

Freak the Mighty



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RODMAN PHILBRICK

Philbrick was born in Boston, Massachusetts but he grew up in New Hampshire. He was an avid daydreamer and writer as a child; he began writing stories around age 12 and completed a novel-length work at age 16. Though Philbrick attended the University of New Hampshire and studied English, he never finished college. As a young man, Philbrick worked for a time as a boat builder and a longshoreman, which inspired his 2004 young adult novel *The Young Man and the Sea*. Though he began his writing career as a mystery and suspense author for adults, his fame skyrocketed when he published *Freak the Mighty*, his first young adult novel, in 1993. Since then, Philbrick's young adult novels have been his most critically and commercially successful works. He collaborated on several series for young adults with his wife, Lynn Harnett, who died in 2012. When Philbrick isn't writing, he spends his time fishing in both Maine and Florida.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The legend of King Arthur looms large over *Freak the Mighty*, as Freak sees parallels to himself in the legendary fifth- or sixth-century king. That Arthur was a real historical figure is debatable; most historians now believe he's entirely fictional. In the earliest stories, Arthur is a fierce warrior and protector of Britain, defending the country against the Saxons as well as against all manner of monsters. Freak, however, identifies far more with the more romantic Arthur figure that rose up after Geoffrey of Monmouth's 1130s pseudo-historical work *History of the Kings of Britain*. Around this time, Arthur turns into more of the "wimpy little kid" who so speaks to Freak. Literary works from this time on focus more on romance and on other knights of the round table, like Lancelot and Bedivere, sometimes sidelining Arthur entirely. Freak likely would've been inspired by the numerous books and films concerning King Arthur that came out after 1950, when people became interested in the legend again following a dip in its popularity during World War II. These include the Disney animated film *The Sword and the Stone* and the spoof *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, as well as T.H. White's novel [The Once and Future King](#).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In 1998, Philbrick published *Max the Mighty*, which continues Max's story after Freak's death. Other young adult novels that tackle issues of disability, difference, and friendship include R.J. Palacio's novel [Wonder](#), which follows a boy with another rare

genetic disorder; [Fish in a Tree](#) by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, which is about a young girl with dyslexia; and [Out of My Mind](#) by Sharon Draper, the story of a girl who cannot speak due to cerebral palsy but who, like Freak, is extremely intelligent. Additionally, other novels that focus on the intersections of friendship and imagination include [Bridge to Terabithia](#) by Katherine Paterson and [The Secret Garden](#) by Frances Hodgson Burnett. In interviews, Philbrick has said that Mark Twain ([The Adventures of Tom Sawyer](#); *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) is one of his favorite authors and is a major influence on his work.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Freak the Mighty
- **When Written:** 1992
- **Where Written:** Maine
- **When Published:** 1993
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel
- **Setting:** An unnamed American town
- **Climax:** Freak and Max escape from Kenny.
- **Antagonist:** Kenny (Killer) Kane
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Quick Turnaround. Rodman Philbrick wrote *Freak the Mighty* extremely quickly—it only took him two months.

Playing Favorites. Philbrick has said that of all the characters he's created and written about, Max is his favorite.



PLOT SUMMARY

Max introduces himself by saying that he didn't have a brain until he met Freak and they became **Freak the Mighty** together. Years ago, when Max first went to daycare, he was known as "Kicker" because he'd kick people. Max's caregivers, his grandparents Grim and Gram, thought that daycare would be good for Max—but all it did was give Max his first glimpse of Freak, whom he remembers as looking "fierce." Freak wore metal braces on his legs and he would hit other kids with his crutches. Years later, Freak taught Max that it's possible to remember anything, whether it happened or not. Max definitely remembers a time when he overheard Grim saying that Max doesn't just like "him"—Max is *like* "him" and so Max might hurt them. Gram shushed Grim and he pointed out that Max had big ears. Max inspected his ears to see if that's what made him look

like “him”—like Kenny, Max’s father.

The summer before eighth grade, Max is growing an inch a day and he can barely keep track of his feet. When he gets bored in his basement bedroom, which he calls the “down under,” he heads out of the house. Outside, he sees Freak, who is less than three feet tall, ordering movers around. When Freak notices Max, he points a crutch at Max and orders the “earthling” to announce himself. Terrified, Max runs back to the down under. After thinking for a while, Max goes back outside to spy on Freak. He sees Freak in the backyard, trying futilely to get something out of a tree, but he isn’t tall enough to reach even when he stands in a wagon. Max walks over and he plucks a tiny colorful thing out of the tree. Freak explains that it’s an **ornithopter**, a mechanical bird. They play with the bird until its rubber band breaks, and then Max pulls Freak’s wagon to his house and they go into the down under. Freak tells Max all about **King Arthur** and why he calls his mom, Gwen, “Gwen of Air”—it’s a play on the lady Guinevere from Arthurian legend. He explains that knights were the first robots and Max tries to hide the fact that he hates to read. The boys hear Gwen calling for Freak, and when she sees Max, she hurriedly whisks Freak away.

Later, Gram tells Max that Gwen called—Gwen feels bad for offending Max and she wants him to come for dinner. Max says that he knows Gwen was just scared of him, but Gram insists that Gwen isn’t scared of him. Max grudgingly agrees to go. Gwen apologizes and she says that Max looks just like Kenny, his father. Max tells the reader that it’s only a big deal that he looks like his father because Kenny is in prison and everyone knows what he did. That night, dinner at Freak’s house is fun; when Max gets home, he cries with happiness. A few days later, Grim and Gram agree that Max can go with Freak to watch the Fourth of July fireworks. They seem concerned that someone will step on Freak, but Max says they really need to watch out for the beer drinkers. Max is right: the local bully Tony D. drunkenly tries to torment Max and Freak. During the fireworks, Max lifts Freak onto his shoulders so that he can see. Freak remains there after the fireworks, and when Tony D.’s friends chase them, Freak steers Max into the local pond to escape and he flags down a cop car. The cops help free the boys, and Freak tells the cops that they’re “Freak the Mighty.” Back at home, Grim behaves oddly and he offers Max a cup of coffee. He commends Max for rescuing Freak, but Max tells the reader that Freak’s brain is what actually rescued him.

For the rest of the summer, Freak wakes Max up every morning so they can go on quests. One day, Freak announces a quest to the far East. He rides on Max’s shoulders for miles, through a ritzy neighborhood that, according to Freak, is full of castles. They reach the “fortress”—the hospital—and there, Freak explains that he comes to the medical research center every few months. They’re fitting him for a bionic body transplant. Max finds this extremely disturbing, but he can tell this is

important to Freak. Later that summer, Freak announces another quest to find treasure—but they must conduct this quest at three a.m., as the treasure is in a storm drain and it’s a secret. Max grudgingly accompanies Freak to the storm drain and he helps Freak fish out a purse that Tony D. stole and threw down there. They find an ID for a woman named Loretta Lee. Loretta Lee’s address is across the millpond, in the tenement buildings that everyone refers to as the New Testaments. Max isn’t supposed to go there, but Freak insists that they have to in order to complete their quest. When they reach the apartment, the door opens before the boys even knock to reveal a thin blond woman and a huge tattooed man. The woman is Loretta Lee, and Max knows they’re in big trouble: the man is Iggy Lee, the leader of a scary biker gang. Iggy tries to intimidate Max and Freak until Loretta realizes that Max is Kenny Kane’s son. Iggy doesn’t believe that Kenny will be in prison for life and he doesn’t want Kenny to hear that he messed with Max, so he lets Max and Freak go.

Max feels a sense of dread as school approaches. The adults decide that it would be good for Freak to have a helper, so Max is going to attend Freak’s classes instead of the “learning disabled” classes. Things go fine until English, when Mrs. Donelli tries to get Max to speak in front of the class. Kids taunt Max until Freak and Max become Freak the Mighty. Max feels proud, and Freak leads the class in a chant of “Freak the Mighty!” Mrs. Donelli sends them to the principal’s office. Mrs. Addison seems charmed by Freak and she lets the boys go. In October, Max learns that the hype surrounding Friday the 13th is real. Though school has been going well—Freak has taught Max to read, though Max still insists he can’t write—Max receives a disturbing summons to Mrs. Addison’s office. He’s convinced that she’s going to put him back in the learning disabled classes but instead, she tells him that Kenny is getting out on parole. Max screams that he doesn’t want to hear it, covers his ears, and curls up in the corner. When he comes to, the nurse is crying, so Max believes that he hurt her and doesn’t remember it. Mrs. Addison assures Max that she won’t make him see Kenny. Then, at lunch, Freak stops breathing and he has to go to the hospital. When Mrs. Addison tells Max that he’s had quite the day, Max points out that Freak is the one who had the bad day. Mrs. Addison says that Max is going to be okay.

Things go back to normal until right before Christmas, when Max hears Grim and Gram shouting, which they never do. Gram insists that Grim cannot get a gun since Kenny might break in, steal it, and shoot them all. Gram thinks the police will protect them, but Grim points out that they couldn’t protect Annie. Later, Grim talks privately with Max and he says that since Kenny is out on parole, he took out a restraining order so that Kenny can’t get near the house. Max suggests that Grim get a gun no matter what Gram says, but he agrees to stay near the house for a few days. Gwen and Freak join Grim, Gram, and Max for Christmas Eve. It’s a wonderful evening until Max

wakes up in the middle of the night to a cold wind and a huge hand on his face: it's Kenny. Kenny kidnaps Max, who's terrified. Max thinks that Kenny doesn't need armor—he's strong enough to get whatever he wants just like he is. Kenny leads Max to Iggy and Loretta's apartment in the Testaments. He menacingly scolds Iggy for allowing Loretta to drink and he forces Iggy to make him and Max burgers. Max can tell that Iggy is terrified.

Iggy then takes Max and Kenny to the apartment of an old lady who's out of town for the holidays. Max makes the mistake of looking at the door, which encourages Kenny to tie Max up. Kenny and Max sleep for a while, but Kenny later wakes Max up and he says that he didn't kill anyone; people just assume he's cruel because he's big. He says that Grim and Gram are awful people for getting him locked up and keeping him from seeing Max, and he swears on a Bible that he didn't kill Annie, Max's mother. Max stays up the rest of the night, trying not to remember horrific things. In the morning, Kenny snaps awake when Loretta brings them cold pizza. When they see a cop car go by, Kenny decides that they need to hide elsewhere while Iggy procures a gun and a car for them. Kenny leads Max to a burned-out building, helps him down the slippery stairs, and ties Max to an old boiler while he goes to find Iggy. Max thinks he sees and hears things, but then Loretta Lee stumbles down the stairs to free Max. She manages to cut the ropes binding Max's hands and feet, but Kenny appears out of nowhere and chokes her. Max feels like he's four years old again and watching Kenny kill Annie. He tries to hit Kenny and screams that he remembers Kenny murdering Annie. This distracts Kenny; he starts to choke Max instead.

Just then, Freak bursts in through the basement window with a squirt gun and he shoots Kenny in the face with what he says is sulfuric acid. Max scoops up Freak and they race out of the building, where they find police officers and Iggy Lee. The cops arrest Kenny and they get Loretta to the hospital. Max has to tell his story over and over again at the police station, and he dreads having to eventually testify. When school starts again, Mrs. Donelli puts up the photo of Max and Freak that ran in the papers on the bulletin board. Freak asks her to leave it up even though someone draws moustaches on them. Max ends up not having to testify; Kenny pleads guilty to all charges and he will be in prison for a long time. Despite this seemingly happy ending, Max still fears that he's going to grow up to be just like Kenny.

Freak's birthday party happens right after school lets out for the summer. It's a double birthday, as it's also Freak the Mighty's first birthday. Due to Freak's declining health, the party is a small affair. Freak receives a computer that will allow him to go to school over the phone, which confuses Max—he knows that Freak is going to receive a bionic body and so he'll never have to miss school. During the party, Freak has a seizure and he's taken to the hospital. Max can't bear to leave Freak alone so he walks to the hospital the next day with the

ornithopter. Gwen and Dr. Spivak allow Max to briefly see Freak. Freak seems smaller than ever and he's connected to all sorts of tubes and monitors. Freak gives Max a blank book and he asks Max to record Freak the Mighty's story in it; he's going to get his bionic operation tomorrow and so he won't have the time to write it himself. The next day, when Max returns to the hospital, he realizes that Freak died overnight. Max loses control and he breaks through several glass doors before the cops finally catch him. Dr. Spivak sits with Max, and Max tells him about how Freak spoke about his bionic operation. Max believes at first that Dr. Spivak lied to Freak about the operation, and then that Freak lied to Max about the operation. Dr. Spivak tells Max that Freak probably told the story to give himself hope; he's known for a long time that he wouldn't live long.

Max wallows in grief for months. Around Christmastime, he runs into Loretta Lee. Loretta says that Gwen now lives in California with a new boyfriend. When Loretta learns that Max is doing nothing, she points out that doing nothing is a drag. This makes Max think, so he pulls out the blank notebook that Freak gave him. At first, Max thinks he can't write—but he starts recording Freak the Mighty's story and he keeps writing until spring. Now, having written the story, Max feels okay remembering things and he thinks he might even read some books.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Max Kane – The 12-year-old protagonist of the novel. Max is extremely tall and big for his age. For this reason, combined with his father's terrifying reputation as “Killer Kane,” most people think Max is mean and violent. This couldn't be further from the truth: Max is kind, generous, and respectful, though he fears that one day he'll wake up and be as cruel as his father was. Because of this fear, Max insists on living in the basement of his grandparents Grim and Gram's house. Things begin to change, however, when Max meets a boy named Freak who suffers from Morquio syndrome. Freak gives Max the opportunity to behave kindly and helpfully in front of others, which begins to help others to humanize Max—especially after Max seems to rescue Freak from Tony D.'s gang on the Fourth of July. In Max's opinion, however, Freak is the one who rescued Max; Max believes that he himself is unintelligent, so it takes Freak's brain combined with Max's brawn to get them to safety. This incident results in the birth of the **Freak the Mighty** persona—that is, Freak riding on Max's shoulders. As Freak the Mighty, Max begins to feel more confident, not least because for the first time, he has a friend. Through his friendship with Freak, Max learns to read and he's able to form stronger relationships with adults in his life. However, all of Max's progress seems to stall when Kenny gets out of prison on

parole and he kidnaps Max. Max regresses to the powerless young child he was when Kenny murdered Annie, Max's mother, in front of Max. The reader learns at this point that Max thinks so little of himself because this trauma still plagues him. Freak helps Max to escape. Soon after this, Freak is hospitalized, and Max fully believes Freak's story that he's going to receive a bionic body so he doesn't fully grasp the gravity of the situation. Because of this, Max loses control when he realizes that Freak died. After a year of grieving, Max does as Freak asked him to do: he records Freak the Mighty's adventures, which becomes the novel. This experience makes Max feel better about remembering—even when his memories are painful.

Kevin/Freak – A 12-year-boy with Morquio syndrome, which means that Kevin is a dwarf, walks with crutches and leg braces, and has other health issues. Though his real name is Kevin, Max usually refers to him as Freak. The boys become friends when Freak and his mom, Gwen, move in down the street. Freak is a shock for Max, both because Freak doesn't treat Max with fear and suspicion and because Freak is extremely smart. He has much of the dictionary memorized, uses big words whenever possible, and is obsessed with robotics. His other major interest is the legend of **King Arthur**, since Freak sees knights in armor as proto-robots. He uses the legend of King Arthur and his knights to help give meaning to his own life, as Arthur was a “wimpy little kid” who improved upon the human body and did great things. Freak tells Max that just like the knights got armor, he's going to receive a “bionic body” transplant in the next few years, which will help him overcome the dangerous effects of Morquio syndrome. On the Fourth of July, when Max and Freak escape Tony D.'s dangerous gang by Freak riding on Max's shoulders and steering Max into a nearby pond, the boys come up with the shared persona of **Freak the Mighty** (Freak on Max's shoulders). As Freak the Mighty, Freak has the ability to see the world from a vantage point he never would otherwise. He teaches Max all manner of things, from how to read a book to how to look things up in the dictionary. Freak consistently makes Max feel smart and capable, especially when they work together as Freak the Mighty. In the hospital on what turns out to be Freak's last day, Freak makes Max promise to write their story down in a blank notebook. After Freak's death, Max discovers that Freak was never going to receive a bionic body—it was just a story Freak told to give himself and Max hope for the future; Freak knew since he was little that he wasn't going to live long. Max writes their story—the novel—to honor Freak's memory.

Kenny (Killer) Kane – Max's father. Like Max, Kenny is extremely tall and wide, but unlike Max, Kenny is cruel and unfeeling—Grim refers to him as an “accident of nature.” Grim's feelings are fueled by the fact that about a decade before the novel begins, Kenny murdered Annie, his wife and Max's mother, with his bare hands. He's in prison for this offense at

the beginning of the novel, but since Max looks so much like Kenny, many people torment Max for looking like “Killer Kane.” Kenny's terrifying effect on people, as well as his grasp of how to effectively use storytelling to get his way, comes to the forefront when Kenny is released from prison on parole. Kenny gets out in the first place because he's able to convince the parole board that he reformed himself by discovering Christianity, though Grim and Gram understand that this is a manipulative lie. When Max hears that Kenny is getting out, he has a violent outburst that resembles a panic attack because he's so terrified at the thought of having to see Kenny. This reaction isn't unfounded: Kenny kidnaps Max out of his bed on Christmas Eve. The way that Max describes his experience of being kidnapped suggests that Kenny has the power to sap the hope and the light out of a room. He's impossibly huge and impossibly strong and he gets whatever he wants. Though Kenny is capable of acting gently, he only does so when it suits him—and any gentle gestures inevitably hold a threat of violence. When Kenny does talk to Max about what happened to Annie, he cries and he crafts a compelling narrative of his supposedly wrongful conviction and subsequent redemption. When Kenny later tries to murder Loretta Lee in the exact same way he killed Annie for trying to rescue Max, however, Max understands that Kenny is still the violent and cruel man he's always been. Ultimately, Freak's ingenuity results in Kenny's arrest, and Kenny eventually pleads guilty to the charges against him, meaning that he'll be in prison for decades after the novel ends.

Grim – Max's maternal grandfather, Annie's father, and Gram's husband. Grim is a gruff individual who, for much of the novel, regards Max with fear and possible loathing. This is because Max resembles his father, Kenny, who murdered Grim's daughter and Max's mother, Annie. Grim fears that Max is going to be just as cruel and violent as Kenny was, and so he makes almost no effort to get to know Max or support him. For the most part, Max is fine with this; Max thinks that Grim is a bit of a know-it-all and he shares Grim's fears that he's going to be violent and dangerous. Grim begins to change his tune when Max rescues Freak from Tony D.'s gang on the Fourth of July. At this point, he begins to refer to Max as “son” and he treats Max more like an adult. By the time that Kenny gets out on parole around Christmastime, Grim has fully shifted his thinking to believe that Max is a kind and generous kid in need of protection. Because of this, Grim takes out a restraining order to protect Max and he even considers getting a gun, though it's unclear if he ever does (Gram forbids it, and Grim doesn't want to have to lie to Gram). After Kenny is released on parole, kidnaps Max, and is sent back to prison, Grim encourages Max to tell his story in the hope that it will be cathartic for Max (as well as put Kenny behind bars for good). This suggests that Grim likely understands that Max needs to engage with his traumatic past if he ever hopes to heal. Grim respectfully agrees to leave Max alone after Freak's death and he

disappears from Max's story after that.

Gram – Max's maternal grandmother, Annie's mother, and Grim's wife. She and Grim took over Max's care after Kenny murdered Annie (Max's mother) when Max was four years old. Max notes that Gram looks more like a mother than a grandmother, as she was very young when she had Annie. Though Gram still treats Max with a degree of fear and suspicion, she seems to recognize the need to treat Max compassionately and do her best to make him feel supported. Her intentions, however, don't always translate into Max understanding that she's there for him. Instead, Max sees Gram more as a needless worrier who's always sticking her nose into his business. Like Grim, Gram begins to treat Max with more overt kindness after Max rescues Freak from Tony D. on the Fourth of July. She nervously but hopefully supports Max's transformation as he becomes closer to Freak; though it takes some convincing to get her to sign the paperwork to allow Max to accompany Freak to the "smart" classes at school, she ultimately does sign and she agrees that it's a good idea. Gram is understandably beside herself when Kenny is released on parole and he kidnaps Max, and she insists that Max sleep in the house on the foldout sofa rather than in the basement for a while after the incident. Max sees this as a reflection of Gram's care and love, though he frames it as more needless fussing. She disappears from the story after Freak's death.

Loretta Lee – A woman who's currently involved romantically with Iggy Lee. She was somehow involved with Kenny prior to his imprisonment. Though it's unclear how old Loretta is, it's likely that she was a peer of Annie and Gwen's since she recognizes Freak as Gwen's son and she has information about Freak's absent father. She's thin, blond, and constantly smoking. Her somewhat disheveled appearance frightens Max. Though Loretta appears to be the victim of Iggy's controlling and potentially violent behavior, she also takes any opportunity she gets to try and assert her own power over others. For instance, she tries to encourage Iggy to beat Max up—something that would help her feel powerful. This all makes Loretta a scary figure in Max's mind. Despite this, Loretta does attempt to rescue Max from Kenny after Kenny is released from prison and he kidnaps Max. Max stops Kenny from choking Loretta, and when he sees Kenny choke her, he begins to feel more warmly toward her; he makes sure that the cops rescue her when they rescue him from Kenny. Even though Max begins to recognize Loretta's humanity at this point, he also knows that she's not going to change substantially after what happened. When he runs into her a few months after Freak dies, she's still smoking and she appears drunk, but she does give Max an important piece of advice: that doing nothing is a drag. This spurs Max to write **Freak the Mighty's** story (the novel).

Iggy Lee – The terrifying leader of a biker gang in Max's town. Max knows of Iggy Lee by reputation and he knows that Iggy isn't someone to mess with. Iggy is a tall, hulking man with a

beer belly, blue tattoos, and a long red beard. He loves chugging cans of beer and then crushing the cans. Iggy also makes a point to intimidate Loretta Lee and he's potentially physically violent toward her. Though Iggy frightens Max and Freak when they show up on his doorstep to return Loretta Lee's purse, Max also sees that Iggy is, a bit surprisingly, terrified of Kenny and what Kenny might do if he ever gets out of prison. Sure enough, when Kenny does get out on parole and he kidnaps Max and brings him to Iggy's apartment, Kenny is able to easily intimidate Iggy and make him seem scared and foolish. Iggy isn't all bad, however: he conspires with Loretta Lee to distract Kenny and rescue Max and he's also distraught when Loretta ends up in the hospital after Kenny chokes her.

Gwen – Freak's mother; he often calls her "Fair Gwen of Air," a play on Guinevere from the **King Arthur** legends. When Gwen was young, she was Max's mother, Annie's, best friend. She's extremely beautiful, kind, and protective of Freak, and she's one of the first adults that Max decides is okay. Though Gwen initially reacts with terror when she sees Max, she makes a point to apologize and explain that she was only afraid because Max so resembles Kenny, and Kenny always scared her. Gwen matches Freak's sarcasm and sass, and it's never obvious to Max that Gwen is likely experiencing major emotional stress on account of Freak's illness and impending death. She forms a close relationship with Max over the course of Max and Freak's friendship, and so she helps him see Freak when Freak is hospitalized. Following Freak's death, Gwen moves to California and she gets a new boyfriend; Max never gets to say goodbye.

Tony D. – The local bully; Tony D. has been to juvenile court several times and he definitely carries a knife. Max suspects that he also has access to firearms. Max says that Tony D. even has sharpened teeth, though it's possible that this is just a product of Max's fear. Tony D. is a terrifying local figure and he has a gang of boys who assist him in causing mayhem. Tony D. and his gang torment Freak and Max on the Fourth of July, which results in the creation of the **Freak the Mighty** persona. Despite Max's insistence that Tony D. is nothing but bad news, Tony does offer his condolences to Max after Freak dies, suggesting that there may be more to Tony than his tough exterior. Max, however, can't deal with this possibility and so he makes sure that he and Tony remain enemies.

Dr. Spivak – Freak's doctor. She's short with spiky red hair and she's very protective of her patient—but she also knows that Freak gets what he wants and that he'll always discover the truth. Dr. Spivak recognizes Freak's desire to know as much as possible, as well as his desire to tell stories that give both him and Max hope. Because of this, she's the one who helps Max to understand that Freak's story about getting a bionic body wasn't a lie—it was a story designed to give Freak something to look forward to.

Mrs. Addison – Freak and Max's school principal; a stern black

woman with white hair. Max is a bit afraid of her. Mrs. Addison thinks that Freak is a delight, and because of this, she allows Freak and Max to get away with various shenanigans. Despite what Max interprets as Mrs. Addison being afraid of him, Mrs. Addison shows that she does care deeply about Max's wellbeing once she sees for herself that Max is nothing like Kenny. She promises to stand up to Kenny's parole board about what Max wants.

Mrs. Donelli – Max and Freak's English teacher. She's a new teacher, so she doesn't understand that Max simply doesn't speak in class. Because of this, she tries to make Max speak—but she eventually gives up. Though Mrs. Donelli seems to have generally poor control of her class, she also does her best to meet Max where he is and reach him in a way that works for him. She's very proud of the boys when they escape Kenny over Christmas break.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Annie – Max's mother. She never appears in the novel because her husband, Kenny, murdered her when Max was four years old. She was a kind and generous individual, and she was Gwen's best friend when they were kids.

TERMS

Morquio syndrome – A rare disorder in which a person's body has trouble processing certain types of sugars. The syndrome can manifest in a host of symptoms such as skeletal abnormalities, joint dysplasia, and hearing or vision loss. Those with a severe subtype may have a shortened life expectancy (20s to 30s); respiratory failure is the most common cause of death for Morquio patients. Although Morquio syndrome is never mentioned directly in the novel, Philbrick has said that this is the illness **Freak** suffers from.



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.



FRIENDSHIP

Freak the Mighty tells the unlikely story of the friendship that develops between Max, a frighteningly tall (and in his own opinion, unintelligent) eighth grader and his new neighbor, a boy named Kevin. Kevin—whom Max calls “Freak” for most of the novel—has Morquio syndrome, which means that he has

dwarfism and he suffers from a number of related health issues. But Freak is also the smartest person Max has ever met. As the boys get to know each other, develop their friendship, and come up with the persona they call **Freak the Mighty**—that is, Freak on Max's shoulders, who possesses their combined height, strength, and brainpower—the novel suggests that meaningful friendship isn't as simple as just liking or spending time with someone. Rather, friendships are valuable when they help friends to feel deeply appreciated, understood, and to discover who they are—or who they want to be.

When Max starts his story, he implies that he's never had a friend before. This is because almost everyone is afraid of him due to his height and because of the fact that his father, who's known around town as “Killer Kenny,” murdered Max's mother (Annie) when Max was little. Because Max looks like Kenny, most people treat Max with caution and fear. To many, he's simply not friend material. In addition to the fact that others ostracize Max, he also intentionally ostracizes himself. He lives with his grandparents, Grim and Gram, and though they'd like Max to live upstairs, Max insists on living in the basement, which he calls “the down under.” Max tries so hard to isolate himself because he so fully believes in his lack of intelligence and he's sure that he's going to become violent one day—but this doesn't mean that he doesn't secretly desire friendship. Being isolated is lonely and difficult, but it's much easier than trying to make friends. Freak, too, is isolated due to his physical disabilities—but like Max, he also desires friendship. When the boys cross paths, they both bring something to the table that the other doesn't have. The first time the boys meet, Max is able to use his height to rescue Freak's **ornithopter** (a motorized bird) from a tree, and Freak introduces Max to the power of storytelling and of imagination. After Freak leaves Max's room that first day, Max cries of happiness. Human connection, this emotional reaction suggests, is absolutely necessary to a fulfilling life.

The boys come up with their shared persona of Freak the Mighty on the Fourth of July, when Freak can't see the fireworks due to his height and so Max picks Freak up and sets him on his shoulders so that he can see. As the boys begin to spend more and more time as Freak the Mighty, they both become increasingly confident and close, as Freak the Mighty gives both of them qualities they don't have on their own. For the first time in Max's life, he gets to feel smart, as being Freak the Mighty lets him “borrow” Freak's brain. Freak is in charge while they're Freak the Mighty: he tells Max where to go and what to do by pulling on his hair and kicking him gently, which gives Max a sense of comfort and pride in his abilities. For Freak's part, he finally gets to see the world from up high and enjoy a type of mobility and freedom he doesn't ever get on his own two feet, where he normally walks with the help of crutches and leg braces. As Freak the Mighty, Max in particular gets to feel proud of who he is for the first time. The experience

of allowing Freak to dictate his movements helps Max to trust himself, which in turn makes him willing to follow Freak into all manner of questionable situations—and get them back out again thanks to his strength and size, combined with Freak’s quick thinking. Together, the boys are able to go on adventures that neither could’ve gone on alone, which adds richness to both their lives as well as increases their affection for and trust in each other.

Moreover, as the novel progresses, both Max and Freak are able to help shared acquaintances and friends think about the boys differently. While Max scares many people at first, a number of people, from Grim and Gram to Max and Freak’s school principal, are able to see that Max isn’t actually a terrifying person as they watch Max interact with Freak. Rather, the way that Max behaves around Freak drives home for them that Max is a generous and sensitive individual. Max is also able to help others shift or tweak the way they think about Freak. Above all else, Max honors Freak’s dignity and he tries not to do anything that makes Freak seem or feel pitiable or weak—and so when others suggest that Freak is a “poor boy” or that he struggles a lot, Max pushes back. Through this, he encourages others to focus on all the things that Freak can do, something that transforms Freak in the minds of others from a “poor boy” to a fully-fledged person who lived a full, if tragically short, life (Freak dies from heart complications related to Morquio syndrome at the end of the novel). Through this mutually enriching friendship, and specifically through writing *Freak the Mighty*’s story (the novel itself) in the year after Freak dies, Max is able to honor Freak’s memory. Further, he’s able to convey the power of friendship to afford others dignity, inspire confidence, and encourage kindness for all.



THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

Freak the Mighty is largely a meditation on the purpose of storytelling and the power that stories can have in a person’s life. The book itself is framed

as something that Max wrote himself as a healing exercise a year after Freak’s untimely but not unexpected death from complications connected to Morquio syndrome. In addition, over the course of Freak and Max’s yearlong friendship, Freak introduces Max to a number of stories about **King Arthur**’s knights and his own upcoming surgery to get what he calls a “bionic body.” As Max listens to Freak tell these tales and as Max ultimately writes his own story, he discovers that stories don’t just entertain: they can provide hope, soothe fears, and even inspire confidence to do well in school. Through this, the novel positions storytelling as something profoundly beneficial—and as something that, most importantly, can give people hope.

From the very beginning of Freak and Max’s friendship, Freak shares how stories give him the tools he needs to find meaning and purpose in his life. Though Freak is a highly intelligent

person and he uses this to his advantage every chance he gets, his short stature due to dwarfism and his other health issues pose very real limitations on what he can physically do. Knowing this, Freak latches on to the legend of King Arthur to come to terms with his limitations. He tells Max that King Arthur was a “wimpy kid” but that he defied expectations by pulling the sword Excalibur out of a stone easily—and Arthur also recognized the fragility of the human body and he sought to improve upon it by “armor-plating” his men. Through this, Freak is able to align himself with King Arthur and suggest to himself and to others that there’s more to him than his disability—just like King Arthur, he can transcend his physical limitations, do great things, and earn his place in history. Freak does so in part by creating the persona of **Freak the Mighty** with Max (the combined character of Freak riding on Max’s shoulders) and by encouraging Max to write their story down.

Even more meaningful than King Arthur in terms of storytelling, however, is another story that Freak tells Max: that he’s undergoing a medical experiment which entails an operation to give him a “bionic body.” The idea disturbs Max from the very beginning, as he doesn’t want Freak to have to experience the pain he knows comes along with surgery. But when Freak has a seizure and he ends up in the hospital, Max fully believes that Freak is going to be okay since he’s clearly at the point where he’s ready to receive his bionic body. However, Max soon learns that Freak actually died overnight in the ICU. This realization is earthshattering for Max, especially since he believes at first that either Freak lied to him about the bionic surgery—or even worse, that Freak’s doctors lied to Freak about the surgery. Freak’s doctor, Dr. Spivak, however, tells Max that Freak never lied. Rather, Freak was telling both himself and Max a story that gave them meaning in their lives—and that encouraged Max to continue supporting and believing in Freak to the very end. In other words, Freak’s insistence that he was going to receive a bionic body was more than a way for Freak to ignore his impending death. This story gave Freak a reason to live, and it helps Max to understand the power of storytelling to give a person hope and drive—even if the story itself isn’t factually true.

However, *Freak the Mighty* draws a clear line between stories with kernels of truth that are meant to provide hope and to entertain (such as Freak’s stories about King Arthur and his bionic body), and stories that are nothing more than manipulative lies. For instance, Kenny, Max’s father, is in prison for killing Max’s mother, Annie. Eventually, Kenny uses his supposed discovery of Christianity to manipulate the court system into letting him out on parole. He’s presumably able to make the case that religion helped to show him the error of his ways, and that now he’s a reasonable and respectful person who has earned the right to return to regular society. Kenny shows right away that while his story may have been successful in getting him out of prison, it’s nothing more than a malicious

work of fiction: he ends up kidnapping Max, tying him up, and insisting that Grim and Gram (Max's grandparents) have "poisoned" Max's mind against Kenny. This suggests both that Kenny is still trying to use storytelling to make things go his way (as when he tries to convince Max that Max doesn't actually remember Kenny killing Annie) and that he recognizes the power that other people's truthful stories must have over Max. Kenny's only hope to earn Max's loyalty is to discredit the stories that Grim and Gram tell about him, as well as the version of events that Max knows is true—a strategy that ultimately fails. While storytelling may be enough to get Kenny out of jail, his malicious intentions combined with the utter baselessness of his tales ultimately make his stories entirely ineffective.

By contrast, Freak's storytelling has a profoundly beneficial impact on Max—it ultimately transforms how Max thinks about his own ability to tell stories. While Max begins the novel insisting that he's unintelligent and incapable of writing anything, a year of absorbing Freak's stories proves transformative for Max. Though Max grieves for a year after Freak's death, he does eventually do what Freak asked him to do: record the story of Freak the Mighty in a notebook that Freak gave Max before his death. The process of writing the story not only helps Max come to terms with his grief; it also helps him see that in addition to providing hope, meaning, and confidence, telling one's story is also a way to honor a loved one. Because Max chooses to write down his story, Freak the Mighty and Freak himself have the opportunity to live on and inspire others.



MEMORY, GRIEF, AND TRAUMA

Much of eighth grader Max's story has to do with what happens in his present over the course of his yearlong friendship with Freak, a boy who's suffering from a rare illness called Morquio syndrome. But underlying Max's story is the idea that memory—and specifically, traumatic memories—dictate the course of Max's life prior to Freak's death. Max retrospectively narrates the novel a year after Freak's death, telling his story as he comes to grips with memories of his parents and of Freak. Through this, the novel suggests that remembering is, on the whole, one of the most effective ways to deal with grief and trauma.

Though Max opens his story with a recollection of what Freak was like (and what he himself was like) when they were both in preschool, Max makes it very clear that by the time he reconnects with Freak about a decade later, he's forgotten many things from the past. He doesn't let on until much later that this was very purposeful on his part, given the trauma he experienced as a young kid. Max's memories of preschool revolve around earning the nickname "Kicker" for kicking and behaving violently toward everyone in his vicinity, as well as observing that young Freak looked "sort of fierce." At first, the

fact that Max was known for a time as Kicker seems to support his grandfather's fear that Max is actually a violent kid—however, when Max later puts his preschool years in context for the reader, his violent actions make much more sense. Max went to preschool just after his grandparents Grim and Gram took over caring for him, and while Max doesn't say so when he recounts his memories of preschool, he later lets on that he lives with Grim and Gram because his father, Kenny, murdered Max's mother, Annie, right in front of Max. Max's violence—along with his later choice to simply forget that he was ever Kicker and the reasons why he assumed that persona—is a defense mechanism that allows Max to move on with his life and become the reasonably functional preteen he is when the reader first meets him.

This suggests that for Max, memory isn't something positive: most of his major memories are extremely painful, and remembering what his father did forces Max to confront what people think *he's* going to be like. Max also experiences occasional tantrums that resemble panic attacks when confronted with anything to do with his father—which, disconcertingly, he never remembers after the fact. However, as Max reconnects with Freak and they get closer to each other, Freak introduces Max to a new way of thinking about memory: he suggests that "remembering is a great invention of the mind, and if you try hard enough you can remember anything, whether it really happened or not." That is, people can choose which memories to focus on, reframe unpleasant experiences in new ways, or even create imaginary memories as a way to cope with and make sense of the past. This piece of wisdom appears at several points throughout the novel. As the novel is narrated (and written as if authored) by Max, this suggests that Freak's way of framing memory gives Max control over his memories for the first time. For the first time, Max can amplify the memories that make him feel happy and in control—such as those that have to do with Freak and their adventures—and gloss over or minimize anything that has to do with Kenny or other uncomfortable topics.

Further, the act of writing his and Freak's story and remembering all of their adventures (or making them up—per Freak's assessment of memory, it's impossible to verify what, if anything, actually happened) helps Max to heal from the trauma of both losing his best friend and the trauma connected to his mother's murder. Though Max the narrator is still dismissive of his younger self's intellectual abilities and general competence, Max the narrator is clearly far more confident and in a much healthier and more stable place than he used to be. This transformation has to do not just with the positive effects that Freak had on Max's life, but with Max's ability to finally make sense of his memories. Remembering his grief and trauma, in other words, gives Max a way to move forward with his life, and hopefully to remember that he is capable of dealing with his memories—no matter how unpleasant—in a healthy,

meaningful way.



FAMILY LEGACY VS. INDIVIDUALITY

When the reader first meets Max, a lonely eighth-grade boy, it's clear that he doesn't fit in with his family. Max lives with his grandparents, whom he calls Grim and Gram, and his relationship with them is rocky: Grim, in particular, fears that Max is going to take after his violent father, Kenny, and so both Grim and Gram treat Max with fear and suspicion. Max similarly fears that he's going to take after his father, and so he distances himself from his grandparents. However, as Max reconnects with a classmate named Kevin (whom he calls Freak) and the two develop a close friendship, Freak starts to humanize Max in his grandparents' eyes. As a result, when Kenny does eventually show up in the flesh, it's apparent to everyone in the novel that Max is nothing like his father. While Max may have to deal with his father's legacy for the rest of his life, Max still has the power to rise above that violent legacy and make choices that show others that he's kind, generous, and caring. Thus, the novel suggests that while family is a permanent and influential fixture in a person's life, one always has the ability to choose one's own individual path rather than falling into the same mistakes one's family members have made.

Freak the Mighty takes place in an unnamed American town, and though the size of the town isn't specified, it's seemingly small given the way that Max is continuously recognized as his father's son. Locally, Max's father is known as "Killer Kane" due to the fact that when Max was a small child, Kenny murdered Max's mother, Annie. When most people look at Max, they see only the ways in which he resembles Kenny. Even though he's only 12 years old, Max is over six feet tall and he is therefore physically intimidating to others. Max also doesn't think of himself as being particularly intelligent (and he doesn't argue with others who subsequently buy into the idea that he's not smart), and unintelligence is something that many people in Max's town associate with violence. Indeed, because of Max's resemblance to Kenny, everyone—including Max—lives in fear that Max is one day going to follow in his father's footsteps and start hurting or killing people. These assumptions and fears have disastrous effects on Max's emotional wellbeing. Even though it soon becomes apparent to the reader that Max wouldn't hurt anyone on purpose, Max has been told his entire life that he's probably going to be violent and mean one day, and so he is terrified that this sudden transformation will inevitably happen. In other words, because of the way that others speak about Max's resemblance to Kenny, Max grows up believing that succumbing to his father's legacy is inevitable.

The townspeople's belief that a switch will flip and Max will suddenly become violent ignores the mountains of evidence that show that Max (despite his abnormally large size for his age) is a softhearted boy who craves connection with others.

Max's teachers and even police officers seem nervous or suspicious of him, even when Max is doing something kind or heroic such as rescuing Freak from Tony D., the local bully. Police at first believe that Max runs into the pond with Freak on his shoulders because he wants to drown Kevin—something that, presumably, Kenny might have done—when in reality, the middle of the pond is the only place where Tony D. can't get to Freak. Similarly, when Freak's mother, Gwen, sees the boys together for the first time, she fearfully whisks Freak away. Freak, however, is in many ways an outsider and so he doesn't think of Max in relation to Kenny. Max's association and budding friendship with Freak, then, begins to change how others view Max. Though people are initially suspicious of the boys' relationship, as Max continuously makes choices that benefit Freak, people—including Grim and Gram—begin to truly believe what they see: that while Max may resemble Kenny physically, he has his mother's kind heart.

That Max doesn't take after Kenny becomes even more apparent when, in the days after Kenny is let out of prison on parole, Kenny kidnaps Max out of his bed. Though Max goes along with Kenny and he does everything Kenny asks him to do, he does so because he's terrified and he feels powerless next to his father—not because he loves Kenny, agrees with him, or wants to be like him. Indeed, Max's emotional outburst as he witnesses Kenny choke Loretta Lee (a woman formerly involved with Kenny) suggests that Max is nothing like his father. Max shouts that he remembers watching Kenny choke and kill Annie in an attempt to distract Kenny and save Loretta, which demonstrates that Max has no interest in following in his father's violent footsteps—rather, Max interprets Kenny's legacy as something horrific and shameful, not as something to emulate or live up to. Following Max's rescue and Kenny's return to prison, people finally begin to treat Max like a normal, nonthreatening person on a regular basis. While this is in many ways a damning indictment of others' prejudices and unwillingness to see Max as anything other than a clone of Kenny, Max's transformation—both in his mind and in the eyes of others—makes it clear that while people might not be able to entirely control how other people think of one's family legacy, it's still possible and beneficial to assert one's individuality.



SYMBOLS

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



KING ARTHUR

King Arthur symbolizes how Freak wants others to see him: as a physically unimposing person, but one who is nevertheless able to do great things and carve out a place in history. Freak loves everything to do with King Arthur

because of the similarities he sees between their biographies. Freak insists that King Arthur was a “wimpy kid” who wasn’t very strong or capable, but that he was somehow able to pull the sword Excalibur out of a stone despite his physical limitations. Arthur also recognized the fragility of the human body and so he chose to “armor-plate” his men so they could do great things that normal men couldn’t. For Freak, King Arthur’s story is evidence for Freak’s own narrative that he’s going to receive a bionic body, and Arthur’s heroism despite his weaknesses enables Freak to believe that he, too, will also go down in history as a “wimpy kid” who was nevertheless able to do great things.



THE ORNITHOPTER

Freak’s ornithopter (a mechanical flying bird) represents freedom—specifically, the medically-assisted freedom that Freak enjoys. As someone with Morquio syndrome (an illness that causes dwarfism and a host of other symptoms), Freak is perhaps more aware than most people that freedom and mobility are precious and, in his case, sometimes rare commodities. Like the ornithopter, which flies thanks to an elastic band and its motor, Freak is able to move around thanks to mobility devices like his leg braces and his crutches—as well as thanks to Max’s willingness to carry Freak on his shoulders as *Freak the Mighty*. And just as the ornithopter needs consistent maintenance (that is, to have its band replaced) every so often, Freak also needs consistent medical attention in order to continue to enjoy his freedom and mobility.



FREAK THE MIGHTY

Freak the Mighty, the persona that Freak and Max create together, symbolizes the power of friendship to help people reach their potential and become better versions of themselves. As Freak the Mighty, Freak rides high on Max’s shoulders, giving him a previously unimaginable vantage point and giving Max the ability to “borrow” Freak’s brain. Because of this, both boys are able to experience things they never could before (unhindered mobility in Freak’s case, and intelligence, imagination, and pride in Max’s case) and thus their shared persona allows them to be better versions of themselves. Freak the Mighty, though relatively short-lived in real life (assuming the persona becomes impossible after Freak’s death), also gives Max and Freak a way to continue being their best selves after Freak’s death. Through Max’s choice to record Freak the Mighty’s story, Freak gets to live on forever exactly how he wanted to be remembered; while Max, through remembering all that Freak taught him, is able to accept his own intellect and imagination and to take pride in his identity and his abilities. Thus, Freak the Mighty is symbolic of friendship’s transformative power to change people for the better.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scholastic edition of *Freak the Mighty* published in 2001.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● It’s more than just the way Maxwell resembles him, Grim says that night in the kitchen, the boy is *like* him, we’d better watch out, you never know what he might do while we’re sleeping. Like his father did. And Gram right away shushes him and says don’t ever say that, because little pictures have big ears, which makes me run to the mirror to see if it is my big ears made me look like *Him*.

Related Characters: Max Kane, Grim (speaker), Annie, Kenny (Killer) Kane, Gram

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3-4

Explanation and Analysis

Max recounts how once, when he was a child, he overheard his grandparents Grim and Gram talking about how Max resembles his father, Kenny. This was a somewhat traumatizing experience for Max, as he understood that he is like Kenny—who is violent, cruel, and mean—because, like Kenny, he has big ears. Though Max doesn’t specify his age, he seems to be quite young here and so it makes sense that he’d misunderstand what Grim means (by having “big ears,” he means that Max is likely to overhear their conversation). However, Grim’s meaning is still extremely sinister. Grim, like Max, is plagued by the trauma of what happened to Annie, his daughter and Max’s mother. Kenny murdered her—something that, given everyone’s descriptions of Kenny, wasn’t something out of character for him. Rather than deal with his own trauma and treat Max like his own person, however, Grim fixates on the fact that Max looks like Kenny. This is despite the fact that in every conceivable way except his looks, Max is nothing like Kenny. Max’s intense fear that his ears make him like his father suggest that people constantly compare him to Kenny, something that over time makes Max even less confident in himself—and makes Max even more afraid that someday, he’s going to wake up and be just as cruel as Kenny was. Because Max overhears things like this, he believes that this is inevitable.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ It's real easy, he doesn't weigh much and I'm pretty sure I remember looking back and seeing him up in the wagon happy as can be, like he's really enjoying the ride and not embarrassed to have me pulling him around.

But like Freak says later in this book, you can remember anything, whether it happened or not.

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Kenny (Killer) Kane, Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Rather than describe the “down under” (Max’s basement bedroom) to Freak, Max pulls Freak in the wagon to his house so they can go look. Though Max thinks he remembers Freak enjoying the ride, he allows that memory is a tricky thing—and it’s possible to remember anything, real or otherwise. Max’s choice to talk about his memories of Freak in this way speaks to how highly Max thinks of Freak and their friendship. He wants to make sure that the reader has the opportunity to learn all the same things that he did from Freak—most importantly that it’s possible to remember anything.


The idea that people can remember anything isn’t just a way for Max to account for gaps in his own memory, however. It’s also a suggestion that people can reframe the memories they do have in ways that make them easier to deal with. To a degree, Max does this throughout the novel, which is written as though authored by Max. Writing the novel was a way for Max to come to grips with Freak’s death and honor Freak’s memory by recording their adventures. However, Max also realizes that he can think about all sorts of memories differently. Most importantly, Max realizes through writing the story that he doesn’t have to try so hard to not remember the horrible things he witnessed as a child—or for that matter, being kidnapped by his father, Kenny, years later. Max can see these things as elements of his past that he can’t deny, but not as memories that are going to entirely derail him or damage him. They can be just a part of his story, just the same as this happy memory of Freak’s ride in the wagon.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ “The design limitations of the human body. You know, like we’re not bullet-proof and we can’t crush rocks with our bare hands, and if we touch a hot stove we get burned. King Arthur wanted to improve his men, so he made them armor-plated. Then he programmed them to go out and do these quests, slay the dragons and so on, which is sort of how they program robots right now.”

Related Characters: Kevin/Freak (speaker), Max Kane

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 18


Explanation and Analysis

In the “down under” (Max’s basement bedroom), Freak explains how King Arthur “armor-plated” his knights and how he turned them into proto-robots of sorts. Freak has Morquio syndrome, a rare disorder that causes dwarfism and a variety of health problems, and his interest in Arthurian legend is a way for him to make sense of and come to grips with his disability and all the things he cannot do. Freak thinks of himself like King Arthur or like one of King Arthur’s knights. Like these men (and like any other human being), Freak’s body limits him—but rather than focusing on these limiting factors, Freak instead focuses on the fact that just like Arthur improved his knights, Freak can improve his body. Most often, this comes up when Freak tells stories about how he’s going to undergo an operation that will give him a “bionic body.” The bionic body can be seen as a direct parallel to the knights, as it would theoretically turn Freak into a sort of robot, allowing him to go on all manner of quests. Thinking of his disability and his body in this way gives Freak hope and it keeps him from fixating on what he can’t do. Additionally, it distracts him from the fact that, though he never tells Max, he’s known for years that he’s not going to live a long life.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ I shrug. Is it really such a big deal for a boy to look like his father? Which is typical butthead thinking, because of course it’s a big deal, if your father happens to be in prison. Which everybody in town knows about, it’s not like there’s any secret about what he did or why he’s there, except everybody *acts* like it should be a secret, and the bigger I grow and the more I look like my old man, the worse it gets.

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Annie, Kevin/Freak, Gwen, Kenny (Killer) Kane

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis



At dinner with Gwen and Freak, Freak interjects that Gwen was initially afraid of Max because Max looks like his dad, Kenny—and Kenny was a terrifying person. The way that Max talks about Kenny reveals that more than anything, Max wishes he could exist separately from his father's legacy (Kenny killed his wife and Max's mother, Annie, when Max was young). Everywhere Max goes in his seemingly small town, everyone knows that Max is Kenny's son—and since Max so resembles Kenny, people believe that Max is going to grow up to be equally scary and violent.

Because Max has grown up hearing that he's going to be just like Kenny—and especially since this gets worse and more frequent as Max grows—he doesn't believe it's possible for him to escape Kenny's legacy. Max fears that he has no choice but to grow up to be just as violent; it never occurs to him that he has the power to choose the kind of adult he wants to be—or for that matter, that whether he admits it or not, his actions throughout the novel show that he's nothing like Kenny. Given that Max is such a kind and generous individual, the prejudice he faces seems especially unfair.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ The deal this year is that I get to go with Freak, which Gram thinks is a good idea because she's afraid he'll get crushed or something, she actually thinks people are going to *step* on him, which just goes to show how brainless she can be sometimes, and scared of everything. I mean nobody steps on little kids down there, so why should they step on Freak?

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Gram, Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis



When Max tells the reader that he gets to go to the fireworks with Freak this year instead of with Grim and Gram, he makes it clear that he thinks Gram's fears for Freak's safety are misguided and even rude. This is one way that (through Max's own narration) Max demonstrates how


kind he is and what a good friend he is to Freak. He fully believes in Freak's capacity to move through the world by himself, make decisions for himself, and generally exist as a fully-fledged human being with thoughts and feelings. Gram, however, appears to only consider Freak's disability, and therefore she believes that he needs extra protection. She doesn't see him as a normal 12-year-old, or even as a normal little kid (Freak is only about as tall as the average toddler due to his Morquio syndrome) in an environment where kids are generally safe. Though Max begins the novel simply advocating for Freak's individuality and dignity to the reader like this, as the novel progresses he says more and more of these things out loud. As he does so, he helps adults treat Freak with more dignity, while also showing them that he's a kind and generous friend.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ Me rescuing Freak. What a joke, right? Except that's how it must have looked from a distance, because they never knew it was Freak who rescued me—or his genius brain and my big dumb body.

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Kenny (Killer) Kane, Tony D., Gram, Grim, Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis



Max and Freak escape Tony D., the local bully, by assuming their Freak the Mighty persona (Freak on Max's shoulders) and running into a nearby pond. Though the police tell Grim that Max rescued Freak from Tony D., Max insists to the reader that Freak actually rescued *him*. This illustrates clearly that Max is a humble person; it's unthinkable to him that he'd do something so heroic or that he'd be able to do so without assistance. Although people assume that Max is just like his father, Kenny, Max's humbleness and humility notably stand in stark contrast with Kenny's, self-importance—and later, these instances of Max's humbleness show that he's the opposite of Kenny in every way.

Then, Max also begins to describe what it's like to be Freak the Mighty, or to move through the world with Freak on his shoulders. As Freak the Mighty, both Max and Freak have the opportunity to experience things they never do alone:

Max gets to feel like he's intelligent, while Freak gets to see the world from a much higher vantage point than he has on his own two feet. When the friends combine their different strengths, it enables them to do amazing things they'd never be able to do alone (such as escaping Tony D.) and it even makes people think that Max is a hero.

☝ I go, "Thanks for the towel, Gram. And the ice cream. Could I have sugar in the coffee? Two teaspoons, please," and Grim claps his hands together and he says, "Of course you can, son," and it's like *woah!* because he never calls me that. Always Max or Maxwell or "that boy."

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Kenny (Killer) Kane, Gram, Grim, Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 42


Explanation and Analysis

After Grim and Gram get Max cleaned up following his excursion into the local millpond, Grim calls Max "son" for the first time. This is a transformative moment for both Max and for Grim. This seems to be the first instance, in Max's interpretation, in which Grim truly accepts Max and in which he's happy about the fact that he and Max share blood. Up to this point, Grim has fixated on all the ways that Max is like his violent father, Kenny, and he's ignored the evidence that suggests that Max is kind, generous, and caring. Therefore, this is the first moment in which Max starts to feel like he belongs in his family. His grandparents, in his mind, are treating him like a reasonable, real person for the first time, and so Max starts to feel more comfortable engaging with them and acting like a polite and mature teenager. Finding this sense of belonging in his family helps Max to continue to come into himself and understand that he doesn't have to succumb to Kenny's legacy—if he can prove to his grandparents that he's a reasonable person, he'll be able to convince anyone.

☝ By now I know what a quest is because Freak has explained the whole deal, how it started with King Arthur trying to keep all his knights busy by making them do things that proved how strong and brave and smart they were, or sometimes how totally numb, because how else can you explain dudes running around inside big clunky tin cans and praying all the time? Which I don't mention to Freak because he's very sensitive about knights and quests and secret meanings.

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

When Freak announces a quest to the East, Max tells the reader his private thoughts on the sensibility (or lack thereof) of King Arthur's quests. The way that Max thinks about how silly knights were suggests that he doesn't entirely grasp why knights and quests are so important to Freak. Though Max treats Freak's interest in King Arthur like he treats Freak's interest in computers or robotics, in actuality, Freak's interest goes far deeper: he sees King Arthur as a symbol for himself. It's understandable why Max wouldn't entirely grasp this connection—he doesn't know yet that Freak's illness means he's not going to live long and that Freak gleans a sense of hope from Arthurian legend. But Max's respect for Freak regardless of what he doesn't know still shows how good of a friend Max is—he would never try to make Freak feel bad for having interests that Max doesn't entirely share or understand. Max understands that in order to be a good friend, he has to show Freak that he cares, and so he keeps these things to himself.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝ I can tell he really means it. This isn't a pretend quest, or making houses into castles or swimming pools into moats. This is why we came here, so Freak could show me where he's been. The place is important to him. I understand this much, even if I still don't understand about bionics or what it means to be a human robot.

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

On the day that Freak leads Max to the hospital on a quest and he explains that he's going to receive a bionic body transplant, Max isn't entirely sure what this means but he fully grasps the gravity of what Freak is saying: this is something important to Freak. By responding in this way to Freak letting Max in on this secret, Max demonstrates that even if he hasn't had many (or any) friends prior to this, he

still understands how he needs to behave in order to be a good friend. He knows that he cannot make Freak feel bad or silly for showing him this and he definitely can't complain about how far they had to walk to get here. Max's ability to be a good friend in this regard shows just how wrong everyone who thinks that Max is just like his father is. Kenny would never be able to behave so honestly and compassionately; Max's behavior is purely due to his own good nature and it has nothing to do with Kenny. This continues to show the reader how misguided everyone else who fears Max is and how harmful their preconceptions are.



Chapter 10 Quotes

☞ “And carrying poor Kevin around, that seems to be putting real muscle on you.”

“He's not that heavy. And anyhow it's not fair everybody always says 'Poor Kevin,' just because he didn't grow.”

Grim gives me this long, sorrowful look and then he clears his throat and says, “You're right, he is a rather remarkable boy.”

Related Characters: Max Kane, Grim (speaker), Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis



At one point over the summer, Grim comments on how Max's body is changing due to carrying Freak around. Max's response, in particular to Grim's suggestion that Freak deserves pity, makes Grim reconsider his preconceptions about both Freak and Max. In terms of Freak, Max forces Grim to acknowledge that despite Freak's disabilities, he's an amazing person. Freak is smart and witty, and it does him a disservice to focus only on his dwarfism.


Grim's sorrowful look is likely due to the fact that despite how mature Max might be in some ways, he still has no idea how ill Freak really is. It may also have to do with the possibility that Max's comments about Freak show Grim that Grim has similarly sold Max short throughout Max's life. Grim has been consistently and vocally concerned that Max is going to be like Kenny, and this moment begins to prove to Grim that this belief is misguided. Just as it's unfair to think of Freak only in terms of his disability and his health issues, it's also unfair to think of Max only as Kenny's son and as a future terror to society.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ “I'm standing up straight, as tall as I can, and I'm marching exactly like he wants me to, right and left, backwards and forwards, and it's like music or something, like I don't even have to think about it, I just do it, and all those kids chanting our name [...]

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Mrs. Donelli, Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis



In English class, Freak makes the other kids stop tormenting Max by climbing on Max's shoulders. In this position, the boys assume their persona as Freak the Mighty and they lead everyone in a chant of Freak the Mighty's name. Max's reaction shows how meaningful it is for him to be Freak the Mighty. As Freak the Mighty, Max doesn't worry about putting his big feet in the wrong place—Freak tells him exactly where to go, so Max only has to follow Freak's directions. The bond between the boys makes Max feel safe and competent, two things that he seldom felt before meeting Freak and becoming Freak the Mighty.

This also begins to change how teachers and other students look at Max: while most of the class's taunts had to do with Max's perceived stupidity and his father, Freak effectively reframes Max in their classmates' eyes. By the same token, while Freak would likely be a prime target for bullying given his disability, he's able to use Max's size and his own charisma to show the other kids that both he and Max are important members of their school community.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☞ “As a matter of fact I do know the answer—the reason Johnny Tremain got mad and hateful is because he burned his hand in a stupid accident—and I know about that because Freak has been showing me how to read a whole book and for some reason it all makes sense, where before it was just a bunch of words I didn't care about.”

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Mrs. Donelli, Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Max describes how the school year is going for him, and specifically the way that Freak has been able to teach Max to read. Because of Freak's tutoring, Max knows the answers to his teachers' questions for the first time in his life. This speaks to one of the positive effects of Max and Freak's friendship: Max is able to do well in school for the first time. Finally, he doesn't have to worry about not knowing how to read or making himself look unintelligent in front of his cruel peers. Now, even if his analysis isn't especially deep, he's able to participate in class and answer basic questions in a way that he suggests satisfies his teachers.

Importantly, Max learns to read because Freak makes him care about doing so. Even more important than the fact that Max is doing better in school is that he's doing better because now, he cares about books and stories. He's beginning to see that stories have power, even if at this point they only have the power to deepen his friendship with Freak and please his teachers.

☞ [...] all I can think is they're going to put me back in the learning disabled class. I've already decided I'll run away if they do that [...] Anyhow, I don't take Freak's dictionary along because my hands are trembly and I might drop it, or Mrs. Addison might ask me a word and I'll forget how to look it up and prove I'm still a butthead goon.

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Mrs. Addison, Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Max receives a mysterious and concerning summons to the principal's office and he declines to take Freak's dictionary with him; he's afraid that it's going to make him look unworthy of being in regular classes alongside Freak. It's telling that Max's biggest fear in regards to this summons is that they're going to put him back in the learning disabled class. This makes it clear that even if Max does suffer from a learning disability, being in a special class for it isn't serving

him—being in regular classes with Freak is far more beneficial. This speaks again to the power of friendship, as Max is only doing so well in school because, for the first time, he has a friend to help him navigate both the social landscape as well as the academic aspects of the school day. The way that Max fears he might make it obvious that he's only pretending to be smart also reveals that Max doesn't believe he's actually intelligent; he thinks it's only because he's able to be around Freak that he's able to perform well in the general classroom. This belief is linked to Max's low self-esteem: if his self-esteem were higher, he'd likely do fine in a regular classroom alone, but at this point Max cannot accept that he's an intelligent person and a meaningful addition to a classroom on his own merits.

☞ "It's not me who had quite a day," I say. "Kevin is the one. All he did was try and eat his lunch."

Mrs. Addison gives me this look, and then she goes, "You're going to be okay, Maxwell Kane. I'm sure of it now."

She's okay for a principal, but for some reason I still can't make her understand that it's not me who had a really bad Friday the Thirteenth.

Related Characters: Mrs. Addison, Max Kane (speaker), Kenny (Killer) Kane, Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

After the ambulance takes Freak to the hospital after he stops breathing at lunch, Mrs. Addison comforts Max and remarks that he had quite the day. She's referring both to Max's emotional reaction to seeing Freak go to the hospital as well as Max's outburst when he learned that his father, Kenny, is getting out of prison on parole and that he wants to see Max. As Max does at several points throughout the novel, here he fails to recognize that he has truly been through some difficult and even traumatic experiences over the course of this day at school. In Max's mind, Freak is the one who had a bad day, since Freak ends up in the hospital instead of getting lunch. This continues to reflect Max's humbleness and selflessness. He simply doesn't understand why people would be worried about him, since he himself is so busy worrying about Freak.



Mrs. Addison's look suggests that in this moment, she begins to see Max differently. His words here, combined with his emotional outburst earlier in the day, shows Mrs.


Addison that Max is nothing like Kenny and that he isn't someone she needs to be afraid of. Rather, Max is a kind and generous kid who needs support and guidance to be the best he can be.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☞ Gram says, "How can you tell such lies on Christmas Eve?"
"I'm telling tales, my dear, not lies. Lies are mean things, and tales are meant to entertain."

Related Characters: Grim, Gram (speaker), Annie, Kenny (Killer) Kane, Gwen, Kevin/Freak, Max Kane

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

When Grim tells ludicrous stories about receiving coal for Christmas as a child, Gram accuses him of telling lies. Grim, however, suggests that there's a huge difference between lies and tales—lies are malicious, while tales are entertaining. His response encapsulates the novel's exploration of storytelling and how different kinds of stories function. Tales, such as those concerning King Arthur and Freak's operation to receive a bionic body, are innocent and often beneficial. They give both Freak and Max hope, and they make life entertaining and worth living. Lies, however—such as those that Kenny tells to get out of prison and those he tells Max—are unspeakably mean. Kenny abuses his charisma and his ability to tell compelling stories to trick the court system into letting him out on parole, though his choice to kidnap Max immediately after getting out of prison suggests that Kenny has no business being out of prison. Kenny then tries to convince Max of things that aren't true—such as that he didn't kill Max's mother, Annie—which has the sole purpose of trying to win Max over.


Chapter 16 Quotes

☞ The quiet is almost as big as he is. He's as tall as me, only wider everywhere, and for some reason, maybe because we're not far from Freak's house, I'm thinking this weird thought: *He doesn't need a suit of armor.*

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Kevin/Freak,

Kenny (Killer) Kane

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

Max is out on the street with Kenny after Kenny kidnaps him. Here, Max notices how huge Kenny is and he thinks that Kenny doesn't need armor to be strong and menacing. Even though Max reflects that this thought is odd, it makes sense given how much time Max has been spending with Freak—Max is simply starting to think in new ways that he's picked up from Freak. For Freak, everything can be related back to King Arthur, knights, and quests. Thinking that Kenny doesn't need a suit of armor to accomplish great and terrible things shows that Max recognizes what armor is supposed to do for a person—but in this case, Max understands that Kenny exists far outside of this system of knights and quests.

Especially since Max makes it clear that Kenny doesn't fit into the system of knights, this suggests that Kenny is somehow more than human in Max's eyes and he's therefore fundamentally unknowable. Most importantly, this suggests that Kenny is entirely different from Max, something that becomes increasingly obvious as Kenny proceeds with his kidnapping attempt, ties Max up, and eventually tries to murder Max.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☞ It's like I'm trapped underwater or something, so weak and floaty I can't hardly fight him, can't pry his fingers loose from my mother's neck. From Loretta's neck. Because everything is mixed up and he's doing the same thing to Loretta Lee he did to my mom, choking the life out of her, and he's got that same cold killer look because he *wants* her to die, like he wanted Mom to die, and nothing else matters what he wants.

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Annie, Loretta Lee, Kenny (Killer) Kane

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 128-29

Explanation and Analysis



When Kenny begins to choke Loretta Lee for trying to free

Max, Max experiences disturbing flashbacks to his mother's death—Kenny killed Annie by choking her, just as Kenny is now trying to kill Loretta. Max's reaction speaks to just how present his memories of his mother's death are in his day-to-day life. No matter what Max does, he can't forget or escape that Kenny killed Annie right in front of him. At this point, these memories rule Max's life. They scare Max and they make him feel weak and powerless, especially when faced with Kenny's cold cruelty and his ability to get whatever he wants.

Importantly, Max fixates on Kenny's cold expression. This stands in stark contrast to the way that Max seems to look and portray himself to others. Even if people are afraid of Max on account of his size, Max never takes what he wants from others in a violent way, if he takes anything at all. Even if this moment makes Max feel small and powerless, it still drives home just how different Max is from his father.

“They never talk about it,” I say. “They don't have to because I can't ever forget it, no matter how much I try.”

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Annie, Gram, Grim, Kenny (Killer) Kane

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

In order to distract Kenny from his attempt to murder Loretta Lee, Max boldly admits that he'll never forget that Kenny killed Max's mother, Annie; Grim and Gram (“they”) don't have to make a point to talk to Max about what happened because Max remembers on his own. In this moment, Max begins to reframe his memories of what he witnessed and he uses them to do something brave and meaningful. Prior to this moment, Max focuses on how small and powerless he feels next to his huge and cruel father. Though Max doesn't feel any more powerful here—and indeed, Kenny's hands are around Max's neck and Kenny proceeds to choke Max after Max says this—his words nevertheless give him power that he didn't have a moment ago when he was silent. In effect, by harnessing his voice and standing up to Kenny, Max does one of the most important and meaningful things he possibly can: show Kenny that Max isn't like Kenny, no matter how much Kenny wishes this weren't true.

Chapter 21 Quotes

“The man is an accident of nature,” he says. “All you got from him is your looks and your size. You've got your mother's heart, and that's what counts.”

The weird I thing I keep thinking about, what if something happens when I get older and I turn out to be another accident of nature?

Related Characters: Max Kane, Grim (speaker), Kenny (Killer) Kane

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

Following Kenny's sentencing (he'll be in prison for a long but unspecified length of time), Grim insists stubbornly that Max only got his looks from Kenny, whom Grim says is an “accident of nature.” This isn't helpful to Max, however. Throughout Max's life, people have said that he looks like Kenny. Because of the resemblance and how much Kenny scares people, Max has grown up believing that he's inevitably going to wake up one day and find that he's just as cruel and violent as Kenny is. Max isn't yet able to trust that this won't actually happen, even as he does brave, heroic, kind, and generous things for Freak and for others and he attracts notice for his good deeds. Even though Max has proven that he's nothing like his father, he still can't believe that he won't make a mistake in the future. In this regard, Max is still ruled by Kenny's legacy—even if by this point, most others (including Grim) believe that Max is safe from a life of evil.


Chapter 22 Quotes

“First you need to invent a time machine,” I say. “So you can go back there and give all the cavemen a hard time about indoor plumbing.”

Freak goes, “You don't need a time machine if you know how to remember.”

Which is something I'll always remember, him saying that and me trying to figure it out.

Related Characters: Kevin/Freak, Max Kane (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 142



Explanation and Analysis


On the last day of school, Freak insists that he can remember the Ice Age because it's possible to remember anything, whether it happened or not. Max continues to demonstrate that he still thinks about things very literally. Though his imagination has expanded over the course of the novel, he still thinks that Freak would need to actually experience something in order to remember it (even if that "experience" would be imaginary, as the time machine would suggest). Freak, however, implies that imagination and memory don't have to be nearly so literal. By talking about his memories of the Ice Age, Freak is able to impress upon Max—if only Max the narrator, not necessarily the Max who hears this firsthand—that it's possible for a person to have far more control over their memories than Max thinks at this point. It's possible for people to use their memories, real or imagined, to find meaning and purpose in their lives, as well as to reframe past occurrences in ways that make them easier to deal with.

☞ The deal is, this is really two birthdays for the price of one, because Freak the Mighty is almost a year old.

[...] Freak says we can't expect her to understand, because you can't *really* get what it means to be Freak the Mighty unless you *are* Freak the Mighty.

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Gwen, Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

For the reader, Max sets the stage for Freak's birthday party. Though this is for Freak's 13th birthday, it's also a celebration for Freak the Mighty, whom Max and Freak created almost a year ago. It's telling, first of all, that Max and Freak want to celebrate the creation of Freak the Mighty, as it suggests that the creation of Freak the Mighty was a major turning point in both of their lives and it's one that merits a celebration. Given this, Freak's insistence that they can't expect Gwen to understand since she's not Freak the Mighty speaks to the special bond that Max and Freak share. Even if Freak the Mighty might seem silly and odd to Gwen, Freak the Mighty is a physical manifestation of Freak and Max's friendship as well as the ideal version of both of

them. Freak the Mighty possesses Max's size and strength as well as Freak's quick mind, which helps both Max and Freak realize their best selves. In particular, it helps Max understand that even if he might not be as quick as Freak, he still has a brain worth celebrating.

Chapter 23 Quotes


☞ "Don't get me upset," he warns. "I won't have the time, so you'll have to do it. Just write it all down like you're talking. Put in all the fun we had, the cool things we did. Our adventures."

"But you *know* I can't write, Kevin."

"It's all in your head, Max, everything you can remember. Just tell the story of Freak the Mighty, no big deal."

Related Characters: Max Kane, Kevin/Freak (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis



When Freak asks Max to record Freak the Mighty's adventures in a blank notebook—he won't have time to do it himself, since he'll be busy getting used to his new bionic body—Max argues that he can't write and properly tell their story. At this point, Max still doesn't believe in his ability to write or do any of the things that, since meeting Freak, Freak has done for Max. Though Freak has taught Max to read and Max is now able to reasonably make it through the school day, writing still poses a challenge for Max.

In part, this is because Max doesn't yet understand how to harness storytelling. He sees it as something that other people do; he doesn't understand that he has a voice too, and that people will listen to him (or read his story) if he speaks or writes. By asking Max to write the story, Freak effectively forces Max to ask others to listen to him, thereby assuring Max's social standing after Freak's death. Freak also knows that by writing down the story, Max will be able to come to terms with the grief he'll inevitably feel once Freak dies mere hours after this conversation. In short, then, Freak is setting Max up for life without him by giving Max the tool he needs to develop his confidence and his own voice.

☝ I go, “Poor Gwen? She’s not the one having the special operation.”

Grim and Gram just look at each other like they can’t believe I’m so dumb, and finally Gram says, “Maxwell, dear, make an effort to eat your vegetables.”

Related Characters: Gram, Max Kane (speaker), Kevin/Freak, Gwen, Grim

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

At dinner, when Grim suggests that Gwen looks like she’s in pain, Grim and Gram realize that Max has no idea what’s actually going on with Freak—Freak is at the end of his life and everyone but Max is aware of this. This is because Max still takes Freak’s story that he’s going to receive a bionic body at face value. Because he doesn’t know much about robotics or bionics (and indeed, he knows next to nothing about Freak’s illness), Max has no reason to not believe Freak when he says that he’s having an operation that will make him better. What Max is missing is that Freak latches onto the bionic operation because it gives him hope for the future and it helps him find meaning in his short life.

It is, of course, likely that Grim and Gram don’t think Max is dumb. They likely recognize that Max is naïve but they don’t believe they should bring the truth crashing down on him yet. Though this has disastrous results later, when Max finds out that Kevin died overnight, this is a way for Grim and Gram to care for Max in the short term. That they do this suggests that after the events of the following year, they now see Max as a child to protect—not the soon-to-be-evil clone of his father they believed he was before.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝ “I don’t think it was a lie, Maxwell, do you? I think he needed something to hope for and so he invented this rather remarkable fantasy you describe. Everybody needs something to hope for. Don’t call it a lie. Kevin wasn’t a liar.”

Related Characters: Dr. Spivak (speaker), Grim, Kevin/Freak, Max Kane

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

After Max discovers that Freak died, he punches through a glass door in the hospital and he cuts himself. As Dr. Spivak bandages Max’s hand, they discuss Freak’s insistence that he was going to undergo an operation to receive a bionic body. Though Max initially fears either that Dr. Spivak lied to Freak or that Freak lied to Max, Dr. Spivak asks Max to think of the story in a different way. In her interpretation, the bionic body was something that Freak came up with to help himself find meaning in his life, even if he knew his life was going to be short. The bionic body gave Freak the strength and willingness to befriend Max, tell Max the story of the bionic body, and make a major impact on Max’s life—all things that Freak might not have been able to do if he hadn’t been able to hope or put a positive spin on things.


Given this, Dr. Spivak’s insistence that the story isn’t a lie recalls Grim’s earlier explanation of the difference between lies and tales. He suggested that lies are mean, while tales entertain. In this case, Freak’s “tale” gave him meaning and purpose, and so it’s inaccurate to call it a lie. Its purpose was pure, so even if the story itself wasn’t true, it’s not something that Max can or should condemn.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☝ So I wrote the unvanquished truth stuff down and then kept on going, for months and months, until it was spring again, and the world was really and truly green all over. By the time we got here, which I guess should be the end, I’m feeling okay about remembering things.

Related Characters: Max Kane (speaker), Annie, Kenny (Killer) Kane, Loretta Lee, Kevin/Freak

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

Max explains how, several months after Freak’s death, a conversation with Loretta Lee gave him the inspiration and drive that he needed to do as Freak asked and record the story of Freak the Mighty. Max’s writing process, and the fact that he says he now feels okay about remembering things, speak to the power of storytelling to help a person put memories in perspective as well as come to terms with grief. Though Max spent the first few months after Freak’s death isolating himself and doing nothing but grieving, he now feels as though he can remember Freak as he

was—sharp, funny, and kind. Max doesn't need to fixate on the fact that Freak died a tragically young death; instead, he can focus on the happiness Freak experienced in his last year of life.

Similarly, the story of *Freak the Mighty* is as much about Freak as it is about Max's journey to making sense of his own traumatic memories. Recording his memories of Kenny killing Annie, and Kenny's attempts to murder Max as well,

helps Max to see that these memories don't have to define him. He can record them as part of the "unvanquished truth," let them go, and understand that remembering doesn't have to mean that these memories rule his life. Rather, he can engage with the memories in ways that are healthy, that make sense, and that give Max a sense of power and control over his life.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1. THE UNVANQUISHED TRUTH

Max tells the reader that he never had a brain until he met Freak; Freak let Max borrow his brain. It sounds weird, but it's the truth. Max explains that Freak had a way with words, but Max could say things with his fists long before they became **Freak the Mighty**. Years ago, when Max first went to daycare, people called Max "Kicker" because he'd kick anyone who tried to hug him. This was right after Max's maternal grandparents, Grim and Gram, began caring for him and they hoped that daycare would improve Max's temper. It didn't—instead, Max kicked everything and anyone to avoid getting hugs. However, in daycare, Max did get his first glimpse of Freak. Freak would only show up occasionally, and Max remembers him looking "fierce."

Freak did eventually teach Max that remembering is "a great invention of the mind," and that it's possible for people to remember anything—so it's possible that Freak wasn't as fierce as Max remembers. In any case, Freak hit kids with his crutches, so Max never messed with Freak. Instead, Max coveted the crutches and the shiny braces that Freak wore on his legs. After daycare, Max didn't see much of Freak until they locked eyes one day during third grade. At that point, kids called Max "Mad Max" or "Maxi Pad." Grim and Gram always call him Maxwell, which is his real name, but he hates it.

One night, Max hears Grim whispering to Gram that Max is starting to look like "him," by which she means Max's father, Kenny. Grim always talks about Kenny like he's too scary to mention by name. Grim continues that Max doesn't just look like Kenny; he is like Kenny and he might do horrible things while they sleep. Gram shushes Grim and she reminds him that Max has big ears. Horrified, Max runs to the mirror to check and see if his big ears make him look like Kenny. To the reader, Max says that this is total "butthead" behavior, but that's just because he doesn't have a brain yet at this point. He gets his brain, courtesy of Freak, the summer before eighth grade. Max's body seems to explode that summer, and Freak moves in down the street with his mom, whom Max refers to as "the Fair Gwen of Air."

Max's recollection of earning the nickname "Kicker" seems to suggest that Max is a dangerous, violent kid. However, the fact that Max's grandparents took over as his primary caregivers suggests that his parents are either deceased or otherwise absent and therefore unfit to take care of Max. Given this, Max is quite possibly experiencing some trauma or other emotional issues regarding his unstable home life, so it's understandable that he'd act out. Regardless, Max's actions have major consequences: people now believe that Max is still violent, like Kicker was.



When Max shares Freak's thoughts on memory, it calls the truthfulness of the entire story into question—but whether or not the story is true matters much less than what Max learns from it. Most importantly, Max internalizes these important lessons about what memory can do, which helps him come to terms with his traumatic past. Grim and Gram's insistence on calling Max "Maxwell" even though he hates the name suggests that they don't treat him as kindly as they could.



Here, Max reveals why Grim and Gram are somewhat mean to Max: they fear that Max is going to be violent and dangerous, just like Kenny was. Gram is referring to the fact that Max is always listening, not actually to his physically large ears. That Max doesn't pick up on this is a reflection of his youth, but it also speaks to the fear and anxiety that Max experiences when he thinks about how he might resemble his father. However, when Max suggests that he only thought this way because he didn't have a brain yet, it offers hope that Max will be able to reevaluate his thinking over the course of the novel.



CHAPTER 2. UP FROM THE DOWN UNDER

Max still lives in his grandparents' basement in a room that Grim built for him. It has cheap paneling and a rug that smells, but Max doesn't complain. He likes it in the "down under," since he's alone and Gram won't bother him about what he's doing. Max notes that he doesn't do much, even though Grim believes that Max is at a dangerous age and he might make bombs or hurt people's pets. Max does say that his brain is vacant; all he does is hide in the down under and "drool" over his comic books. It's the first of July, and Max is counting down to the Fourth. He'd like some dynamite, which he knows is exactly what Grim is afraid of.

Bored, Max heads into the backyard. He notices a cheap moving company moving furniture into the duplex down the way and then he sees Gwen. She's beautiful and she seems familiar, but Max tells himself that there's no way he knows a woman that beautiful. To the reader, Max reflects that he recognized Gwen because he must've seen her drop off Freak at daycare. Max sees Freak ordering the movers to take extra care with his computer. Freak is less than three feet tall and he stands in a twisted way, but he waves his crutches and he shouts at the movers. Gwen finally sends Freak to play in the backyard.

Max is beside himself. He creeps along in front of the duplex and he tries to act casual, but his feet are so big that he trips over everything. Freak notices Max, points a crutch at Max's heart, and asks the "earthling" to identify himself. Max is so busy trying not to trip that he doesn't understand Freak is referring to him. Max finally catches on and he wonders if he should introduce himself as Max or Kicker, but before he can speak, Freak pulls an imaginary trigger and tells the "earthling" to die. Max scurries off, sure that Freak really does want him dead.

CHAPTER 3. AMERICAN FLYER

Max scuttles back into the down under, thinking about how crazy it is that Freak actually scared him when Max is so big. However, he recognizes that he's not truly afraid; he just doesn't understand what happened. Specifically, he thinks that being called "earthling" is weird. Max realizes that he is an earthling, but people don't call each other earthlings. It's the same, he thinks, as the way that people don't address each other as Americans all the time. Max thinks about this for a while and then, when the walls seem to start closing in on him, he creeps into the backyard.

Max's insistence that he likes it in the "down under" suggests that to a degree, he purposefully distances himself from Grim and Gram. Given the way that Grim seems afraid that Max is suddenly going to become violent, this makes perfect sense—Max likely doesn't feel liked or respected by his grandparents, or anyone else for that matter. Saying that he "drools" over his comic books also suggests that Max doesn't think very highly of himself, which is likely a product of the way that others talk about him.



While it's not entirely abnormal to forget one's early daycare experiences, Max likely tries to block out as much as he can about that time of his life. Given Grim and Gram's allusions to Kenny's violence, it's makes sense that Max wants to forget what happened in his childhood. Like Max, Freak is an outsider, though in a very different way—but it's likely that both boys experience prejudice because of their appearances (Max looks like his violent father and Freak is abnormally small for his age).



Deliberating about whether to introduce himself as Max or Kicker is an early clue that Max is very thoughtful. He knows that Freak might remember him but that he may not know Max's real name—and so it's be a courtesy to introduce himself at first using a name that Freak would know. Max's reaction to Freak's play gun also shows that Max isn't at all violent. Rather, he's scared and he's wary of offending people.



Again, everything that Max says here makes it very clear that he's not the hulking, dangerous figure Grim and Gram seem to fear he is. He knows he looks scary to others, but inside, Max is just as afraid of everything else as others are of him. Also, though Max consistently insists that he's unintelligent, his thoughts on calling people earthlings and Americans shows that he's more than capable of critical thinking—he just doesn't know that's what he's doing.



From the backyard, Max can see Freak in his own backyard, waving his crutch at a scraggly tree. Freak looks extremely mad and he tries to jump and hit a branch with his crutch, but he can't really jump. Then, Freak throws down his crutch, crawls quickly back to the house, and then returns to the tree, struggling to drag an old red wagon. Even with the wagon to boost him up, Freak isn't tall enough to reach whatever is in the tree. Max tries to quietly sneak over and, staying well out of the crutch's reach, he plucks the bright thing—a plastic bird—out of the tree and he asks Freak if he wants it back. Max hands it over and he asks what it is. Freak explains that it's an **ornithopter**, or a mechanical bird. Max is in awe of Freak's vocabulary.

Freak winds up the **ornithopter** and then lets it go. The ornithopter flits around, just like a bird, and Max fetches it and brings it back. They do this for an hour until the elastic band in the ornithopter breaks. Max figures that this is the end of the ornithopter, but Freak says in a matter-of-fact tone that all mechanical objects require maintenance, and that he'll install a new "propulsion unit" as soon as Fair Gwen of Air gets a replacement. Max has no idea what this means but he says it sounds cool. When Freak asks where Max lives, Max points and says that he lives in the down under. Rather than explain, Max picks up the wagon handle and he pulls Freak to his house. Max remembers Freak looking happy—but Max reminds the reader that it's possible to remember anything, real or otherwise.

CHAPTER 4. WHAT FRIGHTENED THE FAIR GWEN

Freak is able to climb down the steps into the down under himself, though he's out of breath at the bottom. He's impressed that Max gets to live by himself and he settles himself on the foot of Max's bed. Freak suggests that Gram must be Max's grandmother and Grim must be Max's grandfather—and Grim must be grim, given that Max calls him Grim. Freak starts to define several big words as he talks, but Max cuts Freak off and he insists that he knows what Freak means—even though he doesn't. Max asks why Freak calls his mom "Fair Gwen of Air" and whether it's a nickname. Freak tries not to laugh and he says it's a play on Guinevere, the fair lady from the legend of **King Arthur**. He asks if Max knows about King Arthur. Max just knows of the flour brand, so he shrugs.

The choice to approach someone who scares him and do something kind makes it clear that the people who think Max is scary are wrong—Max clearly wants to help others and to experience human connection. Freak looks like a loner too, and he hasn't said anything about Max's terrifying appearance or about Kenny. Because of this, Freak is likely the safest bet to make friends with, as he's not going to hold Max's history against him or ostracize him because of it.



The innocence of the boys' game with the ornithopter drives home yet again that Max is anything but violent. Max's interest in Freak's vocabulary also demonstrates his desire to learn and prove himself as intelligent. Max is also interested, however, because Freak is a compelling storyteller—even if he's just talking about the ornithopter and his mom. This begins to show Max how to craft a good story by making even the most mundane things seem interesting and important.



The way that Max allows Freak to do things for himself is important, as it shows that Max respects Freak's dignity and individuality; he never looks at Freak as though Freak is incapable of doing things because of his hindered mobility. Freak does much the same thing for Max when he doesn't laugh at Max's questions. He knows Max wants to sound smart and engaged, and so he doesn't make Max feel bad for asking questions. By being respectful in this way, the boys are able to nurture their budding friendship.



Freak explains that since his mom's name is Gwen, he calls her the Fair Gwen sometimes. He says that way back when there were still monsters and dragons, **King Arthur** was a “wimpy little kid” who managed to pull a magic sword out of a big stone. This feat is what made him the first King of England. Max notes that Freak is really into the story and he explains to the reader that when Freak talks, it's impossible to take one's eyes off of him. Freak continues that Arthur married Guinevere and then got bored, so he invited knights to live in his castle and eat around a round table. They'd go on quests to slay dragons, monsters, and evil knights. Freak asks if Max knows what knights wore into battle. Wanting Freak to keep talking, Max asks Freak to tell him.

Freak seems to light up even more and he says that knights wore metal armor that protected them and made them invincible—they were the first human versions of robots. He marvels that hundreds of years before computers, people were already trying to make humans better. Max is confused, so Freak chuckles and he says that human bodies have limits—they get burned and bullets can hurt them. **King Arthur**, however, wanted to improve his men, so he “made them armor-plated” and he programmed them to do quests. Freak says that the knights were just like robots. Max admits that he thought robots just existed in movies, which makes Freak unspeakably angry. When Freak finally gets control of himself, he explains that robotics is a huge industry and that there are robots everywhere, even on the space shuttle.

Max says that he has seen the space shuttle robot on TV, but Freak just rolls his eyes and says that TV is the “opiate of the masses.” Max is confused again, but Freak explains that opiates are drugs and massive means large and heavy—so TV is “the drug of fat heads.” Max asks if Freak doesn't have a TV, but Freak says he does. He needs it to watch *Star Trek*, but he also reads books so he can figure out what's true. Max says nothing—he doesn't want to explain that he's learning disabled and that he hates reading. He acts excited when Freak offers to loan him books, and then they hear Gwen. When Max crawls out of the basement, Gwen looks terrified. Freak climbs out next, and Gwen grabs him and pulls him home in the wagon. Freak shrugs at Max, but Max knows that Gwen is scared of him.

Freak's interest in King Arthur, especially since he describes Arthur as a “wimpy little kid,” suggests that King Arthur is a symbol for Freak himself. Many people probably also see Freak as a wimpy kid who can't do much—but like Arthur, Freak wants to be important, do great things, and find his place in history. Max's respect for Freak's story helps the two deepen their friendship. He knows that this is important to Freak, so he's more than willing to listen and learn something new.



King Arthur's armor seems to help Freak to make sense of his own body and how he exists in relation to the world. Given that Freak needs the aid of crutches to get around, it's likely that he sees his own mobility aids as a kind of “armor” that enables him to better navigate the world. As such, Max's suggestion that robots aren't real perhaps angers Freak because it implies there is no hope for more sophisticated options (like prosthetic body parts) that could aid Freak even further. Listening to Freak talk and learning about real robots, then, is a way for Max to honor the way that Freak thinks of himself.



Freak's very serious deployment of “opiate of the masses” tells the reader that while Freak may be smart, he's still an innocent kid—the phrase should read “opiate of the masses” in reference to the paraphrased Karl Marx quote, “Religion is the opiate of the masses.” However, because Freak is the one telling the story, he can make whatever he wants true, and Max can remember it however he sees fit. Meanwhile, Max's nonchalant insistence that Gwen is afraid of him suggests that Max is accustomed to adults treating him with fear and suspicion, something that certainly wears on his self-esteem and emotional wellbeing.



CHAPTER 5. SPITTING IMAGE

Max explains that sometimes, he goes to a place in his head where it's cool and dim and he feels like a cloud. He goes to this place right after Gwen runs off with a look on her face that tells Max that she thinks he stole Freak. He lies down on the floor under his bed and he stays there until Gram knocks on the door, insisting she has something important to say. Max crawls out, noting that there seems to be less space under the bed than there used to be, and he opens the door. Gram looks like she'd rather be anywhere else, apologizes, and says that Gwen called. Max shrinks; he's certain that Gwen reported him. Gram says that Gwen apologized, shocking Max. Gram confirms that Max and Kevin (Freak) were just "making friends."

Gram says that she thinks Gwen just didn't expect Max to be so big, and now Gwen is afraid she offended Max. Max asks if Gram knows Gwen, and Gram explains that Gwen and Annie—Max's mother—were good friends. She notes that Max and Kevin also went to daycare together she and asks if Max remembers, but Max just shrugs. He doesn't want Gram to know how much he remembers about that time. Gram continues that Gwen is delighted that Kevin and Max are going to be friends and that Gwen invited Max for supper. Without thinking, Max asks if he has to go. Gram puts a hand on Max's shoulder. He can tell that she's nervous to touch him on account of his size, but she tells Max that it'd be nice if he went.

Max insists that it isn't a big deal; he knows he probably just scared her. Gram insists that it wasn't Max who scared Gwen, but she won't tell Max who did. Gram continues that Gwen is a remarkable woman raising the "poor boy" on her own, but Max insists that Freak isn't poor—his body is probably so small because he's so smart. Gram brushes this off and Max agrees to have supper with Gwen and Freak, even though he feels anxious about it. It turns out to not be so bad. Gwen greets Max warmly, quickly apologizes for her behavior, and briefly explains that she was friends with Annie, but that Kenny was scary and crazy. Freak, who's digging through boxes, tells Gwen to leave Max alone.

For Max, escaping inside his head is far easier and is preferable to spending time in the real world, where grown adults treat him like a dangerous enemy even though he's just a 12-year-old kid. His reaction to what Gram says also suggests that he expects this kind of prejudiced behavior—it's normal for him. That it's shocking to hear Gwen apologized speaks to how unapologetically prejudiced people tend to be in Max's town: because Max resembles his father, people assume Max is violent like Kenny.



Here, Max confirms that he's doing his best to ignore his early childhood memories, since they're painful for both him and for the adults in his life. In other words, Max is doing what he can to protect Gram by acting like everything is fine, another indicator that Max is nothing like the violent person people think he is. It's also hard to tell if Gram is truly scared to touch Max, or if that's just Max's interpretation. He seems to have few reasons to believe that adults won't be afraid of him, so he may be unable to see that Gram is nervous for other reasons.



Gram and Gwen confirm here that people are afraid of Max because he resembles his father, Kenny. Max's anxiousness seems to stem from his belief that all adults are afraid of him and they'll therefore treat him poorly, which again says volumes about how cruel people in town generally are to Max. This treatment seems even more misguided when Max stands up for Freak's dignity to Gram, since Max is clearly an empathetic and kind individual. In Max's opinion, Freak doesn't need pity—he needs people to accept that he's an intelligent and worthy human being.



Gwen apologizes one more time and she starts to explain herself again, but Freak interjects that Gwen thinks that Max just looks like Kenny. Gwen looks small and embarrassed, but Max says that everyone says the same thing. He tells the reader that it shouldn't be a big deal for a boy to look like his father, but for him, it matters since Kenny is in prison. Everyone in town knows what Kenny did, and the older Max gets, the more people think it's a big deal. Max asks if Gwen really knew Annie and Kenny, but Gwen quietly says that Kenny didn't make it easy for her to stay friends with Annie. Max passes Gwen a knife when she struggles to open a package of hot dogs. She doesn't flinch, so Max decides she's cool. Dinner is fun and full of laughter. When Max gets home, he cries with happiness.

Gwen's treatment of Max is hopeful, as it suggests that people will be able to reevaluate how they perceive and treat Max as they get to know him better. Importantly, it seems that this process is beginning to happen as a result of Max's budding friendship with Freak, which suggests that their bond may be beneficial for Max's other relationships as well. When Max cries after having dinner with Gwen and Freak, it shows that despite Max's attempts to isolate himself, he does crave human connection. Now, his life will be fuller with Freak in it.



CHAPTER 6. CLOSE ENCOUNTER OF THE TURD KIND

Max remarks that everyone goes nuts for the Fourth of July. Dads get drunk and grill, moms try to keep kids from blowing themselves up, and kids run wild. Max assures readers that he loves the Fourth but he thinks that people don't see what really happens—that is, that the dads just get drunk and act numb. Max says that this year, he gets to go to the fireworks at the millpond without Grim and Gram for the first time. He's going with Freak instead. Gram thinks this is a good idea because she's afraid people will step on Freak, which Max thinks is silly—people never step on little kids, so they'd never step on Freak.

Max's fixation on the role of alcohol in Fourth of July festivities is another clue that he hasn't had good experiences with his own father or with alcohol in the past. He has no reason to think that dads do anything but get drunk on Fourth of July, which suggests that even as Max tries to ignore his own memories of the past, they still influence how he interprets his present. He again stands up for Freak's dignity when he points out how silly Gram's fear is that people will step on him.



Max says that as expected, they have no reason to worry about getting stepped on but every reason to worry about people drinking beer. A few blocks from the millpond, Max recognizes the voice of Tony D., the local bully, shouting insults at them. Tony D. is 17 and he's already been to juvenile court several times; Max knows that the only way to deal with Tony D. and his gang is to avoid them. Regardless, Max and Freak stop. Tony D. struts up and he asks if the boys "got any." Max can smell beer and possibly road kill on Tony D.'s breath. Freak stares Tony D. down and he asks Tony D. what they're supposed to have. Tony D. wants fireworks. Freak starts to walk away faster than he can comfortably go. He tells Max to follow him and to ignore the "cretin."

That Max so willingly stops for Tony D. drives home again that Max isn't violent; rather, Max is scared of others. Although Max seems big and scary to other people, he clearly has no interest in fighting with older bullies. This illustrates again how wrong people's perceptions of Max are: he's clearly terrified and he knows that even he can't take on Tony D., no matter his reputation.



Tony D. steps in front of Freak and he asks what Freak said. Freak spells "cretin" and defines it, and Max laughs out loud. At this, Tony D. bares his teeth. Max thinks they look sharp and he believes that Tony D. is going to kill them, but fortunately, a cop car turns on its siren and it heads for the millpond. Tony D. and his gang run away. Freak breathes that that was "a close encounter of the turd kind," which takes Max a second to get but then makes him laugh. After a minute, Freak asks if Max could take Tony D. Max says that *nobody* can, which just makes Freak laugh louder.

It's impossible to know for sure whether Tony D.'s teeth are actually sharp, but it's very possible that this perception is just a reflection of Max's fear. Because Max is the one telling his story, readers get Max's highly biased version of events—so while Max may present things like this as fact, it's possible he's exaggerating. This is another way in which Max is able to control his own story and his memories.



Freak laughs so hard that he falls over, so Max picks him up and he notes how light Freak is. Later, watching the fireworks, this gives Max the idea to pick Freak up and set him on his shoulders when Freak can't see. Freak trembles for a moment but then he grabs some of Max's hair and starts whooping at the fireworks. Max knows then that it's okay that he picked Freak up like this. Freak shouts the various elements that give fireworks their colors and Max feels in awe of everything that Freak knows.

Max's desire to not offend Freak shows again that he's not a bully by any means. He's generous, kind, and he wants Freak to feel respected and supported—he definitely doesn't want to make Freak uncomfortable. In other words, Max looks at how others treat him and then does the exact opposite, but few people understand that Max operates this way.



CHAPTER 7. WALKING HIGH ABOVE THE WORLD

With Freak still on his shoulders, Max heads for the food carts. Freak comments that the view is amazing from up so high, and then hisses that there are “cretins” at two and three o’ clock. Max is confused, so Freak explains that Tony D. and his gang are converging. He tells Max to turn left. Max doesn't know his right and left, so he blanks and freezes. Freak kicks him with his left foot and something clicks in Max's head. Max turns left, and as Freak shouts for him to go faster, Max runs as fast as he possibly can through the crowd. However, the minute Max thinks they're safe, one of the gang members comes out of nowhere.

This valiant escape attempt speaks to one of the positive effects of Max and Freak's friendship: together, they can do things they couldn't do alone, such as escape from bullies using Freak's intellect and Max's large size. The “click” Alone, Max is unmoored, but with Freak to help him, it seems Max is able to reach his potential.



Max quietly asks Freak what to do, and Freak asks for a minute. Just as Tony D. reaches into his back pocket, presumably for a knife, Freak kicks for Max to go right. Max runs right over one of Tony's boys and then he follows Freak's directions through the crowd. Freak shouts for Max to run into the pond. Max hears Tony's knife zip through the air and he races into the pond. Max almost trips in the sucking mud but he thinks of Tony D.'s teeth and he keeps going. Freak stops Max in the middle of the pond, when the mud is up around Max's knees. The boys turn around and they watch Tony D.'s friends rescue him.

Again, it's unlikely that Tony D.'s teeth are actually sharpened to points, but as the narrator, Max has the ability to tell his story in a way that makes it seem true. That Max doesn't think at all about how deep he is in the pond until Freak stops him speaks to how totally Max trusts Freak, even at this early point in their friendship. This suggests that Max is more than willing to be friends with people if they give him the chance.



Tony D. shouts at his friends to gather rocks. Max is sinking deeper in the mud and he asks Freak again what they should do. Freak insists that the “cavalry” is coming, but Max doesn't know what this means. He can't move, but the rocks fortunately all fall short. Max hears a screech: it's Freak whistling. Finally, Max realizes that Freak saw a cop car and that he's calling it. The cop car spotlight hits them, and Freak waves and makes a fuss. Through a megaphone, a cop instructs them all to stay still, but Tony D.'s boys scatter. Finally, the cops arrive and they help Max and Freak out of the pond. They say that they know all about Tony D., and then one says he recognizes Max as “Killer Kane's” son. When they ask Freak for his name, Freak says that they're **Freak the Mighty**, and they're nine feet tall.

The cop's comment that Max is Killer Kane's son speaks to the fact that everywhere Max goes, he has to contend with his father's reputation. The cops' willingness to help Max, however, complicates this to a degree. The cop is still willing to help Max despite his father's reputation, which speaks to the possibility that as adults continue to observe Max doing good deeds or experiencing violence him, they'll reevaluate how they think of and treat Max.



CHAPTER 8. DINOSAUR BRAIN

Max figures that he's going to get in trouble for running into the pond. The cops drive him home. Grim hoses Max off with a weird look on his face while the cops make it sound like Max heroically rescued Freak. Grim seems surprised, but Max thinks this is silly—he knows it must've looked like he rescued Freak, but in reality, Freak rescued *him*. Gram rubs Max down with a towel and he gives Max a bowl of ice cream, while Grim makes Max a cup of coffee. He gives it to Max in a fancy china cup like it's a big deal. Instead of asking why Grim is being so weird, Max just thanks him.

Max asks for sugar in his coffee and Grim calls Max “son” when he says yes. This is new—Grim always calls Max by Max or Maxwell. Gram's expression suggests that she thinks this is how things are supposed to be. Gram makes Max promise to stay away from “the hoodlum boy” (Tony D.), but Grim insists that Max can handle himself. Max assures Gram that he'll run from Tony D. Gram starts to say something about how Max is so much bigger than Tony D., but Grim interjects and says that Max is just going to avoid confrontation. Max just nods and he doesn't mention that Tony D. carries a knife and probably has guns. Max doesn't want Gram to worry.

In summers past, Max has spent most of his time watching TV and reading comic books. But this summer, with Freak around, Max gets up every day. Freak wakes Max up by banging on the basement door and shouting that they must go slay dragons and rescue maidens. One day, Max notes that Freak must have ants in his pants. Freak suspiciously asks if Gwen asked Max to say that, and then he says that out of the 2,247 species of ants, none are in his pants. Max just laughs.

One day, Freak proposes a quest of a journey to the East. Max now knows what a quest is—it started with **King Arthur**, since Arthur needed to keep his knights busy and he wanted to prove how strong and brave they were. Privately, Max thinks that the quests proved that the knights were dumb since they wore tin cans and prayed, but Freak is sensitive about quests and King Arthur. Freak goes on about how dragons aren't just monsters; they're symbols of the terrifying natural world and “an archetype of the unknown.” Confused, Max asks what an “archy-type” is.

Grim and Gram seem to treat Max so oddly because they want to encourage this kind of heroic behavior—they might think that praising Max for saving Freak will help Max to make better choices and avoid following in his father's footsteps. This seems strange to Max because Max is well aware that he's not evil and violent, and in his experience, he didn't do anything worth noting. As Max says, Freak saved him by telling him what to do; Max couldn't have done it alone.



It seems that when Gram first heard Max got into a scuffle with Tony D., she assumed that Max was the aggressor. This shows again that Gram doesn't believe the truth in front of her eyes that Max is actually kind and nonviolent. Max, however, shows the reader how kind he is when he says he doesn't want Gram to worry. He wants to do everything in his power to make the people around him feel comfortable, even if they don't always show him the same kindness or courtesy.



With Max's help, Freak's quests can be more real because assuming the Freak the Mighty persona enables Freak to travel around town. Even though Max focuses on the ways in which Freak helps him (getting him out of bed, helping him think), Max is also having a major positive effect in Freak's life by giving him this mobility.



Though Freak hasn't shared that he's going to undergo an operation to receive a bionic body, it's telling here that he positions dragons as a symbol of the unknown as well as something that knights slay. Since Freak's bionic body will turn him into a modern-day knight, the story that Freak is going to receive this surgery helps Freak deal with the unknown—that is, the fact that he's going to die.



Freak reaches into his backpack for his dictionary and hands it to Max. He walks Max through looking up the word, though Max hates it—none of the letters look right, and he doesn't know how to spell. Max looks for the words underlined in red ink, since those are the ones that Freak has already looked up. Finally, Freak spells the entire word and Max finds the definition. He insists that it just means “pattern” and that it doesn't say anything about dragons. Freak says that he meant the second definition, which refers to a symbol or idea that's expressed in dreamlike images. Bored, Max pretends to understand. Freak shakes his head and he says he doesn't know why he even cares—dinosaurs had peanut-sized brains and they ruled the earth for years.

CHAPTER 9. LIFE IS DANGEROUS

By now, it's normal for Freak to ride on Max's shoulders and steer. Freak doesn't always know where he's going; he prefers to make things up. Max loves it. He sometimes thinks they're just walking down the sidewalk, but really, they're crossing a dangerous bridge. Freak tells Max to head east and he pulls out a compass with the Cub Scout logo on it. He insists it's actually a rare and valuable **King Arthur** relic. Max heads east and they walk for miles. In a ritzy neighborhood, Freak points out all the houses that are actually castles. Eventually, Max asks if they can stop for a Coke. Freak says they're almost to the fortress—after they get there, they can buy a Coke.

The fortress turns out to be a hospital. Freak leads Max to a new building in the back that's labeled “Medical Research.” He explains that they do experiments there and he asks Max to swear to keep a secret. Freak talks Max through making a blood pact with saliva and then he whispers that inside, there's a lab called the Experimental Bionics Unit. There, they're developing a new form of bionic robot—and Freak is going to be “the first bionically improved human.” Max doesn't know what “bionics” means and he asks Freak to just tell him rather than making him look it up. Freak defines it as the science of designing new parts for the human body.

Freak says that the Bionics Unit is building him a whole new robot. It will look like him, just bigger and better. Excitedly, Freak says that he comes to the Bionics Unit every few months for tests, and they're hard at work fitting him for a bionic transplant. Max can tell that this isn't pretend or pure imagination. This is important to Freak. Max understands this, even if he doesn't comprehend what it means to be a human robot. Max asks if it'll hurt. Freak is quiet for a moment but then he says it will—but he can think his way out of pain. Worried, Max asks if someone else can be first since it sounds dangerous. Freak says that life is dangerous and then he suggests that they head home.

Even if Max doesn't appreciate Freak's insistence on using the dictionary right now, the fact that Freak is adamant about teaching Max how to understand new concepts will almost certainly have an effect on Max in the long term. Given that Max is the narrator of the story, it's clear that Max will eventually understand what Freak is trying to teach him and he'll apply it to his own storytelling.



Through storytelling, Freak is able to turn ordinary or mundane activities, like walking down the sidewalk or through a neighborhood, into something magical. Max loves spending time like this with Freak because it begins to show him the power of imagination and of storytelling. It also helps him deepen his trust in Freak, which in turn helps the boys strengthen their friendship and come up with even more adventures.



Freak's insistence that he's going to be “the first bionically improved human” is, importantly, a story that helps him make sense of the consequence of his disease—the most serious being that Freak likely isn't going to live a very long life. Choosing to fixate on getting a bionic body gives Freak something to look forward to and hope for, rather than fixating on the fact that he's going to die. By telling this story to Max, who takes it at face value, Freak also ropes Max in and he makes the story even more real.



Less important than Max's understanding of what Freak is saying is the fact that Max understands entirely how important this is to Freak. Again, this is so important because the thought of a bionic body is one of the things that keeps Freak moving forward with hope and happiness. It likely also helps him develop his friendship with Max, as he knows that Max is going to believe him and not remind him of the truth (that he's going to die). Max's willingness to believe gives the story more power.



CHAPTER 10. RATS OR WORSE

Over the summer, Max continues to grow. One day, Grim suggests that Max's legs are stretching from all the walking he does carrying around "poor Kevin." Max insists that Freak isn't that heavy and that it's not fair to call him poor. Grim says that Max is right; Kevin is remarkable. Max says that Freak has most of the dictionary memorized. At this, Grim looks like he thinks that Freak is lying and that Max isn't smart enough to understand. Max heads down under, thinking that Grim is okay sometimes but that he often acts like he knows everything. Max quips that in the dictionary, "a smart grown-up" isn't the definition of "grim."

Max is listening to music on his Walkman when suddenly, Freak pops up and startles him. Freak rolls his eyes and he says that he has a quest for them. They don't have to leave the neighborhood, as it's a treasure hunt and the treasure is in the sewer. Max is skeptical, especially when Freak says that they need to wait until three a.m. to get the treasure, since it'll be dark and no one will see them. Freak also insists that they wear all black and they cover themselves in soot. They can't find soot anywhere and so they decide to use dirt, but Freak is scandalized when Max asks if he can just wear a dirty shirt since he doesn't own a black one. Max sets the alarm on his Walkman, but he never falls asleep.

Finally, Max gets up and he sneaks out to hide under Freak's window. It does feel exciting to be out alone at this time of night. Freak tosses Max one of Gwen's black blouses, but Max refuses to wear it. Freak stands up to his full height to reveal that he's wearing a Darth Vader costume and then Max lifts Freak onto his shoulders. Freak makes Max swear to do whatever he says, and then they head for the storm drain at the end of the block. A cat startles them, but they can't tell if it's black. Max attempts to pull up the storm drain but when he can't, Freak pulls out a flashlight and a bent paper clip on a string. Freak holds the flashlight, and though Max thinks this is stupid, he drops the hook down and pulls up a purse.

The purse is disgusting, and Max doesn't want to touch it. Freak explains that he saw one of Tony D.'s boys toss it down the drain yesterday morning; they must've stolen it. Max is certain that there's no treasure in the purse, but it feels good to get back at Tony D. and get some old lady her purse back. Freak pulls out a wallet. There's no money, but they find the ID of a lady named Loretta Lee. Freak declares that Loretta Lee must be a damsel in distress, but Max tells the reader that they were wrong—Loretta Lee is a damsel who *causes* distress.

Standing up for Freak and insisting that Grim not look down on Freak with pity is another way that Max begins to transform how adults perceive Freak and him. This allows Grim to see that Max doesn't think of Freak as someone who needs pity and extra care—rather, Freak is an intelligent (if naïve) young man, while Max is kind, generous, and respectful.



Max's willingness to go along with this wild-sounding quest is a testament to the strength of his friendship with Freak. Max knows that participating is the only way to make Freak feel seen and important, and so Max is more than willing to go along. Meanwhile, Freak's insistence on doing this in the dead of night and wearing all black speaks to his love of drama and storytelling. He wants this to be a compelling, dramatic event, and he's willing to do anything to make it so.



Again, it doesn't matter much to Max that he thinks this is silly—what matters more than that is that he shows Freak kindness and respect by playing along. This continues to show that Max isn't a violent or dangerous person; he's a generous, kind, and selfless young man who just needs the opportunity to make that clear to people. Sharing this exciting experience with Freak, meanwhile, allows the boys to grow closer to each other.



It's likely that if Freak had explained from the outset that they were going to retrieve a purse stolen by Tony D., Max would've played along much more willingly—Max's kind nature means that doing something nice thing for one of Tony D.'s victims would be appealing to him. However, because Freak didn't tell Max the whole story, Max simply had to trust Freak that this was necessary.



CHAPTER 11. THE DAMSEL OF DISTRESS

The address on Loretta Lee's ID is across the millpond in what people used to call the New Tenements. Now, everyone calls it the New Testaments, and Gram forbade Max from going there. The day after Max and Freak recover the purse, Freak insists that it's okay to break a promise for a quest. Freak believes there might be a reward, but Max insists that only poor people and drug addicts live in the Testaments. Regardless, with Freak on his shoulders, Max sneaks around the millpond, happy to have a smart brain for once. Freak talks about the Round Table until they get to the Testaments, which looks sad and smells bad. Freak nervously suggests they rethink their quest. Max insists that Loretta might need her ID.

The door opens before Max even rings the bell. A creepy-looking hand snakes out and grabs a newspaper, and then a woman starts cussing Max and Freak out and calling for Iggy. The door opens to reveal a scrawny blonde woman in a bathrobe. She smokes and squints at them. A huge hairy man with a beer belly and blue tattoos joins her and he insults Max and Freak. The woman insists she knows Max, but Freak interjects that they're looking for Loretta Lee. The man begins to laugh and he pokes Max hard in the chest. Max freezes. He knows the man must be Iggy Lee, the boss of a scary motorcycle gang. Freak blurts out that they found Loretta Lee's purse and he tosses it. Iggy Lee catches it and then he invites the boys inside. Freak tries to decline, but Loretta says that they have to.

Max lifts Freak down to enter, and Iggy makes Max sit in a ratty chair, insisting that it makes him nervous to look up. Loretta warns Max to not make Iggy nervous. When Iggy asks for their names, Freak insists they have to go home. Iggy flicks Freak on the nose, but Freak doesn't say anything except their names. Then, Iggy asks where they got Loretta's purse. Freak tells the truth and Iggy asks where the money is. Loretta coughs and she says that there was no money, but Iggy tells her to shut up. Max can tell that Loretta is afraid of Iggy. Suddenly, Loretta jumps up and shouts "Kenny Kane!" Max thinks for a moment that Iggy is going to hit Loretta, but then Iggy relaxes and he says that Max must be Killer Kane's son.

Max isn't without his own prejudices—even a poor person or a drug addict deserves to get their purse back, and Tony D. shouldn't have stolen a purse from anyone. However, both boys play off of each other and help the other to understand that no matter their fears of or feelings about the Testaments, returning Loretta Lee's ID is still something they're morally obligated to do. Their friendship, then, helps them to be better people.



Realizing that they've stumbled upon Iggy Lee impresses upon Max and Freak that they're in way over their heads. This isn't an innocent, childish quest—they're dealing with real people who don't have Max and Freak's best interests at heart. When Loretta Lee insists that she knows Max, it implies that she knew Kenny—and now, Max is going to pay a price for looking just like his father. That Loretta and possibly Iggy knew of Kenny speaks to the kind of network Kenny had before he went to prison; these people may have been his friends.



Again, even if Max is clearly a scared 12-year-old boy, he still frightens grown leaders of gangs—Iggy telling Max to sit shows how uncomfortable Iggy is being around someone who's more physically imposing than he is. Much of Max's discomfort and fear here stems from the fact that he seems somewhat familiar with the abusive dynamic between Iggy and Loretta. This offers some clues as to what Max's home life was like while he lived with his parents—and it explains why he isn't very trusting of adults now.



Thrilled with herself, Loretta goes to the kitchen, brings Iggy a can of Bud Light, and starts to reminisce about Kenny. Iggy cuts her off, tells her to shut up, and crushes his can after he drains it. Max notices that the entire apartment is covered in crushed cans. Freak gives Max a confused look that scares Max more than anything else. Loretta says that Freak must be Gwen's kid, but Iggy says he doesn't remember Gwen. She continues that Kenny is in prison now, and Iggy asks Max to tell Kenny hi. Max says nothing, but Iggy says that Killer Kane was tough and Loretta asks if it's true that Kenny found religion. Max admits he doesn't know, and Loretta says that Max must be stupid and disabled.

Loretta thinks that Max doesn't know how strong he is and so she suggests that Iggy find out. Iggy scowls and he tells the boys to leave. When Loretta protests, Iggy calls her stupid and he says that he doesn't want Kenny to hear that he messed with Max. When Loretta insists that Kenny is in prison for life, Iggy spits that life doesn't always mean life. At the door, Loretta tries to rub Freak's head for luck. Freak does his best to evade her. Annoyed, Loretta says that she knew Freak's dad and that he was a magician. Freak looks like he really wants to know about his father. Loretta says that he was a magician because as soon as he heard "birth defect," he disappeared. Iggy shoves the boys out the door.

CHAPTER 12. KILLER KANE, KILLER KANE, HAD A KID WHO GOT NO BRAIN

Max feels horrible for Freak, who hates it when people try to rub his head. Max races back around the millpond and when they get to Freak's house, Freak declares that they had quite the adventure. Max insists that they were lucky to get out alive. Freak nonchalantly says that the things Loretta Lee said about his dad are true, but Gwen won't talk about it. Freak says he knows his dad left because of him, but good riddance. Max starts laughing for seemingly no reason.

Max feels horrible in the week before school starts. Gram is thrilled that Max is in eighth grade now, but Max thinks that his seventh-grade teachers just didn't want to deal with him anymore. She takes Max shopping for new clothes and shoes, which is a horrible experience for Max. The girl at the shoe store smirks at him, and the manager is a jerk. Back at home, Grim and Gram comment on how big and grown-up Max looks. Max explains that this year, he's going to be in the same classes as Freak. This means that Max will be in the "smart classes" instead of the ones for kids with learning disabilities. Gram is hesitant to allow this at first, but Grim suggests that all Max might need to do well in school is a friend.

Freak's confusion suggests that he doesn't know what any of this means; the crushed beer can's don't have the same connotation that they do for Max. Because of this, Freak is deferring to Max—something that scares Max, given that Max doesn't think highly of his intellectual capabilities. When Loretta turns to insulting Max, it suggests that she doesn't know how to interact with young boys who aren't abusive and violent—in her eyes, Max must be disabled since he doesn't act how Loretta assumes a man should.



Loretta reads as someone who desperately wants to feel powerful any chance she gets, hence her suggestion that Iggy fight Max. She'd get to feel powerful by association and she clearly gets a kick out of being mean to Freak. Iggy's reaction to discovering that Max is Kenny's son suggests that Max isn't wrong to be scared of Kenny, as Iggy appears just as afraid as Max is. In this instance, Max's association with Kenny actually helps him, as it means that he's not an easy target for a much older, more powerful bully.



Max's laughter is likely a way to release tension after a very scary experience. That he's able to laugh with Freak about what happened helps to cement the boys' friendship, while Freak's willingness to talk about his dad does the same. Sharing things like this with each other helps the boys to get to know each other, which will later allow them to better defend each other too.



Max thoughts about his seventh-grade teachers and the clerks at the stores suggest that he doesn't expect any adults in his life to think well of him or to treat him kindly, an outlook that stems from the fact that most adults expect Max to be just like Kenny. When Grim suggests that Max might need a friend to do well in school, it opens up the possibility that Grim is starting to rethink how he conceptualizes Max. Max might not be the terrifying person that Grim thought—he might just be lonely.



The other kids seem to not notice Max and Freak at first, but midway through the day, Max starts to hear whispers in the hallway. In English class, Mrs. Donelli asks Max to stand up and say something about his summer. Max never speaks in class—if Mrs. Donelli weren't a new teacher, she'd know this. Kids start to chant "Maxi Pad" and things about Kenny; eventually, kids start throwing things. Mrs. Donelli looks scandalized. Freak climbs onto his desk, shouts for order, and tells Mrs. Donelli that he's only Kevin some of the time. When she asks for an example, Freak climbs onto Max's shoulders and he gives Max the signal to stand up. Mrs. Donelli's eyes go wide.

Max feels strong and smart as Freak says that sometimes, they're nine feet tall and they slay dragons. Freak ignores Mrs. Donelli's request that they sit down and he guides Max around the room, leading the rest of the kids in a chant of "**Freak the Mighty!**" Max feels like he's dancing. For this, Max and Freak end up in the principal's office. The principal, Mrs. Addison, allows Freak to explain. Freak uses so many big words that Mrs. Addison has to use her dictionary. She seems to get a kick out of Freak and so she lets the boys go.

CHAPTER 13. AMERICAN CHOP SUEY

Max says that he used to think all the fuss about Friday the 13th was silly, but in October, he starts to reconsider. School is going well, and Mrs. Donelli is getting used to them. She knows by now that Freak is smarter and more well-read than she is, so she often tries to get Max to give answers instead. Max just shrugs and smiles. He doesn't think it matters if he knows the answers or not, since if he doesn't, Freak will explain it to him later in a way he can understand. Max often *does* know the answers, but this is because Freak has been showing him how to read and now it all makes sense. Max's reading tutor insists that this is proof that Max has never been learning disabled.

The tutor even makes Mrs. Donelli stop asking Max questions in class and quiz him during study hall instead. Max tells the reader that there's a big difference between speaking up in class and speaking to one person. Mrs. Donelli seems to understand this, but she doesn't understand how Max can seemingly read but not write. Max explains that no matter what Freak says, writing isn't just like talking. He doesn't believe he'll ever be able to write—he's good at listening, which is like reading, but he doesn't talk or write.

In this situation, Mrs. Donelli's newness means that she doesn't have the information she'd need to know that she should ignore Max—and so she can't keep her class under control. Memory, in this case, can't help her. Freak's choice to take over the situation and make this about Freak the Mighty shows that Grim might be right: Max might just need a friend. Max clearly has no issues following Freak's directions and he's able to feel as though he's doing something meaningful in support of Freak here.



Max's sense of confidence and purpose speaks to the power of friendship. Even as Max does something that's clearly going to get him in trouble, Max doesn't worry about that—he's only focused on how great his connection with Freak makes him feel. Max likely feels even better about being Freak's friend when Freak is able to charm Mrs. Addison, as it shows Max that friendship can do all sorts of amazing things.



Though it's impossible to confirm, it's likely Max has had a hard time reading because he's insecure and he doesn't feel comfortable trusting adults. Few adults in Max's life have proven themselves worthy of his trust, so it would make sense that Max wouldn't want to do anything that might attract extra attention or require him to trust anyone. Since Freak is a peer, he's far less threatening—and he never makes Max feel purposefully dumb, so Max is able to finally feel competent.



Freak's struggle to teach Max to write is really a much bigger endeavor. Freak is trying to make Max understand that Max has something important to say—and that if Max says it, people will listen. Even if Freak isn't entirely aware of it now, his project of teaching Max to write is preparing Max to write this story.



On Friday the 13th, Max gets a note asking him to go to the principal's office. Freak is upset that he can't go too, but he offers to send Max with his dictionary so he can use big words on Mrs. Addison. Max refuses; he's afraid that he'll forget how to look up a word and thereby prove that he's a "butthead goon" who should be in the learning disabled class. If they put him back in the learning disabled class, Max has already decided that he'll run away. Mrs. Addison shows Max into her office and he can tell that this is serious. She assures him that they're not putting him back in the learning disabled class.

Mrs. Addison says that this is personal—it's about Kenny. Max wishes that he was in trouble as Mrs. Addison explains that she got a request from Kenny via the parole board. Before she can finish, Max covers his ears and he says he doesn't want to hear it. Mrs. Addison calls in the school nurse and both women try to hug Max. They try to tell Max that they'll make it clear to Kenny's parole officer and his lawyer that Max isn't going to do anything. Finally, Max removes his hands from his ears and he realizes that he's curled into a ball in the corner. He doesn't know how he got there. The nurse is crying, so Max assumes he hurt her and apologizes. She insists that Max didn't hurt her, but Max thinks that he must've but that he doesn't remember it. This is terrifying.

Later in the cafeteria, something even worse happens: when Max gets up to get Freak another helping of American chop suey, he returns to find Freak red in the face and choking. Max fetches the nurse, who calls an ambulance. The nurse inserts a tube into Freak's mouth, and after a minute, Freak's purple face starts to look pink again. By the time the ambulance arrives, Freak doesn't want to go. They won't let Max join Freak, so Mrs. Addison pulls Max away and she observes that Max has had quite the day. Max insists that Kevin is the one who had quite the day—and all Kevin did was try to eat lunch. At this, Mrs. Addison assures Max that he's going to be okay.

CHAPTER 14. CROSS MY HEART AND HOPE TO DIE

The next day, Gram lets Max stay home to greet Freak when he gets out of the hospital. Max carries Freak in from the car and they hole up in Freak's room, per Gwen's orders. There, they discuss Freak's impending operation to get a new bionic body. Max insists that it's scary, but Freak says he's not scared. Freak isn't sure when the operation will happen, but his doctor, Dr. Spivak, thinks maybe in a year or two. Max asks why Freak can't just stay the way he is. Freak shakes his head and he says that nobody ever stays the same; his problem is that he's growing inside but not outside. After this conversation, everything goes back to normal until Christmas vacation.

Max's insistence that he's going to run away if he has to return to the learning disabled classes represents a major leap from just a few months ago, when Max was extremely nervous about going to school at all. Though Max certainly wants to stay in regular classes because that means he gets to stay with Freak, it's also possible that Max is starting to see the value of being in the regular classroom, especially now that he can read.



Given Max's kind and generous nature, it's likely that Max didn't hurt the nurse—she's probably crying because seeing a child have this kind of reaction is painful. Because Max has been told his entire life he might be violent, however, he can't trust that he's not going to do something bad. Mrs. Addison's promise to advocate for Max starts to show Max that he can trust the adults around him. Once they understand that he's nothing like Kenny, they will do everything in their power to rally and keep Max safe from his father.



It's telling that Freak's hospitalization is worse for Max than hearing that Kenny is requesting something. This suggests that in Max's mind, Freak and their friendship are now far more important to him than worrying about Kenny and how Max might be when he grows up. Max makes this even clearer when he insists that Freak is the one who had a bad day, not him. This demonstrates to Mrs. Addison that Max is kind and selfless, which in turn makes her even more willing to stand up for Max.



Max is afraid because he cares so deeply about Freak's wellbeing. It's disturbing and scary for him that Freak is going to go through pain and come out with a whole new body, concerns that reflect Max's selflessness. Freak, of course, isn't actually going to receive a bionic body because this isn't scientifically possible—it's just a story he's telling. However, telling it to Max helps Max support Freak since it gives Max something to hope for, even as he fears the operation itself.



Max is in the down under wrapping presents when he hears shouting upstairs. This is unheard of—Grim never yells and Gram just cries when she's mad. Max sneaks up the stairs in time to hear Gram shout "over my dead body" through tears, and he hears his grandparents arguing about Grim's desire to get a gun for protection. Gram insists that "he" will break in, take the gun, and shoot them all. Max realizes they're talking about Kenny. Gram reasons that if they let Kenny out, the police will give them protection, but Grim says they won't—they didn't protect Annie. Gram dissolves into tears.

A bit later, Grim knocks on Max's door. He comes in, and for the first time he doesn't comment about how smelly or messy Max's room is. Max thinks that Grim looks old. Max asks if Kenny escaped, but Grim says that he's just up for parole. Grim agrees with Max that this is dumb, but he tells Max that he went to court and ensured that if Kenny tries to come within a mile of the house, he'll go back to prison. Max suggests that Grim get a gun, but Grim says he isn't sure. He says he can't tell Gram, but it'll break his heart to lie to her. Max promises he won't tell. Quietly, Grim gets up and he says that everything is going to be okay. He asks Max to stay inside for the next few days and Max promises that he will.

CHAPTER 15. WHAT CAME DOWN THE CHIMNEY

Christmas Eve is quiet. Gwen and Freak have supper with Max, Grim, and Gram, and nobody says anything about Kenny getting out of prison. Freak is wearing a new tweed jacket with elbow patches; he argues with Grim that he's never going to smoke a pipe while Max digs into Gram's famous mint sauce. After supper, they sit around the tree and Grim tells stories about how poor he was as a kid. He insists that his family was so poor that his father couldn't even afford coal—he and his siblings would get a piece of paper with the word "coal" written on it. Gram scolds Grim for telling lies, but Grim insists he's telling *tales*—he means to entertain, while lies are mean.

After hot cocoa and some candy, they open presents. Grim opens a sweater, Gram opens up Max's gift of a seashell bracelet, and then Freak opens his gift from Max. It looks like a jackknife, but it's actually a bunch of screwdrivers. Gwen gets a scarf, and then Freak gives Max his gift: it's a pyramid-shaped box covered in Sunday comics, and Max follows the instructions to open it. There are signs and arrows, and finally Max gets to a sign that tells him to "PRESS HERE AND BE AMAZED." Max does, and the box folds open to reveal a handmade book. Freak explains that he made Max a dictionary. Max thinks it's the best gift.

This overheard conversation is very different from the conversation Max overheard at the beginning of the novel. While then, Grim and Gram were still concerned that Max was going to be violent, here their only concern is protecting him and themselves. This shows how far they've come in terms of humanizing Max. He's no longer someone who scares them—he's their grandson and he needs their support and protection.



Though Grim used to be the one who was most concerned about Max's supposed latent violence, he shows here that he's truly changed his mind about Max. Taking out a restraining order shows that Max isn't a liability or a burden in Grim's mind; rather, Max is a cherished family member. Further, Grim is also talking to Max more an adult, not just an innocent child. This also reflects Grim's understanding that Max is growing up—and that Max's development isn't something to fear.



Grim's differentiation between lies and tales gets at the heart of how the novel thinks about storytelling. Stories like those concerning King Arthur and Freak's bionic body are fine since they entertain and they give people hope. Storytelling, however, can also encompass stories that are nothing but malicious lies. Presumably, anything Kenny says falls into this second category.



Max demonstrates through his thoughtful gifts that he's kind, generous, and a good friend. Freak does the same; the dictionary will allow Max a window into Freak's world, on Max's terms. The dictionary is, in some ways, Freak's story in his own words. It records the things that Freak finds interesting while omitting the words that Freak doesn't care about. Sharing this part of himself with Max helps the boys connect on an even deeper level.



Max fears that it'll take forever to fall asleep. His head is full of all the happy things that happened earlier, but he falls asleep and he dreams of a snowman that looks like Freak. When Max wakes up, he's cold. This is weird, since the down under is right next to the furnace. Then, Max thinks he hears wind but he realizes that it's someone breathing. The person rises up: he's huge and he puts a massive hand on Max's face and pushes. Kenny tells Max to be silent. Max tries his best to shrink into his pillow and it feels like his heart is waiting to see what happens next. Kenny says that he came back, just like he promised.

CHAPTER 16. A CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

Max feels paralyzed, like the only things that exist are the big hand and the cold wind. Kenny whispers that the "geezers" stuck Max in the basement so they could ignore him, and he spits that Grim and Gram have poisoned Max against him. Max sits up when Kenny tells him to. Max is terrified; he doesn't know if Grim bought the gun or what might happen if Grim tries to use it. Kenny says that whatever Grim and Gram told Max was a lie—he didn't kill anyone. Max puts on his clothes and he thinks that this isn't a surprise—he's always known that Kenny would come for him in the night. He feels weak. Kenny says that this is going to be an adventure and he leads Max outside.

Max looks up at the stars and he thinks of how, according to Freak, the stars are all dead and people on Earth are just seeing the "reruns." He doesn't even feel cold, even though he doesn't have a coat. Max thinks that the cold doesn't even matter, and that his life with Grim, Gram, Freak, and Gwen was just a dream. Now, he's awake and Kenny is real. The lights are off at Freak's house and Max thinks that the stars clicked off. Under a streetlight, Kenny turns Max around so he can look at him. Max can barely see Kenny's eyes under his eyebrows, which is fine since looking him in the eyes will give Max bad dreams. Kenny asks Max if he knows he's a "chip off the old block." Max says nothing. Kenny gently touches Max's face and he tells Max to answer.

Kenny rambles on that it's unfair that he's spent so many Christmas Eves away from his own son, locked up for a crime he didn't commit. Max agrees that this isn't fair. Kenny says that from now on, it'll just be him and Max. Max thinks that it's so quiet that it seems like someone died. He notices that Kenny is as tall as he is but wider. Weirdly, Max thinks that Kenny doesn't need a suit of armor, or a lance, or a horse. He thinks that Kenny is everything and no one can beat him. Kenny says that in neighborhoods like this, he thinks that people live like hamsters. He then says that he knows they've poisoned Max against him, but soon Max will see the truth.

The hold that Kenny has over Max's life becomes physical and real when Kenny shows up in the flesh. Now, he's not just a memory that plagues Max—he's a living, breathing person with a history of violence and cruelty. Max's heart seems to know before Max does that this is Kenny—and that Kenny isn't someone he can fight. Next to Kenny, Max's size and strength doesn't matter.



Kenny's interpretation of Max's living situation shows that Kenny is doing his best to poison Max against his grandparents. It's in Kenny's best interests to make Max believe that Grim and Gram don't love him and that they're liars—if he can convince Max of this, then Max will be loyal to Kenny. However, all of what Kenny says is a malicious, self-serving lie. Even though Max can see and understand this, it doesn't mean that he has the courage to push back.



Feeling like Kenny is the only real thing in the world reflects how Max thinks of Kenny's memory. While Max can ignore Kenny's legacy most of the time, it's still something that, in Max's mind, is inescapable—it will always return to haunt Max. Further, that legacy is in control of Max's life. In this present, this means that Kenny can kidnap Max and physically control him, and in the long term this means that Max doesn't feel like he can make his own choices about his life. He believes it's inevitable that he'll end up like Kenny.



Though Max agrees with everything Kenny says, he doesn't do so because he actually agrees—he complies because he's terrified. This drives home how entirely dissimilar Max and Kenny are. Max, for one, is easily frightened, while it's hard to imagine being able to scare Kenny with threats of violence. Max's thought that Kenny doesn't need a suit of armor shows how much Max has changed since meeting Freak. Now, he's thinking in Freak's terms, not just his own.



Kenny leads Max past the millpond and he pulls Max down as a car drives past. Max is certain that they're headed to the New Testaments as Kenny asks Max if he knows about Mary and Joseph seeking shelter in Bethlehem. Max tries to nod, but he finds that his teeth are chattering even though he doesn't feel cold. Kenny says they're seeking shelter but they're not going to a manger. Max agrees with this, but Kenny touches Max gently again and he tells Max not to be sassy. As they approach the Testaments, Max thinks that the snow makes everything look clean and new. Loretta Lee opens the door before they even get there and she lets them inside. She's wearing a slinky red dress. Iggy bolts the door behind Max and Kenny.

Loretta Lee slurs that she knew Kenny could get out. Kenny turns to Iggy and he asks if he made himself clear about Loretta drinking. Iggy sounds nervous. Loretta's fake eyelashes are coming off and her lipstick is smeared. She slurs something about how Preacher Kane doesn't want anyone to drink, even on Christmas Eve in one's own home. Iggy tells her to shut up and he pushes her down onto the couch. Kenny asks for food. Iggy fries up hamburgers and Loretta falls asleep. Max can barely swallow. When Kenny is done eating, he suggests that Iggy would be a great prison cook. Then, he asks Iggy to show them the place he told them about.

CHAPTER 17. BY ALL THAT'S HOLY

Iggy leads Max and Kenny along an alley between the buildings and into an apartment with a busted door. It smells like old lady perfume and cats, and Iggy explains that the woman who lives here left to visit her sister. Kenny looks around, dismisses Iggy, and then tells Max to sit down. Max looks at the front door, but suddenly, Kenny is behind him. Kenny makes Max promise that he won't run and he says that they need to talk. Max sits down in a soft chair and he wonders where the woman's cats went. Kenny leans over Max and he says that even though Grim and Gram think that Max is stupid, nobody related to Kenny is stupid. He tells Max that Max has to act smart and then he pulls out a rope. Kenny ties Max's hands and feet, ties the other end around his waist, and lies down to sleep.

Max can't move from the chair. Time feels frozen and his hands start to tingle. He falls asleep halfway and he starts dreaming about a meowing cat when he feels a tug. Kenny wakes Max and he says he needs to say some things. First, Kenny claims that he didn't kill anyone—people assumed things about him because he's big. Then, he confirms that Max never received the presents or letters he sent. Kenny says that Grim and Gram hate him, even though he's a loving and emotional person; he even cries during sad movies. Max can see that there are tears running down Kenny's cheeks. Kenny continues that the adults who locked him up took his life away. Max can't help but listen.

The differences between how Max experiences this night in his mind and how he experiences it physically speak to the divide between Max's heart and his body. Just as it's impossible for him to reconcile the two here thanks to his fear, Max's kind heart and his body don't look like they should match up—Max's size, to most people, suggests violence. This suggests that through this experience, Max will start to bring these two aspects of himself together as he confronts the living memory of Kenny.



Judging by Kenny's behavior, Iggy has every reason to be frightened—especially since he doesn't seem to be doing what Kenny told him to in regards to Loretta. Loretta may behave the way she does in part because she doesn't believe she has any power to influence how Kenny or Iggy act. She may recognize that she could become a victim no matter what she does, so it doesn't matter what she says. This speaks to the violent natures of both Iggy and Kenny.



Max's ability to worry about the old lady's cats despite his own perilous situation speaks again to his kindness and his compassion. He wants to care about others, even when he's in grave danger himself. Meanwhile, Kenny speaks to Max as though Grim and Gram are being actively horrible to him. Kenny must do if this if he wants to make Max believe and trust him. He must try to alter what Max knows is true by telling a compelling, believable lie—however, it becomes clear that all of this is a lie when Kenny ties Max up. Kenny wants what he says to be true, but he knows he hasn't convinced Max.



As Kenny speaks to Max, he tries to hit all the points that he knows might sway Max: he notes the fact that people are afraid of Max because he's large, and he tries to convince Max to sympathize with him. Being a naturally sympathetic person (as well as a captive audience), Max can't help but listen. However, thanks to Max's transformation since meeting Freak, Max has good experiences with Grim and Gram to bolster his belief that Kenny is lying.



Kenny says he's worried that Max might wonder about Annie. He says that if Max still believes what Grim and Gram told him, he's wrong—Max was too tiny at the time to know the truth. Kenny fetches a Bible off the table and he swears on it that he didn't kill Annie. He asks Max if he's satisfied. Max's throat closes up, but he manages to squeak out that he's satisfied. Kenny lies down and he goes back to sleep, while Max stays up until sunrise. He tries not to think about the things he doesn't want to remember.

It becomes clear that Kenny's stories aren't having the desired effect when Max stays up all night, remembering things he doesn't want to. Though it's unclear at this point what Max remembers, these memories are certainly uncomfortable and scary—it's likely that Max purposefully chose to forget them since forgetting is a way for Max to protect himself.



CHAPTER 18. NEVER TRUST A CRIPPLE

As the sun rises, Max waits for something to happen. He feels fuzzy. As he looks at Kenny, he thinks of the story about a giant who falls asleep and who gets tied up by little people. Finally, Max hears quick footsteps. Kenny wakes up and almost yanks Max out of the chair, but Loretta Lee glides in with a pizza box. She offers it to Kenny, and when Kenny asks where Iggy is, she says that he's still asleep. Loretta wearing a long winter coat that looks new. She squints and smokes for a minute and then she asks Kenny why he can't be nice—they had good times long ago. Kenny says those days are over, says the pizza won't cut it, and asks for Iggy. Loretta shoots glances at Max but she agrees to fetch Iggy. She leaves.

The way that Max describes Loretta—particularly her new coat—indicates that Max is able to humanize Loretta. He knows that she's not the enemy; she may be complicit but she's also a victim like he is. Max is able to humanize her and not hate her exactly because he's so kind and compassionate. When Max thinks of Gulliver's Travels (the reference to the man tied up), it demonstrates that Max is starting to lean more through stories he's read. This is preparation for eventually writing his own.



Kenny insists that they can't eat food that Loretta touched, so they raid the old lady's kitchen. Max eats cornflakes with water as Kenny says that this is temporary; they'll head somewhere warm soon. He says that first, they'll get a big RV and then paint "The Reverend Kenneth David Kane" on the side. Max will stand out front in a suit, collecting money. He says that people give money to a man of God, and people love stories about bad men who have redeemed themselves. When Max is done eating, Kenny ties him up again and he says it'll be like this just until Max sees the light. With a grin, Kenny says that he's the light.

Kenny's description of where they're going to go next again demonstrates Kenny's grasp of how to manipulate people through storytelling. He knows that religion is a great way to sway people and to make them sympathize, so that's how he's going to frame his story. Knowing this, it's likely that Kenny hasn't actually found religion—it's more likely that Kenny simply recognizes religion's ability to give him power and influence over others.



Kenny flips on the TV but he just cusses at it, since there are only cartoons and Christmas specials on. He wants to see if they're on the news, though he insists that Grim and Gram probably don't know Max is missing since they don't care. Just then, they see blue lights flashing outside and Kenny shoves Max to the floor. A few minutes later, Iggy sneaks in the back. He explains that the cops came to his house looking for Max. Kenny drapes an arm over Iggy, and Max notices that Iggy looks cold and frightened. Kenny asks if Iggy turned on him, but Iggy says it was the "crippled midget kid": Loretta saw Freak in the cop car.

Though Max makes no comment about hearing that Freak is in the police car, knowing that Freak is part of the search effort likely reminds Max that he's not alone. Clearly, Grim and Gram do care about him—they know he's gone and they at least alerted Freak, if not the police. Knowing that he has a friend out there looking for him helps Max to see that he doesn't have to take everything Kenny says as fact. He can instead focus on what Freak has taught him about friendship and memory.



Kenny thinks this is a weird story, but Iggy explains that Max and Freak stole Loretta's purse. Kenny kneels down in front of Max and he asks for Max's version of the story. Max just says that they didn't steal Loretta's purse. Iggy quickly says that Freak is Gwen's son, but Kenny shoves Iggy down into a chair and he asks what they're going to do now. Kenny tells Iggy to procure a gun and a car and then he sends him away. Then, Kenny takes Max's rope and he tells him, "you can't trust a cripple."

Iggy may actually be doing Max a favor here by insisting that Max stole Loretta Lee's purse. If Max did steal the purse (or if Kenny believes Iggy's story), it would mean that Max is more like Kenny. This would definitely appeal to Kenny, as it would make converting Max to his side much easier.



CHAPTER 19. INTO THE BLACK DOWN UNDER

Kenny and Max leave the old lady's apartment because Kenny fears that the cops will knock on every door. They cross the alley to a burned-out, boarded-up building, where Kenny decides they'll hide. He pulls off a huge piece of plywood, startling a black cat. Kenny jumps back and he yanks Max to the ground, bumping Max's head. Kenny assures Max that it's just a scratch, but Max doesn't think it hurts anyway. The taste of the salt also makes him feel more awake. Max goes inside the building and he looks around: there's broken glass everywhere. Kenny finds the stairs to the basement and he sends Max down the stairs first by the light of a cigarette lighter. The steps bend under Max's weight and he slips, but Kenny hauls on the rope and he keeps Max from falling.

Kenny's behavior shows that even as he says they're doing a good thing, Kenny knows that it's wrong to kidnap Max, even if Max is his own son, and he knows that it's inhumane to tie Max up to keep him from escaping. These clues help Max hold onto the fact that Kenny isn't the most powerful person in his life; he's not correct and he's not good. There are many other people in Max's life who treat him like a human being, Freak being the most important one.



In the basement, Kenny ties Max's feet again and then he ties Max to a boiler. He explains that Max isn't trustworthy yet, but that Max will get smarter once they start moving. Then, Kenny rips off a piece of Max's shirt and he gags him with it. Kenny runs his fingers through Max's hair gently and then he says he's going to see about the car. As Kenny glides away, Max stays as still as possible in case Kenny is actually trying to trick Max and see if Max will try to get away. Max can't; his hands are tied too tightly. Finally, he sits and stares at the narrow window that lets in a thin strip of light. He can hear Kenny moving around upstairs.

The fear that this is a test and that Kenny will return seems odd at first glance, but it likely provides insight into the kind of father Kenny was. Max likely thinks this way because Kenny did this sort of thing to him as a child. This continues to explain Max's hopelessness and his yielding behavior. The last time Max saw Kenny he was only four, so Max's only conception of Kenny is as someone who's much bigger, stronger, smarter, and more powerful than Max.



Max hears scratching at the window and then quiet feet on the steps. It's Loretta Lee, and she nervously asks if Max is there. Max kicks around in response. A flashlight hits Max in the eyes and Loretta hurries to him and rips off the gag. She says it isn't right for Kenny to tie Max up and that Kenny isn't who she remembers. Loretta tries to work on the knots as Max thinks he hears boards creaking. She whispers that Iggy is going to distract Kenny while she frees Max, and there are enough cops that once they get out, they'll be safe. Loretta cuts the ropes on a sharp edge of the boiler. As she leans down for the flashlight, two big hands grab her around the neck. Loretta can't respond to Kenny's insults. He squeezes her and no one can stop him.

Loretta's choice to rescue Max indicates that while she may remember Kenny as a nicer person, she's able to free herself from those memories and look at the facts in front of her. She can clearly see that Kenny is cruel, especially since Kenny is willing to tie up his own son. This helps Max humanize Loretta even more, which becomes especially important once Kenny begins to choke Loretta. Because Loretta is a sympathetic character to Max, Max may be more likely to try to stand up to his father and save her.



CHAPTER 20. FREAK THE MIGHTY STRIKES AGAIN

Max says that even someone as dumb as him knows you can't stop Kenny, but he tries anyway. He can barely walk and his hands are numb, but he shoves Kenny and asks him to stop. Kenny flicks Max away and he seems impossibly strong. Loretta isn't struggling anymore. Max tries to get between Kenny and Loretta and he screams that he saw Kenny kill Annie—he knows Kenny did it. Max feels trapped and weak, like he can't move Kenny's fingers from Annie's neck or Loretta's neck. Everything feels mixed up; Kenny is doing to Loretta what he did to Annie and he has the same look in his eye—like he wants Loretta to die. Max feels like he's four years old again and trying to save his mom.

Max screams again that he knows Kenny killed Annie; he's never going to forget. Kenny finally lets Loretta go and he asks Max to repeat himself. As Kenny puts his hands gently around Max's neck, he says that Max can't possibly remember—he was too young and “they” brainwashed Max into thinking he could remember. Max says that they never talk about it but that they don't have to since he can't forget what happened. Kenny says that's impossible, but Max tells Kenny exactly what happened: he tried to stop Kenny, so Kenny locked Max in his room and he said it was a dream. Max broke a window and he shouted for someone to help Annie—and now, Kenny fooled the system into letting him go. Kenny mutters that he has to clean this up and he starts to squeeze Max's neck. Max feels small and weak.

Max hears a window break and a faraway voice commanding a “villain” to put his hands up. He falls to the ground and he can breathe again. He notices Freak rolling through the basement window. Freak points a big squirt gun at Kenny. Kenny looks around, shakes his head, and says he knows it's not a real gun. He insists that Max must really be stupid if Freak is his sidekick. Freak says that for Christmas, he got a squirt gun and a chemistry set—so his squirt gun contains sulfuric acid, a corrosive liquid. He squirts Kenny right in the eyes and Kenny screams. The scream seems to wake Max up. He grabs Freak, and though he can feel Kenny behind him, Max makes it up the stairs. He dives right through the plywood and into Iggy Lee's arms. There are cops all around.

Freak laughs gleefully and he says it worked—his squirt gun only contained soap, vinegar, and curry powder. The cops arrest Kenny, but Max can only think about Loretta down in the cellar. He tells the cops about her and they help her out. Grim, Gram, and Gwen rush to the boys, and as Gram hugs Max, Gwen scolds Freak for getting out of the car. As Gwen carries Freak away, he shouts that **Freak the Mighty** has struck again.

In this moment of trauma, the truth finally comes out: Max did actually see Kenny murder his mother. The trauma is so great that Max experiences flashbacks and he can't entirely separate his past from his present. This indicates that Max's memories still have a great deal of power over him and they can fundamentally change how he interprets his present. Learning what happened also explains much of Max's other odd behavior—everything he does is intended to help him forget and distance himself from this memory.



Even if Max is still very much a scared child here, this is one of the most mature and adult things he does over the course of the novel. Because Freak has been working with Max to show him that he's capable of remembering what he wants, Max now has the ability to say outright what he remembers. Through this, Max gains a degree of control over his memory. Even if Kenny factors into it, it's still Max's memory—and nothing Kenny says or does can make Max forget what he remembers.



Freak is so brave here in part because of his love for Max, but Freak's behavior also has to do with his grasp of the power of storytelling. Like Kenny, Freak is very aware of how to present himself and conduct himself to seem theatrical and compelling. In this case, it works: Kenny lets Max go because of Freak's surprise appearance. It's also possible to interpret Freak's fearlessness to his knowledge that he's not going to live very long. It's possible that since Freak knows he's going to die, he wants to be as dramatic as possible—he does things like this knowing that it will make for a good story later.



The revelation that Freak's squirt gun didn't contain sulfuric acid again drives home how skilled Freak is at telling stories. He's able to convince even someone like Kenny that his eyes are burning. Even stories told by a preteen have the power to bring down someone as strong and cruel as Kenny, if they're told well.



CHAPTER 21. THE ACCIDENT OF NATURE

Everyone heads down to the police station. The cops take pictures of the bruises on Max's neck and they make him get X-rays, which annoys Max almost as much as being kidnapped. Back at the police station, Grim convinces Gram to go home. Max tells his story over and over again. Grim and the police officers say that it's important—this time, they might lock Kenny up for good after everything he did, but especially for the two attempts at murder. He broke a bone in Loretta Lee's neck, but she's supposed to be okay. When Max sees Iggy looking so worried at the hospital, he starts to think that Iggy isn't so bad.

Christmas vacation is weird. Gram won't let Max sleep in the basement and Grim begs Max to humor her, so Max sleeps on the foldout couch upstairs. Gram checks on him multiple times per night. It's obnoxious, but Max knows that she can't help herself and he's glad to not be alone in the down under. Freak gets in huge trouble for disobeying Gwen's order to stay in the car, mostly because Freak now has trouble catching his breath. This is because his insides are growing faster than his outsides, so now he goes to the medical research place more often. This is annoying for Freak. Once, Max asks about the secret operation. Freak says that the research continues, but the idea of the operation still disturbs Max.

Max attempts to convince Gram that when Freak is at the hospital for tests, he shouldn't have to go to school either. She insists that Max has a brain of his own, but Max doesn't buy it. Once Max and Freak go back to school, everyone is jealous that they got their pictures in the paper. Mrs. Donelli puts up the photo from the paper on the bulletin board and another kid immediately draws moustaches on them. Freak is thrilled—he says he can't wait to grow a moustache. Max wants to forget the whole thing but he has to testify soon so that Kenny will go to prison for life. Max wants this to happen given what Kenny did to Loretta, but he doesn't want to testify. He tells Freak that Grim is worried about what will happen if Max doesn't testify, but Freak scoffs that Grim worries too much.

Freak ends up being correct: just before the trial starts, Grim gets a phone call with the news that Kenny pled guilty and he'll have to serve his sentence plus 10 years. Grim is elated, but Max just feels weird and worried. Grim says assuredly that Kenny is "an accident of nature," and all Max got from him was his size and his looks; Max has Annie's heart. Max keeps thinking that something might happen when *he* gets older. He might be another accident of nature. When Grim catches Max thinking about this one night, he says that things will make more sense when Max grows up. Max knows that Grim means well, but he doesn't know that *growing up* is what scares Max.

Grim seems to imply that given the current situation, it's necessary for Max to come into himself as a storyteller. Telling his story to the police might bring about concrete action and meaningful change. If it does, it will show Max that his voice is powerful and that if he speaks, people will listen. Max again demonstrates his compassionate nature when he thinks that Iggy isn't such a bad person.



After what happened, Max begins to believe that Grim and Gram do honestly love him. They've had many opportunities to see that Max is nothing like Kenny, so now they feel more comfortable showering him with the love and attention he needs and deserves. Even if it took longer than it perhaps should've to get to this place, the fact that Max now trusts his caregivers shows the power of friendship—it's only because of Max and Freak's friendship that Grim and Gram truly believe Max is kind.



Though Freak might just be trying to play it cool when he asks Mrs. Donelli to leave up the vandalized photo, it's also worth remembering that Freak knows he's not going to live long—he might not ever have the opportunity to grow a moustache of his own. This could be one of the only opportunities he has to see himself with one, and so it's a nice thing for him to look at. Stories, in this sense, can be visual as well as verbal. Seeing himself with a moustache helps Freak "remember" something that hasn't happened, and might never happen.



Even though Grim has transformed in important ways over the course of the novel, he still demonstrates here that he has a long way to go in getting to really know Max. Max doesn't yet feel comfortable voicing his fears that he's going to grow up to be a horrible person to anyone but the reader—and part of this fear stems from the fact that Grim has been afraid of Max for a long time. Max isn't entirely able to escape this trauma or this fear yet.



CHAPTER 22. REMEMBERING IS JUST AN INVENTION OF THE MIND

On the last day of school, Max and Freak take the long way home. Freak rides on Max's shoulders and he asks if Max remembers what it was like during the Ice Age. Max points out that he wasn't born yet in the Ice Age, but Freak insists that remembering is an "invention of the mind"—if a person wants to, they can remember anything. Freak says that he keeps remembering how he tried to invent things like central heating and indoor plumbing. Max suggests that Freak invent a time machine so he can go back and give the cavemen a hard time, but Freak declares that people don't need time machines if they know how to remember.

Freak's birthday is a few days later. Freak constantly asks for a ride on the space shuttle, a linear accelerator, or a real helicopter. Gwen suggests that Freak is going to be a very obnoxious teenager, and she doesn't understand that the birthday party is also a party for **Freak the Mighty**, who's almost a year old. Max knows what Freak is getting: a new computer. This will allow Freak to go to school over the phone if he can't actually go to school. Max asks Gwen why Freak would have to stay home while Gram and Gwen frost cakes. Gwen and Gram lock eyes for a second and then Gwen says that it's just in case. Max says that he thinks Freak already knows about the computer, and that's why he's asking for a jet.

Freak barely touches his supper. Grim eats until Gram makes him stop, and then Freak asks Max to blow out the candles for him. Freak doesn't eat his cake, but Max figures that he's just excited about the new computer. They sing, and then Gwen brings out the computer. Freak turns it on and he starts to show Grim how to play 3-D chess. It makes Max dizzy so he helps clean up in the kitchen instead. When they're almost finished cleaning, Grim shouts, "Kevin!" Gwen calls an ambulance—Freak is having a seizure.

CHAPTER 23. THE EMPTY BOOK

The doctors won't let Max visit on the first day Freak is in the hospital, but Max can't stand just sitting. He decides to walk to the hospital, following the path that he and Freak took last summer. It's not the same without Freak to turn the houses into castles, however. Max finds Gwen's car at the hospital but he remembers Grim's warning to leave her alone so he sits out back by the medical research building. Max pulls out the **ornithopter** and he makes it fly, thinking that Freak might see it out the window. When the landscaper makes Max move, Gwen finds him. She looks like she's been crying and she leads Max to see Freak in the ICU. There are tons of nurses and monitors, but Max isn't scared until he sees how small Freak looks.

Telling Max that remembering is just an invention is Freak's way of helping Max reframe his memories. While Freak uses this idea to engage in thought experiments about the Ice Age, Max will be able to take this idea and apply it to all his memories, both good and bad. By taking Freak's advice, Max can amplify the memories that are good and help him feel better and he can minimize or reframe the ones that are scary.



Gram and Gwen's behavior when Max asks about the computer suggests that there's more wrong with Freak than Max realizes. Choosing not to tell Max the truth—that Freak might not live long—is its own form of storytelling. It allows Max to go on still believing that Freak is fine and that soon, Freak will receive his bionic body. Celebrating Freak the Mighty's birthday as well as Freak's shows how important the persona is to Freak and Max—Freak the Mighty is their combined best self and it's a marker of their friendship.



Because Max has no idea that Freak's health is failing, it's easy for him to chalk Freak's odd behavior up to excitement. Not having the full story, in this case, allows Max to create a story of his own. Max's story is notably much happier and more lighthearted than the truth, another indicator of Max's goodness and kindness.



In the midst of his fear and worry, Max reverts back to doubting his own storytelling abilities. Max doesn't actually need Freak to turn the houses into castles—Max could do that himself if he believed in his ability to do so. Bringing the ornithopter is an act of kindness on Max's part, but given that its first appearance symbolized the beginning of their friendship, it also suggests that there are big changes ahead for Freak and Max.



Dr. Spivak guards Freak and she sternly says that Kevin shouldn't have visitors, but Kevin gets what he wants. Freak dismisses Dr. Spivak, but he sounds funny: his voice is faint and weak and it whistles. When Max gets closer, he realizes this is because Freak has a button in his neck that Freak says is a tracheotomy. Freak says it's actually really cool and he plays the *Star Trek* theme song on it. Max asks when Freak is coming home. Freak says he's not coming home like this; the Bionic Unit is prepared to perform his operation tomorrow. Max admits that he's scared, but Freak tells Max to not be a moron. After a moment of silence, Max puts the **ornithopter** on the bed.

Freak asks Max if he sees the book on the table and he asks Max to open it. It's empty. Freak says that he wants Max to fill it up with their adventures—Freak would do it himself, but he'll be too busy getting used to his new body. Max points out that Freak has the brain and that he has the legs, but Freak sternly says that he won't have time. He says that Max will have to record all their adventures and tell **Freak the Mighty's** story. Max picks up the book and he feels hopeless but he doesn't want to set off the monitors. Freak starts coughing, so Dr. Spivak shoos Max out.

A bit later, Gram drives Max home. Over supper, Grim observes that Gwen looks like she's in awful pain. Confused, Max says that Gwen isn't the one who's going to have the special operation; she's not in pain. Grim and Gram exchange an incredulous look, and later that night, Max puts the book from Freak in the pyramid box for good luck.

CHAPTER 24. THE RETURN OF KICKER

Max isn't supposed to bother anyone at the hospital but he doesn't think it's possible for him to mess anything up. The next morning, he sneaks out early, hoping to check on Freak and make it back home by breakfast. He almost runs to the hospital in the near dark. There's nobody in the lobby, but the nurses in the ICU see Max coming. One runs up to him and says that he must be Maxwell. She can only say "oh dear" when Max asks if Kevin is back from surgery yet. Another nurse tells someone to page Dr. Spivak, since Kevin was her patient. Max notices that some of the nurses are crying, and all of a sudden, he snaps.

Insisting that he's going to have the bionic operation tomorrow is actually an admittance that Freak is going to die. He knows that he's not going to come home again as a living, breathing person—but, if Max follows through with the request Freak makes, Freak will be able to live on in Max's story. At this point, Freak continues with his story in part to help Max get through this difficult time. Storytelling, in this instance, helps both Max and Freak hold onto hope.



Again, Freak knows he's going to die, so everything he says here is very much for Max's benefit. However, getting Max to record Freak the Mighty's story is Freak's way of making himself into a sort of King Arthur. Through Max's story, Freak will be able to transcend his bodily limitations and live forever, inspiring others along the way.



Because Max believes Freak's story about the operation, he's hopeful—but he's the only one who believes it. When Grim and Gram choose not to correct Max, it's their way of protecting him and helping him get through this difficult time.



Max snaps because it seems, suddenly, as though nothing he thought was true actually is. Freak isn't receiving his operation—he's dead. This, to Max, means either that the bionic operation wasn't real or that Freak lied to him. Given how much progress Max has made in learning to trust others, both of these options are unthinkable. Either one of them being true might suggest that Max shouldn't trust anything that Freak said.



A nurse tries to hug Max, but he throws her off and runs. He feels like Kicker again and he feels ready to hit anyone who tries to touch him. He runs until he gets to doors marked “medical research” and he punches through the glass. Max keeps running until he gets to solid locked doors. He punches and kicks them until the hospital security officers catch up and they finally tackle Max to the ground. Dr. Spivak finds Max handcuffed and surrounded by cops. She apologizes to Max, but Max spits that Freak believed her that he was going to get a new body from the Bionics Unit. Dr. Spivak makes the cops let Max up, asks for coffee, and bandages for Max’s hands. She asks Max to tell her about what Freak told him.

Max explains everything about the medical research lab and Freak’s bionic body. He asks if it was just a lie to keep Freak from being scared, but Dr. Spivak points out that it was impossible to lie to Kevin—she tried once when he was seven, but he went and looked up his condition in a medical dictionary. This convinces Max that she’s telling the truth. Dr. Spivak explains that Kevin has known for a long time that he wasn’t going to live very long. When Max asks if Freak lied about getting a bionic body, Dr. Spivak says it wasn’t a lie. She thinks that he needed something to hope for, so he invented the bionic body. Max agrees and he asks what actually happened. Dr. Spivak says that Freak’s heart got too big for his body. Later, the cops let Max go without arresting him.

CHAPTER 25. WHAT LORETTA SAID

Max says that all that happened a year ago. He hid in the down under for days, so he missed Freak’s funeral and Gwen’s departure. Grim and Gram finally convinced Max to come out but for a long time, he felt deflated and didn’t care about anything. One day, not long before school started, Grim said that most people don’t have friends like Kevin, so Max should think of himself as lucky. Max scoffed, but he went back to school as Grim asked. At school, everyone felt sorry for Max. Even Tony D. offered his condolences, but Max blew up at him and he threatened to throw Tony D. into the millpond. Now, they’re enemies again as they should be.

The attempted hug reminds Max of how people tried to hug him right after Annie’s death, which only compounds his trauma. He now has to relive his mother’s death, as well as deal with the surprising death of his best and only friend. Though Max does behave violently here, it’s only because he’s so upset and traumatized—Max wouldn’t do this of his own volition. Dr. Spivak’s kindness, however, begins to suggest to Max that what he learned from friendship with Freak wasn’t all a lie—he can, and should, trust adults.



Dr. Spivak takes Grim’s insistence that stories and tales are meant to entertain a step further. She insists that stories aren’t just for entertainment purposes—they exist to give people hope and to help them find meaning in their lives. Though she talks specifically about Freak as she explains this, hopefully Max will take her words to heart and realize that he, too, can harness storytelling to find meaning. He does eventually do this by following through on Freak’s request to tell Freak the Mighty’s story.



The fact that Tony D. tried to be kind and offer his condolences suggests that Max’s fears and preconceptions color how Max sees Tony D.—he might not be the terrifying bully that Max made him out to be in earlier chapters. This speaks to the power of Max’s beliefs and memories to dictate how he feels about someone. It’s unthinkable to Max that Tony D. might be a decent person, and so Max simply does what he has to do to not engage with that possibility.



Over the winter, Max ran into Loretta Lee in the street. She smelled like alcohol and Max thinks that he never expected anything else. Loretta told Max that she just heard Gwen is in California with a new boyfriend whom she loves. She asked Max what he was doing, and Max told her the truth: nothing. Loretta looked at Max and she told him that nothing is a drag. Max thought about that all the way home, and that night he pulled out the pyramid box. He thought that he didn't have a brain and that was the truth. However, Max started writing the truth down and he wrote for months. Now it's spring, and Max feels pretty okay about remembering things. Now that he's written a book, he thinks he might even read some.

*Finally, Max is able to put everyone's wisdom about the purpose of storytelling into practice by telling the story of *Freak the Mighty*. In particular, he makes it clear that this was a healing and cathartic exercise for him. This is because through telling his story, Max got to choose what parts of his memory to highlight—and which ones to omit, make up, or embellish. In addition, Max also gets to honor *Freak's* memory by telling this story. In this sense, the story of *Freak the Mighty* can benefit others and help them find a sense of purpose—exactly what *Freak* would want his legacy to be.*





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