A Prayer for Owen Meany

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN IRVING

John Irving was born in Exeter, New Hampshire. His stepfather taught at the Phillips Exeter Academy, where Irving would later study. He graduated from the University of New Hampshire and earned an MFA from the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he studied under Kurt Vonnegut. In 1968, he published his first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*. Ten years later he published *The World According to Garp*, which became an international bestseller and won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1980. In 1989, he published *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Irving has published over a dozen novels throughout his career, including numerous bestsellers, and he continues to write today. Recurring motifs in his fiction include private boys' academies, freak accidents, mysteries of paternity, high school wrestling, and bears.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The narrator of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John Wheelwright, was born in 1942, and he's narrating the book in 1987 at the age of 45. The Cold War between the communist Soviet Union and the democratic United States started shortly after John was born and was still ongoing 40 years later. Heavy-handed American efforts to counteract or neutralize Soviet aggression led to many misguided global interventions denounced in *A Prayer of Owen Meany*, from the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 during John F. Kennedy's presidency, to the Iran-Contra Affair during Ronald Reagan's presidency in 1987. The Cold War–era conflict with the greatest toll on America was the Vietnam War (1955-1975), a long, ugly war waged in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. John and Owen Meany were young men of draft age during the Vietnam War, which eventually became deeply unpopular primarily due to the massive number of U.S. casualties as well as the many documented bombings, massacres, and abuses inflicted on the civilian populations of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Anti-war protests, both peaceful and violent, erupted across the country as millions questioned the goal of the U.S. in continuing to sacrifice its young men in an unwinnable war on the other side of the world. Men like John, Noah Eastman, Buzzy Thurston, and Harold Crosby went to great lengths to avoid the draft (John, for instance, cuts off his trigger finger to make him ineligible), although it was largely the most disadvantaged Americans who ended up going to war and dying, as Owen points out. Crossing the border into Canada was one such way to avoid the draft, but draft dodgers wouldn't be allowed back into the U.S. until President Carter issued a general pardon in 1977.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Irving's style of writing is frequently compared to that of Charles Dickens—his sprawling plots, unforgettable characters, and highly dramatic narratives are all classically Dickensian. *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, in particular, heavily alludes to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The two books are both set in conservative New England communities, and both concern an illegitimate child secretly conceived between a woman and a popular reverend. The female character in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Tabitha Wheelwright, rejects the stigma of her illegitimate pregnancy, but is still divinely punished by death in a freak accident. Tabitha's niece, Hester Eastman, also recalls Hawthorne's protagonist Hester Prynne. Hester Eastman also boldly rejects female chastity, but is belittled by the narrator. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is also heavily inspired by the book *The Tin Drum* by the German novelist Günter Grass. Irving briefly studied under Grass in Vienna during his undergraduate years. The protagonist of *The Tin Drum* has the same initials as Owen Meany, and he is also an unusually precocious child of miniature size with an unnaturally high voice and a Jesus complex.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Prayer for Owen Meany*
- **When Written:** 1987-1988
- **Where Written:** Exeter, New Hampshire
- **When Published:** March 1989
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** Gravesend, New Hampshire
- **Climax:** Owen Meany sacrifices himself to save a group of nuns and Vietnamese orphans from a grenade, fulfilling the prophecy of his death.
- **Antagonist:** Dick Jarvits
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Stranger Than Fiction. John Irving was inspired to create the character of Owen Meany based on the memory of a real boy from his past who was tiny enough to be lifted up and passed around Irving's classroom during Sunday school.

Greatest Hit. Although multiple books by John Irving are major bestsellers, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is Irving's best-selling book

of all time. It's also the book with the author's favorite first sentence, according to Irving.

PLOT SUMMARY

John Wheelwright, an American living in Toronto in 1987, tells the story of his life as he explains how he became a Christian because of his childhood friend Owen Meany. The present-day timeline of the book spans from January to September, as John weaves his childhood memories of growing up in New Hampshire with an account of his life today in Canada.

John and Owen grow up as best friends in the small New England town of Gravesend, New Hampshire. John comes from one of the town's founding families, and grows up in a traditionally dignified, well-to-do household with servants and a large family fortune. Owen grows up in a poor working-class household, and lives in his family's granite quarry. The two boys attend to Sunday school together, since John's mother, Tabitha Wheelwright, recently decided that they will switch to Owen's church. In Sunday school, the kids make a game of picking up the **weightless** Owen and passing him around overhead, because he is so much smaller than the rest of his peers. He also has a strange **voice** that sounds like a permanent high-pitched scream whenever he speaks. The town thinks that Owen was stunted from his exposure to so much granite dust when he was born, but Owen believes his unusual size and voice come from God.

John's mother became pregnant with him after she had a fling with a man she met on the train to Boston, where she took singing lessons once a week. She never told her family who the man was, and she continued living with her mother, Harriet, after giving birth to John. As John grows up, Owen becomes like a second son to Tabitha. His parents are eccentric, emotionally distant, and don't show him much affection—Mr. Meany is too busy in the mines, and Mrs. Meany is an extreme recluse who is likely mentally ill.

When John was six, Tabitha met another man on the train, and this time she married him. John's stepfather, Dan Needham, taught history and theater at the local private high school, Gravesend Academy. When they got married, Tabitha switched from the Congregational Church, led by Rev. Lewis Merrill, to the Episcopalian Church, which Owen attended. Owen's family had once been Catholics, but the Catholic Church had somehow offended them. Owen has always been very religious, and he has visions of angels before Tabitha's death. When Owen and John are eleven, Tabitha is tragically killed in a freak accident by a **baseball** that Owen hit.

Later that year, Owen plays the Ghost of Christmas Future in *A Christmas Carol* and the baby Jesus in the church Christmas pageant, and he has a vision of the day he will die. He believes that since a woman died at his hands, his hands and his life now belong to God. John forgives Owen for his role in Tabitha's death, and they stay close friends. They talk about everything together, from John's desire to find his biological father to their mutual feelings for John's provocative cousin Hester Eastman. Hester has two wild older brothers, Noah and Simon, whom her parents lavish with attention. Just because they're boys, they get to study at boarding schools and private universities across the country, while she has to stay at home and attend public schools. Outraged at her family's sexism, Hester sets out to live her life in the most un-ladylike way possible. John and Owen find her equally sexy and terrifying.

John and Owen attend Gravesend Academy for high school, where Owen becomes notorious for his editorials in the school newspaper, writing as The Voice. He writes in ALL CAPS, just like his speech appears in the book. Owen impresses his peers with his sarcasm and his relationship with Hester, an older girl. The school's authoritarian new headmaster, Randy White, is out to get Owen, but Owen refuses to be silenced. He boldly believes in treating rude behavior rudely in return, and is ultimately expelled. After his expulsion, he uses his skills from mining and carving granite to uproot a **statue** from the local Catholic school, remove its arms and head, and weld the rest of the statue to the stage at Gravesend Academy. That night, Owen dreams of how he will die: heroically saving children in Vietnam from an explosion. He knows he must join the army, learn Vietnamese, and perfect a slam-dunk jump with John.

Following his dream, Owen enlists in ROTC at the University of New Hampshire, where John also attends. While they're in college, the Vietnam War begins to escalate. Both John and Owen are against the war, but Owen still wants to go to Vietnam and fulfill his destiny, while John wants to avoid the draft at all costs. Ironically, Owen is deemed too small to fight on a battlefield, while John is the perfect draft candidate. To protect John from going to war and from being with Owen on the day of his prophesized death, Owen slices off John's trigger finger.

John earns his master's degree in English while Owen escorts the bodies of soldiers killed in Vietnam home for burial. One day over the summer, he calls John and invites him to come to Arizona for a few days of vacation while he completes an extended assignment. John flies to Phoenix and accompanies Owen as he puts the body of Frank Jarvits to rest. They meet Frank's deeply disturbed teenage brother, Dick Jarvits, a psychopath who can't wait to go to war and start slaughtering the Vietnamese. During this trip, Owen is confused when the date of his death arrives and he is still in America—after all, his vision shows him saving Vietnamese children from an explosion. That day, he goes with John to the Phoenix airport to wish him goodbye. At the airport, a plane full of Vietnamese orphans lands, bringing the children to America to be adopted. Dick Jarvits, loitering around the airport, murderously draws a grenade on the children. Owen saves them by telling them in

Vietnamese to lie on the ground, while he leaps high off the ground with John's help and stuffs the grenade onto a cement windowsill, sacrificing himself to shield the children from the explosion. He dies surrounded by John and the nuns who were accompanying the orphans on the plane.

After Owen's death, John returns to Gravesend. Owen's father tells him that Owen's mother conceived him as a virgin, like Mary and Jesus. No one ever believed them, which is why they left the Catholic Church. John thinks that the Meanys are either horribly ignorant or mentally impaired to tell Owen, in all seriousness, that he was born divine. John goes to talk to Rev. Merrill about the Meanys, and Merrill is compelled by Owen's spirit to confess that he is John's father. He had an affair with John's mother after she secretly became a singer for a supper club in Boston.

John goes to Canada on Owen's advice. He joins the Anglican Church and becomes an English teacher for an all-girls boarding school in Toronto, but he never feels Canadian—he remains too obsessed with America, criticizing its dishonest government and careless citizens. He refuses to move back to America, however. His powerful grief over Owen's traumatic death leaves him stuck in the past, unable to forgive his country or start a new life. Meanwhile, Hester becomes a world-famous rock star by singing about the war, but John can only wait and pray for God to bring Owen back.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John Wheelwright – The narrator and protagonist of the book, John is an American living in Canada and teaching English at an all-girls Anglican boarding school. He is Tabitha's son and Dan's stepson, and although he adores his stepfather, John spends much of his life trying to find out who is biological father is. When he finally realizes that it's the local reverend, Rev. Lewis Merrill, who is known for his doubt-filled sermons, John is deeply disappointed. In the book, John recalls how he came to believe in God after experiencing the extraordinary life story of his best friend from childhood, Owen Meany. If Owen's life mirrored that of Jesus Christ, John's life mirrors that of Jesus's father, Joseph—a passive bystander, a sidelined virgin. Throughout his childhood, John always goes along with whatever plans Owen or John's rowdy cousins (Hester, Noah, and Simon) suggest, rarely acting for himself. He never approaches girls with confidence, and he depends on Owen to help him through school and to help him escape the draft. John experiences many senseless tragedies in his life—his mother's premature death in a freak accident at poor Owen's hands, an untold number of needless deaths in Vietnam, even the violent death of Owen himself in an attack by a militant teenage psychopath named Dick. John claims that all these tragic deaths effectively "neutered" him (at 45, he's still a virgin), and made him fatalistic and detached from life. Seeing Owen willingly sacrifice himself to save a group of innocent children makes John believe in God, yet he does not believe that he has the same God-given purpose as Owen did. After Owen's death, John becomes painfully frustrated with the sheer amount of evil and complacent stupidity present in the world, but feels that he lacks the means to change anything. He concludes the book by humbling asking God to give Owen Meany back to him—but perhaps what he needs more is to be given a purpose of his own.

Owen Meany – One of the protagonists of the novel, Owen Meany is John Wheelwright's best friend and the reason he believes in God. Born premature, Owen is raised at his family's granite quarry, where he is exposed to massive amounts of dust. Owen is freakishly small and has a grating voice, which is trapped in a perpetual high-pitched scream, though he makes up for his small stature with his outsized opinions, exerting a strong persuasive influence over everyone he meets. He is obsessed with the image of the **armless man** from town legend, especially after he accidentally kills John's mother, Tabitha Wheelwright, with a foul **baseball** when he and John are eleven, and becomes convinced that his arms belong to God. Owen's parents tell him that that Mrs. Meany became pregnant with him while she was still a virgin, meaning that Owen was a miracle, a son of God like Jesus himself. While they were likely mistaken, Owen nonetheless believes from a young age that he is meant to be God's instrument. As a young boy, Owen begins to have a recurring dream that reveals to him when and how he will die—somewhere tropical, surrounded by nuns, and saving Vietnamese children from an explosion by "slam-dunking" a grenade away from the children with John's help. Although Owen can be prideful and combative, he is also strongly principled and believes wholeheartedly in doing what he can for his country. He is far from blindly patriotic, however, and he knows he is meant to sacrifice his life for foreign children, not Americans. He bravely sets out to meet his duty as God's martyr, and faithfully prepares for the day when he is to save a group of Vietnamese children from dying in an explosion. Eventually that day comes, and he dies exactly as he's dreamed it all these years: as a selfless hero, sent by God to be just the right person at just the right place at just the right time.

John's Mother / Tabitha Wheelwright – John's mother, who is killed by Owen Meany's foul **ball** when the boys were just eleven years old. She had a gifted singing voice and a stunning figure of which her sister, Martha, was always jealous. John compares Tabitha to a cat, saying she looked perfectly touchable in theory, but rarely wished to be touched, by nature. She was very sweet-tempered, which made it difficult for anyone to stay angry at her for long. She wielded this to her advantage when she defied her parents' wishes by not going to college and becoming pregnant from an illicit affair. Refusing to

bow to scornful opinion, she raised her son proudly and never apologized for her choices. She firmly denied John's father, Rev. Lewis Merrill, any say in their son's life. She believed in doing what made her happy, and secretly performed in a dinner club in Boston once a week under the stage name "The Lady in Red." When she met her future husband, Dan Needham, on the train, she trusted her judgment absolutely and knew she would marry him. She was very loving as well as being naturally lovable, and she showed enormous care and affection for Owen Meany, John's best friend, who lacked for the same love and opportunities that John always had.

Rev. Lewis Merrill – Tabitha Wheelwright's ex-lover and John's biological father. The popular pastor at the Congregational Church, Merrill has a degree in English from Princeton and speaks eloquently. His congregation loves him because he shares their doubt and reassures them that skepticism is normal and can be conquered by faith. He tries to help Owen Meany when Owen is troubled by his visions of the future and his parents' claim that he is the product of a virgin birth, but Merrill does not believe that Owen was truly an instrument of God. He memorably leads Gravesend Academy in a prayer for Owen Meany after Owen's unjust persecution by the headmaster, Randolph White. However, Owen believes Merrill to be a hypocrite and a coward after he discovers that Merrill had an extramarital affair with Tabitha Wheelwright. Merrill believes he caused Tabitha's death when, overcome with guilt regarding their affair, he prayed to God that she would drop dead; moments later, Owen accidentally killed her with a **foul ball**, and Tabitha really did drop dead. Merrill thinks God has turned away from him after such evil thoughts. John finds this idea preposterous, and is disgusted with his father's selfish imagination. Merrill's faith in God is soundly restored when John plants his mother's **armless mannequin** outside the church window to make him believe that Tabitha has descended from heaven to give him a message.

John's Stepfather / Dan Needham – John's stepfather and Tabitha's husband. Dan met Tabitha on the train from Boston to Gravesend when he was on his way to interview at Gravesend Academy for a teaching position. He teaches history and theater to high schoolers and directs the local amateur theatre troupe, the Gravesend Players. His family background is as upper-crust as the Wheelwrights', only more high-powered; however, he cut ties with his family because they disapprove of him for squandering his Harvard education on a teaching career and marrying a woman with an illegitimate child. Above all, he is a kind and compassionate man. He understands children and adolescents and shows his students more empathy than the rest of the faculty at Gravesend. He is a wonderful father to John, and he tries his best to help Owen Meany, whom he cares for deeply as well. After Tabitha's premature death, he never remarries. He inspires John to become a teacher.

Dick Jarvits – The antagonist in the novel, Dick Jarvits is a deeply troubled teenage boy whose older brother, Frank, was killed in Vietnam. Dick is obsessed with war and killing, and he often arms himself with lethal weaponry that his brother smuggled home from Vietnam and loiters menacingly around the airport. Although the airport security guards usually confiscate his weapons, they always return the weapons to him at the end of the day. One day, when a group of nuns and Vietnamese children are disembarking from a plane, Dick finally makes his move, throwing a grenade into the bathroom where the children have stopped off at. Just like in his dream, Owen Meany catches the grenade and does his long-practiced "slam-dunk" move with John to get the grenade as far from the children as possible. Owen dies in the explosion, and Major Rawls kills Dick, but everyone else is safe.

John's Grandmother / Harriet Wheelwright – John's grandmother. Harriet was widowed from a young age, but she took great satisfaction in managing her family and her house herself. She was descended from John Adams, and her family first came to America on the *Mayflower*. She married a Wheelwright, which was a very important family in Gravesend. She was a traditional puritanical New Englander and a highborn elitist who greatly minded her reputation, but she loved her daughters, Tabitha and Martha, and her grandchildren very much. She generously took in her longtime maid, Lydia, after Lydia lost her leg to cancer, and hired a pair of maids, Ethel and Germaine, to look after both her and Lydia. She also served as Owen Meany's benefactor when he needed help purchasing a private school uniform and school supplies. She eventually became obsessed with television and died while channel surfing. She maintained her proud spirit until the end, demanding to be royally catered to.

Hester Eastman – John Wheelwright's female cousin, who is younger than her two brothers, Noah and Simon Eastman, but one year older than John. Being younger and smaller than her brothers, she can never beat them in their endless athletic competitions. They make fun of her for being a girl and generally make her feel inferior. Hester's parents, Alfred and Martha Eastman, also treat her as inferior to her brothers when they won't let her attend a private high school or a university like the boys do. She takes her revenge on her family for their sexist attitudes by flouting every rule of female modesty and chastity they expect of her, and sleeping freely with whomever she pleases—including most of her brothers' friends. She later becomes involved with Owen Meany for the last several years of his life. After he willingly martyrs himself and dies, she refuses to attend his funeral in protest of his choice, but grieves him for the rest of her life, believing that Owen was truly her soulmate. In his memory, she becomes a famous anti-war rock star, and never seriously dates again.

Mr. Meany – Owen's father and Mrs. Meany's husband. Mr. Meany is from a working-class, Boston Irish family, and owns a

granite quarry. He resents the private Gravesend Academy and is reluctant to send his son there. He firmly believes that his wife conceived Owen when she was a virgin, and when the Catholic churches in Massachusetts rejected them, they moved to New Hampshire and stopped going to church altogether. He eventually loses his son, his wife, and his quarry, and becomes a part-time meter reader for the electric company.

Mrs. Meany – Owen's mother and Mr. Meany's wife. She never leaves the house or opens the windows, because she is supposedly allergic to dust. She rarely speaks, and she is likely mentally impaired. She wholeheartedly believes that she became pregnant with Owen while she was still a virgin, like Mary, and was painfully ostracized when she looked to members of the Catholic Church for support. After Owen hits the **baseball** that kills Tabitha Wheelwright in a freak accident, Mrs. Meany becomes convinced that her son is the child of God. After Owen is killed by a grenade, she often sits by the fireplace and wears his American flag as a shawl, until it accidentally catches fire one night and burns her. She dies in the hospital.

Randolph "Randy" White – Randy White succeeds Archibald Thorndike as the headmaster of Gravesend Academy. He was previously the headmaster of a small private school in Lake Forest, Illinois, a wealthy community that has historically excluded people of color or Jews from moving in. Before working in education, he was a businessman in the Chicago meat industry. An authoritarian headmaster and a Republican, White frequently butts heads with Owen Meany. He is more concerned with fundraising and financial liability than the wellbeing of his students. When Owen pranks the school by moving Dr. Dolder's car onto the stage of the auditorium, White refuses to ask for professional help to remove the car and becomes trapped while trying to get it out. He ignores the students' rights by going through their wallets when Larry Lish is caught with one of Owen's fake draft cards, and tries to get Owen's college acceptances rescinded. He is dismissed from the school after Owen's class graduates.

Dr. Dolder – The school psychiatrist at Gravesend Academy, Dr. Dolder is an elderly Swiss man. He attributes John's difficulties in school to his childhood trauma rather than his learning disabilities. After hearing about Owen's insulting proposition to Mitzy Lish and his earlier role in the accidental death of Tabitha, Dr. Dolder concludes that Owen is obsessed with older women. Whenever he has too much to drink, he leaves his car blocking Owen's parking spot at school, prompting Owen to pull a grand prank one morning, having the strong basketball players lift the car and deposit it on the stage of the auditorium.

Noah Eastman – The eldest of John Wheelwright's rambunctious cousins, Noah is three years older than John. He and his brother, Simon, are essentially good-natured, but they are extremely rowdy and competitive as children, and they lord their greater age and strength over their younger sister, Hester. Noah struggles with the demanding academics of Gravesend Academy and had to repeat his freshman year. He later goes into the Peace Corps to avoid going to Vietnam.

Simon Eastman – Noah Eastman's younger brother, Simon is two years older than John. He is wilder than Noah in childhood, and relishes crashing down mountains and provoking Noah into beating him up. He has injured his knees so many time in skiing accidents that he is judged physically unable to serve in Vietnam.

Martha Eastman – John Wheelwright's aunt, Alfred Eastman's wife, and the mother of Noah, Simon, and Hester. Martha has always been slightly envious of her younger sister, Tabitha Wheelwright, who perpetually outshines Martha with her naturally lovely voice and beautiful figure. Martha claims that Tabitha is "a little simple" because she never went to college and became pregnant with a stranger she met on the train (Rev. Lewis Merrill). Yet she loved Tabitha a great deal, and is always warm to John. John calls her "a model of womanhood," as sweet-tempered and happily domestic as could possibly be. However, being so content with her conventional path, Martha fails to understand how other women like her sister or her daughter could prefer a less traditional life.

Alfred Eastman – John Wheelwright's uncle, Martha Eastman's husband, and the father of Noah, Simon, and Hester. Alfred owns an extremely successful lumber company—"a lumber baron," John calls him—and he embodies the height of masculine potency: both staggeringly rich and strappingly fit. He believes in giving his sons the best education possible, but doesn't care much about the education of his only daughter, to her great anger and hurt.

Mr. Chickering – The kind manager and coach of John Wheelwright and Owen Meany's Little League **baseball** team. Right before Tabitha's death, he tells Owen to bat for John in the lineup, and later tells Owen to go ahead and swing at the ball instead of taking a walk. When Owen hits a foul ball that strikes and kills John's mother, Chickering both protects the modesty of Tabitha's body (rearranging her body so that her legs aren't splayed apart) and prevents John from seeing the traumatic sight of his dead mother by throwing his jacket over John's face. Chickering dies of Alzheimer's in later years, but never forgot that day.

Lydia – The Wheelwrights' former cook and housekeeper. After Lydia has her leg amputated due to cancer, Harriet hires two other maids, Ethel and Germaine, to care for her and Lydia. The family takes care of Lydia for the rest of her life, treating her as one of their own, and she always imitates the dignified Harriet Wheelwright. She develops dementia and dies at home on Christmas Eve while Owen Meany is performing in *The Christmas Carol*.

Rev. Dudley Wiggin – An ex-pilot who became an Episcopalian

clergyman, Dudley Wiggin is the rector of Christ Church. He flew a bomber plane in World War II and later believes that God supports America in the Vietnam War. John Wheelwright finds him rather crass compared to Rev. Lewis Merrill, and Dan Needham calls him "Captain Wiggin" for his brash pilot's manner. Owen Meany is able to manipulate Wiggin into going along with all of his ideas for the church's Christmas pageant.

Barb Wiggin – A red-headed former stewardess, Barb is brash like her husband, Rev. Dudley Wiggin. She enjoys picking up Owen Meany, who hates her. He antagonizes her by seizing control of her Christmas pageant, and she gets her revenge by manhandling him and giving him an erection right before the curtain goes up. As a former stewardess, Barb likes to run a tight ship, and Owen's meddling infuriates her.

Harold Crosby – A Sunday school classmate of John Wheelwright and Owen Meany's, Harold Crosby is a quiet, overweight boy who is unwillingly cast as the airborne Announcing Angel in the Christmas Pageant, despite being afraid of heights. He forgets his lines and throws up all over himself after Barb Wiggin leaves him hanging suspended in the air after the show. He later escapes the military draft by acquiring a deferment for psychological reasons.

Mary Beth Baird – A Sunday school classmate of John Wheelwright and Owen Meany, Mary Beth Baird is a shy, clumsy, and plain girl unexpectedly chosen by Owen to play Mary in the Christmas pageant. She subsequently falls in love with Owen and tries to smother him with unrequited, inappropriate affection during the performance. Later she becomes pregnant and drops out of high school, marrying a boy from a dairy farming family.

Buzzy Thurston – A boy on John Wheelwright and Owen Meany's Little League **baseball** team. He hits just before Owen in the lineup. In the game where Owen hits the foul ball that kills Tabitha Wheelwright, Buzzy reaches base on an error, allowing Owen to come to bat. After he graduates college and becomes eligible for the draft, he tries to convince the draft board that he is psychologically unfit to serve by consuming a spectacular amount of mind-altering drugs in the two weeks leading up to his physical. He succeeds in appearing psychologically unfit, but becomes addicted to drugs in the process. He fatally crashes his car while under the influence.

Harry Hoyt – Another boy on John Wheelwright and Owen Meany's Little League **baseball** team. He is two spots above Owen in the lineup, and he walks to allow Owen to come to bat in the game where Owen hits the ball that kills Tabitha Wheelwright. He later enlists in the Navy and dies of a snake bite he receives while peeing outside of a brothel in Vietnam. He comes to represent the unfortunate American soldiers who died needlessly in the war.

Mrs. Hoyt – Harry Hoyt's mother. A widow who later loses her son to the Vietnam War, Mrs. Hoyt protests against the war and tries to help other boys evade the draft. She also teaches John Wheelwright that criticizing a specific American president or policy is not anti-American or pro-Communist. She is unjustly fired for her political views and eventually moves away.

Mr. Morrison – The town mailman. Mr. Morrison is a tall and extremely gloomy man whom Dan Needham casts as the ominous Ghost of Christmas Future in *A Christmas Carol*. However, Mr. Morrison vainly resigns from the part when he realizes that he has no lines, and is swiftly replaced by Owen Meany. He faints when Owen has a fit on stage.

Mr. Early – Maureen Early's father. An English teacher at Gravesend Academy who is also the school newspaper advisor under Headmaster Archibald Thorndike. He tries to defend Owen Meany's bold editorials in the paper, but is mostly useless. He is also involved in the town theater, although he is a poor actor who tends to act as if every role he plays is deeply tragic. He plays Marley's Ghost in *A Christmas Carol*.

Canon Mackie – The rector at Grace Church-on-the-Hill who succeeds Canon Campbell. John Wheelwright finds him warm and kind, but less sympathetic than Canon Campbell and less willing to debate the finer points of religion. He constantly pushes John to renounce his obsession with American politics and assimilate into Canadian society. He believes John lives in the past, and speaks frankly to John about his fatalism.

Amanda and Arthur Dowling – A young married couple who believe in challenging gender norms. The Dowlings always request to be cast in the roles of the opposite sex in Gravesend's theatrical productions. They also protest against girls' exclusion from Little League **baseball** and against the types of sexist stereotypes in classic literature taught to children.

Archibald Thorndike – The headmaster of Gravesend Academy during John Wheelwright and Owen Meany's first two years of high school. "Thorny" is a classic "old-school" headmaster beloved by the student body. He believes in educating "the whole boy," and values both sports and intellect highly. He respects and defends Owen, who nonetheless believes the headmaster to be a fool.

Larry Lish – A classmate of Owen and John's, Larry is the rich, spoiled son of Herb Lish, a movie producer, and Mitzy Lish, a socialite. Larry is said to be "a charming sociopath" and a womanizer who seduces girls into sleeping with him, then forces them to get abortions in Sweden if they become pregnant. He is a witty editor of the school newspaper, and he offends Owen by repeating a rumor heard from his mother that Marilyn Monroe is sleeping with President Kennedy, who is Owen's idol. Larry gets Owen expelled from school by tattling on Owen for making him a fake ID to buy alcohol. Ironically, he eventually becomes a well-known journalist who writes with a self-righteous and moralizing tone.

Mitzy Lish – The mother of Larry Lish and ex-wife of Herb Lish,

Mitzy Lish spoils her son with parties and girls, then cleans up after his messes. She is vain about her good looks, and is accustomed to the life of a rich socialite. A relentless gossip, Mitzy tells Owen Meany that President Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe are having an affair, and laughs at Owen's earnest defense of the president. When Owen is rude to her in return, she tries to have him expelled, claiming that he was being anti-Semitic because she's Jewish.

Father Findley – Father Findley is the head of St. Michael's, the Catholic church from which Owen Meany removed and vandalized the **statue of Mary Magdalene**. Father Dingley kindly forgives Owen for mutilating the statue and tries to help his case with college admissions, since Randolph White is trying to have all of Owen's offers rescinded.

Canon Campbell – The rector at Grace Church-on-the-Hill. Canon Campbell is interested in helping Americans who have fled to Canada. He introduces John Wheelwright to Teddybear Kilgour, who gives him a job at Bishop Strachan. Before his death, Campbell welcomes John into the Anglican church and helps him adapt to his newfound faith and his new life in Canada.

Major Rawls – A ROTC professor in Arizona who serves as the Army's liaison to the family of Frank Jarvits, a fallen soldier. Even after fighting in Korea and Vietnam, he was never promoted to lieutenant colonel. Major Rawls kills Dick Jarvits after Dick kills Owen Meany with a grenade at the airport.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Chief Ben Pike – The town police chief who has always wanted to find the missing **baseball** that killed Tabitha Wheelwright. John Wheelwright later dates his daughter, Lorna.

Maureen Early – Mr. Early's daughter. A girl in John Wheelwright and Owen Meany's year, Maureen wets her pants watching Owen perform as the terrifying Ghost of Christmas future in *A Christmas Carol*. She is best friends with Caroline O'Day.

Caroline O'Day – A girl in John Wheelwright and Owen Meany's year who attends St. Michael's Catholic school. She casually dates John but mostly rejects his advances. She is best friends with Maureen Early.

Rev. Katherine Keeling – The headmistress of Bishop Strachan. Wise and kind Rev. Katherine Keeling is a close friend of John Wheelwright. She often invites John to join her large family in their cozy vacation home on a tiny, secluded island in the Canadian wilderness, where he can get away from the world.

Mr. and Mrs. Ginger Brinker-Smith – A young British couple who live in the dormitories at Gravesend Academy. The unnamed husband, a biology teacher, once invited his attractive wife, Ginger, to demonstrate breastfeeding their newborn twins in class. John and Owen frequently fantasize about Ginger.

Graham McSwiney – Tabitha Wheelwright's voice teacher. He diagnoses Owen Meany with a permanently fixed larynx and tells Owen and John Wheelwright about Tabitha's secret singing gig as "The Lady in Red" at a supper club in Boston.

Buster Freebody – A queer black man who accompanied Tabitha Wheelwright on piano during her performances as "The Lady in Red" at a supper club in Boston. Owen and John try to find him and ask him about Tabitha, but eventually John learns that Buster has since passed away.

Teddybear Kilgour – The elderly principal of Bishop Strachan who trusts young John Wheelwright to teach at an all-girls school. He meets John through Canon Campbell.

Mrs. Walker – The Sunday school teacher for John and Owen's class. Mrs. Walker frequently left the class unsupervised, likely to take smoke breaks. John and Owen admired her legs when she displayed them in town theatrical productions.

Germaine – One of the maids who replaces Lydia, Germaine is shy and superstitious. She believes Owen Meany is unnatural and prone to devilish mischief. She resigns after Lydia dies.

Ethel – One of the maids who replaces Lydia, Ethel is strong and capable but lacks intelligence and confidence.

Mr. Fish – Harriet Wheelwright's neighbor. He owns a black Labrador named Sagamore who is struck and killed by a diaper truck. He plays Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, and is terrified of Owen Meany as the Ghost of Christmas Future.

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.

FATE AND PREDESTINATION

In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John Irving explores the concept of fate and predestination in the lives of his characters. The book's narrator, John Wheelwright, describes the unusual history of his friend Owen Meany, who has a very detailed vision of his own death at a young age. Later, Owen dies exactly as he once foresaw. This incredible story raises the question of whether or not Owen's death was truly "fated," or if he had any free will about the matter. If he truly lacked control over his destiny, does that mean that all of humanity is also powerless to choose the course of their own lives? Irving does not explicitly answer this question in the novel, instead leaving readers to contemplate the issue for themselves—a push towards individual judgment that is suggestive in itself. However, the novel implies that while

Owen may have known his destiny, he had to actively choose to fulfill it, and so retained his free will in his life.

Both the extremely specific and unusual nature of Owen's death and his accurate prediction of it suggest that he was always linked to a particular destiny, thereby emphasizing the power of fate. However, this situation also points to the power of free will—glimpsing such a specific vision of his own possible death presents Owen with the opportunity, if he so chooses, to avoid ever putting himself in such a situation. Owen's idea of his own death comes from a recurring dream where he sacrifices himself to save a group of Vietnamese children and nuns from an explosion somewhere in a warm place with palm trees. At the end of the book, he dies in exactly that way: at an airport in Arizona, he runs into a group of Vietnamese orphans being escorted to new homes in America by nuns, and he dies from the injuries he receives when he shields them from a grenade. Owen even knew the exact date of his death and the exact way in which he would manage to save the orphans: by pulling off a perfect "slam dunk" shot with John to thrust the grenade out of harm's way.

While this fulfilled prophesy points to the power of fate, Owen's foresight regarding his own death also emphasizes the equal power of free will: if Owen had wanted to reject his fate, he simply could have planned to spend the day of his supposed death at home in New Hampshire, where he was unlikely to come across Vietnamese orphans, nuns, or grenades. As a child, Owen never once left the town where he was born—it would have been perfectly natural for him to never travel to a new climate, or at least not until the day of his premature "death" passed. Yet instead of thinking about how to preserve his own safety, or passively following the course of the provincial life he was born into, Owen actively pursues his fateful vision—that is, he uses free will to prepare for and bring about his fate—determined to save the innocent lives he saw in danger. For years, he tirelessly rehearses the slam-dunk shot with John. He voluntarily enlists in the Reserve Officer Training Corps to become a soldier and fight overseas in Vietnam. He even studies Vietnamese to be able to communicate with the children he saw his dream. Rather than use free will to escape his fate, or have no choice in the matter whatsoever, Owen does everything he can think of to position himself for his fated martyrdom.

As the day of his imminent death draws closer, Owen continues to carry out the final preparations for his sacrifice, even when the hardest choice he has to make is about putting his best friend at risk. In his recurring dream, Owen always saw John with him at the moment of his death, which frightened Owen because he was more concerned for his friend's life than his own. At first, he seeks to prevent John from being drafted into the war so that John can't join him in Vietnam, where Owen logically expects to die. Yet as time goes by and the military continues to employ Owen in roles on American soil rather than deploying him overseas, Owen begins to have doubts about when or where he is supposed to die—or if he's even supposed to die, after all. However, when he is assigned to a body escort mission in Arizona the week of his death, he realizes that Arizona could be the warm place of his dream, and he could still have the opportunity to save people. Focusing on the innocent lives he has the potential to save buoys Owen and strengthens his resolve to use free will to bring about his fate. In order to move everything into place, Owen invites John to spontaneously come to Arizona with him, knowing John is instrumental to the slam-dunk from his vision. John would not have been on the scene if Owen had not brought him there; Owen had to make the difficult choice of exposing his friend to trauma and violence (that is, exercise free will) in order to save many other lives and allow his fate to play out.

Even if Owen could not have predicted from the start that he would die at the hands of a deranged teenager named Dick in an airport restroom in Arizona, he was always willing to become a martyr, and repeatedly chose the path he believed would take him there. In other words, Owen was always an active participant in his fate, not a passive victim. Throughout the novel, Irving emphasizes Owen's firm will and conscious decisions to try and carry out his "destiny." He could have stepped back or turned away, but he chose not to. A significant quote in the book from the theologian Søren Kierkegaard reinforces Irving's idea that following one's faith into a designated fate is a formidable act of will and selflessness rather than a passively divine outcome: "What no person has a right to is to delude others into the belief that faith is something of no great significance, or that it is an easy matter, whereas it is the greatest and most difficult of all things." Owen's precise foreknowledge of his fate made the circumstances of his choice more extraordinary, but the basic principle of his experience—coupled with his Christian faith—suggests that even those believers who have not seen God's exact plan for them can actively work to bring about their destiny.

CHRISTIANITY AND FAITH

In the opening sentence of John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the narrator, John Wheelwright, announces that his childhood friend "is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany." Neither John nor Owen are strictly religious in the sense of belonging to one specific church or practicing careful rituals, but they profess to believe in the existence of God. However, many of their attitudes and actions throughout the book seem sacrilegious—the boys' Sunday School is useless, the annual Christmas pageant is a farce, and the reverend fathered an illegitimate child, who happens to be John. Furthermore, once the war rolls around, God seems absent from a world filled with so much senseless violence and suffering, and John wrestles

with how to overcome his doubt amidst so much pain and evil. In light of these contradictions, the novel seems to suggest that a fully informed and thoughtful inner faith, not blind adherence to dogma, is the most meaningful way to approach religion and belief.

One of the book's most consistent messages about true faith is how difficult it is for most people, positioning genuine faith as rare and valuable. In the opening pages of the novel, John disdains the Sunday school teacher who frequently leaves the classroom to go on smoke breaks: "Mrs. Walker would read us an instructive passage from the Bible. She would then ask us to think seriously about what we had heard—'Silently and seriously, that's how I want you to think!' she would say. 'I'm going to leave you alone with your thoughts, now [...] I want you to think *very* hard.'" However, the woman's encouragement to respond to the Bible with profound individual reflection is a method John would himself adopt in later years. The novel suggests that "think[ing] *very* hard" about philosophy and morals matters more than blind belief. As an adult, John observes, "According to *The New York Times*, a new poll has revealed that most Americans believe that President Reagan is lying; what they should be asked is, *Do they care?*" Believing that something wrong is being done without caring enough to do anything about it is like believing in Christianity and its principles without actually thinking about how to live by them.

According to Owen, true Christian faith requires a genuine belief in things unseen. One of the distinctions the book makes between shallow faith and profound faith is made clear in the difference between Christmas and Easter. The miracle of birth, if not Christ's birth, is witnessed every day on Earth; the miracle of resurrection, never. Therefore, most people find it easier to believe in Christmas than in Easter. Owen declares that real Christians must be able to believe in a miracle the likes of which they've never seen: "IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN EASTER [...] DON'T CALL YOURSELF A CHRISTIAN." Similarly, Owen and John look down on performative religion as it is staged in the absurd Christmas pageant and the popular biblical epics of the time, believing that the earthly portrayal of holy events is ridiculous and "SACRILEGIOUS." Owen objects, "'YOU CAN'T TAKE A MIRACLE AND JUST SHOW IT! [...] YOU CAN'T PROVE A MIRACLE—YOU JUST HAVE TO BELIEVE IT! IF THE RED SEA ACTUALLY PARTED, IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE THAT [...] IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE ANYTHING—IT'S NOT A PICTURE ANYONE CAN EVEN IMAGINE!'" In his view, pure Christian faith resists the crutch of earthly representation.

On the other hand, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is ultimately created around the "proven" miracle of Owen's dramatic martyrdom. After seeing a detailed vision of his death at a young age, Owen spends most of his life preparing to sacrifice himself to save a group of innocent children, and his heroic death unfolds exactly as he foresaw. John believes in God because he personally witnesses this contemporary miracle. This would seem to contradict the boys' emphasis on the superiority of the unseen miracle to the seen one, and perhaps Irving seeks to lightly undermine or challenge some of their most rigid statements about belief. Of course, John claims that there is a difference between faith based in the "real miracle" of Owen Meany, and faith based in the type of staged miracle that John himself orchestrated in order to restore Reverend Lewis Merrill's lost faith—planting an **armless mannequin** in the exact likeness of John's deceased mother underneath the reverend's window in order to make him believe that she had visited him from the beyond. However, John acknowledges that Owen himself would probably treat *any* revival of faith as miraculous—after all, "GOD WORKS IN STRANGE WAYS!"

Ironically, the faith inspired in Rev. Merrill by John's illusion is more secure than the faith inspired in John by Owen's "real miracle." John both longs for and mistrusts the "absolute and unshakable faith" in God that Rev. Merrill develops. John despairs, "My belief in God disturbs and unsettles me much more than not believing ever did [...] belief poses so many unanswerable questions! [...] If God had a hand in what Owen 'knew,' what a horrible question that poses! For how could God have let that happen to Owen Meany?" However, John nonetheless believes that a faith that engages with these unanswerable questions, rather than ignoring them or disregarding them, is better to practice—in other words, unanswered questions surrounding faith and religion are far better than unquestioned answers.

John aspires to a faith that is clear-eyed and judicious, a faith resulting from thoughtful contemplation, and a faith that one lives by, not merely pays shallow homage to. He exclaims at one point in the novel, "Watch out for people who call themselves religious; make sure you know what they mean—make sure they know what they mean!" To John, not being able to fully explain or justify what one means when calling oneself a believer is a sign of empty religion, devoid of introspection and genuine faith. However, the fact that it took witnessing the miraculous martyrdom of his best friend to instill John's faith reminds readers that he, too, is flawed, and his ideal faith in the unseen is not so very easy to attain.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is a novel that mixes progressive statements about women's intelligence and fortitude with a relentless objectification and critique of women's bodies. Through its frequent references to literary works such as *The Scarlet Letter* that grapple with gender (and the fact that *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is itself a literary work), the book highlights the role literature plays in shaping and perpetuating gender stereotypes. While the novel's main characters, John Wheelwright and Owen Meany, admire a small handful of

sharp and complex women, the book's broader treatment of its female characters is negative and steeped in stereotype.

John's mother, Tabitha, is on the one hand a liberated woman who refuses to be shamed for the supposed transgression of conceiving a child out of wedlock. However, her link to the adulterous protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter* reveals Irving's reliance on stereotype. Tabitha initially seems like an empowered character, because she never feels compelled to apologize or atone for her affair and her pregnancy. John discovers near the end of the book that his biological father is Reverend Lewis Merrill, his mother's pastor. Their affair pointedly recalls the affair between protagonist Hester Prynne and the minister Arthur Dimmesdale in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, also set in a small, conservative New England town. Hester Prynne is the more revolutionary of the pair in *The Scarlet Letter*, arguing that their love for one another doesn't warrant absolute condemnation from their community. Tabitha feels similarly, and refuses to be branded by the town, despite the number of unenlightened attitudes toward her that seem to have been preserved from Hester Prynne's seventeenth-century ordeal. Tabitha's enduring dignity and willful defiance of her town's oppressive norms presents what initially appears to be a positive representation of women. However, Tabitha proves to be the exception, not the rule, for female dignity in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*—and even then, her adultery and relationship to men (the extramarital lover of Rev. Merrill and the mother to illegitimate child John Wheelwright) defines her character.

Hester Eastman's character in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* appears to overcome the legacy of Hawthorne's oppressed Hester Prynne, who bears the same first name. Hester Eastman is a brash, strong-willed woman who believes in embracing and wielding her sexuality, and eventually she becomes a world-famous rock star. However, Hester's powerful rebellion against gender norms is generally dismissed as "an overdose of sexual aggression and family animosity." John recognizes how Hester's life was shaped by the rampant sexism she encountered in her family, but he discredits her principled protest as shallow personal revolt. Hester's family has always turned her gender against her, denying her the same opportunities, liberties, and basic respect that her brothers took for granted. Her parents send her brothers away to broaden their horizons at boarding schools and colleges far from home, while she graduates from the local public high school and has to enroll at the local college. The family's double standard for Hester and her brothers, spurning and stifling her individual potential, reflects the sexism that has defined New England society since the time of *The Scarlet Letter*, when women were understood to be weaker in faith and mind than men. Hester's brothers, Noah and Simon, constantly degrade her and treat her gender as something shameful. John largely goes along with his male cousins' attitudes, only later in life reflecting on what it must have felt like for Hester to believe "that kissing Hester was punishment, the penalty part of the game; to have to kiss Hester meant you had lost." Even her prepubescent sexuality was a perpetual offense in her brothers' eyes, and she was powerless to stop them from forcing her and John to kiss over and over. As soon as Hester grows into her own sexuality, she embraces it in defiance of her family's paternalistic and sexist principles of feminine chastity. John explains, "To drive them to madness was the penalty she exacted for all of them treating her 'like a girl.'" However, attributing all of Hester's radical actions to a reaction against her family's view of her undermines her own autonomy and principles, and reduces her yet again to her gender.

Furthermore, throughout the novel Owen and John never cease to comment on women's bodies, rudely reducing women to mere objects. As young boys, Owen and John assess the breasts of the mothers they know; as schoolboys, they asses their classmates' breasts. They dissect Hester's sex appeal, ogle Mrs. Walker's legs, and discuss how pregnancy affects women's desirability. They feel somewhat ashamed for their lust, but not for their disrespect of women. The novel itself includes hardly a dignified female character. Hester is a wild, drunken wreck, unable to get over Owen Meany. The boys' classmates, like Mary Beth Baird, are brainless objects of ridicule. The older women they meet, like Barb Wiggins and Mitzy Lish, are "whorish flirt[s]" who torment Owen and John sexually, while the Wheelwrights' maids are all slow and stupid.

As a much older man, John has many highly respectful things to say about his friend and boss the Rev. Katherine Keeling—"she is wise and kind and witty and articulate"—yet he cannot stop thinking about how she should govern her body. He remarks, "I think Katherine is terrific; but she is too thin," and later adds, "My only qualm with her is when she's pregnant. The Rev. Katherine Keeling is often pregnant, and I don't think she should serve the wine when she's so pregnant." Of course, if Rev. Keeling is so often pregnant, chances are she knows by now what she's capable of doing during her pregnancy and doesn't need John's input. Ultimately, the bulk of the female characters in the novel are pigeonholed into female stereotypes, and the rare positive female character is still subjected to derogatory or heavily patriarchal remarks.

The novel's many explicit parallels to *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as the numerous references to other works of literature in the text, reveal Irving's consciousness of literary tradition. He is clearly aware of the powerful influence ideas in literature—especially surrounding the concept of gender—can have upon audiences. In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Irving seems to be making an effort to critique harmful sexism and portray empowered women, but his respect for female dignity leaves a great deal to be desired. With a tolerant "boys will be boys" attitude, the novel indulges the casual misogyny and sexism that its male characters regularly engage in.

POWERLESSNESS

A central theme of John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is powerlessness—be it powerlessness in the face of fate, freak accidents, overpowering forces, or God's will. The book follows two best friends, John Wheelwright and the titular Owen Meany, as they grapple with their own powerless throughout their lives. While powerlessness is typically thought of as synonymous with weakness, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* reveals how powerlessness can sometimes best position people to make great sacrifices.

Two images of powerlessness introduced early in the text change over the course of the book to become images of strength and salvation. The first is the singular image of the exceptionally tiny Owen Meany being unwillingly hoisted into the air by his classmates during Sunday school. He was so little and light that his classmates could lift him above their heads and pass him around the room, despite his vocal objections: "'PUT ME DOWN!' he would say in a strangled, emphatic falsetto. 'CUT IT OUT! I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS ANYMORE. ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. PUT ME DOWN! YOU ASSHOLES!'" Owen's classmates always ignored him, and would continue to play their game whenever their teacher left the room. John Wheelwright, the book's narrator and Owen's best friend, remembers how Owen "grew more fatalistic about it, each time. His body was rigid; he wouldn't struggle. Once we had him in the air, he folded his arms defiantly on his chest; he scowled at the ceiling." Owen accepted that he was powerless to escape his predicament; he even denied himself the opportunity to stop his classmates from harassing him again, refusing to tell on them to the teacher. John claims, "As vividly as any number of the stories in the Bible, Owen Meany showed us what a martyr was," foreshadowing Owen's later—and much greater—act of martyrdom.

The second vivid image of powerlessness that becomes sacrifice is the **armless totem** of Watahantowet, a Native sagamore, or chief. When John's ancestor, the Rev. John Wheelwright, purchased the land for the town of Gravesend from Watahantowet in 1638, town legend recalls that Watahantowet "made his mark upon the deed in the form of his totem—an armless man." The townspeople later wondered why he had chosen that form for his totem, whether "it was how it made the sagamore feel to give up all that land" or perhaps "to indicate the sagamore's frustration at being unable to write." Owen Meany made the helpless, armless figure his own totem when he formally apologized to John for hitting the foul **ball** that struck and killed John's mother. He removed the claws from his and John's favorite toy, a stuffed armadillo, to create a resemblance to the Watahantowet's tragic symbol. On a primary level, the dismemberment of the armadillo showed how horrified and helpless Owen felt after the fatal accident. On a secondary level that John would only later uncover, Owen's declawed armadillo had another message: "GOD HAS TAKEN YOUR MOTHER. MY HANDS WERE THE INSTRUMENT. GOD HAS TAKEN MY HANDS. I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT." Owen was powerless at the moment that he innocently swung at the pitch that would kill Tabitha Wheelwright. He takes from this experience the lesson that all people are powerless in the face of God's will; it is how people receive this fact that matters. Owen decides that he will commit to God's path and sacrifice his own arms, and his life, for God's will.

By the end of the novel, Owen has faithfully delivered himself into God's hands and sacrificed his life to save a group of innocent orphans and nuns. When the moment God has prepared him for arrives, Owen is the only one in the room who is *not* powerless to act. Helpless no more, Owen uses his rare **weightlessness** to propel himself and a deadly grenade out of harm's way, and severs his arms shielding the others from the blast. John describes how Owen was content to finally become the figure whose arms no longer belonged to him: "he tried to reach out to me with his arms [...] he realized that his arms were gone. He didn't seem surprised by the discovery. 'REMEMBER WATAHANTOWET?'" By putting all his faith in God's power rather than his own, Owen was able to accomplish an extraordinary feat and fulfill a great purpose. At the end of the book, John returns to the memory of holding Owen helplessly aloft when they were children, and considers the divine forces that must have made him so miraculously light: "they were the forces we didn't have the faith to feel, they were the forces we failed to believe in—and they were also lifting up Owen Meany, taking him out of our hands." Even at that age, Owen's supposed powerlessness foreshadowed his mighty surrender to God.

John concludes his remembrance with a humble appeal to God: "O God—please give him back! I shall keep asking You." Like Owen's armlessness, John is also damaged by the forces of bloodlust, greed, and hubris that produce so much warfare and violence during his lifetime—he loses a finger to the Vietnam War, and is traumatized by the endless bloodshed and death he witnesses firsthand and watches unfold from afar. He confesses, "What has happened to me has simply *neutered* me." Unlike Owen, John is paralyzed by his powerlessness to change the violent course of the world. His anger and frustration do not have a clear outlet, but his final acceptance of humility before God's will represents a hopeful chance to move closer to a sense of purpose in God just like Owen did.

SYMBOLS

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

THE BASEBALL

When Owen hits the baseball that kills Tabitha, the fatal ball represents a loss of innocence and the different ways people grapple with that loss, especially in the context of religious faith. Owen and John are no longer children, and life is no longer a game. To the novel's characters, the deadly ball is proof of either life's senseless chaos or God's mysterious will at work. People like Chief Pike search for the ball because they want to restore order and understand how this tragic accident could have happened. Everyone thinks that Owen kept the ball in light of his role in Tabitha's death, but Owen understands that God's will cannot be known, and he does not take the ball. Instead, Rev. Lewis Merrill takes the ball, believing that *he* caused God to kill Tabitha by praying for her to die. Tabitha's death prompts Merrill to completely lose his faith, and although he continues to preach, his sermons are laced with doubt. When Merrill later shows John the baseball, John accuses him of childishly believing in a self-centered religion and imagining signs from God instead of recognizing real miracles. John throws the ball through the church window when he tricks Merrill into thinking that Tabitha is sending him a message from the beyond, and the ruse ends up restoring Merrill's faith in a God who speaks to him and forgives him his sins.

ARMLESS TOTEMS

Armlessness is a complex symbol in the book, representing both helplessness and heroic sacrifice in light of God's will. The symbol of the armless totem takes many forms throughout the book, including Chief Watahantowet's armless man, Tabitha's armless mannequin, John's declawed armadillo, the vandalized statue of Mary Magdalene, and even Owen Meany himself after a grenade explosion rips off his arms. The symbol of the armless totem is always associated with Owen, who repeatedly declares, "GOD HAS TAKEN MY HANDS. I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT." (Owen's obsession with symbolism is conspicuous; John himself says, "As always, with Owen Meany, there was the necessary consideration of the *symbols* involved.") Owen alternatingly feels helpless and heroic for being chosen by God. Through these different armless totems, the book highlights how people can despair at losing their arms or agency to greater forces, or they can embrace the path set before them by God and selflessly give up their arms to fulfill his plans. The symbol takes both male and female—and even animal—form, suggesting that all living creatures are subjects of God, dependent on him and capable of submitting to his will. While morbid, armlessness is also an understandable image for children to identify with, given the lack of control that young people have over their own lives. Owen is at his most fixated with armlessness when he is still subject to adults' authority, like when he carves the arms off of the Mary Magdalene statue and leaves it on the school stage following his unjust expulsion.

THE VOICE

Owen's exceptional voice, made unforgettable by the ALL-CAPS formatting of his speech, symbolizes that he is chosen by God. John Irving's special treatment of Owen's speech in the book has been compared to the red-lettering editions of the Bible, in which the words spoken by Jesus are printed in striking red ink, while the rest of the words are printed in black. Owen's voice is thus unmistakably divine, as he himself claims throughout the book. He believes that his voice was made permanently high and childlike by God, suggesting lasting innocence and moral purity and allowing him to communicate his good intentions to the frightened children when he carries out his climactic self-sacrifice. After Owen's death, when divine forces save John from falling down the stairs and also reveal his long-sought-after birth father to him, it is Owen's unmistakable voice speaking to him from the beyond that proves to John beyond a doubt that God is at work.

As a child, Owen sometimes abstains from using his voice, self-conscious of how unusually high and childlike it sounds. Ironically, as Owen gets older and his peers' voices all begin to deepen with puberty, Owen seems to grow into his unchanging, squeaky voice. Rather than avoid drawing attention to his peculiar speech, he makes it central to his adolescent identity, becoming The Voice of Gravesend Academy in the school newspaper. The period when his voice did not change with puberty seems to have confirmed to him the special role God intended for him and his voice to play. If his earlier reluctance to speak represented his doubts and unease about God's design, then his later determination to raise his voice represents his faith and commitment to God's path for him.

WEIGHTLESSNESS

Owen's weightlessness, which forms the opening and closing motif of the book, symbolizes the way that one's flaws or deficiencies actually can be used for good. Throughout the story, John is fixated on Owen's extraordinary lightness and his seeming vulnerability to every minor force, even the meager strength of his young peers. Owen's weakness is deceptive, however. He cannot be budged from any ideological stance; his will is like the heavy granite he mines and refines in the family business. Moreover, the conclusion of the book suggests that Owen's weightlessness was merely a sign of his formidable mission and his election by God. His lightness doesn't stop him from orchestrating enormous feats of strength, from picking up a whole car and carrying it up a flight of stairs to prying up a solid marble statue and depositing it on an auditorium stage. Of course, Owen himself never touched

the car—the basketball team did all the work—nor did he dislodge the statue without a great deal of specialized equipment, but he was the primary force behind these efforts. He transcends his physical limitations by wielding other means of carrying out his objectives. Thus he refuses to let his disadvantage dictate his life, determined to fulfill his ambition by force of will. He trusts in God to help him where his own means fall short; the novel implies that God intervened when he was being tested for the Army's height and weight requirements ("Since when do you weigh one hundred pounds?" John later asks him in disbelief). In the novel's climax, Owen's diminutive size endears him to the frightened Vietnamese children, who quickly follow his orders to get down on the ground, and allows Owen to rise high out of John's hands with the deadly grenade, sacrificing himself to save everyone else.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Collins edition of *A Prayer for Owen Meany* published in 1989.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Owen was so tiny, we loved to pick him up; in truth, we couldn't resist picking him up. We thought it was a miracle: how little he weighed.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright (speaker), Mary Beth Baird, Owen Meany

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The image of Owen being lifted into the air during Sunday school class bookends *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. It subtly foreshadows from the very beginning how the "miracle" of Owen's weightlessness would play a significant part in the story to come, making him seem angelic and set apart from his peers. It also establishes Owen as someone who has always had to contend with other people's claims over his body. His classmates on earth handed him around as they saw fit, while divine forces also had their hands on him at this point, John later thinks. Being in such a humble and helpless position at a young age must have taught Owen to appreciate the humility necessary for true faith in God. Being subject to such treatment also must have shown him firsthand how it feels to be someone who most needs help from God—the vulnerable and the powerless, whom he would bravely try to champion later in life. In high school, he spoke for the students who were subject to the administration's arbitrary regulations. After high school, he joined the military for the purpose of protecting innocent children from violence. His early experiences of being picked up by his peers helped instill his lifelong mission of helping others in God's name.

Chapter 2 Quotes

I think [Hester] was up against a stacked deck from the start, and that everything she would become began for her when Noah and Simon made me kiss her—because they made it clear that kissing Hester was punishment, the *penalty* part of the game; to have to kiss Hester meant you had lost.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright (speaker), Simon Eastman, Noah Eastman, Hester Eastman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

John recalls how his cousins Noah and Simon liked to play a game with him where the loser had to kiss their younger sister, Hester. Hester grew into a very sexually aggressive young woman who slept with all her brothers' friends. She later finds great fame as a rock star known as "Hester the Molester," the name her brothers christened her when they found her playing a board game alone with John when they were children. John imagines that Hester's radical path, "everything she would become," was provoked by her brothers' demeaning treatment of her gender, suggesting that being a woman was a defect and a disgrace. If her family found her sexuality so disgraceful, she was going to disgrace them as much as she possibly could by wielding her sexuality frequently and prominently. She perhaps also internalized her brothers' idea of her and spent the rest of her life living up to the identity they imposed on her of a sexual deviant. It isn't clear exactly what John means by claiming that this incident triggered Hester's evolution into a woman of an exceptionally bold, even transgressive, sexuality. One possibility that John doesn't appear to entertain is that this experience taught Hester about how men oppress women and unthinkingly engage in abusive demonstrations of power. Her brothers repeatedly exert their power over her by forcing her to kiss John unwillingly,

and one way for her to get her power back is to humiliate them in turn.

"Your friend is most *original*," Dan Needham said, with the greatest respect. "Don't you see, Johnny? If he could, he would cut off his *hands* for you—that's how it makes him feel, to have touched that baseball bat, to have swung that bat with those results. It's how we *all* feel—you and me *and* Owen. We've lost a part of ourselves." And Dan picked up the wrecked armadillo and began to experiment with it on my night table, trying—as I had tried—to find a position that allowed the beast to stand, or even to lie down, with any semblance of comfort or dignity; it was quite impossible…

And so Dan and I became quite emotional, while we struggled to find a way to make the armadillo's appearance acceptable—but that was the point, Dan concluded: there was no way that any or all of this *was* acceptable. What had happened was unacceptable! Yet we still had to live with it.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright, John's Stepfather / Dan Needham (speaker), Owen Meany

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Owen, at the young age of eleven and in the aftermath of a shocking tragedy, somehow manages to conceive of a way to express his feelings perfectly without words. After accidentally killing John's mother with a baseball, Owen offers John a gift: the stuffed armadillo they share, but with its arms cut off. John initially fails to understand what he means by mutilating the armadillo, but Dan is able to interpret for John what Owen sought to symbolize. Accidentally killing John's mother made Owen so horrified that he would have cut off his hands if he could. The creature that is missing a crucial part of itself is also a symbol of Tabitha's grieving loved ones—John, Dan, and Owen. That a happy and healthy young woman, newly married, should die in a freak baseball accident on a beautiful summer day is senseless and absurd, like an armadillo without claws. Life is unbelievably ugly at times, and mortals are as helpless in the face of death's whims as creatures without arms. The armadillo toy, like the fatal baseball, also symbolizes John and Owen's ruined innocence, their childhood forever destroyed.

Chapter 3 Quotes

It made [Owen] furious when I suggested that *anything* was an "accident"—especially anything that had happened to him; on the subject of predestination, Owen Meany would accuse Calvin of bad faith. There were *no* accidents; there was a reason for that baseball—just as there was a reason for Owen being small, and a *reason* for his voice. In Owen's opinion, he had INTERRUPTED AN ANGEL, he had DISTURBED AN ANGEL AT WORK, he had UPSET THE SCHEME OF THINGS.

Related Characters: Owen Meany, John Wheelwright (speaker), John's Mother / Tabitha Wheelwright

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

Owen doesn't believe in accidents—he believes in God's purpose. John says that Owen was more extremist in his convictions than John Calvin, the founder of Calvinism, who preached that the lives of all humankind were predetermined by God, making it impossible for anyone to live a good enough life to enter heaven if they weren't already destined for salvation at birth. Owen insists that nothing in life is left to chance; the fatal flight of his baseball that day was due to a divine design. Perhaps this belief is a coping mechanism for Owen, used to keep his grief and despair at bay. He may not be able to bear the thought of all of his suffering being for nothing. His dread of the angel he thought he saw over Tabitha's sleeping body one night seems to predate her death, making it more than a convenient justification for later events, but he and John could both be remembering things even more ominously in hindsight. Throughout the book, John wonders what is worse—believing that nothing one does could have any meaning in a senseless world, or believing that God could really allow such tragedies as his mother's death to take place.

Mrs. Hoyt was the first person I remember who said that to criticize a specific American president was *not* anti-American; that to criticize a specific American policy was *not* antipatriotic; and that to disapprove of our involvement in a particular war against the communists was *not* the same as taking the communists' side. But these distinctions were lost on most of the citizens of Gravesend; they are lost on many of my former fellow Americans today.

Related Characters: Mrs. Hoyt, John Wheelwright (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

When John thinks back to Tabitha's funeral, he reflects on the people there who would die in the years afterward, like Mrs. Hoyt's son. After Tabitha's accidental death, the town is marked by a large number of deaths related to the Vietnam War. In a way, these deaths are even more tragic than Tabitha's because they could have been prevented by the nation not expending its soldiers in such an unwise and unwinnable war. Mrs. Hoyt told John that it was right to question the war and criticize the government if necessary, but most Americans found it unacceptable to challenge their leaders. In a way, their faith in their country was like Owen's faith in God; they needed to believe that their suffering had a purpose. The soldiers' deaths were part of some unknowable design for the greater good, not to be questioned or called meaningless. If they accepted that their sons were sacrificed for nothing, then their grief and rage would be overpowering. The difference is, Americans are not as helpless to change their government's ways as they are to change the will of God, and a government of men and women is infinitely more flawed than God's judgment. People should not neglect the power they have to influence their mortal leaders and protect lives.

> All those same crones, as black and hunchbacked as crows gathered around some roadkill—they came to the service as if to say: We acknowledge, O God, that Tabby Wheelwright was not allowed to get off scot-free.
>
> Getting off "scot-free" was a cardinal crime in New Hampshire. And by the birdy alertness visible in the darting eyes of my grandmother's crones, I could tell that—in their view—my mother had not escaped her just reward.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright (speaker), John's Grandmother / Harriet Wheelwright, John's Mother / Tabitha Wheelwright

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

The elderly women of Gravesend's traditional elite attend Tabitha's funeral to witness the grief of the most superior of them all, Harriet, and to testify that even she and hers were not immune to the strict standards of morality that have governed their lives for so long. Conceiving an illegitimate child had been a considered a great sin in Puritanical New England societies since the days of *The Scarlet Letter*. Decades later, most of these women remain opposed to allowing women any more autonomy over their bodies and their sexuality. They are still obsessed with dictating what women like Tabitha should wear—if not a red letter A on her chest, then certainly not a white dress on her wedding day. Tabitha refused to play by their rules, and she died for it, they think. John himself does not believe this to be true, and the book portrays Tabitha as a wonderful, strong-willed woman who had more conviction and self-respect than the man she had an affair with, and who certainly didn't deserve to die. When Tabitha wore red, it was on her own terms. However, growing up in a community that demanded such modesty and subservience from its women still gave Tabitha damaging notions about her sexuality. She was so concerned about keeping her singing career within strict moral bounds that she invited her pastor to approve her performance, leading them into their affair. Her sexuality was given so much scrutiny that she hated to be seen wearing her red dress. Men leered at her, and women judged her. She couldn't win, and can't even escape society's judgment after her death.

Chapter 4 Quotes

> Barb Wiggin looked at Owen as if she were revising her opinion of how "cute" he was, and the rector observed Owen with a detachment that was wholly out of character for an ex-pilot. The Rev. Mr. Wiggin, such a veteran of Christmas pageants, looked at Owen Meany with profound respect—as if he'd seen the Christ Child come and go, but never before had he encountered a little Lord Jesus who was so perfect for the part.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright (speaker), Rev. Dudley Wiggin, Owen Meany, Barb Wiggin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

This passage shows the Wiggins changing their opinion of Owen, who has been cast in their pageant. Even from a young age, Owen shows the world that he is more formidable than he may appear. His diminutive size and his

piercing, childlike voice cause people to underestimate him, to his immense frustration—he can't stand people taking him lightly. Most superficial misconceptions about Owen are quickly corrected, though, as he is a master of eclipsing others' expectations. The effect he can wield upon people is remarkable, and from this point on John begins to liken him to Jesus Christ himself—whom Owen is about to play in the Christmas pageant. Owen's innate understanding of human nature is unparalleled, and once he reaches the age in which he can put his understanding to use, he becomes a powerful force to be reckoned with, compensating for his delicate appearance with a fearless way of carrying himself and a commanding way of speaking.

Chapter 5 Quotes

"He sounds a little sicker than I had in mind," Dan told me on our way back to town. "I may have to play the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come *myself*. Or maybe—if Owen's too sick—maybe *you* can take the part."

But I was just a Joseph; I felt that Owen Meany had already chosen me for the only part I could play.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright, John's Stepfather / Dan Needham (speaker), Owen Meany

Related Themes:

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

In the Christmas pageant, Owen plays the Christ child, while John plays the part of Joseph. If Owen is the reborn son of God, gifted with superior knowledge and authority, John is Joseph, the mortal husband to the Virgin Mary. A simple carpenter with no role in Jesus's miraculous conception, Joseph is a passive spectator to the birth and life of the Savior. John himself is also a deeply passive character, content to follow while others lead. He lets his cousins walk all over him, going along with all their games and schemes rather than taking a stand against their excessive violence or their teasing of Hester. He fears that they will surely hurt the delicate Owen, but Owen quickly has the Eastmans eating out of the palm of his hand. Unlike John, Owen can stand up for himself and stand behind his convictions. He has the bravery and the faith to carry out what he believes to be right rather than second-guessing himself. Joseph does have the faith to stand by Mary and help her with her holy duty, and John does have enough faith to be a good partner to Owen throughout all the years that Owen insists on practicing the repetitive, ridiculous slam-dunk shot, and is a faithful accomplice to Owen at the climactic moment of Owen's heroic sacrifice. He never outgrows his "Joseph" role, though, even when Owen Meany is gone. He follows Owen's posthumous instructions to go to Canada, and spends the rest of his life praying for Owen to come back. He never prays to be given a purpose in his own life.

Sexual stereotypes did not fall, [Amanda] liked to say, from the clear blue sky; books were the major influences upon children—and books that had boys being boys, and girls being girls, were among the *worst* offenders! *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, for example; they were an education in condescension to women—all by themselves, they *created* sexual stereotypes! *Wuthering Heights*, for example: how that book *taught* a woman to submit to a man made Amanda Dowling "see red," as she would say.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright, Amanda and Arthur Dowling (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 244-245

Explanation and Analysis

Amanda Dowling is a passionate feminist who serves on the Town Library Board, and who condemns books for teaching harmful gender stereotypes to young readers. Irving satirizes her opinion, depicting her objections to classic stories as an oversensitive simplification of the issue. The frequent emphasis to Amanda's words—"*worst* offenders," "*created* sexual stereotypes," "*taught* a woman to submit"—make her sound worked up, even hysterical. Indeed, books are far from the only influence upon children's views of the world, but they do present an important example of behavior to developing minds. John seems to recognize how his male cousins' sexist words had a damaging effect on their sister, and the book's parallels to *The Scarlet Letter* seem to suggest that Irving recognizes the harmful legacy of sexism that would cause people to look down upon Tabitha. At the same time, he is more interested in making fun of Amanda's radical book-banning stance than in making real progress against sexism, and his portrayal of her as an overwrought and unsophisticated crusader, the shrill feminist cliché, certainly doesn't help to dispel sexual stereotypes.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"YOU CAN'T TAKE A MIRACLE AND JUST SHOW IT!" [Owen] said indignantly. "YOU CAN'T PROVE A MIRACLE—YOU JUST HAVE TO BELIEVE IT! IF THE RED SEA ACTUALLY PARTED, IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE THAT," he said. "IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE ANYTHING—IT'S NOT A PICTURE ANYONE CAN EVEN IMAGINE!"

Related Characters: Owen Meany

Related Themes:

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

Owen objects to biblical films that try to recreate miraculous events—most notably "The Ten Commandments" starring Charlton Heston. Owen doesn't believe in making a miracle appear so convincing on screen that it could be real. In the first place, he doesn't think that people should need to witness any miracle in order to bolster their faith: "YOU JUST HAVE TO BELIEVE IT!" In the second place, he doesn't want humans to have the arrogance to think they could actually envision a miracle: "IT'S NOT A PICTURE ANYONE CAN EVEN IMAGINE!" Ironically, Owen in earlier chapters seemed to care very much about trying to direct as faithful a scene of the Nativity as possible. He wanted the portrayal of Jesus's miraculous birth to be true to his vision of it, down to the costumes and the music. Of course, he allowed his own ego to interfere in his design, and the show was an utter disaster. Perhaps from this failure he learned that humans cannot presume to visualize or depict a miracle. Yet John himself seems to violate Owen's principles when he says that he became a Christian only after witnessing Owen's miracle, and he depicts this miracle in the writing of the book itself. Human faith is impossibly flawed; it struggles to take root in the absence of proof.

Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But Easter is the main event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you're not a believer.

"IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN EASTER," Owen Meany said. "DON'T KID YOURSELF—DON'T CALL YOURSELF A CHRISTIAN."

Related Characters: Owen Meany, John Wheelwright (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

Similarly to Owen's principled declaration that "YOU CAN'T PROVE A MIRACLE—YOU JUST HAVE TO BELIEVE IT," he and John think that it is necessary to believe in the miracle of the resurrection in order to truly be a Christian. Christmas is secondary, because while no one still living witnessed the birth of Jesus, countless other births take place every day; it is a routine part of life. It is therefore easier to believe that a holy child could be born than to believe that a person could come back from the dead, which will never happen in most people's lifetimes, no matter how hard they may pray. People have no proof at all that the resurrection could have occurred, let alone that it is promised to all of God's faithful, and even the elder John himself is still struck with doubt. He has seen Owen Meany's miraculous martyrdom, but he has not seen Owen come back to life, despite addressing prayer after prayer to God asking Him to "please give [Owen] back!" The fact that John doesn't give up on his prayers—"I shall keep asking You" is the final line of the book—suggests that he still believes God *can* give Owen back. He still believes in the resurrection. He may hate Christmas, to the horror of his fellow parishioners, but he has not given up on Easter.

In both classes, Pastor Merrill preached his doubt-is-the-essence-of-and-not-the-opposite-of-faith philosophy; it was a point of view that interested Owen more than it had once interested him. The apparent secret was "belief without miracles"; a faith that needed a miracle was not a faith at all. Don't ask for proof—that was Mr. Merrill's routine message.

"BUT EVERYONE NEEDS A *LITTLE* PROOF," said Owen Meany.

"Faith itself is a miracle, Owen," said Pastor Merrill. "The first miracle that I believe in is my own faith itself."

Related Characters: Rev. Lewis Merrill, Owen Meany (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

Interestingly, Owen seems to be wrestling with his earlier declaration that "YOU CAN'T PROVE A MIRACLE." He has

already shown himself to be susceptible to the temptation of reenacting a miracle like the Nativity, and perhaps he cannot live up to his own lofty standards for faith. He may also be playing devil's advocate against Merrill's ideas for the sake of argument, exaggerating his skepticism. Ironically, Merrill is the one who has already lost his faith after witnessing what he believes to have been an act of divine retribution for a wicked prayer of his. He took Tabitha's death as proof that God had heard his prayer and turned his back on him, while Owen took Tabitha's death as proof that God had chosen him to be his servant. Both Merrill and Owen tend to interpret events as "proof" of God's will more readily than they will admit to doing. Indeed, Merrill later believes that a divine message comes to him from a dummy that John plants in the church flowerbeds. It's almost an elitist way of thinking, for the preacher to proclaim that the faithful should not live their lives expecting to hear the word of God, because God will not speak to most people—but he speaks to *Merrill*.

John does not pretend that his faith comes from anything other than witnessing what he believes to be a true miracle in Owen's death, and he doesn't doubt what he saw pr what it meant, even when others—even Merrill—would try to convince him that he did not see a true miracle or find true faith. The book itself is a testimony to the miracle he saw, the proof that flawed humans crave despite themselves.

Chapter 7 Quotes

"IF WE CAN DO IT IN UNDER FOUR SECONDS, WE CAN DO IT IN UNDER THREE," he said. "IT JUST TAKES A LITTLE MORE FAITH."

"It takes more *practice*," I told him irritably.

"FAITH TAKES PRACTICE," said Owen Meany.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright, Owen Meany (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 346-347

Explanation and Analysis

As John and Owen gradually approach the end of their senior year, facing the possibility of going two separate ways, John is losing patience with Owen's quest to master their trick basketball shot. Owen finally tells John that he believes himself to be an instrument of God, which John thinks is preposterous. He doesn't think that anyone could possibly be an instrument of God—such an idea is only a delusion that the mad believe. But incredulous as John is, or pretends to be, he never truly quits on Owen and the shot. Owen sees the shot as the ultimate exercise of faith—he doesn't yet know exactly why it's so important to master, but he has a gut feeling that God wants him to learn it. Every time Owen listens to his intuition and practices the shot, he is practicing his faith. Even after he has the recurring dream that finally illustrates how he will use the shot to save many lives, practicing the shot still means keeping faith in God's plan. God never gives John a clear sense of why the shot matters, but John always manages to keep his faith in Owen and Owen's connection to God.

According to *The New York Times*, a new poll has revealed that most Americans believe that President Reagan is lying; what they should be asked is, *Do they care?*"

Related Characters: John Wheelwright (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 377

Explanation and Analysis

As an adult, John frequently criticizes the American people for failing to pay enough attention to their leaders' vices. As long as their own lives aren't affected, they don't mind what their government does to other people. The majority of Americans aren't interested in rigorously defending ethics and principles when they can just live their own lives in peace and convince themselves that the president knows what's best. A country's unwillingness to challenge the government creates disastrous situations like the Vietnam War, when most Americans continued to support the government's war, stubbornly denying the idea that the nation's leaders could ever make such a mistake. John himself used to be one such uncaring American, avoiding anti-war protests and rallies because he didn't like the type of people who were the biggest activists. He later says that he believed their vocal activism only hurt their cause, but he would rather believe that than believe that he didn't do enough to prevent Owen Meany's death at the hands of a psychopath whom the raging war drew into violence. Perhaps his later resentment of his indifferent countrymen is an outgrowth of self-hatred.

I remember the independent study that Owen Meany was conducting with the Rev. Lewis Merrill in the winter term of 1962. I wonder if those cheeseburgers in the Reagan administration are familiar with Isaiah 5:20. As The Voice would say: "WOE UNTO THOSE THAT CALL EVIL GOOD AND GOOD EVIL."

Related Characters: Owen Meany, John Wheelwright (speaker), Rev. Lewis Merrill

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 402

Explanation and Analysis

Owen and Merrill both liked to discuss this biblical saying. It preaches that people will be punished for not speaking truthfully, calling evil things good and good things evil. It's not clear if people will similarly be punished for being ignorant or mistaken, not knowing the true nature of which they speak. Deliberately lying is one matter, but people can also misunderstand or be misinformed. John seems to be the angriest with the people who understand but deny the truth, or have suspicions but don't look into them, content to live in ignorance. Maybe people would be more virtuous, he thinks, if they believed that they really would pay the consequences for their unprincipled behavior, but just like people doubt in God's existence if they can't see him or his miracles, they also doubt that there will really be a price for their wrong actions if they see people around them getting away with unethical choices. That's why Owen always believed that a president like Kennedy had the responsibility to uphold a high moral standard, so the country would have someone to look up to. This is also why John is so angry at President Reagan for badly compromising his moral integrity.

As always, with Owen Meany, there was the necessary consideration of the *symbols* involved. He had removed Mary Magdalene's arms, above the elbows, so that her gesture of beseeching the assembled audience would seem all the more an act of supplication—and all the more helpless. Dan and I both knew that Owen suffered an obsession with armlessness—this was Watahantowet's familiar totem, this was what Owen had done to my armadillo. My mother's dressmaker's dummy was armless, too.

But neither Dan nor I was prepared for Mary Magdalene being *headless*—for her head was cleanly sawed or chiseled or blasted off.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright (speaker), Owen Meany, John's Stepfather / Dan Needham

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 409

Explanation and Analysis

Owen always thinks in terms of symbols. By explicitly pointing this out, John Irving is mildly satirizing his own literary mode of writing. The symbolism in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* can be quite heavy-handed at times, but at least Irving is upfront about it. In this case, Owen has removed the arms and head from the statue of Mary Magdalene, then installed the mutilated statue on the school stage in symbolic protest of his expulsion. As John observes, the result of Owen's work is a figure of extreme helplessness, wholly at the mercy of a greater power. The armlessness of the statue represents humans' lack of control over their lives, when their futures can be taken from them when they least expect it. If they place their faith in God and trust him to guide their actions according to his needs, however, their arms are not really gone—just given to God.

The headlessness of the holy statue in addition to its armlessness suggests that one's individual identity must also be sacrificed for God—one's personal ambitions, emotions, and connections to others. People must be willing to give up all of their private desires to fulfill the work that God asks of them. Owen will give up on Harvard and Yale to join the army, and give up a long life with Hester and John for a heroic sacrifice.

Chapter 8 Quotes

What we witnessed with the death of Kennedy was the triumph of television; what we saw with his assassination, and with his funeral, was the beginning of television's dominance of our culture—for television is at its most solemnly self-serving and at its mesmerizing best when it is depicting the untimely deaths of the chosen and the golden. It is as witness to the butchery of heroes in their prime—and of all holy-seeming innocents— that television achieves its deplorable greatness.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright (speaker), Owen Meany

Related Themes:

Page Number: 448

Explanation and Analysis

Television plays a fairly large role in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Irving spends a lot of time describing the television shows that Harriet, John, and Owen watch together after Harriet finally gets a television set. While the narrative of the book may be drawn-out and stuffed with secondary characters, everything tends to connect back to its primary themes. The lengthy section about television, however, seems to be somewhat disconnected from the story. Only near the end does Irving suggest how television might reflect on the events and themes of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. In this quote, John suggests that television makes death and tragedy into spectacle, something to entertain people rather than make them think. It thrives by portraying a simplistic narrative with familiar, iconic imagery, like the tragic death of a "golden" figure. It doesn't convey nuance or try to communicate a new viewpoint, only show Americans what they already care about.

It's not obvious, but John as an adult never talks about watching the news on television, even though he's obsessed with news. Instead, he only talks about reading the newspaper. Evidently, he's sworn off the television he used to watch with Owen and Harriet, unable to stand its shallowness.

"YOU HAVE NO DOUBT SHE'S THERE?" [Owen] nagged at me.

"Of course I have no doubt!" I said.

"BUT YOU CAN'T SEE HER—YOU COULD BE WRONG," he said.

"No, I'm not wrong—she's there, I know she's there!" I yelled at him.

"YOU ABSOLUTELY KNOW SHE'S THERE—EVEN THOUGH YOU CAN'T SEE HER?" he asked me.

"Yes!" I screamed.

"WELL, NOW YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT GOD," said Owen Meany. "I CAN'T SEE HIM—BUT I ABSOLUTELY KNOW HE IS THERE!"

Related Characters: John Wheelwright, Owen Meany (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 458

Explanation and Analysis

Owen provokes John by asking him how he's so sure that the statue of Mary Magdalene hasn't actually disappeared when it becomes impossible to see in the dark. To John, it seems like a ridiculous thing to ask—solid objects like statues, firmly rooted to the earth, never just vanish into thin air. But while John's certainty that the statue hasn't moved or ceased to exist is based on absolute laws of physics as well his own experience of object permanence, Owen's faith in God is not based on any empirical science or visual evidence. His sense of God's existence is purely subjective. Even the times when he claims he saw or felt God at work can be rationalized away by logic, if he allowed himself to be swayed by convincing scientific explanations, but Owen's faith is absolute. He believes in miracles, the impossible that God makes possible. For him, to be a Christian and to believe in the Resurrection, one must be able to recognize a knowledge—"I ABSOLUTELY KNOW HE IS THERE!" that exists apart from science.

Chapter 9 Quotes

What has happened to me has simply *neutered* me.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 521

Explanation and Analysis

John may not have served in the Vietnam War, but it has left him with lasting trauma nonetheless. He lost his faith in his government and in his fellow Americans after seeing the great wrongs that people are capable of inflicting on each other. He saw how ideologies can become fatally warped, as Dick followed America's fervent anti-Communist stance to homicidal extremes. Even before the war, Owen's parents' extreme religious ideology led them to burden their son with the terrible idea that he was the Messiah, and Hester's parents' staunchly sexist ideology led them to treat their daughter like a mere afterthought. People do so much harm to one another, and the best people of all can be extinguished at any moment: John's exceptionally brave, loving, and generous mother died in a freak accident when he was only eleven years old, and his brilliant, loyal, and heroic best friend died of a random act of violence when they were only twenty-six.

Witnessing so much senseless loss and suffering has sapped John's desire for intimacy with another person. He can't make himself vulnerable to the loss of another loved one, if he could even find someone to love, someone who could understand everything he's been through. In his celibacy he is like a priest who has given his life to God, or an armless man who has given up the ability to touch or hold another person.

"SINCE I DISCOVERED SEVERAL YEARS AGO, THAT I WAS LIVING IN A WORLD WHERE NOTHING BEARS OUT IN PRACTICE WHAT IT PROMISES INCIPIENTLY, I HAVE TROUBLED MYSELF VERY LITTLE ABOUT THEORIES. I AM CONTENT WITH TENTATIVENESS FROM DAY TO DAY."

Related Characters: Owen Meany (speaker), John Wheelwright

Related Themes:

Page Number: 528

Explanation and Analysis

Here Owen quotes Thomas Hardy to John. Hardy wrote this in a diary, and Owen suggests that John should use it in his Masters thesis. An atheist, Hardy is referring to his lack of belief in a higher power or a philosophy that explains the world. Owen says that Hardy came very close to believing in religion, but could not overcome his skepticism and doubt. Too much meaningless pain and injustice in the world persuaded him that there could be no greater purpose for human life. People's hope and goodwill too often come to nothing; their prayers are not answered. Faith in God makes no difference, in his experience, so he would rather greet each day with no expectations, instead of being continually worn down by disappointment. This way of thinking is also tempting to John, who would rather live a passive life than seek in vain to understand what purpose God might have for him. In the end, however, John cannot help but believe that God shapes people's lives. After all, he saw how Owen's miraculous life really *did* bear out as heroically as God promised him it would.

Dan Needham, occasionally, stares at me that way, too. How could he possibly think I could "forgive and forget"? There is too much forgetting. When we schoolteachers worry that our students have no sense of history, isn't it what people forget that worries us?

Related Characters: John Wheelwright (speaker), John's Stepfather / Dan Needham

Related Themes:

Page Number: 532

Explanation and Analysis

John describes how Dan sometimes looks at him like he's crazy for refusing to move back home to the country that he blames for killing his best friend. Owen died twenty years ago, but John is unable to bury his hostility to America. The rest of the country has mostly moved on from the Vietnam War, choosing national unity over division, but John fears that America has not learned its lesson, and continues to harbor another dishonest leader who thinks himself above ethics and the law. They don't seem to remember when their leaders took the nation to war with lies, at great cost. John is powerless to change what happened to Owen in the past, but he can choose not to forget, and to try and keep others from forgetting, so that such a tragic history might not repeat itself. John's choice to exile himself from his remaining family is extreme, but he feels that to return to America is to condone or downplay his country's sins.

Because he'd wished my mother dead, my father said, God had punished him; God had taught Pastor Merrill not to trifle with prayer. And I suppose that was why it had been so difficult for Mr. Merrill to pray for Owen Meany—and why he had invited us all to offer up our silent prayers to Owen, instead of speaking out himself. And *he* called Mr. and Mrs. Meany "superstitious"! Look at the world: look at how many of our peerless leaders presume to tell us that they know what *God* wants! It's not God who's fucked up, it's the screamers who say they believe in Him and who claim to pursue their ends in His holy name!

Related Characters: John Wheelwright (speaker), Owen Meany, John's Mother / Tabitha Wheelwright, Rev. Lewis Merrill

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 554

Explanation and Analysis

John thinks that Merrill and the Meanys are equally guilty of warping religion to justify events they experienced. Both Merrill and the Meanys became convinced that God had directly intervened in their lives, and their relationship with religion suffered as a result. People must be humble before God, John thinks, and not presume to understand why He allows events to unfold in a certain way. On the other hand, Owen always believed he had been chosen by God to fulfill a purpose, and events seemed to prove him right. His faith was tested from a young age, when he hit the baseball that killed Tabitha, but instead of turning away from such a cruel God, he remained humble and did not imagine he could know why God took Tabitha in such a way. He waited for God to show him what he was meant to do next. Most often, people who claim to be doing God's work have ulterior, preconceived ideas of what such work should be, as John rants about here.

"YOU'RE MY BEST FRIEND," said Owen Meany—his voice breaking a little. I assumed it was the telephone; I thought we had a bad connection.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright, Owen Meany (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 589

Explanation and Analysis

Owen tells John that he's his "BEST FRIEND" after John says he'll come to Arizona with him on a last-minute invitation. John doesn't really understand what Owen is asking him to come for, but he agrees to go because he trusts Owen and wants to be there for him. Owen doesn't tell John that he wants him there because he thinks he's going to die soon, and he needs John to be there if he's going to pull off the heroic sacrifice God has entrusted him with. He's overcome by John's faith in him, his willingness to cross the country on a whim for his friend and not question it. John may not always have perfect faith in God, but his faith in Owen Meany is absolute, and their friendship is extraordinary. He trusts Owen so much that he will do what Owen asks of him without knowing the whole story, just as people trust God's will without knowing why He asks them to bear things. Owen himself doesn't know why God needs John to be a part of Owen's dangerous mission. He would do anything to protect his friend from harm, and bringing John to Arizona is the hardest thing that God has asked of him, but God has also told him that John's life will not be at risk, and Owen trusts in God like John trusts in him. By inviting John to fly out West, Owen lets go of his final reservation regarding God's mission for him.

"THAT IS WHERE THIS COUNTRY IS HEADED—IT IS HEADED TOWARD OVERSIMPLIFICATION. YOU WANT TO SEE A PRESIDENT OF THE FUTURE? TURN ON ANY TELEVISION ON ANY SUNDAY MORNING—FIND ONE OF THOSE HOLY ROLLERS: THAT'S HIM, THAT'S THE NEW MISTER PRESIDENT! AND DO YOU WANT TO SEE THE FUTURE OF ALL THOSE KIDS WHO ARE GOING TO FALL IN THE CRACKS OF THIS GREAT, BIG, SLOPPY SOCIETY OF OURS? I JUST MET HIM; HE'S A TALL, SKINNY, FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD BOY NAMED 'DICK.' HE'S PRETTY SCARY. WHAT'S WRONG WITH HIM IS NOT UNLIKE WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE TV EVANGELIST—OUR FUTURE PRESIDENT. WHAT'S WRONG WITH BOTH OF THEM IS THAT THEY'RE SO SURE THEY'RE *RIGHT*! THAT'S PRETTY SCARY."

Related Characters: Owen Meany (speaker), Dick Jarvits

Related Themes:

Page Number: 613-614

Explanation and Analysis

Owen writes this in his diary after meeting Dick Jarvits. He connects Dick's deeply troubled and violent mindset with the people on television who captivate an audience by preaching about the righteousness of their cause and how sure they are to win, with the proper loyal support. It's the kind of ideology that brands any opponent or neutral party a traitor—everyone is either with them or against them, and there is no middle ground. When this kind of divisive, simplistic talk is all anyone hears, they don't learn to think with nuance or to seek out an alternative to the two warring sides of a conflict. They just line up to join the fight, like Dick. He never questions whether it's right to exterminate the Vietnamese—he just accepts what he's been taught, without

hesitation. A nation of such thoughtless militants will consume itself, Owen fears. His prediction that America's future president would be like a popular TV evangelist was also uncannily farsighted—more so than perhaps Irving himself could have known.

When we held Owen Meany above our heads, when we passed him back and forth—so effortlessly—we believed that Owen weighed nothing at all. We did not realize that there were forces beyond our play. Now I know they were the forces that contributed to our illusion of Owen's weightlessness; they were the forces we didn't have the faith to feel, they were the forces we failed to believe in—and they were also lifting up Owen Meany, taking him out of our hands.

O God—please give him back! I shall keep asking You.

Related Characters: John Wheelwright (speaker), Mary Beth Baird, Owen Meany

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 627

Explanation and Analysis

In the final passage of the book, John recalls Owen's astonishing weightlessness. He and the other young children thought Owen's size was a gift just for them, a minor miracle that made them feel a bit less small and weak themselves. They hated feeling so powerless in a world where adults controlled everything. Only Owen, the smallest of the small, could accept his powerlessness and humble himself before God, putting himself into God's hands. The other children were so preoccupied with their own rare experience of strength that they were blind to a greater force at work as they lifted Owen. Now John knows just how much greater God's power is—great enough to bring back Owen Meany, if he chooses to have Owen live again. John demonstrates his faith and his humility be continuing to pray to God to give Owen back, but he also shows how he is still trapped in the past, lost in the wake of Owen's disappearance from his life.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1: THE FOUL BALL

John Wheelwright believes he is "doomed" never to forget Owen Meany, an extremely small boy with a broken **voice** who killed John's mother and is the reason John believes in God. He admits that he is not zealously religious—he reads The Book of Common Prayer much more frequently than he reads the actual Bible. However, he has always attended church regularly, even if he has changed denominations multiple times.

The opening section of the book immediately grabs the reader's attention by dropping the bombshell that John's best friend killed John's mother. Irving doesn't hold back this part of the story, but shares this shocking fact upfront. It also sets up the book's major ideas of fate, religion, and forgiveness.

John was baptized into the Congregational Church, confirmed in the Episcopalian Church, attended nondenominational church as a teenager, and then joined the Anglican Church after moving from the United States to Canada twenty years ago. When he dies, he would like to be buried in America, in his home state of New Hampshire, but he wants his services performed in the Anglican Church before his body is taken back to the United States.

John switched churches frequently throughout his life. The numerous changes from one church to another suggest that John did not have a strong individual will, and was content to go where others took him. He seems to have found a stubbornness later in life, or perhaps he's just clinging to the last place Owen pointed him, as Irving later reveals that Owen told John to go to Canada.

However, despite John's strong personal ties to the Anglican Church, he acknowledges that he sometimes skips Sunday services, and is far from being especially pious. He says he has a "church-rummage faith—the kind that needs patching up every weekend." His limited faith only exists because of Owen Meany.

John's faith is more flawed than many other believers'. Calling it a "church-rummage faith" suggests that it is worn and battered rather than polished and pristine, like old furniture donated to raise money at a church rummage sale. It is not perfect—but it can still be put to good use.

John recalls how as children, he and his peers would take advantage of Owen's miniature size to entertain themselves during Sunday school. Owen was such a small child that his legs didn't hang over the edge of his chair, but stuck straight out. John and the rest of the class "couldn't resist" lifting up the tiny Owen like an infant and passing him over their heads. They thought his **weightlessness** was miraculous.

Irving shows the natural cruelty of humans through the actions of uninhibited children. They amuse themselves with Owen's body against his will. The notion of children easily lifting one of their own above their heads seems surreal, introducing the idea that Owen is somehow holy or separate from others.

Owen's unusually slight stature was a great contrast to his family's business, which was mining granite in the local quarry. It seemed absurd that he could come from a family who ran such a rough and dangerous operation as granite mining. He looked very pale and fragile—"the color of a gravestone" or "a pearl," with nearly translucent skin and visible blue veins. His stunted size and apparent fragility, among other things, suggested that he was born prematurely.

Owen's survival as such a frail and delicate-looking child born to such a rough livelihood was always rather miraculous. He was always so fundamentally ill-suited to the life he lived, first in the quarry and later in the army, that his premature death seemed almost inevitable. After all, he was born "the color of a gravestone."

Owen also had an underdeveloped or damaged **voice**, perhaps a side effect of breathing in so much quarry dust since birth. He had to shout through his nose to be heard. But the children all loved him, and loved treating him like "a little doll."

Owen's unmistakable high-pitched voice captivates everyone he encounters throughout the book. It is described as both terrible and endearing, a source of tension always existing between the two extremes.

The children's Sunday school teacher was named Mrs. Walker, and she frequently left the classroom while ordering the class to think silently about the Bible in her absence. John thinks she was probably addicted to smoking, and had to take smoke breaks. While she was gone, the class would grab Owen and pass him overhead around the room, never dropping him.

The opportunity for silent spiritual contemplation was valuable, but the children were too young to appreciate it. Perhaps the only one who would have enjoyed it would have been Owen, but the others prevented him from doing so.

Owen's tie would often become untucked from his trousers, and his loose change and **baseball** cards sometimes fell out of his pockets, but he wasn't injured or stolen from, only subject to his classmates' manhandling. He was annoyed by this treatment, especially when his baseball cards became disorganized—he was a baseball fanatic, and kept his cards in a specific order.

The children justified their harassment of Owen by arguing that they never dropped him or abused their power for profit—only inconvenienced him for their amusement.

While Owen loved **baseball**, he was not a good player. He was too small to swing at a ball without falling down, but he was frequently inserted into games as a pinch hitter because he could always gain a base on balls. His strike zone was so small that the pitchers rarely managed to aim any strikes there, so he always walked. The coach told him *not* to swing, which Owen hated, but which was somewhat less humiliating than falling down on his own feet whenever he tried to hit. Pitchers hated missing his strike zone every time, so they would sometimes hit him with the ball when he refused to swing.

Owen's love of baseball is rather tragic, given his physical handicaps. However, the game is not wholly rigged against him, and he is still able to help his team in many instances. Like most young athletes who dream of individual heroics, Owen is not a selfless team player—he has his pride, and he won't relinquish his dream of making a big hit, even when he can help his team more by standing still.

Owen was fast, so he was inserted as a pinch runner, too. But he was afraid of the **baseball**, and rarely caught it, and his hand was too small to throw it. However, his unique **voice** made his complaints entertaining to listen to. John now believes Owen's voice motivated the Sunday school class to mess with him—they liked to listen to him protest. John also now believes that Owen's voice was "not entirely of this world."

Owen was also not one to stay silent about his grievances and injustices. His voice makes his passionate complaints ring out so curiously that his peers are tempted to egg him on. The fact that his voice sounds like it was made to perfectly captivate children will later seem to be divine design.

"PUT ME DOWN! YOU ASSHOLES!" Owen would shout in his falsetto **voice**. But the class ignored him, and would resort to tickling him to pry him away from his chair. Whenever Mrs. Walker came back into the room and found Owen up in the air, she would scold him for leaving his seat. John found this extremely stupid of her, to imagine that Owen could possibly have lifted *himself* up. But Owen never blamed his classmates or told the teacher what was going on, only stoically endured the teacher's scolding. He wasn't a snitch, but a juvenile martyr.

Owen was willing to protest as forcefully as his voice would allow, but his body always betrayed him. He is only one small figure against the will of many, a powerless position that he and John later find themselves in when they are in the minority of the country opposed to the Vietnam War and other governmental failures. Owen forgave his classmates their faults, however.

Owen was also lifted up and hung by his collar on coatracks and in his gym locker, but he never struggled or made a commotion, only waited for someone to put him back down. John didn't imagine at the time that Owen was really a hero.

Even when Owen was subjected to pranks that were more mean-spirited than being handed around for fun, he kept his composure. His vulnerability to being put in such humiliating situations didn't make him seem heroic, and his lack of vengeance wasn't outwardly tough, but he had a quietly heroic self-discipline.

John identifies himself as a Wheelwright, one of the local families whose names still carried weight at the time. His type of family was not typically sympathetic to Owen's type of family, the Meanys. John's family was matriarchal because his grandfather died young, leaving his grandmother to run the family. John's grandmother rose to the challenge "grandly," he recalls. She was descended from John Adams, and she was born a Bates; her family came over on the *Mayflower*. She always carried herself with the gravity of her three extremely dignified names. Her first name was Harriet, but everyone called her Mrs. Wheelwright. She wrongly associated the Meany family with George Meany, an influential labor union leader whom she frowned upon.

John is descended from a prestigious and wealthy line of New Englanders, the closest thing to an aristocratic legacy in America. His proud grandmother looked down on the working-class Meany family. Ancestry and money meant a great deal to her, and she viewed the poor Irish-Catholic Meanys as her inferiors. However, she would later come to care for Owen and support his ambition to improve himself.

The Wheelwright family lived in Gravesend, New Hampshire, a town bought by John's namesake, Rev. John Wheelwright, from an Indian sagamore in 1638. A sagamore was the name for an Indian chief, although in John's lifetime the word had lost its history, and was merely the name for a lake and his neighbor's dog. Ignorantly naming the pet Sagamore was a sign of disrespect—as karma, the innocent dog was eventually struck and killed by a diaper truck.

The Wheelwrights and families like them were not the first men and women to inhabit the land of Gravesend, despite their haughty attitudes. The land belonged to the Native tribes of New England first, but the settlers who followed them did not even give them the dignity of remembering the term for their most powerful warrior and leader.

The Rev. John Wheelwright presumably named his town after the Gravesend in England. He graduated from Cambridge, where he earned a reputation as a vicious soccer player who tripped his competitors and played dirty. He bought the land for Gravesend from a local sagamore named Watahantowet. Watahantowet signed the deed with his totem, which was an armless man. No one knew why he chose an **armless man** for his totem—whether he was indicating the loss he felt in giving up all his land, his frustration at not being able to write, or his wish for peace.

John's ancestor and namesake was an ambitious and unscrupulous man, not a leader with a strong ethical code. He wouldn't have felt any shame or remorse for extorting as much as he could from a tribe of people who were outgunned and powerless to stop him from making his own rules. Watahantowet couldn't stop Wheelwright from taking his land, but he could make the loss into a powerful statement.

Among the eminent names of Gravesend's founding families, "Meany" is nowhere to be found, but Wheelwright is foremost. Wheelwright was John's mother's name, and she never gave it up. John kept her name as well, since he never knew who his father was. His mother had been waiting until he was the right age to tell him who his father was, but she unexpectedly died before he was old enough.

The prestige of John's family name would be theoretically lessened by his illegitimate birth, but his mother doesn't allow anyone to slander him for being born out of wedlock. She carries off her pregnancy by an unknown man with unimpeachable dignity.

After John's mother died, Owen and John talked about the unsolved mystery of his father. They skipped rocks while they talked. Owen told John that his father would know what had happened to his mother, and he would approach John when he was older. John isn't sure if his father is alive or aware that he's John's father, but Owen insists that he's certain that John's father isn't dead or clueless. Owen also believes that God knows who John's father is, and will show John the truth even if his father never introduces himself. As Owen says this, he throws a stone all the way to the water for the first time.

John flashes back to a time when he and Owen discussed his unknown father. Owen is firmly positive that John's father is alive and will be revealed to John by God. His confident words are accompanied by a rock that flies beyond his normal means. God seems to be with him as he divines John's future.

While New Hampshire is known as the Granite State, its biggest business was originally lumber. John's uncle, Alfred Eastman, was in the lumber business. He married John's aunt, Martha. Owen Meany's family was in the granite business. Harriet Wheelwright believed that lumber was a clean business and granite was dirty. Lumber was certainly more lucrative than granite. The granite quarry in Gravesend was mostly out of good granite when the Meanys took it over, and it was extremely difficult to get any remaining good granite out of the ground without cracking it.

The Meanys are contending with a doomed enterprise, forced to expend a great deal of effort for rarely valuable returns. The granite industry has less history and dignity than the lumber industry, which Martha Wheelwright happily marries into.

Owen read the book *History of Gravesend* when he was very young, and told John that it was full of Wheelwrights. John was born in the Wheelwright house after his mother became pregnant with a man she met on the Boston & Maine Railroad. Other than this fact, his mother never spoke a word of the baby's father, not even to her family. As a young woman, she decided not to go to college, but to stay home and care for her dying father while taking weekly singing lessons in Boston. Her mother was distracted by her father's illness, and the leader of her church choir, the Rev. Lewis Merrill, vouched for her talent, so she was allowed to skip the college degree her older sister, Martha, had earned.

Owen has more historical consciousness that John does. John doesn't initially feel the need to understand his place in history, taking a comfortable and sheltered existence for granted. John's mother never had to worry about how to support herself or her son, and had the freedom to pursue her hobby of singing rather than going to school, finding a job, or getting married for the sake of financial security. Her lack of ambition was frowned upon in her family, but they never withheld their support.

John's mother took the train to Boston once a week and stayed overnight for an early morning singing lesson with a teacher who normally only saw professionals. Martha disapproved of her sister's frivolous path in life, although she was jealous of her natural gift for singing and her beauty. At the time, going to Boston meant visiting a "city of sin," and John's mother had to stay in a chaperoned women's hotel while she was there. But she still managed to have an affair on the train there.

John's mother was apparently gifted with real talent, but her idea of following her calling is merely taking once-weekly lessons on top of her normal performances in the church choir. She doesn't seem especially interested in launching a real career, and doesn't wish to leave behind her small-town life for a full-time artistic pursuit in the city.

Although Martha and others frowned on John's mother's conduct, she was never bothered by their disapproval. She happily called her son her "little fling." Martha later told her children that her sister had been "a little simple." She was always slightly resentful of how talented her sister was, and how she was spoiled by their parents for her sweet disposition that made staying mad at her impossible. Not only did John's mother manage to make her illegitimate pregnancy acceptable to her family, her conservative town, and her church, but she also got away with continuing her weekly singing lessons and trips to Boston after giving birth to John.

John's mother was able to live a very happy life by blithely deflecting the judgment of others, ignoring disapproval, and charmingly endearing herself to all. Despite scandalizing conservative sensibilities with her illegitimate pregnancy, she doesn't lose her social standing or her place in the church choir. She even returns to the same routine where she got into such trouble to begin with.

John occasionally resented his mother's weekly absences. John's mother only canceled her trips when he was seriously ill or injured, until she stopped going altogether when he was ten and she married John's stepfather.

As a young child, John naturally wanted to be the constant center of his mother's attention, but she kept this one personal pilgrimage for herself. Finding a partner perhaps gave her enough adult companionship and happiness that she didn't need to take time away to herself.

John was born in his grandmother Harriet's grand old brick house. The house included a secret passageway to a separate basement. John purposefully scared Owen down there, and Owen's peculiar **voice** made his fear very memorable. Harriet was very disturbed by Owen's shrieks from the passageway—she told John his singular voice could have raised the dead.

John enjoys antagonizing Owen to elicit his cries of protest, but his grandmother finds the sound of Owen's distress terrifying and unnatural rather than amusing. His voice has an ominous side to it.

John explains that Harriet, while snobbish, was also generous and noble. When her longtime maid, Lydia, had to have her leg amputated for a tumor, Harriet replaced her with two maids—one for herself and one for Lydia. Lydia joined her former mistress for tea every afternoon and played cards with the guests she used to serve; she even began to talk like Harriet, and was mistaken for her by visitors. When Harriet grew older and began losing her memory, she never forgot the disturbing sound of Owen's piercing **voice**.

John's grandmother was a large figure in his life, being a more enduring presence than his own mother. While she had certain class prejudices, she had a good heart and was generous to all who needed it, from her former maid, Lydia, to her grandson's poor friend, Owen.

Owen's working-class Irish family came to New Hampshire from Boston. The local kids could swim in one of the Meanys' granite quarries if they went in the water one at a time, with a thick rope around their waists. It was very deep, cold water, and not safe to swim in freely. Once Owen untied himself and swam away to give his friends at the end of the rope a scare. They were too frozen with terror to jump in and look for him, and he accused them of being uncaring: "YOU LET ME DIE."

The Meanys were outsiders in Gravesend, especially compared to the Wheelwrights, who are descended from the town's founder. The local children at least didn't seem to care where their playmates came from, and enjoyed the thrill of swimming in deeper water that was not the tame, familiar beach or pool. They only like the thrill when there's no real danger, however—they're not brave enough to risk their lives to try and save their friend.

John and Owen both joined the Episcopal Church after leaving the Congregational Church and the Catholic Church, respectively. John's mother insisted on switching churches after she married an Episcopalian, John's stepfather—whom she also met on the train. The Congregational pastor, the Rev. Lewis Merrill, was unhappy to lose John's mother, who sang so beautifully in his choir and whom he'd supported when she insisted on her maintaining her privacy after becoming pregnant. Owen's family turned away from the Catholic Church for darker, more mysterious reasons—"an UNSPEAKABLE OUTRAGE" against Owen's parents that Owen never explained to John.

John and Owen both have mixed religious histories. Owen has a lot of antagonism towards the Catholic Church, while John seems to miss the Congregational Church. By the end of the book, both of them eventually appear to have found peace with the religious institutions that divided them. Most of the time, they speak generally about God and faith, not any particular organization.

John reflects that he partially took pleasure from manhandling Owen during Sunday school because he was resentful that Owen had a much stronger religious faith than he did. Owen disliked dogmatic, ritualized worship, but he strongly believed in God's will and in personally communicating with God.

From a young age, Owen had a strong sense of spirituality. His dislike for religion's sacred objects and rituals is ironic given his own passion for symbolic objects and rituals like writing in his diary and practicing his and John's basketball shot.

Owen took everything very seriously, and was insulted by jokes. He read the whole Bible, and was a brilliant student. John was not a strong student, and he wouldn't have been admitted to the town's private school, Gravesend Academy, if his mother hadn't married a man on the faculty. Owen was a natural candidate for admission, and would have gotten a full scholarship for tuition, but he was worried about paying for things like the expensive formal uniforms and supplies. He came from a working-class family, and was wary of going to school with the rich. John's mother promises to take care of everything for him, but Owen worries about how he will get to school, because his parents can't drive him.

Owen later develops a strong sense of sarcasm, but he does not kid around. He has a maturity and an intellect beyond his years. He is conscious of the gulf between his background and means and the pedigree of most of the students who attend Gravesend Academy. The best education doesn't always go to those who most deserve it, but to those who can afford to pay for it.

Mrs. Meany can't take Owen to school because she never goes outdoors, and never even opens the windows; Owen says she's allergic to dust. She also wears headphones to muffle the noise from the quarry. Mr. Meany runs the family's errands and drives Owen to Sunday school. He doesn't want Owen to go to the academy.

Owen's mother is quite a sad case—she won't leave her house or even let any air inside. Presumably she was once more capable of engaging with the outside world, to have met a husband and started a family, but something seems to have deeply traumatized her.

Gravesend Academy was an extremely old institution, founded in 1781. John's mother secretly visited Owen's parents to convince them to allow Owen to go there—Owen could smell her perfume after she left. His mother doesn't wear perfume, or even look out the window at the world. John suspects that her withdrawal is related to the Catholics' "UNSPEAKABLE OUTRAGE" that Owen won't tell him about.

Gravesend Academy is nearly as old as the country itself. John's mother wants the best for Owen just like she does for her own son, so she uses her position as a Gravesend native to explain to Owen's parents, newcomers to the area, why the school would be so beneficial for their son.

Owen had a crush on John's mother, who couldn't resist touching Owen. Owen tells John that she has the best breasts out of all their peers' mothers, and John lets him get away with it because he trusts that Owen never jokes around. John's mother drives the boys back and forth between their houses to play, since Owen's house is too steep to easily ride a bike to.

Owen is very close to John's mother, who is technically also a stay-at-home mother but in a much more active and present sense than the detached Mrs. Meany. Owen's affection is not entirely innocent, but his obsession with the bosoms of his peers' mothers could stem from the lack of physical intimacy he wishes to share with his own mother.

Owen and John were eleven when John's mother died. It was summer, and they were growing bored with **baseball**. Their team was badly losing the game, and the coach, Mr. Chickering, was bored, too. The game was almost over, and he told Owen he could bat for John if John came to bat. John's mother had just arrived to pick them up. She was looking off at the stands to see who else was sitting there. There were two outs in the inning when Harry Hoyt walked and Buzzy Thurston hit a grounder that should have been an out. Owen came up and the coach told him to swing away and end the game.

On the day of the fateful baseball game, nothing seemed amiss. It was such an unremarkable game that the whole team—even the coach—felt bored and wished for it to end. For once in this story, there were no omens to hint at the tragedy to come. Death came from out of nowhere, on a beautiful day, during a children's game of "America's pastime." The innocence of the children involved was brutally shattered.

After letting the first two pitches go, Owen hit the third **ball** foul, and it struck John's mother in the head, killing her almost instantly. Mr. Chickering reached her first; he closed her eyes and rearranged her splayed legs to preserve her dignity. He took off his jacket and threw it over John's face before John could see his mother's face. John was initially angry, but he quickly changed his mind and didn't want to take the jacket off—he stayed under it, hiding, in Mr. Chickering's lap, while the Chief of Police looked for the baseball that had killed his mother. Chief Ben Pike was obsessed with taking the "instrument of death" into police custody.

John saw his mother die, but he did not have to see her gruesome wound or her final expression. The kind and empathetic coach protected the remaining innocence of mother and son by shielding the body from indecent exposure and the boy from a worse sight. The police chief can't seem to accept that the death was an unpreventable freak accident, as if he is unable to believe that such a horror could happen in the town he is supposed to keep safe.

Owen fled the game after apologizing to John for hitting the **ball**, and everyone later assumed he took the fatal ball from the scene. He was a big collector of things like his baseball cards. But John ominously says that he had no idea, at the time, who else had been there and could have taken the ball.

After hitting the ball that killed John's mother, Owen has to go home and face what he's done. People assume he took the ball because he collected special objects and because they couldn't imagine anyone else taking it. But someone else there would have also had a personal reason for keeping the ball—John's real father.

CHAPTER 2: THE ARMADILLO

John's mother's name was Tabitha, but everyone called her Tabby. Only her mother refused to call her Tabby, although Rev. Lewis Merrill once called her Tabitha when he was trying to convince her not to leave his church. Tabby was a popular name for pet cats at the time, and John says that his mother was feline in many respects—not sly, but sleek and touchable. Everyone wanted to touch her, and like a cat, she could both repel and welcome being touched.

Readers don't learn the name of John's mother until after they hear how she died. All that mattered to the first part of the story was her identity as a mother, as readers could envision her as their own mother and imagine how devastating her death would be. Now Irving can describe Tabitha in detail, and she's a complex character, both charming and somewhat detached from others.

Owen once told John, "YOUR MOTHER IS SO SEXY, I KEEP FORGETTING SHE'S ANYBODY'S MOTHER." Indeed, Tabitha's sex appeal gave most people the wrong idea about her. Everyone assumed she was all body and no brain, but she was never as simple or as eager to please as she appeared. She was a wonderful mother, and a woman whose pure happiness provoked envy in others, for she was perfectly content with very little. She seemed to need nothing but her son and the right man to be happy, and she had them both for the last few years of her life. Tabitha's sister, Martha, was a warm and kind woman who loved Tabitha, but never understood her.

Owen might as well have said, "Your mother is so sexy, I keep forgetting she's a person." Tabitha's sex appeal sadly eclipses everything else about her as a human being. People can't see beyond her body, and she becomes an empty vessel for others to pour their longing or jealousy into. Even John and Owen can't help but think of her in terms of her physical attractiveness.

Tabitha mostly dressed modestly, never exposing much flesh or wearing dresses tight around the hips, but she liked to wear things that flattered her ample chest and small waist. John wonders if she was a flirt, or if she just discarded her inhibitions on the train, since she met both of her lovers there. Owen tells him he's being absurd, and nothing happens to his mother on trains. The story behind his mother's first liaison on the train is her own secret to keep, but she readily tells John the story of how she met his stepfather, Dan Needham, on the same train. Dan loves telling the story with equal enthusiasm, and John badly wishes Dan were his real father.

John's mother dresses like a man's ideal woman: not immodest, but pleasing to the male gaze. Such a woman doesn't flaunt her sexuality, but she is still sexy, and men enjoy looking at her and fantasizing about her. John thinks about his mother in the traditionally misogynistic way that men often think about women—suspecting that they are secretly promiscuous and unworthy. Owen corrects him, not allowing Tabitha's dignified memory to be insulted.

The Wheelwrights and Lydia were eating dinner one evening after Tabitha returned from her weekly overnight stay in Boston when Tabitha announced that she had met another man on the train. At first they all assumed she meant that she was pregnant again, with a different man. But she realized what they were thinking and corrected herself, saying she had just met a man whom she really liked. Harriet and Lydia are skeptical that she could already know how strongly she felt about this man, but Tabitha is sure.

Tabitha's judgment seems to be so sound in the case of her future husband that readers have to wonder what could have gone wrong before. Why did she have such an unwise first love affair with a man who wouldn't marry her?

Harriet is horrified to hear that the man Tabitha met is an actor. Tabitha explains that he was coming to town to interview for a job teaching drama at the academy, which is somewhat more acceptable to her mother. He also graduated from Harvard, which pleases Harriet. When she learns that his name is Daniel Needham, a fine old New England name, she finally relaxes. Just then, Dan himself arrives at the house.

Harriet has snobbish expectations for a man worthy of marrying into her pedigreed family. She is satisfied to learn that he also has a respectable—that is, traditionally wealthy—background, but any idea she may have entertained of Dan as a refined and aristocratic type is quickly corrected by his down-to-earth, unassuming nature.

All of Tabitha's past dates were young men who didn't have a clue about what to do with a six-year-old. Dan was unlike the other men because he was gawky and far from handsome; he also knew just how to kindle John's curiosity with a mysterious package. John peeks into the package when he isn't supposed to, and finds a terrifying creature inside: a stuffed armadillo. Dan brought it to the academy as a dramatic prop, and he gave it to John as a present. John and Owen both loved it, and liked to scare each other with it.

Dan shows a rare understanding of how children think, and he is prepared to be a dedicated father to John from the start. He is not an aloof man who expects absolute obedience from children, but a loving and compassionate figure who will later fill in for the absence of John's mother. John and Owen are thrilled with the alien creature he gives them to play with.

Before the armadillo, all the excitement in John's life came from visits with his cousins up north, in the rural country. His cousins Noah, Simon, and Hester Eastman, all older than him, were daredevils and wildly competitive. He always lost their violent contests, which was a nice change for Hester, who always lost to her two older brothers. Hyper-masculine Uncle Alfred was equally wild, while conventionally feminine Aunt Martha was perfectly mild.

John's extended family is very different from his own. Harriet's house is full of women, usually orderly and quiet. The Eastmans' household, where men outnumber women, is very rowdy. The aristocratic Wheelwrights are scrutinized by the town's civilized society, while the Eastmans can run wild in the country. John is not well-suited for this dramatic change in environment.

John's cousin Hester was more drawn to her father's robust role model, and disdained the constraints of womanhood. Being constantly disparaged by her brothers for being a girl must have also formed her attitude about gender, but Noah and Simon refuse to believe they pushed their sister to become such a radical feminist later in life. Instead they blame Hester's ambition to defy propriety and scandalize her family as much as possible on an innate "overdose of sexual aggression and family animosity."

Hester's father was a towering figure in her life, and she wanted to be as tough as him. If most implicit social messages at the time suggested that females were weaker than males, then Hester wanted to avoid acting like a female should, or at least prove that a female could act however she wanted to. But her family refused to allow her to be anything but an inferior.

John now sees the societal forces at work in Hester's later sexual rebellion, observing that she must have been affected by being constantly told that her sexuality was a detriment and a punishment, like when her brothers repeatedly forced her and John to kiss whenever John lost a race. John eventually started to lose on purpose, and even got a hard-on.

From his future perspective, John hints that Hester has become a sexual radical, although he doesn't go into detail. Ironically, he is the one who first harbored inappropriate sexual thoughts about Hester. He allowed her brothers to tie them up and make them kiss because he enjoyed it.

Even after John tells Owen about how "physically damaging and psychologically upsetting" his visits to his cousins are, Owen seems to be jealous of John having fun with his cousins. He wants John to invite him up to Sawyer Depot, where the Eastmans live, but John fears that his cousins would absolutely destroy Owen. Owen is hurt that John would think him too wimpy to keep up with his cousins, but John insists that they're simply too wild. Owen asks John if he can meet his cousins when they come to Gravesend for Thanksgiving, but John says his grandmother gets upset having so many kids in the house. To make Owen feel better, John invites him to stay the night, which Owen does so frequently that he keeps a toothbrush and pajamas at the Wheelwrights'.

John and Owen are both only children, and Owen seems to envy John's close relationship with his cousins. The two friends are as close as brothers, and Owen hates to be left out and left alone. He is also insecure about his small size and worries that John might enjoy playing with his normal-sized cousins more than he likes playing with Owen. But John doesn't mind Owen's size—he only wants to protect him from the Eastmans' savage contests, where even an ordinary boy risks moderate injury.

Owen becomes very attached to John's stuffed armadillo, and asks if he can take care of it when John is with his rough cousins. John agrees that Owen should take the armadillo to protect it. Over Thanksgiving, Owen comes over to the Wheelwrights' to finally meet John's cousins.

It makes Owen feel better to be entrusted with the care of the armadillo while John is away with the Eastmans. The beloved creature is a comfort to him when he feels bad that he can't join them.

The night before Owen comes over, he calls John to check in. One more time, they go over everything about the Eastmans: Noah is the oldest, Simon is next, but no smaller or less wild than his brother, and Hester is the youngest, "PRETTY, BUT NOT *THAT* PRETTY." She has the same masculine traits that look so handsome on her brothers—broad shoulders, big bones, heavy jaw—but she's also dark and hairy, with her father's large hands. She has almost no traits of her mother's, who was blonde and aristocratic. Nonetheless, her tough appearance and attitude created a certain sex appeal, combined with her clear skin, solid curves, flashing healthy teeth, thick hair, and taunting, sharp eyes. She would struggle with her weight in her teens, but she was still sexy.

Owen and John are both nervous for Owen to meet the Eastmans—Owen doesn't want to make a bad impression, and John doesn't want Owen to get crushed by his cousins. They discuss Hester's looks like they would any girl's, even though she's John's cousin. John believes Hester's attractiveness is decreased by her "masculine" attributes, but he approves of her many other pleasing traits. His judgment of her appearance is terribly thorough and critical, and he even shames her for putting on more weight than he'd like in a woman.

When Owen arrives, he is reluctant to announce himself and give a bad first impression with his freak **voice**. So he waits quietly to be noticed by John and the Eastmans, who are naturally making as much of a ruckus as one can possibly make in an old attic. They finally spot him when the sun blazing through the attic skylight strikes him from above and illuminates him like a descending angel, posed with his arms clasped behind his back like an **armless** Watahantowet. His face is blood red from his bitterly cold bike ride down the hill. He looks so inhuman that Hester screams, startling Owen into screaming back at her in his singular, high-pitched voice.

Owen is more self-conscious about his voice in this moment, when he wants to impress children who are older than him, than he is throughout the rest of the book. Of course, being Owen, he still finds it impossible to make an ordinary, inconspicuous entrance. He strikes John and his cousins as a creature not of this world, come to judge them.

The Eastmans are so unsettled that they don't think of harming Owen, as John had feared. They don't want Owen to catch cold outside, so they decide to play a game indoors where Hester hides inside a dark closet and someone has to find her. Simon goes inside, and she yanks his "doink" to get back at him for ruining her blouse. Owen goes next, and Hester grabs him and tickles him. But he's so surprised—and scared she's going to yank his "doink"—that he wets his pants. Poor Owen immediately sprints out of the house and launches himself on his bike to ride home. Instead of making fun of him, John's cousins feel bad about frightening him.

John may be used to Owen's strange voice and appearance, but his cousins are not, and they restrain their wildest impulses in the presence of this exceptional boy, who is at once so delicate and so self-assured. They try to be considerate of Owen by coming up with a game to play inside, but he's still not used to the Eastmans' signature rough treatment—including rather inappropriate groping. He accidentally pees himself and thinks that he blew his chance at fitting in with the older Eastmans, but they thankfully seem to recognize that their antics are too extreme for everyone to handle.

John and Tabitha drive after Owen, and find him pushing his bike up the hill, wet and cold and embarrassed. He's stubborn but anxious about getting in trouble with his dad, who is mad at Owen for struggling to outgrow his pants-wetting. John's mother promises to wash and dry Owen's clothes, and give him a bath and some of John's old clothes to wear. In the car, Owen says he's upset he didn't make a good impression on the Eastmans to win an invitation to Sawyer Depot. John explains again that he thought his cousins were too rough for Owen—which they just proved, he thinks—but Owen shouts that he doesn't care what they would do to him. He just wants to ride on a train, and see the mountains. He only gets out of his house when he goes to school, church, or John's house.

Owen is very embarrassed and worried about telling his parents what happened. He would rather go back and face the Eastmans again than face his father. John's mother, on the other hand, is very understanding and doesn't make Owen feel ashamed of himself at all. Owen's feelings of disappointment and frustration boil over and he finally reveals why he wanted to visit the wild Eastman household so badly—he never gets to go anywhere, *period. He's not as jealous of the people John spends his time with as he is of the traveling John gets to do, even if it's just going upstate. Owen's parents stay in their own little world.*

Tabitha stops driving to give Owen a hug and a kiss, and she promises him that he can always come with them anywhere. John puts his arm around Owen until he's ready to go back to the house. Owen marches up to John's bathroom and takes a bath before rejoining John and the Eastmans. He proposes a new game, where one of the others gets to hide him around the house and the others search for him. Hester goes first, and they search everywhere for Owen until giving up. He never tells where she hid him.

Tabitha and John pity Owen's claustrophobic existence and try to comfort him. Owen bravely returns to the Eastmans after wetting his pants in front of them. He restores his influence over them, leading them in a game of his own devising where less harm threatens his dignity. Already Owen is good at influencing others for his own advantage. The secret of Owen's hiding place won't be revealed until decades later, after Owen's death.

Owen stays the night at John's, and remarks how it's difficult to go to sleep without the armadillo, now that he's gotten used to it. John would think back to this moment, and to the earlier image of Owen struggling to ride his bike up the hill, at a later date, on the night his mother died. He knew that he and Owen would be thinking about the same things while trying to fall asleep after that awful tragedy: Tabitha, Dan, and Dan's armadillo. And he knew what poor Owen must have looked like while riding his bike home alone after the fateful **baseball** game, preparing to face his parents and tell them what he had done.

Owen has really become a part of John's family, sleeping at the Wheelwrights', wearing John's clothes, sharing custody of the creature Dan gave John, befriending the Eastmans, etc. He may even love the Wheelwrights more than his own family, who never show him such love and affection. His closeness with the Wheelwrights' makes his fatal swing even worse, knowing that he's inflicted the worst kind of pain on the people he loves most. But their love also allows him to remain part of the family even after the accident, which is extraordinary.

The morning after Tabitha died, Owen deposits a few big boxes at their door. The boxes contain Owen's entire **baseball** card collection, his most prized possession. Dan says that Owen gave the beloved cards to John as a gesture of apology, trust, and love, and that Owen surely wishes for John to return the cards to him as a gesture of forgiveness. John needs to give the cards back, and give Owen a prized possession of his own. John gives him the armadillo. The boys exchange these objects because they cannot yet express their feelings about the tragedy.

John is puzzled about why Owen has left him all his baseball cards, but Dan wisely understands the offering. When words fail to capture the enormity of feeling, Owen frequently turns to symbols to express himself. The baseball cards are not meant to be equivalent to the value of Tabitha's life, of course, but Owen has so little to call his own in life that the cards are especially precious.

Owen returns the armadillo to John after removing its front claws so that it can no longer hold itself upright. John is quite upset that Owen has mutilated the animal, until Dan explains that the amputation is a symbol of how Owen feels, having accidentally killed Tabitha with his own two hands and ripped John's mother away from him. He and John have lost a part of themselves with Tabitha's death, and he would cut off his hands to bring her back. John realizes that the armadillo also resembles Watahantowet's **armless totem**. Owen told him that Watanhantowet believed that animals had souls, along with rivers, rocks, trees, and other living and non-living natural things. Giving up his land therefore cost him more than the buyer could have imagined.

Owen takes the opportunity to add a further layer of symbolism to his exchange of meaningful objects. He identifies with the armless totem of the sagamore Watahantowet, who was also both robbed of his agency and unwillingly responsible for taking life away from his people by signing away so much of their land to the white settlers.

Later, Owen would tell John what else he meant to communicate through the **armless** armadillo: "GOD HAS TAKEN YOUR MOTHER. MY HANDS WERE THE INSTRUMENT. GOD HAS TAKEN MY HANDS. I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT." John could not have conceived of such a thought at eleven years old, and he would not even have believed in divine appointments. He did not know at the time that Owen had other evidence to convince him that God had selected him for a mission.

Owen believes that only God could have been behind such a freak event as Tabitha's death by foul ball. Because Owen was the one who sent the ball flying on its fatal trajectory, he believes that God acted through him, making him—and his hands, literally—God's instrument(s). John later learns that Owen had other signs pointing him towards such a striking conclusion.

John steps back into the present: January 1987, where he's walking his dog in the snow in Toronto. He tries to avoid American news and television, as well as other Americans in Toronto, but even Canada's news features too much coverage of American politics, and he finds it difficult to look away.

From John's hostility towards everything American, readers can assume that his past life in America likely includes terrible memories that he has yet to fully reveal.

In recent news, President Ronald Reagan is militantly determined to prevent the Soviet Union from establishing a "beachhead" in Central America from which to spread Communism in the Western Hemisphere. John criticizes Americans and their leaders for forgetting recent history: for example, the massive antiwar demonstrations in the late 1960s following the disastrous escalation of the war earlier in the decade, under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

John's anger over the mistakes and misbehavior of American presidents in the Cold War suggests that the trauma in his past is tied to the long, violent conflict between American democracy and Soviet communism. The importance of remembering history is something John often emphasizes.

Owen had strong doubts all along about the rationale behind going to war in Vietnam. He questioned whether America was supporting the right Vietnamese leaders in the lead-up to war: "[NGO DINH] DIEM IS A CATHOLIC [...] WHAT'S A CATHOLIC DOING AS PRESIDENT OF A COUNTRY OF BUDDHISTS?" He questioned the dubious authority on which the United States went to war: "DOES THAT MEAN THE PRESIDENT CAN DECLARE A WAR WITHOUT DECLARING IT?" And he quickly perceived the fatal strategic flaw at the heart of the war: "THERE'S NO END TO THIS [...] THERE'S NO GOOD WAY TO END IT."

The Vietnam War (1955–1977) was a long, ugly conflict between Western democratic forces, primarily America, and Soviet Union–supported communist forces in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The region was formerly a colony of France that gained its independence after WWII. The newly independent countries had to choose their governments, and became caught between the different models of the United States and the Soviet Union. In Vietnam, the U.S. supported President Ngo Dinh Diem, who was unpopular with the people. His regime collapsed and civil war broke out. America intervened without officially declaring war.

John asks if people today remember the Tet Offensive, a fierce North Vietnamese offensive during the Vietnamese New Year celebration in January 1968 that struck a heavy blow to morale late in the war. Later that year Robert Kennedy was assassinated, and Richard Nixon was elected. Over 500,000 American soldiers were still in Vietnam a year later. Over 30,000 Canadian soldiers served, too, and a similar number of Americans moved to Canada during the war, including John. In 1971, Lt. William Calley was convicted of premeditated murder in the My Lai massacre of Vietnamese civilians, and John was applying for Canadian citizenship.

America fought with the South Vietnamese pro-democratic forces against the North Vietnamese pro-communist forces, also known as the Viet Cong. The American military continued to fight even when the war was hopeless. The Viet Cong would hide among civilian populations, and American soldiers would target innocent Vietnamese civilians in frustration. The worst civilian massacre was in My Lai, a name which came to symbolize horrific war crimes. John is unable to forget the war's terrible toll of American and Vietnamese lives.

John says that Owen kept him out of Vietnam, which he's very grateful for. In fact, John believes that everything Owen did for him more than outweighs everything Owen took from him—even John's mother.

At the time, nearly all young men in America were drafted to fight in Vietnam, whether they wanted to join the military or not. Owen somehow kept John from having to go to war, among many other blessings he apparently did for his friend—help so valuable to John that it eclipsed Tabitha's loss.

CHAPTER 3: THE ANGEL

Tabitha kept a dressmaker's **dummy** next to her bed. She was a talented seamstress who made her own clothes. She never had a real job, and lived off of Harriet's generous allowance, but she saved a lot of money by bringing home clothes from nice stores, copying the designs for herself, and then returning the clothes to the store. The dummy was designed to match Tabitha's physical measurements exactly, and at night John and Dan frequently mistook it for Tabitha standing next to the bed.

As readers have already seen, Tabitha's body is very important to the book—John and Owen give thorough commentary on it. The dummy, as her body incarnate, will also hold a meaningful place in John and Owen's lives.

John and Owen liked to play dress-up with the **dummy** and Tabitha's clothes. She was practical, and only made clothes in black and white, easy to mix and match. The one dress Tabitha owned that she never wore or put on the dummy was a red dress she brought home to copy into white and black, and then was unable to return when the store had a fire. Dan suggested donating it to his costume collection, but Tabitha thought that the dress would be wasted.

Tabitha is faithful to her puritanical New England heritage, abstaining from anything that could be seen as overly frivolous or flashy. The only colorful dress in her wardrobe is justified by its pattern and the extreme circumstances (later revealed to be false, however) of how it fell into her hands. She can't bring herself to just get rid of it, however.

Dan became the director for both the students at the Gravesend Academy and the members of the town's amateur theatre company, the Gravesend Players. Tabitha loved to sing but was too shy to act—she only acted in one of Dan's plays as a gesture of love for him, when she was the star of the play *Angel Street*. She wore the red dress once during a rehearsal, but appeared very uncomfortable in it.

Tabitha's discomfort with acting compared to her passion for singing corresponds with her reluctance to draw too much attention to her body. The attention is on her voice when she sings.

One night, Owen was sleeping over at the Wheelwrights' when he woke up feeling very ill with a fever. He went to Tabitha's bedroom, and came back to John's room to tell him he saw an angel by Tabitha's bed. John thought Owen must have seen the **dummy**, but Owen insisted it was on the other side of the bed. Tabitha gave him an aspirin for his fever and he stayed in bed with her in case the angel came back—he suspected he had seen not a guardian angel at her bedside, but the Angel of Death.

The fact that Owen was sick with a fever and that there was a lifelike dummy standing next to Tabitha's bed makes John, and the reader, skeptical that Owen really saw an angel in Tabitha's room. His belief that the angel was an ominous figure of death rather than a comforting figure of protection is surprising, since many children are taught that good angels are watching over them.

John thinks that this angel sighting was just a feverish hallucination that Owen believed was real. He became irritated when Owen later suggested that the **baseball** that killed Tabitha was "fated"; John believes that his mother's death was purely an accident, while Owen thinks there are no accidents. Owen believes that he hit that baseball for a reason, and that he was made to be so little and speak so strangely for a reason. He is convinced that in going into Tabitha's room that night, he had interrupted a holy angel at work, and the angel had thus made him responsible for carrying out Tabitha's death.

John doesn't share Owen's belief in divine intervention. He can't bear to think that his mother would have been taken from him by God. Meanwhile, Owen can't bear to think that God is not *behind his trials, and that his pain is meaningless. After Tabitha's death, he thinks back to the omen he believed he saw, and concluded that he had been re-assigned the task of ending Tabitha's life.*

Later that same night, Harriet came into Tabitha's room to scold her for leaving the light and the water on in the bathroom when getting Owen's aspirin. Owen woke up and mistook Harriet for another deadly angel, letting out such a terrible **scream** that he awoke the household and the whole neighborhood. Harriet cried out in response, and Lydia shrieked in pain from leaping out of bed and crashing into her dresser. Owen would frequently recall Harriet "wailing like a banshee," which Dan later told John referred to a female spirit in Irish folklore whose wailing foreshadowed a loved one's death.

Still feverish, this time Owen is definitely mistaken in believing that an angel has come to Tabitha's room. The second "angel sighting" incident serves to cast doubt on the first, although Owen still manages to fit it into his theory of omens by suggesting that Harriet's scream was like the mythological wail of a banshee, foretelling Tabitha's death. Owen dubiously mixes religion with pagan myth in this questionable theory of events.

Although Tabitha and Dan were clearly in love from the start, she waited four years to agree to marry him. The rest of her family and the town didn't understand why she insisted on waiting so long, especially because she had already been in such a hasty affair when she became pregnant with John. John thinks that maybe she waited to prove the town wrong about her impulsive judgment, but everyone was quite impatient with her by the time she finally agreed to marry Dan—everyone adored him so much.

Tabitha's instincts about Dan were so clearly correct that her hesitation to marry him is baffling to people. Why did she leap into such a bad choice and hold back from such a good one? Her motives were a mystery to everyone else who was already convinced that her judgment was correct in Dan's case.

Harriet frequently prodded Tabitha about her surprising hesitation to marry Dan, which Tabitha insisted was not based on any specific obstacle but just "to be sure." During their four-year courtship, Tabitha gradually started bringing John to the Episcopal Church and gradually stopped going to her singing lessons. Dan would never have insisted on either change, but she chose to end her old routine. John wondered if Tabitha's singing teacher could have been her lover, but Owen insisted that it wouldn't have made sense for her to keep seeing him.

Tabitha keeps her feelings about her marriage to herself like she kept her details about her lover to herself. Either she's always this intensely secretive about love, or the two secrets are connected. By the time she is ready to get married, she has left both her old church and her old singing ambition behind, suggesting that perhaps the two things are connected to her first secret.

John worried that maybe *he* was the problem—that Dan wouldn't marry Tabitha until she told him who John's father was—but Owen argued that Dan would never have forced Tabitha to tell him anything she didn't want to. Dan's family wasn't the reason for their wait, either—while they certainly didn't approve of Tabitha being an unwed mother, Dan didn't get along with them and wouldn't have listened to them.

John fears that he and his secret paternity could be getting in the way of Tabitha and Dan's blissful marriage, but Owen reassures him that he isn't the reason—Dan would never have a problem with John and would never pressure Tabitha to reveal John's father.

There were no religious objections to Tabitha and Dan's marriage, either. Both churches approved of the couple and wanted them for their congregations. John preferred the atmosphere and the reverend of the Congregational Church to those of the Episcopal Church. Rev. Lewis Merrill was the pastor of the Congregational Church, while Rev. Dudley Wiggin was the rector of the Episcopal Church. Wiggin was a former airline pilot, forced to retire early from flying after he developed a disqualifying visual impairment. Merrill was highly educated, with an Ivy League English degree, and preached eloquently.

Even though Tabitha was an unwed mother, both Protestant churches in Gravesend welcomed her. John never speculates on whether the Catholic Church would have accepted her, having a traditionally rigid and less progressive stance on sexual morality. The two Protestant churches are led by very different men—one highly intelligent and philosophical, and the other more blue-collar and blustering.

Wiggin had a pilot's cocky confidence and lack of doubt in his preaching, while Merrill was "*full* of doubt" in a relatable way that endeared him to his congregation. Merrill preached that faith required clearing the high hurdle of believing in God without any certain evidence that He exists. To Merrill, doubt was not the opposite of faith, but the essence of faith. Wiggin believed absolutely—fearlessly—and he wanted to impart the fear of God into his congregation. Merrill was so popular that members of other churches would regularly miss their own services to hear him preach.

Wiggin preaches as if God is an invisible but certifiable fact, like the temperature and wind speed he measured from the cockpit in midair. But many people fear flying in a plane because they can't quite believe that unseen forces will keep them in the air, and many people also find it very difficult to believe in a God that can't be seen. Merrill's sermons about the natural doubts people feel are extremely relatable.

Owen disapproved of what he considered to be Merrill's overly intellectual approach to faith, arguing, "IF HE'S GOT SO MUCH DOUBT, HE'S IN THE WRONG BUSINESS." But people liked the boyishly handsome Merrill, who had an endearing mild stutter. The town also sympathized with Merrill because of his unfortunate family—his wife was a native Californian who failed to acclimate to New England, suffering from endless colds. His children were also sickly, and they were dull and disrespectful.

Owen, who has no doubt in God's existence, believing himself to be living proof of divine intention, disagrees with Merrill. But people born into ordinary bodies, who don't find themselves at the center of freak accidents, aren't as sure that God is watching over them. They like Merrill's empathy for their flawed faith and they like his deeply human, imperfect life.

Wiggin was comparatively robust and healthy, with a tendency to smirk. He was a bomber pilot in WWII. His wife, Barb, was a former stewardess with a manner as brash as his own, and their kids were great, bulky athletes. John didn't really understand why they had to leave Merrill's church for Wiggin's, but Tabitha implied that Dan cared more about which church they went to than she did. They were married in a neutral, nondenominational church at Gravesend Academy. Merrill and Wiggin shared the service, which was very well attended. In retrospect, John reflects that much of the town may have wanted to see his "fallen" mother finally making herself "respectable," many thinking to themselves, "Tabby Wheelwright has some nerve to wear white."

New England traditionally prefers a bit more humility from its church leaders than this couple has, who used to command the skies. Tabitha doesn't mind the Wiggins, although Dan doesn't seem to be a big fan of them, as Irving will later show in greater detail. It's not clear therefore why Dan would have been the reason for the switch. Splitting the ceremony between two reverends also seems rather unusual. Tabitha can't seem to shake her old church. She can't leave her past behind, as the occasion of her wedding is still shadowed by her past transgression.

A reception followed at the Wheelwrights' house, where the Eastmans were their rowdy selves, slapping each other with a toad. There were only two bathrooms in the house open to the reception, and the boys bragged to Hester that they could pee in the bushes. Hester asked them to stand guard so she could squat in the bushes. She gave her underwear to Owen to hold and keep dry while she went.

Hester is just one of the kids messing around in the backyard until she has to go to the bathroom, and then her sex sets her apart from the rest of the group. She only wants the same freedoms that they have, to get back to playing instead of wasting a quarter hour in the bathroom line, but social decorum would forbid it.

For a wedding present, Owen made the couple an abiding memento cut from his father's finest granite: a brick-shaped marker that he designed and polished himself, engraved with the month and year of the wedding—July 1952. He was very proud of his work.

Owen doesn't have much to work with—he doesn't have money to buy Tabitha and Dan anything—but he uses what he does have available, granite, and spends days perfecting it for a heartfelt wedding present. Unfortunately, it's a bit morbid, like a gravestone.

Owen playfully refused to give Hester her panties back for the rest of the party. She was mildly angry, with a hint of flirtatiousness. A summer storm descended on the backyard party, providing an ominous early end to the festivities. The judgmental attendees in the group probably thought the storm was "what that Tabby Wheelwright deserve[d]—her in her white dress." It even began to hail while Tabitha and Dan were leaving. Tabitha told Owen to come along so they could drop him off at his house. When she stepped out of the car to make room for him, a hailstone struck her in the head, another omen. Owen drove off with Hester's panties still in his grasp. When she ran outside after him, the rain soaked her dress, showing the whole party that she wasn't wearing underwear.

Owen denies Hester the simple relief a boy takes for granted, of quickly and inconspicuously peeing. He insists on holding onto the evidence of her transgression. She doesn't make a big protest, but she is reminded of yet another male privilege that society prevents her from seizing for herself. And when the rain turns her dress transparent, she is shamed in front of the entire party while Owen has his fun. She is judged for what she is not *wearing just as Tabitha is judged for what she wore—a white dress, traditionally symbolic of virginity. The old conservatives at the party believe that the rain—and maybe even the hailstone that strikes her—are divine signs. And of course, Owen is forever associated with Tabitha's bad omens.*

Back in the present, Coach Chickering is dying of Alzheimer's. He occasionally remembers John and says things like "Owen's batting for you, Johnny!" and "You don't want to see her, Johnny." At Tabitha's funeral, he cried openly, mourning both Tabitha and his team, which mostly disbanded after the tragic accident. Sitting with him was John's teammate Harry Hoyt—the boy who had walked before Owen came to bat. Harry would enlist in the Navy after graduating from the town's public high school, to the great dismay of his mother, a widow. He would then go to Vietnam, where he would die of a venomous snake bite while peeing under a tree outside a brothel.

Tabitha's tragic death would have a long-lasting effect on many Gravesend residents, like poor Mr. Chickering. The premature death of a young woman at the prime of her life prefigured the senseless deaths of many young people that would later occur during the Vietnam War. Tabitha dies at a baseball game, that favorite American pastime, and America would utterly lose its way during the war, unable to stop playing an unwinnable game.

After Harry died, his mother became politically opposed to the war, and offered to help other local boys avoid the draft and escape her son's fate. Her employer, the local Gas Works, fired her, and her home was vandalized. She was compelled to move away. At Tabitha's funeral, she didn't sit with her son and the rest of the team—unlike her son, Mrs. Hoyt "was never a team player."

While Harry had willingly enlisted in the military, the fact that he died for the sake of such a dubious war enraged his mother. Unable to go back and save her son, Mrs. Hoyt wanted to save all the other boys who might not have known what they were getting themselves into—or how to get themselves out of it.

John recalls that Mrs. Hoyt was the first person to suggest to him that criticizing the president was not, in fact, anti-American, criticizing the country's policies wasn't anti-patriotic, and criticizing the Vietnam War wasn't the same thing as supporting the communists. Most other Gravesend residents couldn't tell the difference, and most Americans still can't.

Mrs. Hoyt told John that true democracy meant making one's idea and opinions heard, not following along with whatever one's leaders said. If the leaders were wrong, it was a citizen's responsibility to speak up. Exercising one's right to free speech and protest is as "patriotic" and "American" as it gets.

Buzzy Thurston was not present at Tabitha's funeral—although he "should have been," since he was the player who brought Owen up to bat when he should have been out on an easy grounder. But John admits maybe he just didn't see Buzzy, since the church was so full, as packed as it had been for Tabitha's wedding. The same people who had witnessed Tabitha walking down the aisle in her white dress were back "to acknowledge, O God, that Tabby Wheelwright was not allowed to get off scot-free."

In John's mind, the teammates who allowed Owen to come up to bat are accountable, in part, for what happened to his mother. It's not rational, but he still holds it against them, as anger helps him forget his grief. He is also angry at the self-righteous townspeople who gather like buzzards to reap their satisfaction at his mother's death, feeling like her transgression was finally punished.

God did not allow Buzzy "to get off scot-free, either," one could say. If Buzzy was judged for reaching base and allowing Owen to come up to the plate when he should have gotten out, he received his punishment when he later died. Buzzy was in perfect shape before he was called to appear before the draft board, but he was so desperate to receive an exemption that he poisoned himself for two weeks straight before his physical. He binged on drugs and alcohol so heavily that he got himself declared psychologically unfit to serve. However, his plan worked only too well, and he became addicted to his drugs and alcohol. He crashed his car and died while he was high. Mrs. Hoyt argued that he was yet another tragic casualty of the war.

Buzzy, like Tabitha, died at the prime of his life; he was perfectly healthy but was forced to throw his health away in order to escape a tour of duty that would likely have destroyed his body or his soul. His self-sabotage saved him from Vietnam, but couldn't save his life.

Chief Pike was also at Tabitha's funeral, still on the lookout for the stolen **ball**. Pike stared at Owen throughout the whole funeral, suspecting him of possessing the ball. Just like at the wedding, Wiggin and Merrill shared the service. When it came time for the ending hymn, a song about resurrection, John knew that Owen would sing it at the top of his lungs, being extremely fond of the song. For once, John dreaded the sound of Owen's **voice**.

The Gravesend Chief of Police is still searching in vain for a way to restore order and bring closure to this tragic case. But there was no sense in this death, and there would be little sense in the deaths to come. The only way to avoid hopeless despair, the book suggests, is to have some kind of faith.

When the mourners proceed to the cemetery, John notices several people holding their ears. He doesn't understand why until he hears it for himself—the sound of children nearby playing **baseball**. After the funeral, the Wheelwrights and Eastmans return to Harriet's house, where Aunt Martha and Dan each invite John to move in with them. John decides to stay with Dan, who has already legally adopted him.

The world does not stop turning when a loved one dies; people continue to live as they have always done. Most of the grieving members of John's family can't bear it at first, but they will move on eventually. John, as an adult, seems unable to move on from his trauma.

At the funeral at Harriet's house, John's cousins are subdued. Harriet is stoic, and Martha is overwhelmed by grief and disbelief. Hester offers to take a walk with John, alone. She holds John's hand as they walk and tells him that Owen feels worse than he does. They walk to the cemetery, where Mr. Meany sits in his truck. He tells John that he will keep his promise to Tabitha not to interfere if Owen wants to go to Gravesend Academy. Although John didn't realize it at the time, he says later that Mr. Meany stopped interfering with anything Owen wanted after Owen hit the fatal **ball**.

Everyone is processing their grief in their own ways. Hester tries to make John feel better by getting him out of the house. She has enough distance from the tragedy to see how both and John and Owen must be hurting, and how both of their lives have changed forever. The incident seems to have changed how Owen's parents treat him, allowing him to have his own way from that day on, like he is no longer a child.

John and Hester walk into the cemetery to find Owen praying over Tabitha's grave. When John calls his name, Owen thinks God is speaking to him. When John and Hester tell Owen that Dan has gone back to his apartment in the Gravesend Academy dormitory for the night, Owen declares that Dan shouldn't be left alone with Tabitha's dressmaking **dummy**, her double. Mr. Meany drives them over to the dormitory and Owen leaves his flashlight illuminating Tabitha's grave, knowing that she hated the darkness. Dan, who is drinking whiskey, makes no protest when Owen carries the dummy in the red dress away.

Owen is intently praying; whether he prays for his own sake or Tabitha's, no one knows. He surely wants answers from God about what this terrible death at his own hands could mean. He seems to want to make things right for Tabitha's family, sparing them as much pain as he can.

Owen says he'll keep the **dummy** with him, since Dan, John, and Harriet shouldn't have it around to look at. Hester points out that he really shouldn't be looking at it, either, but Owen ignores her. John marvels at how Owen once again manages to orchestrate events exactly as he wants to, easing the Wheelwrights' grief while making off with what he wanted for himself—first the armadillo claws, now the dummy. As it turns out, the dummy would later have a purpose, proving Owen's gift for foresight yet again. But at the time, John thought Owen just wanted the dummy to protect him from the forces he disturbed with his supposed "angel" sighting.

While Owen may seem to have only the most helpful of intentions, John perceives an element of self-interest in his preoccupation with the dummy. Taking the armadillo claws and the dummy are actions with their own private motives for Owen as much as they are meant to help Tabitha's family grieve. But in John's later experience, he finds that Owen's secretive actions usually do turn out to help other people, especially John himself.

In the present, it is February 1987, and John believes in angels now. He is upset that he wasn't elected—or even nominated—for any of the parish offices at Grace Church-on-the-Hill. He feels he should have at least been recognized for his longstanding devotion with a courtesy nomination for something. He recognizes that his fellow parishioners were probably well-intentioned in granting him a break, but still takes the gesture as an insult. He reminisces about the golden years when Canon Campbell was alive, and rector of Grace Church. He finds the new Canon Mackie to be warm and kind, if long-winded, but doesn't have the same special bond with him as he did with Canon Campbell.

Like Mr. Meany, John doesn't doubt Owen any longer. Today he knows that angels really can visit. His belief is strong, and he thinks he deserves an appointment to a parish office at his church for the strength of his convictions. However, a church is about more than individual belief—it's about community, and John evidently struggles with that. The new rector of Grace Church isn't as tolerant of John's eccentricities and anti-social tendencies.

John rebukes himself for allowing childish petty thoughts to distract him from the service. But even the Bible proves unsatisfactory that day. Canon Mackie reads Matthew's Beatitudes, which always troubled John and Owen. Statements like "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" strike John as false—he is still grieving Tabitha's death, and has yet to feel "comforted." Like John, Owen didn't believe that pain and suffering on Earth should be hailed for bringing one closer to God and a heavenly reward. Owen called such ideas "GOODNESS AS BRIBERY," not genuine faith or selflessness.

John is trapped in a black mood, finding fault with just about everything. Owen and later John himself have a strong faith in God and His divine miracles, but they don't agree with everything that Christianity teaches. They have seen how people twist religion to justify their own ends. The idea that suffering on earth is acceptable because the reward in heaven will be great makes people passive about helping others—or helping themselves.

John also struggles to sincerely proclaim the language of the Nicene Creed and the general confession. Canon Campbell used to talk him through the words and their meaning, but Canon Mackie tends to brush him off by saying he worries too much about "mere words." The only part of the service that really speaks to John is the verse from Psalms that says, "Leave off from wrath, and let go displeasure: fret not thyself, else shalt thou be moved to do evil." He admits that he has been "moved to do evil" by anger in the past.

John believes in the power of the words one speaks—perhaps a lesson he learned from Owen. Other people are content to repeat what they ought to say, but becoming too caught up in pinning down the exact meaning of certain words can keep one from seeing the big picture or taking concrete action. John can recognize the danger of his unresolved anger, even when he's caught up in it.

CHAPTER 4: THE LITTLE LORD JESUS

John spends the Christmas after Tabitha's death at home. Harriet argues that if the whole family is together at Sawyer Depot without Tabitha, her loss will be too painfully apparent. John and Owen occupy themselves over break by using Dan's master dorm key to infiltrate the students' rooms at the school.

Tabitha's loss leads to the loss of other happy traditions. Cut off from the past, Owen and John look for the clues to their future.

Dan is busy rehearsing with the Gravesend Players for their annual production of *A Christmas Carol*. Dan wanted Owen to play Tiny Tim, but Owen refused to play another "cute" part—he is already forced to play the Announcing Angel in the Wiggins' Christmas pageant every year, havng the perfect size and delicate appearance to be suspended in the air above the stage to declare Jesus's birth.

Owen resented the limited roles that he was sorted into based on his unusual appearance. Ironically, his new part in the Christmas pageant will be more dependent on his size than ever.

Owen also complains that whoever plays Joseph, Jesus's father, always smirks obnoxiously throughout the show, while Mary, Jesus's mother, is always played by the prettiest girl in the church: "WHAT DOES *PRETTY* HAVE TO DO WITH IT?" He also hates the Wiggins' insistence that the Baby Jesus should never cry, requiring an assembly line of adults to swap out fussy babies for calm ones throughout the show. Owen believes in taking things seriously, and hates that his **voice** always wins laughter rather than respect when he plays the Announcing Angel.

Owen has a long list of complaints about the Wiggins' annual Christmas pageant. His faith is so strong that he thinks he knows better than the pastor what the scene of the Nativity should look like.

Harriet tends to get cranky when Owen and John play at her house, so they would rather spend their days at Dan's dorm. The students are all gone, as are most of the faculty occupants. Only Mr. Brinker-Smith and his wife, Ginger, are around, and the couple is very busy with their newborn twins. Ginger is a freckled, voluptuous, strawberry-blonde beauty, and the sex-obsessed boys at the academy lust over her even during her pregnancy with the twins. John remarks that her appearance was hardly alluring during that Christmas break he and Owen spend at the dorms—she wears only loose, slept-in clothes due to her exhausting nursing schedule.

Owen and John have the whole dorm building to themselves, and they have no inhibitions on how they act. They can freely violate people's privacy and indulge in fantasies about Ginger Brinker-Smith. The boys' appraisal of her sexual appeal as a nursing mother is rather disturbing. They haven't even hit puberty yet, so their preoccupation with her figure is not based in real desire—yet they have been conditioned to think of women's bodies as objects for male appreciation.

Once, Mr. Brinker-Smith brought Ginger into his biology class to demonstrate nursing in mammals—an "eye-opening" illustration that Owen and John are extremely sad to have missed. During Christmas break, they often linger around the Brinker-Smiths' apartment in the hopes of being invited in for a similar "scientific demonstration." They even volunteer to help Ginger on a trip to the grocery store, but after all their work pushing the stroller and carrying the groceries, Ginger does not reward them with a glimpse of her breasts.

Nursing a child is not a seductive act—it's the primary biological function of a woman's breasts—but many men cannot separate their lust from an innocent action. If they're not shaming women into hiding themselves away when they have to nurse, they're lining up for a view. Owen, who hates that his body makes him the target of unwanted attention and physical exploitation, should understand how a woman in that position would feel.

Owen and John let themselves into the students' rooms and go through all their belongings. Owen looks through each boy's things methodically and lies on each bed to try and get an idea of what each boy is like. John and Owen learn where the students keep their dirty magazines or pictures, and are dissatisfied to find that most of the pictures are either "disturbingly unclear" or "disappointingly wholesome." The truly nude photos are usually creepy-looking, featuring grim-faced women with censored nipples.

Again, Owen and John feel entitled to ogle the female body at will. If they can't see enough of the body to please them, the picture is too "wholesome." They feel ashamed if the pictures aren't clear or well-staged, suggesting that the woman isn't pleased to be photographed. They dream of women happily willing to expose themselves for the sake of fulfilling male lust.

Owen is preoccupied with determining whether or not an occupant is "happy." He imagines that the presence of any kind of hard-core pictures proves that the boy must be unhappy—"HOW CAN YOU BE HAPPY IF YOU SPEND ALL YOUR TIME THINKING ABOUT *DOING IT*?" John thinks that the rooms are probably less illuminating than Owen believes them to be, given that they are only the boys' temporary homes. The same sports and movie stars are found in every room, as are the same tokens of home. Owen thinks that the transitory nature and homesickness evident in the boarders' rooms proves the boarding system "EVIL."

Owen wants to understand what other, older boys are like. He wants to understand how people think out of a general curiosity, but he also wants to understand who he could one day become. He's searching for reasons to attend Gravesend or not, his family's prejudices warring with John's family's admiration for the school. He wouldn't have a dorm room himself, but perhaps he wants to know who he'll be studying with.

The older boys' rooms show John and Owen what awaits them in adolescence—secrets, messiness, lust. In one room, they find condoms, also known as "rubbers" or "beetleskins," in a sock drawer. They unwrap one and take turns awkwardly putting it on. Owen says that the Catholics forbid condoms, which John doesn't understand. The two boys are only eleven, and they treat the condom more like a scientific experiment than a sexual object. To Owen, putting on the condom is an act of religious rebellion.

The boys are too young to have real sexual desires, but they are curious about condoms, and about teenage rebellion. They take this opportunity to practice both, trying to forestall the powerlessness they feel about growing up.

At the first rehearsal for the Christmas pageant, Owen instigates another religious rebellion. He begins by refusing to play the Announcing Angel anymore, and proceeds to cast the play himself. He chooses John to play Joseph, which John isn't happy about—he considers Joseph to be an "uninspiring" part, being merely "that guy along for the ride." As Joseph, John is told to pick the girl to play Mary, a choice he is extremely reluctant to make. Owen saves John by suggesting that Mary Beth Baird play Mary because of her name. Mary Beth is far from the prettiest—she is timid and gawky, a "lump of a girl"—but no one can rudely deny her the role once she is offered it.

After exerting his influence on John's family, Owen starts to take charge of larger affairs. He turns the Christmas pageant completely upside down, giving new directions left and right. As soon as he gets on a roll, everyone has to go along with what he's already set in motion.

Barb Wiggin is quite angry that Owen is upending all of her plans for the pageant. He doesn't make it easy for her to find a new Announcing Angel—he warns the rest of the class that the harness can turn you to face the wrong way and cut into your skin, and you have to wait a long time in the dark above the stage and memorize a long speech. Poor overweight Harold Crosby falls over in his chair from dread, which Rev. Wiggin mistakes for eagerness to volunteer. He names him to be the new angel.

Taking his revenge for always being conscripted into playing the Announcing Angel, Owen tells the rest of the children exactly why they shouldn't want to play the crucial part. The boy who has the opposite of the Wiggins' idea of a perfect body for the role become Owen's replacement.

Finally, Owen brings up the Christ Child and the ridiculous spectacle of the adults handing the babies on and off the stage. He offers to take the place of the baby in the manger, since he can fit in the crib. The rest of the children love this idea—Mary Beth wants to lift him up onstage like they do in class. Barb reevaluates how "cute" she used to find Owen, while Rev. Wiggin appears to recognize in the masterful Owen "a little Lord Jesus."

One would have thought that Owen would hate nothing more than to play an infant because of his exceptionally small size. However, the chance to play Jesus Christ himself evidently outweighs the humiliation of calling more attention to his childlike body.

Owen continues to get his way in subsequent rehearsals for the pageant, scrapping the confining crib for a bed of hay, where he will be more comfortable—and more visible. He even rearranges the order of the music. Mary Beth wants to caress Owen like a loving mother, but he refuses.

Owen's resemblance to Jesus Christ is not just physical, but behavioral. He leads the other children and even the adults in his design for the show. He seems to want to be worshipped, while also being set apart from the others.

Harold continues to dread his role as Announcing Angel; scared of heights, he can't concentrate and always forgets his lines. Owen objects to having his arms trapped in the "swaddling clothes," so only his torso, chest, shoulders, and neck are swaddled. Covering his Adam's apple is necessary to preserve the illusion that he could be an infant, but his face isn't babylike, either. The swaddling clothes just look like bandages on some horrible burn victim. Mary Beth is still determined to perform some gesture on Owen—she suggests kissing him on the forehead, which he refuses. Barb teases him about it, but he convinces Mary Beth to bow over him instead.

Despite Owen's modifications, the pageant still promises to be a farce, with a tongue-tied angel, a mummified newborn, and an incestuous Holy Mother and Son. Owen's vision doesn't appear to be working out in practice.

When Mary Beth bows over Owen, he raises his hand over her head in a blessing. The image they make is so holy that the whole stage freezes in awe for a long moment before the choir begins to sing the final carol. Barb wants to rehearse one more time, but the "Prince of Peace" declares, "I THINK WE'VE GOT IT RIGHT."

Just when the whole scene is looking its most ridiculous, Owen pulls off a miracle: a truly holy Nativity. Without saying a word, he leaves everyone stunned and speechless. John starts referring to him in the text using names for Jesus, like the "Prince of Peace."

Back in the present in Toronto, John reflects on how he prefers attending weekday services to Sunday worship. On weekdays, he has the church practically all to himself, and doesn't have to listen to the sermons delivered on Sundays. John finds people who attend Sunday services reluctantly to be a great distraction. How can one pray while surrounded by so many petulant, unhappy people? The crowded, miserable atmosphere of the church on Sundays invites cynical, ungenerous thoughts. In contrast, the weekday services are peaceful.

John has become a very solitary man, who prefers his own inner thoughts and reflections to the words and presence of others. His negative attitude towards most people makes the reader question: to whom is he really telling this story?

Back in the Christmas season of 1953, the evenings seem very long without Tabitha. Dan complains bitterly about how his amateurs are making a mess of *A Christmas Carol*. Harriet's neighbor Mr. Fish, who plays Scrooge, always complains about the ghosts. The worst is the Ghost of Christmas Future, played by the mailman, Mr. Morrison. He is insulted to be cast as a character without any speaking lines, and doesn't take the role seriously. None of the ghosts are scary, which undermines the effect of the story.

With both Owen and Dan, John is surrounded by theater directors. He has no interest in running the show himself. Between all the rehearsals for the two Christmas plays, it's impossible to forget the looming holiday without Tabitha, which surely doesn't help everyone's attitudes. The two plays are supposed to be hopeful stories—Christ is born and Scrooge embraces the generous Christmas spirit—but the mood evoked is bleak.

Years ago, Mr. Fish had a dog named Sagamore. One September day, he convinced Owen and John to play football with him. The boys only liked to see Sagamore lunge after the football and try to fit it in his mouth, so they always dropped Mr. Fish's passes. A young couple with a new baby who lived on the street would always complain about the noisy game, which the boys and Mr. Fish always ignored.

In this book, a harmless game is never just a harmless game, especially when Owen is involved. The football incident foreshadows the baseball incident to come.

That day, Owen managed to punt the ball high out of the yard and into the street. Chasing it, Sagamore was struck and killed by the diaper truck, headed for the young couple's house. Mr. Fish decided to bury his dog in Harriet's rose garden. The young couple with the baby attended Sagamore's burial, along with the neighborhood children, Tabitha, and even Harriet. Owen wanted the mourners to hold candles, and Rev. Merrill and his wife noticed the candles when they walked by. Mr. Fish asked Merrill to say a few words for Sagamore, but he could only stutter.

Ironically, the dog named after an Indian chief left this earth in one of the least heroic ways go. John would say it was karma for having such an ignorant name. The dog's burial is dignified, however, thanks to Owen's vision. Merrill appears less at ease with such spontaneous, untraditional ceremonies. His faith is more formal.

Owen was the one who found the words: "I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE [...] WHOSOEVER LIVETH AND BELIEVETH IN ME SHALL NEVER DIE." Owen would preside over all the town's rituals.

Owen speaks over Sagamore's grave with a tone of considerable gravity. Given that the deceased dog was probably not a "believer"—his owner certainly wasn't—Owen's words are not particularly relevant, but he is compelling nonetheless. He speaks as if he is Jesus: "I am the Resurrection..."

In the Christmas of 1953, John says he was mostly unaware of Owen's orchestrations. He couldn't tell if the Meanys celebrated Christmas—they had no decorations except for a battered wooden crèche, where Mary's eyes and one of Joseph's hands were missing, and the baby Jesus himself was nowhere to be found. In Owen's room, the **dummy** stands at the head of his bed, close enough for him to touch. John imagines that Owen must be keeping other things out of sight—his **baseball** cards, the fatal baseball, the armadillo's claws, and the missing baby Jesus.

Most of Owen's designs only become apparent to John in hindsight, sometimes many years later. That Christmas, John notes the Meanys' battered crèche. In retrospect, one could say that the blind Mary represents the blindness of most Americans, Joseph and his missing hand represent John and his future loss (both physical and psychological), and the absent Jesus represents the loss of Owen Meany.

Mr. Meany is pleasant whenever John stops by with Owen, but Mrs. Meany only stares into the distance, or into the fireplace. When John mentions that Owen is playing Jesus in the pageant, Owen hits him—his parents don't know about his role. John says that Owen is both the star and the director of the show, making Owen hit him again. Mrs. Meany stares at Owen with a strange, confused look of shock and resentment. Outside, John asks Owen if he said anything wrong, but Owen doesn't explain.

Owen's parents, especially his mother, continue to act cryptically around their son. Owen hasn't told them about what he's doing in the Christmas pageant, and they seem especially shocked to hear that he's playing the Baby Jesus—even when one takes into account the fact that it's an unusual role for just about any child Owen's age.

John goes back inside to get his hat. In Owen's room, he finds Mrs. Meany sitting on Owen's bed, staring at Tabitha's **dummy**. Without looking at John, she says, "I'm sorry about your poor mother." Walking down the hill later, Owen and John pass under the railroad trestle bridge just as *The Flying Yankee*, the express train from Portland, Maine, to Boston, thunders overhead. The boys are thrilled to watch the speeding train cross over their heads for the first time. John believes it is a great coincidence of timing, but Owen doesn't believe in coincidences—he believes that everything happens by design.

Evidently, Mrs. Meany can move from her perch by the window, and she can speak. She can't look at John, however. The experience of crossing under a bridge as a rare express train is going over provides another example of John and Owen's separate ways of thinking: John believes—or used to believe—in chance, while Owen believes in holy design.

The maid who replaces Lydia is named Ethel. Ethel is a robust, strong worker, but she isn't very bright or self-assured. Unlike Lydia, she is no fun for John and Owen to scare. The second maid is named Germaine, and she is young, extremely timid, and incredibly clumsy. In a generous and practical gesture, Harriet donates all of Tabitha's clothes to Germaine after Tabitha dies, but she didn't realize how upsetting it would be to see someone else wearing her daughter's familiar clothing.

For someone who takes pride in running her own household "grandly," Harriet manages to hire the most inept pair of maids to replace Lydia. Perhaps after losing Lydia's expert help around the house, her heart wasn't in it. John mostly thinks of the maids in terms of how they can amuse him—are they pretty? Are they fun to frighten?

Unlike Ethel, Germaine makes a great target for John and Owen to scare, and they frequently do. She is superstitious, and Owen's size and **voice** disturbs her. Once, Harriet asks whether the Meanys have ever tried to fix Owen's voice. John says that Tabitha suggested Owen visit her voice teacher for a consultation, but Owen would never go. He thinks his voice has a purpose, or a reason for being the way it is—he thinks it comes from God.

If Owen and John take pleasure in terrorizing Germaine, one would sympathize with her hostility towards the boy whom she doesn't work for. Owen doesn't believe that his voice should be treated; it should be left as God gave it.

Germaine, overhearing, counters that Owen's **voice** comes from the Devil. Harriet says both ideas are nonsense—Owen's voice surely comes from the granite dust. She then asks whether Owen ever kept the information about Tabitha's voice teacher. John lies and says no, wanting to explore this information privately.

Germaine claims that Owen's voice has a more diabolical origin. It frightens her—but the voice of God is often frightening to people in religious stories. Tabitha trusted Owen enough to give him the name of her voice teacher, which she kept from her family.

One afternoon when John and Owen are exploring a room on the second floor of the dorm, they hear another master key unlocking the door. John rushes into the closet while Owen hides under the bed. Mr. Brinker-Smith and Mrs. Brinker-Smith enter, laughing that it is finally "Nap time!" They live on the first floor, making their visit to the second floor unexpected, and the boys realize that the couple is following the same mission that they are—to stop in every room. They would have sex in every bed in the building.

The young voyeurs finally see more than they were looking for. Apparently the temptation of an entirely empty residence hall is irresistible to everyone. The couple seem to be trying to recapture their youth and escape the responsibilities of their children for a while.

After that afternoon, the boys decide to return to playing at Harriet's house. They're there on the day when Mr. Morrison, the mailman, tells Harriet to tell Dan that he's quitting the show. Owen tries to talk him into staying on, explaining why the Ghost of Christmas Future is such an important part even with no lines. But Mr. Morrison isn't convinced that simply acting like he knows the future is scary.

Surprisingly, Owen and John, once so eager to see a woman in the nude, make no effort to stake out the next room and witness the couple in action again. They really were too young to see sex firsthand. They have glimpsed the future, however, and it was rather frightening.

Standing behind Owen, Harriet thinks that nothing is scarier than the future, or someone who knows it. The rest of the household stands behind her, rapt. Mr. Morrison finally leaves, and Owen calls Dan to tell him what happened. He volunteers himself as Morrison's replacement. Owen couldn't be happier to have a nonspeaking part, so he won't have to use his laughable **voice**. Like the Christ Child, he has to project a staggering presence—to convey his knowledge of the future without uttering a word.

Harriet has the experience to know that Owen is right—the future is frightening—but Mr. Morrison can't see it. Owen takes the opportunity to nominate himself for the vacant role after realizing how important a part it is. He has already shown himself to be capable of silencing a crowd without saying anything.

Dan is initially skeptical, but Owen convinces him to let him rehearse that afternoon and test the reactions of the cast. John already knows what Owen's test will prove—he can see how unsettled Owen has made Harriet and the maids. Indeed, Dan reports that night that Owen was a stunning success, striking terror into everyone, even Mr. Fish as Scrooge, who screamed when he saw Owen's face under the ghostly hood. Dan even heard that Mr. Early's daughter wet her pants. Mr. Fish comes by the house after dinner, and they worry that Owen might be *too* scary.

Owen naturally has a very unsettling presence due to his extraordinary maturity for his age and his size. When he purposefully plays up his disconcerting aura, he is terrifying. He is like the angels of God who people find frightening, like Tabitha's supposed angel.

Mr. Fish is leaving just as Owen arrives at the door, and he steps out just as Owen is reaching to ring the bell. The unexpected sight of Owen sends him jumping backward into the hall. "Speak of the Devil," Dan says. Mr. Fish starts humming a Christmas carol to himself "as the little Lord Jesus stepped inside."

In this one brief scene, Owen is called both "the Devil" and "the little Lord Jesus." To outsiders, his true nature is somewhat ambiguous, but John never doubts Owen's humanity and friendship.

CHAPTER 5: THE GHOST OF THE FUTURE

Owen has established himself as a prophet—one who knows the future, and can even orchestrate it as he wills. He is a scene-stealer in *A Christmas Carol*. Dan is concerned, however, by the number of small children who burst into tears when Owen comes onstage—surely not what Dickens intended. He takes some comfort from the fact that Owen seems to be coming down with a cold, which might detract from his ghostly presence onstage by humanizing him.

As Dan worried, Owen is indeed too frightening for the purpose of a family entertainment, despite the fact that he is still—in theory—a child, himself. He's playing an infant in the Christmas pageant, after all. But in neither role is he childlike—his "baby Jesus" is more "Jesus" than "baby."

Mr. Morrison would surely also wish for Owen's presence to be somewhat diminished—he is upset to hear what a terrific splash Owen has made in the part. John wonders if Owen's parents know about his impressive performance. Dan asks Owen if he would like to invite his parents to the show, but Owen insists they wouldn't enjoy it. "Anything you say, Owen," Dan tells him. Like Tabitha, he understands that Owen is not shown affection at home.

Owen continues to keep his roles a secret from his parents. He doesn't seem to long for their praise like another child might—he is remarkably self-sufficient for an eleven-year-old. But adults like Dan and Tabitha can still perceive in him an unfulfilled need for love and affection.

Owen gets a curtain call all to himself on Saturday night, and a girl faints when he pulls back his hood. His face is whitened with baby powder and his eyes are darkened with eyeliner. But his cold is getting worse, and he's coughing frequently. Dan tells John that *he* might have to play Owen's part if Owen is too sick, but John thinks that Owen has already chosen his role for him—"just a Joseph."

Owen's ghostly aura terrifies girls into fainting—extreme reactions that feed the stereotype of feminine weakness and hysteria. Even John is drawn into Owen's all-seeing air, trusting that Owen is right to deem him "a Joseph."

That Sunday, the day of the church Christmas pageant, Owen arrives at Harriet's house layered in winter clothes, including a "lucky" scarf that Tabitha once gave him after she learned that he didn't own one. He coughs horribly while he and John walk to the church. Owen is very disappointed that Harriet isn't coming to the pageant, being too worried that she could slip and fall on the icy pavement. They run into Mr. Fish on the way there, who doesn't normally go to church but wants to see Owen's performance. Dan joins them, and they arrive at Christ Church.

Owen seems to care more for Tabitha and even Harriet than he cares for his own parents, whether Harriet is aware of his esteem or not. She has expressed only her objections to Owen's voice thus far, leaving Tabitha and Dan to be the fond and affectionate ones. Her aloofness towards Owen is seemingly no worse than whatever treatment he receives at home, though.

The Wiggins are outside the church with the Merrills. Barb hurries Owen inside to be wrapped in his swaddling clothes while the Merrills look scandalized to hear that Owen is playing the Christ Child. Owen is very picky about how Barb swaddles him—he finally insists that she wrap him in his scarf, then the cotton swaddling cloth on top.

The Merrills' shocked reaction to Owen as the Christ Child reminds the reader that it really is an unusual role for Owen to play, despite his air of cool nonchalance about volunteering for it. He acts as if he was simply meant to play the part, but not everyone can see it.

When Owen is finally wrapped to his satisfaction, Barb has to carry him over to the manger, since his legs are bound too tightly together. She wipes his running nose with a handkerchief, and makes him blow. Then she pinches Owen's cheeks, which she says are too pale, and kisses him on the mouth to make him flush. Owen is furious; the last person to kiss him was Tabitha. When Barb lays him in the manger, it becomes apparent to her and John that Owen has an erection, visible through his tightly swaddled clothes. Owen is angry and humiliated, and Barb finally has her revenge.

Getting ready for his part requires Owen to make himself helpless. To prove his faith, he has to surrender to the will of someone greater than himself. Barb is surely not the person he imagined putting his faith in, and she cruelly takes advantage of his powerless position. She leaves him with an erection, an extremely inappropriate look for a newborn Christ. But the experience is humbling to Owen, perhaps reminding him that he isn't really *Jesus.*

However, Owen miraculously recovers his composure and controls his erection. As Barb mans the controls that raise and lower Harold the angel above the stage, Owen gives her such a withering glare that she freezes. Harold suffers a terribly jerky descent, and predictably forgets his lines in fear. Owen prompts him from below. Mary Beth kneels and lays her head heavily in Owen's lap, overcome.

Owen overcomes his early adversity just as the newborn Jesus did, summoning an innate dignity that transforms the scene into his sovereign ground. He shatters the composure of a grown woman, and announces his own birth when the tongue-tied angel falters.

In the heat of the stage lights, a donkey faints, causing a cow to butt a shepherd off the stage. Mary Beth throws herself on top of Owen, who is not strong enough to push her off—he can only prod her off by "goosing" her painfully, out of sight of the audience. He then stares out at the audience, who are in awe of his undiminished stage presence despite error, bad acting, and characters going off-script. Owen sees his riveted parents in the crowd: Mr. Meany looks afraid of his son, while Mrs. Meany is overwhelmed with uncontrollable sobbing.

The scene quickly verges on farce and chaos; only Owen maintains his air of gravity, to the audience's amazement. His parents seem especially cowed by Owen's commanding presence. Their fear and tears at the sight of Owen as the Christ Child are puzzling to John, who still doesn't know what pushed them away from the Catholic Church. Later he will understand that they took Owen's role literally.

Owen abruptly sits up in the hay and points into the crowd, yelling, "WHAT DO YOU THINK *YOU'RE* DOING HERE? YOU SHOULDN'T BE HERE!" He is talking to his parents, but the audience can't tell who he means, so some of them get up to leave along with Mr. Meany and Mrs. Meany. Owen tells John to get him out of there, so he and Mary Beth carry him down the center aisle and out of the church. They exit in a spontaneous procession with the rest of the cast following behind as the choir sings. John and Mary Beth deposit Owen in the cab of the granite truck, lying across his parents' laps. Even the snowplow makes way for Owen as they drive home.

Owen's reaction to seeing his parents is just as puzzling as their reaction to watching him. He breaks character—or does he?—and screams at his parents to leave. He shamelessly spurns the traditional principle of theater that "the show must go on" regardless of what happens, forcing the show to go along with him *instead. John and Mary Beth end up carrying him out, after all, and leave him lying helpless in his parents' laps in an unsettling image—a grotesque reflection of the Christ child with Mary and Joseph.*

Back in the present in Toronto, it is now February. John remarks on his church's communion services, expressing his preference for a lightly attended communion, where people don't have to stand in line like a herd about to feed. He wants communion to be a sacred event, not spoiled by Canon Mackie's jokes. He manages to find fault in the two wine servers—the Rev. Katherine Keeling shouldn't serve the wine when she's heavily pregnant, and the Rev. Mr. Larkin pulls the cup back too quickly and doesn't wipe the rim of the cup closely enough.

This dark image of what was supposed to be a festive religious celebration colors John's future experience of religious customs. He is quick to perceive human flaws in sacred rites. Even pregnancy is too human for his sanctified ideas.

Nonetheless, John expresses his admiration for Rev. Keeling, who is his favorite person to talk to in the church now that Canon Campbell is gone. The other reverends aren't as willing to talk to him at length—one unsympathetic reverend, who is heavily involved in volunteer projects for the city's most needy, says John's worries are all merely in his mind. John thinks this doesn't make them less painful to him.

Despite his objections to her pregnancies, John respects Katherine Keeling's keen mind and kind manner. Her clerical peers have less patience for John's spiritual conflict, being more concerned with meeting the critical material needs of the less fortunate of God's children. John thinks that his spiritual suffering is just as agonizing.

John is left to try and talk to Canon Mackie about his frustrations with President Reagan's nuclear subterfuge, but Canon Mackie turns the conversation towards John's disappointment in the recent Vestry elections. He points out that John's strong opinions (a distinctively American trait) could be alienating him from the rest of the church, as "it's very Canadian to distrust strong opinions." John insists he *is* Canadian, but Mackie points out that John talks about America more than any American he's ever met. John's constant anger about America isn't very Canadian, either—nor is it very Christian.

Unsurprisingly, a Canadian reverend is less than enthused about discussing the behavior of an American president—there are enough people out there who make a living talking about the President, and the Canon's profession is not (supposed to be) a political one. But John seems to have no real friends of his own to converse with—possibly because he only wants to talk to his fellow Canadians about American politics. His anger prevents him from finding friends or finding peace.

Mackie believes that John lives in the past, and even John himself wonders if his fondness for Canon Campbell is part of his inability to let go of the past. He imagines that if Campbell were still alive today, he might be as frustrated with John's stubbornness as Mackie is. Mackie points out that John's recent speech about Christmas at the Parish Council meeting—in which he said that he found Christmas depressing—surely also hurt his candidacy. The church greatly relies on Christmas for the success of its missions and its general livelihood, but John can't see past his own bitter history with Christmas.

John does seem to be living in the past—most of the book itself is about his memories. He's clearly spent years thinking about his childhood and its repercussions on the rest of his life. Perhaps this written account is his attempt to put history to rest for good, so that he can make the most of what life still has to offer. He needs to move on from his own story to re-engage with the rest of the world. If he can't even understand what Christmas means to other people, he's very alienated.

After the Christmas of 1953, the old idyllic vision of Christ's birth was replaced by the memory of Owen Meany angrily banishing his parents from church, then lying stiffly swaddled across their laps like a mortally wounded patient laid out on a stretcher. "How can you like Christmas after that?" John asks. Outside the church after Owen's departure, the rest of the children have no idea what to do—fleeing the freezing cold, they push their way back into the church. People are exiting early, confused and disturbed by what they just witnessed.

Owen gave many blessings to John, but one of the things he took from him may have been the comfort of an uplifting holiday like Christmas. Perhaps Tabitha's death had already taken that from him, but Owen's astonishing behavior during the Christmas pageant made John's memories of the holiday even more harrowing.

Mr. Fish is impressed by the drama of the Nativity—he thinks Owen's improvisations are part of the biblical account. When John goes to gather his and Owen's clothes, he finds Mary Beth weeping on top of Owen's things. She is distraught to think that Owen now hates her. Her hysterics make John furious—she imagines that she has a special understanding with Owen, but John knows that what she really has is an unconscious desire to "take him home and lie on top of him."

Mr. Fish, unfamiliar with the real Nativity story, mistakes Owen's shocking interruption for actual events. John is rather jealously possessive of his understanding of Owen—he doesn't want to share Owen with a girl (who is implied to be struggling with her own feelings).

Barb grabs John as he finally leaves with Owen's clothes and shakes him, ordering him to tell Owen that he must come see her before he's allowed back into the church. John tells Dan everything that happened between Owen and Barb, worried that Owen will shun the Episcopalians as he has shunned the Catholics. Mr. Fish suddenly observes that Harold is still hanging in the stage's rafters. Dan uses his theatrical expertise to lower Harold in his harness to the ground. Harold has thrown up all over himself and ruined his costume, but Dan still picks him up and carefully carries him over to Barb to confront her.

Barb is hell-bent on regaining control over their church like she use to have over her airplane. If it came to a battle of wills, though, Owen would rather leave the church forever than concede to a woman as tyrannical as Barb. John senses that there's something wrong with Barb's enraged attitude towards a mere child, and Dan agrees. Barb has allowed her resentment of Owen to blind her judgment and distract her from her responsibilities to the other children.

Dan tells Barb that he doesn't want to have to tell the Vestry members the story of how she left Harold hanging twenty feet about a concrete floor. He tells her that she will not give Owen any ultimatums—Owen is welcome in the church anytime, without her permission, and if the rector wants to talk about Owen, he can talk to Dan. Barb quickly becomes eager to please, helping Harold get into cleaner clothes just before his mother arrives.

Barb surrenders her quarrel with Owen so quickly that she appears even more contemptible. She did have a fair cause to be angry with Owen—his outrageous outburst and spontaneous exit utterly derailed the program, and he showed little regard for the success of the show he had insisted on taking over. Her fury with Owen was far too personal, but someone probably should have held Owen accountable for his rudeness.

John wishes he was back at Sawyer Depot for Christmas Eve. This year, he and Dan are going to the final production of *A Christmas Carol*, then the cast party—planning to occupy them for as much time as possible, so they won't grieve Tabitha's absence. Harriet almost refuses to join them at the show, since Lydia is sick and she doesn't want to leave her alone with only Germaine for company. But she finally agrees to go, and John escorts her to the performance, where she makes her usual regal entrance.

John goes to see A Christmas Carol on Christmas Eve, the night when the story is supposed to take place. The real world and the world of the play will collide tonight, as Owen will be visited by a vision of the future just as Scrooge is visited by the various ghosts. Harriet's concern for Lydia nearly prevents her from going out, and her foreboding will be proven right.

John goes backstage to see Owen, who is so feverish that he barely needs his makeup to look ghastly. On his makeup table, he has traced his name in baby powder. He refuses to explain why he evicted his parents from church the other night, only referencing the old unspeakable "RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION."

Owen looks even worse after his recent impassioned outburst. He is juggling so many roles—Christ Child, Ghost of the Future, his parents' son, the child he no longer is—that he perhaps writes his name down to try and remember who he is.

From backstage, John looks out into the audience. Mr. Morrison is there, as is Rev. Merrill and his family. It occurs to John that many of the same people in the crowd must have also been watching the **baseball** game the day Tabitha was killed. Mr. Chickering is there, and Chief Pike. John remembers his mother had been waving to somebody in the bleachers before she died—the last person she ever saw. He imagines that she must have been waving at his father. With this idea in mind, he searches the crowd for people who were present at the game.

John observes the world from an unfamiliar perspective, looking out invisibly from behind the scenes. A powerful instinct abruptly rises in him as he takes in this new perspective—an instinct that Owen would call heaven-sent. Despite Tabitha's account of meeting a man on the train, he suddenly suspects that his father is one of Gravesend's familiar faces.

The girls Maureen Early and Caroline Day were at the game. Arthur and Amanda Dowling were also there. Amanda is playing the Ghost of Christmas Past. She challenges sexual stereotypes by dressing in men's clothing and cutting her hair short, while her husband wears an apron to the grocery store and grows his hair long. If they have a daughter, they will insist in enrolling her in **baseball**, to Mr. Chickering's dismay. Amanda serves on the Town Library Board, and believes in banning books that teach children to conform to sexual stereotypes—basically all the classics. She and her husband try out for opposite-gender roles in Dan's plays.

As John canvasses the faces that he recognizes from the baseball game, Irving expands on the idiosyncrasies of the Gravesend locals. He introduces the characters of Arthur and Amanda Dowling, a couple with strong ideas about gender equality. They're essentially caricatures of the radical feminist and her emasculated husband. Amanda is basically right about classic literature being full of sexist characters, but her lack of nuance makes her a ridiculous figure, another one of the book's hysterical women.

John watches the audience until Owen comes on stage, and he sees their faces transformed by fear. Owen's cough is not humanizing, but a death rattle. When he points to the grave engraved with Scrooge's name, he suddenly faints. He regains consciousness by jumping to his feet and screaming, then backing off the stage. Dan and John find him sobbing over his makeup table, burning with fever. Rev. Merrill comes backstage to try and help, and Owen tells him he saw his own name on the grave. Dan hugs Owen and tells him he's just hallucinating the same story as Scrooge's grave. John points out that Owen wrote his name on the table earlier, making it easier to imagine.

Owen's effect upon the audience is more terrifying than ever. However, in an ironic reversal, he gets a dose of his own medicine and tastes the overpowering fear of the future that he inspires in his audience. His "vision" of his gravestone is so clearly a parallel of the plot of the play that it's easy to dismiss what he saw as a harmless delusion. He even had the engraving of his name in his mind before he went out on stage.

Merrill drives Owen home and drops John off at Harriet's house. He seems to believe that Owen had an upsetting "vision," but not the type of prophetic vision that Owen thinks he saw. John feels upset to be missing the cast party at Dan's apartment. Harriet's house is silent. Then John hears Germaine whispering in the secret passageway, praying to herself. Germaine tells him that Lydia died in her bed while Germaine was reading to her. While Germaine was sitting with the body, she had grown spooked, and fled into the secret passageway.

Owen refuses to be comforted by the rational explanations offered by everyone else. He firmly believes in the truth of what he saw. Even Merrill, a man of faith who might be familiar with spiritual visions, refutes Owen's story, but Owen doesn't listen. John returns home to find Germaine hiding in the secret passageway and Lydia dead. The ominous mood of the night found its fated victim.

Harriet imagines that Owen had somehow foreseen Lydia's death and mistaken it for his own. Germaine agrees, saying that she and Lydia thought they heard a scream right before she died. Dan protests, saying that Owen was simply feverish and prone to an overactive imagination. Germaine is so beside herself that she is put to bed in John's room. John wants to call Owen, but he has to wait for Germaine to fall asleep.

Everyone tries to rationalize the events of the night differently, believing in certain fateful connections and dismissing the rest as coincidence. Like in the case of Tabitha's death, everyone has their own particular system of order that they want to fit the unsettling occurrences into, to make them less disturbing.

As Germaine tosses and turns, John begins to imagine climbing into her bed and taking advantage of her distraught state. He says that he believes her about hearing Owen's scream, and takes her hand between the beds. But she is soon asleep, and he is left with his shame. He imagines that his lust comes from his unknown father, and wants to find him even more, in order to discover in that man what sins he himself might one day be capable of.

After his secondhand experiences of condoms, passionate sex, and erections, John finally feels the stirrings of his own desires. Like Owen's on-stage hard-on, John's desire strikes at an inappropriate moment, and he feels deeply ashamed. John thinks he and his father must be uniquely connected by a terrible lust, but he doesn't realize he's far from alone.

John goes into the kitchen to call Owen. He tells Owen everything that he realized that night about his father, and Owen agrees that John's instincts regarding the **baseball** game and stirrings of lust are pointing him in the right direction. He argues that it was not Lydia's death he saw a premonition of—it was his own gravestone, with his real name on it: Paul. He hangs up on John, who calls him back to ask if he saw a date on the gravestone. Owen hesitates—a giveaway—then says there was no date. John thinks that this is the first time Owen has ever lied to him.

John entrusts Owen with all his private intuitions about his father's identity. Owen fails to entrust all of his secrets to John, however. He tries to keep from John the fact that he saw a date on the gravestone—the day of his death. Presumably, he lies because he believes the vision is true, and doesn't want to burden his friend with the knowledge he now carries. Perhaps he understands that John is not meant to know what he knows.

CHAPTER 6: THE VOICE

Harriet always hated a lack of effort, which is ironic because she never worked in her life, never told Tabitha to work, and never gave John any chores. She thought watching television demanded too little effort. But after she sees a TV in an old folks' home, she begins to crave one, even as she denounces them for hastening the deaths of the elderly. She finally gets a TV after Tabitha and then Lydia die. Without Lydia to take care of, Germaine soon resigns.

Television insinuates itself into even the most resistant of households. The device becomes linked to the decline of Harriet's household.

John and Owen didn't know what would be on TV—they were only familiar with the films shown in town, mostly Tarzan movies or biblical epics. Owen found the biblical epics "SACRILEGIOUS." When the TV comes, Harriet watches it all day long, but her passion is born from contempt—commenting on the trashy shows on TV gives her endless energy and purpose.

The town movie theatres run either Tarzan films that indulge people's fantasies of living an uncivilized existence, or biblical films that remind them about proper religious values. Ironically, the conservative citizens of Gravesend enjoy both types of films equally.

Harriet and Owen both appreciate one show, at least—*The Liberace Show*, featuring the flamboyant piano prodigy Liberace. John cannot understand their love for such a kitschy performer, whose attention to his costumes surpassed his attention to his music. Liberace is rumored to be gay, but he fiercely denies the rumors and successfully sues a newspaper for libel, much to Owen and Harriet's delight.

Criticizing everything on TV makes Harriet feel happily superior to everybody else, and even John can't help feeling superior to her and Owen in their love for Liberace, a campy popular pianist. Homophobia was especially strong at this time, and many of Liberace's fans would have been horrified if he were gay.

John complains to Dan about feeling left out of this ridiculous phenomenon. Dan is a good listener, patient and devoted to children. He may not have initially planned to teach at Gravesend Academy until his retirement, but losing Tabitha led him to dedicate himself to the education of "the whole boy," which is what Gravesend Academy sought to promote in its pupils. Unlike many of his fellow faculty members, he actually believes that it's harder to be a teenager than an adult, and is sympathetic to the problems of the adolescents in his care. He also believes it's hard to be elderly. He tells John to have more empathy for Harriet, who has suffered many losses.

John doesn't understand why Harriet and Owen like Liberace. Thankfully, he has Dan for a stepfather, an understanding man who has great empathy for everyone from children to the elderly. John, who tends to be more judgmental of people, could use some of Dan's compassion. Dan understands that Harriet has little left to take happiness from now that both her daughter and her closest companion are gone.

John still thinks it's absurd for Owen, who thinks he's so smart, to adore Liberace, but Dan reminds him that Owen is not worldly—he has never even left Gravesend. Dan dismisses a lot of Owen's eccentricities to his stilted and superstitious upbringing, but John thinks this is too simplistic a theory. He thinks Dan is too simplistic in his thinking about the Academy too—Dan thinks the Academy can save any boy, and Owen just has to make it there to be rid of his family's superstitions.

Dan explains that Owen finds Liberace so great because he's seen so little of the world. His sheltered childhood has given him little exposure to sophisticated art. The flamboyant Liberace is the opposite of buttoned-up Gravesend sensibilities, and it's thrilling to Owen—another rebellion, perhaps. Dan thinks Owen will see everything clearly after going to Gravesend Academy, but John is more skeptical.

Martha and Alfred Eastman also believe in the saving graces of a private education, and they have high hopes that sending Noah and Simon to Gravesend Academy will save them from the dangers of growing up in rural, uncivilized society—mainly driving drunk and having unprotected sex out of sheer boredom. Noah and Simon have wild natures, and they need the heavy workload and strict, numbing routine of Gravesend Academy to wear them down. They are less worried about civilizing Hester.

Martha and Alfred have certain fixed notions about who needs the benefits of a private school education: namely, boys. Even after watching all three of their children grow up wild, they still insist on denying what's before their eyes and pretending that Hester is inherently different from her brothers.

While the boys all prepare to go to the academy, Hester has only the public high school to look forward to. She becomes angry that her parents won't give her the same educational opportunities—or the same chance to be saved—as her brothers.

Hester doesn't want the life that her parents are stubbornly raising her for—a life in which she doesn't need a strong education because she will marry someone to support herself instead of pursuing her own goals.

Owen and Harriet bond over their love for Liberace and their disdain for everything else, and Harriet becomes a champion for Owen's studies at the academy. When Owen protests that his parents can't afford the kind of clothes boys have to wear to the academy, Harriet promises to take him shopping. Owen has no problem earning admission and a full scholarship with his stellar grades, but John has to repeat a year of school before the academy will admit him. Owen could have skipped a grade, but instead he faithfully decides to stay behind with John and help him with his homework—as he promised Tabitha he would. "I'LL NEVER LEAVE YOU," he tells John.

Harriet finally returns the respect that Owen has always had for her. Exchanging scornful comments on the low quality of TV shows—all except for Liberace—reveals them to have similar tastes and intellects. Like Tabitha, she wants Owen to transcend his low origin and limited means and fulfill his full potential at Gravesend Academy. Meanwhile, the rightful Wheelwright heir can't get into the Academy without an extra year of school. Owen proves his loyalty as a friend and follows John.

Back in the present, Liberace has just died at age sixty-seven, allegedly of AIDS. He reversed his former public opposition to homosexuality before he died, but never admitted to being gay.

From the present, John reports the news of Liberace's death. Irving perhaps interjects this fact here to show how much the world has changed since Owen and Harriet first loved the star.

Over Thanksgiving in 1954, the Eastmans come to Gravesend and see Harriet's television. Simon likes everything, and Hester hates everything. Noah is in his first year at the academy, and is feeling overwhelmed by the demands of his classes. The Eastmans decide to take a relaxing Caribbean vacation over Christmas, leaving Owen disappointed by yet another lost opportunity to see Sawyer Depot.

Simon, who likes to lose himself in fights and other pursuits of adrenaline, loves the content on television that appeals to people's baser instincts. Noah is struggling at Gravesend, perhaps proving to his parents that gender does not determine intellectual capability.

Owen has become disenchanted with Christmas pageantry, and religious pageantry in general, after the disastrous pageant of the year before. He denounces the Catholic adoration of "OBJECTS" that manifests in biblical films and in representations like statues. He especially hates the statue of Mary Magdalene erected near the playground of St. Michael's parochial school, the school Owen would have attended if his parents had not switched religions. Mary Magdalene, posed in a stone archway, makes a tempting target for balls and pucks, but the nuns living nearby keep an eye out for troublemakers.

Owen once wanted to stage a perfected scene of the Nativity, complete with him at the center in his rightful place. The resulting disaster soured his feelings towards pageantry, especially Catholic representation. His animosity towards Catholicism has only worsened since his confrontation with his parents at the Christmas pageant. He identifies Catholicism with the statue of Mary Magdalene, which looms large in his mind.

Owen is afraid of nuns. Ironically for such an unusual boy, he thinks they are "UNNATURAL"—but he and John can't resist throwing chestnuts at the statue every fall, or covering its feet with tadpoles in the spring. The nuns give chase if they see them, but Owen and John can outrun the "penguins." In the spring of 1957, Owen is especially keen on vandalizing the statue. He and John had seen the movie *The Ten Commandments* just before Easter, which Owen found to be a terrible time for such a release—showing the story of Moses during the time dedicated to Jesus. Moreover, he hated seeing the parting of the Red Sea on screen: "YOU CAN'T TAKE A MIRACLE AND JUST SHOW IT."

Owen seems to find nuns more unnatural than priests, for whatever reason. Both priests and nuns are required to be celibate, but Owen seems to find a woman's choice to forgo a family for a closer relationship with God more unnatural than a man's. The nuns don't even get the authority and the respect that priests do, since only men can lead and preach in Catholicism. For someone like Owen, who loves being an authority, perhaps it's unthinkable to make such a sacrifice without gaining anything. His objection to the material representation of miracles and saints leads him to vandalism.

Owen and John continue trying to solve the mystery of John's father by watching the crowds at Dan's shows and searching their memories for who was at the **baseball** game. They decide that Mrs. Merrill never would have gone to a game, not being a fan of baseball, and Rev. Merrill wouldn't have gone without his wife. They agree that they would have remembered the Wiggins making a spectacle of themselves if they had been there. Owen cautions John not to forget the likelihood that if his mother had thought his father would be a good influence, she wouldn't have kept his identity secret. He should be prepared for disappointment.

The idea that the boys could identify John's father by remembering who was at the baseball game is fanciful, but they take their deliberations seriously. Perhaps their latest quest is yet another search for meaning in that terrible accident—they want to believe that some illuminating revelation can be born from such a random tragedy. Finding a father in the same moment John lost a mother would be apt. Or perhaps the boys just take comfort from returning to the moments before they lost their innocence.

By the Christmas of 1957, both Noah and Simon are juniors at the academy—Noah having been held back a year. At Sawyer Depot High School, Hester skipped a grade to end up in the same graduating year as her brothers. John is disappointed not to see more of Hester, whom he has un-cousinly feelings for. Owen tells him that Hester is probably too dangerous for him, but she would probably consider going out with him to drive her family crazy.

Noah, Simon, and Hester end up in the same year of school like triplets, a matched set from beginning to end, but their parents still insist on separating them by gender. John can't shake his mildly incestuous crush on Hester, but Owen points out it's exactly the kind of sexual taboo Hester would probably embrace for the purpose of shocking and embarrassing her family.

Hester is determined to scandalize her family to punish them for denying her the same freedoms and opportunities as her brothers. In 1957, the Eastmans stay home for Christmas instead of returning to the Caribbean after Hester became involved with a native boatman the previous year. They still don't invite John and Owen to Sawyer Depot, to the boys' regret. They're both fifteen, and slightly in love with Hester.

Hester wants to act as un-ladylike as possible in protest of how gender norms have crippled her freedom. Her parents return to the tactic of keeping her at home where they can try and keep an eye on her. Perhaps they can tell that inviting boys over would be an invitation for trouble.

Back in the present year, it's Palm Sunday. John always finds the week before Easter to be exhausting—he worries that Jesus couldn't possibly have come back to life after all that he suffered before his death. Christmas is a much easier story to swallow, being more believable and more upbeat than the saga of Jesus's death and rebirth. But the Resurrection is the central miracle to Christianity, and faith in it is necessary to be a Christian.

John finds the Easter holiday to be more trying than the Christmas holiday, although he seems to find the Christmas holiday trying as well lately. Owen made Christmas more like Easter, acting more like a tortured martyr than a bringer of peace and light. John's experience should have shown him that the miracle of peace on earth—the miracle promised by Christ's birth—is nearly as impossible to have true faith in in as the miracle of the resurrection.

After the Palm Sunday service, John heads to the dining hall of The Bishop Strachan School, where he teaches. He reflects on the clothes that the boarders—all girls—are wearing on the weekend. He thinks that the girls dress badly when they aren't wearing their uniforms; he thinks they must prefer not having to worry about what to wear most of the time. He wonders if they dress with him in mind on Sundays, since he is frequently the only man who comes to the boarders' lunch on Sundays.

John judges the outfits of the girls at the boarding school, thinking that they don't know how to dress themselves. He (rather naively and self-centeredly) imagines that they must think about him as much as he thinks about them, and dress with him in mind.

Rev. Katherine Keeling, the headmistress, oversees the meal. John thinks she is fantastic, but finds her too thin. He sees her not eating at lunch, but admits that her clerical collar makes her look more underweight than she really is. He says she's his closest friend now that Canon Campbell has died. The previous principal of Bishop Strachan, Old Teddybear Kilgour, hired John on Campbell's recommendation twenty years ago. John teases Katherine by asking her if she would have hired him at that age—a young, single American man applying to teach at an all-girls school. Kilgour trusted John to take his faculty responsibilities seriously, and not become involved with any students.

John can't even stop from thinking critically about Rev. Keeling, an accomplished adult woman who surely knows how to take care of herself. John's thoughts about the girls and women he is surrounded by are not sexual in nature, but they are paternalistic and patronizing. He thinks it is his place to tell the women in his life how they should dress and eat. Kilgour trusted him not to take advantage of the young, impressionable female students he would be teaching, and he has not betrayed that trust, but he has not shed his lifelong sexist tendencies.

Katherine reminds John of Harriet in a way—they both have a gift for sarcasm and diction. He thinks Harriet and Owen would have liked Katherine. He says the Sunday boarders' lunches are an important ritual to him, combatting loneliness. After lunch, he and Katherine sign up to pray together during an All Night Vigil. John thinks that Katherine is "wise and kind and witty and articulate; and she does not bullshit herself about what Easter means."

John certainly admires the strong female figures in his life, putting Katherine and Harriet on a similar level as the exceptional Owen Meany, but he is still susceptible to condescending thoughts about most women.

A week later, on Easter Sunday, the weather has miraculously changed from cold and rainy to humid and summery. John compares the change in weather to walking into the bright light from inside the dark tomb where Jesus's body once lay. John thinks of Owen when he says to Katherine, "He is risen."

Easter dawns bright and warm, a promising sign of hope and rebirth. Though the details of Owen's death are not yet revealed, John is still clearly associating him with Christ, and hoping for Owen's own resurrection.

In the summer of 1958, Owen and John turn sixteen and get their drivers licenses. Owen gets his license first, because he had already learned to drive on the quarry roads in his father's trucks. Dan teaches John to drive that summer in the mornings before his daily rehearsals for *Julius Caesar*.

Owen and John are officially no longer children, but well on their way to adulthood. No longer dependent on parents to drive them around, they can seize their own autonomy. Owen is also no longer the tiny, pitiable figure struggling to pedal his bicycle up a steep hill, but now a young man driving himself.

In the evenings, Owen drives Mr. Meany's tomato-red pickup truck down to the boardwalk at Hampton Beach with John. They drive along the strip and look at girls until a cop pulls them over and tell them to look on foot. But if the girls rarely look back at Owen and John when they are driving, they stare and laugh at them when they're walking, due to Owen's size. Owen also gets hassled by the other guys around. So he and John leave the boardwalk and head back to Gravesend, or sit on the deserted beach or harbor.

Owen and John don't get particularly far with their new privileges—they're still peering out from the truck at a world out of their reach, like the children sneaking into the high schoolers' dorm rooms and watching the adult audiences of Dan's shows.

The boardwalk girls may have ignored them, but John notices that women find Owen attractive. He has a confidence borne from earning his way in the world, and from being in command of himself and others. Girls want to touch him, like Mary Beth all those years ago. Then he develops muscles from his hard labor in the quarries with Mr. Meany, and starts smoking a pack a day. The work and the cigarettes give his face a gaunt, adult quality. He and John still discuss breasts, but they compare their classmates' chests now. They despair that the girls their age all want to date older boys, but await their eighteenth birthdays, when they'll get their classmates back and the younger girls, too.

Now that he's a teenager, Owen's exceptional maturity is less unsettling and more compelling. His self-assured attitude is impressive to his peers, normal teenagers in the grips of adolescent uncertainties and insecurities. In the pampered town of Gravesend, few can match his rough image. Unfortunately, neither he nor John have matured past objectifying the women they know and speaking of them as if boys are entitled to their favors.

In the fall of 1958, when John and Owen finally start at Gravesend Academy, Owen looks especially sophisticated in the clothes Harriet had bought him in Boston. He isn't scared of the bigger boys because he is used to being smaller, and he isn't scared of the older boys because he always knoww more than them. The boys admire cynicism and rebellion above all else, and Owen had mastered sarcasm from Harriet. He is nicknamed Sarcasm Master; John never gets a nickname. Owen writes essays for the school newspaper, *The Grave*, under the pen name **The Voice**. His articles are always published in capital letters, which is part of his plan to become a school "INSTITUTION."

After worrying for years that he wouldn't fit in at Gravesend Academy because of his lower-class background, Owen takes the school by storm. He carries himself with more authority than any other first-year student. He even embraces the full potential of his voice, instead of allowing himself to be silenced by self-consciousness. John, meanwhile, seems too timid or self-consciousness to ever stand out and earn a nickname. Owen's regular publications in The Grave *are ironic, given how death shadows his life.*

Gravesend students embrace **The Voice** as a new institution—Owen is their voice, speaking up for their causes, asserting their dignity in an environment where they are belittled by the adults. He can also criticize the student body, however, for failing to be open-minded or self-aware, or for bullying. He even speaks out against drinking and drugs, showing a fearlessness towards his peers' judgment.

Owen has never hesitated to speak the blunt truth, and his newspaper editorials are no different. Believing that God had a purpose for giving him his voice, he seems to have realized that such a gift was meant to be used, not muted. He's not interested in pandering or pleasing a crowd, but in voicing his principles.

That spring, Owen dares to invite Hester to the senior ball as a freshman. He had sent her every issue of *The Grave*, and she loved the irreverence. She has lost a substantial amount of weight, and mastered a subtle aura of danger and maturity for her age. She dresses well, although John thinks "her body belonged in the jungle, covered only essentially." She wears a fitted, short, plunging black dress to the dance, and Owen wears an elegant tuxedo Harriet had bought for him. Unlike the other boys, who have to escort their dates straight to the visitors' dorms, Owen gets to drive Hester back to Harriet's house.

Owen steps in where John cannot—or will not—and claims Hester for himself. Hester has made herself sexier to male eyes than ever, as John notes her weight loss and thinks that her body is so naturally perfect that it should be observed bare in the wilderness. John's hopeless preoccupation with Hester's body seems to get in the way of a deeper understanding of her character.

Other boys brag about their sexual escapades, but Owen does not. Noah and Simon assume Hester had slept with him—"Hester fucks *everybody*!" Simon claims—but the couple never say how they spend their evening. After the dance, **The Voice** denounces both the crass bragging of boys claiming to have taken advantage of their dates, and the chaperones' rapid policing of any forms of affection.

At last, Owen is respectful enough of a woman not to announce what he's seen and thinks of her body. He even criticizes his peers who speak of their dates in this way. Perhaps he finds such locker-room talk acceptable in the abstract, as a boy's harmless fantasy, but objectionable in reference to real relationships.

In the search for a new headmaster for Gravesend Academy, the candidates for the job are given subscriptions to *The Grave*, and they are also given private meetings with **The Voice**. Several of the faculty object to this, but the faculty adviser to *The Grave*, Mr. Early, supports Owen. The current headmaster, Archibald Thorndike, also supports Owen, calling him "a delightful little fella" and saying that he "wouldn't miss reading The Voice—not for all the world!" "Thorny" is an old-school type who believes in "the whole boy," and believes that well-educated men will improve society by criticizing it. Thorny is nice, but a fool when it comes to managing and modernizing a school.

Owen's influence extends beyond his peers to the adult realm when he becomes involved in the recruitment of a new headmaster. The current headmaster reads his essays faithfully and supports his practice of intelligent dissent, but not all of the adults at the school are won over by Owen's wit and bold opinions. They feel threatened by his sharp intellect and willingness to challenge authority. A new headmaster could easily feel the same hostility.

Over the summer, John gives tours of the school while Owen returns to the quarries. Owen doesn't talk about Hester, but he is able to score some dates for him and John. They are able to walk the boardwalk after Owen holds his own in a few fights with the punks and earns a reputation as "a mean little fucker." That fall, Noah and Simon start college in California, while Hester unhappily starts at the state university, where her parents can pay resident tuition. Owen's cool reputation increases further from dating a college girl.

John gets another boost from his family connections in the form of a nice job at the school, while Owen must return to his family's tough labor in the quarries. Dealing with the rough quarrymen, perhaps, gives him the backbone to take on much larger boys in scuffles on the boardwalk. Hester's neglect by her parents continues, and perhaps she takes her revenge by dating the boy who took her mother's sister from her.

Back in the present, it's May, and former U.S. senator Gary Hart has dropped out of the running for president after being found in a hotel with a model. John thinks that Hart will surely be back—"remember Nixon?" John criticizes Americans for caring more about sexual infidelity than Constitutional violations like the Iran-Contra affair. Toronto is rejoicing in the sunshine, but John remembers that Owen hated the spring—it meant school was almost over, and he would be going back to the quarries.

John thinks that matters of sexuality are so much less important to ethical and moral standards than critical breaches that lead to true harm. However, the rabid attention Americans pay to sensational sex scandals is grossly disproportionate to their weak response to transgressions like lying to the country and violating the Constitution.

Owen had written a bunch of essays over the summer about the ongoing search for a new headmaster, urging the Search Committee to find someone committed to serving the faculty and the students rather than the alumni and the trustees, who prioritize fundraising above education. Dan argues to the faculty that Owen really loves Gravesend Academy, and his constructive critique is better than blind devotion. Owen's petition against fish on Fridays is less defensible—he protests against only fish being served in the cafeteria on Fridays for the sake of Catholics who don't eat meat that day. He wins his case, but it seems more frivolous—and more personal—than his other campaigns. He still calls nuns "penguins," and often asks, "DO YOU THINK THEY'RE ALL LESBIANS?"

Owen doesn't want a headmaster beholden to outside interests, who won't put the best interests of his students first. For the students, the selection of a new headmaster is like the election of a new president—they're powerless, too young to vote for the person who will rule over the next four years of their lives. Owen tries to reclaim the students' lost power and assert their will in the decision. However, the fact that he hasn't outgrown his bias against the Catholics doesn't help his case to add his voice to the adults'. Again, he is more preoccupied with nuns' sexuality than priests'.

Thorny warns Owen that he's making enemies, and he should be careful not to give them any way to get him. Although he doesn't play **baseball** anymore, once his favorite game, Owen still plays soccer, tennis, and basketball throughout the year. He makes John practice a coordinated "slam-dunk" shot with him, where John boosts him high enough into the air to stuff the ball into the basket. John finds this practice pointless and boring, but Owen says John owes him for all the times he lifted him up unwillingly in Sunday School. He can't use the move in a game, but he insists "IT'S NOT FOR A GAME."

Owen's loud and divisive words could come back to haunt him. As much as he would like to believe otherwise, he cannot really see the future—at least, not all of it. He does seem to see a special future purpose in the trick shot that he insists on practicing with John—the shot that isn't "FOR A GAME." But Owen rarely seems to do anything just for a game.

Owen and John have plenty of time to practice over Christmas, as the Eastmans continue to not invite them up to Sawyer Depot. John thinks Martha doesn't want to encourage Owen's relationship with Hester—that's what Hester says, at least, but John also thinks she could be making it up to prejudice Owen against her mother. John also has to spend his vacation writing two late term papers, with Owen's generous aid. He struggles so much with spelling and other schoolwork that he is enrolled in a remedial course and sent to see the school psychiatrist. At the time he was in high school, learning disabilities like dyslexia weren't widely understood, and students' academic difficulties were thought to result from stupidity or psychological issues.

Another Christmas passes in Gravesend, exiled from Sawyer Depot. Perhaps the idea of having John and Owen over is simply too painful for Aunt Martha, still grieving her sister. Perhaps having three young adults home for the holidays is enough trouble without adding two more. Owen and John are left to be each other's family. John's difficulty with his high school English papers is surprising given that he becomes an English teacher in the present, but in hindsight he suspects he had undiagnosed dyslexia.

The school psychiatrist, Dr. Dolder, believes that John's studies are hampered by his past and ongoing psychological traumas, no matter how much John insists that he loves Owen and forgives him for the accident, and loves his stepfather and grandmother and doesn't mind living in two places. Dolder wants John to bring a **baseball** to his next session, and bring Owen, too, but John refuses.

Dolder hunts for evidence to support his hypothesis of trauma rather than actually listening to his patient. He has a fixed idea of what the problem must be and refuses to hear otherwise.

Back in the present, John buys a newspaper about Reagan's illegal support for the Nicaraguan contras. He considers again that the sexual misconduct of politicians is so insignificant compared to the immorality of the president who acts above the law and runs guns to terrorists, but Americans only care enough to be outraged by sexual transgressions.

People frequently choose not to hear what they don't want to hear. Americans cannot bear to think that their president—the man they chose to represent themselves—is truly corrupt and dishonest. They would rather believe that he is acting with the right intentions and that their country is righteous no matter what.

John is teaching his senior girls Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, a nineteenth-century novel about a young woman who was seduced, or raped, and suffered a tragic end. He urges them to pay attention to the meaning of Hardy's text, but the girls only want to know if they can have class outside tomorrow.

Of course, sexual abuses and abuses of power frequently go hand in hand. Tess's vulnerability to sexual exploitation is symptomatic of a larger imbalance of power where the rich and aristocratic live without fear of being held accountable for their actions. People don't like to think that they could be living in such a society.

In the winter of 1959, the minister of Gravesend Academy suffered a bad head injury on the icy steps of the church and Rev. Merrill was hired as his temporary replacement. Merrill had to teach the school's religion classes, where he preached his "doubt-is-the-essence-of-faith-and-not-the-opposite-of-faith philosophy." Owen is intrigued by the idea of "belief without miracles." He protests to Merrill, "BUT EVERYONE NEEDS A *LITTLE* PROOF." Merrill insists, "Faith itself is a miracle."

Merrill, with his Ivy league English degree, is prepared to take over a teaching role. Owen, as usual, has no qualms about challenging any of the school's teachings. Owen's concern with proof is rather ironic given his earlier scorn for people who think they need to envision a miracle. Then again, Owen has always taken the unusual facts of his life as "proof" that God is taking an active interest in him.

The rest of the Gravesend boys, including John, are "an atheistic mob," taken with secular writers like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Sartre, and Camus rather than with Tolstoy, Graham Greene, Joyce, or Dostoevski. Merrill counters the boys with Kierkegaard, who said that faith "is the greatest and most difficult of all things." Owen defends Merrill's ideas to the rest of the class: "JUST BECAUSE A BUNCH OF ATHEISTS ARE BETTER WRITERS THAN THE GUYS WHO WROTE THE BIBLE DOESN'T NECESSARILY MAKE THEM *RIGHT*!" **The Voice** tells the school to just hire Merrill as the new minister instead of searching for someone else, and they do.

Aside from Owen, the other students find the theories of secular writers to be more original and compelling than Christian writers, whose ideas seem more familiar on first glance. Merrill makes the case that keeping faith is not childish—it is supremely challenging. Owen accuses his classmates of being caught up by the secular writers' style and craft rather than evaluating the merits of their conclusions. Of course, Owen is never above making a statement with his own style to counter theirs.

Back in the present, John runs into the mother of a girl in his Grade 12 English class. While he's talking to her, he thinks of giving a pop quiz on *Tess* to his class, since he's sure they haven't been reading it very carefully. Then he remembers that he and Owen first read the book in Mr. Early's tenth grade class, when the book shouldn't have been assigned to them so young. John has even been trying to convince his colleagues to teach it in Grade 13 instead of Grade 12. He struggled mightily when he read it for the first time. "I can't read this!" he screamed to Owen.

John's memory is far from perfect, especially for a man who thinks other people forget too easily. He forgot what it was like to be a teenager reading such a difficult book for the first time, fighting to wade through the writing while also trying to endure so many other trials of growing up.

Owen was willing to even read the book aloud to him if that would help, but John refused. Owen says he can either do all of John's homework for him, or he can teach him how to do it. He wants John to succeed "AFTER I'M GONE," or at least after high school. He questions John on his plans for the future—work? College? What major? Owen says he's going to study Geology, and he suggests that John study English. John protests that reading books is difficult, and he hates it, but Owen helps him see that the books are not the problem—the reading is. In the present, he feels terrible for thinking of giving his girls a nasty quiz after remembering how much help he needed.

Owen is deeply devoted to John—for the long term, not just the short term. He recognizes John's reluctance to take charge of his own life, and tries to guide him towards a rewarding path to follow. However, by continually helping John find his way, Owen prevents him from finally becoming self-sufficient and taking control of his own future. Judging from where John finds himself today, he looks to have followed Owen's advice exactly.

In the spring of 1960, Gravesend Academy found its new headmaster. Randolph White, or "Randy," was the headmaster of a small private day school in Lake Forest, Illinois, which John understands to be "a super-rich and exclusively WASP community that does its utmost to pretend it is not a suburb of Chicago." A few students who came to Gravesend from the Midwest agree that Lake Forest is one of those homogeneous suburbs that exclude black or Jewish families from moving in. White is the only candidate who wouldn't accept an interview with Owen when he came to visit the school. Education was White's second career, after running a Chicago meat business. He dresses like a businessman.

Randy refused to meet with Owen, showing himself to be someone who does not care about the student body he is applying to serve. His background implies that he sees his students as objects, not people but silent bodies for him to profit off of. He also doesn't see people of minority backgrounds as human, as he refuses to live with them.

Owen predicted the trustees would pick White, also being businessmen. They like decision-makers, and don't care about his lack of educational background. Owen even suggested that White's admission policy in Lake Forest had excluded black and Jewish students. He tried to say all this in a column, but Mr. Early cut it for its potential for libel. Dan suggested he try to find proof of White's school's exclusionary policies, but Owen can only find hearsay.

The trustees in charge of the private institution choose someone who makes decisions quickly—rashly, even, as future events will show. White is not a thoughtful and open-minded leader, but a bully.

Back in the present, John continues to follow the Iran-contra affair in the Canadian newspapers. He vows not to talk about it and confirm his reputation as the obsessed American, but one of his students brings it up in class in order to distract him from the day's lesson about F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. With great self-restraint, John manages to resist her obvious attempt to get him off topic and disguise the fact that she hasn't done the reading. To himself, he thinks that the Reagan administration is filled with the same kinds of "careless people" who destroy lives in *The Great Gatsby*.

Like the American president who disregards the principles of the Constitution and the wealthy Buchanans who ruin Gatsby in The Great Gatsby, *Randy White is "careless" and destructive. America has failed to learn its lesson from the past, allowing such people to spread their damage without restraint and even electing them to positions of greater power.*

One of John's fellow teachers also tries to prompt him into a political rant, but he restrains himself to another line from *Gatsby*—saying that the Reagan administration demonstrated "an urban distaste for the concrete." He remembers when Owen taught him how to read better by showing him how to write a complete term paper, and also by making a cheat sheet for him to place over the page he was reading in order to help him keep his place on the page. Owen even encouraged John to learn how to type, since it was easier for him to notice a typewritten misspelling than one in his own handwriting.

Dishonest and ruinous people dislike the "concrete" because they prefer to make up their own rules and practice their own self-serving logic rather than face the truth of their actions. Reading books like The Great Gatsby *can help people to recognize these flaws in their society. By teaching John to read and write critically, Owen helped him to see the truth and share it with others.*

In the summer of 1960, John and Owen turned eighteen, and they swam in the quarry lake without a rope. They registered for the draft and practiced the slam-dunk shot in the Gravesend Academy gym. They would time themselves and try to make the shot in less than four seconds. In the fall, Owen used the new photocopier in the newspaper office to make blank draft cards as fake IDs. He sold the cards to students for $21 each.

John and Owen are legal adults, leaving some of the protections of childhood behind—like the safety rope in deep water, or the youthful exemption from military service—but Owen's trick shot follows them into adulthood. No longer being a minor doesn't make them full adults, however—they can die in battle, but not drink or vote.

Back in Toronto in May, Reagan cites his diary as proof he didn't bring up aid for the contras with the King of Saudi Arabia. Harriet gave Owen a diary for Christmas in 1960—he called her his "BENEFACTOR." That fall, Owen had been busy protesting Randy White's first decisions as headmaster—to build himself a new house on campus, to move the morning assembly from Hurd's Church to the Great Hall in the Main Academy Building, to abolish the Latin requirement, and to change the school's dismissal policy from a faculty-wide vote to the vote of an Executive Committee. Many of these initial changes are popular, or neutral, in the eyes of the students and faculty. Owen protests that changing the dismissal policy created an oligarchy, but the school is more preoccupied with the upcoming national election.

Reagan tries to use his own informal record as proof against wrongdoing. The diary of an accused liar doesn't inspire much trust, though. Owen also kept a diary, which he would never have lied in. White does away with the school traditions that don't suit him, and the school lets him do this. Owen is the only one who speaks up and objects to measures like making student dismissal subject to the judgment of a small, select committee rather than based on a faculty vote.

Owen organizes a mock election for the student body, and he is a big JFK supporter, to John's surprise—John F. Kennedy is Catholic. JFK wins the student election in a landslide, although most of the students are too young to vote in the real election—the voting age was still twenty-one, at the time. Randy White begins to talk back to **The Voice** during the morning assemblies, and he personally replaces Mr. Early as the newspaper advisor. Dan and John warn Owen to be careful.

Owen appears to have grown out of his personal prejudice against Catholics as he considers the nation's fate—as Kennedy himself would famously say, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." Owen can put his private grudge with Catholicism aside for the good of the nation. However, his grudge with White worsens.

After receiving the diary for Christmas, Owen begins to write in it every night. He writes furiously the night after President Kennedy's inauguration in January 1961. He is impressed with Kennedy's famous inaugural speech, which he would go on to regularly quote to John: "ASK NOT WHAT YOUR COUNTRY CAN DO FOR YOU—ASK WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR COUNTRY." Owen wants to "BE *OF USE* WITHOUT BEING USED"; he believes Kennedy is "A KIND OF SAVIOR."

Owen needs to express his feelings in writing, like John will later do though this book. A Prayer for Owen Meany *is strongly yet subtly reminiscent of a diary at times, as John records the present date and the events of the day. Of course, diaries are theoretically private, while John seems to be writing for an audience. Owen's wish to be useful "without being used" explains a great deal about his noble actions yet bitter attitude.*

CHAPTER 7: THE DREAM

When Owen and John were seniors, practicing the shot in the school gymnasium, Owen finally tells him what he has believed since he was eleven: "GOD HAS TAKEN YOUR MOTHER. . . . MY HANDS WERE THE INSTRUMENT. . . . I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT." John asks why Owen needs his help with the shot, if he's God's instrument. Owen insists that "FAITH CAN MOVE MOUNTAINS," and says John's problem is that he doesn't have faith.

John is becoming irritated with Owen's unexplained insistence on mastering a seemingly pointless trick. Owen tells him that he and his hands are God's instruments, but John doesn't understand what that has to do with the shot. Owen just tells him he doesn't have enough faith.

That fall, John only applies to the University of New Hampshire, while Owen applies to Harvard and Yale. The University of New Hampshire gives Owen an Honor Society Scholarship before he even applies, but he won't go there unless it's to be with Hester and John. John won't ask Owen to turn down an Ivy League school for him, and he is becoming a good student in English and History by himself—he tells Owen he can finally fend for himself. But Owen won't rule out going to state school to see more of Hester, and his parents.

John is still reluctant to take an adventurous approach to life, preferring the path of least resistance. Even Owen, with all of his vast potential, seems to be at risk of getting trapped in a rut—sticking by John's side and staying in New Hampshire instead of striking out on his own. True adulthood is closer than ever, and suddenly they don't want to leave childhood behind.

After their disagreement, Owen and John finally manage to make the basketball shot in under four seconds. Owen immediately wants to try for three seconds, to John's irritation. "FAITH TAKES PRACTICE," Owen says. That fall, he and John begin to quarrel for the first time. They can't agree on where to go now that they have the senior privilege of taking the train to Boston once a week. John is happy going along with the boys who buy booze with fake IDs, get drunk, and go to a strip club. He doesn't mind drinking, and he hasn't lost his virginity yet, despite going on dates with Caroline O'Day and Lorna Pike.

Owen is never satisfied when it comes to how perfectly they can make the shot. He frames their quest as a matter of faith, strangely enough, for what appears to be an athletic endeavor. As their lives prepare to possibly diverge, he and John begin to experience friction. Trying to do everything together can't work forever when they're fundamentally different people. John is more eager to conform with others, even if their values are questionable.

Owen doesn't drink, and he won't make fake draft cards anymore, having become self-righteous and law-abiding after taking Kennedy's speech to heart. So he and John have to endure their trips to Boston completely sober, even the shows at the strip club that are "only watchable to the blind drunk"—otherwise the performances are clearly "DISGUSTING" and "DEGRADING." Owen makes them leave the strip club and walk around a nicer part of town, which is a new sight to him. John doesn't realize that Owen purposefully wants to go to the upscale boutique where Tabitha once bought her infamous red dress.

Unlike John, Owen sticks to his values. John always goes along with Owen, so he ends up acting out Owen's morals—and even Owen can apparently be persuaded to visit a strip club. While he objects to the degrading displays that the other men encourage, the woman on stage is portrayed as repulsive and grotesque, with little empathy for her humanity. Owen does make them leave, but only to pursue another woman—Tabitha.

Once Owen and John get to the store, they see that Tabitha had lied about it burning down. Owen saw the store in the newspaper one day and recognized the name from the label on the dress. They go inside and talk to the owner, who says the store never had a fire. Owen shows him a picture of Tabitha, and he says she was "The Lady in Red"—a singer at a supper club who always wore the red dress she bought at his store. She performed one night a week with a black pianist named Buster accompanying her, and she was a regular feature of the club.

Owen and John discover that Tabitha was hiding more than just the identity of her lover—she was hiding large parts of herself. She pretended to hate the red dress but wore it frequently, while she performed in secret. She wasn't just taking singing lessons, but singing in a regular act. Doing one show a week seemed to satisfy her, as she never pursued more gigs, but perhaps she needed only a single outlet to escape the stifling conventions of her town.

Next Owen takes John to the office of Tabitha's singing teacher, Graham McSwiney, who gave Owen an appointment to have his **voice** analyzed. They wait outside for the previous lesson to finish while John absorbs the fact that his mother was a very convincing liar. McSwiney eagerly examines Owen's Adam's apple, or larynx. When a normal person like John swallows, yawns, or screams, his Adam's apple moves up and down. Owen's Adam's apple doesn't move—he has a fixed larynx, stuck in the position of "a *permanent scream*." McSwiney advises him to consider seeing a throat doctor for surgery.

Owen and John continue to track down Tabitha's secret life, everything she never told her mother or sister about. They don't know what Dan knew. John wonders what else Tabitha could have been lying about. He and Owen already suspected that the man on the train was in fact a familiar Gravesend resident, so the revelation of another secret isn't a total shock. The anatomical explanation of Owen's unusual voice doesn't really mean anything to Owen, who only cares for the divine justification.

Owen refuses, saying, "IF GOD GAVE ME THIS **VOICE**, HE HAD A *REASON*." John asks McSwiney why Owen's voice hasn't changed with puberty, and McSwiney says he can't explain why—he can only say that it likely won't change in the future. Owen introduces John as Tabitha's son, and shows McSwiney her picture. He explains that he got her the gig when the supper club asked him for good singers to perform. It wasn't a serious gig, but she still thought she could be "discovered" singing there, despite McSwiney's advice that nobody got discovered in Boston, especially in such a little joint. She wouldn't sing under her real name out of shyness or provincialism.

Owen refuses to pursue the possibility of changing his voice. If he'll never have a deepened adult voice, he'll never sound perfectly normal, anyway. One would think that speaking in a perpetual scream might be painful, but Owen doesn't say anything about this. He trusted God's will to provide for him, just as Tabitha seemed to believe that she would be discovered if it was meant to be. She didn't actively pursue a singing career, but hoped nonetheless that her talent would be noticed.

McSwiney thought Tabitha was charming, but careless and unambitious—she preferred simple, popular songs and didn't practice. Her voice was pretty, but she wouldn't train it to be strong. She wanted to be "wholly out of character—but only once a week." The club was named The Orange Grove, and her accompanist was a gay black man named Buster Freebody—another made-up name. McSwiney says he isn't John's father—he once tried to make a pass at Tabitha, but she turned him down. Owen says once again that God will tell John who his father is. McSwiney reassures them that nothing bad would have happened to Tabitha at The Orange Club.

McSwiney usually trains serious artists, but Tabitha was mostly a hobbyist with a dream she wasn't really committed to. Her modest life in the small town of Gravesend truly suited her, even if she longed for a little adventure every now and then. McSwiney found her attractive, but wasn't her lover. He says that nobody would have taken advantage of her at her gig. The world of potential fathers seems larger than ever, but Owen doesn't lose faith that John will find him.

Back in the present, John scoffs at a headline about Reagan in *The New York Times*. He remembers New Year's Eve in December 1961, when just over three thousand U.S. military personnel were stationed in Vietnam. That night, Hester threw up in the rose garden outside from too much rum and Coke. By the next New Year's Eve, there are over eleven thousand military personnel in Vietnam, and Hester was once again stuck throwing up in the rose garden. In Toronto, the school year will soon be over. John looks forward to going with Rev. Keeling's family to their private island in Georgian Bay. He also looks forward to visiting Dan in Gravesend, and seeing one of his summer school productions. He doesn't watch The Gravesend Players anymore.

New Year's Eve is supposed to be a turning point, an opportunity to change course and look to the future with hope. But year after year, the world seems trapped in the same terrible cycle—more and more men are being sent to their deaths, with no signs of stopping. Hester can't stop from drinking until she makes herself sick. America is poisoning itself, and people are powerless to stop. John looks forward to the simple pleasures of the upcoming summer, perhaps hoping for a reprieve from his dark memories.

In 1961, John and Owen still scanned the audiences at Dan's shows to find John's father. Now they imagine that his father must have been to see his mother sing at The Orange Grove. Owen wants to pull off a *Hamlet*-like scheme of staging a play set at a club called The Orange Grove, and seeing how the audience members react. But they don't want to tell Dan about Tabitha's secret life in case he doesn't already know, and John doesn't want him to be hurt by his curiosity about his biological father. John and Owen have this discussion on New Year's Eve, at Hester's apartment in Durham. It's only two o'clock in the afternoon and Hester is already passed out from drinking.

Even after learning about Tabitha's secret singing gig in Boston, John and Owen still believe that her lover lived in Gravesend. They think the performances at the club are related to the affair, however. Owen wants another opportunity to stage a show, even after the disaster that was the Christmas pageant. But John rejects the idea, saying that he doesn't want to hurt Dan. John is likely also scared by the chance to finally discover the truth about his father, unwilling to risk disappointment or rejection.

Owen wants to go to the gym and practice their basketball shot, but John doesn't want to. He asks Owen why Hester drinks so much, and Owen says Hester is "AHEAD OF HER TIME"—he believes, without knowing why, that the next generation or two will be angry and callous.

Another New Year's Eve means another bout of binge-drinking for Hester. Her rage at being denied so many opportunities in life for reasons outside of her control anticipates the rage of a generation drafted into war.

Back in the present, it's June in Toronto. John bought a copy of *The New York Times* after talking to a car full of ignorant American tourists. He thinks that Americans became bored with hearing about Vietnam before America left Vietnam; they became bored with hearing about Watergate before the investigation was even finished; and they'll be soon bored with Iran, Nicaragua, and the Persian Gulf, too, if they're not already. The phenomenon is as familiar to John as Hester's inevitable bouts of puking on New Year's Eve. She puked in 1963, when there were 16,300 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam; she puked in 1964, when 23,300 Americans were there; and in 1965, when there were 184,300 Americans in Vietnam.

John thinks that Americans have disturbingly short attention spans. They don't care to dwell for too long on difficult problems, preferring to turn away from crises that don't have a simple answer. Matters of sexual indecency, like the senator's sex scandal, are black-and-white issues for most Americans, for better or for worse. In the case of sexual misconduct, it's usually easy to denounce the wrongdoing and call for the guilty party to step down. This isn't always the case for complicated problems like war.

In 1966, there were 385,300 Americans in Vietnam, and John was by himself at Harriet's house. In 1967, there were 485,600 Americans in Vietnam, and John himself threw up in the rose garden. He doesn't remember New Year's Eve 1968, but there were 536,100 Americans in Vietnam, and he was surely throwing up somewhere.

John flashes forward to later memories of New Year's Eve, showing glimpses of an ominous future when he is alone rather than joined by Owen and Hester, and where his memories are too painful to recall.

On January 1, 1962, Owen wrote in his diary, "I know I am God's instrument." John still didn't understand the extent to which Owen believed God was guiding his life, which would later explain why Owen reacted as passively he did to the crises of that year. One day John and Owen were hanging around the editorial offices of the school newspaper, of which Owen was now the editor-in-chief, when a fellow senior named Larry Lish told them that JFK was sleeping with Marilyn Monroe. Larry was the son of the movie producer Herb Lish, and he was "Gravesend's most cynical and decadent student." He would get a girl pregnant every now and then, and his mother would fly her to Sweden for an abortion.

As another year dawns, Owen recommits himself to following God's will. This new year promises to be the most transformative of any he has faced before, as he and John prepare to leave Gravesend and their intertwined lives behind for an uncertain future. Owen trusts that God will lead him down the right path. As bright as he is, he doesn't express many concrete ambitions for the future, waiting to see where God will take him (or assuming that he already knows his own future).

Larry was undeniably witty, but students and teachers secretly hated him—never outright, though, because his parents were too powerful. His father threw him parties in Beverly Hills, and his mother threw him parties on Fifth Avenue. The Lishes were divorced, and they competed for Larry's attention with "excessive partying and expensive sex." Larry's mother told him about JFK and Marilyn Monroe, which Owen calls "A TRULY TASTELESS LIE." Larry says that Owen can ask his mother himself when she visits next weekend.

Larry is a foil to Owen—a boy who is equally clever with his words, but who comes from a drastically different background. Unlike Owen, who is from working-class origins and seems painfully unworldly at times, Larry has traveled all over the world. And unlike Owen's parents, who rarely show him affection, Larry's parents lavish their son with attention.

Owen is very disturbed all week by this rumor—he idolizes JFK, and John says he wasn't "sophisticated enough to separate public and private morality." Today, John says, an affair between JFK and Marilyn Monroe would seem only moderately immoral compared to "the willful secrecy and deception, and the unlawful policies" of the Reagan administration. Owen, however, was very upset back then. "IF KENNEDY CAN *RATIONALIZE* ADULTERY, WHAT *ELSE* CAN HE RATIONALIZE?" he wonders. He blames Kennedy's loose morals on his Catholicism—"IF CATHOLICS CAN CONFESS ANYTHING, THEY CAN FORGIVE THEMSELVES ANYTHING, TOO!"

Owen is horrified to think that the president might really be cheating on his wife with Marilyn Monroe. Owen took so much inspiration from Kennedy's inaugural speech—in which he called for Americans to place the good of their country over their personal interests—that he would feel greatly betrayed if Kennedy valued his personal lusts over the greater virtues of staying faithful to his wife and providing the country with an exemplary role model. John is more cynical, thinking that infidelity is hardly as outrageous a transgression as other presidential dishonesties. But Owen sees an affair as the start of a greater moral collapse.

Owen doesn't believe the president is above the law—the president is supposed to set the example for upholding the law. He also objects to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's draft program that would draft an outsize proportion of minorities, high-school dropouts, and men from low-income families. McNamara pitched the draft as "an opportunity" for "the poor of America," but Owen sees through the unjust policy.

Owen thinks that Kennedy's position gives him a greater responsibility to lead an upstanding life. He doesn't believe that leaders should lie or conceal their intentions. The people should be able to have faith in their government not to deceive them, especially about the sacrifices they may be asked to make.

In the present, it's a hot July in Toronto, and John is back in the bad habit of buying *The New York Times*. The paper's poll says that most Americans believe Reagan is lying, but John wonders if they care. He wants Katherine to invite him to her isolated island.

The summer has not brought John any relief from his gloomy thoughts. Without teaching to occupy him, he becomes even more preoccupied with following America's evils.

Larry's mother, Mitzy Lish, was an attractive older woman—sexier than Hester, even, whose "early-blooming eroticism" was diluted by her carelessness and heavy drinking. Mitzy spent her days drinking coffee, smoking, doing her makeup or her hair, shopping, lunching with a friend or a lover, going to the movies, and gathering gossip. She never worked, or even cooked. Larry told everyone all about his mother—he thought she was a joke. But John and Owen are very intimidated by her, and feel very provincial in her presence.

Mitzy comes from the rarified world of New York society, alien to the boys who rarely even venture into Boston. She is a caricature of the shallow society type who has nothing to do but gossip and tear down others for her amusement. Own and John never fail to rate the relative attractiveness of every woman they meet, judging the women against each other.

As promised, Larry brings Mitzy to confirm the rumor about JFK and Marilyn Monroe. She seems to enjoy Owen's distress at the news; like Barb, she bullied young men. To her and her son, Owen seems laughably naïve and unworldly to be so upset by an affair. Mitzy asks Owen, "If Marilyn Monroe wanted to sleep with *you*, would you *let* her?" Owen says he wouldn't do it if he were the president—especially not if he were married. In disbelief, Mitzy says, "This is the *future*?" For Owen is the school's valedictorian as well as the paper's editor-in-chief.

Mitzy is a bully in the vein of Barb. A snob from a rich and worldly lifestyle who looks down on others, she is the type of person whom Owen was most reluctant to encounter at an exclusive school like Gravesend. However, Mitzy is also the product of her society, which teaches that women have little value outside of their attractiveness. She spends a large part of every day on her beauty, conforming to this ideal. Owen and John themselves judge her looks.

But Owen won't stand to be bullied or taken lightly—he says to Mitzy, "IF *YOU* WANTED TO SLEEP WITH ME…WHAT THE HELL…I SUPPOSE I'D *TRY* IT." Then he walks away. Larry makes no effort to defend his mother, but Mitzy reports Owen to Randy White. Owen tries to defend himself to White, but it's hard for him and John to put into words exactly what kind of sexual bullying Mitzy had taunted him with. Owen refuses to tell White about the JFK rumor that made him so upset, in case the rumor spreads. He wants to protect the president.

Owen never stands down—he gave Barb Wiggin a look that could kill when she tried to humiliate him at the pageant, and now he uses his words to cut down Mitzy Lish. He insults her by implying that she would be promiscuous enough to sleep with him, but he wouldn't really want to sleep with her. He calls her easy and ugly at once, two grave insults to a woman in Mitzy's society.

Mitzy apparently told White that Owen said something anti-Semitic to her, but Owen hadn't even known she was Jewish. In a faculty meeting, White says that such disrespect to school parents cannot be tolerated, but Mr. Early and Dan argue that Owen broke no rules by propositioning Mitzy. White wants Owen expelled, but Dan says he should be put on probation, at most. White wants Owen punished for being anti-Semitic, but Mitzy never explained what he could have said to her that was related to her religion. White himself—as well as a good number of the WASPy Gravesend faculty—is known to be anti-Semitic himself, and Owenias not indicted for his supposed "discrimination."

Mitzy has such a large ego and feels so deeply insulted by Owen's snub that she wants to punish Owen beyond the bounds of his indirect insult. Since propositioning a woman is not technically against school rules, she lies and tells the headmaster that Owen used anti-Semitic language. White also wants the opportunity to take Owen down, but lacks proof. Ironically, the real bias of many faculty members helps Owen's overall case, and Mitzy's plan backfires.

Owen is put on probation for the rest of the winter term, as Dan suggested. But he isn't grateful to have been saved by the faculty, and he stops speaking in class or writing as **The Voice**. He says he's focusing on writing his valedictorian speech, when it'll be too late for them to expel him for what he says. The school makes him go to Dr. Dolder.

Owen still thinks his insult was justified in response to what Mitzy herself said, and feels that he's being unfairly persecuted. Disillusioned or disappointed by the corruption he sees in the adults around him, he stops speaking up.

Back in Toronto in July, John is still waiting to be invited to Georgian Bay, and still raging at *The New York Times*. Congress is more concerned with lecturing the president's lackey against blind devotion to the president's agenda than with reprimanding the president himself. Whenever Owen got wind of such a bunch of bullshit, he would echo Harriet and declare: "THAT'S *MADE FOR TELEVISION*."

John feels anger against the timeless failure to hold people in power accountable for their actions. The most powerful always face the least consequences.

Owen would say that about his bi-weekly sessions with Dr. Dolder—"MADE FOR TELEVISION." He wouldn't tell John what really happened in the sessions, however. He only says that he answers all of Dolder's questions truthfully, without humor. Dolder told him to talk to Rev. Merrill, so he has two more sessions every week. Owen is already doing an independent course of study with Merrill, pursuing his interest in miracles and life after death.

Owen thinks his mandated psychiatric appointments are absurd. He gives honest answers to the school psychiatrist, but doesn't seem to take what the doctor says seriously. Dolder refers him to speak to Merrill, which is surprising. Evidently Owen's religious beliefs seem disturbing to Dolder.

Back to July in Toronto—John is getting his hair cut, and he tells the barber he wants it as short as Colonel Oliver North's hair. The barber has no clue what he's talking about, and John despairs at humanity's short memory. Owen remembered everything, he says.

John is somewhat absurdly disappointed when the Canadian hairdresser doesn't know who the American Colonel Oliver North is. His standards for humanity's memory are rather unreasonable.

In February 1962, the winter term was nearly over. Owen was tired of getting up early in the dark, freezing mornings to go fulfill his scholarship job as a faculty waiter. It is so cold one morning that his pickup truck is dead, and he has to jump-start the granite truck and roll it down the hill before it will start. When he finally gets to school in the big truck, another car is blocking him from parking in the school's circular driveway and he can't park out on the street because of snow-plow rules.

Owen has always had his share of grievances, despite his noble principles. He faced more obstacles in his life than most of his peers, having to work harder to make up for his small size and poor background, so his frustration at his circumstances is understandable. The fortune of having Harriet as a benefactor and a bright, determined mind makes his struggles easy to forget, but they're real.

The car in the driveway is Dr. Dolder's Volkswagen Beetle, which he leaves parked outside the Main Academy Building overnight whenever he's been drinking at the Whites' house. He could have just walked across campus to begin with instead of driving, but he loves to drive everywhere. He never drinks so much that he couldn't get back behind the wheel, but he loves his car too much to risk it. Owen is sitting in his truck fuming when he sees the basketball team walking towards the dining hall. He calls them over, since he knows them from practicing his shot.

Ironically, the school psychiatrist regularly acts irrationally by taking his car to go a short distance instead of simply walking, then inevitably leaving the car when he drinks excessively. He seems like even more of a hypocrite when he interrogates the students about their own issues. Owen hates hypocrisy as well as adults who abuse their power. When he sees an opportunity to undercut the power of men like Dolder and White, he takes it.

Owen bets the players that they can't pick up the Beetle in the driveway, but they claim they're strong enough to carry it anywhere. Owen tells them to carry it into the Main Academy Building and put it on the stage of the Great Hall, where White has moved all the daily meetings to serve his "GRANDSTANDING." While the team moves the car, Owen parks at Dan's dorm to avoid suspicion, then goes to work. A janitor finds the car onstage when he is raising the blinds in the Great Hall, and calls White. White then calls the faculty to come and move the car offstage before the assembly, to avoid giving the students "the last laugh."

Owen smoothly orchestrates the prank by using other students' strength for his own ends. He might be too small to ever participate in such a feat, but his strength lies in convincing others to do what he cannot. He may no longer be addressing the school as The Voice, but he has always commanded the silent message as well as the spoken one. He tells the adults that they do not have the power they think they do—they will still have to answer to the student body one day.

When Dan gets White's call and sees Owen's car outside his dorm, he realizes who is probably behind the prank. White suspects Owen, too, without proof. Moving the car goes disastrously, since the faculty are not as strong as the basketball players, and moving a car downstairs is harder than moving it upstairs. Teachers start dropping from injury left and right. Dan thinks that they should have just ordered the more capable students to move it back instead of moving it themselves—then the students would also be liable for damaging the car.

White is determined to avoid what Owen has set him up for, what he fears most—public humiliation and appearing powerless in front of his students. Yet his stubbornness makes the problem exponentially worse. He's not smart enough to think of the solution Dan does.

White refuses to cancel morning meetings or enlist the students' help; he climbs behind the wheel of the car and insists the teachers push the car down the stairs while he steers. Instead of driving smoothly down the staircase, the car flips and lands on its roof. White is trapped in the car while his back spasms painfully from lifting the car single-handedly earlier. He eventually has to be rescued by professionals with a blow torch.

White is more humiliated than Owen could have dreamed of. He refused to listen to the other teachers, and ignored all reason. Like many bad leaders, he is unable to admit that he has made a mistake, and ends up making a massive fool of himself.

Back in Toronto in July, Katherine has invited John to her island. He needs to get away from the newspapers—he hasn't been to church in a month, too preoccupied with the news. He remembers what Owen and Rev. Merrill used to say: "WOE UNTO THEM THAT CALL EVIL GOOD AND GOOD EVIL."

John is happy to get away from his obsession with current events. He reminds himself that the wrongdoers in the newspaper will one day meet their due: woe unto them, God says. John can only find satisfaction in the possibility of divine justice, since earthly justice is clearly lacking.

Merrill was the first person after John to ask Owen if he had been involved with moving the car onstage. Once Owen confirms that their conversation is confidential, he confesses. Merrill promises to steer White away from suspecting him. Dan tells Owen he doesn't want to know anything about what happened. The headmaster has no hard evidence against Owen, but he soon receives evidence of a different transgression—Owen's old fake ID business. Larry is busted buying beer, and he rats Owen out for selling fake IDs to the whole school. White and Chief Pike strike a deal where no criminal charges will be brought against anyone at the academy if all the fake draft cards are turned over. White makes all the students hand over their wallets to the faculty, who remove their fake draft cards.

Merrill also knows Owen well enough to suspect that he was behind the prank. Owen trusts Merrill to tell him the truth, and Merrill promises to help. However, no one can save Owen from all his past misdemeanors. The rich and privileged Larry Lish seizes the opportunity to reassert his power over Owen, and White eagerly joins him. The order-obsessed Chief Pike makes a special exception for Gravesend Academy, as even he is not immune to the school's long tradition and influence.

Dan protests that confiscating wallets is illegal, but White insists he's saving the school from the disgrace of having charges brought against its students for possessing illegal fake IDs. The student who produced and sold the IDs—Owen—will be brought before the Executive Committee, while everyone possessing a draft card will be on probation for the whole spring term. The Executive Committee "crucified" Owen, according to John. He is expelled. Old Archibald Thorndike publicly condemns the decision, as well as "the *Gestapo* methods" of confiscating the students' wallets. Dan tells White that he's "the worst thing that ever happened to this school," and vows to resign, with other teachers, if White doesn't leave.

The school violated the students' right to privacy by seizing their draft cards. Everyone in possession of one is then punished with probation—a rather lenient sentence for carrying an illegal fake ID. The majority rich, white male students of Gravesend students are rarely subject to the full consequences of the law. The only student not to receive such lenient treatment is Owen Meany. White's totalitarian seizure of the students' wallets, combined with his blatantly unequal treatment of Owen, turns the school against him.

Owen refuses to talk to anybody afterwards, until he calls Harriet to apologize for letting her down. She says that he didn't let her down, and that she's still proud of him, but he says that he'll make her even more proud. He asks her to tell John and Dan to be sure to come to the next morning assembly. Worried about what he could be up to, John and Dan look for him all night, but can't find him. Finally they drive past St. Michael's School and realize that the statue of Mary Magdalene is missing. They go to The Great Hall and find the **statue** onstage. Owen has removed both her arms and her head, welded her to the podium, and bolted her to the floor. The janitor says that he isn't telling Headmaster White, this time.

Owen goes silent again, only wanting to apologize to Harriet for spoiling her investment in his Gravesend education, but Harriet loyally takes his side over the school's. John and Dan fear what Owen could be capable of doing without the former inhibition of school rules. Owen didn't plan to wreck Dolder's car last time, but now he has intentionally destroyed the statue of Mary Magdalene. For such a small person, Owen operates in grandiose gestures.

John tells his friends to tell everyone to come to the meeting early, and Dan tells his friends on the faculty to come to the meeting, "If you only go to one more meeting for the rest of your life." Dan and John worry about what this latest vandalism will mean for Owen's college acceptances, and how the head of St. Michael's will react. They go to see Rev. Merrill to ask him to talk to the head of St. Michael's on Owen's behalf. They find Owen sitting behind Merrill's desk, fiddling with the desk drawers. When Merrill arrives, Owen retreats to his normal chair and seems to sneer at Merrill.

John and Dan want Owen's message to be witnessed by as many people at the school as possible. Owen is jeopardizing his future to make this statement, so it clearly means a lot to him. St. Michael's Church would be right to be mad at Owen for his willful destruction of their statue, but nevertheless Owen's friends hope they'll be merciful to him. Owen seems to know something about Merrill that makes him scorn the man.

Merrill tells Dan that the head of St. Michael's Church and School is Father Findley. He doesn't know what Owen has done, but Owen asks him to say a prayer for him at that morning's meeting. Dan steers John out of the office so Owen and Merrill can talk. As they leave, John hears Merrill ask Owen if he's had "that dream" again. Owen says he has, and he begins to sob. Merrill tells him that it's only a dream, but Owen refuses to believe him. John doesn't know what dream they're talking about. Eventually Owen will tell him, and he will also tell Owen that it's only a dream.

Dan gets the information they were looking for and leaves Owen and Merrill to their talk. Dan wants to do whatever he can on Owen's behalf, but Dan also trusts Owen to know who he needs most. Dan tries to be a good father to Owen as well as to John. Owen hasn't trusted anyone but Merrill with his disturbing "dream" yet. He seems to think Merrill would be the one most likely to believe him, suggesting that the dream is spiritual, but Merrill already showed with Owen's first "vision" that he doubted the divine nature of Owen's premonitions.

Walking back to the Main Academy Building, Dan and John see Randy kissing his wife, Sam, goodbye. Randy expects to lead a triumphant morning assembly, believing that he's finally gotten the better of Owen. Little does he know that Owen will eventually defeat him, and that what awaits him in The Great Hall is the least of his embarrassments to come. The faculty will soon hand him a vote of "no confidence," and the Board of Trustees will choose not to renew his appointment as headmaster. At commencement, the replacement valedictorian will refuse to deliver his speech as the crowd raises banners for Owen and chants his name, cheered by many of the faculty, members of the Board of Trustees, and parents who objected to the seizure of their sons' wallets.

Owen succeeds in exposing White as a terrible headmaster, more concerned with grandstanding and abusing his power than running an enlightened educational institution. If The Voice couldn't speak at graduation, nobody would. The school did not forget Owen and his message.

White is such a terrible man that he flouts the tradition among "good" schools like Gravesend Academy that headmasters shouldn't further jeopardize the college admissions of seniors they've expelled. White goes to the schools that had accepted Owen and tells them about Owen's record of selling fake draft cards, as well as his "virulently antireligious" behavior. The University of New Hampshire withdraws Owen's scholarship, while Yale asks him to defer for a year and find meaningful employment while his employer reports to Yale on Owen's "character and commitment." Harvard also wants Owen to defer, but they specify that he will work for the Catholic Church during that time. Father Findley kindly does not press charges against Owen, and agrees to help his case with schools.

The gentlemen's code among top private schools discourages headmasters from further damaging an expelled student's chances at college admission—getting kicked out of school already hurts their chances enough. But White maliciously leaks the reasons for Owen's expulsion to the schools he was accepted to. Even Findley, who was the most wronged by Owen's stunt, felt compelled to help Owen rather than punish him. Owen's gesture seemed to express so much anguish that he appears as much victim as villain to Findley.

Findley apparently knew Owen's family, and was very sympathetic when he recognized who Owen's parents were, without saying why. Owen considers taking Harvard's offer, even talking with Findley about it. But even though he seems to like Findley more than he expected to, he says he can't accept the deal because his parents would never understand it. He says he wants to go to the University of New Hampshire with John, anyway. He doesn't have his scholarship anymore, but he finds another one: he enlists in the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC).

Findley seems familiar with the situation that turned the Meanys away from Catholicism. He doesn't hold it against Owen—rather, he seems to take pity on him because of it. His kindness evidently makes Owen reconsider his Catholic prejudice, but his parents would still never let him work for them, so Harvard is out of the question. He decides to follow John once more.

In ROTC, the U.S. Army will pay for Owen to go to college while he takes some military courses and attends Basic Training while he's in school. After graduating, he will become a second lieutenant and serve for four years of active duty, followed by two years on Reserve. In 1962, there are only 11,300 American military personnel in Vietnam, and none of them are in combat yet. Owen said he preferred this path because he wouldn't have to wait a year to start college and he could be with John, but he doesn't say anything about the six years he would be gone afterwards.

Owen decides he would rather go to state school on an ROTC scholarship, giving up six years of his life after college, than wait a year to go to Yale. His choice doesn't really make sense, even if there wasn't a war raging yet. He seems unable to break away from John and his family, including Tabitha, Harriet, Dan, and Hester.

Dan and John wonder how Owen passed the height and weight requirement. Owen proudly informs them that he only had to be five feet tall and weigh one hundred pounds—which he apparently reached by standing on his toes and eating lots of bananas and ice cream. John says he didn't know the details of Owen's recurring dream at this point—he would have been more worried for Owen if he had.

Ironically, Owen had the perfect grounds for exemption from military service that other young men could only dream of, but he sought desperately to pass the physical while they tried to fail. John later connects Owen's dream to his surprising desire to join the military.

When Rev. Merrill enters The Great Hall, he is struck with horror at the sight of the decapitated and **amputated statue**. When White arrives, he is perfectly oblivious to the unusual crowd or the figure onstage, mistaking it for Merrill leading a prayer. Finally he realizes what he's looking at, and he tries and fails to pick the statue up. He tries to lecture the students on the seriousness of crime, but they interrupt him to ask what the opening hymn is. Merrill climbs onstage and gives the hymn—one of Owen's favorites. After the hymn, Merrill says, "Let us pray for Owen Meany." He doesn't say anything himself, but lets the students pray silently, for as long as they wish.

Merrill is much more observant and thoughtful than White. In Owen's absence, the rest of the students speak up instead. Even Merrill finds the courage to speak up, even if he cannot find the words to pray for Owen. The quiet auditorium recalls the original Sunday school class, when Mrs. Walker would leave the children to silently reflect on the Bible. Perhaps the boys from that class remember how they treated Owen then, and in the silence, they can all imagine Owen's voice.

White eventually says, "That's enough," but Merrill quietly replies, "*I'll* say when it's 'enough.'" The students pray in silence until White has left the building—then Merrill says, "Amen." John regrets that he didn't know how to pray better back then. He wishes he could have prayed for Owen knowing what he knows now, such as what Owen wrote in his diary. He later saw how Owen had written his name the way he saw it on Scrooge's grave: 1LT PAUL O. MEANY, JR. He wrote his name with an army rank, and the date of his death, over and over in the diary, even before he knew he would join the army. Owen later had an even more specific vision of his death, which came to him in a dream.

Merrill holds the students in silent prayer until White relents and leaves, once again powerless in his own auditorium. John feels that his prayers back then lacked the force and the purpose he would have prayed with today. If he had known that Owen always believed he would die in the army, he could have prayed to change his fate.

CHAPTER 8: THE FINGER

John says that up until the summer of 1962, he had always wanted to grow up and enjoy the freedoms of adulthood. He was tired of a long, humiliating adolescence when he couldn't buy beer, couldn't live by himself, couldn't afford a car, and couldn't get a girl to sleep with him. Owen, who knew when he would die, wasn't in any rush to grow up. They spent the summer apart for the first time in 1962, and it made John afraid for the future—he found himself longing to stay a kid with Owen forever. He worked for Alfred in Sawyer Depot over the summer, not wanting to return to his summer job of giving tours of the academy after what the school did to Owen. Owen and Hester lived together in her apartment.

John suddenly realizes that growing up is not all that it was cracked up to be. Ironically, with adulthood finally comes the maturity to realize that the privileges of adulthood don't matter as much as the personal ties that adulthood and its responsibilities threaten.

In the present day, Noah and Simon are married with their own families, and they take care of their parents. Alfred has had two heart bypass operations, but he's all right. Martha still wants to know who John's father is, but all John confides, teasing her, is, "Dan Needham is the best father a boy could have." He and Noah and Simon still talk about Hester, and Alfred and Martha still believe she will come home for Christmas someday. But they never treated her the same way they treated the boys, and that made her furious. She never stopped using other things and people to fuel her fury.

Noah and Simon turned out just like Alfred, just as Alfred and Martha always dreamed. Yet by denying their daughter the same space to safely explore the world and reach her full potential, they created a child who saw home as a cage to escape instead of a peaceful haven. Her fierce anger at her parents' unjust treatment of her created a hole that she could only fill with more anger.

Owen shared Hester's sense of unfairness and injustice. He believed that God had designated him for a special role, and the knowledge that he had a mission to fulfill stripped him of his fun. When the rumor of JFK and Marilyn Monroe destroyed his idealism, he stopped doing anything for the fun of it. Hester was angry and indifferent to the world. While they spend the summer together, John can't manage to have one successful date, despite all his cousins' efforts—he's too timid and awkward.

Owen and Hester are a good match, each full of disillusionment and bitterness. John doesn't share their sense of grievance, but he isn't particularly optimistic about the future, either. None of them know about the war to come at this point, but they have all witnessed the ways in which power in the hands of the arrogant and oblivious can be utterly ruinous.

Back in July in Canada, John discovers that it is possible to buy newspapers on the coast a short distance from Katherine's island, making it harder to resist following the news. Katherine's large, friendly family help to take his mind off of current events. Once John overhears Katherine's husband tell her that John is a "nonpracticing homosexual," which he says is not the same thing as being gay—"a nonpracticing homosexual doesn't always *know* what he is." John seems to agree, thinking to himself, "it means I don't know *what* I am!"

John can never escape the outrageous news that obsesses him. He knows the news isn't good for him, only raising his temper and making him cynical instead of open to God's benevolence. His faith in the goodness of others is frequently in doubt, which could be one reason why he has never had a serious relationship. But it's also possible that he has always felt afraid or ashamed of his own sexuality, whether because of his father's lust for women or because he's not entirely straight. Maybe he's simply confused, or asexual.

Being on the island makes John think of what the land of Gravesend must have been like before Watahantowet sold it to Rev. John Wheelwright—before America's "murderous deceptions" and "unthinking carelessness" nearly ruined the land. He thinks back to the summer of 1962, when he and Owen sent each other letters talking about their jobs and their plans to perfect the shot.

John pictures Gravesend as it might have looked when it belonged to Watahantowet, before the Americans took it. Thinking of Watahantowet and America's evils always makes John think of Owen.

One day in August, Simon had a minor injury while logging and the boys had to take him to the ER. A man who was drinking a bottle of beer when he crashed his car is also in the ER with his mouth all cut up from the glass. He tells them that Marilyn Monroe died of an overdose. John calls Owen that night, and Owen says that Marilyn "WAS JUST LIKE OUR WHOLE COUNTRY…VERY BEAUTIFUL, MAYBE A LITTLE STUPID, MAYBE A LOT SMARTER THAN SHE SEEMED…I THINK SHE WANTED TO BE GOOD…SHE WAS TRICKED, SHE GOT USED, SHE WAS USED *UP*."

Owen thinks of Marilyn as the embodiment of America itself—extremely bright but extremely troubled, and vulnerable to being led astray. Her tragically premature end foretells a dark future for the country. Owen himself fears being "USED UP."

Back in July in Canada, John is still reading the newspapers. Owen believed that the most discouraging thing about the anti-war protests was that most of the protesters were only involved for selfish reasons—because the draft placed their lives at stake. He thought that if young Americans weren't being unwillingly drafted to fight, they wouldn't care what their country did. John thinks of the lack of uproar over Reagan's illegal and immoral actions in Nicaragua. Owen claimed, "THE ONLY WAY YOU CAN GET AMERICANS TO NOTICE *ANYTHING* IS TO TAX THEM OR DRAFT THEM OR KILL THEM." John sees a mink and thinks of Mitzy Lish. Larry Lish has become a well-known reporter who writes with a self-righteous, moralistic tone.

John attributes the lack of public outcry over Reagan's wrongs to Americans' indifference to everything that does not threaten their own livelihoods. If there had been no mandatory draft forcing all young men to fight in Vietnam, the country wouldn't have paid as much attention to the casualties and atrocities amassed in the war. Self-absorbed and self-interested, Americans are blind to the suffering of others (or so John believes). They rarely live up to their national ideals, only deploying empty talk about moral principles when it's convenient.

In the fall of 1962, John and Owen became freshmen at the University of New Hampshire. They still lived at home. Compared to the rigorous Gravesend Academy, they both found the university to be easy. John took pride in finally getting good grades, while Owen became lazy and only maintained the grades he needed to stay in ROTC. John even gets better grades on papers than Owen, whose professors don't indulge his eccentric style like the teachers at Gravesend used to. College professors only care about their own subjects, not about "the whole boy."

On the surface, not much changes when John and Owen start college. They haven't moved out or gone their separate ways—but the university is very different from the academy. Owen was used to getting special treatment for being the cleverest and most original student. At college, professors have larger classes to teach, and they don't care for Owen's unconventional voice. Owen seems lost, his ambition gone.

Owen doesn't stand out in the large student body at the university like he always did in the small town of Gravesend. He only stands out for having a conspicuously old truck among his classmates' identical new Volkswagen Beetles. He and John become friends with all of Hester's friends, which leaves them friendless when Hester graduates. In October, the Cuban Missile Crisis unfolds, but Owen isn't scared—he knows he isn't going to die yet, so nuclear war isn't about to break out.

Owen's unusual body doesn't make him special anymore, either. Ironically, his lower-class origins are more glaring at the public state school than at the private academy. People aren't wearing standardized uniforms anymore, and Harriet can't subsidize a nice car for Owen like she could a nice wardrobe. John and Owen end up with only each other for friends once again.

A guy who wants to date Hester asks Owen how he knows there isn't going to be a war, and Owen says there will be a war, just not now. The guy calls Owen little, and Hester claims that Owen has "the biggest penis ever." John thinks that she's right—from what he glimpsed in the gym locker room, Owen's "doink" is at least disproportionately large to his body. John and Owen spend the summer of 1963 practicing the shot again after they got rusty. They both work for Owen's father that summer—John in the monument shop, Owen in the quarries.

Owen alludes to his mysterious knowledge of the future, which seems arrogant to others. Other guys, jealous of Owen's relationship with Hester, try to belittle him, but Hester defends his manhood, satisfying the curiosity of anyone who wondered if Owen's "doink" was as tiny as the rest of him. After freshman year, they return to practicing the shot. John thinks of it as a token from their past, while Owen thinks of it in terms of the future.

John is jealous of Owen's tan and muscles, and suspects Owen of interfering with his plan to grow his own muscles. Owen just says that if John wants to work in the quarries out of vanity, he'll end up crushed beneath the granite. Whenever a customer comes to order a gravestone, Owen comes to take the order, because he is extremely considerate of the grieving family's wishes. Owen also handles difficult pieces of stonecutting on the diamond wheel, a large saw with an extremely sharp blade studded with pieces of diamond. It's more a scalpel than a saw. John thinks that given how much time Owen spends working on graves in the monument shop, it makes sense for him to have a vision of his own gravestone.

John wants Owen's tanned and toned physique, but he doesn't seem to understand that Owen pays a high price in difficult and dangerous labor for his enviable build. Owen seems to be adept at every aspect of the granite trade, from the crude mining of the heavy raw material to the sensitive emotional conversations and careful craftwork for gravestones. John rationalizes Owen's vision of his own grave by attributing it to too much time spent carving headstones.

John has another disappointing summer in terms of dates. He recalls, "I was twenty-one and I was still a Joseph; I was a Joseph then, and I'm just a Joseph now."

John implies that he has never lost his virginity or become special in any way—he is a "Joseph," the man who didn't father Mary's child, the redundant and impotent bystander.

Back in Canada in July, John still can't quit reading newspapers. He is fascinated by a story about black holes, which have the potential to engulf entire galaxies. The black holes are two million light-years away from Earth. John thinks, "That is about as far away from Earth as Owen Meany is; that is about as far away from Earth as I would like to be." JFK is probably about that far away now; he was assassinated one day in November, 1963.

John is captivated by the idea of a hole that could swallow the world, putting humanity out of its misery. It's hard to believe that scientists could know about phenomena so far away from Earth, as utterly unreachable as the dead are from the living. John thinks that he would like to be far away from Earth. He's not explicitly wishing to be dead, but he hates being bound to what he sees as an awful planet.

John thinks that "television is at its most solemnly self-serving and at its mesmerizing best when it is depicting the untimely deaths of the chosen and the golden." Bobby Kennedy's assassination follows five years later. Hester says, "Television gives good disaster." Owen goes to see Rev. Merrill more after Kennedy's death. He still won't tell John about his dream, and Hester won't say what it is, either. John also sees Owen at St. Michael's.

John connects television's glorification of spectacle to the public assassinations that characterized the 1960s. President Kennedy, his brother Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. were all assassinated in that decade, as one sensationalized murder seemed to inspire another. Owen appears to wrestle with his faith after the President's death.

Owen says he's been talking to Father Findley and working on replacing the **statue** of Mary Magdalene that he vandalized. He wants Findley to get rid of the archway around the statue to make it a less tempting target for kids like him to aim at. John imagines that Owen is talking about his dream to everyone but him. In 1964, Owen tells John about the military's activity in Vietnam: there's a lot of turnover among the leading Generals, and President Johnson orders the withdrawal of American dependents from part of the country. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution passes, allowing the president to declare war without declaring it.

Owen seems to repent for destroying the Catholic statue. He's even willing to help make another one himself, despite his former dislike for manmade objects that represent works of God. John feels hurt by Owen's hesitation to confide in him, when he has shared his every fear and shame to Owen. Owen uses his military education to interpret the ambiguous news of the situation in Vietnam being reported to the public. Signs point to a dangerously convoluted, escalating conflict.

That summer, a new **statue** of Mary Magdalene is finally installed at St. Michaels. Owen successfully got rid of the archway, leaving the statue alone on a pedestal. The statue is no longer whitewashed, but a granite-gray color that Owen says is more "NATURAL." Its pedestal is shaped to look as if the statue is rising from the grave. Owen says Father Findley is pleased by it, while Hester thinks it's disturbing—she's fed up with Owen's preoccupation with death. John prefers the new statue to the old.

Two years after destroying the sacred statue, Owen replaces it with his own version. As always, he still gets his way. The new statue is humbler than the previous one, not posed in an incongruous decorative archway and carved of gleaming white marble. This statue is a testament to God's power over death.

Hester is having a tough year, as a college grad still living in her college apartment in her college town, still working her college job as a waitress at a lobster restaurant. She doesn't like driving to work, especially since all she has is a car that was used even before her two brothers drove it, so Owen picks her up after her shifts, which usually end late at night. The late nights contribute to Owen's declining academics. He doesn't take any interest in his studies.

John doesn't try to understand why Hester is staying in the same apartment and waitressing instead of pursuing a career. Like her parents, he doesn't seem to have very high expectations for her, but one would think that she would want to prove them all wrong instead of languishing in a dead-end job. She is heavily dependent on Owen, which also seems out of character for her.

In the summer of 1964, John agrees to keep practicing the shot if Owen will finally let him work in the quarries for the last month of the summer. For the first time they successfully make the shot in under three seconds, and then the goal becomes to always make it under three seconds. They practice at the outdoor court at St. Michael's when the Gravesend Academy gym is occupied. Sometimes Owen and the nuns wave to each other, to John's shock, although Owen says the nuns still give him the shivers. The **statue** of Mary Magdalene watches over them. When they practice in the fall, Owen brushes snow off of her.

John uses Owen's dedication to the shot to secure the right to work in the quarry. Owen is dependent on John to pull off the shot, so he doesn't have much choice, but it's fair that if Owen can demand so much of John's time for the shot, John can get the chance to work on his muscles. Things have changed over the years since they first began practicing the shot—Owen is now friendly with the nuns he used to recoil from, and he cleans the statue he used to vandalize.

In the fall, the darker gray color of the **statue** disappears in the shadows. John once asked Owen if the statue resembled the angel Owen once thought he saw. Owen says no, because the angel he saw was in motion, reaching out with her hands—that's why he knew it wasn't the **dummy**. The boys practice the shot until it grows so dark outside that they can't see the basket anymore, or the statue. Owen asks John if he believes the statue is still there, even though he can't see it. John insists that yes, the statue is there, whether he can see it or not. Owen says that's how he thinks of God.

The more "NATURAL" color of Mary Magdalene's statue makes her less visibly divine. She even vanishes from sight like the unseen miracle that tests people's faith. However, it was seeing the supposedly unmistakable angel that first convinced Owen that he was part of a divine plan, so he has some visual proof behind his belief.

Back in Canada in July, Katherine tells John to stop reading the newspapers. She points out that it's been a long time since they talked together about their respective beliefs, which they used to spend hours discussing. John is ashamed to tell her how many Sunday services he's missed this summer. When he first moved to Canada, he thought it would be easy to be a Canadian—it would be just like living in a northern state like Maine or Minnesota. But he discovers that Toronto is not as snowy, or as provincial, as the small American towns he's familiar with. Canadians were polite and sympathetic to Americans fleeing the draft or renouncing their country. They also thought the Vietnam War was stupid and wrong.

Katherine can see that reading the newspapers is bad for John's faith, filling him with anger and despair. John once expected Canada to be filled with people like the residents of Gravesend—people accustomed to a degree of isolation, with a tendency to be small-minded and suspicious of outsiders—but the people he met in Toronto were surprisingly kind and better informed about the war than many Americans.

In 1968, the Union of American Exiles was formed in Canada. They were not very radical compared to protesters in America, including Hester, who rioted, getting herself arrested and her nose broken. Most of the American deserters in Canada were not radical, either, only guys who had been drafted or had enlisted and hated the service. Some claimed they deserted because the war was "insupportable," but John suspects them of saying this as a politically acceptable excuse. He says that moving to Canada was not the best way to beat the draft—there were other ways. Becoming Canadian did make a "very forceful political statement," though; it was "resistance as exile." But John admits that he never suffered; he avoided death in the war, and befriended many Canadians.

The American exiles in Canada usually left America out of self-interest rather than as a principled statement. On the other hand, most people like Hester could afford to stay and riot because their lives and freedoms were not at immediate risk like the people who could be arrested for desertion. Still, leaving America and its problems behind was not the only way to escape to the draft. Choosing exile had some public impact, testifying to people's willingness to give up their families and homes, but other people made greater sacrifices to escape the war. John was one of them, but he doesn't pretend to have suffered too badly, either.

As John says, "we Wheelwrights have rarely suffered." Schools in Canada were impressed by his degrees and his junior teaching experience at Gravesend Academy, so he had no trouble getting hired. He met Canon Campbell, who welcomed him into the Anglican Church. He picked up helpful connections, as Wheelwrights are wont to do, and tried to assimilate, thinking it would be easy. He refrained from complaining about Canadian hypocrisy, unlike other American expats who criticized Canada for profiting off the war by selling hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of ammunition and other war supplies to the U.S. They said that Canada was making more money, per capita, from exporting arms than any other nation in the world.

John's privilege continues to smooth his way, even in a new country. He recognizes that he is more fortunate than most, to have settled in so easily. He wanted to leave his old life behind and become a true Canadian, not continue to obsess over the war and the Western powers—including Canada—who supported it.

Dissatisfied Americans in Canada also pointed out that black Americans didn't come to Canada in the same number as their white counterparts, and the ones who came didn't stay, due to how poorly Canadians treated them on account of their race. John stayed silent on the subject of Canada's flaws, not wanting to be an angry American hung up on American issues. John says, "I must have believed that my anger and my loneliness would simply go away—if I simply let them go." He skipped the rallies and marches, the folk songs and protest songs, the beards and long hair, the free love. Knowing that Owen sacrificed and suffered so much more than these hippies, he was not sympathetic to their imagined distress.

Canada is not a utopia immune from the faults of its southern neighbor. Just like Americans, Canadians, too, are racist, and Canada's material support of the Vietnam War makes them complicit in its terrible toll. John didn't hold these failings against his adopted country, but tried to make peace with an imperfect place. He wanted to forget history, but as readers have seen, ultimately he could not help but remember.

John says his experience followed the truism that no one is more zealous than the convert, nobody more patriotic than the immigrant. He wanted to believe the best of his new church and new country, and not admit that they shared many of the same flaws of his old ones. He looks down on protestors for having it so much easier than Owen and the soldiers who actually fought and died. Hester was big on protests and hippie culture—she had the grungy folk singer look and a pretty voice like her mother (although not as pretty as Tabitha's). Unlike Tabitha, Hester didn't believe in learning to sing, but simply voiced what was inside her. Owen helped her to write songs. Owen thought that it was sad to go to Canada, causing Hester to scream at him that going to Vietnam was a lot sadder. Owen said that he didn't want to die where it was cold; John later knew he planned to die where it was warm.

Eventually John realized that his idealized view of Canada was unsustainable. He had been learning from Mrs. Hoyt that America was not above criticism, and neither is any other country. Rationally, he shared protestors' anti-war views, but he felt emotionally alienated from activists who couldn't understand Owen's courage and sacrifice. Hester sang protest songs, but John thinks even she couldn't understand what she was writing about, though they loved and lost the same person. John seems dead set against the idea that a woman could understand Owen as well as he does. Hester can't even take credit for her music; Owen wrote her lyrics for her.

In 1965, most Americans began to realize that the conflict in Vietnam was becoming problematic. The military began "BOMBING THE SHIT" out of North Vietnam, in Owen's translation of military-ese, then began to "SEARCH AND DESTROY, SEARCH AND DESTROY." Owen observed that with no end to the relentless guerilla conflict in sight, it was more like "DESTROY AND DESTROY." John can't imagine Harry Hoyt effectively searching and destroying "*anything*"; Owen remarks, "HAS IT OCCURRED TO YOU THAT VIETNAM IS *FULL* OF HARRY HOYTS?" Owen wants to go to Vietnam "TO KEEP THE HARRY HOYTS FROM GETTING THEIR HEADS BLOWN OFF."

Even if the government and the military aren't being upfront about the situation, it's becoming clear to those Americans paying attention that the conflict is deteriorating. Their goals are vague and unfeasible in practice. The largely young, uneducated American soldiers in Vietnam, like Harry Hoyt, will struggle to implement the impossible aims the military sets. Owen says he wants to protect such clueless soldiers from dying in vain.

Owen's Military Science professor thinks that Owen is too small for a combat branch, and Owen tries to impress him by excelling in his classes. Owen believes that if he can become the number-one graduate from his ROTC unit, he will surely be assigned to a combat branch. John scoffs at Owen's desire to be a hero in such a stupid war—he tells him that if he's really smarter than Harry, he'd be smart enough to pick desk work over combat. John even goes to Owen's Military Science professor and tells him that he's right to think that Owen isn't suitable for combat—not only due to his diminutive size, but also due to his emotional instability.

Owen actually wants *to go into combat, to John and Hester's disbelief. They are horrified to think of losing Owen to such a pointless war, and bewildered by his determination to be sent to the front. John thinks that Owen is desperate to be a hero. John is equally desperate to keep Owen from throwing his life away in Vietnam, enough to go behind Owen's back and undermine his quest to receive a combat designation. He believes that Owen's history of grandiose thinking and dramatic actions suggests poor decision-making.*

Owen responds to the professor's doubts in him by giving up smoking and taking up running. He's in good shape by the time he leaves for Basic Training the summer before senior year. Nonetheless, he fails the obstacle course—he can't get over the wall. He still has the highest marks in academics and leadership, but he won't be ranked number one, and won't have his choice of a combat branch guaranteed. Owen is so upset by his failure that John feels guilty for trying to undermine him—but he still doesn't want Owen to be assigned to a combat branch.

Owen may technically have been tall enough to get into the military, but he simply isn't tall enough to clear the wall all recruits must face in the Basic Training obstacle course. He cannot will away all *of his physical limitations. He is devastated to have his combat worthiness in doubt, but his friends are relieved.*

In the fall of 1965, the start of their senior year, protests against U.S. policy in Vietnam were getting underway. Hester must have attended about half the protests across the country, John says. He's typically undecided—he thinks the protestors have a lot more sense than the supporters of U.S. policy, but he thinks that Hester's crowd are "losers and jerks." He doesn't understand why Owen, always quick to call bullshit, wants to go to Vietnam so desperately. "Did he want to be a hero so badly that he would have gone *anywhere*?" John wonders.

As protests break out, Hester joins the cause, but John holds back, reluctant to ally himself with the type of people who are most active in the movement. He thinks opposing the war is the smart thing to do, and wonders why Owen is suddenly content to go along with such a misguided institution as the military. After all, Owen is the one so fond of quoting, "WOE UNTO THEM WHO CALL EVIL GOOD."

Owen is told in the fall that he is destined for the Adjunct General's Corps—not a combat branch. He tries to appeal the orders. Meanwhile, Harry Hoyt dies of a snake bite, and Mrs. Hoyt starts advertising free draft-counseling advice to young men in Gravesend and Durham, the university town. The university students are more receptive, nearing the end of their college draft exemptions upon graduation. Although John is going to grad school, student deferments will end during his first year for any students less than two years along, making him eligible for the draft.

Owen is officially spared from the fighting, but he is anything but grateful. Mrs. Hoyt, having lost her son to a war she never believed in, is determined to make sure that other young men eligible to fight are fully informed about the conflict they're facing. If they would rather not give their lives in such a short-sighted war, they should have a choice. Owen is well-informed and he has the choice to stay out of the war, but still he chooses to fight.

Mrs. Hoyt tells John about his options for avoiding the draft: convincingly faking a history of mental illness like tragic Buzzy Thurston, or applying for the Peace Corps and going someplace like Tanzania. John is paralyzed by the awful choices: "Imagine this: you're a university student, you're a virgin—do you believe it when someone tells you that you have to make up your mind between Vietnam and Tanzania?" Harriet and Dan urge him to find a way to get out of going to Vietnam—to do the opposite of Owen, for once. "This time Owen is making a mistake," Dan says.

Unfortunately, most young men don't have Owen's opportunity to avoid combat. Their alternatives to Vietnam are limited to extreme self-sabotage or foreign exile. Everyone in John's life wants him to avoid Vietnam, but they are powerless to give him a way out. John doesn't want to go to war, but he doesn't want to leave his home, either. Yet he can find no other choice.

Everyone thinks Owen is crazy for chasing a combat-branch assignment. John asks him why he wants to be a hero and go to Vietnam, and Owen says that he doesn't particularly want to go—he just knows he will. He claims, "I DON'T *WANT* TO BE A HERO...IT'S THAT I *AM* A HERO. I KNOW THAT'S WHAT I'M *SUPPOSED* TO BE."

Owen struggles to explain himself properly to John. He says that he knows he is meant to be a hero. All signs from the universe seem to point to the opposite conclusion—that he is not *meant to go to Vietnam—but he refuses to relinquish this belief.*

While Owen and John argue, Hester is cooking dinner, which John says is always carelessly prepared and unappetizing. Before Owen can explain how he "knows" what he knows, Hester runs out of the room and shuts herself in the bathroom, where they can hear her being sick even over the sound of the bath she runs to drown it out. She yells that she isn't listening to Owen's shit again. John says that if Owen is talking about his "dream," surely it's only a dream. Owen says that Rev. Merrill and Father Findley have told him the same thing. He tells John again that John has no faith. He says he wouldn't request a combat assignment if he wasn't serious.

John is extremely critical of Hester's cooking abilities for someone who never helps in the kitchen himself. If he is sick of poor cooking, he could easily try to make something himself, but he is content to sit back and criticize while a woman makes him dinner. Upset with Owen, Hester runs out of the room and throws up—she is going crazy over Owen's determination to die in the war. Owen doesn't react to her hysterics, only continues talking to John.

John prompts Owen to explain the dream. Owen says he saves Vietnamese children, not soldiers, in his dream—he wouldn't go to such lengths just to save soldiers, he says. John says Owen is being childish to believe he dreamed his destiny; Owen says his faith is more selective than John thinks it is. He gets his diary and reads from it an account of his vision—an edited version, John later realizes. Owen describes hearing the aftermath of an explosion, seeing pieces of debris in the air, and smelling smoke. Around him, children sit up and hold their ears. They don't speak English. When they look at Owen, it's clear to him that he saved them and that they're scared for him.

For the first time, Owen says he is meant to save children. He contradicts what he said earlier, when he told John he wanted to go Vietnam in order to save the poor Harry Hoyts of the world. Apparently he wasn't being wholly honest before—it has taken him years to trust John with the content of his dream, and even now he withholds certain major facts. Perhaps John's skepticism and lack of faith have discouraged Owen from confiding in him—or it could be the fact that John is in the dream as well.

Owen continues describing his vision, saying that nuns appear and one of them takes him into her arms. Blood spurts onto her wimple and her face, but she isn't afraid. The blood is Owen's. She makes the sign of the cross over Owen—when he tries to grab her hand and stop her, it's as if he doesn't have any **arms**. Then he leaves, and finds himself looking down at the scene from above. He says his body looks like it did when he was swaddled up as the Baby Jesus. He keeps rising higher, higher than the palm trees. The sky is beautiful, but the air is hotter than anywhere he's ever been—he's not in New Hampshire.

Owen's dream is incredibly, realistically detailed. At the same time, it seems to follow a dream logic, where certain preoccupations that haunt one's waking life reappear in one's dreams. It is natural, perhaps, that Owen would dream of saving children when his own childhood was so unhappy, for nuns to appear when he has always been fixated with them, and for him to lose his arms when he has been obsessed with armlessness for years.

John says again that it's just a dream. He points out that Owen's touchy feelings about Catholicism are probably the reason he imagines a nun as his personal Angel of Death. Similarly, he dreams about saving Vietnamese children someplace with palm trees because of the war. But Owen doesn't budge an inch. When Hester comes out of the bathroom, she tries to beat sense into Owen, putting him in a headlock and punching him until John has to drag her off and she attacks him too. They have to sit on her until she subsides. She screams at Owen that he wouldn't go to Vietnam if he loved her, and kicks him out.

John also thinks that Owen's dream is just a natural, random dream rather than a special premonition. But Owen stubbornly ignores all the sound reasons people try to use against him. Hester resorts to using violence to finally make Owen see reason. She would rather hurt him herself than see him die from a delusion. She always lost to her brothers in fights, and she loses to Owen and John. She thinks that Owen doesn't love her enough to stay alive for her sake.

John and Owen go to the breakwater and Rye Harbor, then to the ER so Owen can get stitches for his lip. At the hospital, John realizes that Owen doesn't have any insurance. He tells the hospital to bill Harriet. When they get to Harriet's house, she doesn't believe that Owen could have fallen down the stairs or gotten assaulted by delinquents at the beach, so Owen says that John accidentally hurt him while roughhousing, unwilling to tell Harriet that Hester attacked him.

Hester has pummeled Owen so badly that he needs to go to the hospital, just as John feared she might do all those years ago when Owen first met the Eastmans. Owen still protects Hester from Harriet's outrage. Conservative Harriet would have been scandalized to learn that her granddaughter, not her grandson, was throwing punches.

Owen and John stay up watching a movie that reminds John of the Orange Grove. John asks Owen if he remembers the play they were going to write about the Lady in Red. Owen says he started writing it a few times even after John didn't want to do it, but he found that making up a story was harder than he thought. He urges John to learn to follow things through until the end, instead of giving up. John never even looked for Buster Freebody in the phone book, while Owen called up all the Freebodys to see if they knew him, and even called up all the places offering live music to see if they'd heard of him. He spent so much time making secret calls on the phone that Hester thought he must be cheating on her.

Owen, the prolific author of so many persuasive editorials, struggles to come up with a good story. He still made more of an effort to uncover John's father than John himself did, and he warns John that he needs to pursue his own goals instead of waiting for everything to fall into place. Owen wanted to fulfill his vision of saving Vietnamese children, so he tried to put himself in the best position to do so instead of just waiting for the opportunity to arise. He also thinks God will show John his father, but John can still look for himself.

Owen and John try to plan a trip for the summer—John isn't working before he starts to teach classes part-time in the fall and Owen is taking some time off before the Army. Owen wants to go someplace with palm trees, but can't afford to go anywhere so far. They walk to visit Tabitha's grave. When they get back, Hester is asleep on the couch. She kisses Owen softly and apologizes for giving him stitches. Soon they graduate—John earns a B.A. in English, *cum laude*, and Owen earns a B.S. in Geology and the rank of second lieutenant. Owen is given a post in communications command in Arizona. He continues to appeal his assignment, but John is relieved to think that the military "was not as easy to manipulate as a children's Christmas pageant."

Owen wants to go someplace with palm trees because he dreamed of them, and his dream is never far from his mind. Hester apologizes for his injuries and the couple seems to make peace with Owen's fate. After all, he is not set to go to Vietnam anytime soon. She can forget his dream for a while, even if he cannot. Owen can still try to win an overseas assignment, but he is a single soldier in a force of hundreds of thousands—as John says, it's not the same thing as getting his way in a town Christmas pageant. Owen's voice might go unheard.

The night before Gravesend Academy's graduation, Owen recites his old valedictorian speech to the empty chairs lined up on the lawn. He won't tell John what it says. They head up to Sawyer Depot for their vacation instead of someplace tropical. Martha and Alfred are polite to Owen, but not warm. Noah is in the Peace Corps, teaching Forest Management to Nigerians instead of risking the draft. Simon has a draft deferment from all the skiing accidents that took their toll on his knees. Martha and Alfred respect Owen's decision to go to Vietnam, although Martha questions the war's morality. Owen impresses them by giving a breakdown of the conflict and saying he would like to see the situation for himself.

Four years later, Owen finally delivers the speech he was meant to give, but no one hears it. He is crossing off the experiences he has always wanted to have as if he is preparing to die, even though he's only going to Arizona for now. Owen's supposed interest seeing the war for himself is another reason for going to Vietnam that sounds noble, like saving Harry Hoyt, but it seems more likely that he is still trying to understand his own purpose in God's plan.

After spending a night with the Eastmans, John and Owen stay in the boathouse at Loveless Lake, then camp at Lake Francis. Before returning to Gravesend they drive up to the Canadian border and look at the other side of the border. Harriet hosts a small going-away party before Owen reports to his training for the administrative branch. Owen makes John and Hester stand in a circle with him, holding hands, and tells them, "DON'T BE AFRAID." In his letters later that summer, he sounds bored—he says his work is mostly writing, like he used to do at Gravesend Academy, not anything he learned in ROTC or Basic Training.

John and Owen camp out, making the most of their last summer together. They stop in sight of Canada, giving John a glimpse of his future. Owen is as far-sighted as ever. He reassures them with his singular authority that they have nothing to fear. Presumably he means they have nothing to fear for themselves, since he still believes he will die in the war. His belief is tested by the mundanity of his army duties.

John starts grad school, and moves into Hester's apartment when her last roommate moves out. She seems to know a lot of guys, but she never brings them back to the apartment or spend the night at their places. John discovers that Hester is not actually a slob; she keeps the apartment very neat, and "it was only herself she treated carelessly." Owen seems to really like his fort in Arizona, although he's still gunning for a transfer overseas. By December, he's working as a casualty assistance officer, meeting with grieving families with his usual tact. When bodies of Arizona servicemen came back to America from Vietnam, Owen flies to California to collect the bodies and escort them home.

John, who once had to repeat the ninth grade, is now happily getting a graduate degree. Hester's faithfulness to Owen is surprising to John, as is her tidiness. She can take good care of her living space, and even make the effort to clean up after John, but she won't make the same effort for herself. She seems to struggle with self-hatred, a consequence of being forever treated as her brothers' inferior. Owen finds himself doing the same work he did in his family's business, dealing in death and grief.

Owen comes home for Christmas and he tells John and Hester about his work. He and John practice the basketball shot. Owen, John, and Hester discuss how the war could end, but they "talked like the war itself, going nowhere." John sleeps over at Harriet's and Dan's to give Owen and Hester some privacy. Everyone plans to take the train up to Sawyer Depot for Christmas, until they realize that train service from Gravesend to Sawyer Depot isn't running anymore, so they spend the holiday apart, after all. Owen talks to John about what John's going to do after he loses his student deferment. He says that if John wants to do things his own way, he's going to have to make a decision, and show some courage.

The Christmases at Sawyer Depot are forever lost to the past. John and Owen cannot forget that they are stuck in the present, in the middle of a never-ending war. Despite sleeping in the bed of his youth once again, John cannot retreat back into childhood, but must face the difficult choices of being an adult in wartime.

John says he wants to keep being a student, and become a teacher. Owen says he had better find the courage to do something now, because courage won't help him after his physical. John picks Thomas Hardy for his master's thesis, but he doesn't pick an alternative to Vietnam. He writes to Owen that he doesn't understand what he means by showing courage—none of the options besides going to war require bravery. He says his lack of faith makes him feel that nothing he decides to do will make any difference in the random chaos of life. "What good does courage do—when what happens next is up for grabs?" Owen tells him not to so be cynical.

John voices his ambition to become a teacher, like Dan. Owen tells him he has to decide what to do before it's too late, but John is still unwilling to take the drastic step of going into exile. He blames his poor faith for his passivity—why take a risk when it could easily be for nothing? When the world can take his mother away from him in an instant, all of his hopes could be undone just as swiftly. Yet Owen refuses to believe that everything must unfold in the same tragic way.

John gets told to report to his pre-induction physical. He calls Owen, who tells him not to report for anything until he gets there. Owen comes back as soon as he gets a leave, and he calls John when he's at the monument shop, asking him to come over. At the shop, they each have a beer. John notices that the diamond wheel saw has a new blade. Owen says that he boiled the blade and wiped it with alcohol. He did the same thing to the wooden block below the saw. John finally realizes what Owen plans to do. He sees sterile bandages and a tourniquet waiting. Owen explains that according to Army regulations, you can't be physically qualified to serve if you're missing one joint from your thumb or more than one joint from your index, middle, or ring finger.

John calls Owen for answers, as he has always done, and Owen takes charge, as he always does. He invites John to the shop that trades in death, where they will try to figure out how to save John's life. Owen is a figure of both life and death, the newborn and the ghost. Like Hester, Owen would rather spill John's blood than see him die in the war. John will have to sacrifice his finger to ensure his safety. This also means losing part of an arm, like Watahantowet's totem.

Owen says that the safest thing to do is to remove John's trigger finger, and John agrees. John is terrified, however, as Owen shows him how to hold his hand on the cutting board. Owen tells John that this will take guts and faith, like looking for his father. He reminds John of how his lust disturbs him, and how he thinks it comes from his father. Owen says that John's father is probably cowardly, as well, another thing that John dislikes in himself. He tells John that his mother was never afraid.

Cutting off the finger John would use to shoot and kill is a powerful anti-war statement as well as an effective way to become ineligible to fight. He also symbolically loses the ability to figuratively pull the trigger, in the sense of taking decisive action. John has never been good at that. Owen can see this in him, and he tells John to be more like Tabitha, who fearlessly followed her own path.

Owen tells John to scrub his hand and rub it with alcohol, and they'll be at the hospital in less than 10 minutes. John doesn't know his blood type, but Owen does—it's the same as his. He says John can have some of his blood if he needs it. He reveals that John appears in his dream about his death, and he wants to keep John out of it by keeping him out of Vietnam. He tells John it's his choice to go along or not.

Owen has carefully planned a sterile, surgical amputation of John's finger. There's nothing he wouldn't do for John—repeat a year of school for him, teach him to read, give him blood, and now save him from Owen's own sad destiny. He can accept every other demand of fate except for putting his friend in danger.

John puts his finger on the chopping block, and Owen puts on his safety goggles. He tells John to look him in the eyes so he won't get dizzy. The only thing John has to do is stay perfectly still. John says he can't do it, but Owen tells him not to be afraid; he can do anything he wants, if he believes he can. "I LOVE YOU…NOTHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU—TRUST ME," Owen says before he slices.

Owen tells John that he can do anything if he believes he can; what he means here is that John must believe in Owen, and his reassurance that John will come to no harm. John does trust Owen, and it is perhaps his first real leap of faith in life.

CHAPTER 9: THE SHOT

John feels sick whenever anyone today reminisces positively about the sixties. He thinks that there was practically no irony in those days—everyone was so self-righteous, even in their muddled thinking. Hester failed as a folksinger and songwriter because no one appreciated her irony. When she was just Hester Eastman, an earnest nobody, she flopped. But when she transformed herself into a hard-rock star, a queen of the grittiest and coarsest style of rock 'n' roll, she became a household name: Hester the Molester.

John hates to hear people recall the sixties with nostalgia. The sixties were a time of stubborn, frequently misguided convictions at odds with one another. Hester eventually learned to harness everyone's anger and express it in music, and her career took off.

John's students are impressed that he's related to Hester, and they always ask him for tickets to her Toronto shows. He goes with them and brings them backstage to meet Hester, where she tells the girls to sleep with him if they want safe sex, because he's a virgin. The girls giggle at her joke, never imagining that it's the truth. John *is* a virgin, and Hester knows it. He no longer has any interest in losing his virginity; what has happened to him has "simply *neutered*" him, he thinks. Katherine's husband is partially correct in that John just doesn't feel like "practicing" anything.

Hester is famous even in Canada. She is eternally blunt about sex, and never lets John forget that she knows he's a virgin. In Freudian imagery, having his finger cut off was like losing his "doink," and he says outright that he feels himself to be "neutered" by his past. The lust that once haunted him seems to have been extinguished by the accumulated trauma of so much loss—his mother, his best friend, his home.

Hester has stayed virginal to the memory of Owen Meany—he was the love of her life, and she never became as seriously involved with anyone else. She only sleeps with younger guys who don't expect anything from her. John thinks that Hester's music videos are quite ugly, with electric bass distorting her voice and shots of her liaisons with young men intermixed with shots of Vietnam War footage. John's students' generation find Hester and her commentary "profound and humane," which makes John sick. He believes that they were both damaged by what happened by Owen, but Hester has channeled her damage into incredible fame and fortune. She has created "a mindless muddle of sex and protest" out of her and Owen's suffering. What an irony, John thinks.

Hester herself has been partially neutered by Owen's loss—she will never share her life with anyone else the way she once did with him. She won't be perfectly celibate, like John, but she will never have another long-term relationship. As famous as she is, such a life must be as lonely as John's. Hester doesn't even have her family to return home to—she has nobody. John looks down on her for misappropriating the pain of the war for sensational songs and music videos, but his female students don't see it that way.

John thinks Owen would have scoffed at Hester's music videos. Hester wears lots of crucifixes—she likes them or she likes to mock them. John appreciates her song titles, at least, and he believes that she has an equal right to interpret the silence that Owen left behind. Owen hasn't left perfect silence behind him, however. John heard from him one night at Harriet's old house, where John was staying with Dan. They were drinking and talking about Harriet's last years in the house. They kept her at home as long as they could, even convincing the grocery store to make special deliveries for her. But she was going senile, and she wouldn't recognize the delivery boys.

John thinks he knows what Owen would say of Hester's career, but even Owen had a weakness for popular music once. John doesn't consider that Hester could be writing the music she does in full awareness of Owen's distaste—she has no obligation to honor the preferences of a man who couldn't put her first. She could also very well have chosen her career to spite him, as she chose to spite her parents.

Harriet also lost her hair and had to resort to wigs, which she would hide from her maids. Eventually she had to go into the seniors' home. Dan says that her preserved jellies are still in the secret passageway, and John goes to see them for himself. He can't find the light switch, and then Dan shuts the door on him. He gropes for the light, and feels something awful to the touch—one of Harriet's old wigs. He steps backward, yelling, and begins to lose his balance on top of the stairs.

Harriet ended up going into the nursing home that she swore she would never move into, just like she bought the TV that she swore she would never get. In further irony, her unintentional legacy was to leave a scare waiting for someone in the secret passageway, where she always hated to hear Owen screaming.

John is saved from falling to his death by "a small, strong hand" that guides his hand to the light switch and pulls him forward. He hears Owen's **voice** saying, "DON'T BE AFRAID. NOTHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPTEN TO YOU." When Dan opens the door, he sees that the roots of John's hair have turned white. The next morning, Dan is somewhat skeptical of John's claim to have felt and heard Owen. John points out that Owen's voice is unmistakable, but Dan only says that they were very drunk.

Owen comes to rescue John from the place where John used to scare him (and where both of them would frighten the maids). Once again, Owen assures him that he has nothing to fear. John's drunken state is a rational explanation for why he could have imagined Owen's presence, but he has faith in what he witnessed.

The summer of 1967, John's finger was healing. Owen was promoted to first lieutenant. He helped John start his Master's thesis on Thomas Hardy, explaining his view that Hardy was almost religious—he came so close to believing that his eventual rejection of religion made him very bitter. He tells John about a line from Hardy's diary that Hardy wrote to explain his disinterest in theories like religion: "Nothing bears out in practice what it promises incipiently."

After John's amputation, he was free from worries about the war and could focus on finishing his Master's degree. Owen helps him with his studies one last time, giving him a topic to write about. Hardy represents one possibility for John's future: a man who just can't believe because of how meaningless life's promises seem to be.

Back in the present, it's August and John is visiting Dan in Gravesend. Harriet left her house to Dan and John when she died, and Dan wants John to move back. John thinks of August as their month to talk about teaching together, and he doesn't want to talk about moving back to America. He complains to Dan that his students fail to recognize wit in the works they read; he believes they would see more of it if they could see the work performed, like Dan does. Meanwhile, Dan tries to convince him to forgive and forget, and come home already. Even Owen wouldn't blame the whole country for what happened to him.

A new school year looms, and John is happy to have his teaching to occupy him again. Dan wants John to finally let his decades-old wound heal and return home to America, to Gravesend. But on this question, John has refused to take Dan's advice for once. He can't forget what happened to Owen in this country.

"There is too much forgetting," John thinks. He tried to forget who his father could be, only once calling Mr. McSwiney, who also told him to forget about it. McSwiney told him again that Owen should go see a doctor—there wasn't any good reason not to fix his **voice**. In Owen's case, there really was a reason. John tried to tell Dan and Rev. Merrill about that reason, but they didn't fully believe him. "I believe *you*," Dan said neutrally. Merrill says that to believe the whole story "calls upon more faith than I have."

John feels like he is the only person who truly remembers what happened to Owen. If he forgets, what Owen did will lose most of its meaning. John doesn't take many stands, but he takes a stand on the miracle of Owen Meany. Even Merrill can't bring himself to believe everything John describes.

Merrill insists that it's harder for him to believe in a supposed miracle as someone who has been both filled with faith and filled with doubt, as compared to John who hasn't lost his newfound faith yet. He also says that miracles shouldn't cause faith; one has to already have faith to believe in true miracles. He agrees that Owen was very gifted, and very emotional. He believes that Owen experienced some disturbing visions, but doesn't believe that every instance of precognition can be ascribed to God.

Merrill has always preached that faith should not depend on miracles—it should be independent of earthly proof. Faith that needs miracles is not true faith. But John and Owen might say in return that believing in God's influence on earth makes it natural to believe in the possibility of witnessing or experiencing a miracle.

One day in the present August vacation, John lies down on the couch where Hester once laid down while John, Noah and Simon searched the house for Owen. He finds a **baseball** card under the couch cushions and realizes that Owen had been lying under the couch cushions—under Hester—the whole time they looked for him.

Owen is never gone from John's life—he continues to appear in the most unexpected of places. He has been there all along, just waiting for the moment to reveal himself.

Harriet's decline at the seniors' home was quick and painless; she died in her sleep two weeks before she would have turned one hundred. Her birthday was on Halloween, which she hated. She also would have hated a big celebration that called attention to her age. She died in front of the TV, the remote clutched in her hand, stuck on the button to change the channel.

Thankfully, Harriet did not endure the drawn-out death she feared. The TV that was her primary companion in the last years of her life saw her out of the world. Ironically, she did not die while listening to someone read, like Lydia, even though she always claimed that reading was superior to TV.

In the present, it's September—time to go back to school. At a staff meeting, John again requested to teach Günter Grass's book *Cat and Mouse* to his Grade 13 girls, but another English teacher called the book "nasty," saying, "The masturbation scene alone is offensive to women." He finds this female teacher very disagreeable, and is looking forward to catching her off guard with his missing index finger. It's not grotesque-looking, since Owen made the cleanest cut possible. The only thing wrong with the hand, and the only thing wrong with John, is what's missing: "Owen Meany is missing."

John refuses to consider the female teacher's point of view on the book he wants to teach. To him, she is just an Amanda Dowling type, opposed to any book with a whiff of sexism, regardless of cultural value or artistic merit. Literary censorship is a slippery slope, but John could at least give greater consideration to a woman's perspective on the harms of misogynistic literature on his young female students. Instead he waits to upset her with his finger, just as he and Owen have always enjoyed upsetting girls.

At the end of the summer of 1967, Hester tells Owen she won't go to his funeral. She says she'll do anything—get married, move to Arizona, have his children—except go to his funeral. And she sticks to her word; she doesn't go to his funeral. Owen never asked her to marry him or move for him, saying it wouldn't be fair to her. Owen strikes a deal with a Major General at Fort Huachuca who is impressed with his body escort service: if he stays as a body escort for eighteen more months, the Major General will get him "a good job in Vietnam." Hester questions how Owen could possibly believe in such a thing as "a good job in Vietnam."

Hester will do whatever it takes when it comes to making a life with Owen Meany, but she wants nothing to do with his death. If he doesn't love her enough to stay alive with her, she won't eulogize him. But Owen won't give up on his mission for her sake, and he won't give her false hope. They don't marry, and he continues arranging to go overseas.

Hester and John attend an anti-war march in Washington fifty-thousand people strong. She questions why Owen didn't also cut off his own finger and save himself, if he's so smart. John leaves the march, and Hester stays and gets arrested. John thinks that the protestors' righteousness simply hardened the attitudes of those who supported the war. Rather than "giving aid and comfort to the enemy," as Reagan later claimed the protestors did, they gave fuel to the pro-war Americans.

John is critical of the protestors' attitudes, but it's not clear how else they were supposed to voice their opposition to a war they hated. Most young draftees and their peers weren't even old enough to vote. Powerless to change the government through the ballot, there weren't many other ways to get the attention of their leaders without being loud and impassioned.

Perhaps the protests worked against the protestors, helping to extend rather than end the war. Either way, it did not end soon enough to save Owen. He was placed in a closed casket, draped with a U.S. flag with his medal pinned to it. He was given a full military funeral with honors, and Mr. Meany and Mrs. Meany asked that he be buried in Gravesend rather than Arlington. Rev. Wiggin, a supporter of the war, wanted to hold the funeral in his church, but John convinced the Meanys to hold the service in Hurd's Church, with Rev. Merrill. Mr. Meany was still mad at Gravesend Academy for kicking Owen out, but John said Owen would be more upset if Wiggin performed his service rather than Merrill.

If the pro-war people in power decided to double down on their support of the war in light of the highly vocal opposition of the youths being sent to die, that's a separate problem in itself. Owen went to war willingly, and he would die willingly, but the war consumed so many willing and unwilling lives alike, needlessly. John ensures that a pro-war preacher does not preside over Owen's funeral.

Owen's funeral was held in the summer of 1968, not long after Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated and *Hair* had opened on Broadway within the same month. John is sick of people who pretend to be radical but stand by as tragedy and violence run riot. At the Meanys' house, Mrs. Meany stares into the dead ashes of the fireplace while Mr. Meany talks with John. He believes that the government has given them $50,000, while John knows that the money came from Harriet. John goes into Owen's bedroom and sees that Owen attached the severed arms from the statue of Mary Magdalene to Tabitha's **armless dummy**. He sees that Owen never unpacked his baseball cards after John gave them back to him. He sees how withered the armadillo's claws became. He doesn't see the fatal **baseball**.

It's unclear what John wants from his country—he can't stand the protestors, but can't specify what opposition he would rather see. He's certainly not an example of principled advocacy himself. Perhaps he belittles the protestors to ease his own guilt and self-loathing for not getting more involved in stopping the war before it was too late. Harriet has anonymously given the Meanys money to make up for the loss of Owen as a provider. In Owen's room, John reviews the symbols of Owen's life. The missing arms of the statue have been fitted onto the dummy—perhaps even Owen found the armless torso too bleak, relentlessly reminding him of his fate.

Mr. Meany says the **baseball** was never there—he looked for it in Owen's room for years, and never found it. John unpacks Owen's duffel bag for his family. Inside is Owen's diary, his copy of St. Thomas Aquinas's writings, and his Bible. Mr. Meany sits down with John and tells him that Owen wasn't born naturally. Mrs. Meany shouts at him to stop talking. Mr. Meany explains that Owen had been a virgin birth, since he and Mrs. Meany never had sex. Nobody ever believed them.

Shockingly, Owen never had the baseball, all along. The ball itself was never symbolic to him—neither was the bat he hit it with. His own hands, guided by God, were always all that he held responsible for Tabitha's death. At this very moment, John discovers just why Owen so firmly believed himself bound to God's will.

Mrs. Meany continues to order Mr. Meany to stop talking, and John thinks that she's perfectly crazy—possibly even mentally disabled. She might not have known what sex was, or might have been lying all these years, or might have repressed or forgotten the experience due to trauma or mental disability. Mr. Meany believed his wife had conceived Owen as a virgin, like Jesus's mother Mary, but none of the Catholic priests believed him. Wherever he went, they accused him of blasphemy. His parents told Owen when he was ten or eleven, around when he hit the fatal **baseball**.

Mrs. Meany can't stand to hear Mr. Meany telling their story to anybody else, after how badly it was always received in the past. John doesn't react outwardly, but inwardly he fiercely scorns the Meanys. He certainly doesn't believe them. He thinks that Mrs. Meany must be mentally handicapped, a plausible explanation for her highly abnormal behavior. But John only sees her after "THE UNSPEAKABLE OFFENSE," which could have triggered this state. He can believe that her husband never slept with her if he says so, but he can't believe she never had intercourse to conceive Owen. A woman's word is always doubted.

John thinks that he could kill Mr. Meany and Mrs. Meany for their ignorance. He thinks of them as "monsters of superstition," and "dupes." He feels that Owen has been used cruelly both by ignorance and by design, and that Mrs. Meany should have been sterilized. Mr. Meany tells John to come to the monument shop; Mrs. Meany again tells him to "Stop!" John hadn't been to the workshop since his amputation. Owen spent a lot of time in the shop over the Christmas holidays in 1967, and also spent a lot of time practicing the shot with John, as usual. Losing his finger didn't stop John from doing the shot, although it gave him difficulty with writing, eating, and typing.

No matter how the Meanys came to believe what they did, John thinks that they did great harm to their son by telling him that he was born of immaculate conception. His outrage on Owen's behalf is great; he even thinks viciously that Mrs. Meany should have been forcibly sterilized. On the last Christmas Owen and John have together, they practice the shot, minus one finger.

Owen didn't see much of Hester that Christmas. Her refusal to attend his funeral seemed to have hurt him. She became more and more radically opposed to the war in 1968, and Owen didn't try very hard to reconcile with her. John believes Owen wanted Hester to fall out of love with him before he died. In the monument shop, Mr. Meany shows John Owen's gravestone, with his full name, dates of birth and death, and Latin inscription for "forever." John is surprised to see how well-carved the headstone is, given Mr. Meany's lack of carving skill. Mr. Meany says it's all Owen's work—he even inscribed the exact date of death, six months before he died.

Hester finally seems to have sent a message to Owen that he couldn't simply ignore or shake off. Her great pain at his choice to die is valid, and at last he appears to understand the limits of what she is willing to suffer for him. Perhaps Hester could never understand that his love for God would always come before his love for her; perhaps she did, but needed to protect her heart. Owen wouldn't have wanted her to go through worse pain, but he does seem unrealistically disappointed that her devotion isn't absolute. Owen's headstone is proof that he always knew when he would die.

Rev. Merrill agrees with John that Mr. Meany is a "monster of superstition" and Mrs. Meany is likely mentally disabled, and he shares John's horror that they told Owen their belief when he was still so young and impressionable. He says that Owen talked to him and Father Findley about his parents' ideas, causing them both to pity him. Owen didn't believe he was Jesus, but he did challenge Merrill by asking him why he couldn't believe in another virgin birth.

Before Owen's funeral, John talks with Merrill about everything he learned from the Meanys. Merrill already knew most of the story from Owen, who could never bring himself to tell John about his parents' belief, perhaps out of fear of John's scorn. Those who knew pitied Owen and the burden his parents had unreasonably placed upon him. Owen doesn't necessarily agree with his parents, but he does believe in miracles, and doesn't think another virgin birth is impossible.

Owen did believe that everything that happened to him had a purpose, that he was picked by God. Merrill only believes that Owen was gifted with some "precognitive powers." John is angry that Merrill would treat Owen like an intellectual problem rather than acknowledging that his life was miraculous or extraordinary. Merrill warns him not to confuse his grief for Owen with real religious belief. John says that Merrill's doubt has overwhelmed him, as Owen suspected. They sit without speaking until John asks what Merrill will say about Owen at his funeral. Merrill doesn't reply, and John remembers his silence in The Great Hall.

Merrill, a man of faith by trade, has very little faith outside of the set teachings of the Bible. He doesn't have the strength of belief to accept a new miracle that the Gospel hasn't already blessed. A lot of Owen's story can be intellectually rationalized, but the most incredible parts seem like they could only be what Owen always believed them to be: God's work. Merrill's stubborn refusal to admit any potential of divine intervention is startling given his profession.

John thinks that Merrill treats religion like a career, preaching without believing or opening his heart to a new manifestation of God's will. In Merrill's vestry office, John suddenly feels Owen near. Merrill turns on the lamp and opens his mouth without speaking, choking on his words. Finally he speaks in Owen's **voice**: "LOOK IN THE THIRD DRAWER, RIGHT-HAND SIDE." Merrill opens the desk drawer and out falls a **baseball**, undoubtedly the fatal ball that killed Tabitha. "Forgive me, my s-s-s-*son*!" Merrill stutters.

Merrill has never been able to pray for Owen Meany. How could he believe, as a man of God, that God would answer the prayers of humankind if he can't believe that God could actually intervene in human lives like Owen's? Finally Merrill experiences his own likely miracle: channeling the spirit of Owen Meany. Owen, who looked inside Merrill's desk drawers after mutilating the statue of Mary Magdalene, has known since that day who John's father was, for only his father would have kept the ball that killed his mother.

This was the first time Owen spoke to John from the beyond, the second being when he saved John in the secret passageway this August. John thinks that Owen should understand by now that John knows he is there—even without seeing or hearing him. Owen promised John that God would tell him who his father was, and John isn't surprised that God spoke to him in Owen's **voice**. Merrill denies that God was working through him; he suggests that he had finally found the courage to reveal himself to John by using a voice not his own. He would rather blame his subconscious than believe in divine intervention. John asks if he's a pastor or a psychologist.

John's faith in Owen is secure enough that he does not need Owen to speak to him to know that he is there. Owen never told John who his father was when he was alive, for his faith was so strong that he knew John would find out at exactly the right moment. Still Merrill rejects the idea that God has anything to do with the miracle they just experienced.

Merrill then confesses that he has no faith at all—he lost it when Tabitha died. He had been at the game, Tabitha had waved to him, and he had prayed for her to drop dead. Seeing her always filled him with guilt and self-disgust after their affair. He believes that God listened to him when he asked for Tabitha to die, and has not listened to him since. John thinks that Merrill is no different from Mr. Meany and Mrs. Meany—they all used self-centered religion for their own ends.

John was right all along—his father was *at the baseball game, and his mother had been waving to him when she died. Like Owen, Merrill believes that he is the reason why Tabitha is dead. But while Owen humbly believes that God fulfilled His unknowable, divine will through his hands, Merrill believes that God fulfilled* his *mortal wish.*

Tabitha and Merrill had an affair after she asked him to come to The Orange Grove and confirm that she was not doing anything dishonorable by singing at the supper club. John says it was a sincere affair—Merrill sincerely believed he was in love with Tabitha, who was sincerely innocent. But Merrill never intended to leave his wife and children, and quickly felt ashamed. Tabitha soon got over him, and didn't trouble herself with guilt or anguish over their affair. But Merrill wallowed in guilt and remorse after being forced to accept that he would never find the courage to abandon his miserable family for Tabitha.

Tabitha did lie about how she met John's father, and it was just a sad story all along, a vulnerable young woman led off the moral path by the man she had trusted to keep her on it. But she didn't allow herself to be ruined by their affair, refusing to become a tragic Hester Prynne or Tess D'Urberville. Merrill would have preferred a heartbroken, pining young woman to match his own misery.

John finds his father to be an utter failure. He says sarcastically to Merrill, "How I wish I could help you restore your faith." He feels "moved to do evil," and he recalls how Owen warned him that his father would disappoint him.

John is furiously disappointed in his father and angry for his mother's sake that her lover was such a coward. Merrill's faith is hollow, and he does not deserve to eulogize Owen.

Back in Toronto in September, John thinks about how Katherine says the most un-Christian thing about him is his unwillingness to forgive. He is sitting in Grace Church, reflecting again on the Thirty-seventh psalm: "Leave off from wrath…else shalt thou be moved to do evil." He is again upset at his students, resenting their disengagement from literature and their infatuation with rock music.

John recognizes that his resentment is a flaw. The Bible instructs against the evils of wrath, and he sees how it poisons his life with needless pain. He becomes easily vexed with his students and thinks the worst of everyone, instead of having faith in God's ability to make things right.

After John learns about Merrill, he doesn't know what to tell Dan. He asks Dan why he insisted that Tabitha change churches before getting married. Dan says he thought that *John* had insisted on changing churches to be with Owen. Dan's actually a Presbyterian. Tabitha lied to them. John asks Dan why he and Tabitha waited so long to get married. Dan says John's father made Tabitha wait; he wanted her to be sure about marrying Dan. Tabitha wanted John's father never to identify himself to John, and he wouldn't promise her anything if she didn't wait to marry Dan. It took four years for him to promise never to tell John the truth. Tabitha never wanted John, or Dan, to know who John's father was.

The mystery of why Tabitha and John switched churches is finally solved: it was to get away from Merrill. Perhaps Tabitha couldn't leave Merrill's church earlier without raising suspicions, or maybe she didn't mind still seeing him until meeting Dan made her ready for a clean break. Maybe Merrill's interference in her engagement was the last straw that made her leave his church for good.

Dan says he doesn't believe that John's father was jealously trying to derail their marriage—he truly wanted Tabitha to be sure about her husband, and truly wanted his son to know who he was one day. John asks him if he knew about The Orange Club, and "The Lady in Red," and Buster Freebody. Dan says he knew about all that, and went with Tabitha to Buster's funeral. John decides that Dan doesn't need to know about Merrill being John's real father. He also thinks of a plan to restore Merrill's faith with a "miracle."

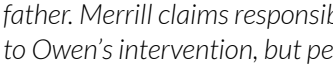
It seems cruel of Merrill to have forced Tabitha to delay her marriage, but also unfair of Tabitha to prevent her son from ever knowing his biological father. John has a right to know who his father is, and Merrill has some paternal rights. Completely disappointing dad or not, to decide that John should never know the truth about Merrill doesn't seem right.

John drives to Owen's house and picks up his mother's **dummy**, still wearing her red dress. He places the dummy in the flower beds under the stained-glass windows of the church. In the dusk, it looks like Tabitha is hovering above the flowers, her missing head and feet consumed by shadows. He takes the **baseball** and throws it through the stained-glass window, then hides behind a tree.

John goes back for the dummy, which the farsighted Owen may have kept exactly for a reason like this. He creates the illusion of Tabitha standing outside the church.

Merrill comes outside, spots Tabitha's **dummy**, and falls to his knees, clutching the **baseball** to his heart. He drops the ball and prays: "God—forgive me!...Tabby—forgive me, please!" He covers his eyes with his hands and slumps to the ground, babbling to himself. John retrieves the dummy and the baseball and drives to Rye Harbor, where he used to sit with Owen. He throws the baseball into the harbor, along with Mary Magdalene's arms. He climbs out along the breakwater to throw the dummy as far out into the ocean as he can, into the deepest water. He hugs it for a moment, then throws it in the sea.

Merrill falls for the illusion completely, begging forgiveness for breaking his promise to Tabitha and "telling" John that he is his father. Merrill claims responsibility, refusing to attribute his outburst to Owen's intervention, but perhaps he always believed unconsciously, for he certainly seemed primed to accept another miraculous visitation. John finally puts the symbols of Tabitha's death to rest.



John watches the sun rise over the harbor, and then returns to Hester's apartment to shower and dress for Owen's funeral. He hasn't seen Hester since they watched Bobby Kennedy's assassination together on Harriet's television: "Television gives good disaster." Owen didn't have anything to say about it, for once; he was too concerned with his own impending death. John packs up his belongings and reads Owen's diary. Owen had written down Vietnamese vocabulary and expressions, especially "COMMAND FORMS OF VERBS," like "LIE DOWN" and "DON'T BE AFRAID."

Bobby Kennedy died almost exactly a month before Owen did. Both men died during the summer, when the rising heat seemed to enflame America's worst passions. Owen always knew he would die then—perhaps another reason he dreaded the warming weather every year. He knew what he needed to say to the children he would save, preparing thoroughly to make sure they weren't afraid.

In the margin of one page, Owen wrote, "THIRD DRAWER, RIGHT-HAND SIDE." He must have seen the **baseball** the day that he mounted the **statue** on the stage of The Great Hall, and sat behind Merrill's desk. He knew then who John's father was, but he knew that God would tell John himself—and he knew that John would be let down. He wrote about John in the diary, saying that cutting off his "BEST FRIEND'S FINGER" was "THE HARDEST THING I EVER HAD TO DO." He says that after he dies, John should "MAKE A CLEAN BREAK FROM THE PAST" and go to Canada.

Owen found where Merrill kept the ball in his desk, although it's not clear if he knew where it would be before he started opening drawers—a divine intuition—or if it's something he wrote down to remember after he happened to see it. He and John had already ruled Merrill out from being part of the ballgame's audience, so it seems more likely to be an "accidental" fated discovery than a directed one. He tells John to go to Canada and break from the past, although John really only accomplishes one of these things.

John packs the diary with the rest of his things and heads to Harriet's house to pick up some photographs and clothes. He has breakfast in the rose garden with Harriet, and tells her where he plans to go next. Then he goes to Dan's apartment to get the granite doorstep Owen carved as a wedding gift for him and Tabitha. He also tells Dan his plans, and says to him, "You're the best father a boy ever had—and the only father I ever needed." Then they go to Owen's funeral.

John prepares to follow Owen's instructions immediately and head to Canada after the funeral. He wants to take Owen's wedding gift with him, a connection to the memory of both his best friend and his mother. His words to Dan make it clear that he has no intention of pursing a closer relationship with Merrill. The truth is finally out in the open, despite all that Tabitha did to hide it from him, but he still decides not to make Merrill a part of his life, agreeing with her judgement.

Chief Pike stands at the door of the church as if he's going to frisk the mourners for the missing **baseball**. Coach Chickering is there, and Buzzy Thurston's parents, who recently buried their own son. Father Findley and Mrs. Hoyt are there; the Wiggins are not. A unit of the New Hampshire National Guard serves as Owen's honor guard. Owen's favorite professor of Military Science from the University of New Hampshire is there; he tells John that they were clearly wrong about Owen's suitability for combat.

The residents of Gravesend assemble one last time to mourn the loss of the singular Owen Meany. Everyone there has seen their lives transformed by the war, and many of their lives were also transformed by Owen.

Sunlight shines through the new hole in the stained-glass windows made by John's **baseball**, reflecting against the medal pinned to the flag on Owen's casket. Mr. Meany and Mrs. Meany stare at the medal and the casket as if they expect Owen to rise and condemn them for coming to his funeral. Mr. Fish and Harriet sit behind them, with Alfred, Martha, and Simon. Noah is still abroad with the Peace Corps and Hester is nowhere to be found. Harold Crosby is sitting across the aisle from John. John recalls hearing that Harold was coached by Mrs. Hoyt into securing a psychological deferment.

Light hits Owen's medal, the sign of his courage and sacrifice. The medal is only an earthly salute to his heroism, a trophy from a war that Owen didn't really believe in, but Owen seemed to value it highly, as he demonstrates later. Perhaps he wanted it for his parents to take some pride and comfort from it, or perhaps it was just another of the symbols that he so loved to collect.

Mrs. Walker is there, and Arthur and Amanda Downing. Larry O'Day and his daughter Caroline, John's former girlfriend, are there, with Maureen Early. Mr. Morrison is there. Randy White's replacement as headmaster is there. The Brinker-Smiths returned to England in opposition to the war, not wanting their twins to be Americans. Even the Gravesend Academy janitor is there.

The town comes together to mourn one of their own. Even the Sunday school teacher who thought Owen was a disturbance to the classroom by putting himself into the air, even the girls whom he frightened to the point of fainting and wetting their pants, and even the mailman whom he upstaged so memorably are there.

Rev. Merrill starts to speak with a newly firm and forceful voice; now that he has regained his faith, he preaches with "absolute belief in every word he uttered." He reads multiple moving passages from the Bible, and says, "Compared to Owen Meany, I am an amateur—in my faith." He admits that he wonders at times if God's existence makes any difference to the world, and when he feels most faithful, he is also full of hard questions to ask God: "For example, I would like to ask God to give us *back* Owen Meany…O God—I shall keep asking You!" Harriet cries at this.

John's trick worked; Merrill is now more confident in his faith than he ever was before. He speaks movingly in Owen's eulogy, expressing his grief and his faith in such poignant words that John himself will later repeat them, despite his disdain for his father's weakness.

When Merrill is done, the honor guard folds Owen's flag and hands it to Mr. Meany and Mrs. Meany. The recessional hymn is the same one played at Tabitha's funeral. It's another summer funeral, and they can still hear the children nearby playing **baseball**. Merrill prays over Owen's grave, and John listens with careful attention, knowing that he is listening to his father for the last time. What will they need of each other after this, when Merrill has his faith once more and John has Dan? John thinks that Merrill is a fraud for ignoring the real miracle of Owen Meany and finding God in a **dummy**. Owen would say, "GOD WORKS IN STRANGE WAYS!"

The story has come full circle, with Owen's funeral mirroring Tabitha's, the life that was taken by Owen's own hands and that always haunted him. Once again, the world does not stop to grieve. Children continue playing baseball, safe in their innocence for another game, which is surely what Owen would have wanted. John prepares to take leave of his father, disgusted with Merrill's hypocrisy in denying a true miracle and embracing a fake one.

As John is leaving the cemetery, a woman with three children approaches him. At first he doesn't recognize her, until she asks him if he remembers how they used to lift Owen up. It's Mary Beth Baird, who got pregnant in high school and dropped out to marry the father, a dairy farmer. She asks John, "How could he have been so **light**?" John can't speak—he doesn't want to hear his own **voice**, only Owen's. When Mary Beth speaks to him, he knows Owen is gone.

Mary Beth Baird, who loved Owen once, is the one who makes Owen's loss real to John. Owen cast her and John as his "mother" and "father" in the Christmas pageant, acting as the miraculous child who chose his parents. Like Mary, Mary Beth's life was changed by an unexpected pregnancy, and John is still a meek, celibate "Joseph."

John crosses the border to Canada, showing his missing finger when he's asked if he's a draft dodger. He lands in Toronto purely by chance. He thinks that Owen must have been so let down to learn that John's mysterious father was merely "an insipid soup of a man." Merrill was so forgettable that John and Owen never remembered seeing him at their **baseball** game, even though they saw him in the audience of all of Dan's plays. John was let down to learn that his father was "just another Joseph…just another man like me." He believes like his father used to, swinging back and forth between faith and doubt.

John still doesn't travel with purpose, simply ending up in Toronto after driving aimlessly. He seems to share this lack of foresight with his father, who found himself trapped in an unsuitable marriage and then stuck with the consequences of a short-sighted affair. He must have been at the baseball game to watch John play, which John himself never acknowledged as part of his suspicion that his father was at the game.

John doesn't hate Merrill, but he doesn't care about him much. He hasn't seen him since Owen's funeral. Dan says he's a great preacher now, without a trace of his former stutter. John sometimes feels jealous of his father's "absolute and unshakeable faith"; he wants to be tricked into forgetting his doubt, too. John knows what real miracles are, but he despairs at the many unanswerable questions his faith poses. How could Owen have known what he did? If God was behind Owen's knowledge, that poses the terrible question: how could God have let this happen to him?

Merrill has shed all of his doubts in the wake of his "vision" of Tabitha. Even though he always claimed that Owen's visions couldn't have possibly come from God, he readily believes that he could be sent such a divine message. John has seen such messages for himself, but he struggles with doubt over God's role in people's lives. How can God love humanity, but make his most loyal supporter suffer so?

Owen taught John to keep a diary, which is much less interesting than Owen's own. One highlight is when a rock-music journalist stopped him for an interview about Hester's early years. John tells him to look up Owen Meany if he wants to know who first influenced Hester. He also wrote about returning to Gravesend for Harriet's funeral at the Congregational Church, performed by Merrill's replacement. At Harriet's old house, he was shocked to see Mr. Meany in the garden, reading the electric meter. His granite company was gone, and this was his new part-time job. Mrs. Meany had died not long after her son; she died of complications from burns. She had been sitting by the fireplace when a spark ignited the American flag she wore like a shawl.

Without many new relationships or endeavors to fill his life, John's diary revolves around the same people who influenced his early years. He continues to talk about what happened after Owen died, delaying the moment when he will finally have to recount the difficult story of Owen's death. Owen's parents have since lost everything: Mrs. Meany is dead, and Mr. Meany's company is finished. Mrs. Meany's death by immolation makes her another symbolic victim of the Vietnam War, where people sacrificed themselves in protest or died from bombs or napalm burns. It's also an example of tragic irony, as people would burn the American flag to protest the war.

John sees Mr. Meany still wearing Owen's medal, which survived when the flag burned. He thinks of Hardy's quote about "living in a world where nothing bears out in practice what it promises incipiently." He thinks that he will never forget how Owen died.

Owen's medal evidently means a great deal to Owen's father, if he can wear it even after everything the military took from his family. The promised "American dream" fails to materialize for so many.

On the 4th of July in 1968, John sits on the porch of Harriet's house, waiting for the parade. He will go to the University of Massachusetts for his Ph.D. in the fall. Without work to do or teaching to plan—he's not even teaching in the fall—he feels worthless. He watches the fireworks with Hester later, and she says she won't marry or start a family with anyone if she can't do so with Owen. Late that night, Owen calls, saying there's an emergency with a missing body they just recovered. He wants John to meet him in Phoenix, where he can get a few days free to hang out after delivering the body.

Although John won't know it at the time, Owen's death is set in motion on the 4th of July. John is still planning to get his Ph.D., which he will soon abandon when he leaves the country after Owen's funeral. He and Hester will both abandon major plans for the future when Owen dies, as Hester stays true to her word and never has a family without Owen. Owen surely wouldn't have wanted them to give up on certain dreams because of him, but they are too broken when he's gone.

John thinks it's a long way to go for a few days, but he agrees to join Owen, who sounds agitated. He thinks Owen needs the company, since they haven't seen each other since Christmas. "YOU'RE MY BEST FRIEND," Owen tells him, and his **voice** breaks a bit. When John lands in Phoenix, he notices the tall palm trees at the airport. The only bathroom he can find is a temporary restroom set up while the other one is out of order. It's a dark, high-ceilinged room, an old storage closet of some kind, with a large industrial sink and a small, high window.

Owen's invitation for John to join him on a body escort mission is a bit unusual, but John is feeling useless where he is, and he can tell that it would mean a lot to Owen if he came, even if he doesn't know why. Later he'll know that Owen was secretly asking him to come join him on his heroic mission, even though he had wanted to keep John out if it in the past. Owen realized he couldn't do it without John, and changed his mind.

John waits for Owen's plane with the family of the fallen soldier. An Army officer is standing with them, a local ROTC professor. The family is angry—they have been waiting for their son's body for three days. The dead soldier's sister is pregnant, and very young. Her other brother is even younger than her—not more than fourteen or fifteen, very thin but so tall that he looks like he could morph into a monster if he gained weight. His anger already seems monstrous.

At the airport, John observes the fallen soldier's family, who eventually show themselves to be greatly dysfunctional. Although their son is dead along with so many other tragically young soldiers, it is difficult to feel much sympathy for these people, who are so angry and unpleasant.

Owen writes in his diary on the plane to Phoenix. He thought he would die in Vietnam, but there's no time left to get there. He's wrong either about where or when he dies. He says that he didn't like knowing about his death at first, but now he doesn't like not knowing: "GOD IS TESTING ME." He doesn't understand why John is still in his dream after Owen kept him out of the war. He wanted to save John's life by cutting off his finger, so bringing him to Arizona before the date of his death seems hypocritical. Owen can only have faith in God, who has promised him that nothing bad would happen to John.

Owen knows that the date of his death is imminent, but he doesn't understand what's going to happen anymore since he isn't in Vietnam and isn't seemingly facing any threat of violence. He is troubled by the fact that John hasn't disappeared from his dream like he wanted him to. Apparently, Owen doesn't get to choose how he dies—John is going to be there when he dies whether Owen wants him there or not. Owen can only choose to go ahead with the mission or back out, and bringing John to Arizona represents his commitment.

Owen wonders if the date—and everything else—was just a figment of his imagination. He wonders how there could possibly be Vietnamese children in Arizona. He even asks God how, if he doesn't actually save any children, He could have put him through everything. He finally sees the palm trees as his plane descends.

Briefly, Owen doubts that the mission he's spent years preparing for is ever really going to happen—but then he sees the palm trees that haunt his dreams. He needs some visual proof, too.

On the runway, Owen formally covers the casket with a flag. A hearse takes the coffin away. The family approaches Owen, and John sees that the teenage boy is dressed in jungle fatigues and wearing a cartridge belt loaded with ammo and other Army equipment, including a machete and a bayonet. His sister, who looks sixteen or seventeen, begins to cry. The boy spits tobacco, and she asks him to stop. "Fuck you," he replies. The father punches him in the face and he falls to the tarmac. The boy says the girl is not his sister but his half-sister, and the man is not his father. He pulls the machete and the bayonet on the man.

Owen does his duties for the body, then prepares to do his duties for the family. The family is very on edge and short-tempered after spending three days waiting to lay the body to rest. The teenage boy acts violent and psychotic, but his step-father seems to be equally abusive. On this solemn ceremonial occasion, they're about to start trying to kill each other on the tarmac.

Owen interrupts, telling the boy he likes his bayonet sheath. The family is frozen by Owen's **voice**. The boy calls Owen a twit and asks him what's wrong with his voice. Owen asks the boy what's wrong with *him*—if he wants to dress up and play soldier, he should know how to talk to an officer. The bully respects being bullied.

Owen defuses the tension with his usual interpersonal expertise. He knows just what to say to put the boy in his place and take command of the situation. His startling voice works in his favor in such circumstances.

In the major's car, John and Owen can finally greet each other. The major, whose name is Rawls, explains that the family of the dead soldier is a mess. Rawls had earned a battlefield commission in Korea; he'd served the army for nineteen years, after enlisting at eighteen. He is very cynical, and predicts that the soldier's family is full of incest. The teen boy hangs around the airport all day, watching the planes and talking to the soldiers. He wants to fight like his brother, who was on his third tour.

Rawls, a dignified and capable veteran of the military who signed up to do his duty for his country as soon as he was old enough, is the foil to this teenage boy who is bloodthirsty and unhinged. The boy doesn't want to serve for any particular values—he just wants to start fighting and killing people.

Rawls offers to find John and Owen dates or show them where to buy porn while they're in town, but Owen says they just want to hang out and relax. Rawls laughs and asks if they're gay. "MAYBE WE ARE," Owen says, and Rawls laughs more, calling him "the funniest little fucker in the Army." At the funeral home, Owen introduces John as the Army's "BODY EXPERT." He makes John look at the dead body after he identifies it. The soldier died when he made a mistake refueling a helicopter.

Owen doesn't seem to be as homophobic any more, or at least he doesn't immediately get defensive like so many men would. Owen hates to give anyone the satisfaction of playing into their jokes. At the funeral home, Owen probably makes John look at the dead body to prepare him for the sight of Owen's own dead body.

Owen, John, and Rawls head to the family's ongoing wake, which Rawls treats like a spectacle. Unexpectedly, Owen says that in his experience, the Catholics honor death best—they have "THE PROPER SOLEMNITY, THE PROPER SORT OF RITUALS." The family's house is overflowing with people who are sick of waiting three days for a funeral. Rawls says there's not a woman there he would sleep with, besides the pregnant girl. Out of the whole family, she has made the most effort to be nice to them. She looks liable to be beaten or assaulted by the rest of her murderously crazy family.

Owen's new esteem for Catholic funerals is shocking—perhaps he's coming to terms with the fact that he's going to die surrounded by nuns, and he always taken comfort in rituals and symbols. Rawls's sexism is far from shocking.

Inside the house, Owen asks the girl where her brother is and what his name is, so he can speak to him. She tells Owen his name is Dick. Rawls tells Owen that the police at the airport never take their eyes off this kid. Owen knocks on Dick's door and gets him to let them in. His face is blackened for camouflage, and his bare chest has black circles drawn around his nipples. He clearly dreams of "butchering the Viet Cong" like his brother, Frank Jarvits. Frank smuggled home bayonets, machetes, an AK-47, and even two grenades as souvenirs for Dick.

Owen tries to talk some sense into the disturbed young man, who inspires terror in his stepsister and suspicion in the security at the airport. He's a real menace, not just a harmless kid playing at being a soldier. He has deeply violent fantasies encouraged by his brother, who supplied him with real weaponry.

Rawls tells Dick he had better not bring the rifle or the grenades to the airport. He's not even sure if the bayonets or machetes are legal. Dick says sometimes the police confiscate them and give them back on the same day. Rawls tells Owen that Dick is beyond saving, but Owen says, "IT'S NOT UP TO US: WHO'S BEYOND SAVING." Rawls says Owen is too good for this world.

Despite the fact that Dick is clearly very troubled, the airport police give him back his weapons anyway. Perhaps it's too much hassle to actually take Dick or his weapons into custody, and they would rather just walk away. Owen tries to intervene, but he has to walk away, too.

The next day, Owen writes in his diary about his fear for the future of kids like Dick who never learned real morality, who only know a simplistic, antagonistic mindset: "THEY'RE SO SURE THEY'RE *RIGHT*! THAT'S PRETTY SCARY." He doesn't tell John that he thinks he's going to die tomorrow. When John asks what they should do all day, Owen says, "LET'S JUST HAVE A GOOD TIME." They try to find a gym to practice the shot in, but there's none nearby, and Owen finally says, "I'M PRETTY SURE WE'VE PRACTICED THAT DUMB SHOT ENOUGH." They pass the day drinking beer by the pool and remembering their childhood days.

Owen wonders what the years of war have done to the development of kids like Dick, who have acquired a taste for vengeance and violence. They see the world in terms of black and white, us vs. them. Owen feels ready to die—he finally thinks they're ready to pull off the shot, or else it's all in God's hands now, anyway. He wants to just enjoy his last day with John.

Rawls drives John and Owen to the airport in the morning. He waits with them for their flights, since he has nothing else to do. John tells Owen, "We have plenty of time." When only half an hour is left until John's flight takes off, Owen begins to think his dream might not come true after all. Just then, passengers begin disembarking a plane—nuns escorting Vietnamese children. Catholic Relief Services frequently helped relocate war orphans.

John thinks they have plenty of time left together, but Owen knows they don't. When John is about to leave, Owen feels doubt, since he knows John is meant to be part of his death. But his doubt is gone as soon as he sees the nuns with the Vietnamese orphans—in Arizona, of all places.

One of the nuns asks Owen to help take the boys to the bathroom. He says he'd be happy to help, and John shows them to the temporary men's room. The anxious children stop crying, captivated by the sight of a soldier nearly their size. They pass Dick Jarvits on the way to the restroom. The children use the unfamiliar bathroom, chattering to themselves. John suddenly remembers Owen describing the Vietnamese-speaking children from his dream. Owen already knows what's about to happen.

Owen's size puts the frightened children at ease. They've come to a brand-new country with a brand-new language, and normally soldiers are threatening, but Owen is so small that they think of him as one of them, not a threat. It takes John a long time to figure out why the situation seems so familiar, but Owen knows.

Dick kicks in the door, holding a grenade. A boy screams and the others begin to cry. Owen speaks to them in Vietnamese: "*DOONG SA*...DON'T BE AFRAID." Hearing their own language—in the **voice** of a child like them—makes the children trust Owen. He tells them to lie down. He tells John they have four seconds. Dick throws the grenade at John, who catches it and passes it to Owen. Owen jumps into his hands, and John lifts him **lightly**.

Dick is the unforeseen threat in this improbable scenario, the monster who would deliberately throw a grenade into a room full of children. Owen tells the children just what he always told Hester and John: "DON'T BE AFRAID." The time has finally come to use the shot they always practiced, with a live grenade in place of a basketball. Balls are symbolically deadly in the book.

A nun who was waiting outside the bathroom ran to get Rawls, who caught Dick running away from the men's room. Dick draws his bayonet, but Rawls grabs Dick's machete and breaks Dick's neck with it. Meanwhile, Owen **soars** toward the high window. He stuffs the grenade into the windowsill and holds it in place to make sure it won't roll back down into the room. He ducks his head beneath the windowsill before the explosion.

All of Dick's weapons can't save him from a real soldier who actually knows how to use them. Owen's weightlessness propels him up high, away from the children huddling below. He crams the grenade onto the window ledge instead of into a basket, and hangs onto it instead of releasing it and dropping down.

The cement window ledge protects John and the children from the grenade fragments. Only their eardrums are hurt. Owen lands in the big industrial sink. A nun lifts him out of the sink while another kneels on the floor. Together they rest his body in their laps. The children surround them, crying, but Owen reminds them not to be afraid. His **arms** are amputated below his elbows. He tries to reach out to John, then realizes he has no arms. "REMEMBER WATAHANTOWET?" he asks calmly.

Thanks to Owen's angel-like intervention, John and the other children are safe. The nuns rush in after hearing the explosion. John is so disoriented from the blast that he doesn't even look for Owen—or he doesn't want to look. The nuns cradle Owen, who is rapidly bleeding out even as he comforts the children around him. His arms were blown off when he held the grenade down to save the others. He has become a living embodiment of the symbolic armless totems throughout the book.

Owen tells the nun, "WHOSOEVER LIVETH AND BELIEVETH IN ME SHALL NEVER DIE." Then he seems troubled, saying, "I'M AWFULLY COLD...CAN'T YOU DO SOMETHING?" Then Owen smiles again, and looks only at John. "YOU'RE GETTING SMALLER, BUT I CAN STILL SEE YOU!" Those are his last words.

Owen quotes the Bible to the nuns, showing that he is at peace with dying because of his faith in God. He seems for one moment to feel the agony of death, then it passes as his soul begins to leave his body, rising into the air as he dreamed it. He seems happy to have his best friend at his side, after all.

"I am always saying prayers for Owen Meany," John says. He thinks about how he would have answered Mary Beth in the cemetery, if he hadn't been speechless with grief. When they held Owen so **lightly** above their heads as children, they didn't know that there were other forces at work, forces they didn't have the faith to sense, that were raising Owen up, out of their reach. "O God—please give him back! I shall keep asking You."

To this day, John prays for Owen, gone from this world so much sooner than he deserved. All along, Owen was being raised up by God—but if God can raise him up, God can put him back on Earth, John believes. He has faith in Owen's resurrection, and prays for it to come quickly.

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