The Nickel Boys

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF COLSON WHITEHEAD

Colson Whitehead was born and raised in Manhattan. He attended Trinity School and Harvard University, graduating in 1991. He then moved back to New York and began working as a reporter for *The Village Voice* while simultaneously working on his first novel, *The Intuitionist*, which was published in 1999. Whitehead has now published multiple novels, including *The Underground Railroad*, *Zone One*, and *The Nickel Boys*, among others. Although well-known as a humorist, Whitehead's writing bridges several distinct literary genres, including science fiction. In addition to novels, he has published numerous essays and two nonfiction books. He has won many awards, including the National Book Award (for *The Underground Railroad*), a Whiting Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a MacArthur Fellowship. Whitehead currently lives in Brooklyn, New York.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1954 the Supreme Court declared in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* that it was illegal to segregate public schools based on race. Ten years later, President Johnson made all institutional forms of racial segregation and discrimination illegal by signing the Civil Rights Act. However, schools like the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys—upon which Whitehead based Nickel Academy—remained segregated until 1968. *The Nickel Boys* draws from this history, as Whitehead takes inspiration from the group of former Dozier students that came forward in the early 2000s to share their stories of abuse. The group is now known as The White House Boys and includes hundreds of members. In 2009, the Dozier School failed to pass an inspection and was subsequently investigated by the Florida government. Two years later, the school closed because of the number of abuse allegations leveled against it. In the intervening years, an anthropological team studied the land and unearthed 55 graves, in addition to determining that there had been at least 100 deaths on the campus, though the state of Florida forbade the team from exhuming the bodies, thereby making it impossible to know how these students died. Part of this had to do with the fact that the government wanted to sell parts of the property, but a relative of one of the dead students eventually filed and won a lawsuit prohibiting the state from selling the grounds before exhuming the bodies. Consequently, the state of Florida allowed for further studies. Since then, multiple previously undiscovered graves have been found, while only 14 bodies have been identified. The investigation is ongoing.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Before writing *The Nickel Boys*, Colson Whitehead composed *The Underground Railroad*, his sixth novel. Like *The Nickel Boys*, *The Underground Railroad* deals with racism, rebellion, violence, and history, though the novel looks specifically at slavery, whereas *The Nickel Boys* concerns itself with the period of American history directly following the Jim Crow era. In this regard, it is also related to *The New Jim Crow*, a work of nonfiction by Michelle Alexander, since both books examine the ongoing racism and discrimination of the United States judicial system. In addition, *The Nickel Boys* follows in the tradition of novels like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, since both books trace a young black man's coming-of-age story against the backdrop of American racism and bigotry in the 20th century.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Nickel Boys
- **When Published:** July 16, 2019
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Literary Fiction, Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** The novel takes place at the fictional Nickel Academy in Eleanor, Florida.
- **Climax:** As Elwood and Turner run toward freedom, Harper shoots and kills Elwood while Turner hops a fence and disappears into the woods.
- **Antagonist:** Maynard Spencer
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Pulitzer. In 2017, Colson Whitehead won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for his sixth novel, *The Underground Railroad*.

Response to Politics. After writing *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead didn't want to "deal with such depressing material," but then felt "compelled" to write another novel about the United States's troubled history in the wake of the 2016 election. This novel eventually became *The Nickel Boys*.

PLOT SUMMARY

During an "environmental study," a team of archaeologists unearths a **secret graveyard** on the grounds of what used to be Nickel Academy, a reform school that recently closed. Because the bodies are largely unidentified, the state of Florida is forced to reopen investigations into the many "abuse stories" related

to the infamous institution. As the media reports the grisly findings of the archaeology team, the school's alumni—known as the Nickel Boys—continue to post stories to a website, where they can talk about the violent physical, emotional, and sexual abuse they endured at Nickel. The Nickel Boys have been organizing yearly trips to the school and speaking openly about their horrific pasts for several years, but nobody paid attention until the archaeology team corroborated their claims. One Nickel Boy who goes by the name of Elwood Curtis lives in New York City and keeps tabs on the various stories about Nickel, but he doesn't return to the school, thinking that there's no use confronting his painful past.

Elwood grew up in Tallahassee in the 1950s and '60s, living with his grandmother and accompanying her to work at the Richmond Hotel. Spending his time in the kitchen, young Elwood wonders when he'll see the first black patron sitting at one of the tables in the dining room. The Supreme Court has just declared that segregated schools are unlawful, so he thinks that soon all the "visible walls" will come crashing down. However, his grandmother tells him that "it's one thing to tell someone to do what's right and another thing for them to do it."

As a teenager, Elwood works at a cigar shop owned by an Italian American man named Mr. Marconi. Mr. Marconi is kind and laidback, but Elwood still works especially hard. This is because he wants to cultivate a "sense of dignity," drawing this idea from the ideas that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. expresses in **Martin Luther King At Zion Hill**, the only record Elwood owns. On this record, Dr. King urges African Americans to respect themselves by working hard and proudly renouncing bigotry. Taking this to heart, Elwood develops a strong moral compass and refuses to compromise his values, which sometimes gets him into trouble. Nonetheless, Elwood excels as a hard worker and a successful student.

When he's an upperclassman in high school, Elwood meets his new history teacher, Mr. Hill. Mr. Hill is a young black man involved in the Civil Rights Movement, so Elwood takes an immediate liking to him. Mr. Hill also recognizes Elwood's strong work ethic and passion for equality, quickly taking him under his wing. Around this time, Elwood decides to attend a protest outside the Florida Theatre, a segregated cinema in Tallahassee. Against his grandmother's orders, he attends the rally, and though he initially feels out of place, he soon sees Mr. Hill in the crowd. Inviting him into a small group of dedicated activists, Mr. Hill helps Elwood feel a sense of unity and communal support for the first time.

That summer, Mr. Hill tells Elwood about an opportunity to attend Melvin Griggs Technical, an African American college looking for motivated young men like him to take free classes while finishing their high school degrees. Thrilled, Elwood pursues this opportunity. On his first day of class, he hitchhikes from Tallahassee to the school, getting into a fancy car driven by a black man. Before long, a police officer forces the car to the side of the road and arrests both the driver and Elwood—the car, it turns out, was stolen. Rather than attending Melvin Griggs, then, Elwood is sentenced by a judge to Nickel Academy, a ruthless reform school that illegally segregates its white and black students.

On his first night at Nickel, Elwood walks into the bathroom to find two bullies named Lonnie and Black Mike beating up a younger boy named Corey. When he tries to intervene, a staff member reports all four boys to Superintendent Spencer, a fearsome white man. Elwood has already met Spencer, who explained how Nickel works when he first arrived on campus. Boys earn merits for working hard and behaving well, and these points help them move up the ranks. If a student earns enough points, he will be released once more into the free world.

At one in the morning, Spencer and his sidekick, Earl, take the four boys from their beds and bring them to the White House, a squat building in which they torture students. One at a time, they take the boys into another room and beat them. Although Elwood tries to keep track of how many lashes he receives, he passes out before Spencer finishes.

For weeks after his first beating, Elwood is confined to the school's infirmary, where he makes friends with Turner, a boy from his dorm who ate soap to avoid work and school. The schedule at Nickel is yet another thing that shocks Elwood, since the boys only attend class every other day, spending the rest of their time doing physical labor. Worse, Elwood has discovered that academic performance doesn't influence a student's progress toward "graduation." Rather, only work and obedience earn merits, and there's no telling when a staff member might dole out subtractions and punishment.

Turner tells Elwood that he received more lashes than most students but that he was still lucky, since sometimes boys never return from the White House. This astounds Elwood, who insists that he and Turner ought to do something to publicize Nickel's injustices, but Turner scoffs at him, saying that the only way to survive in this place is to keep to oneself. Elwood doesn't like this idea because it goes against his "sense of dignity," but he tries to follow Turner's advice when he gets out of the hospital, diligently applying himself to his work and keeping out of trouble. Not long after he leaves the infirmary, Turner recommends Elwood for a position on the Community Service team, of which he himself is a part. The Community Service supervisor is a young white man named Harper who treats Turner and Elwood kindly, saying that he more or less sees them as equals. With Harper, the two boys drive around the nearby town of Eleanor to complete chores and also illicitly sell goods that the school receives from the government.

The narrative periodically jumps forward in time, detailing Elwood's life in New York City as an adult. Having arrived in the city shortly after leaving Nickel, Elwood works as a successful professional mover. One day roughly 50 years after his stay at Nickel, he runs into a Nickel Boy named Chickie Pete. Chickie

insists that they have a drink, so they go to a bar and talk about the past, avoiding discussing Spencer and his violent ways. Chickie is an alcoholic who has had a hard life after leaving Nickel, but he's overjoyed to see Elwood, relishing any opportunity to talk about the past. When Chickie asks when Elwood got out of Nickel, Elwood is shocked to see that his former classmate doesn't remember that he escaped. All these years, he has thought that the story of his escape must have been a source of inspiration for his peers. Now, though, he realizes that the administration kept his success story a secret. When Elwood leaves the bar, he feels a flash of anger that somebody like Chickie Pete survived Nickel Academy when his own friend did not, though it's not yet clear what, exactly, this means.

Returning to the 1960s, a group of government workers is scheduled to inspect Nickel. Director Hardee hears ahead of time about the inspection and cancels classes so the students and staff can repair the campus. Elwood decides to write a letter outlining the school's unlawful dealings, since he's been keeping a list of the deliveries he and Turner make as part of their Community Service work. When he tells Turner that he's planning to slip the letter to the inspectors, Turner grows angry, insisting that this is only going to get Elwood killed. After all, he has recently shown his friend the two iron rings on the edge of campus, where Spencer sometimes chains black students and tortures them to death, subsequently claiming that his victims have escaped. "They going to take you out back, bury your ass," Turner seethes, but Elwood refuses to listen.

On the day of the inspection, Elwood puts the letter in his pocket. However, the only time he's close to the inspectors is when he's standing in plain view, so can't deliver it. He decides to try again that afternoon, but Harper asks him to run an errand on the other side of campus, which will make it impossible for him to complete the task. But then, seeing Elwood's disappointment, Turner says he'll deliver the letter himself.

Turner successfully gives Elwood's letter to the inspectors. That night, Spencer takes Elwood to the White House and gives him yet another beating before putting him in solitary confinement. The only reason he doesn't kill him right away is because he's worried the government will take Elwood's letter seriously and look into the matter. When three weeks pass and nothing of the sort happens, Turner hears that Spencer is going to kill Elwood the next day. He helps Elwood escape in the middle of the night, taking him to an empty house nearby before setting out on stolen bicycles. Turner has always said he wouldn't take anyone with him if he tried to escape, but he's breaking his own rule because he knows Elwood would die if he didn't help him. Around dawn, the Community Service van appears behind the two boys. Ditching their bikes, they jump over a fence and run through a long field. Harper and another staff member get out of the van and chase after them with shotguns. Just as Turner looks back, Harper shoots Elwood, and Turner jumps over yet another fence and disappears into the woods.

At the end of the novel, Turner finally returns to Florida. For the past 50 years he has been using Elwood's name as his own. He sees this as a tribute to Elwood, who he hopes would be proud of the life he's built. He's now married to a loving woman named Millie, and though he kept her in the dark about his past, he finally tells her the truth about his time at Nickel. Hearing this, she gives him support and accepts that he must return to Nickel to properly bury Elwood's body. When he arrives in Tallahassee, Turner checks into his hotel and goes downstairs for dinner. As he waits for a server, he reads the menu and learns that the hotel used to be called the Richmond, and though he doesn't remember Elwood's story about sitting in the kitchen and dreaming about a black person eating in the dining room, he unwittingly fulfills his old friend's wish.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Elwood Curtis – Elwood Curtis is a teenage black boy living in Florida in the early 1960s, and the protagonist of *The Nickel Boys*. A determined young man, Elwood lives with his grandmother, who takes him with her to the hotel where she works. While she's cleaning the rooms, Elwood spends his time in the kitchen, peering out at the hotel's dining room and imagining what it would be like to see a black person sitting at one of the tables. Elwood is particularly interested in the Civil Rights Movement because the only record he owns is a **recording** of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking at the Zion Hill Baptist Church in Los Angeles. During high school, Elwood works at Mr. Marconi's cigar shop and reads magazines about the Civil Rights Movement, which is why he ends up admiring his new history teacher, Mr. Hill, who is an activist. Recognizing Elwood's impressive determination, Mr. Hill helps him enroll in college classes, which he plans to take while finishing high school. On his way to his first class, though, he hitchhikes with a man who—unbeknownst to him—stole a car. Consequently, Elwood is arrested and sent to Nickel Academy, a reform school. At Nickel, it doesn't take long before Elwood experiences the wrath of Spencer, the school's superintendent, who brutally whips him for trying to break up a fight. This experience sends him to the infirmary, where his new friend, Turner, tells him that the safest way to get through Nickel is to simply keep to oneself, focusing only on earning enough merit points to "graduate." Elwood initially decides to follow this advice, but when he hears that government inspectors will be visiting the school, he writes a letter to them outlining the institution's egregious practices. Turner is against this idea but ultimately helps Elwood carry it out. That night, Spencer takes Elwood from his bed and beats him before putting him in

solitary confinement. Several days later, Turner hears that Spencer is going to kill Elwood, so he helps him escape, but Elwood is shot and killed in the process.

Jack Turner – Turner is one of Elwood's peers at Nickel Academy. A young man who has had a wayward childhood, Turner has been to Nickel Academy once before. Consequently, he has an understanding of the institution and its rules. Wanting to help Elwood acclimate, he says that it's best to keep to oneself and focus on earning the necessary points to "graduate" from Nickel. This, he explains, means ignoring other people. Promoting this worldview, Turner presents himself as something of an individualist, convincing Elwood to mind his own business. Despite this individualism, though, Turner looks out for Elwood by recommending him for a job on the Community Service work detail, which is the crew he works on, too. This involves riding around the surrounding town with Harper, a young white staff member whose parents worked at Nickel. Turner has a good relationship with Harper, who drops him and Elwood off at the houses of powerful community members to do various chores. During one of these outings, Elwood tells Turner his plan to slip a letter to government inspectors who will soon be visiting Nickel. Turner advises him against this, saying that it will only get them both in trouble. However, he later decides to help Elwood by delivering the letter himself. When Spencer—the superintendent—discovers this, he beats Elwood and places him in solitary confinement. Several days later, Turner helps Elwood escape because he hears that the school intends to kill Elwood. Before they manage to slip away, though, Harper shoots and kills Elwood. Turner, for his part, manages to flee. Deciding to take Elwood's name as a tribute, he travels to New York City, where he founds a successful moving company and marries a woman named Millie. Throughout his adulthood, he keeps his past a secret, but he finally tells Millie his real name when an archaeological investigation unearths Nickel's **secret graveyard**. Deciding to face his trauma, Turner returns to Florida to properly bury Elwood.

Harriet (Elwood's Grandmother) – Elwood's grandmother is a kind and principled older woman who has served as Elwood's primary caretaker ever since his parents (her daughter and son-in-law) left Florida in the middle of the night to live in California. Harriet works at the Richmond Hotel, where she cleans rooms while Elwood passes his time in the kitchen. A strict guardian, Harriet forbids Elwood from spending time with children she believes are not well behaved. When Elwood tells her that he wants to work at Mr. Marconi's cigar store, she has no problem with the idea, especially since he gives her half of his paycheck every week. What's more, she's delighted to learn that he wants to save the other half of his paychecks so that he can go to college, something that makes her immensely proud. Accordingly, she's quite excited when she learns that Mr. Hill has helped Elwood gain admission to Melvin Griggs Technical College. Unfortunately, though, she's unable to do anything when Elwood is wrongly convicted of stealing a car and sent to Nickel Academy. And though her love and support sustains him on an emotional level even while he's a student at Nickel, she finds it nearly impossible to help him, since a lawyer who promises to free him ends up taking all of Harriet's money and leaving town. Harriet slowly succumbs to illness while Elwood is at Nickel and eventually dies one year after he is shot and killed.

Mr. Marconi – Mr. Marconi is an Italian American man who owns the cigar store where Elwood works before going to Nickel Academy. During World War II, Mr. Marconi opened his cigar store in the African American part of town, which was near an army base. Knowing that African American soldiers liked to come and "raise hell in Frenchtown" on the weekends, he sold tobacco and condoms, demonstrating that "a white man savvy to the economics of segregation could turn a real buck." When the war ended, though, he focused on selling magazines, candy, and soda, turning the store into a family-friendly establishment. An even-tempered man, Mr. Marconi doesn't actually need help running his shop, but he hires Elwood because his wife likes the idea of her husband having an employee. In addition, he likes Elwood, who comes into the store on a regular basis to read the comic books. Shortly after hiring Elwood, Mr. Marconi sees that he made a good decision, since the young man is devoted to making sure the store runs efficiently. However, he and Elwood have slightly different approaches to how to manage the shop, since Mr. Marconi is such a laidback proprietor, whereas Elwood is detail-oriented and strongly principled. This difference comes to the forefront of the novel when Elwood sees two neighborhood boys steal candy from the shop and tells them to give it back. Mr. Marconi believes it's best to ignore such incidents, since he thinks doing so would ultimately drive down business, but Elwood refuses to let his peers make a mockery of the store. All the same, Mr. Marconi makes no attempt to punish the thieves. Mr. Marconi later helps Elwood's grandmother hire a lawyer to get Elwood out of Nickel Academy, but he's ultimately unable to help him.

Mr. Hill – Mr. Hill is a young African American man who is active in the Civil Rights movement. Elwood looks up to Mr. Hill, who is also his history teacher. On the first day of school, Mr. Hill tells the class to go through their textbooks and erase all of the racist graffiti that white students penciled into the margins, saying that such hateful sentiments will interfere with the children's ability to learn. This impresses Elwood, who admires Mr. Hill's engagement with social justice. When Elwood takes off work one day to attend a rally against a local theater's segregation, he feels out of place until Mr. Hill spots him and invites him into a small group of young men, all of whom make him feel welcome and respected. Later, Mr. Hill hears about an opportunity for young black students to take classes for free at Melvin Griggs Technical College, and he immediately thinks of

Elwood. Insisting that this program is perfect for Elwood, he convinces the boy to pursue this opportunity. Unfortunately, though, Mr. Hill's relationship with Elwood gets cut short when Elwood is sent to Nickel Academy, a place where even Mr. Hill can't help him.

Desmond – Desmond is one of Elwood's peers at Nickel Academy. When Elwood first arrives, Blakely instructs Desmond to show him around. Because of this, Desmond becomes Elwood's guide, telling him everything about Nickel and becoming one of his closest friends, along with Turner and Jaimie. When Desmond finds a bottle of "horse medicine" in a shed, he stashes it away and fantasizes about secretly feeding it to one of the authorities at Nickel during the annual staff Christmas banquet. At first, this is nothing more than a thought experiment, as Elwood, Turner, and Jaimie fantasize about whom they'd like to poison, thinking that the medicine would simply make a person violently ill. However, Jaimie fixates on the idea of putting the medicine into Earl's drink, hating Spencer's sidekick for some unknown reason. Before long, Desmond and the other boys drop the matter, but Jaimie follows through, giving Earl the medicine—which seems more like actual poison—and refusing to admit to his friends that he did so.

Jaimie – Jaimie is one of Elwood's peers at Nickel Academy. A boy of Mexican descent, Jaimie looks light-skinned in most contexts but dark-skinned when he has been working outside. For this reason, the staff at Nickel has a hard time deciding whether he should live in the school's white dorms or its black dorms. Superintendent Spencer, for his part, wants Jaimie to live with the black boys, but Director Hardee moves him to live with the white boys whenever he sees him on the black campus. When Desmond finds a strange bottle of what seems to be horse medicine, he, Jaimie, Elwood, and Turner fantasize about slipping it into the drink of various staff members at the annual Christmas banquet. And though the other boys aren't particularly serious about this plan, Jaimie fixates on the idea of giving the medicine to Earl, though he won't say why, exactly, he has such a vendetta against the man. Nonetheless, he hatches a plan to put the medicine in Earl's drink at the staff's holiday luncheon—which is exactly what he ends up doing, though he never admits it to his friends. In a strange way, this earns him Turner's respect, since Turner admires people who are willing to stick to their lies even when those lies are obvious. Although Earl gets very sick, Jaimie doesn't get caught or punished for the incident.

Maynard Spencer – Maynard Spencer is the superintendent of Nickel Academy. A severe man, he has no problem beating and even killing students who don't obey his every word. In keeping with this, Spencer is the one who severely whips Elwood after Elwood tries to break up a fight between Corey, Black Mike, and Lonnie. Later, Spencer tells Griff to intentionally lose against Big Chet in the school's annual boxing championship. When Griff fails to do so, Spencer and his crony, Earl, take Griff to the horse stables behind the school and beat him to death in the middle of the night. Because of this kind of behavior, Elwood fears Spencer on a visceral level, though this doesn't stop him from delivering a note to government inspectors about Nickel's gross injustices. When Spencer discovers this, he takes Elwood back to the White House for another whipping, then puts him in solitary confinement for three weeks even though the school isn't allowed to isolate students in this manner. When it becomes clear that nobody from the government is going to hold Spencer accountable for what happens to Elwood, he decides to take him "out back" and kill him, but Turner helps him escape before this can happen.

Griff – Griff is a student at Nickel Academy. With Lonnie and Black Mike, he bullies the other boys, intimidating and beating them up on a regular basis. Griff is an extraordinarily large young man, which is why he's chosen to represent the black students in Nickel's annual boxing championship. However, his lack of intelligence gets him in trouble when he fails to obey Spencer's order to intentionally lose the fight. Forgetting that he and Big Chet—his opponent in the championship—have already boxed three rounds, Griff doesn't "take a dive" in the match's final round, which is what Spencer ordered him to do. Because he won the majority of the rounds, then, he wins the championship, thereby defying Spencer's instructions. As a result, Spencer takes Griff to the abandoned horse stables in the middle of the night and beats him to death, later claiming that he ran away. Griff's body is eventually found during the archaeological excavation that takes place decades later.

Lonnie – Lonnie is a student at Nickel Academy. A menacing boy, he spends his time with Black Mike and Griff, forming a fearsome trio that harasses the other students. When Elwood walks into the bathroom on his second night at Nickel, he finds Lonnie and Black Mike ganging up on a younger boy named Corey. He tries to intervene, but Black Mike throws him against the sink, at which point another boy walks into the bathroom and yells, attracting a houseman's attention. That night, Spencer and Earl take Lonnie, Black Mike, Corey, and Elwood to the White House and beat them one by one. Later, Turner tells Elwood that he shouldn't have intervened, suggesting that Corey frequently and willingly endures Lonnie and Black Mike's abuse before taking them into a bathroom stall and giving them oral sex.

Big Chet – Big Chet is a student at Nickel Academy. A large and threatening young man, he fights for the white dorms in the boxing championship against Griff. Although he puts up a surprisingly good fight, Griff eventually beats Big Chet—an outcome that leads Spencer to kill Griff, since he ordered him to throw the fight.

Director Hardee – Director Hardee is the director of Nickel Academy. Although he isn't involved in the institution's day-to-day operations, he oversees things like the annual boxing

championship, gathering board members and influential people from the town of Eleanor and getting them to bet on the outcome of the fights. When he hears that a team of government inspectors is coming to survey the school, he cancels all classes and forces the students to clean and repair the grounds, wanting everything to look good during the inspection.

Blakely – Blakely is the "house father" in Cleveland, the dorm in which Elwood lives while he's at Nickel Academy. Blakely isn't a particularly ferocious man, but he does enforce the rules and demands set by people like Spencer. Accordingly, Elwood and his peers fear Blakely just as much as any other staff member at Nickel.

Dr. Cooke – Dr. Cooke is the doctor at Nickel Academy, where he mostly tends to the wounds students get from being beaten by Spencer. In the aftermath of Elwood's first beating, Dr. Cooke has to remove pieces of fabric from the backs of his legs, since bits of his pants have become embedded in his skin. When Turner joins Elwood in the infirmary, the boys joke that Dr. Cooke hardly ever does anything other than give people aspirin.

Hennepin – Hennepin is a vicious man who enjoys beating and whipping students at Nickel Academy. When Jaimie poisons Earl, Spencer brings Hennepin onto the Nickel staff to replace him. Though the boys don't know it at the time, this substitution ultimately works against them, since Hennepin is far more ruthless than Earl.

Millie – Millie is Turner's wife. Having grown up in Virginia at the same time Turner was coming of age in Florida, she knows what it's like to face discrimination, though she can hardly fathom the horror he has been through. In fact, she doesn't even know about his past at Nickel Academy until he tells her years after they get married. When she finally finds out, though, she reacts with kindness and support. Millie wants to hear everything, saying that Turner is going to have to tell her his entire story so that she fully understands and he can process his trauma.

Mr. Goodall – Mr. Goodall is Elwood's teacher at Nickel Academy. Providing a stark contrast to Elwood's previous teachers, Mr. Goodall is apathetic when it comes to teaching, not caring that none of his students pay attention in class. When Elwood asks if he can have harder classes, Mr. Goodall promises to look into the matter but never actually acts on this promise. In retrospect, Elwood wonders if Goodall told Spencer that he wanted harder classes, thinking that Spencer may have beat him especially hard during his first visit to the White House because he heard that Elwood was acting above his "station" by asking for challenging work.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a prominent activist and preacher during the Civil Rights Movement. When Elwood is 12, his grandmother gives him *Martin Luther King at Zion Hill*, a **recording** of the reverend speaking about segregation and discrimination. This record has a profound effect on Elwood, who strives to cultivate a "sense of dignity" because of Dr. King's moving message. This instills in him a belief in the power of activism, which emotionally sustains him throughout his time at Nickel Academy.

Harper – Harper is a twenty-year-old staff member at Nickel Academy. A white man who grew up around Nickel because his mother worked there, Harper is used to interacting with the school's students. Unlike the other staff members, he presents himself in a friendly, relatable manner, even establishing something of a friendship with Turner and Elwood, since he's their supervisor on the Community Service work team. In this capacity, he drives Turner and Elwood off campus to illicitly sell food and supplies that the school receives from the government. He also drops them off at the houses of various powerful townspeople so that the boys can do chores for them. Despite his suggestion that he sees Turner and Elwood as equals, though, Harper is the person who eventually shoots and kills Elwood when he and Turner try to escape.

Earl – Earl is Spencer's righthand man, who helps him exact beatings on the boys at Nickel Academy. When Jaimie, Desmond, Turner, and Elwood fantasize about poisoning one of the staff members, Jaimie insists that it should be Earl. Although the rest of the boys refuse to participate in the plan, Jaimie goes forward with the idea, dropping what he thinks is horse medicine into Earl's drink at the staff's holiday luncheon. The result is catastrophic, as Earl spews vomit and blood all over the dining hall before the other staff members drag him away. In the end, his doctor attributes the illness to Earl's poor health and forbids him to return to work, so Spencer replaces him with Hennepin—an even more vicious sidekick. Jaimie, however, never gets caught or punished for poisoning Earl.

Corey – Corey is a young boy at Nickel Academy. On Elwood's second night at the school, he enters the bathroom to find Black Mike and Lonnie beating up Corey. When he tries to intervene, a houseman hears the commotion and reports all of them to Spencer, who takes them that night to the White House for individual beatings. Afterwards, Turner tells Elwood that Corey likes it when Black Mike and Lonnie harass him, adding that the young boy takes the bullies into a bathroom stall when they're finished beating him up and gives them oral sex. Whether or not this is true, Turner's story about Corey outlines his belief that it's best to stay out of other people's business at Nickel.

Trevor Nickel – Trevor Nickel is the man after whom Nickel Academy is named. In 1942, Nickel was made director of the school, which was at that time called the Florida Industrial School for Boys. Although Nickel had no previous experience as an educator or school director, he "made an impression at Klan meetings" by speaking effusively about "moral improvement" and the "value of work." This earned him the position of

director, which he used to abuse young boys both physically and sexually.

Denise – Turner (who at the time goes by Elwood) dates Denise while living in New York City after having left Nickel Academy. A teacher who holds night classes at a local high school, Denise meets Turner when he's hard at work earning his GED. Although they form a happy couple for a time, their relationship doesn't last.

Chickie Pete – Chickie Pete is a former Nickel Boy whom Turner (who at the time goes by Elwood) encounters on the streets of New York City. It has been decades since both Turner and Chickie left Nickel, so the two men decide to catch up at a nearby bar. Chickie explains that he has served in the military and worked a number of odd jobs, and that he recently got out of a rehabilitation clinic for alcoholism, though he tells this to Turner while drinking beer. Much to Turner's disappointment, Chickie doesn't even remember that Turner escaped from Nickel. Frustrated, Turner decides to leave, promising to call Chickie to give him a job at his moving company, though he never really intends to do this.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Black Mike A tough kid at Nickel. Elwood intervenes when he sees Black Mike beating Corey in a bathroom. An altercation ensues. As a result, Elwood ends up getting whipped by Spencer in the White House (as do Black Mike and Corey).

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.

TRAUMA AND REPRESSION

In *The Nickel Boys*, a novel about racism and violence at a Florida reform school, Colson Whitehead draws attention to the fact that escaping physical trauma doesn't necessarily end a person's suffering. For instance, Turner—who in his adulthood goes by the name Elwood—is unable to put his past behind him, no matter how hard he tries to repress his memories about his time at Nickel, a school where ruthless disciplinarians beat young boys and killed black students without remorse. Now that Nickel has finally closed, some of Turner's former classmates organize annual trips to the school—trips to commemorate and recognize the terrible things they endured. Each year, though, Turner has refused to participate in these events, feeling that there's no use rehashing such traumatic memories. However, when an archaeological investigation unearths the school's "**secret graveyard**"—where staff members buried the black boys they used to beat to death—Turner knows he has to return, realizing that the entire experience isn't as resolved in his mind as he'd like to think. In this way, Whitehead reminds readers that certain psychological wounds persist even if a person represses them. Furthermore, Turner's decision to finally revisit Nickel suggests that dealing with painful memories often means learning how to actively confront trauma, since it's "not enough to survive, you have to live."

Many of Turner's former classmates recognize the value of acknowledging their traumatic pasts. This is why one of them creates a website where Nickel Boys can post their stories. They also form support groups, where they can talk and commiserate about their terrible pasts. In doing so, they gain a sense of camaraderie, acknowledging that—at the very least—they aren't alone with their trauma. On top of this, one of the former Nickel Boys organizes a yearly meetup and sojourn to the school. And while the Nickel Boys who attend this event sometimes have the strength to face the places that so thoroughly traumatized them, they also sometimes find it impossible to confront their painful memories. In turn, readers see that people sometimes have enough strength to confront their trauma but that this kind of courage is a delicate thing, the kind of emotional resilience that takes true determination to embody.

Unlike some of his former classmates, Turner would prefer to avoid dealing directly with his painful memories. For this reason, he never talks about Nickel, even when he marries Millie. This, however, doesn't mean that his trauma doesn't bring itself to bear on his life. On the contrary, Millie takes note of his strange and intensely emotional behavior, wondering—for instance—why he speaks so vehemently about police officers and authority figures, or why he often succumbs to dark moods without warning. Many of Turner's former classmates, on the other hand, publicly embrace the fact that Nickel has forever impacted their entire lives. When they encounter the website where other Nickel Boys post their stories, they see it as an opportunity to share their harrowing pasts with their loved ones. "Sharing a link with your family was a way of saying, This is where I was made. An explanation and an apology," Whitehead writes, implying that these men have previously felt unable to justify or explain their behavior as adults, which is fueled by their complicated pasts. Unlike other Nickel Boys, though, Turner doesn't tell the people around him what happened to him, preferring to keep the memories private. Rather than pointing to his past to help others understand what he's going through, he represses thoughts of what happened at Nickel—represses them so much that he often has nightmares that wake Millie up, though he claims not to remember them. Turner's experience suggests that simply trying to repress psychological trauma isn't enough to make it

go away.

Despite Turner's determination to ignore his trauma, he eventually finds it impossible to keep running from his past. For years, he thinks he has been processing the murder of his best friend, Elwood, by leading a life that would have made the boy proud. But when he learns that an archaeology class from the University of South Florida has unearthed the school's secret graveyard (where the administrators buried all the black students they killed), he knows he has to tell his wife about what he endured. This is because he realizes that truly surviving Nickel means finding a way to live *with* his memories, not in spite of them. He used to think of his former classmates as "pathetic" for complaining about what happened to them as teenagers, but now he realizes that he's the one who has been mishandling his trauma. This is why he finally acknowledges just how profoundly his time at Nickel influenced his entire life. By holding onto his emotions, Turner effectively binds himself to sadness, making it impossible to ever actually sort through his emotions. Consequently, he's never able to move on. In keeping with this, Whitehead outlines how, although living with trauma is painful and challenging, denying and repressing it is even more emotionally taxing than confronting it head-on.

UNITY, SUPPORT, AND HOPE

In *The Nickel Boys*, Colson Whitehead emphasizes the capacity of friendship and interpersonal support to sustain people facing adversity and oppression. intense hardship. The power of this kind of compassion becomes evident early in the novel, when Elwood receives encouragement from people like Mr. Marconi (his white employer) and Mr. Hill (his high school teacher). When he's wrongfully arrested and sent to Nickel Academy, though, Elwood no longer has access to adult role models willing to guide and support him. As a result, it is his friendship with Turner that emotionally sustains him, even if this sustenance is subtle and small in the face of Nickel Academy's all-consuming terror. And though the rest of the Nickel Boys don't always do much to help one another withstand the school's bigotry and aggression, the mere idea of silent camaraderie helps buoy Elwood and gives him the courage to fight for a better reality—a fact that illustrates the fortifying powers of unity and companionship.

Before attending Nickel Academy, Elwood's primary difficulties have to do with racism and segregation. Thankfully, he manages to find people who encourage him to advocate for and believe in himself. For instance, his new history teacher, Mr. Hill, tells him and the other students at the beginning of the year to go through their textbooks and erase the racial slurs that white students have graffitied into the margins. Mr. Hill is an activist who tells Elwood about the Civil Rights Movement, and when Elwood sees him at a protest in front of a movie theater, Mr. Hill invites him to stand with him, making him feel suddenly less alone. This simple action helps Elwood see the point of standing up against injustice as a unified group, feeling as if he's fighting not just for himself, but for everyone in the United States. "My struggle is your struggle," he thinks, "your burden is my burden." The fact that Elwood draws this message of unification and camaraderie from Mr. Hill's acceptance is worth noting, since it underlines just how inspiring it is for disenfranchised young people to find compassion, support, and guidance.

Of course, Mr. Hill's support means little after Elwood is sent to Nickel Academy, having been falsely accused of stealing a car. Worse, there are no positive role models at Nickel, where the educators are apathetic and the staff is unspeakably abusive. It's not long before Spencer—the school's vicious superintendent—whips Elwood's legs to shreds, forcing him to spend many days in the infirmary. As he waits for his legs to heal, Elwood talks to Turner, who's also in the infirmary. Elwood insists that they should stick up for themselves, but Turner dismisses this idea, saying that such efforts are even more ineffective at Nickel than they are in the outside world. It's worth noting the stark contrast between Mr. Hill's optimism and Turner's cynicism regarding social justice and change. Whereas Mr. Hill makes Elwood feel as if he and his comrades are capable of realizing their human rights, Turner insists that racist authorities make it impossible for people like him or Elwood to fight injustice. In response, Elwood says that Turner only thinks this in this cynical manner because he doesn't have anybody supporting him in the outside world, and Turner agrees that this assessment is accurate. This idea suggests that isolation and a lack of support leads to hopelessness, a point Turner admits is true. At the same time, though, Turner says that just because he's cynical doesn't mean he can't recognize the way the world really works.

Because Nickel is a violent environment, the students are forced to put their own safety first. In fact, the only reason Elwood got whipped in the first place is because he tried to save a younger boy from two bullies—an attempt that only resulted in his own punishment. This is Turner's second stay at Nickel, so he has learned to look out only for himself. In turn, he advocates for a fierce kind of individualism, telling Elwood, "Nobody else is going to get you out—just you." This notion stands in stark contrast to Mr. Hill's message of collective social advocacy and the compassion of the Civil Rights Movement. And yet, the idea also addresses an unfortunate truth: Elwood will be safest if he keeps to himself.

Despite Turner's insistence that it's best to operate alone at Nickel, he develops a strong friendship with Elwood, a bond that eventually convinces him to take a stand against his oppressors. When the boys hear that the government will be visiting the school for an inspection, Elwood writes a letter outlining the institution's acts of violence and abusive policies. At first, Turner refuses to take part in Elwood's plan to deliver the letter to one of the inspectors, but when Elwood's chance

to hand it to one of the white men disappears, Turner takes the letter from his friend and promises to deliver it himself. Then, when Spencer discovers this and puts Elwood in solitary confinement, Turner busts him out in the middle of the night, helping him run away even though he previously swore he would never take anyone with him on an escape. As they run off campus, Elwood asks why Turner's breaking his own rule, and Turner says, "You're dumb, and I'm stupid," acknowledging that, although he knows it's risky for two students to escape at once, he's no longer willing to operate as the staunch individualist Nickel has forced him to be. Instead, he stands with his friend, yet another indication that camaraderie and support lead to a sense of hope, since Turner is finally doing something to fight the injustice keeping him down. It is this gravitation toward camaraderie that later bonds an entire generation of former Nickel Boys, who create online support groups and work together to make sure the rest of the country hears about the terrible things that took place at Nickel Academy. In this sense, then, unity continues to be a source of resistance, one that brings people together and inspires them to think optimistically about their ability to address injustice.

HISTORY, SECRECY, AND RACISM

The Nickel Boys is a novel about the lasting reverberations of slavery. Examining the ways in which a painfully racist history works its way into the present, Colson Whitehead draws an important distinction between laws and reality, demonstrating that racists often point to official condemnations of bigotry to avoid taking responsibility for their own prejudiced ways. For instance, Elwood and Turner attend Nickel Academy roughly 100 years after the end of slavery and right after the end of Jim Crow laws, but they still experience extreme bigotry, racial violence, and segregation. Although the school receives funding from the government and should therefore follow its desegregation laws, black students are nonetheless forced into inferior dorms and are in far more danger than white students. Not only are the two groups separated, but the administrators don't hesitate to beat black students to death, knowing that nobody will hold the institution accountable. Because of this lack of accountability, the school is unspeakably cruel to young black boys , burying them in a **secret graveyard** and saying that they ran away. Most significantly, the general public doesn't hear about this abuse until decades later, in contemporary times. The fact that the rest of the nation thinks it has achieved equality while such horrific racial violence continues to take place demonstrates that there is terrible secrecy surrounding such matters—secrecy that makes it even harder to address the fact that racism still exists.

The Nickel Boys takes place during a time of great change, shortly after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made it illegal to discriminate based on race, skin color, nationality, sex, or religion. Despite these official changes, though, both Elwood and Turner recognize that racism and bigotry still run rampant throughout their communities. This is especially the case at Nickel Academy, where black students are not only separated from their white peers, but are also subject to significantly harsher treatment. "You can change the law but you can't change people and how they treat each other," Turner believes, suspecting that the majority of the staff members belong to the Ku Klux Klan. This, Turner thinks, is evidence of the fact that the law has almost no effect on how people truly behave. His cynicism in this moment urges readers to consider how white people *actually* act on an everyday basis, regardless of what the laws say. That Spencer and other Nickel employees continue to perpetuate bigotry proves that true change must take place within actual communities and on an individual level, not just in the government.

What's more, the disconnect between the country's civil rights laws and its actual practices is particularly harmful because it means that racial violence often takes place in the shadows. This is certainly the case at Nickel Academy, where there's a secret graveyard for black students whom the administrators have beaten to death. There is also an official graveyard, Boot Hill, but even the records for this gravesite are incomplete and vague, since many of the students buried there died in suspicious ways that Nickel has purposefully obscured. For instance, the administration claims that some of these students were killed while on "unauthorized leave," despite the fact that the school used to rent them out as laborers to various townspeople, meaning that their business off-campus was quite obviously *not* unauthorized. Still, the administration has avoided scrutiny simply by hiding this aspect of history. This, in turn, demonstrates that Nickel Academy simply distorts the stories behind the students' deaths, twisting the narratives in its own favor to hide their racist roots.

When reading *The Nickel Boys*, it's worth keeping in mind that Nickel Academy is based on a real reform school, the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys. As is the case in the novel, the Dozier School was shut down in 2011, meaning that its clandestine violence continued long after corporal punishment fell out of common practice. In *The Nickel Boys*, news of the secret graveyard astounds the general public after an archaeology class from the University of Southern Florida unearths it. Even though the Nickel Boys have been talking about the secret graveyard for a long time, nobody has believed them until now. This perfectly illustrates the problematic fact that many Americans choose to ignore reality until the government or some other official entity acknowledges it, especially when it comes to racism. This is why there was such a disconnect in the 1960s between civil rights legislation and the continued existence of bigotry—white Americans were happy to believe that the country had left behind racism when, in reality, this was hardly the case. Whitehead, for his part, is interested in how

racism continues to work its way through society, manifesting itself in many different ways. For instance, when Millie considers the many small acts of discrimination she experiences at the hands of white people in contemporary times, she sees them as part of a "routine humiliation" that she forces herself to ignore because she thinks she would become an emotional wreck if she didn't. That Millie finds this coping mechanism necessary indicates that bigotry is still at work in the United States. Consequently, Whitehead implies that Americans must not make the mistake of ignoring reality, which only allows racism and discrimination to flourish—just like it did at Nickel Academy.

CIVIL RIGHTS, DIGNITY, AND SACRIFICE

The Nickel Boys is not an emotionally uplifting novel, but it does demonstrate that it's possible for a person to maintain a sense of self-worth even in times of hardship. Elwood especially embodies this gravitation toward dignity, which he learns from the Civil Rights Movement. He adopts Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s belief that African Americans ought to believe in themselves and, in turn, believe that their rights are worth fighting for. This sense of self-worth helps Elwood cultivate an image of himself as a hard worker with a strong moral compass—a moral compass that sometimes puts him at odds others. This is all well and good when he's a top student working in Mr. Marconi's shop, but his convictions become harder to uphold when he's sent to Nickel Academy after a wrongful arrest, where standing up for himself and his fellow classmates puts him in real danger. Nevertheless, Elwood maintains his resolve, eventually writing a letter about Nickel's abusive practices and attempting to deliver it to white government inspectors. This is an act of pure bravery, and though it ultimately leads to Elwood's death, Whitehead suggests that certain sacrifices are worth making, even if they're doomed for failure.

Elwood learns the importance of cultivating a sense of self-worth by listening to a **recording** of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking at the Zion Hill Baptist Church in Los Angeles in 1962. One of the most important ideas that he draws from Dr. King's words is that African Americans should stand proud in the face of racism. "*We must believe in our souls that we are somebody, that we are significant, that we are worthful, and we must walk the streets of life every day with this sense of dignity and this sense of somebody-ness*," Dr. King asserts. This particular idea resonates with Elwood because it gives him an impetus to believe in himself, something that the racist environment in which he exists actively discourages. Armed with this message, he develops the wherewithal to advocate for himself. "There are big forces that want to keep the Negro down, like Jim Crow, and there are small forces that want to keep you down, like other people, and in the face of all those things, the big ones and the smaller ones, you have to stand up straight and maintain your sense of who you are," he realizes. Consequently, he cultivates a "sense of dignity" that helps him believe not only in himself, but also in the value of resisting bigotry.

Elwood's newfound dignity helps him establish strong morals, some of which get him into trouble. When he sees two black boys stealing from Mr. Marconi's store, for example, he decides that they deserve to be caught. Mr. Marconi knows that children steal from his shop and has decided it's best to do nothing, but Elwood can't accept this. Accordingly, he says, "Put it back," when he sees two boys from his neighborhood shoplifting—a decision that earns him a thorough beating on his way home that night. Nevertheless, he stands by his decision to call them out because he feels morally obligated to do so. After all, he sees the boys' misbehavior as a personal insult, something that makes both the shoplifters and himself look bad. Acting on his sense of self-respect and dignity, then, Elwood speaks up because he thinks it's the right thing to do. To him, doing the right thing takes precedence over all else, even when there are negative consequences.

It's relatively easy for Elwood to honor his convictions when he's facing little more than a neighborhood beating. At Nickel Academy, though, the stakes are much higher. This is why Turner initially rejects Elwood's idea to slip a note about the institution's injustice to a group of government inspectors. He tells Elwood to forget the idea, saying that his friend should simply focus on getting through Nickel unharmed. Nonetheless, Elwood disagrees, telling his friend that it's important to "walk with your head up no matter what they throw at you." Although Turner at first refuses to participate, he eventually helps Elwood go through with his plan to deliver the letter. That night, administrators take Elwood from his bed and beat him before placing him into solitary confinement. Shortly thereafter, Turner hears that Spencer and his employees are going to kill Elwood, so Turner helps him escape. However, the Nickel employees catch up to them and shoot Elwood, killing him in a field while Turner gets away. Decades later, Turner bemoans his decision to help Elwood act on his convictions, wishing that he hadn't taken part in Elwood's plan to speak out against Nickel Academy's injustice. After all, he can't ignore the fact that, although he saved his friend from getting beaten to death, Elwood still died because of his refusal to submit to his oppressors.

Turner is retrospectively cynical about the efficacy of standing up for one's own convictions, seeing Elwood's dignity as the very thing that got him killed. But even though *The Nickel Boys* outlines the grim fact that doing what's right often means making great sacrifices, Whitehead also hints that these sacrifices are worthwhile. To understand this, it's worth considering the following: As a boy, Elwood used to look into the dining room of the hotel his grandmother worked in, and he would fantasize about someday seeing a black man sitting at one of the tables—an idea that seemed nearly impossible at the

time. In the novel's final scene, Turner visits this very restaurant and unknowingly fulfills Elwood's dream, a turn of events that suggests that even though racism is still very much alive, the sacrifices people made during and after the Civil Rights Movement have indeed made a difference to society.

POWER, FEAR, AND UPWARD MOBILITY

In many ways, *The Nickel Boys* looks at how people in positions of power often use fear to subjugate others. For example, Elwood encounters this dynamic when he arrives at Nickel Academy and learns that even the slightest infraction will get him beaten senseless. This gives him a reason to do whatever his superiors tell him to do, especially since his first visit to a building called the White House—where Spencer whips the students—leaves him feeling viscerally afraid of ever getting in trouble again. The problem is, though, that many of the punishments students receive at Nickel have little or nothing to do with their actual behavior. In fact, students find themselves enduring brutal violence even though they haven't done anything wrong. On top of this, many students experience sexual abuse simply because an employee takes a liking to them. In turn, it becomes clear that there is no logic underlying Nickel's system of discipline. Knowing that the lack of meaning behind this abuse might encourage students to openly rebel, though, the institution gives the boys an extra incentive to behave, arranging a points system that creates an illusion of upward mobility that will supposedly lead to their release from the school—an outcome that rarely comes to pass. Simply put, the school gives the students something to strive for, ultimately establishing a superficial kind of hope that keeps most students from standing up for themselves while giving them little of value in return. By spotlighting such tactics, Whitehead shows readers that corrupt people in positions of power often give vulnerable groups a false sense of agency in order to more thoroughly control them.

It's not long before Elwood discovers Nickel Academy's flawed approach to discipline. After he tries to intervene in a fight (wanting to protect a younger student from bullies), he receives a merciless whipping and is sent to the infirmary until he can walk again. Lying in bed, he talks with Turner—who is also in the infirmary—and decides to follow the boy's advice, which is to figure out how to exist at Nickel without attracting any attention or getting into trouble. Turner believes that this means sticking to oneself, and he argues that this tactic is the only way a student can avoid beatings. Consequently, Elwood resolves to put his head down and follow the rules as best he can, not wanting to ever return to the White House, where Spencer doles out life-threatening lashes. This is exactly the kind of frightened worldview that people like Spencer want him to adopt.

When Elwood returns from the infirmary, he contemplates how best to avoid punishment, wondering if his original beating had something to do with the fact that he had previously asked his teacher if he could take more challenging classes. Had Spencer found this out and decided to give him an especially hard beating? As he asks himself these questions, Elwood realizes that there's no point in trying to understand what drives Nickel's disciplinarian methods, since there is clearly "no higher system guiding Nickel's brutality, merely an indiscriminate spite, one that ha[s] nothing to do with people." In other words, the vehemence fueling Spencer's violence has little to do with how his students behave and everything to do with his desire to take power over them. But the problem is that a student can get in trouble even if he's following all of the rules, since there's no telling when a peer might start a fight or a staff member might arbitrarily blame him for something he didn't do. Although Nickel Academy advertises itself as a reform school, then, it quickly becomes apparent that it's nothing more than a pitiless factory of inescapable punishment and abuse.

Once Elwood learns that Nickel's system of punishment is so meaningless, he tries to take comfort in the idea of graduating as soon as possible. However, he soon learns that even the school's merit-based path toward graduation is nothing but a façade, a small slice of hope the institution gives to students to lend them an extra incentive to behave. Asking his fellow students about the school's points system, Elwood tries to more thoroughly understand how a person could manage to graduate early, but he learns that demerits might come his way regardless of how he behaves. Accordingly, he sees that seemingly everything is out of his control, even if people like Spencer want him to believe that he has agency. Indeed, this agency is an illusion, something intended to keep him from rebelling against the rules. After all, if there's no logic to who gets punished *and* no way to genuinely work one's way out of such an abusive environment, then there's no reason to remain submissive and well-behaved. This is exactly why Elwood ends up writing a letter to government officials outlining Nickel Academy's illicit activities, an act that puts him in great danger. Either way, he realizes, he's at a severe disadvantage, so he might as well take the risk. In this way, Whitehead suggests that people who face fear in all directions are more likely to rebel against their oppressors, especially if they're able—like Elwood is—to see through manipulative attempts to blind them to their own helplessness.

SYMBOLS

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

THE SECRET GRAVEYARD

The unofficial graveyard that a team of archaeologists discovers on the grounds of Nickel

Academy represents the many secrets that the institution has kept from the world. For decades, the school beat, raped, and killed its students (especially its black students) without any repercussions, and the only reason it was able to do this was because it shrouded itself in a veil of secrecy. By keeping its horrific policies out of the public eye, Nickel Academy managed to avoid punishment, doing whatever it wanted to its students for decades. When news of the secret graveyard finally spreads across the nation, though, people suddenly realize that the institution was run by evil and heartless disciplinarians—even though the Nickel Boys themselves have known this truth the entire time. Furthermore, the fact that the public discovery of the graveyard is what inspires Turner to confront his trauma suggests that the graveyard itself reflects his own unwillingness to examine his painful history. In this sense, then, the secret graveyard also symbolizes Turner's repressed emotions and eventual decision to more thoroughly process his trauma.

MARTIN LUTHER KING AT ZION HILL

Because the record *Martin Luther King At Zion Hill* informs Elwood's worldview so profoundly, it comes to stand for his belief in the power of activism. Moreover, Elwood learns to value himself by listening to the record and hearing Dr. King speak about the importance of developing a "sense of dignity." It is this "sense of dignity" that later inspires Elwood to take a stand against his oppressors at Nickel Academy, risking his life because he believes that it's important to proudly uphold his morals no matter what might happen to him as a result. In turn, the record itself is an embodiment of Elwood's strong convictions, and it ultimately represents his unyielding drive to fight for justice.

THE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

The blank encyclopedias Elwood receives after winning a rigged competition symbolize the fact that hard work doesn't always lead to positive—or fair—outcomes. When a busboy at the Richmond Hotel shows him the set of encyclopedias, Elwood immediately hopes nobody else will want them. However, a dishwasher expresses his interest in the set, so he and Elwood have a dish-drying race to see who will get to keep the books. Elwood wins, but when he brings the encyclopedias home, he discovers that all but one of them are blank, since the books themselves are only sample models used by salesmen to show customers what the set will look like on their shelves. As time goes on, Elwood begins to sense that everyone else in the kitchen knew that the encyclopedias weren't real and that the entire dish-drying race was just a way to make him look stupid and work for free. This, in turn, causes him to question his belief that he will be able to advance in life by working hard and remaining diligent. And though Elwood himself never becomes fully discouraged about life's inherent unfairness, the blank encyclopedias serve as a vivid image of futility and injustice in an indifferent world, ultimately foreshadowing the fact that Elwood's sincere efforts at Nickel Academy will only lead to his death.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Doubleday edition of *The Nickel Boys* published in 2019.

Prologue Quotes

"The discovery of the bodies was an expensive complication for the real estate company awaiting the all clear from the environmental study, and for the state's attorney, which had recently closed an investigation into the abuse stories. Now they had to start a new inquiry, establish the identities of the deceased and the manner of death, and there was no telling when the whole damned place could be razed, cleared, and neatly erased from history, which everyone agreed was long overdue.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears near the very beginning of *The Nickel Boys* and serves as an explanation of how Nickel Academy's myriad horrors are viewed in contemporary times. Rather than turning the grounds of the school into a commemoration of all the boys who died there, the state of Florida closes all "investigation[s] into the abuse stories" and gladly hands the land over to a real estate company planning to construct commercial buildings. However, their plans to do this are put on hold when an "environmental study" finds Nickel's secret graveyard, which is full of boys whose unjust deaths went unreported. Having stumbled upon the institution's shameful and secret history, the government and real estate company are forced to "establish the identities of the deceased and the manner of death," a job that they treat as nothing more than an inconvenience. This attitude illustrates just how little the general public cares about the atrocities that took place at Nickel Academy. Instead of eagerly pursuing what really went on at Nickel, the state of Florida bemoans the fact that they won't be able to "neatly erase" the institution from

history. Of course, this impulse to "erase" Nickel is what has long enabled the school to carry out such horrid acts. In turn, readers see that the state of Florida (and perhaps society more broadly) has learned very little from its past, failing to see that ignoring ugly realities is exactly what allows such travesties to happen in the first place.

❝ Plenty of boys had talked of the secret graveyard before, but as it had ever been with Nickel, no one believed them until someone else said it.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Whitehead explains the circumstances surrounding the discovery of Nickel Academy's secret graveyard, where the institution buried black boys killed by violent staff members. Because these deaths were clear examples of the school's racist and abusive ways, they were never reported—if administrators killed a boy, they simply claimed that the student escaped, thereby avoiding ever having to take responsibility for the murders. When an archaeology class digs up this graveyard decades later, though, news of the bodies spreads across the entire country. However, Whitehead notes that students from Nickel have been talking about the secret graveyard for years. In this way, he shows readers just how difficult it has been for the students to penetrate the secrecy surrounding Nickel, a secrecy that has long protected the institution. After all, if nobody believed the students about what went on at the school, it makes sense that they were never able to address the many horrors that plagued them on an everyday basis.

❝ Together they performed their own phantom archaeology, digging through decades and restoring to human eyes the shards and artifacts of those days. Each man with his own pieces. *He used to say, I'll pay you a visit later. The wobbly stairs to the schoolhouse basement. The blood squished between my toes in my tennis shoes.* Reassembling those fragments into confirmation of a shared darkness: If it is true for you, it is true for someone else, and you are no longer alone.

Related Characters: Jack Turner , Elwood Curtis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Decades after leaving Nickel Academy, a group of alumni begin to form support groups and online communities. In doing so, they create spaces to talk about their traumatic experiences, piecing their stories together in order to better understand and process what happened to them. As they "reassembl[e]" the "fragments" of those days, they realize that they all have a "shared darkness," one that ties them to one another and subsequently makes them feel less "alone." This, in turn, helps them recognize that they don't have to bear the weight of their trauma on their own. In this regard, Whitehead implies that trauma is easier to manage when a person can connect to other people who are willing to engage in an exchange of mutual support. Unfortunately, though, Turner has trouble embracing this kind of openness in the aftermath of his stay at Nickel. Instead of talking about what happened to him and Elwood, he shuts down, refusing to share his traumatic experiences. As a result, he continues to feel "alone" with his painful memories throughout much of the book.

❝ Some years you felt strong enough to head down that concrete walkway, knowing that it led to one of your bad places, and some years you didn't. Avoid a building or stare it in the face, depending on your reserves that morning.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of what it feels like to participate in the annual visit to Nickel Academy organized by a group of alumni. Each year, a collection of former Nickel Boys meets up and travels to the school, rehashing their memories and confronting the things that haunt them in adulthood. Whitehead stresses the fact that this kind of emotional excavation isn't necessarily an easy thing to do. In fact, some Nickel Boys don't always have the resolve to revisit their "bad places." This idea suggests that "star[ing]" trauma "in the face" requires a certain kind of strength that isn't always accessible. If this is the case, then it's reasonable to conclude that even the most well-adjusted Nickel Boys still struggle to process their trauma. Just because a former

student is brave enough to "face" his painful memories once, Whitehead implies, doesn't mean he will *always* be able to do so. In turn, readers see that sorting through trauma is a continuous process, one that requires constant work.

Chapter Two Quotes

❝ The morning after the decision, the sun rose and everything looked the same. Elwood asked his grandmother when Negroes were going to start staying at the Richmond, and she said it's one thing to tell someone to do what's right and another thing for them to do it. She listed some of his behavior as proof and Elwood nodded: Maybe so. Sooner or later, though, the door would swing wide to reveal a brown face—a dapper businessman in Tallahassee for business or a fancy lady in town to see the sights—enjoying the fine-smelling fare the cooks put out. He was sure of it.

Related Characters: Elwood Curtis, Harriet (Elwood's Grandmother), Jack Turner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Elwood fantasizes about one day seeing a black person dining at the Richmond Hotel, where his grandmother works. The "decision" Whitehead refers to in this moment is the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared that schools were not allowed to segregate white and black students. In the aftermath of this decision, Elwood eagerly waits to see the effects of desegregation, but his grandmother soberly tries to explain that the law doesn't always accurately reflect reality, saying that "it's one thing to tell someone to do what's right and another thing for them to do it." This is an important idea, since Elwood will later encounter this unfortunate discrepancy when he goes to Nickel Academy, where the racist staff members mercilessly beat their students despite the state's laws surrounding corporal punishment. At this point, though, Elwood remains optimistic, refusing to doubt that change will come. And though he never lives to see the day that a black patron can sit in the Richmond's dining room, that day does eventually come—as evidenced by the fact that Turner has dinner in that very same room in the novel's final scene.

❝ From time to time it appeared that he had no goddamned sense. He couldn't explain it, even to himself, until *At Zion Hill* gave him a language. *We must believe in our souls that we are somebody, that we are significant, that we are worthful, and we must walk the streets of life every day with this sense of dignity and this sense of somebody-ness.* The record went around and around […]. Elwood bent to a code—Dr. King gave that code shape, articulation, and meaning. There are big forces that want to keep the Negro down, like Jim Crow, and there are small forces that want to keep you down, like other people, and in the face of all those things, the big ones and the smaller ones, you have to stand up straight and maintain your sense of who you are.

Related Characters: Elwood Curtis, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

This is a critical passage because it outlines the values that Elwood adopts and holds close to his heart, values that drive him to stand up against injustice even when doing so poses a threat to his safety. When two boys beat him up after he calls them out for shoplifting, they tell him that he has "no goddamned sense." Strangely enough, Elwood agrees with this sentiment, since he recognizes that sometimes his moral convictions only lead him into trouble. However, he's unwilling to stop acting in accordance with his moral compass, since this would mean undermining his own "dignity." He draws this idea from one of Dr. Martin Luther King's speeches on the record *At Zion Hill*. Listening to the reverend urge African Americans to develop a "sense of somebody-ness," Elwood resolves to stand up for what he believes in, even in the face of racism and bigotry. After all, if he let other people scare him out of living according to what he believes in, he would be letting them "keep [him] down." Consequently, he decides to "stand up straight and maintain [his] sense of who" he is, regardless of what this means for his future. This, it's worth noting, is exactly what he does when he dares to write a letter to government inspectors outlining the terrible conditions at Nickel Academy—a decision that ultimately leads to his death.

Chapter Three Quotes

He hadn't marched on the Florida Theatre in defense of his rights or those of the black race of which he was a part; he had marched for everyone's rights, even those who shouted him down. My struggle is your struggle, your burden is my burden.

Related Characters: Elwood Curtis, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears shortly after Elwood decides to join a protest outside the Florida Theatre, which won't admit African Americans despite the country's new laws regarding desegregation. At the rally, he feels a rewarding sense of camaraderie with his fellow protestors, but he also recognizes that there are people who detest the notion that the movie theater should admit black patrons. Rather than seeing this opinion as purely antagonistic, though, Elwood views it as ill-informed, believing that the true reason he's marching for equality is so that he can help his country become the best it can be. Under this interpretation, he marches "for everyone's rights, even those who shout[] him down." This viewpoint promotes the idea of complete unity across all races, a communal message that Elwood draws from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who advocates for love and acceptance across all divisions. By adopting this mindset, Elwood frames his engagement in the Civil Rights Movement as something that extends beyond his own experience, thereby giving him a sense of encouragement and inspiring him to continue fighting for his values.

Chapter Five Quotes

Academic performance had no bearing on one's progress to graduation, Desmond explained. Teachers didn't take attendance or hand out grades. The clever kids worked on their merits. Enough merits and you could get an early release for good behavior. Work, comportment, demonstrations of compliance or docility, however—these things counted toward your ranking and were never far from Desmond's attention. He had to get home.

Related Characters: Desmond, Elwood Curtis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Elwood learns the ins and outs of life at Nickel Academy. On his way to class, he talks to a student named Desmond, who has been tasked with showing him around. Although Elwood is under the impression that Nickel is a serious and strict school, Desmond tells him that this only applies to nonacademic activities. Because "academic performance ha[s] no bearing on one's progress to graduation," he explains, there's no reason for students to exert themselves in the classroom. In fact, the teachers don't even give out grades, nor do they take attendance. Needless to say, this comes as a shock to Elwood, who would be taking college classes if he weren't at Nickel. More importantly, though, what Desmond tells Elwood about the school's approach to academics helps readers see that Nickel Academy is an exploitative place. By giving students an incentive to commit themselves to physical labor, the institution can profit from the students' work. Furthermore, the school creates an illusion of upward mobility, convincing students to work hard and diligently by suggesting that this will help them graduate early. This promotes a culture of "docility" that makes it easier to control students who might otherwise misbehave or stand up for themselves. Whitehead suggests that Nickel tricks its students into submission simply by framing "work, comportment, [and] demonstrations of compliance" as the only paths back to the free world.

Chapter Six Quotes

Corey got around seventy—Elwood lost his place a few times—and it didn't make sense, why did the bullies get less than the bullied? Now he had no idea what he was in for. It didn't make sense. Maybe they lost count, too. Maybe there was no system at all to the violence and no one, not the keepers nor the kept, knew what happened or why.

Related Characters: Elwood Curtis, Corey, Black Mike, Lonnie, Maynard Spencer, Earl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

After Elwood tries to protect Corey from Lonnie and Black Mike, all four boys get in trouble and are taken to the White

House, where Spencer and Earl whip them one at a time. Not knowing what he's in for, Elwood decides to count how many seconds each boy must endure. This impulse is noteworthy because it indicates that certainty can help a person bear abuse. Although Elwood doesn't know what's going to happen to him, he can at the very least try to sense how long he can expect to undergo punishment. However, he realizes that there is "no system at all to the violence" that Spencer and Earl dole out, since they whip Corey significantly longer than they whip Lonnie and Black Mike. Wondering why "the bullies get less than the bullied," Elwood slowly grasps that the system of discipline at Nickel Academy is fickle and illogical. This, in turn, makes it even harder for him to bear the violence and abuse, since the randomness of his punishment suggests that the only thing people like Spencer care about is violently subjecting students to their wrath. As a result, Elwood realizes that there's very little he can do to stay out of trouble, since Nickel Academy's disciplinarian practices are inscrutable and unpredictable.

Chapter Seven Quotes

"It's not like the old days," Elwood said. "We can stand up for ourselves."

"That shit barely works out there—what do you think it's going to do in here?"

"You say that because there's no one else out there sticking up for you."

"That's true," Turner said. "That doesn't mean I can't see how it works. Maybe I see things more clearly because of it. [...] The key to in here is the same as surviving out there—you got to see how people act, and then you got to figure out how to get around them like an obstacle course. If you want to walk out of here."

Related Characters: Jack Turner , Elwood Curtis, Harriet (Elwood's Grandmother)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation, Elwood insists that he and Turner have rights that they can stand up for. Maintaining that "it's not like the old days" anymore, he urges Turner to embrace a sense of hope regarding their ability to bring about change at Nickel. In response, Turner disregards his friend's optimism, which he sees as naïve and distracting. He also admits that some of his pessimism comes from the fact that he doesn't have anyone "sticking up" for him in the free world, an idea that suggests that isolation and a lack of emotional support lead to disillusionment and hopelessness. All the same, Turner also posits that this is exactly why he's capable of seeing the bleak reality of his situation in a clear, levelheaded way. By saying this, he implies that Elwood has cultivated a false sense of hope because he has people like his grandmother who care about him. In reality, Turner suggests, Elwood's grandmother can't do anything to help him, so he might as well focus on navigating the "obstacle course" that is Nickle Academy. Rather than trying to go against the entire system, Turner intimates, Elwood should follow the rules and abandon all hope of changing his unfortunate situation. This, he believes, is the only way to survive. The tension between the two boys' perspectives that this passage illustrates will come to shape their entire lives at Nickel and beyond.

Chapter Ten Quotes

The blinders Elwood wore, walking around. The law was one thing—you can march and wave signs around and change a law if you convinced enough white people. In Tampa, Turner saw the college kids with their nice shirts and ties sit in at the Woolworths. He had to work, but they were out protesting. And it happened—they opened the counter. Turner didn't have the money to eat there either way. You can change the law but you can't change people and how they treat each other. Nickel was racist as hell—half the people who worked here probably dressed up like the Klan on weekends—but the way Turner saw it, wickedness went deeper than skin color. It was Spencer. It was Spencer and it was Griff and it was all the parents who let their children wind up here. It was people.

Which is why Turner brought Elwood out to the two trees. To show him something that wasn't in books.

Related Characters: Jack Turner , Elwood Curtis, Maynard Spencer, Griff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

When Turner overhears Spencer ordering Griff to intentionally lose during the annual boxing championship, he quickly tells Elwood about what he's heard. He says that Griff would be crazy not to listen to the superintendent, since disobeying these instructions would lead to his death.

Going on, he explains that Spencer would take Griff "out back," and when Elwood asks what this means, Turner takes him to the old horse stables at the edge of campus, showing him where Spencer takes black students he wants to beat to death. Elwood, for his part, can't believe that this sort of thing goes on at Nickel, which is why Turner grows annoyed at his friend's naivety. Turner often feels as if Elwood is wearing "blinders" that keep him from seeing that "you can change the law but you can't change people and how they treat each other." Turner knows this firsthand, since he once witnessed a group of protestors successfully desegregate a restaurant without actually changing the fact that people like him still couldn't eat there. Nickel, Turner knows, is also impervious to genuine change, regardless of what Elwood believes about the power of the law to enact justice. Tired of Elwood's optimism, then, he takes him "out back" "to show him something that [isn't] in books," a bleak and secret reality that remains uninfluenced by activism or any kind of progress toward equality.

❝ Elwood frowned in disdain at the whole performance, which made Turner smile. The fight was as rigged and rotten as the dishwashing races he'd told Turner about, another gear in the machine that kept black folks down. Turner enjoyed his friend's new bend toward cynicism, even as he found himself swayed by the magic of the big fight. Seeing Griff, their enemy and champion, put a hurting on that white boy made a fellow feel all right. In spite of himself. Now that the third and final round was upon them, he wanted to hold on to that feeling. It was real—in their blood and minds—even if it was a lie.

Related Characters: Elwood Curtis, Jack Turner , Griff, Big Chet, Maynard Spencer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Turner, Elwood, and the rest of the students at Nickel Academy watch the annual boxing championship. As Griff squares up against Big Chet, Elwood has trouble enjoying the spectacle, since he knows that Spencer has ordered Griff to lose on purpose, manipulating the fight so that he can profit off the results. Having to watch this rigged fight upsets Elwood because he sees it as a representation of the many ways in which people like Spencer use their power to unfairly get what they want. Turner, on the other hand, has already acknowledged that this is the way the world works, so the fight doesn't bother him quite as much. In fact, he relishes the spectacle "in spite of himself," taking pleasure in the excitement surrounding Griff's power over Big Chet. Although he knows that Griff isn't supposed to win, he wants to "hold on to [the] feeling" that comes along with seeing one of his peers in such a prominent and powerful position. For a fleeting moment, then, Turner allows himself to embrace the kind of hope and optimism that Elwood normally embodies, suggesting that he actually *does* harbor a desire to challenge his oppressors—a desire he later acts upon by helping Elwood deliver a letter to government inspectors about Nickel's many transgressions.

❝ He was all of them in one black body that night in the ring, and all of them when the white men took him out back to those two iron rings. They came for Griff that night and he never returned. The story spread that he was too proud to take a dive. That he refused to kneel. And if it made the boys feel better to believe that Griff escaped, broke away and ran off into the free world, no one told them otherwise, although some noted that it was odd the school never sounded the alarm or sent out the dogs. When the state of Florida dug him up fifty years later, the forensic examiner noted the fractures in the wrists and speculated that he'd been restrained before he died, in addition to the other violence attested by the broken bones.

Related Characters: Griff, Maynard Spencer, Big Chet

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of what happens after Griff accidentally wins the boxing championship. Although he intended to follow Spencer's order to lose the match, Griff forgets how many rounds he and Big Chet have fought and wins one too many, mistakenly claiming the championship title. As the winner, he comes to represent all of his black peers, becoming a symbol of resistance. In other words, his victory gives his fellow students hope, making them feel less powerless in the face of Nickel's merciless staff. Predictably, though, Spencer takes Griff in the middle of the night and kills him. To maintain their newfound sense of hope, though, the students insist that Griff "broke away and ran off into the free world." In this way, they try to convince themselves of an unlikely story, purposefully overlooking what really happened. Decades later, the archaeology team digs Griff up and finds "fractures in [his] wrists," an indication that he was "restrained before he died." Consequently, the true

story of what happened to the boy rises to awareness, though it's too late to hold Spencer accountable for what he's done. Once again, then, Spencer protects himself from the law by keeping his violence a secret, making it impossible for anyone to hold him responsible for his wrongs.

Chapter Twelve Quotes

❝ It wasn't Spencer that undid him, or a supervisor or a new antagonist […], rather it was that he'd stopped fighting. In keeping his head down, in his careful navigation so that he made it to lights-out without mishap, he fooled himself that he had prevailed. That he had outwitted Nickel because he got along and kept out of trouble. In fact he had been ruined. He was like one of those Negroes Dr. King spoke of in his letter from jail, so complacent and sleepy after years of oppression that they had adjusted to it and learned to sleep in it as their only bed.

Related Characters: Elwood Curtis, Maynard Spencer, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jack Turner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

As Elwood serves his time at Nickel Academy, he tries to follow the rules, especially after his first beating in the White House. Heeding Turner's advice to keep to himself and try to find his way through the "obstacle" course that is Nickel Academy, he embarks on a "careful navigation" of his remaining time at the school, "keeping his head down" so that he can get through each day "without mishap." This, Whitehead notes, gives him the inaccurate impression that he has "prevailed," a sense that he is working his way toward something positive. In reality, his staunch obedience only leads to an emotional kind of "ruin," making Elwood feel "complacent" and defeatist, as if he has undergone "years of oppression" that have altered the way he sees the world. In other words, he begins to recognize the deterioration of his will, which is normally so strong. Whereas he's usually full of hope and zeal, he has worked his way into mindless submission, simply accepting his unfortunate situation for what it is so that he can avoid abuse. In this way, it becomes clear that the scare tactics employed at Nickel to control students are quite effective, even on someone as strong and determined as Elwood.

❝ Chickie Pete and his trumpet. He might have played professionally, why not? A session man in a funk band, or an orchestra. If things had been different. The boys could have been many things had they not been ruined by that place. Doctors who cure diseases or perform brain surgery, inventing shit that saves lives. Run for president. All those lost geniuses—sure not all of them were geniuses, Chickie Pete for example was not solving special relativity—but they had been denied even the simple pleasure of being ordinary. Hobbled and handicapped before the race even began, never figuring out how to be normal.

Related Characters: Elwood Curtis, Jack Turner , Chickie Pete

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Turner—who goes by Elwood in his adulthood—considers the extent to which Nickel Academy impacted its students' lives. He thinks about how Chickie Pete used to be a fantastic trumpet player who "might have played professionally." Despite this bright future, though, Chickie Pete hasn't played trumpet for years, telling Turner that his fingers are too bent and swollen from his struggle with addiction. "The boys could have been many things had they not been ruined by that place," Whitehead writes, implying that Chickie Pete's addiction is—at least in part—a byproduct of his time at Nickel. This makes Turner think about the many students who might have been "geniuses" if Nickel hadn't ruined their potential. Of course, he most likely has this thought because Elwood died while trying to escape the school (though readers don't yet know this). No doubt pondering what Elwood would have been capable of if he hadn't been sent to Nickel, Turner laments the fact that the institution irrevocably "hobbled and handicapped" its students before they could find success or opportunity. In turn, readers see that trauma and abuse follow people throughout their lives, altering their trajectories in monumental ways.

Chapter Thirteen Quotes

It was funny, how much he had liked the idea of his Great Escape making the rounds of the school. Pissing off the staff when they heard the boys talking about it. He thought this city was a good place for him because nobody knew him—and he liked the contradiction that the one place that *did* know him was the one place he didn't want to be. It tied him to all those other people who come to New York, running away from hometowns and worse. But even Nickel had forgotten his story.

Related Characters: Elwood Curtis, Jack Turner , Chickie Pete

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

After Turner—who goes by the name Elwood in his adulthood—talks to Chickie Pete and learns that nobody at Nickel remembered his escape from the school, he becomes depressed. It upsets him that Chickie Pete can't remember how he (Turner) got out, since he "liked the idea of his Great Escape making the rounds of the school." He also relished the thought that the staff would get angry when they heard his story circulating amongst the students. This suggests that Turner thought of his escape story as something that might give students at Nickel hope for the future, something that is quite hard to come by at the school. Living in New York City, Turner has always liked that nobody knows who he is, since this connects him "to all those other people who come to New York, running away from hometowns and worse." In this manner, Turner takes pleasure in the feeling of community that prevails over the city, something he never felt at Nickel. Now, though, he feels even more isolated than before, as he learns that "even Nickel had forgotten his story." After all, if nobody where he's currently living knows his story *and* nobody where he used to live knows it either, then he is utterly and completely alone.

Chapter Fourteen Quotes

But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom.

The capacity to suffer. Elwood—all the Nickel boys—existed in the capacity. Breathed in it, ate in it, dreamed in it. That was their lives now. Otherwise they would have perished. The beatings, the rapes, the unrelenting winnowing of themselves. They endured. But to love those who would have destroyed them? To make that leap? *We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you.*

Related Characters: Elwood Curtis, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

Having realized that he has become overly obedient, Elwood thinks back to the ideas that Martin Luther King Jr. expresses in the recording *At Zion Hill*. He remembers Dr. King's belief that a black person's "capacity to suffer" will "wear" white oppressors down. This outlook promotes resilience and perseverance, which is what resonates with Elwood as he decides to stop being so docile at Nickel Academy. In this moment, he realizes that his failure to do anything—his failure to stand up to his oppressors—will make the many "beatings" and "rapes" that take place at Nickel even worse than they already are, because they won't have led to anything but pain and misery. Thinking this way, Elwood sees that he and his peers must "endure" injustice without giving up hope, and it is this line of thinking that inspires him to write a letter to a group of government inspectors. Once again, then, readers see how Martin Luther King Jr.'s ideas about facing oppression influence Elwood and bring him to action.

"You're getting along. Ain't had trouble since that one time. They going to take you out back, bury your ass, then they take me out back, too. The fuck is wrong with you?"

"You're wrong, Turner." Elwood tugged on the handle of a weathered brown trunk. It broke in half. "It's not an obstacle course," he said. "You can't go around it—you have to go through it. Walk with your head up no matter what they throw at you."

Related Characters: Elwood Curtis, Jack Turner , Maynard Spencer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation, Turner tries to dissuade Elwood from delivering a letter to government inspectors outlining all of Nickel Academy's illegal activities. To do this, he reminds his friend of the first beating Elwood received at Nickel, saying that Elwood has been "getting along" well ever since this incident. He also points out that Elwood would be risking his life by writing this letter, saying that Spencer would undoubtedly kill him if he got caught. However, none of this discourages Elwood, who remains determined to do what he thinks is right. Objecting to his friend's cynicism, Elwood takes issue with Turner's idea that it's possible to avoid trouble in a place like Nickel. "You can't go around it—you have to go through it," he says, suggesting that confronting adversity is their only option. This aligns with Elwood's general worldview, since it would go against his moral conscience to stand idly by while people like Spencer behave so wretchedly. To do this, Whitehead implies, would mean becoming complicit in the widespread abuse. Consequently, Elwood decides to "walk with [his] head up no matter what" kind of trouble his oppressors send his way, doing all he can to keep Nickel Academy from harming its defenseless students. This moment marks a shift from Elwood's previous attempts to stay out of trouble, and it sets up the dangerous confrontation that comes when Elwood goes through with his plan.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ In some ways Turner had been telling Elwood's story ever since his friend died, through years and years of revisions, of getting it right, as he stopped being the desperate alley cat of his youth and turned into a man he thought Elwood would have been proud of. It was not enough to survive, you have to live—he heard Elwood's voice as he walked down Broadway in the sunlight or at the end of a long night hunched over the books.

Related Characters: Jack Turner , Elwood Curtis, Millie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

In novel's epilogue, Whitehead reveals that Turner took Elwood's name shortly after Elwood died trying to escape. For 50 years, then, Turner has gone by Elwood, seeing this as a way to honor his friend. In another sense, his decision to take Elwood's name is a way for Turner to acknowledge his painful past without having to actually talk about it. What's more, he likes to think that he has lived a life that would make Elwood proud, because he eventually realizes that he has to do more than simply "survive"—rather, he has to find a way to truly "live." This, it seems, means finally processing his trauma, which is why Turner tells his wife Millie about his past before going back to Florida to visit Elwood's grave. In doing so, he confronts his personal demons, and though this won't instantly soothe his pain, the mere fact that Turner is no longer repressing his trauma suggests that he will now find it easier to enjoy his life and embrace the future.

❝ And he had betrayed Elwood by handing over that letter. He should have burned it and talked him out of that fool plan instead of giving him silence. Silence was all the boy ever got. He says, "I'm going to take a stand," and the world remains silent. Elwood and his fine moral imperatives and his very fine ideas about the capacity of human beings to improve. About the capacity of the world to right itself. He had saved Elwood from those two iron rings out back, from the secret graveyard. They put him in Boot Hill instead.

Related Characters: Jack Turner , Elwood Curtis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Turner wishes that he never helped Elwood deliver his letter to the government inspectors, since it is this letter that led to the boy's death. Once again, then, readers see how Turner's worldview clashes with Elwood's, since his pessimism regarding whether or not a person can actually bring about meaningful change is at odds with Elwood's belief in the value of standing up for what he believes in. "Elwood and his fine moral imperatives and his very fine ideas about the capacity of human beings to improve," Whitehead notes, articulating Turner's inability to adopt his friend's strong moral convictions. On the whole,

this passage is worth paying attention to because it outlines the grim reality that often (and unfortunately) accompanies brave acts of selflessness. After all, Elwood's attempt to address Nickel's immoral actions led to nothing but his death, suggesting that good people don't always triumph over bad people. And yet, it's also worth recognizing that Elwood's actions ultimately led to Turner's escape as well, and that Turner went forth and lived a relatively fulfilling life as a successful and well-loved small business owner. In turn, Whitehead invites readers to reflect upon the fact that good deeds often have positive outcomes even when they ostensibly fail.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

PROLOGUE

The Florida state attorney's office has recently closed an investigation into abuse allegations surrounding Nickel Academy, an old reform school in a town called Eleanor. Nickel Academy has officially closed, and now a real estate company plans to install an office park on its former grounds, but first it has to wait for an environmental survey of the land to wrap up. However, the company's plans to start construction are delayed when an archaeology class from the University of Southern Florida finds Nickel's "**secret graveyard**," where the bodies of unknown students have been buried for decades. Now, the state attorney's office has to look into the abuse allegations again to find out who, exactly, has been buried. This is a process that will only delay them from "eras[ing]" Nickel Academy from history.

From the very beginning of The Nickel Boys, *Whitehead spotlights how eager the government is to ignore and "erase" ugly portions of history. Although readers don't yet know what kind of travesties took pace at Nickel Academy, the existence of abuse stories suggests that it was a violent place. All the same, the state has apparently decided to turn a blind eye to these stories. Now, though, the unearthing of a "secret graveyard" makes this impossible, and the government is forced to examine what, exactly, happened to the many bodies found hidden in the dirt.*

The Nickel alumni, known as The Nickel Boys, have known about **the secret graveyard** for quite some time, but nobody has believed them until now. There is also an official cemetery at the school called Boot Hill, where—although the records are spotty—the archaeology team is able to identify 36 of the 43 dead bodies, correlating them to living relatives and effectively reestablishing their connection to the world.

The fact that nobody believes in the existence of a secret graveyard until the archaeology team digs it up illustrates just how difficult it is for people who have been abused and neglected in society to speak up for themselves, especially when those people are also from a marginalized racial group. The Nickel Boys have known about this graveyard for a long time, but the general public only pays attention when an archaeology class finds it. This, it seems, is why it has been so hard to spread the news of Nickel Academy's terrible history. After all, nobody has been paying attention to the many stories coming out of Nickel—stories that former students have been telling for years.

Once news of **the secret graveyard** reaches the general public, the nation finally starts paying attention to the travesties that took place at Nickel Academy, which has been closed for only three years. Pictures of the reform school seem haunted and sinister, as if each mark on the wall is made of blood and gore. Recently, some Nickel Boys have created websites where survivors of the school can tell their stories. In this capacity, the men discuss the sexual and physical abuse they endured, feeling as if they have a painful history in common while also noting that connecting over their experiences makes them feel less alone.

Whitehead emphasizes the fortifying power of communal support, something the former Nickel Boys only find in adulthood. Coming together for the first time to talk about their experiences at the school, they see that they have a shared sense of trauma. This, in turn, helps them cope with their difficult memories, feeling as if they aren't alone anymore. It's worth noting here that these restorative conversations could not have happened if the stories surrounding Nickel had remained in the shadows.

One Nickel Boy creates and runs a website where he posts stories and pictures sent to him by other survivors. For many of the former students, sending this website address to family members helps them both explain and apologize for why they are the way they are, making it easier for them to show loved ones their painful (and formative) histories. Other Nickel Boys arrange a yearly trip to the school, paying the grounds a visit and talking about what happened. Sometimes the men who make this trip feel brave enough to stare their trauma in the face, and sometimes they don't. It all depends on how much emotional strength they've stored up for the journey.

Again, Whitehead underlines the therapeutic aspect of unity and communal support. The Nickel Boy who created the community website has effectively given his peers a resource that can help them explain their complicated pasts to their loved ones. When Whitehead suggests that sharing a link to this website helps men both explain and apologize for their pasts, he addresses the fact that the trauma the Nickel Boys experienced has shaped their entire lives, profoundly affecting their closest relationships even all these years later. By confronting these memories head-on, the former students can finally address their painful experiences, though it's also worth noting that this is often too much to bear.

One Nickel Boy who goes by Elwood Curtis lives in New York City. He sometimes reads about his fellow alumni but never participates in the annual expedition to Nickel, wondering how he could possibly benefit from standing around and crying with other survivors. He reads a story on the Nickel Boys website about a man who drove to Superintendent Spencer's house with the intention of beating him with a leather strap. When the man reached Spencer's house, though, he couldn't get himself to go inside. This doesn't make sense to Elwood, who thinks that the man should have followed through with his plan after going to so much trouble. Despite his unwillingness to participate in the reunions, though, Elwood knows he has to return when the archaeology class finds **the secret graveyard**. Seeing it there on the television, he realizes he's never truly escaped Nickel.

Elwood's hesitance to participate in the community his former classmates have built suggests that he can't bring himself to confront his trauma. When he wonders what the point is of reminiscing with other Nickel Boys, readers see his skepticism regarding the benefits of communal support. At the same time, though, his decision to finally return to Nickel when he sees the secret graveyard on television indicates that he hasn't been as successful as he'd like in repressing his memories. In keeping with this, he realizes that these traumatic are still quite immediate—an idea that frames the very act of repression as a futile and ineffective way of dealing with emotional turmoil.

CHAPTER ONE

On Christmas in 1962, Elwood receives a **recording** of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking at Zion Hill Baptist Church. He isn't allowed to listen to Motown, since his grandmother—with whom he lives in Tallahasee—believes such music is inappropriate. Accordingly, he covets this record as the only thing he can listen to, reveling in Dr. King's speeches about segregation and the importance of standing strong in the face of discrimination. In particular, he likes the speech that Dr. King gives about Fun Town, an amusement park that is closed to black people. Dr. King says that he had to explain to his daughter why he couldn't take her to Fun Town, a place Elwood himself has often dreamed of visiting. When Dr. King says that his daughter is "as good as anybody who goes into Fun Town," the message resonates profoundly in Elwood's soul.

Elwood's engagement with the Civil Rights Movement begins when he receives this record of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking at Zion Hill Baptist Church. As the novel progresses, it's important to remember his fondness for Dr. King's notion that any black person is just "as good" as any white person, since Elwood eventually faces racist authorities at Nickel Academy—powerful figures who would like him to believe that he's inferior to them.

Elwood knows that Fun Town lets children in free if they present a report card with perfect scores. A studious and intelligent young boy, Elwood saves his many perfect report cards, waiting for the day that Fun Town opens its doors to African Americans.

Right away, it becomes clear that Elwood is a hardworking young man determined to succeed despite the obstacles imposed on him by a racist society. At the same time, though, Whitehead has already revealed that Elwood is eventually sent to a reform school. The discrepancy between his hardworking nature and his embattled future thereby invites readers to wonder how, exactly, he finds himself doing time at Nickel Academy.

Elwood's grandmother works at the Richmond Hotel, where Elwood spends his time when he's not in school. While she cleans rooms, he reads comic books in the kitchen. Before long, he starts competing with the dishwashers to see who can dry the most plates the fastest, and he always wins. Eventually, the staff realize that they can trick him into doing their work, but he doesn't notice this until a busboy brings a set of **encyclopedias** into the kitchen one day, explaining that a traveling salesman left them behind. Elwood challenges one of the dishwashers to a drying race, the winner of which will keep the encyclopedias. It's a close race, but Elwood wins. When he gets the encyclopedias home, though, he realizes their pages are blank. The encyclopedias, his grandmother explains, are props used as sales samples.

Elwood's determination to win the encyclopedias is emblematic of his optimistic belief that hard work and determination lead to good things. When he gets the encyclopedias home and realizes that they're blank, though, he sees for the first time that this isn't necessarily always the case. In truth, the world is often an unfair place, and diligence doesn't always bring about positive change. This is an important lesson, one that he will encounter later when he arrives at Nickel Academy.

The disappointment of the empty **encyclopedias** deeply bothers Elwood, but he leaves them displayed on his bookshelves nonetheless. One of the books (the primary sample) has text inside of it, so he studies that one as much as possible. The next day, the busboy at the Richmond facetiously asks if Elwood liked the books. As the other staff members try to hide their smiles, Elwood realizes that they all knew the books were blank. From that point on, he stops accompanying his grandmother to work. In the following years, he wonders if the busboys were simply trying to trick him into doing their work all along.

When Elwood realizes that the staff at the Richmond knew the encyclopedias were blank, he suddenly questions his entire worldview, wondering if the dishwashers have been taking advantage of him. Simply put, this is the first time he recognizes his own naivety and sees that his optimistic belief in the goodness of the world isn't necessarily based in reality. Rather, he slowly understands that many people are willing to take advantage of others and that the things he values most—hard work and diligence—won't always help him avoid injustice.

CHAPTER TWO

Elwood leaves behind another game when he stops going to the Richmond Hotel. When he wasn't reading comic books or drying dishes, he used to peer into the dining room as the kitchen doors swung open and closed, and he would make bets with himself about whether or not there would be a black customer at one of the tables. He knows that the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* dictated that all schools must desegregate, so he thinks that all forms of segregation will soon crumble. Still, he never saw a black person sitting in the Richmond dining room. Addressing this fact, his grandmother tells him that the world isn't going to immediately change, explaining that telling people to do the right thing doesn't mean they'll actually do it. Still, Elwood remains optimistic about the prospect of desegregation.

That Elwood maintains hope about the chances of true desegregation is worth noting, since it provides insight into how he approaches adversity. Rather than feeling completely defeated about the fact that no African American people ever come into the Richmond, he chooses to remain hopeful about the future. Although his grandmother insists that rules and reality often don't accord with one another, Elwood refuses to believe that the world will continue to be an unjust place forever.

After he stops going to the Richmond with his grandmother, Elwood gets a job at Mr. Marconi's cigar shop. Mr. Marconi is a white Italian American man who originally set up his store during World War II in the African American part of Frenchtown because it was close to a military base. This meant that black soldiers would come to the area on weekends and buy large amounts of tobacco and condoms, proving to Mr. Marconi that he was right to think that breaking the rules of segregation could be profitable. After the war, though, he moved his cigars to the back of the store and started carrying comic books, candy, and soda, wanting to make the establishment more family friendly. Around this time, he hired a young black man to help him run the store. When this position opens up, Elwood fills it.

Although Elwood has just experienced discouragement after discovering that his encyclopedias are blank, he doesn't let this shake his belief that hard work leads to good things. Accordingly, he gets a job at Mr. Marconi's cigar shop. Furthermore, it makes sense that he would want to work with Mr. Marconi, who seems to care more about hard work than about race, as evidenced by his willingness to hire Elwood and his decision to set up his shop in an African American part of town.

Elwood's grandmother doesn't mind the idea of Elwood working with Mr. Marconi , since he seems like a good person and Elwood gives her half of every paycheck. He puts the other half toward a college fund, something that overjoys his grandmother, since nobody in her family has ever gone to college. Elwood quickly proves himself to be a diligent and conscientious employee, tidying up the shop and making sure it runs efficiently. When it's slow, he spends his time reading the magazine *Life*, in which he learns about the Civil Rights Movement and sees pictures of protestors, whom he views as heroes.

Again, it becomes clear that Elwood still believes in the value of hard work. As he diligently applies himself to his job at Mr. Marconi's shop, he invests himself in the idea that his efforts will lead to some kind of upward mobility—a belief underlined by the fact that he saves half of each paycheck for college. It is this kind of hope, it seems, that also fuels his interest in the Civil Rights Movement, since he doesn't hesitate to believe in the movement's ability to bring about meaningful change.

Mr. Marconi likes having Elwood as an employee, since Elwood is hardworking and helps him interact with the shop's African American customers. However, he also thinks the boy doesn't know when to let things slide. This becomes evident when Elwood catches two boys from his neighborhood trying to steal candy. Mr. Marconi, for his part, doesn't particularly mind when children steal from his store, thinking that this is simply part of the cost of doing business. According to Marconi, chasing children out of his store over stolen candy will make it less likely that their parents will shop there, since they'll be embarrassed. Because of this mindset, then, Mr. Marconi is startled when Elwood says, "Put it back," one day when two boys are shoplifting.

By this point, it's evident that Elwood is a deeply principled young man. If he believes something is wrong, he will speak out, which is exactly what he does when he sees two boys shoplifting from Mr. Marconi's store. And though this is an admirable trait, it's worth noting Marconi's belief that Elwood sometimes doesn't know when to let go of something. After all, readers know that Elwood eventually ends up in a reform school, so the fact that he can't quite manage to stay out of certain kinds of confrontation seems rather foreboding.

Elwood has known the two shoplifters for his entire life and he even used to play with them when he was a boy, before his grandmother decided that they're too badly behaved for her grandson. When they hear him tell them to put back the candy, they obey and then angrily leave the store. That night, they spring out at Elwood as he rides his bike home. They give him a thorough beating and tell him he needs to be taught a lesson. During the beating, they say that he doesn't have any sense, and Elwood inwardly acknowledges that this might be true. He has often felt that he doesn't have any common sense, but **At Zion Hill** has finally given him the "language" to understand why, exactly, he's sometimes willing to do things that go against his better judgment.

The "language" that Martin Luther King At Zion Hill *gives Elwood is moralistic and principled. Having taken Dr. King's words to heart, Elwood feels as if he can't stand idly by and watch things that go against his morals. Instead, he feels compelled to speak out, even when it puts him in danger. This is why he told the shoplifters to replace the stolen candy, knowing all the while that doing so might bring trouble his way.*

Thinking about **At Zion Hill**, Elwood considers Dr. King's words. "*We must believe in our souls that we are somebody, that we are significant, that we are worthful, and we must walk the streets of life every day with this sense of dignity and this sense of somebody-ness*," Dr. King declares. This idea makes sense to Elwood, and he decides to adopt a "sense of dignity," one that enables him to believe in himself. In keeping with this, he wonders how he could possibly explain to the shoplifters that he takes their poor behavior as a personal insult. After all, he feels as if he'd be going against his own dignity if he were to stand idly by while they stole.

Here Whitehead clarifies how, exactly, At Zion Hill *has affected Elwood. By helping him cultivate a sense of self-worth, the record instills in him the desire to protect his own "dignity." To do this, he must oppose anything that might undermine his self-image. In turn, he feels compelled to stop his peers from stealing, believing that it's his moral obligation to do so. Once again, then, readers see the strength of Elwood's convictions, which force him to follow his moral compass regardless of the circumstances.*

CHAPTER THREE

On the first day of school, Elwood and his classmates receive hand-me-down textbooks from the white high school. The white students are aware that their books will be given to black students, so they graffiti racial slurs into the margins. Each year, Elwood is dismayed to see such hateful phrases scrawled across the pages. This year, though, his new history teacher, Mr. Hill, does something different. Mr. Hill is a young black man who is involved in the Civil Rights Movement, having participated as a freedom rider and marched in multiple rallies. Saying that racist graffiti in textbooks always got to him, he instructs Elwood and the rest of the class to go through the books and color over the phrases with black markers. This strikes Elwood as a fantastic idea, and he wonders why he's never done it before.

Mr. Hill is perhaps the first person Elwood has ever met who actually embodies the "sense of dignity" that Dr. King urges all African American people to cultivate. Rather than simply bearing racism, Mr. Hill actively tries to counteract it, urging his students to erase racial slurs from their textbooks. In doing so, he shows Elwood and his peers that combatting racism is worthwhile, thereby encouraging them to stand up to injustice in any way they can.

Elwood is an exceptional student, and Mr. Hill notices this. In particular, he picks up on the fact that Elwood is interested in the Civil Rights Movement. Until now, Elwood has been too young to participate in any of the marches or rallies that have taken place in Frenchtown, and though his grandmother would never let him take part in such activities, she supports the movement from afar. Now, though, Elwood hears of a plan to protest outside of the Florida Theatre, which still refuses to let black people in. It is 1963, and Elwood believes he's old enough to participate in the cause.

It's no surprise that Elwood decides to get involved in the Civil Rights Movement shortly after Mr. Hill underlines the importance of doing what one can to counteract injustice. Mr. Hill serves as a perfect example of somebody who isn't afraid to actively resist even the smallest forms of racism, as made clear when he encourages his class to erase the epithets from their textbooks. Having recognized that his teacher believes it's worthwhile to stand up for oneself, then, Elwood decides to join the Civil Rights Movement by protesting at the Florida Theatre.

Elwood thinks that his grandmother will be proud of him, especially since she herself participated in the Frenchtown bus boycott of the 1950s. However, this was only because she didn't want to be the only woman in Frenchtown who still rode the bus. On the whole, she believes that acting above one's station will only bring trouble. After all, her own father died in prison after refusing to make way for a white woman on the sidewalk. Furthermore, Elwood's father came back from the army with ideas about equality that didn't fit into the everyday life of Tallahassee. Given these outcomes, she tells Elwood that he can't go to the protest outside the Florida Theatre, saying that he has to focus on working at Mr. Marconi's shop.

Unlike Elwood himself, his grandmother is willing to undermine her own sense of justice in order to avoid trouble. This is because she has witnessed what can happen in a racist society when a black person stands up against racism. Elwood, on the other hand, hasn't witnessed such things, and even if he had, he would probably still go to the protest, since he believes that he must always protect his "sense of dignity" by honoring his moral compass.

Defying his grandmother's orders, Elwood asks Mr. Marconi for the day off. Without hesitation, Marconi gives him the time off, and so Elwood makes his way to the Florida Theatre. At first, he feels out of place amongst the college students, all of whom are carrying signs. Eventually, though, Mr. Hill spots him and invites him to stand with him and a group of seniors at Elwood's high school. These seniors shake his hand, giving him a kind of respect he's never experienced. This comes as a pleasant surprise, and Elwood realizes that he's been too focused on his own private fantasies about the Civil Rights Movement to recognize that people at his school also care about activism and equality.

When Elwood goes to the protest, he becomes part of the activist community. All of a sudden, he no longer feels like the only person who thinks about discrimination, racism, and injustice. Finally, it seems, he has found people who align with his own worldview, and this reaffirms his conviction to remain true to his morals. This moment again highlights the importance of unity as a source of hope in the face of oppression.

A friend of Elwood's grandmother sees Elwood at the protest outside the Florida Theatre and relays the message. Three days later, his grandmother brings this up before giving him the silent treatment, recognizing that he's too big to be spanked with a belt, which is what she used to do when he misbehaved. The ensuing week is grueling, since Elwood isn't even allowed to listen to **At Zion Hill**. At the same time, though, he feels at one with himself after having participated in the protest. Recognizing this rewarding feeling, he starts looking forward to someday attending college, where he'll act independently and pursue his dreams of activism and education.

Although Elwood's grandmother punishes him for going against her word, he's still glad to have gone to the protest outside the Florida Theatre. Once again, then, readers see that he's primarily concerned with remaining true to his own moral convictions, rather than meeting the expectations that others place upon him.

That summer—which is the last he spends in Tallahassee—Elwood receives a copy of James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*. Mr. Hill gives the book to him, and he immerses himself in it, taking note of Baldwin's idea that "*negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny*." This idea helps Elwood understand why he wants to be part of the Civil Rights Movement, clarifying his belief that fighting for equality doesn't only benefit the African American community, but the entire nation. To spread this message, he spends his time writing to local and activist newspapers and even gets one piece published by *The Chicago Defender*.

When Elwood reads Baldwin's ideas about how racial equality factors into the United States as an entire nation, he finally understands why he's so willing to face injustice even when doing so is risky—it's not that he's interested only in helping himself, but that he's concerned about the welfare of the country as a whole. Nobody can be free, he suddenly understands, when so many people live under oppression. Adopting this mindset, Elwood invests himself in the idea of unity and communal support, devoting himself to a vision of America as a truly unified place.

One summer day, Mr. Hill visits Elwood at Mr. Marconi's shop. Dressed in casual clothing, he looks like he hasn't thought about school for a very long time. Telling Elwood that he has an opportunity for him, he explains that he has a friend who works at Melvin Griggs Technical, which is an African American college near Tallahassee. Apparently, the college has opened classes to academically successful black students, and Mr. Hill's friend asked him to spread the word to anyone who might be interested in and qualified to make use of this opportunity. Mr. Hill insists that Elwood is the perfect candidate, adding that the classes would be free of charge. When Elwood asks his grandmother if he can do this, she immediately agrees, so he prepares to enroll, deciding to take a course in British Literature.

At this point in the novel, Elwood's hard work and determination has seemingly paid off. Unlike his experience at the Richmond Hotel, his commitment to schoolwork has only led to good things, reaffirming his belief that it's possible for a young black man to attain upward mobility in the United States. However, readers still know that Elwood eventually ends up at Nickel Academy, so this moment also implies that the long-term outcome for Elwood may nonetheless be unjust.

The day before Elwood's first class at Melvin Griggs, Mr. Marconi gives him a beautiful pen. The next day, he sets off toward the school, planning to hitchhike the seven miles between his house and the campus. On his way, he gets a ride from a black man driving an impressive car. After riding with the man for a short time, Elwood notices police lights flashing behind them, at which point a white police officer beckons them to the side of the road. Soon enough, Elwood sees the officer getting out of the patrol car with his gun drawn. "First thing I thought when they said to keep an eye out for a Plymouth," the officer yells. "Only a nigger'd steal that."

Just as Elwood's hard work is about to pay off, he ends up in a fraught situation by accidentally getting into a stolen car. As a young black man in the South, it's unlikely that he'll be able to escape punishment, despite the fact that he has nothing to do with the theft. This, it seems, is most likely what leads him to Nickel Academy, a cruel trick of fate that squashes his dreams even though he has done nothing wrong. The police officer's use of a racist slur also highlights how unjustly African American people are treated in Elwood's society; the police officer immediately assumes the worst about people simply because of their race.

CHAPTER FOUR

Elwood has three nights at home before going to Nickel Academy, the reform school a judge sentences him to in the aftermath of his arrest for stealing a car. A police officer picks him up and then drives him and two white boys to Eleanor, Florida. When they arrive at Nickel, Elwood is surprised to find the grounds clean and well-kept. He even sees a group of boys playing football and begins to think that the school might not be so bad after all. Right away, he meets Maynard Spencer, the superintendent, who tells him and the other two boys how things work at Nickel. He explains that Elwood is a Grub, saying that there are four tiers of students at Nickel: Grubs, Explorers, Pioneers, and Aces. Students earn points for behaving well, and this helps them move through the different levels.

Although the mere fact that Elwood has been sent to Nickel is itself a grave injustice, the school's achievement-based hierarchy actually seems to align with his overall belief that hard work leads to progress. While the world outside fails to conform to this belief, at least Nickel's system of upward mobility resembles Elwood's general outlook—giving him small solace in an otherwise troubling time.

Spencer explains that students at Nickel can leave when they become Aces. To do this, Elwood needs to listen to his supervisors, do his work, and complete his studies. Before Spencer finishes his welcome speech, he says that the students are responsible for how long they stay at Nickel. Before he leaves, he warns them against misbehaving, assuring them that they won't like the results.

Spencer's parting words foreshadow the violence that underlies Nickel Academy's entire structure, but this threat is couched within a message of independence and agency. To that end, Spencer suggests that Elwood has the ability to change his circumstances by working hard, a message that no doubt resonates with Elwood's belief in the value of determination and hard work. In this way, Spencer gives Elwood a sense of power while also hinting that he is completely powerless in comparison to his superiors.

After Spencer's introductory speech, another staff member leads Elwood to a room in a basement, where he dresses in a school uniform, which is in significantly worse condition than what the two white boys have to wear. He then goes to the part of campus where the black students live. On his way, a man named Blakely—who is in charge of his dorm—reiterates the idea that each student is responsible for his own destiny at Nickel. There is an emphasis on work, he says, but the students also have educational instruction every other day. "Not what you expected?" he asks when he sees Elwood's reaction to the idea of only going to school every other day. In response, Elwood tells him that he was going to take college classes before he was sent to Nickel, but Blakely only tells him to speak to Mr. Goodall—the teacher—about the matter.

Although the Supreme Court has already ruled that schools must desegregate, Nickel Academy continues to separate white and black students. This hints at the fact that the school operates on its own terms, paying little attention to laws and regulations. On another note, Elwood is disappointed to hear that his education will almost certainly grind to a halt at Nickel, and though Blakely tells him to speak to Mr. Goodall about this, it seems unlikely that the school will make an exception for him. Consequently, he's forced to come to terms with the fact that his upward trajectory has been suddenly stalled through no fault of his own.

Elwood's dorm building is called Cleveland. When he walks inside, he quickly sees that the interiors of the buildings are in much worse shape than the exteriors. The couches are ripped and dirty, there are initials and curses etched into wood surfaces, and the floors are buckled and weak. Blakely shows him to his bed, which is in a room of thirty bunks, and introduces him to a student named Desmond. Blakely tells Desmond to show Elwood around. Before he leaves, he says, "Don't think I won't be watching you." That night, Elwood wakes up to the sound of a strange *whoosh* that sounds mechanical and unrelenting. Wondering what it is, he hears a boy across the room say, "Somebody's going out for ice cream," and several other boys laugh in response.

When Blakely tells Elwood that he'll be "watching" him, it demonstrates the extent to which the students at Nickel are under constant scrutiny. This, in turn, undermines the idea that they have agency, since the staff members are constantly looking for opportunities to punish them. To add to this climate of fear, Elwood wonders about the sound in the middle of the night, his uncertainty surely contributing to his overall sense of disorientation.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning, Elwood tries to look unsurprised by the communal showers, but finds it difficult to suppress his alarm when the ice-cold water hits his skin with a sickly, sulfuric smell. At breakfast, he has trouble finding a place to sit, and when he finally does find one, he focuses on his food, wolfing it down so that he doesn't have to look at the boy across the table, worrying that the boy will tell him to change seats. This boy's name is Turner, and he's astonished to see Elwood eating so quickly. He tells Elwood that he's never seen somebody eat this food so unhesitatingly, since the food itself is quite disgusting—old oatmeal with heaps of cinnamon to mask its stale flavor.

Elwood is very much on his own at Nickel, though he has Desmond to explain the school's various routines. In spite of this, he still has to find a place to sit at breakfast, completely unaware of the preexisting dynamics at play in the student body. Needless to say, this feeling of isolation must make it that much harder for him to acclimate to an environment that is already menacing and intimidating.

Turner has a strange divot in one of his ears, but Elwood doesn't stare. When Turner asks, Elwood tells him that he's from Frenchtown, and a boy at the end of the table mocks the way he says this. The boy's name is Griff, and he's intimidatingly large. Next to him sit Lonnie and Black Mike, both of whom are just as menacing as their friend. All of the seats around them are empty because the other students know better than to sit next to this fearsome trio. After telling Griff that he should be careful because the staff members have an eye on him, Turner returns to his conversation with Elwood, explaining that he's from Houston. When Elwood thanks him for telling Griff off, he claims not to have done anything.

Turner's willingness to stand up for Elwood—even in this small way—is worth noting, especially because of the way he himself conceives of his own kindness. Indeed, when Elwood thanks him for what he says to Griff, Turner denies the fact that he did anything to help. In turn, readers see that Turner sees himself as an individual first and foremost, believing that his bravery in the face of Griff's comments has nothing to do with Elwood and everything to do with the mere fact that he likes standing up to bullies, something he does for its own sake. This is worth keeping in mind as the novel progresses, since Turner likes to present himself as a staunch individualist even when he can't keep himself from helping others.

Elwood parts ways with Turner after breakfast, meeting up with Desmond on the way to class. Desmond tells him that class at Nickel is a good time to get some sleep, and when Elwood says that he was under the impression that Nickel was strict, Desmond tells him that grades have nothing to do with a student's ability to graduate. For this reason, students focus on earning merits, which—again—have nothing to do with education. If a boy gets enough merits, he can earn an early release from Nickel. To do this, people like Desmond concentrate on staying out of trouble and being good physical laborers—both of which contribute to whether or not a person can become an Ace.

It makes sense that Elwood would be disappointed to learn that academic performance is a joke at Nickel Academy. After all, he was supposed to take college courses, which is the only reason he found his way into a stolen car in the first place. At the same time, though, he can focus on getting enough merits to secure an early release. This, at least, accords with his belief that hard work leads to progress, though the kind of work required is different from what he'd imagined.

In class that day, Elwood is astounded to see that the textbooks Mr. Goodall hands out are ones he used in the first grade. Throughout the class period, the other boys goof off and sleep while Mr. Goodall does nothing to stop them. At the end of class, he asks Mr. Goodall for more challenging work, and the man promises to take up the matter with Director Hardee.

During this period, Elwood still has reason to hope that his time at Nickel Academy won't be so bad. Although it's clear that he won't receive a terribly good education, Mr. Goodall's promise to speak to the director about giving him more challenging work keeps up the illusion that the institution is attentive to student needs. As a result, Elwood has yet to understand the extent of his powerlessness at Nickel Academy.

That afternoon, Elwood works on the lawn with other Grubs. The leader of this work crew is a Mexican American boy named Jaimie. Because Jaimie has light skin that darkens when he's in the sun, he frequently gets moved between the black and white campuses. Whenever Spencer sees him amongst the white students, he reassigns him to the black dorms, but when Director Hardee sees him there, he moves him back. Despite this, Jaimie focuses on showing Elwood the grounds. When they reach Boot Hill, the school's cemetery, they avoid getting too close. At one point, Elwood notices a small white building and asks why nobody has cut the grass surrounding it. In response, two other boys tell him that nobody nears this building unless they're forced to by a staff member.

The fact that Jaimie goes between the black and white dorms demonstrates the extent to which Nickel still clings to its segregationist policies, which have been banned by the Supreme Court. Despite the law, the school continues to separate its students by race, making it clear that the institution is uninterested in following any rules but its own. Jaimie's case also reveals that this kind of segregation is inherently nonsensical; he genuinely doesn't fit into either racial category, but the school is so set on distinctions between black and white that they continue the absurd practice of moving him back and forth. On another note, the secrecy surrounding the white building adds to the ominous nature of Nickel, inviting Elwood—and, in turn, readers—to guess what, exactly, goes on at this school.

That evening, Elwood decides to think of his time at Nickel as a good test of character, deciding that he will graduate two times faster than anyone would expect. However, his plan to speed through the ranks goes awry later that evening when he sees Lonnie and Black Mike beating up a younger kid named Corey in the bathroom. "Hey," Elwood says, stepping toward them. Without hesitation, Black Mike whirls around and punches him in the face, sending him hurtling against the sink. Just then, a younger boy opens the door, sees what's happening, and yells, "Oh, shit." Just then, a supervisor appears, calls the boys the n-word, and informs them that Spencer will be hearing about this incident.

Elwood's sense of right and wrong brings itself to bear in this moment, as his attempt to defend Corey ends up getting him—and everyone else involved—in trouble. Although he's only trying to do a good deed, it quickly becomes clear that it's dangerous to take a moral stand at Nickel Academy, where racist staff members are quick and eager to punish anyone who does anything out of the ordinary—even if that thing is morally commendable. The staff member's use of a racist slur again highlights how prejudiced the school is against African American students.

CHAPTER SIX

The white boys at Nickel Academy call the torture building the "Ice Cream Factory" because of the multicolored bruises that students earn inside the small white structure. The black boys, on the other hand, don't think the building needs a special name, so they simply refer to it as the White House. When students get in serious trouble, Spencer and Earl—another supervisor—fetch them at one in the morning and bring them to the White House. That night, a brown Chevy arrives for Elwood, Lonnie, Black Mike, and Corey. Elwood doesn't know what exactly takes place in the White House, but Desmond told him before falling asleep that it's best to stay still once the punishment begins, since the leather switch has a "notch" in it that will cut through skin if a person struggles.

When Elwood is taken to the White House in the middle of the night, the nature of Nickel finally becomes clear—this is a place where even the smallest infraction leads to violent punishment. Worse, this punishment is shrouded in a strange sort of secrecy, as Spencer abducts the children at night and drives them to the unmarked building, thereby adding a sense of drama to the depraved ritual, one that no doubt heightens its power and keeps the students in a constant state of fear. This, it seems, is an attempt to intimidate the boys into submissively following the rules.

The White House used to be a simple utility shed, but now it's used exclusively for beatings. Still, no random passerby would ever guess its true purpose. When Elwood enters with Spencer, Earl, and his fellow students, he's hit by the building's putrid aroma, which smells of bodily fluids. Spencer leads the boys into an empty room and takes Black Mike across the hall into yet another room, from which that strange industrial sound issues once more. Elwood listens carefully, but can't hear anything over the mechanical sound. After waiting for a moment, he starts counting in his head, thinking that his own beating will be more bearable if he knows how long it will last.

Part of what makes this experience so unbearable—aside from the mere fact that Elwood is about to endure a beating—is the uncertainty surrounding the entire event. Not only does Elwood have no idea what's about to happen to him, but he doesn't know how long it will last. Worse, nobody—not even his fellow students—is willing to tell him what to expect. In this regard, it becomes clear that the staff at Nickel has created an atmosphere of fear that uses secrecy and silence to assure that the students remain in a state of frightened confusion. Furthermore, that the boys are unwilling to talk to each other about this shared sense of fear isolates them from one another, making the experience even more unbearable since each of them has to suffer alone.

Spencer and Earl take Black Mike to the car after Elwood counts up to 28. Next, they bring Corey into the small room, and the little boy cries the whole way. When the mechanical sound begins again, Elwood counts to 70, mystified by why Corey—the smallest of them all—would receive a harsher beating than Black Mike, his bully. He wonders if Spencer perhaps lost count while beating Corey, but then he begins to worry that there's "no system at all to the violence." When it's his turn, he enters the room and sees a blood-covered mattress and a pillow caked in saliva from where the previous boys have bit into it. Above the mattress is a large fan, which has apparently covered the sound of the beatings ever since the state of Florida banned corporal punishment.

If there is "no system at all to the violence" at Nickel Academy, then students like Elwood will never be able to fully avoid punishment. After all, Elwood must understand the institution's underlying policies if he wants to figure out how to keep out of trouble and follow the rules. Unfortunately, though, fear itself is the only constant at Nickel, as Spencer works to keep the boys in a state of confusion and fright. This, in turn, makes it easier for him to control them.

Spencer instructs Elwood to lie face-down on the mattress, turns on the fan, and starts whipping the backs of his legs. Holding onto the mattress's top edge and biting into the pillow, Elwood passes out before the beating ends. Later, when people ask him how many lashes he received, he's unable to say.

In alignment with Elwood's idea that there's "no system at all to the violence" at Nickel, the details of his very first punishment are vague and hazy. Passing out before the beating ends, he's unable to fully grasp the nature of his punishment, a fact that makes it even harder for him to wrap his head around the institution's disciplinary policies.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Elwood's grandmother, Harriet, comes to visit him shortly after his beating in the White House, the staff members tell her that he's sick. Worried, she asks what he's come down with, but the staffer rebukes her for asking. Harriet, for her part, is used to being separated from her loved ones, since her father died in jail and her husband was killed while trying to break up a barfight. Parting ways with Elwood, though, was the hardest farewell she's ever had. Because of this, she and Mr. Marconi have been working hard to bring justice to his case, hiring a white lawyer who is young, kind, and optimistic about the chances of appealing Elwood's sentence.

Harriet is no stranger to injustice, considering that she has lost multiple loved ones in untimely ways. Unlike Elwood, though, she is less optimistic about the future, though the mere fact that she hires a lawyer to continue fighting on Elwood's behalf suggests that she hasn't given up all hope of overturning his sentence.

Meanwhile, Elwood passes the time in the school's infirmary after his beating. He lies on his stomach and takes note of the infirmary's various patterns, though the ward is almost always empty. There was another boy there on Elwood's first day in the infirmary, but Elwood was too preoccupied by his wounds, enduring the pain as Dr. Cooke carefully picked the fabric of his pants out of his legs, since the material had become lodged in his skin. Eventually, though, he gains company when Turner intentionally eats soap so that he can have a little break from his everyday life at Nickel. In the infirmary, he jokes with Elwood about the fact that Dr. Cooke hardly does anything to treat his patients, saying that the doctor's only method of care is to give people aspirin, regardless of the severity of their injuries.

By this point, it is clear that Nickel Academy is a dangerous institution, the kind of place where a superintendent can get away with whipping students so hard that their clothing fuses to their skin. In the face of this cruelty, Elwood finds no solace other than Turner's company, which at least helps take his mind off the pain in his legs. In this way, then, companionship and camaraderie distract him from his woes and help him move on from his first beating, hinting at how important this friendship will become as the novel goes on.

When Elwood isn't talking to Turner, he studies the school newspaper, *The Gator*. The small paper explains the history of Nickel Academy. He learns that the school puts students to work in order to reform them, though the institution also makes money off of the boys' labor, sometimes making as much as $250,000 from the school's printing press. In addition, Nickel operates a brick-making machine, with which the students produce 20,000 bricks every day—bricks that Nickel sells throughout the county.

As if it isn't bad enough that the staff members of Nickel Academy abuse the students, Elwood learns in this moment that the institution actually profits from their forced labor. Considering the country's embattled racial history, it's worth noting that this kind of system is unnervingly reminiscent of slavery or—at the very least—indentured servitude, though it's true that the white students also have to work. Still, the entire structure's dependence on child labor suggests that nobody at Nickel has any problem exploiting the students and prospering while they toil away under miserable, violent conditions.

In the infirmary one day, Elwood asks Turner if beatings in the White House are always so brutal. Turner says that most people receive beatings as harsh as Elwood did, though he admits that he's never been taken to the White House himself. At this point, Elwood insists that his lawyer can advocate for him and his fellow students, but Turner disregards this, telling his friend that he's already lucky enough as it is. When Elwood asks how, exactly, he's lucky, Turner explains that sometimes students disappear after Spencer and Earl take them to the White House. When family members ask what happened to these unlucky students, the school claims that the boys ran away.

When Elwood tells Turner that he has a lawyer, he reveals his optimistic belief that he might be able to speak up against Nickel's corruption and injustice. Turner, on the other hand, thinks this is impossible, suggesting that taking a stand against Nickel would only invite even more dangerous fates. To illustrate this point, he tells Elwood that Spencer and Earl sometimes kill students. The fact that they can get away with this by simply saying that a student has escaped once again illustrates the extent to which Nickel Academy makes and goes by its own rules, never having to take responsibility for its grave misdeeds.

In a low voice, Turner tells Elwood that he was wrong to interfere with what Lonnie and Black Mike were doing to Corey, claiming that Corey *likes* the abuse. "They play rough, then he takes them into the stall or whatever and gets on his knees," he says. When Elwood expresses his disbelief, saying that Corey looked genuinely frightened before he intervened, Turner discredits this idea, insisting that Elwood doesn't know what people like or dislike. Thinking this way, he tells Elwood that Nickel is the same as the external world, except that nobody has to pretend to be something they're not at Nickel.

Whether or not it's true that Corey actively likes it when Lonnie and Black Mike beat him up—or that he gives them oral sex after their stand-offs—Turner's point is an important one, since it outlines his belief that it's best to stay out of other people's business at Nickel. Rather than interfering when something seems immoral or wrong, he encourages Elwood to recognize that he will undoubtedly encounter more ugly things while at Nickel, since nobody has to hide their wretched desires in this harsh environment.

Turning his attention to the fact that it's unlawful for Spencer and the other staffers to beat the students, Elwood insists that he and his fellow students can stand up for themselves. However, Turner claims that activism hardly works in the free world, let alone at Nickel. Hearing this, Elwood suggests that Turner only believes this because he doesn't have anybody outside of Nickel to support him, and Turner admits that this is true. Still, though, Turner points out that this doesn't keep him from seeing reality, insisting that Elwood should learn to survive Nickel by imitating everyone else, since the school itself is like an "obstacle course." Going on, he emphasizes the fact that Elwood is the only person responsible for getting himself out.

In this conversation, Turner presents himself as a staunch individualist, claiming that it's best to stick to oneself while at Nickel Academy. While Elwood believes that he and his peers ought to stand up for themselves in the face of adversity, Turner maintains that this will only lead to trouble. When Elwood suggests that Turner only thinks this because he doesn't have anybody supporting him, Turner agrees. Through this conversation, Whitehead implies that people are more likely to give up hope when they feel isolated and alone. Accordingly, Turner commits himself to the idea that each student ought to concentrate on his own problems rather than trying to band together with his peers to address the school's injustice.

Elwood tries to take Turner's advice to heart. Five days later, he finally leaves the infirmary, feeling like he's been fully inducted into Nickel Academy. Shortly thereafter, his grandmother comes to visit, and though he wants to tell her what happened, he simply says that he's unhappy but making it through nonetheless.

Elwood's decision to hide the story of his abuse from his grandmother suggests that he has opted to not dwell on the injustice of his beating. Instead, he decides to follow Turner's advice, effectively keeping to himself and trying to follow the rules without thinking about taking a stand against Nickel Academy. This, it seems, is exactly the mindset people like Spencer want him to adopt, since it keeps outside parties like Elwood's grandmother from finding out what's going on and perhaps intervening.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Upon Elwood's release from the infirmary, he resumes his work on the yard crew. He also approaches Mr. Goodall and asks once more for challenging coursework. Mr. Goodall enthusiastically agrees, but Elwood understands that nothing will come of this conversation. He then begins to wonder if Spencer heard that he had asked to be challenged and subsequently punished him more than the others to discourage him from acting superior. However, he then begins to sense that there is nothing informing Nickel's system of violent punishment—nothing but hatred and aggression. With this in mind, he asks his peers how a person can get enough points to graduate early, but he learns little from their answers. Demerits, it seems, can rain down on a person at any moment.

As Elwood tries to find out how best to earn points, it becomes clear that Nickel's hierarchal system is quite flawed. The fact that a student might earn demerits at any moment is discouraging, but meanwhile, the general promise of graduating early keeps students from openly rebelling, instilling in them a false sense of possibility. By creating an illusion of upward mobility, then, the institution further manipulates its students into submission.

Knowing that it's extremely difficult to graduate from Nickel, Elwood sets a goal for himself, deciding to earn enough points by June. Upon leaving Nickel, he plans to work for the summer so that he can save up enough money to go to college, since he and his grandmother spent all of his savings on hiring a lawyer. This is not an ideal situation, he understands, but it will only be a short setback if he manages to graduate early, as if he simply missed one year of school.

Even though it's rather apparent that Nickel's points system is flawed, Elwood commits himself to graduating early. Once again, then, readers see his belief that hard work leads to progress—a belief that seemingly sustains itself even in the discouraging environment of Nickel Academy.

Several days later, Elwood receives a new work assignment. Reporting to the warehouse, he sees Turner with a young white staffer named Harper. Harper is the head of the school's Community Service initiative. After saying that Elwood will fit the job, Harper tells both boys to get into a van, which, to Elwood's great surprise, he then drives off campus. On the way out, Turner explains that the Community Service detail requires two trustworthy students, and that he recommended Elwood after his former partner graduated, promising that Elwood could keep quiet about what they do (an apparent requirement to be on the Community Service team). Harper is quite familiar with Nickel, since his mother worked at the school as a secretary. Having grown up around the students, Harper feels as if people like Elwood and Turner are just like him, except that they've been unlucky.

The Community Service work detail is shrouded in mystery, adding to the school's strangely secretive nature. The less the students know about day-to-day operations, the more powerful the administration seems to them. Now, though, Elwood has been let in on a certain secret, though he doesn't yet know what—exactly—that secret is, other than that he and Turner get to leave campus. Harper's comment about the students' bad luck also indicates that he might feel some empathy for them in a way that the other staff members don't.

On Elwood's first day on the Community Service team, he, Turner, and Harper go around the town of Eleanor unloading food and various supplies to local shops. These are goods that the government sends to Nickel, but the Nickel administration skimps on what it actually gives to the students, selling the rest to stores in the surrounding area to make a profit. At the end of the day, Harper drives to the house of one of Nickel's powerful board members, where Elwood and Turner are instructed to paint a gazebo. Wanting to pay a visit to his girlfriend, Harper leaves them there, which the boys thoroughly enjoy. Although they're doing shady work for the school, they like the freedom that comes along with being on the Community Service team, and Elwood finds it refreshing to be around Harper, a white staff member who treats him like something of an equal.

In this section, Elwood enjoys a small sense of liberation. By working on a secret assignment, he suddenly gains freedoms he wouldn't encounter if he had stayed on campus. However, it's worth noting that the deliveries he, Turner, and Harper make are ethically dubious, since the supplies they sell are intended to be used at Nickel Academy. In this way, Elwood is forced to help the school—his very own oppressor—benefit in shady ways, something that no doubt goes against this moral compass. At this point, though, there's seemingly nothing he can do about this.

While Elwood and Turner paint the gazebo, Turner tells Elwood that this is his second stay at Nickel. He doesn't say why he was originally sent to the school, but he explains the circumstances surrounding his second punishment. He was, he tells Elwood, a pinsetter at a bowling alley. Each night, he fraternized with the white customers, laughing and joking with them in a jovial manner. While taking a break one night, though, he spoke to an old black man who worked in the kitchen. Having watched Turner acting so friendly toward the customers, this cook chastised him for pandering to white people, saying that Turner must not have any "self-respect."

Turner's apparent lack of "self-respect" recalls Elwood's desire to cultivate a "sense of dignity," an idea he drew from listening to Martin Luther King At Zion Hill. Although Turner is only trying to be a good employee, he ends up appealing to white people who most likely harbor racist ideas. In this way, his attempt to do a good job as a pinsetter causes him to degrade himself, ultimately putting him in a difficult position. Like Elwood, Turner has struggled with reconciling his personal goals and value with the racist society in which he lives.

Turner explains that he was so bothered by what his coworker said that he stopped being friendly to the customers. In fact, he started making fun of them as they played. This led to an altercation with an angry white man, and though Turner escaped unharmed, he threw a cinderblock through the man's windshield when he saw his car parked outside the bowling alley a week later. Shortly thereafter, the police came for him.

Turner's experience at the bowling alley is worth noting, since he doesn't have very many options—either he continues to degrade himself by placating his white customers, or he upsets them and thus presents himself as a bad worker. Needless to say, he chooses the latter, and when this leads to an altercation, he gets so fed up that he takes his anger out on his aggressor's car, an ill-advised decision that underlines just how much stress such situations can put on a person.

When Elwood and Turner finish their work for the day, Harper picks them up. On the way home, Elwood tries to commit everything about the outside world to memory. He also decides to keep a list of everything they deliver to people in town, documenting Nickel Academy's unlawful practices in a notebook.

Given Elwood's strong sense of morality, it's rather unsurprising that he keeps a list of Nickel's unlawful deliveries. This list, it seems, is the only way he can take a stand against the institution's unethical practices without putting himself in immediate danger, though the mere existence of such a list does pose a threat to his wellbeing, since a staff member might find it and punish him as a result. Still, this doesn't deter him, suggesting that he cannot be intimidated by Nickel's culture of fear and continues to prioritize his own "sense of dignity."

CHAPTER NINE

In the winter there is a boxing match between the white and black students. It has been fifteen years since the last white student won, and Griff is this year's contender for the black students, facing off against a white boy named Big Chet. The tradition of having boxing championships began when Trevor Nickel became the director of the school in 1942, when the institution was still called the Florida Industrial School for Boys. Nickel had no experience as a school director, but he was a prominent member of the Ku Klux Klan who often talked about morality and work ethic, so he was given the job. In addition to boxing, he was interested in "fitness" and took to watching the boys shower. This practice has continued into Elwood's time at Nickel: the school psychologist picks his "dates" by watching the white boys shower.

In this section, Whitehead clarifies the racist underpinnings of Nickel Academy, revealing that Trevor Nickel—the school's namesake—was an active member of the Ku Klux Klan. This information helps explain why the institution has no qualms about segregating its students despite the fact that doing so goes against the law—after all, the man after whom the school is named was clearly an outspoken bigot. In addition, Whitehead also shows readers the school's history of sexual abuse, noting that Trevor Nickel used to spy on the children as they showered. The fact that this still happens while Elwood is at the school is further proof that harmful practices perpetuate themselves throughout history. In turn, it's easy to see that the institution's racist and abusive patterns are especially hard to eradicate, because they are deeply entangled with the very history of Nickel.

In the lead-up to the boxing match, Elwood's peers frantically talk about how thoroughly Griff is going to beat Big Chet, who hardly stands a chance. One day, though, Turner is napping in a hidden spot he found in the warehouse when he hears Spencer walk in with Griff. Spencer asks Griff how his boxing training is coming along, and this immediately concerns Turner, who remains hidden. Turner believes that white men only asks black boys about themselves when they want to "fuck [them] over." This is why Turner isn't surprised when Spencer makes multiple hints that Griff should lose the boxing match on purpose. However, Griff isn't intelligent enough to pick up on Spencer's insinuations, simply agreeing with whatever the superintendent says until finally Spencer tells him to lose in the third round of the fight, threatening to take him "out back" if he doesn't.

The corruption at Nickel Academy brings itself to bear on Griff when Spencer tells him to intentionally lose the boxing match. This championship is perhaps the only thing that the black students look forward to, since it's the only time they're able to feel triumphant. By beating the white students in the boxing match, the black students are able to enjoy a rare moment of victory over a group of people (namely, white people) that dominates and subjugates them in other areas of life. Nevertheless, Spencer revokes the only sense of pride and happiness available to the black cohort at Nickel Academy, not caring what the boxing match means to them.

Turner tells Elwood that Spencer wants Griff to lose the boxing match on purpose. Elwood isn't surprised, but he wonders why Spencer would want to manipulate the match, since it only makes sense to rig a fight if people are betting on the outcome. Turner points out that it would be crazy for Griff to disobey Spencer, and when Elwood asks if Spencer would take Griff to the White House to punish him, Turner leads him to a collection of old horse stables behind the laundry building. "This is *out back*," Turner says, pointing to two oak trees with iron rings affixed to them. Sometimes, Turner explains, Spencer takes black boys out here and chains them to these iron rings before whipping them senseless.

It's important to note that Spencer only takes black boys "out back." Although the staff members of Nickel Academy abuse both white and black students, it becomes evident in this moment that the administration is particularly hard on African American students. This isn't all that surprising, considering that Trevor Nickel himself was in the Ku Klux Klan. Once again, then, the school's fraught history works its way into the present, this time shaping the institution's horrific system of discipline.

Elwood asks if Spencer ever brings white boys "out back," but Turner tells him that the space is only for black students. If they kill a black student, they simply claim that the boy ran away. Hearing this, Elwood asks what the boys' families do in these situations, but Turner reminds him that not everyone has people who care about them in the outside world. This is a point of tension in their friendship, since Turner himself doesn't have anyone supporting him outside of Nickel. Elwood's belief that people in society might be able to help him bugs Turner, who thinks his friend is too optimistic. "You can change the law but you can't change people and how they treat each other," he believes.

It's difficult for Elwood to wrap his head around the fact that people like Spencer aren't held accountable when they kill black students. As someone who believes in the inherent goodness of humanity, it's hard for him to comprehend that staff members actually get away with such wretched behavior. Turner, on the other hand, believes that the world is full of people who "treat each other" badly. In this way, the two friends stand in opposition to one another, each one representing a different worldview. While Elwood embodies hope and optimism, Turner moves through the world with a cynical kind of suspicion.

The reason Turner brings Elwood "out back" is to show him that there are certain kinds of injustice that people refuse to acknowledge. Turner understands that Nickel Academy is an incredibly racist place, considering that the majority of the staff most likely go to Ku Klux Klan meetings on the weekends. Elwood, on the other hand, remains naïve when it comes to the true nature of Nickel Academy, which is why Turner brings him "out back," wanting to show him the place's hidden and frightening underbelly.

Once again, Turner's pessimism comes to the forefront of the novel, as he tries to show Elwood the harsh reality of the environment in which they exist. Rather than investing himself in the idea of overcoming this hardship, he simply acknowledges the horror all around him and does what he can to avoid punishment. In this regard, his fear makes him submissive and obedient, which is the exact outcome people like Spencer want.

Two days later, Harper tells Turner and Elwood that Spencer and the board members of Nickel are, in fact, placing bets on the outcome of the boxing match. He explains that this practice used to be casual back when Trevor Nickel was in charge. These days the betting is a much more serious affair, though Harper notes that everyone bets on the black contenders. Hearing this, Elwood remarks that boxing matches are always rigged, but Harper denies that the administration would fix the match, insisting that the tradition is "a beautiful thing."

During this exchange, Whitehead reminds readers that Harper grew up around Nickel Academy. Consequently, he has a certain amount of faith in the institution, believing that people like Director Hardee and Maynard Spencer wouldn't rig the boxing championship. In reality, this is exactly something they would do, but Harper still thinks of Nickel as a positive environment. His character demonstrates how difficult it can be for people immersed in a corrupt society to see its deep flaws. Harper's opinion is also important to remember as the novel progresses, since Harper's allegiance to Nickel Academy eventually clashes with the friendly relationship he has with Elwood and Turner.

The boxing championships are spread out over two nights. During the first night, the white and black dorms determine who will fight in the final match, though everyone knows it will be Big Chet against Griff. Near the ring, Director Hardee sits with various board members and with his wife, whom the students try hard not to stare at, since she's strikingly beautiful—anyone caught looking her for too long is immediately given a beating, so they make sure to avert their eyes. Sure enough, Big Chet and Griff win their rounds and are chosen to fight the following night. That evening, the black students speak excitedly about how badly Griff is going to beat Big Chet, and Griff walks around with immense pride, taking so much enjoyment in this attention that Elwood wonders if he's forgotten that Spencer instructed him to lose.

The excitement surrounding Griff's upcoming fight against Big Chet emphasizes just how much this event means to Elwood's fellow students. The idea of Griff pounding a white boy to the ground is the only form of resistance and triumph that these students are allowed to experience. This, in turn, is why it's so disheartening that Spencer has decided to rig the fight, ordering Griff to lose and thereby depriving the black students of their only source of hope and pride. What's more, Griff's apparent refusal to throw the fight adds a sense of ominous suspense to the event, since Elwood and Turner know that Griff could be killed if he disobeys Spencer.

When the fight begins, Griff and Big Chet seem well matched. In the first rounds, Griff shows no signs of going easy. Elwood visibly disapproves of the entire charade, since it reminds him of the unfair dishwashing races he had as a child at the Richmond Hotel. As the fight continues, Turner sees a number of perfect opportunities for Griff to go down, moments that wouldn't make it totally obvious that he's been told to lose. However, it soon becomes clear that Griff won't hold back, regardless of what happens to him afterward. Finally, the bell sounds to signal the end of the last round, and the referee breaks the two boys apart. Because Griff won two out of three rounds, the referee declares him the winner.

Griff's victory is astonishing, considering that Spencer ordered him to lose. By refusing to lose, though, Griff bravely commits a brazen act of defiance, something that very few students at Nickel would do. In this moment, then, he becomes a symbol of righteous disobedience, ultimately maintaining a "sense of dignity" despite what might happen to him as a result.

Griff darts across the ring, rushing to where Spencer sits. Over the sound of the wild crowd, Turner hears him yelling at Spencer and telling him that he thought it was only the second round. He continues to scream this as the black students sweep him away, cheering heartily as they go. Thinking about it, Turner acknowledges that Griff may have been confused because he got hit in the head too many times, though Turner would never have thought this could make him forget which round it was. That night, Spencer and Earl come for Griff. He is never seen again. In the aftermath of it all, the students say that he refused to purposefully lose, and some of the boys even believe that he escaped, a thought that makes them feel better about the situation.

In a way, Griff's confusion can be blamed on Nickel Academy. After all, the school places no importance on education, making it all the more likely that a student might find addition as challenging as Griff does when he miscalculates how many rounds he's fought. It's also possible that having been beaten and made to fight in the past really has affected Griff's brain, as Turner speculates. And though his victory buoys the spirits of his peers, he comes to a bad end when Spencer and Earl take him "out back" and kill him, once again demonstrating that there is nobody to hold them accountable for their violent actions.

Fifty years later, the state of Florida digs Griff up and discovers that his wrists were broken before his death, indicating that he was shackled and physically restrained. To this day, the iron rings remain embedded in the oak trees, where Griff was beaten to death. And though few people know about the horrors that took place in this location, the rings themselves are ready to "testify[] to anyone who cares to listen."

Clarifying that Spencer and Earl did indeed kill Griff, Whitehead invites readers to consider the legacy of Nickel Academy's violent past. Although these horrific stories have only just reached the ears of the general public, these tales have been around for decades, just waiting for somebody to actually care enough to listen.

CHAPTER TEN

As Christmas approaches, the students at Nickel Academy prepare various decorations. Around this time, Desmond finds a strange green bottle while cleaning a shed. Another boy tells him that the bottle is full of horse medicine, which is intended to make a horse vomit if it eats something it shouldn't. Desmond hides this bottle and tells Elwood, Jaimie, and Turner about it later that day. Thus begins a thought experiment of sorts, in which the boys discuss which staff member they'd most like to feed the medicine to. For days, the friends propose hypothetical targets. Elwood suggests a supervisor who apparently punched him in the stomach for talking to a white boy. Jaimie, on the other hand, suggests Earl. Jaimie is the most interested in this discussion, frequently bringing it up and insisting that Earl would be the perfect target, though he won't say why.

As Elwood, Jaimie, Turner, and Desmond fantasize about poisoning one of the staff members, they grow closer to one another. Although Whitehead has mentioned all of these boys at various moments throughout the book, this is the first time that the four students appear to have formed a group friendship. In turn, readers see that dreaming about standing up to power often gives people a sense of unprecedented unity. In the same way that Elwood felt a sense of camaraderie when he protested outside of the Florida Theatre, he now enjoys talking to his friends about how they could stand up for themselves, even if this conversation is largely hypothetical.

Jaimie keeps bringing up the idea of poisoning Earl. Eventually, the other boys agree that Earl *would* be the perfect target, and they realize that the staff's annual holiday luncheon would be the perfect time to slip the horse medicine into his drink. However, none of them except Jaimie is serious about the plan. One by one, they withdraw their support, leaving Jaimie alone with the scheme. "They'd put us in the ground," Desmond says.

Although it's a fun bonding experience to fantasize as a group about how best to take revenge on the Nickel staff members, everybody but Jaimie knows that the plan to poison Earl is too risky. When Desmond says that the Nickel staff would kill them if they ever found out about the plan, he tries to help Jaimie see that the prank isn't worth the risk. Of course, he's correct about this, but it's also worth noting that his refusal to take action out of fear is exactly how Spencer and the other Nickel staff members want the students to respond to the school's constant threats of violence.

On the day of the luncheon, Turner and Elwood are in downtown Eleanor with Harper when Harper tells them that he'll be back soon. Suddenly, then, the boys are on their own. Walking along the streets, they're stunned by this sense of freedom and start talking about how they would escape if they were to ever run away. Turner, for his part, has thought this out very carefully, saying that he would run south, since nobody would expect an escapee to make that decision. After taking clothes from a clothesline, he says, he would raid one of the empty houses near town for supplies. Finally, he reveals his most important tactic, which is that he wouldn't take anyone with him, since he thinks his peers would only slow him down and ensure his demise.

Again, Turner presents himself as a fierce individualist, the kind of person who thinks that helping others will only make him more vulnerable. This is an attitude he urges Elwood to adopt, claiming that it's best to mind one's own business at Nickel. In keeping with this, he says he would escape alone if he were ever to run away, believing that taking another student with him would only bring trouble. This worldview contrasts sharply with Elwood's affinity for unity and communal support.

When Harper returns, he brings Elwood and Turner back to Nickel. Upon their arrival, they learn that Earl has been rushed to the hospital. As Harper rushes off to gather more information, Elwood and Turner find Desmond, who tells them that he doesn't think the green bottle actually contained medicine. He's standing outside the dining hall, where chairs have been upturned and a trail of blood indicates the path Earl's body took across the floor as the other staff members dragged him toward help. Desmond swears that he didn't do anything, indicating that Jaimie must have stolen the poison from him. As the boys strategize, Jaimie appears, looking a bit out of sorts. He tells them the story of what happened, saying that Earl suddenly stood up from his chair and grabbed his stomach, at which point he sprayed his bloody insides all over the table.

Considering that Elwood received a brutal beating simply for trying to break up a fight, it's obvious that poisoning a staff member would be a serious offense—one that would inevitably lead a student to the secret graveyard. This is why the boys only ever talked about the plan to poison Earl in a hypothetical way, treating it like a fun thought experiment but nothing more. Now, though, it seems that Jaimie has actually gone through with the idea, thereby putting them all in danger, since each one of them technically helped formulate the plan. This danger seems to support Turner's idea that unity is dangerous; being friends makes the boys happier, but it also increases the risks in situations like these.

Elwood calls Jaimie crazy, but Jaimie claims that he had nothing to do with Earl's poisoning. Desmond points out that the can of poison has vanished from his locker, but Jaimie says again that he had nothing to do with it. However, a slight smile passes over Jaimie's face in brief, almost imperceptible intervals as the boys discuss the poisoning, and this gives Turner a strange sort of appreciation for his friend, since he can't help but admire people who lie even though it's obvious that they aren't telling the truth.

Turner appreciates Jaimie's refusal to tell the truth because it suggests that there's nothing anybody can do to change the way Jaimie acts, not even people like Spencer. The boys are usually powerless in the face Nickel's cruelty, but Jaimie demonstrates in this moment that it's possible to fight back. In other words, this is perhaps the first time Turner feels hopeful or optimistic about his position at Nickel, since seeing Jaimie's confidence reminds him that nobody can fully control another person.

Turner silently plans to escape if any of the staff members find out about what Jaimie did to Earl, but the boys eventually hear that Dr. Cooke attributed the event to Earl's bad health. In the end, Earl recovers, but he doesn't return to Nickel. Consequently, Spencer replaces him with a man named Hennepin, whom the boys later learn is even harsher.

Although Jaimie's prank successfully banishes Earl from Nickel, it backfires when Spencer brings on an even meaner sidekick. This once again reminds readers that, no matter what the boys do, they are at the mercy of Spencer and his cronies. However, this doesn't mean they're completely powerless, as evidenced by the fact that Jaimie doesn't get in trouble for poisoning Earl.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Elwood is smoking a cigarette on a windowsill in his New York City apartment. It is summer, and the heat is bearing down on the city. Worse, there is a garbage strike, meaning that the streets are piled high with trash. Denise, his girlfriend, tells him she's going out to get ice, making her way downstairs and through the trash. Garbage strikes make Elwood think of when he first moved to the city in 1968, since he came in the middle of a strike. When he first arrived, he made his way from Port Authority to a dirty "flophouse" on 99th Street. Settling in, he he decided to clean the place because nobody else was willing to do the work.

In this section, Whitehead jumps forward in time, giving readers a glimpse of what life is like for Elwood after Nickel Academy. At this point, it's unclear what has happened in the intervening years; the only thing that seems obvious is that he managed to find his way out of the school. Furthermore, the fact that he lived in a "flophouse" when he first came to New York City is worth noting, since it suggests that his time at Nickel severely altered the trajectory of his life, considering that he was a college-bound student before attending Nickel. If he hadn't been sent to Nickel, readers might think, he probably would never have found himself living in such a run-down, dirty building.

When Denise returns with the ice, she massages Elwood's back, which hurts because he's a professional mover. Denise and Elwood met when Elwood was taking night classes at a nearby high school, earning his GED because he never had the chance to finish high school after Nickel. Denise taught English as a Second Language in the school at the same time. When Elwood finished his final class, he walked over to her classroom and asked her out, but she declined because she was in a relationship. A month later, she called and asked him out. Now, Denise complains about the garbage strike, insisting that the sanitation employees should get back to work. Elwood, on the other hand, thinks it's "good for the rest of the city to see what kind of place they [are] really living in. Try his perspective for a change."

Readers don't yet know much about this version of Elwood, other than that he lives in New York and works as a professional mover. The fact that he didn't earn his GED until he was a full-grown adult is a testament to just how thoroughly Nickel delayed his actual education, even though it was supposedly a school. Rather than giving him an opportunity to earn a degree, the institution used him for labor. This is most likely why he has apparently adopted a cynical attitude, one that makes him suspicious of how most people view reality. When Denise complains about the garbage strike, for example, he thinks about how it's "good for the rest of the city to see what kind of place" they're living in, a thought that underlines his belief that New York City—or perhaps the entire country—is an essentially dirty, rotten place.

Recently, Elwood bought a van and decided to start his own moving company. He has decided to call the company Ace Moving, since he wants it to be listed at the top of the phonebook. Six months after making this decision, he realizes that he subconsciously chose the name Ace because it's a reference to his time at Nickel Academy.

That Elwood doesn't initially realize why he wants to name his company Ace is significant, since it suggests that he has repressed all thoughts pertaining to his time at Nickel Academy. Rather than immediately recognizing that becoming an Ace is something he's apparently still striving for, he thinks that he's choosing the title for practical, unemotional reasons. When it dawns on him that this isn't the real reason, though, it becomes impossible for him to deny the fact that his traumatic memories are still informing the way he lives his life.

CHAPTER TWELVE

There are four ways to get out of Nickel. First, a student can wait for his sentence to run out. Second, a court can intercede, but this is a rare occurrence, since it usually means a lawyer or family member has managed to bribe a judge. The third way out is to die, and most deaths are recorded as the result of "natural causes." For instance, one boy died in a sweatbox, but Nickel claimed that he perished because of "natural causes." Most dead students are buried in Boot Hill, but others are hidden because of the circumstances surrounding their deaths. For instance, many students are killed while on "unauthorized leave," and these cases are never investigated. The fourth way out of Nickel is to escape. This, of course, is an incredibly risky thing to do, and the boys who are successful effectively disappear into unknown existences.

The chances of getting out of Nickel are rather slim. Because of this, it's somewhat irrational for students to cultivate a sense of hope about their prospects, since the best way to leave Nickel is simply by making it to the end of one's sentence without getting killed, and there's little way for them to control whether that happens. And though a student might hope to graduate by earning enough merits, Whitehead has already made it clear that this systems is flawed at best, since students receive demerits for even the smallest infractions. What's more, the students who manage to escape simply disappear, meaning that Nickel effectively erases them from history, thereby making it impossible for other students to draw hope from the story of a peer's successful getaway plan.

Elwood believes there is yet another way to get out of Nickel. He thinks of it after his grandmother comes to see him shortly after New Year's. He has spent his time obediently following the rules, deriving a sense of progress from this dutifulness. However, this sense of progress has enabled him to trick himself into believing that he has made progress. In reality, though, he has let the institution defeat him, turning him into someone who's too exhausted to resist oppression. Meanwhile, his grandmother has been ill, forcing her to skip previous opportunities to visit. Now, though, she is finally here, but her frailty forces Elwood to recognize for the first time that she might not be alive when he gets out of Nickel.

Whitehead waits to reveal Elwood's idea regarding how to get out of Nickel. Instead, he focuses on the way the boy thinks about his time at the school, suggesting that Elwood's determination to follow the rules is more or less futile. By doing the best he can to avoid trouble, Elwood feels a false sense of hope, as if he's working toward something. Unfortunately, though, all he's doing is submitting to abusive authority figures like Spencer, who make him feel like submission is the only way out of Nickel—even though there's actually no guarantee that he'll get out at all.

Harriet delivers bad news about Elwood's prospects of getting out of Nickel. The lawyer she hired, she tells him, has fled town with all of the family's money. Harriet apologizes for failing Elwood, but he insists that he's all right, explaining that he just rose to the level of Explorer. In the aftermath of this visit, though, he considers the various ways out of Nickel, deciding once and for all that there is, in fact, a fifth way, which is to take down Nickel itself.

Rather than letting Harriet's news about the lawyer discourage him, Elwood decides to fight back against Nickel. He most likely decides this because he sees that following the rules has done little to actually help his situation. As a result, he once again reveals his belief in the value of standing up for what one believes in—not just for his own benefit, but for the benefit of others as well.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As an adult in Manhattan, Elwood likes to watch the New York Marathon. He likes the spectacle's camaraderie and hectic joy, remembering the silent nights he spent at Nickel, where a grave sense of isolation prevailed over the grounds despite the fact that all of the boys were facing the same horrors. At the New York Marathon, though, everyone happily cheers with each other and nobody is afraid to chant optimistic sentiments like, "*You can do it.*"

Elwood's love for the New York Marathon stems from his desire for camaraderie and communal support. Whereas each boy was isolated and alone at Nickel, he experiences a sense of togetherness when he watches the marathon, feeling as if everyone is rooting for each other. It is exactly this kind of support he so desperately needed as a young man facing violence, abuse, and injustice, so it makes sense that he seeks this out as an adult.

Walking back from the New York Marathon, Elwood runs into Chickie Pete, who lived in his dorm at Nickel. As soon as Chickie Pete sees him and calls him over, Elwood can tell that his former classmate has been through tough times, since he seems like someone who recently got out of rehab. Hesitantly, he agrees to go for a beer with Chickie, so the two men duck into an old bar and talk about their time at Nickel without ever really addressing its horrors. Instead of speaking seriously about the abuse they endured, Chickie tells Elwood about other former Nickel students he's run into over the years, eventually admitting that he has just spent a month getting sober, though this doesn't stop him from quickly downing two beers.

Chickie and Elwood discuss their time at Nickel without ever addressing the most harrowing and defining moments of their shared history. This is a clear indicator that both men are still struggling to process what happened to them, since their desire to avoid talking about Spencer and his violent ways suggests that they still don't know how to handle such traumatic memories. Even all these years later, then, their time at Nickel affects them in deep, painful ways.

Elwood remembers that Chickie Pete used to be a fantastic trumpet player, but Chickie says those days are behind him, holding up his knotted hands. This general story is all too familiar to Elwood, who has heard similar tales from other people who were forced to endure harsh treatment at such a young age. Since leaving Nickel, Chickie has been in the army, has worked odd jobs, and has found his way into trouble with the law. Most recently, he got into a bar fight that led to a court-ordered stint in rehab. When Chickie asks Elwood what he does for a living, Elwood is embarrassed to tell the truth, which is that he owns his own moving company and has a nice new office on Lenox Avenue.

The trajectory of Chickie Pete's life illustrates just how hard it is to succeed after undergoing trauma. For years, boys like Chickie lived in fear at Nickel, becoming accustomed to routine violence and abuse. In turn, he now has trouble processing his painful past, a struggle that has most likely contributed to his battle with addiction. Thankfully, Elwood himself has managed to attain a bit of upward mobility, but this doesn't mean he doesn't also suffer from the same emotional setbacks as Chickie.

At one point, Chickie asks when Elwood left Nickel. "You don't remember?" Elwood asks, but he stops himself from telling Chickie the truth, instead telling him that he was let out when his sentence was over. This is a lie Elwood has told time and again. In reality, he escaped Nickel. He has always loved the idea of students repeating the tale to each other over and over, letting the story of his triumph make its way through generations of boys. Now, though, he learns that nobody knows about his grand escape, since even Chickie Pete is unaware of how he left Nickel.

Whitehead reveals in this moment that Elwood escaped from Nickel Academy. This is something Elwood is clearly proud of, relishing the idea that his success story might have given other students hope as they tried to endure the institution and its abusive ways. Now, though, he learns that news of his escape never made it to his peers, a fact that aligns with Nickel's tendency to shroud everything in secrecy. By keeping his escape story a secret, the school makes sure that other students continue to think of themselves as powerless. Again, secrecy leads only to further oppression, stifling the sense of unity that Elwood hoped his escape might create.

"Hey, hey, what happened to that kid you used to hang around with all the time?" Chickie Pete asks. Elwood pretends he doesn't know who Chickie is talking about, so Chickie gets up to go to the bathroom. While he's gone, Elwood thinks about how most Nickel Boys could have accomplished many things if they hadn't been through so much trauma. As his mind drifts, he thinks about his failed relationship with Denise, and as he does so, he sees an ambulance whip by outside. As its colors flash across the mirror behind the bar, Elwood sees himself haloed in a red light that distinguishes him as someone who doesn't belong in the free world. Suddenly, he feels like everyone can see this light around him, thinking that he and all the other Nickel Boys will forever be running from their terrible pasts.

Elwood's refusal to talk about Turner suggests that something bad may have happened to his friend, though Whitehead doesn't reveal what took place. When Elwood unexpectedly feels like "an outsider" running from the police, the nature of his trauma comes to the forefront of the novel. Still struggling to overcome what happened to him at Nickel, he feels like he doesn't belong in regular society, even though he's been relatively successful. This illustrates just how thoroughly his time at Nickel transformed him, forever altering the way he moves through the world.

Elwood decides to leave when Chickie Pete returns from the bathroom, feeling suddenly angry that somebody like Chickie is still alive when his friend isn't. Before he leaves, Chickie mentions that he's looking for work, and Elwood half-heartedly promises to give him a call to hire him as a mover. On his way home, he thinks about how much he had liked the idea of his escape story circulating through Nickel. The fact that even Chickie doesn't know this story depresses him. Ripping up the napkin upon which he wrote Chickie's number, he makes his way back to his empty apartment.

Elwood's decision to leave the bar is motivated by the fact that Chickie is still alive even though Elwood's "friend" is not. This suggests that Turner is indeed dead, though Whitehead still doesn't clarify what, exactly, happened. Nevertheless, it's obvious that Elwood feels as if his friend's death was deeply unfair. Worse, he has just learned that his own escape didn't even do anything to inspire his fellow Nickel Boys, since it apparently never reached the student body. Once more, then, Nickel Academy triumphs over him through its secretive ways, getting the best of his anger and ruining his night even decades after he escaped.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At one point during Elwood's spring term at Nickel Academy, Director Hardee learns through a whisper-network of board members that the state will be sending inspectors to the school. Nickel has frequently attracted the state's attention because of its nefarious ways, but this is just a routine inspection. Nevertheless, Hardee halts all classes on campus two days before so that the students and staff can focus on repairing the grounds. In this atmosphere, everyone sets to work replacing squeaky floorboards, installing a new boiler, working on the busted plumbing, and generally fixing everything that has slipped into disrepair. During this time, Turner and Elwood continue their Community Service. As they work cleaning out a powerful politician's basement in Eleanor, Elwood tells Turner his plan to overthrow Nickel Academy.

Whitehead has already established that Nickel Academy operates outside the law, largely making up its own rules for itself and disregarding what the government tells it to do. For this reason, a state inspection is a very serious affair, since its purpose is to find out whether or not the institution is operating the way it should. In other words, the inspection might actually hold Nickel accountable for its many misdeeds. However, powerful board members hear about the inspection beforehand, rendering the entire ordeal useless. That Nickel Academy is capable of avoiding true scrutiny is yet another indication that the school manipulates its power so that it can avoid taking responsibility for its unethical practices.

Elwood no longer thinks about Dr. King's ideas as mere vague concepts, since they now apply directly to his life. Thinking specifically about Dr. King's notion that mistreatment only strengthens a person's character, Elwood decides to adopt an immense "capacity to suffer," one that prevents him from fearing punishment. With this in mind, he tells Turner his plan to slip a letter to the government inspectors when they visit Nickel the following day. He tells his friend about the list he's been keeping of the people and stores to whom Nickel has been selling government-issued supplies. Furious, Turner asks why Elwood has been doing this, warning him that Spencer will kill him if he finds out what he's planning to do.

The lessons Elwood has learned from Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement finally brings themselves to bear on Nickel Academy, as Elwood draws on his belief that it's worth standing up for what he believes in, even if doing so will put him in danger. Fear of punishment is no longer enough to keep him from acting on what he thinks is right. Turner, on the other hand, doesn't have such strong convictions, which is why he curses Elwood for wanting to do such a courageous thing—after all, delivering a letter to the inspectors will put both boys in danger, since they work on the Community Service team together.

Elwood insists that it's a mistake to remain obedient, telling Turner that he can't simply navigate Nickel Academy like an "obstacle course." According to Elwood, it's necessary to confront adversity head-on. Still, though, Turner refuses to participate in the plan, leaving Elwood to face the task on his own.

Once again, Turner acts as a staunch individualist, refusing to do anything that might put him in danger. In contrast, Elwood is willing to jeopardize his own life in order to do what he thinks is right and perhaps create meaningful change. Seeing himself as somebody who stands up for himself and what he believes in, Elwood makes peace with the idea of possibly sacrificing himself for a greater good.

On the day of the inspection, Elwood stuffs his letter into his pocket. On this particular day, Elwood and Turner stay on campus because Hardee doesn't want the inspectors to know that they usually leave the grounds. Consequently, they work on refurbishing the football bleachers, a job Hardee has intentionally put off because he wants the inspectors to think the students often take on such difficult projects. As Elwood works, he sees the three white inspectors approaching. He's not sure how to slip them the letter, but he decides which one he wants to give it to if he has the chance. At one point, the inspectors walk a mere two yards from him, but he doesn't have a good opportunity to address them.

Elwood's convictions are quite strong, but this doesn't mean he doesn't feel fear. After all, it's quite likely that Spencer will kill him if he catches him trying to give the inspectors a letter, and though it's true that Elwood is determined to stand up for himself, it's also understandable that he doesn't want to hand the letter to the inspectors in such a public context. At the same time, though, his failure to follow through suggests that Nickel's culture of fear still has an effect on him, ultimately keeping him from advocating for himself despite his resolve.

At lunch, Elwood curses himself for failing to deliver the letter, but he resolves to try it again, this time deciding to hand it to the inspectors in a more secluded area. He knows that he's risking a lot to do this, but he doesn't let that stop him. After all, he's already survived one beating, so he might as well take his chances to bring about change. After lunch, Elwood and the other boys set out once again for the football bleachers, but Harper stops Elwood and tells him to go deliver a message to another teacher, saying that the inspectors won't be visiting him that day. Consequently, Harper wants Elwood to tell the teacher that he can relax.

Elwood regains his courage when he reflects upon the fact that he has already survived one of Spencer's beatings. If he gets caught, he realizes, his punishment will belong to a long history of oppressive violence. This thought puts his predicament into a wider context, helping him see that delivering the letter (and thereby possibly shutting down Nickel) might outweigh his punishment, even if that punishment is severe. Simply put, he realizes that he is fighting for a greater good, a cause for which he's willing to risk his life.

Knowing that delivering Harper's message will make it impossible for him to slip the letter to the inspectors before they leave, Elwood asks Harper if he can stay. Hearing Elwood call him by his first name, Harper corrects him, saying: "Mr. Harper, *sir*." Elwood knows that this formality is necessary on campus, even if he never has to talk to Harper like this when they're doing Community Service. Going on, Harper tells him to do as he was told, promising that everything will return to normal after the inspectors leave. After Harper leaves, Elwood stands paralyzed and defeated until he hears a voice behind him. "I'll do it," Turner says, stepping forward and saying, "I'll get it to them, fuck it."

Although Harper acts as if he's Elwood's equal when they're in the Community Service van, he emphasizes his authority when they're on campus. This is perhaps simply because he doesn't want other staff members to hear him speaking casually with a student, but it's worth pointing out that he still forces Elwood to do what he says—an indication that he's more invested in his authority than he has previously led Elwood to believe. On another note, Turner's willingness to deliver the note marks the first time throughout the novel that he abandons his individualistic mindset in order to do something for someone else.

After giving Turner the letter, Elwood delivers Harper's message, taking the long way back to the dorms on his return because he's nervous about what might have happened in his absence. Just before dinner, Turner leads him to his secret hiding place in the warehouse and tells him that he put the letter in a copy of the school newspaper and gave it to the inspectors before they left. That night, everything goes along like normal—authorities don't come zooming onto the premises. But in the middle of the night, Spencer and Hennepin appear and take Elwood to the White House.

At first, it seems as if Elwood and Turner may have gotten away with their plan to overthrow Nickel. That night, though, Elwood sees once again that there's virtually nothing he can do to stand up for himself. No matter what, it seems, Nickel Academy will get the best of him, making it impossible for him to advocate for his or his peers' rights. And yet, Elwood has known all along that this might happen if he went through with his plan. In this sense, then, he has willingly sacrificed himself for a greater good.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After years of living alone in New York City, Elwood marries Millie. She doesn't know about his past at Nickel Academy, but she's a supportive and wonderful person. One night, she insists that they meet at a new restaurant in Harlem, saying that they haven't been on a date in a long time. He's hesitant, since the restaurant seems like the kind of place designed to attract the white people who have taken over the neighborhood and dubbed it "Hamilton Heights" to make it sound fancy and new. He sees the area's gentrification as a reverse version of "white flight," since so many white people left this area years ago and are taking it over again now that it's considered safe.

This brief meditation on the growing problem of gentrification in New York City is relevant to the novel's overall narrative because it demonstrates the ways in which racial prejudices still exist many decades after desegregation. Although Elwood no longer has to worry about racist teachers at Nickel whipping him for small infractions, he can't escape the fact that discrimination continues to influence his everyday life. Indeed, the evidence of racial disparity is all around him as he stands on the sidewalk in Harlem.

As Elwood waits for Millie outside the restaurant, he thinks about his time working as a mover in Harlem, remembering what it felt like to schlep furniture out of a dead person's apartment. This experience made him fear the idea of dying alone, especially since he knows his last thoughts would be of Nickel Academy—something he doesn't want to endure on his own. Standing on the street, he decides to buy flowers for Millie, whom he met at a fundraiser. This, he thinks, must be what a "normal" husband would do. He, for his part, still thinks about Nickel on a daily basis, wondering how it has prevented him from having a regular life. Just as Elwood goes to buy flowers, he sees Millie approaching him and affectionally calling him handsome.

Elwood still struggles with the traumatic experiences he underwent at Nickel Academy, but he finally has somebody willing to support him unconditionally. Although he still spends a time every day thinking about all of the terrible things that happened to him when he was a teenager, he's in a loving relationship and knows that he isn't going to die alone, and this helps him adopt a certain kind of optimism or hope for the future.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The state of Florida banned solitary confinement in schools years ago, but Spencer still throws Elwood into solitary confinement after beating him in the White House. However, because he doesn't yet know what the effect of Elwood's letter will be, the superintendent doesn't beat him quite as hard as he did the first time. After whipping him for a while, he gives the switch to Hennepin, who takes his own swipes at Elwood until Spencer tells him to stop, wanting to keep Elwood alive in case the government follows up on Elwood's letter.

Spencer's fury rains down on Elwood once again. This time, though, Spencer fears that he might be held accountable for his actions, so he doesn't whip Elwood quite as hard. In this way, Whitehead suggests that the threat of exposure keeps evil people from fully enacting their wicked ways. This is why Nickel Academy maintains a veil of secrecy, knowing that exposure is the only thing that might put an end to the institution's depraved policies. In a way, then, Elwood's plan does lead to some positive change, however small.

As Elwood sits in solitary confinement, he tries to recapture Dr. King's optimism, reciting the line, "*Throw us in jail and we will still love you…But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom.*" In the confounding, soul-stilling darkness, these words fail to stir Elwood's optimism, and he begins to feel his strength slip. Staring into the blackness, he remembers the days he spent at the Richmond Hotel, waiting in vain to see a black customer.

Elwood has been discouraged before, like when he initially took Turner's advice to keep to himself in the aftermath of his first beating. This, however, is the first time he has truly succumbed to despair, unable to summon the strength to believe that his "capacity to suffer" will actually lead to any kind of genuine liberation. This newfound sense of defeat makes sense, since it's obvious that the government inspectors ignored his letter, deciding to report it to Spencer rather than paying attention to what it actually said.


One night, the door to Elwood's cell opens. He flinches, preparing himself for another beating and wrapping his head around the idea that Spencer has, after three weeks, finally decided to kill him. The only thing keeping Spencer from taking him "out back," he knows, is that the superintendent isn't sure whether or not the state will make him answer for his actions. Now, though, everything seems to have calmed down, meaning that Spencer is free to do whatever he wants. Elwood is prepared to face this fact, but then he hears Turner's voice, telling him to get moving because Spencer is going to kill him the following day. Saying this, he helps Elwood down the hall, past Blakely's nearby bedroom, and out into night.

Elwood has lost seemingly all hope, finding it impossible to find solace even in Dr. King's words, which used to bring him such strength. Turner, on the other hand, has apparently adopted a newfound desire to push back against Nickel's abusive ways. Consequently, he helps Elwood break out of solitary confinement, leaving behind his individualistic mindset so that he can help his friend. This change in Turner's thinking indicates that camaraderie really does lead to increased action against oppression, since Turner was presumably inspired by Elwood's bold example.


The Nickel staff members are playing poker in a separate building, so Turner and Elwood manage to slink off the grounds undetected. When Elwood asks why Turner chose to come for him, Turner explains that he heard through the grapevine that Spencer and Hardee are planning on taking him "out back" the next night. Stopping for a moment, Elwood asks Turner why he's coming, too, and Turner says that Elwood is so dumb that he would surely get caught in no time at all. When Elwood reminds him that he once said he'd never take anyone with him while escaping, Turner says, "You're dumb, and I'm stupid."

Spencer and Hardee's plan to kill Elwood confirms the idea that the only thing keeping evil people from doing terrible things is the threat of exposure. Now that it's clear the government won't do anything to protect Elwood, the administrators are free to do whatever they want, no longer held back by the risk of getting caught. On another note, it's obvious that Turner has undergone a complete transformation, leaving behind his individualistic ways in order to band together with Elwood and recognizing that worrying only about himself will inevitably lead to Elwood's death—something that would forever weigh on his conscience. Even for someone as individualistic as Turner, Whitehead indicates, it's not actually possible to separate one's own fate from those of other people.



Turner brings Elwood to a house he knows is empty, where they steal two bicycles before hitting the road. Each time a car appears, they both have the urge to turn and look, but they force themselves to simply keep pedaling. They ride like this all night, and when the sun rises, more cars overtake them. To Turner's surprise, Elwood keeps up quite well, considering the fact that he has spent the past three weeks in solitary confinement. Even though they're far from Nickel, though, a staff van approaches them just as they begin to climb a hill. It is, Turner sees, the Community Service van. The boys pedal as hard as they can, but they soon see that they won't be able to outrun the van, so they ditch their bikes and jump over a fence, bolting out into a stretch of farmland.

Even far away from Nickel Academy, Elwood and Turner don't manage to fully escape the powerful institution. When Turner looks over his shoulder and sees the Community Service van hurtling toward him, he most likely recognizes that everything about Nickel Academy—even his Community Service work, which felt like a refuge from the hardships of everyday life as a student—has always been out to get him. Just when he decides to stand up for himself, then, he is reminded of Nickel's inordinate power over him.

Turner yells at Elwood to run faster through the tall grass. Behind them, the Community Service van comes to a sudden stop, and Harper and Hennepin jump out holding shotguns. At the end of the field stands another fence, beyond which a massive stand of trees reaches up from the ground. As the boys sprint toward this refuge, they hear the first explosion from the shotgun. The shot misses. When Turner looks over his shoulder, he sees that it came from Hennepin. Now, though, Harper stops running and aims his gun, and just as he pulls the trigger, Turner looks back. He then sees Elwood's arms fling out, and in a long, terrible sweep, Elwood falls forward and crumples into the grass as Turner keeps running, hopping the fence and disappearing into the woods.

It's noteworthy that Harper is the person to shoot Elwood, since he has previously presented himself as something of a friend to both Elwood and Turner and suggested that he felt empathy for their bad luck. Now, though, it seems as if this friendliness has been nothing but an act, perhaps something Harper does to make himself feel better about the fact that he is just as authoritarian and oppressive as any other staff member at Nickel. On a separate note, this scene is intentionally confusing, at least in terms of how it affects the novel's overall narrative—after all, readers know that Elwood later lives in New York City and that his friend is the one who dies, not him. However, neither of these plot points aligns with what has just happened in this scene.

EPILOGUE

Unable to work the electronic kiosks at the airport, Turner makes his way to the counter and checks himself in for his flight to Tallahassee, telling the clerk that his name is Elwood Curtis. Two weeks after he escaped from Nickel, a waitress in a diner asked Turner his name, and he immediately said, "Elwood Curtis." He has used the name ever since, thinking of it as a tribute to his friend.

In the first scene of the epilogue, Whitehead addresses any questions readers might have about what really happened to Elwood, making it clear that the boy did indeed die and that Turner is the one who survived. Because he wanted to honor his friend, though, Turner has taken Elwood's name. By living his adult life under Elwood's name, then, he pays a secret tribute to his past and to the most painful memory of his life. In this way, he manages to address his trauma and keeps it close to him every day, without ever having to actually talk about what happened at Nickel.

News of Elwood's death made its way into the local press at the time, but the story favored Nickel, depicting Elwood as nothing more than a dangerous runaway. After hiding in railroad yards for several nights, Turner took a train north and made his way to New York City. Then, in 1970, he returned to Florida and obtained a copy of Elwood's birth certificate, then applied for a Social Security card several years later. He has been Elwood Curtis ever since—until now, that is. Last night, he gave Millie two articles about the discovery of Nickel's graveyards, and when she failed to see the relevance, he told her that this is where he lived as a teenager. Going on, he told her his entire story, spending hours crying with her and trying to explain the details.

When Turner tells Millie about his time at Nickel, he finally confronts the painful memories he has kept hidden ever since he escaped. This suggests that, though it's possible to make it through life without addressing trauma, it eventually becomes too burdensome and emotionally fatiguing to keep this kind of pain a secret.

Turner has been living as Elwood for decades, wanting to live a life that would make his friend proud. This is because he knows Elwood would tell him that he has to learn how to truly live, not just survive. As Turner tells his story to Millie, she suddenly understands certain aspects of his personality, like why he has so much scorn for police officers and authority figures, and why dark moods often overcome him without warning. She briefly wonders who he really is, but she knows he's still the same person she fell in love with. What's more, she realizes that she understands some of his pain, since she grew up as a black person in the United States, making her no stranger to discrimination.

Turner's desire to live a life that would make Elwood proud underlines just how profoundly Elwood's death has impacted Turner's entire trajectory. When Whitehead suggests that Turner has to learn how to do more than simply survive, he implies that holding on to trauma can actively keep people from reaching their full potential. This, it seems, is why Turner decides to tell Millie about what happened to him, and though she can't fully relate to everything he says, she can at least empathize with the racism he has faced, fully aware herself of what it's like to experience bigotry and hatred. In this regard, she's able to support Turner even if she herself has never undergone the kind of trauma that he's had to endure. Connection with others, Whitehead suggests, is crucial for processing trauma, even if the traumatic experience itself was a very isolating one.

Like Turner, Millie has to face prejudice on an everyday basis. Indeed, she undergoes "routine humiliation[s]" that remind her of what it was like to grow up in segregated Virginia. Also like Turner, she tries to ignore these things, since she believes that she might lose her mind if she didn't. Still, she's shaken by the fact that she doesn't even know her husband's real name, he tells her that his name is Jack Turner. In response, she says that he has to tell her his entire story and that this conversation will take longer than one night.

Millie's understanding of what it's like to experience "routine humiliation[s]" as a black person in the United States is important, since it enables her to connect with Turner's pain and support him on an emotional level. In keeping with this, she tells him that he has to tell her all of his story, demonstrating that she sees his trauma not as a burden, but as something that she can help him process. It's also significant that Millie's experiences of racism, while not as dramatic as Turner's, are in some ways just as affecting in that they've shaped her life profoundly. Whitehead seems to argue here that all forms of racism have devastating effects, even when the stories behind them are more mundane than the story of Nickel Academy.

Turner has decided to return to Nickel for the first time. He admits to Millie that he doesn't know what will happen, unsure whether or not he'll be arrested for having escaped. No matter what happens, he has decided to go back, though he thinks about how he wishes he never delivered Elwood's letter. This makes him think about Elwood's strong ideas about morality and his belief that humans are capable of changing for the better—beliefs that ultimately led to his death.

After all this time, Turner still maintains his skepticism regarding Elwood's strong moral convictions. Although he briefly adopted Elwood's worldview when he dared to help his friend escape, this mindset was only temporary—after all, his actions only led to the death of his best friend, no doubt discouraging Turner once again and squashing any ideas he may have cultivated about his power to address injustice. And yet, he himself managed to escape, implying that although taking a stand against immorality will sometimes lead to disaster, it will also sometimes lead to positive change.

In the last several years, Turner has learned that Nickel buried dead students as quickly as possible to avoid official investigations. He has also learned that Elwood's grandmother died just one year after her grandson, and though Elwood's mother is presumably still alive in California, Turner has decided to be the one to properly bury his friend. After arriving in Tallahassee, he plans to attend a press conference the next morning, when the sheriff of Eleanor will talk about what has been found in the grave sites. A group of the White House boys are going to testify at this event, since they want the state to formally apologize and build a memorial. Although Turner used to think that these men were "pathetic" for still complaining about what happened to them so many years ago, he now thinks that he's the "pathetic" one for trying to ignore his emotions.

After years of repressing his memories of Nickel and of Elwood, Turner finally seeks closure. The media's focus on Nickel seems to have awoken a desire in him to shatter the secrecy that made the institution so powerful. This is why he wants to revisit the school and find Elwood's body, grasping that the only way to restore justice to his friend will be by making his story known. As a result, he no longer thinks of his peers as "pathetic" for talking about their trauma, realizing that this is exactly what he should be doing, too.

The White House boys at the press conference are all white, so Turner has come to speak out for the black boys. Whatever happens to him, he's determined to find Elwood's grave so that he can tell his friend about his life and how it was affected by his death. Moreover, he's ready to talk about what happened to him and to Elwood to whomever is willing to listen.

That the White House boys are all white suggests that Turner lives in a society in which it's easier for white people to speak up about their trauma than it is for black people. This is largely because the United States still holds tight to certain prejudices, ultimately choosing to believe white people more readily than black people when it comes to stories of abuse and mistreatment. Once again, then, a sense of secrecy keeps the world from fully grasping what happened to boys like Turner and Elwood. Accordingly, Turner decides to speak for the many black boys who were mercilessly killed and beaten in the shadows of a racist, corrupt institution. Making these stories known, readers see, is the only kind of justice available to these unfortunate souls, and one of the most powerful ways to keep similar cruelty from continuing in the future.

Turner books a room at The Radisson in Tallahassee. It's an old building that has been renovated, but the ground floors have remained somewhat the same. That night, he goes to the hotel restaurant, and a hostess tells him to sit wherever he wants. As he waits for a server to come by, he reads the menu, learning that the hotel is a Tallahassee landmark formerly known as the Richmond Hotel. Sitting there at the table, he doesn't recall that Elwood once told him that he used to sit in the kitchen of this very hotel and read comic books, just waiting to see a black customer in the dining room.

In the novel's final scene, Turner sits in the very same dining room that Elwood used to fantasize about as a boy. From the kitchen, young Elwood always hoped to catch a glimpse of a black person sitting down at one of the restaurant tables—a vision of equality and desegregation that he never got to witness. Now, though, Turner unknowingly fulfills Elwood's wish. In this manner, Whitehead implies that although the United States still struggles with racism and bigotry, the country has *made some progress through the sacrifices of people like Elwood, even if that progress seems small in the face of continued injustices.*


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