpreter Claude, a new friend, and his old companion Brice. As Bauby listens to their conversation about him, he feels less isolated to realize how deeply they each care for him in their own way—and bolstered by Brice's happy recollections of the man Bauby once was. There is a tinge of melancholy as Bauby notes that he feels like the stories from his old life are "legends of a lost civilization"—but for the majority of the passage, Bauby seems overcome with gratitude for his friendships, new and old, and for the sense of community he himself has inspired in those around him. Though he spends most of his life in physical and emotional isolation these days, he has helped to bring many disparate people together—and this in itself is a huge accomplishment.

The Duck Hunt Quotes

❝ Far from such din, when blessed silence returns, I can listen to the butterflies that flutter inside my head. To hear them, one must be calm and pay close attention, for their wingbeats are barely audible. Loud breathing is enough to drown them out. This is astonishing: my hearing does not improve, yet I hear them better and better. I must have butterfly hearing.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Jean-Dominique Bauby has been reflecting on the many frustrating and annoying noises he hears on his ward—noises which are magnified by Bauby's imbalanced, amplified hearing in the wake of his stroke. After recounting the "din" of noises that daily upset and unsettle him, he turns to an examination of a more calming phenomenon: the "butterflies" in his head. Throughout the book, Bauby has compared his mind in the moments he reaches into memory, fantasy, and imagination to a butterfly "taking flight." Now, as he imagines more literal butterflies within his mind, the symbol's purpose stays the same even as its representation is transfigured. Bauby's mind is not the butterfly itself, but rather it is filled with butterflies which distract and calm him in difficult moments. The butterflies bring Bauby piece and calm, and allow him to feel less anxious and alone in moments when his life becomes too overwhelming.

The Mythmaker Quotes

❝ I should not feel morally superior to Olivier, for today I envy him his mastery of the storyteller's art. I am not sure I will ever acquire such a gift, although I, too, am beginning to forge glorious substitute destinies for myself.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker), Olivier

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 116-117

Explanation and Analysis

Jean-Dominique Bauby reflects on his memories of his childhood friend, Olivier, a strange young boy who attempted to cement friendships and improve his social standing by making up vast, winding, ludicrous stories of his unlikely travels, connections to famous people, and near-death experiences. The young Bauby and his friends always took Olivier's stories with a grain of salt, and even teased him behind his back for his "mythomania." Now, though, as Bauby thinks about Olivier, he finds himself feeling not just empathy and understanding but actually envy for Olivier. Bauby's whole enjoyment of life, now, often depends on how able he is to reconstruct memories and create wild fantasies in his head—he realizes the power of Olivier's "gift," and commends the boy for his artistry when it came to storytelling.

"A Day in the Life" Quotes

Like millions of Parisians, our eyes empty and our complexions dull, Florence and I embarked like zombies on a new day. [...] I mechanically carried out all those simple acts that today seem miraculous to me: shaving, dressing, downing a hot chocolate.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker), Florence

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

As he reflects on the last day of his "old life" and the events leading up to the massive stroke that robbed him of nearly all ability to move, Jean-Dominique Bauby is anxious, ashamed, and sheepish. He thinks back to his old morning routine, which he took for granted every day of his life. Now, the simple movements of getting ready for a day of work are "miraculous" accomplishments to Bauby. There is a measure of regret and judgement in his tone as he looks back on the "zombie"-like way he and his partner Florence moved through the world, unappreciative and unaware of how lucky they were to be able to complete such simple tasks. Bauby has been loath to return to his memories of the day of the stroke, perhaps afraid of being forced to examine his own lack of gratitude for his health and happiness and recollect the years he took for granted.

Season of Renewal Quotes

I have indeed begun a new life, and that life is here, in this bed, that wheelchair, and those corridors. Nowhere else.

September means the end of vacations, it means back to school and to work... [...] But here at Berck I hear only the faintest echoes of the outside world's collective return to work and responsibility...

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129-130

Explanation and Analysis

As the summer draws to a close—and, simultaneously, as Bauby composes the final chapter of his memoir—he is aware of the changing of the seasons that will affect the patterns of life that his friends, family, and other loved ones follow. He knows, however, that for himself, life will continue on as it has for the last several months since his stroke. He is both comforted by the fact that he hears only the "faintest echoes" of life in the real world—and plagued by a sense of longing for the familiar old patterns of the changing seasons and fluctuations of life. He is beginning to accept that his life will take place "nowhere else" but where he is right now—and though he still feels a measure of sadness and isolation, there are certain advantages to his new life. He doesn't feel the sorrowful tug of summer's end, or the dread of returning to work—his life operates outside of the rules of society, metered by its own peculiar but singular rhythm.

[Claude's] purse is half open, and I see a hotel room key, a metro ticket, and a hundred-franc note folded in four, like objects brought back by a space probe sent to earth to study how earthlings live, travel, and trade with one another. The sight leaves me pensive and confused. Does the cosmos contain keys for opening up my diving bell? A subway line with no terminus? A currency strong enough to buy my freedom back? We must keep looking. I'll be off now.

Related Characters: Jean-Dominique Bauby (speaker), Claude

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 131-132

Explanation and Analysis

In the book's final lines, Jean-Dominique Bauby describes looking into his interpreter Claude's purse and seeing some of the objects gathered there. They are as foreign to him as "objects brought back by a space probe"—confined as he is to the hospital, shut forever out of his old life and its cosmopolitan joys, these quotidian objects have no more use to him. As he looks at them, he wonders if anything in this universe holds the "key" to his diving bell—or whether he will have to "keep looking" in the alternate dimensions of his imagination for the ways to get his "freedom back." These pensive lines reveal Bauby's many conflicting feelings. He is isolated within his own experience in spite of being surrounded by people who love and care for him. He approaches his entrapment in the "diving bell" with bemusement rather than despair, and seems excited (rather than resigned) by the prospect of finding answers to the

existential questions that plague him within his own mind

rather than in the “real” world.

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.

PROLOGUE

As a "wan glow announces the break of day," Jean-Dominique Bauby looks around his room and takes stock of the items around him: pictures of loved ones, posters, toys sent by friends—and an IV pole hanging over the bed to which Bauby has been confined for six months. He feels like "a giant invisible **diving bell**" is holding his body prisoner.

As Bauby begins his memoirs, he sets the scene for his readers, inviting them to picture him surrounded by beauty and love but unable to reach out and touch it. He is encased within himself completely.

On Friday, the eighth of December of the previous year, Bauby suffered a massive stroke which affected his brain stem, the "inseparable link between the brain and the spinal cord." Bauby survived the stroke—but is now suffering from "locked-in syndrome." Paralyzed from head to toe but with full consciousness, Bauby is "imprisoned" in his own body. The only way he can communicate is by blinking his left eyelid, one of the few parts of his body he can still move.

As Bauby provides some basic background as to his physical condition, he doesn't shy away from using cold, clinical, even bleak language to describe what his day-to-day life has become. He feels like a prisoner in his own body, cut off from the world around him despite still being physically present in it.

After the stroke, Bauby fell into a coma and did not awake until the end of January. When he did wake up, he found himself in the Naval Hospital at Berck-sur-Mer on the French Channel coast. For six months he has been living in this room, trying to break through his paralysis—he is able to move his limbs barely a fraction of an inch when he tries to stretch—and he is writing with the help of an interlocutor who interprets his blinks.

Though Bauby has been painting an almost unimaginable portrait of isolation and paralysis, this passage begins to shine some light on the incredible resilience and determination he still has within him. He works daily at physical therapy, despite knowing he will never walk again, and he isn't allowing his isolation to shut him off from the outside world—he is "writing" and attempting to communicate not just with friends, family, and caretakers, but with the larger world.

Though the oppressive **diving bell** holds Bauby's body down, his mind is "like a **butterfly**" in flight. His only escape is through his imagination—and his writing. In order to make sure he efficiently communicates with the "emissary" from his publisher who will take his dictation, he writes every sentence of his memoir in his head and perfects it by repeating it to himself upwards of ten times over.

The two titular symbols—the diving bell, which encases Bauby and weighs him down, and the butterfly, which symbolizes his mind as it takes flight through memory, imagination, and fancy, are introduced here. Bauby's mind is his refuge, even if it never allows him to fully escape his new life.

As dawn breaks, a nurse enters the room, interrupting Bauby's flow of thoughts. She turns on the television as she checks his tracheostomy, drip feet, and vitals, and as Bauby watches a cartoon frog prance across the street, he begins to imagine what life would be like were he "changed into a frog."

This short scene demonstrates Bauby's mind in action. As the depressing and routine hospital checks begin to take place, he's able to retreat into his mind and find comfort in even a simple imaginative exercise.

THE WHEELCHAIR

Bauby thinks back to a time when he was at Berck just a few weeks. He had no "accurate picture" of what his situation was or would come to be, and based on what he'd overheard his nurses and doctors saying, he believed he'd very soon recover both movement and speech. His mind raced night and day as he came up with ideas for novels and plays and daydreamed about the things he'd do once he was well.

There is another layer of cruelty and unfairness to Bauby's situation—in the early days of his hospitalization at Berck, he still believed he'd make a full recovery. It is, perhaps, in this frame of mind that he learned to rely on future-oriented thinking and productivity—so that by the time he received his actual prognosis, to admit defeat and turn off his one connection to the outside world would seem like a profane waste.

Unexpectedly, one evening, a group of nurses, orderlies, and doctors burst into his room, dressed him, and lifted Bauby into a wheelchair. The group pushed him around the hospital to make sure using the chair wouldn't send him into spasms, and upon finding that it didn't, congratulated Bauby on being able to "handle the wheelchair" before returning him to his room and abandoning him once again. Bauby, depressed, felt like the nurses and orderlies helping him back into bed had been like "movie gangsters struggling to fit [a] body into the trunk of their car." Bauby laid in bed alone, watching the rain pour down outside.

Bauby wrestles daily with feeling like a piece of meat—like a disposable object. Though his nurses and caretakers mean well, he finds himself humiliated by the physical and emotional way they handle him, and he resents being infantilized, lied to, and carted around against his will.

PRAYER

Once Bauby had been introduced to the wheelchair, he knew he was an "official quadriplegic"—he would not recover. He began to give up his "grandiose plans," and in spite of the sadness of doing so, he felt a burden lifted off of himself—and noticed one lift from the shoulders of his friends, family, and other visitors. Bauby realizes now that though he'll never walk, talk, or move normally again, there are small hopes for improvement: the blinking of his eyelids suggests that his nervous system has begun a very slow recovery. In a few years, he thinks, he may even expect to "wiggle [his] toes." He hopes that his respiratory functions will soon return, and he'll be able to breathe and perhaps even eat without the assistance of tubes and machines.

It was difficult, in the beginning, for Bauby to accept the truth of his fate. Now, though, he has more realistic expectations for what his new life might one day look like. He has resigned himself to being a quadriplegic, and has begun carving out smaller dreams for himself. This is not admitting defeat, but rather its opposite: it is renewed determination in the face of devastating news.

Bauby thinks of all the people he loves, and all the prayers they've dedicated to him across the world over the years. Many of Bauby's friends travel widely, and they tell him often that they've prayed for him in places like chapels across France, temples in Nepal, and with holy men in Cameroon. He thinks, too, of his daughter, Céleste, whom he knows prays for him each night. Since the two of them fall asleep at roughly the same time, Bauby feels protected and "shield[ed] from all harm" by his daughter's prayers especially.

Though the first half of this chapter is concerned with the tough reality of what Bauby can expect from his future, the second half is more hopeful and dreamlike. Bauby knows that a tough road lies ahead—but as he considers all the prayers people are putting out into the world on his behalf, he feels bolstered by the love and support of his friends and family. He may be physically isolated, but emotionally he is surrounded and held.

BATHTIME

Each morning at eight-thirty, Bauby's physical therapist Brigitte arrives to exercise his arms and legs. Bauby feels the exercise, which is called "mobilization," is useless—he has lost "sixty-six pounds in just twenty weeks." Still, Bauby is able to see the irony of the fact that he started a diet the week before his stroke, hoping to lose some weight.

Bauby begins injecting his wry sense of humor and irony into the narrative as he examines the cruel—but kind of funny—fact that his dreams of weight loss did materialize after all, just in a much more dramatic way than he'd ever imagined.

Though Brigitte tries to get Bauby to squeeze his fingers as hard as he can, he cannot move his limbs. In a new development, he can turn his head about ninety degrees and can open his mouth about enough to insert a lollipop between his lips. As the physical therapy session ends and Brigitte massages his face, Bauby feels comforted by the ritual.

Bauby is no doubt frustrated with his miniscule progress much of the time—but in this passage, he shows how comforting, relaxing, and encouraging much of the work he does with Brigitte really is, and how much it inspires and renews him.

Bauby admits that he finds it at least "amusing"—and sometimes even comforting—that, at forty-five years old, he is back to having his "bottom wiped and swaddled like a newborn." He feels a sense of "guilty pleasure from this total lapse into infancy" some days—but other days he is painfully depressed by the state of his health, especially during his weekly bath. Each week, being sponged down, Bauby is reminded of the luxurious baths he used to love taking—soaks during which he'd drink good Scotch and read for hours. As he recalls his old life, he is "cruelly" aware of his new one.

Bauby goes back and forth between hope and determination and an abject, "cruel" awareness of his reality. In moments as ludicrous as his weekly sponge bath, both despair and humor are deeply present. Bauby is learning how to handle these conflicting feelings and avoid surrendering to the darker side of his emotions.

THE ALPHABET

At night, Bauby dreams of the letters of the alphabet—but now, after the accident, they appear to him in a strange new order. So that he can "dictate" his book, Bauby's interlocutor has arranged the alphabet "according to the frequency of its use in the French language." E is first, followed by S, A, R, I, N, T, and so on. As the interpreter—or Bauby's visitors who wish to talk with him—recite the alphabet, he waits until he hears the letter the word he wishes to "say" starts with, and then blinks. Then the recitation begins over again, until slowly, the words Bauby wants to speak come together.

As Bauby describes the manner in which he dictates his thoughts and feelings to others, readers get a sense of how difficult, laborious, and slow the process is. Bauby's determination not just to use the alphabet to communicate with his caretakers or loved ones—but to take on the writing of an entire book—is a testament to his resilience and ironclad will.

The system is not perfect, and often Bauby and his visitors grow frustrated when he either misspells a word or when his companions misread a blink and select the wrong letter. The process is "laborious," and often there are mix-ups, but Bauby still manages to reflect on the poetic nature of the French language and the similarities between words such as glasses ("lunettes") and moon ("lune.")

Even when Bauby struggles with the system that's been put in place for him, he's able to see the poetry and coincidences in language and communication.

THE EMPRESS

The main hall of the Naval Hospital where Bauby is a patient is decorated in art which pays homage to Empress Eugénie, "the wife of Napoléon III [and] the hospital's patroness." The "mini-museum" features a letter to the editor of an old magazine describing the Empress's "brief" visit to the hospital on May 4th, 1864. Bauby enjoys reading the letter and imagining himself among "the chattering flock of [Eugénie's] ladies-in-waiting," picturing the sumptuous details of the women's beautiful clothes and soothing voices as they visited with the hospital's patients.

During Bauby's long hours in the hospital, whether confined to his room or pushed through the halls, he uses his imagination to help pass the time and enrich his experience of his "new life." His imagination lets him travel to new and unexpected times and places, many of which are directly inspired by his curiosity about the things around him at Berck.

One afternoon, Bauby recalls, while sitting in his wheelchair in front of a glass-encased marble bust of Eugénie, Bauby caught sight of a man "who seemed to have emerged from a vat of formaldehyde" in the glass. Upon viewing his own "damaged," "doomed" face, Bauby felt a "strange euphoria" at the realization that not only had everything been stripped away from him—but that he had also become "horrible to behold." This "final blow from fate" allowed Bauby to at last see his predicament as a "joke," and as he began to laugh, he imagined Eugénie laughing with him.

Sometimes, the cruel reality of Bauby's situation becomes too much for him—such as in this moment, when he catches sight of his new face for the first time. Horrified but unwilling to surrender to sadness and despair, Bauby imagines a companion alongside him who laughs at the unbelievable sadness and irony of his situation.

CINECITTÀ

Bauby describes the Berck hospital where he is a patient. It has a "massive, overelaborate silhouette" and "high redbrick walls typical of northern France." Built originally as a refuge for sick children who needed a healthier climate than that of the hospitals in Paris, the hospital's façade still bears the words "City of Paris" even though it is far from the city in France's northern Pas de Calais region. The interior of the hospital is a confusing maze, and during wheelchair outings around the building and the grounds, Bauby often encounters patients who have found themselves lost.

The hospital's imposing structure and mazelike construction are a kind of metaphor for the ways in which Bauby feels encased not just in the building itself but in his own body and mind.

On one of Bauby's very first wheelchair "expeditions," shortly after awakening from his coma, he spotted a tall red-and-white striped lighthouse at the edge of the hospital grounds. Bauby often asks to be wheeled to "Cinecittà," the nickname he has given to the "perpetually deserted terrace" of one of the hospital's wards, so that he can look out at the lighthouse and the sea beyond. Cinecittà is the name of the largest film studio from Europe—and from the balcony he's given this name to, Bauby looks out at the town below and directs movies in his head, waiting for the setting of the sun and the "hope-filled beams" of the lighthouse to shine.

Bauby is divulging more of his secret techniques for passing the time and entertaining himself. By allowing his imagination to take flight, and by seeking out corners of the hospital which allow him to feel free rather than enclosed, he's making the most of his situation and finding pockets of hope, beauty, and indeed escape.

TOURISTS

Berck, originally a children's hospital, now focuses mostly on aged patients—though the hospital also houses coma patients, obese patients, and "a battalion of cripples" who are recovering from accidents. Bauby calls these patients "tourists," due to their short stays and good prognoses. Bauby and his fellow neurological patients, on the other hand, are "ravens of doom" who bring decided "uneasiness" to other patients whenever they're wheeled to other wings of the hospital. In daily sessions in the rehabilitation room, as Bauby lies "tethered to an inclined board that is slowly raised to a vertical position," he endures worried stares—and even sometimes cruel jokes—from the "tourists" and their visitors.

Bauby feels no small measure of resentment towards the "tourists" whose lives will soon go back to normal, while his will remain forever changed and yet unchanging during the long hours, days, months, and years ahead of him at Berck. Though Bauby is hopeful and resilient, it would be impossible for a bit of resentment, anger, and sadness not to creep in at the edges of his thoughts.

THE SAUSAGE

Every day, after his session on the vertical board, Bauby is returned to his room and his bed. Every day, without fail, the nurse's aide transporting him wishes him "Bon appetit!" since it is about lunchtime when he returns to his room. As Bauby has been unable to swallow anything over the last eight months other than a few drops of water and half a teaspoon of yogurt, he finds this cheerful wish ridiculous. Bauby is fed through a tube now—and "for pleasure," he must turn to his memories of eating delectable meals before his accident.

Though Bauby's nurses and aides are no doubt just trying to be pleasant and cheerful, he's struck by the cruel irony of their words—words which, at a certain point, become so meaningless and ludicrous they take on a strange humor.

Daily, Bauby imagines lush, decadent meals of escargot, soft-boiled eggs, fresh vegetables, tender fish, and fatty steaks. He rotates the menu in his head as the seasons pass, imagining "oysters and game [in] the autumn" and cooler meals of melon and fruit in the summertime. In the weeks after awakening from his coma, Bauby was "gluttonous," but these days he is content to imagine meals of simple things, like a good sausage—his favorite meal all through his childhood, which his ailing grandfather's nurse (and later, wife) often served him on visits to the old man's apartment.

In this passage, Bauby shows how he takes his nurses' ludicrous wish—"Bon appetit!"—quite seriously after a while, deciding not to despair over the foods he can't eat but instead lose himself in sumptuous memories of his life's greatest meals.

GUARDIAN ANGEL

Sandrine's badge reads "Speech Therapist," but Bauby thinks it should read "Guardian Angel." Sandrine is the woman who created the communication code without which Bauby would be "cut off from the world." Though Bauby's friends, family, and visitors have adopted the system, however, most of the hospital staff (except Sandrine herself and Bauby's psychologist) fail to use it. This forces Bauby into a kind of solitude as he faces off with staff members who carefully decipher his messages and those who ignore his delicate, esoteric attempts to communicate entirely. Sandrine's visits are one of the few from the hospital staff that allows Bauby to feel the "invisible and eternally imprisoning **diving bell**" lift off of him.

Someone in Bauby's position might easily slide into despair and decide that communicating with the outside world was too difficult, too painful, or simply not worth it. Bauby, however, sees the chance to communicate—no matter how much it requires of him—as a godsend, and the only thing, some days, that allows him to feel like his true self.

As he has been in recovery, Bauby has come to marvel at the "art" that is speech therapy. He is confounded by the effort it now takes for him "puff out one or two" sounds on a "good day." Once, he was able to hoarsely whisper the sounds of the whole alphabet, but the exercise exhausted him entirely.

Bauby's healing continues, and yet he is constantly aware of how often tasks in his "new life" are herculean compared to their unquestioned ease in his old one.

Sandrine often helps Bauby take phone calls, and holds the phone to his ear while his loved ones, like his daughter Céleste and his aging father, tell him stories from their lives. Bauby wishes he could respond "with something other than silence." Once, when his partner Florence asked him over the phone if he was still "there," Bauby was forced to "admit that at times" he simply doesn't know anymore.

Bauby has been given a lifeline by Sandrine and the others who have the patience to use the communication code—but he is sometimes still dragged down by the fear of losing touch not just with his loved ones, but with who he always thought he was.

THE PHOTO

The last time Jean-Dominique Bauby saw his father was the week of his stroke. He was caring for his father, who had fallen ill, and made the man tea and shaved his face. The act of shaving his father's beard has become "engraved" in Bauby's memory, and he can perfectly recall his father's aging face, "emaciated features," and thick "snow white" hair. Bauby has not seen his father since he left the man's apartment after shaving him—they are both trapped, infirmed, and "locked-in" in their own ways.

In this passage, Bauby reflects on the painful parallels between his situation and his father's, and laments that they are both, in a way, paralyzed. He loses himself in memories of happier times—realizing that even moments that seemed tinged by sickness or strife were precious and sacred.

Bauby's father calls him "every now and then," and has sent him letters in the mail. One letter contained a photograph of Bauby as a young boy at a miniature golf course—as Bauby looked at the photograph, he realized it was taken in 1963 in Berck-sur-Mer, the same town where Bauby is now a patient.

Strange ironies and coincidences seem to be around every corner lately, and Bauby marvels at their frequency and profundity.

YET ANOTHER COINCIDENCE

Though Bauby believes that most readers of Alexandre Dumas's work would pick as their favorite characters D'Artagnan from *The Three Musketeers* or Edmond Dantès from *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Bauby now feels his favorite of Dumas's creations is the "sinister" Noirtier de Villefort from *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The "living mummy," a "profoundly handicapped creature" who communicates only through blinking, is, Bauby now realizes, literature's first "and so far only" character with locked-in syndrome.

Bauby's struggles have given him an unbelievable set of challenges—but have also allowed him to explore a new perspective on things he'd always taken for granted. He sees himself in characters and experiences he'd never considered before, and has a newfound empathy and appreciation for things he'd known all his life.

Before his stroke, Bauby had just finished rereading *The Count of Monte Cristo* for the first time in years. He had been "toying with the idea" of writing a modern-day adaptation of the novel himself—and feels his cruelly ironic meeting with the same fate as Noirtier is a kind of "punishment" for even thinking about tampering with a "masterpiece." Now, "to foil the decrees of fate," Bauby is imagining writing a novel which features a Noirtier-esque character who is "not a paralytic but a runner."

Bauby wonders whether he is being punished for presuming to believe he could empathize with the experience of a paralytic as a well man. His humorous declaration that he is trying to re-transform himself into a healthy, able person by imagining himself as a character who is a "runner" shows that the irony and humor at the heart of the strange twists of fate he's suffered are not lost on him.

THE DREAM

Bauby has found that the dreams of the December before his stroke are "etch[ed]" in his memory. One such dream he remembers in particularly stark detail. In it, he and a friend, are walking through a thick snow, trying to get back to France from an Italian resort. A strikers' picket line interrupts their journey at the border. The men walk over a concrete bridge to meet with an "influential Italian businessman," who has installed an office in a high-voltage room beneath the overpass. Inside is Radovan Karadzic, leader of the Bosnian Serbs, who performs a tracheotomy on Bauby before bringing him to a bar where a beautiful hostess plies him with alcohol. Bauby loses consciousness, and wakes to a loud noise. The hostess tells him the police are coming. As Bauby tries to run away, through the snow, though, he finds himself paralyzed and "unable to utter a word."

This strange dream Bauby describes contains themes of isolation, entrapment, illness, and dependence on others—all things that his current existence is made up of. The dream, which occurred before his stroke, then takes on a prophetic quality—causing Bauby to wonder whether his stroke was a coincidence or an outcome his body and subconscious had, on some level, been trying to prepare him for.

VOICE OFFSTAGE

Bauby recalls the late January morning when he first awoke from his coma. He awoke to find an ophthalmologist leaning over him, sewing his right eyelid shut. Bauby felt a terror that the man would sew his left one shut, too, but luckily the doctor stopped, packed away his tools, and declared that the right eye would need to rest for six months. Bauby peered at the man through his good eye, but the arrogant doctor did not notice his patient's attempt to communicate. Bauby has, in the months since, stoked a loathing for this inattentive doctor, whose visits he both hates and relishes because they allow him to feel such strong emotions.

Though Bauby is surrounded by many genuinely kind caretakers, interpreters, nurses, and doctors—and even those he sees as incompetent are often well-meaning—he still has to contend with the fact that some of the people in charge of helping him adjust to his new life are simply ill-fitted to the job.

Bauby often feels he is in a kind of pressure cooker in the hospital—so much so that "*The Pressure Cooker*" is what he wants to title the play he is planning on writing based on his experiences in the hospital. Bauby envisions a "voice offstage" providing the inner monologue of the main character. In the play, Bauby envisions the main character, "Mr. L," realizing in the final scene that his entire ordeal has been nothing but a dream.

Bauby feels a lot of anger and indignancy at his situation—and uses the vast landscape of his mind to imagine fictional scenarios for fictional versions of himself that allow him to feel catharsis, relief, and wishful hope.

MY LUCKY DAY

Bauby is having a difficult morning. The alarm on his feeding tube beeps incessantly, he is sweating profusely, his right eyelid—taped shut since the sutures have been removed—is irritated from said sweat, and his catheter has become detached, leaving him drenched in his own urine. Bauby can do nothing, though, but lie inert and hum to himself while "awaiting rescue." When a nurse finally enters the room, she switches on the TV before even looking at Bauby—a commercial plays in which a computer spells out the question: "Were you born lucky?"

In this brief anecdote—as sad and pitiful as it is funny—Bauby shows how his particular situation has taught him patience and stoked his sense of humor. In awful, uncomfortable moments, Bauby can do nothing to extricate himself from them—he must simply lie in wait for either his circumstances or mood to change, and often, he must force himself to change his mood first.

OUR VERY OWN MADONNA

Many of Bauby's friends have jokingly asked whether he would consider making a journey to pray at the Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes, a major Catholic pilgrimage site since the mid-1800s. Bauby tells these friends that he already made the trip, years ago, at the end of the seventies. He went on a road trip there with his then-girlfriend, a woman named Joséphine, a high-maintenance and dramatic woman—their relationship was deteriorating even before the start of the trip. Joséphine was angry because Bauby was enmeshed in reading an absorbing, seven-hundred-page novel, and didn't want to participate in any activities along the way.

Bauby's recollection of a disastrous trip to a touristy pilgrimage site with a demanding girlfriend (with whom he was on the verge of breaking up) is both humorous and profound. He recalls being self-absorbed and isolated during the trip in spite of his purported closeness with Joséphine, perhaps suggesting that his life was characterized by reclusiveness even before his stroke.

After checking into a hotel, a difficulty at the height of tourist season, Bauby wanted to continue reading, but Joséphine insisted on going right back out to see the Madonna, at a grotto whose springs are rumored to have healing powers. The two went out, even though the sky threatened a storm, and at the Madonna, Bauby encountered a group of paraplegics in wheelchairs. He couldn't help but stare.

Bauby's memory of encountering a large group of disabled individuals at the site of the Madonna shows how previously unremarkable memories from his old life have now become tinged with deep meaning and strange, coincidental energy in the wake of his stroke.

As rain began coming down, Bauby tried to get Joséphine to get out of the long line for the grotto, and as a measure of desperation told her that he didn't want to be the only well people visiting the statue—should a miracle occur, he joked, they might both become paralyzed. The two returned to town, where Bauby purchased a small Madonna lamp for the sulky Joséphine.

Bauby's cruel joke about being transformed into a paralytic should the statue work its magic in reverse takes on a perverse irony as he looks back on the moment from his present situation.

Back in their hotel room, after Joséphine fell asleep for the evening, Bauby dressed for a nighttime walk to tire himself out from the stressful day. After wandering around the city for a while, he returned to the hotel and cracked open his tome to find that Joséphine had scrawled a long letter to him in thick ink over several of the book's pages—pages that Bauby had already read. He ignored Josephine's notes, finished the novel, and turned off the Madonna lamp as dawn was breaking.

Bauby's cruel dismissal of Joséphine's beliefs and his desire to isolate himself from her physically, emotionally, and intellectually ring with new sadness and cruelty given the profound isolation of Bauby's current situation.

THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

Bauby's ex-lover Sylvie pushes him in his wheelchair down one of the hospital's corridors while their two children, Théophile and Céleste, walk alongside the chair. Théophile tenderly dabs drool from his father's chin with a Kleenex, and when the wheelchair slows down at the end of the hall, Céleste covers Bauby's forehead in kisses. Today is Father's Day—a holiday Bauby and his family never celebrated before his stroke. As happy as he is to have his children with him on this symbolic day, he worries that his appearance and stillness upset them.

This passage shows how Bauby's whole family's lives have been changed by his stroke. Things that once seemed trivial or inconsequential, like the celebration of Father's Day, are now moments for connection and togetherness that take on a new weight and profundity for them all.

Sylvie wheels Bauby out to a little sand dune outside of the hospital walls, and as Théophile and Céleste talk to him, Bauby laments that he cannot reply wittily and jokingly to their fast-paced remarks. The three of them play a game of hangman, but Bauby is distracted—he is too depressed by how painful it is to interact with his children in his current "monstrous, iniquitous, revolting, horrible" condition. He begins to cry quietly while Théophile wins the game. Bauby turns away from the paper and watches as the athletic Céleste cartwheels up and down the shore, and then begins singing and dancing for her family and all the others gathered on the dunes.

Even when Bauby is with his family, enjoying a pleasant summer day, he feels he isn't fully present in the moment. He isn't his old self—he can't respond with witty remarks or dance on the sand with his children. There is a profound isolation even in his moments of connection with those he loves—a kind of loneliness he is realizing he'll never be able to erase.

Céleste's little show sends Bauby down memory lane, and he recalls listening to the records she's singing songs from and summons their album covers to his mind's eye. When Céleste finishes, she and Théophile play on the beach for a little while and Sylvie sits silently with Bauby, squeezing his hand and weeping.

Bauby's memories of his own carefree past comingle with his daughter's joyful performance, causing him to feel deeply emotional and full of longing for the simplicity and ease of the past.

Soon it is late, and it is time for Bauby's family to leave. They all return him to his room and say goodbye—as they head out the door, Bauby laments that, although he himself has had a "wonderful" day, his children have had little more than a "field trip into [his own] endless solitude."

Bauby loves visits from his friends and especially his family—but at the same time, he worries that in allowing them to visit, he is exposing them to the vulnerability of his profound isolation and loneliness and hurting them in the process.

PARIS

Bauby is sad to realize that his old life is fading away—it "burns within" him sometimes still, but his memories are slowly, surely turning to "ashes." He recalls two medical trips to Paris made "since taking up residence in [his] diving bell." On the first, looking at the city through the windows of the ambulance transporting him, he became emotional when he passed by the high-rise building which housed the offices of *Elle* magazine, where Bauby was once the editor in chief. On the second trip back to Paris, he felt "unmoved" by the sight of the office building—the city streets appeared to him as a "movie background," a set from which he was the only thing missing.

Bauby looks back on his memories of returning to Paris to find that, by his second trip back, he felt almost nothing as he passed through the city. This shows that, in spite of his stagnant state, Bauby is indeed changing—the things that were once important to him are now mere facsimiles of themselves. His old life is truly gone, and the new person he's become has overshadowed who he once was. This fact is both heartening and deeply sad.

THE VEGETABLE

In the early weeks of June six months after his stroke, Bauby began composing a bulletin newsletter for friends and associates, which he writes and sends out monthly with the help of Sandrine. He'd learned that his old coworkers had started rumors that he'd become a "total vegetable," and he wanted to try to dispel the mean-spirited gossip. His "hubris," which motivated the first newsletter, has surprisingly had "gratifying results"—his friends and former associates now know they can "join [him] in [his] **diving bell**."

Bauby, once a charismatic and powerful man, laments that gossip now paints him as a shell of his former self. Determined to take the narrative back into his own hands, he sends out a bulletin almost as a snide act of revenge—but finds that he is actually able to start a real, profound dialogue with many of his coworkers, and feels less alone through his communication with them.

Bauby now receives many "remarkable letters" which range from ones that are serious and existential and touch upon "the meaning of life" to ones that are chatty and quotidian, in which his friends simply capture "small slices of life" and relay them. He hoards the letters he receives like "treasure," and feels they "keep the vultures at bay."

The unexpectedly deep, beautiful letters Bauby begins receiving restore his faith in the act of reaching out to one's fellow humans, and allow him to keep the dark "vultures" of his most painful thoughts away for a while longer.

OUTING

In this stifling heat of summer, Bauby takes a wheelchair excursion down the promenade along the shore. He hasn't been down the promenade since winter, and though the route down there is "grueling" and full of potholes, once his interlocutor Claude and his old friend Brice get him down to the shore, he begins enjoying himself. He has only known Claude, a young woman, for two weeks; as Brice, his friend of two decades, tells her stories all about Bauby's former life, Bauby delights in Claude's amazement as she takes in tales of who he used to be. The trio continues down the boardwalk past a carousel, running into a couple other patients before reaching the destination Bauby has in mind: a seaside fry shack, where they stop so Bauby can take in the fragrant smell.

This pleasant anecdote about a day down by the shore shows that Bauby's life is not without its simple pleasures—nor is it one of isolation. He has brought many people together—total strangers, united only by their shared love of Jean-Dominique and their belief in him.

TWENTY TO ONE

As Bauby's old friend Vincent drives from Paris to Berck to pay him a visit, Bauby recalls a memory from their time as young men working at a now-defunct daily newspaper. Bauby's mind moves back and forth between memories of working hard seven days a week at the paper with Vincent and imaginings of the frustrating route ahead of Vincent now as he drives the small backroads towards Berck—a trip he has made many times, devoted as he is to visiting Bauby despite the poor roads and constant construction.

Bauby happily and somewhat anxiously anticipates visits with friends and family. These exciting visits allow him to break up the monotony of his time at Berck and experience true joy—even as he knows the visits must weigh on his friends and family and prove burdensome for them.

One Sunday, Bauby and Vincent went to the racetrack. Though neither was a racing fan, the track correspondent gave the newsmen a tip about a "guaranteed winner," a horse called **Mithra-Grandchamp**, whose odds were twenty to one. The two men ate lunch at a restaurant overlooking the track alongside "gangsters [and] pimps, parolees, and other shady characters." The men smoked cigars, ate, drank, and lingered so long in the restaurant that they missed the chance to put their bets in—they'd collected money from all their coworkers, assured that the horse would win and all would receive a large payout. Vincent and Bauby watched helplessly as the race they'd failed to bet on was run—and Mithra-Grandchamp, as foretold, won the race by a lead of five lengths. Vincent and Bauby imagined their coworkers, who must have been "going wild around the TV screen" back at work.

As Bauby looks back on his and Vincent's folly on the day of Mithra-Grandchamp's fateful race, he points out the irony in their having missed out on the chance to pick a winner, and the strangeness, pleasantness, and humorousness of the day. This is clearly a happy memory for Bauby, even in spite of the fact that he and his friend lost out on a great deal of money and botched the purpose of their journey to the race track.

As Vincent, in the present, arrives at Berck and enters Bauby's hospital room, Bauby notices a "transient gleam of fear" pass his old friend's face. Nonetheless, Vincent approaches Bauby, kisses his forehead, and sits beside him. Bauby had, until today, forgotten all about the story of **Mithra-Grandchamp**—but now, he sees the horse as a larger metaphor for all the things he and Vincent narrowly missed out on in life. Bauby cannot help but feel that his life, in retrospect, is "a string of those small near misses."

Bauby feels a tinge of melancholy as he thinks about the Mithra-Grandchamp race in the context of his paralysis. All of the "near misses" that make up a life seem small and inconsequential along the way—but the paths these misses open up and the ways they alter the course of a life can ultimately be enormous.

THE DUCK HUNT

Bauby describes the "serious hearing disorder" he has experienced since his stroke, in which his right ear is blocked completely while his left ear "amplifies and distorts all sounds father than ten feet away." Even a plane flying overhead sounds as loud as a coffee grinder going off right beside Bauby's ear. The many nurses and orderlies who attend to him often forget to close the door to his hospital room, leaving him at the mercy of the clattering chaos in the halls of Berck.

Bauby's needs are not always met at Berck—it is a large hospital with many patients in it, and his nurses and orderlies, well-meaning as they may be, sometimes fall down on the job and leave Bauby at the mercy of his own changed body.

Bauby describes hearing gurneys, floor waxing machines, and other "auditory foretaste[s] of hell." The worst offenders, though, are his fellow patients. One neighbor, a young child, was given as a gift a plush motion-sensor-equipped duck which quacked loudly when someone entered the room; one woman, who emerged from a coma "demented," screamed "Fire!" over and over again at the top of her lungs several times a day.

Bauby describes the "hell[ish]" atmosphere his ward can have when things get too noisy—but even as he describes the deafening, sometimes frightful sounds, there's an air of humorous chaos to his narration.

In rare moments of peace and quiet, Bauby likes to focus on the softly-fluttering **butterflies** inside his head. Their "barely audible" wingbeats require close attention, and Bauby is amazed by his ability to hear them better all the time even as his hearing does not improve one bit.

Bauby is able to distract himself from misery and annoyance by focusing on the butterflies in his mind—a symbol and metaphor for his newfound ability to find comfort as his mind takes flight, bearing him away from Berck and towards his dreams and fantasies.

SUNDAY

Bauby watches through the window as the red bricks of the hospital buildings are saturated with the brilliant light of dawn. The shade reminds him of a Greek grammar book he loved as a high school student. In spite of the pleasant memories, though, Bauby is full of dread. Today is Sunday—he hates Sundays, because if he is "unlucky enough" to have no visitors, there will be nothing else to break up the long hours. On Sunday there are no visits from the physical therapist, the speech pathologist, or the psychologist. "Sunday," Bauby writes, "is a long stretch of desert," and even the nurses are gloomy and lethargic on this day of the week.

Bauby's descriptions of the rhythms of hospital life largely focus on the constant chaos around him, the closeness of his proximity to others' suffering, and the endless routines which mark his days. In this chapter, though, he focuses on what happens when stillness and languor descend—and he finds himself missing the distractions that allow him to pass the time as the days go by.

Looking at the calendar on the wall, Bauby is confronted by the paradox that is time. Though the "hours drag," the months "flash by"—it is already August, and summer is nearly over. He closes his eyes and pictures his friends' summer vacations with their families, and the luxurious, lazy days they're no doubt spending boating, painting, and swimming. As he does so, a small fly lands on his nose—he tries to wiggle his head to shake it off, but he cannot dislodge it.

While all of Bauby's friends are enjoying their summers and taking refuge in the long hot days of summer, to Bauby, these hours are a curse. He feels profoundly trapped, unable to do anything but wait for time to go by.

THE LADIES OF HONG KONG

In his old life, Bauby writes, he "loved to travel." He has stored enough "pictures, smells, and sensations" in his mind over the years to enable himself to "leave Berck far behind" using only his imagination and memories. Every day this week has been rainy and dull—and so every morning, Bauby has been flying in his mind to Hong Kong, where he knows a conference for the international editions of *Elle* is taking place. He still feels that the magazine is "his," and misses the work he did there. Bauby has never actually visited Hong Kong, and is forced to imagine the city from scratch, so to speak.

Throughout the book, readers have seen Bauby look back on memories wistfully, with an air of sadness, and invent fantastical situations for himself that are tinged with that same sense of loss. Here, though, as Bauby explores the powers of his imagination, he finds himself relishing his own fantasies and enjoying the act of constructing an alternate present for himself bit by bit.

Bauby pictures his colleagues, "tireless [...] ambassadors of French style," standing around in hotels and discussing the "typical *Elle* woman." He imagines them walking through the "neon-bright streets" of Hong Kong, taking in the sights, drinking in hotel bars, and soaking up the "international glamour."

Bauby clearly luxuriates in these escapist fantasies, which comingle past, present, and future as he envisions an end to his confinement and a return to his previous life.

THE MESSAGE

Bauby's corner of the hospital looks like an "expensive private school"—but the cafeteria crowd of boys and girls are tough and hardened, and often talk about "fistfights and motorbikes" as they eat and chain-smoke together at meals. Whenever Bauby is wheeled through the smoky crowds of young people, he feels utterly alone—they look at him with "neither pity nor compassion." On a table in the cafeteria is a typewriter with a sheet of pink paper in the roller, and every time Bauby wheels by it, he checks to see if there is a message waiting there for him.

This brief, esoteric chapter seems to speak to Bauby's sense of isolation, even in spite of his frequent visits from nurses, therapists, friends, and family. He longs for the feeling of being part of a community—and to be singled out as special, to be wanted as a friend, to be recognized as human by strangers.

AT THE WAX MUSEUM

Last night in a dream, Bauby writes, he visited the Musée Grévin—Paris's wax museum. Rather than wax figures on exhibit there, however, Bauby found the faces of the male and female nurses and orderlies who care for him at Berck. Many of these staff members "terrified" Bauby during his early days at Berck, and even drove him to rage and anger as they failed to care for him in the ways he needed to be cared for—but now, he understands that they are doing their best at a very "delicate mission." Bauby has now nicknamed many of these attendants, and he has developed a fondness for several of them—a fondness he only realizes during his dream about looking upon their waxen faces.

As Bauby describes his strange journey through the wax-museum version of Berck, he reflects on how far he has come since his arrival. The figures that once loomed over him and terrified him, barely appearing as human, are now among his most cherished comrades in life.

In the dream, Bauby wandered from a hall containing all the nurses and orderlies to a hall which replicated his own room—only there was no figure of himself in the bed "just a hollow in the middle of the yellow sheets." Nevertheless, "watchers" rendered in wax lined either side of the bed, looking down on the emptiness. His friends, his partner Florence, and many loved ones looked down, projecting "great tenderness" and "a shared sorrow." Bauby moved on from the exhibit, hoping to see the rest of the "museum," but was awakened by a real nurse flashing a light in his face and offering him a sleeping pill.

What is strange about the dream is that even Bauby's loved ones appear to him as cold, hard, unchangeable wax. This suggests that Bauby is drifting further from his friends and family in spite of his ability to remain close and in constant communication with them.

THE MYTHMAKER

Bauby recalls one of his school friends as a young boy, a "mythomania[c]" named Olivier who spun wild and obviously false stories about his travels, his dramas, and his luxurious lifestyle. He lied wildly about his life, claiming to be an orphan one moment and a pampered only child the next. The stories had no coherence or consistency, and yet even in the face of the protestations of Bauby and other children, Olivier insisted all his fabrications were real.

Bauby's memories of the fanciful, mendacious Olivier are tinged with an air of annoyance and superiority—but at the same time, he's acknowledging that the very things he once resented or made fun of Olivier for are now at the heart of his own life.

Having looked the adult Olivier up some time before his stroke, Bauby discovered that the man worked in advertising—a fitting profession, Bauby thinks. Though he once looked down on Olivier for his nonsensical, desperate storytelling, he now "env[ies] him his mastery" of the art of telling tales. Now, in his locked-in state, Bauby himself is forced to spend lots of time in his imagination, coming up with fanciful "substitute destinies" which allow him to escape the depressing monotony of his new life.

Here, Bauby examines the irony of the fact that he once looked down on Olivier for spinning such unbelievable flights of fancy, when now he himself is forced to do just that in order to merely cope with the hand he's been dealt. He feels more empathy for Olivier, even as he admits to feeling a kind of embarrassment for himself.

"A DAY IN THE LIFE"

Bauby looks back on the "disastrous" day of his stroke—Friday, December 8th, 1995. He has put off describing the day of the disaster, though he's been planning on including it in this book since he started composing it in his head. He dreads describing the "elusive" and "futile" hours of his final day in the normal world, and hates looking back on the ungrateful and "zombie"-like way he moved through the world. The "mechanical" way he carried out the simplest tasks that now seem insurmountable and "miraculous" embarrasses him.

It is obviously very painful for Bauby to use his memory to return to the day of his stroke. He relies on his memory, now, to be a source of comfort—to drag the most painful day of his life out and put it on display is a great effort. Not only that, but the cavalier, unthinking way he moved through the world before his stroke shames and angers him—he never understood how "miraculous" his life really was.

On the day of his stroke, Bauby had hired a driver to help him test-drive a new model of a luxe BMW. After kissing his partner Florence goodbye briefly, he headed outside and got in the car, and the "pleasant" driver began ferrying him through the city to work. Bauby announced his plans to later pick up his children from their mother's place. Since separating from Sylvie, Bauby had felt a strain on his relationship with his children, and hoped to connect with them over a beautiful weekend together.

Bauby's last day of his "old life" got off to a normal start—normal for him, but luxurious and extravagant by any other standards. Bauby again laments not being fully grateful for the things he had, and for wasting time worrying about trivial matters rather than leaping at the chance to truly connect with his family.

At work, Bauby did minor "damage control" on a magazine interview subject unhappy with the pictures of her slated to appear in the magazine, spending forty-five minutes on the phone with an unnamed celebrity. He then attended a luncheon on the top floor of the magazine—though he says he hardly remembers his last meal. After work, the driver once again picked Bauby up and began ferrying him through traffic to Sylvie's. He recalls seeing Théophile waiting for him at the gate—but after this point, he writes, everything becomes blurry.

Bauby recalls the structure of his day—but admits somewhat sheepishly that in spite of the day's significance, many of its details are lost to him. There is a terrible sense of dread as his memory of events edges later and later into the day, and the fateful moment occurs.

Bauby switched places with the driver, taking control of the BMW in spite of feeling ill and sweaty. At the first intersection past Sylvie's house, Bauby began seeing double, and exited the vehicle, asking the driver to take over and get him to his sister-in-law Diane's house. At Diane's house, Diane—a nurse—instructed the driver to go straight to a clinic ten miles away. The driver sped towards the clinic "grand-prix style," and when Bauby tried to open his mouth to tell the driver to slow down a bit, no sound came out. At the clinic, as Bauby was ushered into a wheelchair, he had one final thought before darkness descended: "Where could Théophile have got to?"

Bauby was determined to power through whatever he was feeling, not realizing that in a stroke, precious seconds stand between recovery and permanent damage to the brain and body. As Bauby recalls his last thoughts from his "old life," they are of no one but his children—not even his own health or well-being.

SEASON OF RENEWAL

It is late August—summer is nearly over. As everyone else's summers wind down and their lives return to normal, with work and school replacing vacations and leisure time, Bauby realizes that he has "indeed begun a new life"—a life within the corridors of Berck, and "nowhere else." He looks forward to having more visits from friends who will bring him stories of their eventful summers, and revels in a strange kind of relief: for the first time in his life, he does not have the "awful sense of a countdown" that accompanies the end of a holiday season.

Though Bauby spent part of his summer fantasizing about the summer trips he was missing out on, there's a part of him that's grateful to exist, in a way, outside of time and outside of society. He can no longer access the joys of his old life directly—but the stresses, sorrows, and small disappointments that crept in are things he's also now able to hold at arm's length.

As Claude reads to Bauby from the pages of the book they've assembled together slowly over the course of the summer, Bauby is full of both pride and anxiety. He wonders if his work really "add[s] up to a book." As Bauby takes in the room around him and looks carefully at Claude, he notices some objects sticking out of her purse: a hotel room key, a metro pass, and a hundred-franc note. He sees these items as "objects brought back by a space probe sent to earth to study how earthlings live." He finds himself feeling pensive and wondering whether "the cosmos contain[s] keys for opening up [his] **diving bell** [such as] a subway line with no terminus [or] a currency strong enough to buy [his] freedom back." Bauby determines that he must "keep looking."

Even after finishing the book, Bauby still feels, in part, unfulfilled. He has been able to open up his diving bell a crack, but he remains isolated and frustrated with his inability to truly break free of it. Bauby retreats into his imagination in the book's final lines, discussing sci-fi and fantasy solutions to his predicament as he imagines a future in which he is relieved of his solitude and able to regain his "freedom."

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