Spies

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MICHAEL FRAYN

Michael Frayn is a prolific playwright, novelist, and translator. After graduating from the University of Cambridge, where he studied philosophy, Frayn worked as a reporter and columnist for *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, writing satirical and comical pieces and publishing several novels on the side. He wrote *The Tin Man* (1965), the winner of the Somerset Maugham Award; *The Russian Interpreter* (1966), which was awarded the Hawthornden Prize; and *Towards the End of the Morning* (1967). His plays include *Noises Off* (1982), *Benefactors* (1984), and *Copenhagen* (1998), which won the 1998 Evening Standard Award for Best Play of the Year and the 2000 Tony Award for Best Play (USA). All the while, Frayn translated many works from Russian, including plays by Chekhov and Tolstoy. He is married to Claire Tomalin, a biographer and critic.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Frayn specifically sets his novel during World War II, presumably near the end of the war when Britain frequently carried out bombing raids over Germany. England declared war against Germany in 1939, and the war ended in 1945 with the Axis powers' defeat. In addition to the violence and chaos on the battlefield, the war had a large effect at home—many men left their families at home to go fight around the world, and the war established a different kind of social structure, as it glorified those who served. In particular, the Royal Air Force (RAF), of which Uncle Peter was part, was one of the most important and glorified divisions in the British Army because it kept the country safe from invasion. However, the bombing runs were largely controversial because they indiscriminately killed civilians. Thus, the war plays an important role in structuring the novel and motivating the characters in different ways.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* (1939) utilizes a similar plot structure to Frayn's novel by presenting the nostalgic narration of a protagonist who returns to his boyhood town and looks back on his past before and during World War II in London. Other titles, such as Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* (1964) and Sarah Waters' *The Night Watch* (2006), explore the related themes and topics of children as spies and the effect of the war on life and love in London, respectively. Although set in the mid-19th century, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861) examines how the highly organized London society affects the personal development of its child protagonist, in much the same way that Frayn also engages with class differences in his own story. Finally, the way the novel explores the subjective and mysterious nature of memory through specific associations with various senses recalls some major themes of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Spies: A Novel
- **When Written:** 2002
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 2002
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary English Literature
- **Genre:** Bildungsroman, psychological thriller, realist fiction
- **Setting:** Britain, during World War II
- **Climax:** The voice of the mysterious man calls out Stephen's name as he is delivering a satchel full of food.
- **Antagonist:** Keith's father, the Germans
- **Point of View:** First person limited, from the perspective of Stephen as an elderly man and as a young boy

EXTRA CREDIT

Award-winning. Michael Frayn's *Spies* won the 2002 Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize, the United Kingdom's only literary award for comic literature, and the 2003 Commonwealth Writers Prize.

A Common Theme. Despite the variety in the kind of work that Frayn produces, he consistently explores a common theme. In every one of his works—whether it be a play, novel, or piece of journalistic writing—Frayn strives to understand "the way in which we impose our ideas upon the world around us."

PLOT SUMMARY

The elderly protagonist, Stephen Wheatley, narrates the story of his childhood, after fifty years have passed. The unique scent of **privet** in the summer air evokes childhood memories and encourages him to travel from Germany, where he lives, back to the Close, the English neighborhood where he grew up. When he arrives, the familiar yet different neighborhood brings back new, specific memories.

Stephen then recounts the story of his childhood, flashing back and forth throughout the novel from the present to the past, when he was an awkward young boy who followed around his best friend, Keith Hayward. He explains that Keith and his

family were very well-off, and that he felt fortunate to be Keith's friend. Stephen was the only person in the Close—other than Auntie Dee, Keith's mother's sister—who frequently visited the Haywards' house.

Stephen begins his reminiscence on the fateful day when Keith says six simple words that "turned our world upside down." Although he struggles to establish the exact order of the events in which they happened, Stephen states that Keith's six words were: "My mother is a German spy."

From that moment onward, Stephen does not question Keith's claim, and the two begin devising an undercover mission to spy on Keith's mother. They convert a used notebook into a logbook and carry out their first investigation in Keith's mother's sitting room. Stephen and Keith find her diary and make note of little "**x**" marks in her calendar that occur once a month. They attribute it to a notation for secret meetings, but it is more likely that the x's simply mark her menstrual cycles. Stephen, from the present, notes that this is another turning point in the story.

Stephen fast-forwards the narrative to when he and Keith create an official hiding spot where they can spy on Keith's mother in the privet hedges that adorn the front of Miss Durrant's bombed house. They swear to never tell anyone about their secret mission, and Keith erects a sign labelled "Privet" ("private" misspelled) at the entrance of their concealed hangout.

Several of their initial observations of Keith's mother prove to be unfruitful, but on one Saturday, Stephen and Keith see Keith's mother going to Auntie Dee's and receiving a grocery list to do Auntie's dee shopping. Keith runs after her, with Stephen immediately behind, but they lose her at the turn of the street. As they start conjecturing where she could have disappeared to, they find her back at Auntie Dee's house again. The same situation, where Keith's mother disappears at the corner as the boys follow her, happens a few more times. In one instance, a girl in the neighborhood, Barbara Berrill, bothers them in their hiding spot and tries to expose their undercover operation. However, just as their efforts begin to seem futile, Stephen notices Keith's mother rubbing slime off her hands as she reprimands Keith for staying out late.

Stephen pauses the story and returns to the present, where he describes the geographical arrangement of his childhood town. He explains that the Close had been newly-built when he first moved there, as an outshoot from the railway. At the end of the Close, the street became the Avenue to the left, whereas the right led to a tunnel that connected with the Lanes, a narrow trail that petered out into empty green fields. Beyond the Lanes were the Cottages, a dismal village of dirty children and vicious dogs, an abandoned farm, and finally, a no-man's land where development ceased at the start of the war (called "the Barns").

Stephen explains that the source of the slime on Keith's mother's hands was the tunnel. Thus, he pieces together the mystery of her disappearance: she turns right at the end of the street and goes into the tunnel. Stephen and Keith go to the tunnel to explore, during which they pass by Keith's mother, who is holding a letter. Beneath the undergrowth beyond the tunnel, they find the box of an old croquet set and a package of cigarettes labelled with an "X" inside.

The next day, Stephen is waiting in the hideout alone when Barbara joins him. Barbara makes several suggestions about why Keith's mother is always doing Auntie Dee's shopping. She speculates that Keith's mother might be buying items from the black market, or taking a message to Auntie Dee's secret boyfriend. Meanwhile, Stephen ignores her gossip and feels guilty about letting her invade his and Keith's secret space.

The following day, Stephen is alone again in the privet hedges when Keith's mother comes into the hiding place. She questions Stephen about his and Keith's game of spying and gently warns him that it could potentially be insulting to the neighbors. She informs Stephen that she may not allow Keith to play with him if they don't stop spying, and asks Stephen to keep their conversation a secret. That night, Stephen ventures out to the box by the tunnel to definitively prove that Keith's mother is a spy, but he finds that a mysterious man, whose face he does not see, is there. The man runs away and the terrified Stephen returns to the Close to his worried parents. Under the streetlights, he discovers that he brought back a sock from the croquet box.

Stephen and Keith go back to the tunnel together and find that the box has disappeared. They then hear footsteps that go up into the Lanes and decide to follow the sounds. They go all the way past the Cottages to the Barns, where they discover someone hiding in an underground hideout, concealed by an old corrugated iron sheet. The boys start hitting the iron sheet with sticks until they become frightened that the man behind it has died from fear. When they run back to the Close, they find Keith's father impatiently waiting for Keith's mother, who has not returned from her errands. Keith's mother immediately appears and asks Stephen, "Was it you two?"

The narrative returns to the present, with Stephen questioning what his younger self had known at that point. He states that he felt guilty for breaking his promise to Keith's mother and that he had probably both believed and not believed that she was a German spy. He recounts that he eventually built up the courage to knock on Keith's door, after not having seen him since the last time. He finds that Keith has abandoned their undercover mission and he accepts that everything is back to normal. Keith's father asks Keith for a missing thermos, but Keith does not know its whereabouts and is beaten as a result. At that point, Stephen becomes aware of the fact that Keith's mother has taken the thermos to the Barns. He runs into her in the tunnel, getting slime on her dress, and tells her that Keith will be punished again if she does not bring the thermos back

home.

After this incident, Stephen no longer plays with Keith, and he realizes that he has been pushed out of the Haywards' world forever. He still observes the Haywards from the lookout and rarely sees Keith's mother leave the house, which Barbara believes may be because of Keith's mother's secret boyfriend. Meanwhile, Barbara states that her older sister, Deirdre, and Stephen's brother Geoff have been smoking and kissing in the hideout.

One afternoon, Keith's mother pays Stephen a visit in the lookout to ask him to deliver a shopping basket to the mysterious man, who she says is very sick. After Stephen agrees and Keith's mother leaves the hedges, Barbara immediately comes in to ask what Keith's mother had wanted. She takes out a cigarette that they smoke together, they look through the contents of the basket, and, eventually, they kiss. Stephen and Barbara find a letter in the basket, which Barbara tries to open. Suddenly, Keith's father appears and asks to have a word with Stephen—and tells him to bring the basket.

Stephen follows Keith's father to his garage and Keith's father tells Stephen to stop playing silly games. Though Stephen initially resists, he leaves the basket with Keith's father and returns home crying, unable to tell his parents what has upset him. The next day, Stephen returns home from school and assembles a makeshift package of food and medicine in a satchel to deliver to the mysterious man. At the Barns, he leaves the contents of the satchel near the iron sheet. The man calls out Stephen's name.

Again the story returns to the present, and Stephen wonders if he had understood then who it was that had called out his name. He describes the voice as familiar, not at all foreign or tramp-like. He says that the voice asks for Keith's mother, but Stephen tells him that she can't come. The man then asks how Auntie Dee and her daughter Milly are doing. When Stephen tries to leave, the man tells him that he had always loved Keith's mother and asks Stephen to give her a patch of silk with a map of Germany drawn on it and to tell her "forever."

Stephen waits in the lookout and concludes that Keith will not come to their hiding place again. But after dinner, he finds Keith waiting for him, angry that Stephen let Barbara into their spot and showed her all their things. Keith tortures Stephen by pushing his knife against Stephen's throat until he draws blood. Stephen realizes that Keith must have learned this technique from his father, which explains why Keith's mother wears a scarf around her neck even in the summer. Stephen returns home and is unable to hide his wound from his parents. His father cleans the wound, and soon afterwards Stephen falls asleep. When he wakes up in the middle of the night, he decides to go to the Barns to hide the silk map. But he discovers other men at the Barns, collecting the mysterious man's body, which had been hit by an incoming train.

Stephen begins bringing the story to a close, as (in the present) he revisits the tunnel and the Lanes and thinks about the hidden scarf. He describes what had happened after that night: he never played with Keith again, Uncle Peter had gone missing, and there was a falling out between Auntie Dee and Keith's mother. Stephen finally reveals that he himself was the secret German, because he used to be "Stefan Weitzler." He explains that his family had moved from Germany before the war had started and, since his mother was English, they all became the Wheatleys. He also reveals that they are Jewish, though Stephen hadn't known this growing up.

After his parents died, Stephen returned to his homeland, because he felt that he had "never really taken to life" in England. In Germany, he had a rough start with learning an unfamiliar language in a new environment, but he became a professional translator and met a German woman, whom he married and started a family with. Stephen then says that his father was actually a spy—he was a German man working for the British war effort. He continues giving accounts of what happened to the others who lived in the Close, including Keith, who became a barrister. Stephen finally reveals that the mysterious man was Uncle Peter.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Stephen Wheatley – The narrator and protagonist of the novel, Stephen is an elderly man who recounts a time in his childhood sixty years before. Describing himself as "the one with the stick-out ears and the too short gray flannel school shirt hanging out of the too long gray flannel school shorts," Stephen never seems to fit in completely with his surroundings. At school, he is bullied by his classmates, and in his neighborhood he submits to the instructions of his best friend, Keith Hayward. He is particularly self-conscious about his own low social standing and belonging to an inferior middle-class family. Although he portrays himself to be unkempt and mediocre to Keith in every aspect, especially in wealth and competence, Stephen actually shows himself to be meticulous, introspective, and clever—qualities that distinguish him from the more "superior" Keith. On the other hand, Stephen is easily frightened and often unassertive of his thoughts and beliefs. In addition, Stephen shows a consistent aversion towards **germs**, which is often interpreted as a symptom of obsessive-compulsive disorder, but it could also simply be a psychological product of his acute class awareness. His inability to fit in continues in England until Stephen decides to move to his homeland, Germany, and becomes "Stefan Weitzler."

Keith Hayward – Stephen's childhood best friend who is responsible for declaring the "six simple words" ("My mother is a German spy") that begin their mission of spying on Keith's

mother. The novel clearly illustrates Keith's higher social status: he goes to the local preparatory school, has a separate playroom that stores all his toys, and rides a bike to school, in comparison to Stephen, who goes to public school, shares his room with his brother, and rides the bus to school. Although Stephen envies and respects his best friend, Keith is actually not everything Stephen makes him out to be. Keith can be controlling—he is always the leader for every project and adventure that the two undertake, and he insists that everything must go his way. From his family, especially his father, Keith inherits an air of haughtiness and a tendency to be manipulative and violent. As such, Keith does not get along with the other children in the Close, and Stephen is his sole friend.

Keith's Father / Mr. Ted Hayward – A stoic ex-officer who displays his military achievement for killing five Germans in the First World War, Keith's father largely spends his time doing work around the house and the garden. The garage is his personal abode where he completes different kinds of projects. From Stephen's description, he works for the Home Guard, a volunteer organization for those who are ineligible for military service, which is very likely embarrassing for Keith's father and contributes to his desire to maintain strict control of his household and family. It is also likely why Keith tells Stephen that he actually "works for the Secret Service." He exerts an enormous influence on Keith, who echoes his father's cold snobbishness and inherits his domineering and violent personality. Keith's father never acknowledges Stephen's presence unless he believes Stephen knows something he shouldn't. Frayn portrays Keith's father as being violent to his wife, who covers her neck with a scarf to hide the sadistic method with which he punishes her—cutting her with his **bayonet**, the same method that Keith uses on Stephen. Although he generally uses casual and even playful language, Keith's father also frequently threatens Keith with physical punishment. He is referred to as "Ted" by Keith's mother near the end of the story.

Keith's Mother / Mrs. "Bobs" Hayward – Keith's calm and composed mother, who Keith proclaims is a German spy and is made the subject of the two boys' spy operations. Stephen, whom she initially addresses only indirectly, describes her as suspicious because she often writes letters and runs errands for her sister, Auntie Dee, disappearing into the shops on the Avenue and reappearing in Auntie Dee's house "all in such a smooth, unhurried way." Later in the story, it is revealed that Keith's mother actually *is* hiding a grave secret—she has secretly been taking care of Uncle Peter, who has deserted the British army and with whom the novel suggests Keith's mother is having an affair. Eventually, this leads to Keith's mother falling out with her sister. She has an abusive relationship with her husband, who uses violent methods to punish her and, later, even keeps a strict watch on her after he has most likely figured out her secret. Keith's father calls her "Bobs" near the end of the story. It is likely that Stephen harbors a confused crush on Mrs. Hayward, as evident by the way the scent of **privet** reminds him of the sexual urgency he feels whenever he is sitting in the lookout with Keith's mother alone. Overall she is a tragic figure, and by the end of the book her life has seemingly been ruined.

Auntie Dee / Mrs. Tracey – Auntie Dee is the sister of Keith's mother, mother of Milly, and wife of Uncle Peter. Unlike her sister, who is composed and collected, Auntie Dee is described as short, hectic, and cheerful. In contrast to the Haywards' meticulous aesthetic, Auntie Dee's house is untidy, which instead "reflected the glory of Uncle Peter." Unlike most sisterly relationships, as Stephen judges, Auntie Dee is particularly close with Keith's mother, who is always doing her shopping for her. It later turns out that the two were secretly looking after Uncle Peter, but they have a falling out when it is revealed that Keith's mother and Uncle Peter have an affair together. Auntie Dee is the only adult from Keith's family who actually addresses Stephen by his name.

Stephen's Father / Mr. Wheatley – Stephen's father, a German immigrant to Britain, is the actual German spy in the novel (but working for the British side), though Stephen and Keith do not know this. Stephen describes his father as a dull man who works in an office and hardly talks. He is said to be found sitting at the dining room for hours with piles of papers and files, meeting with mysterious strangers, or dozing off silently in the living room armchair. He uses peculiar words like "coodle-moodle" and "schnick-schnack" that embarrass Stephen, but his odd vocabulary reflects his German origins. Although Stephen believes his father to be uninteresting, his involvement in Stephen's life—his concern for Stephen when he is upset or when he comes home with a wound, for example—demonstrates that Mr. Wheatley is an especially caring father, particularly in comparison to Mr. Hayward.

Stephen's Mother / Mrs. Wheatley – An Englishwoman who married Mr. Wheatley (a German) and moved back to England before the start of the War. She is described by Stephen as always "sighing and anxious" about her two sons. She is frequently depicted throughout the novel as making sure that Stephen isn't causing too much trouble at the Haywards' house.

Uncle Peter / the Man – Keith's uncle and Auntie Dee's husband, who is an air force officer supposedly away at war, but is actually hiding in a field. He is glorified in the novel for his participation in the Royal Air Force, and his service is a point of pride for Auntie Dee. Stephen explains that she even mirrors his person with her messy home and reckless yet cheerful personality. It is implied that Uncle Peter has deserted his post in the air force, most likely due to PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) or his discomfort in being involved in the British bombing efforts, which were controversial for their indiscriminate targeting of civilians. However, as Stephen notes, Uncle Peter is still glorified in the Close for his

participation in the war, making his desertion all the more disappointing and important to be kept secret. In Uncle Peter's interactions with Stephen, it is revealed that he has loved Keith's mother from the very beginning and hints at the fact that they are involved in a secret affair.

Barbara Berrill – Barbara, who is one year older than Stephen, lives in house No. 6 on the Close. Younger Stephen considers her to be annoying and typically "girlish." She is often said to be wearing her school frock and purse "made of bobbly blue leather and closed with a shiny blue popper." She shows interest in Stephen by frequently appearing at his and Keith's secret hiding place and revealing certain gossip about the people in the Close. Although Stephen constantly expresses his frustration towards her, he hints at a mutual interest in her. Stephen and Barbara smoke cigarettes together in the lookout and they eventually kiss each other. In essence, Barbara marks a kind of estrangement of Stephen from Keith, and introduces Stephen to a different and more adult life.

Geoff Wheatley – Geoff is Stephen's older brother, who failed his Common Entrance exam and ended up going to the same "wrong school" as Stephen. Although he is a bit of a rebel (he smokes cigarettes with his girlfriend, Deirdre) and frequently harasses his little brother, he plays the role of the protective older brother whenever Stephen needs him most. Unlike Stephen, who winds up returning to Germany as an adult, Geoff lives as a British man for the rest of his life, fully comfortable in the country in which he grew up.

Miss Durrant – The deceased previous tenant of Braemar, the house that stood between No. 3 (the Pinchers) and No. 4 (the Geests) and which was bombed by a stray German bomb. Stephen speculates that Miss Durrant was bombed because she discovered Keith's mother's secret. It is in Miss Durrant's **privet** bushes that Stephen and Keith make their hideout.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Milly – Auntie Dee's and Uncle Peter's daughter, who is seemingly as cheerful and energetic as her parents. She is the reason that Keith's mother does Auntie Dee's shopping, and she possibly provides them with a believable cover when they must secretly take care of Uncle Peter in hiding.

Mr. Gort – The old man living in House No. 11. Keith claims that he is a murderer, but this is highly unlikely given Keith's penchant for imagination and the similar way in which he assumes his mother to be German spy.

Mr. McAfee – The neighbor who lives in house No. 8. It's stated that he sometimes acts as a kind of policeman for the neighborhood, and at several points Stephen considers writing a letter to him revealing Keith's mother's activities as a supposed German spy.

Deirdre Berrill – Barbara's older sister, who is dating Stephen's brother, Geoff. Barbara mentions that she and Geoff kiss each other and smoke cigarettes together.

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.

CLASS DIFFERENCE AND SOCIAL STATUS

Throughout the story, it is fairly evident that Keith and the Haywards are better-off financially than Stephen and the Wheatleys. However, this class difference is not simply an arbitrary distinction; the gap in wealth between the two families defines all aspects of Stephen's relationship to Keith. More significantly, Frayn allows the reader to see, through young Stephen's eyes, how class permeated the social arrangement and attitudes in wartime London.

From the start, the wealth of the Haywards is evident from Stephen's description of their house and the different knick-knacks that adorn its interior. Keith's separate playroom, his array of toys and gadgets, and his personal belongings all speak to the Haywards' affluence. Furthermore, the kinds of delicacies that they enjoy, such as "lemon barley" and "chocolate spread," not only intimate their material wealth, but hint at the high social standing they occupy. Although other fathers in the Close support their families by working at an office or participating in the War Effort in some way, Mr. Hayward is instead said to be working all day around the house. In fact, the Close itself is spatially arranged by social status, with the Haywards' house occupying the most central and inner lot in the cul-de-sac (House No. 9) and the Wheatleys' (House No. 2) fringing the end of the Close with the other lowly-regarded family, the Pinchers in No. 3. However, despite occupying the most accessible position in the neighborhood, the Haywards do not interact with any other families, except Auntie Dee and Stephen.

Due to the stark contrast between the Haywards and other families, socioeconomic difference provides the only way that Stephen can compare his family to Keith's. As such, Stephen regards everything that is associated with himself and his family as "wrong," while everything that the Haywards possess and do is "right." For example, Keith appropriately cycles to his "right local preparatory school" every day, while Stephen and his brother Geoff take the bus and attend the "wrong school." Thus, the way Stephen uses economic status to create moral nuances in his descriptions of his family and Keith's suggests that class was the main deciding factor in not only organizing English society but also determining how one introspectively

situated oneself in the world at the time.

The Haywards' elevated social status wholly dictates the power dynamics of Keith and Stephen's "friendship." Stephen explains that he and Keith "had a great many enterprises and projects in hand, and in all of them he was the leader and I was the led." In times when Stephen takes the lead inadvertently, his actions are considered less legitimate, since they do not originate from Keith first. For example, Stephen states that Keith seemed unpleased or unimpressed by the sock and heel that Stephen had found alone in the tin croquet box at night. Furthermore, Stephen admits that Keith's authority apparently "was entirely warranted by his intellectual and imaginative superiority." However, the reader will soon realize that Keith isn't everything he is made out to be. Throughout the story, Keith frequently misspells words, such as "private" and "secret," of which Stephen makes no mention since he is more concerned about Keith's feelings than correcting his mistakes. But, more importantly, Keith displays more immaturity, naiveté, and cruelty in comparison to Stephen, who actually demonstrates frequent instances of responsibility and selflessness that he does not notice in himself because he is always obediently following the orders of his "more superior" friend. Furthermore, whenever the reader is given the perspective of characters other than Stephen and Keith (such as Stephen's mother or Barbara Berrill) it's suggested that Keith doesn't have any friends other than Stephen, and no one else in the neighborhood "can stand him."

Stephen's relationships with Keith's parents also speak to his social "lowliness." Early in the story, Stephen states that he is surprised that the Haywards even allow him play with their son, and he is unable to imagine any of the other kids from the neighborhood coming over to play with Keith. In turn, he expresses gratitude for being allowed to associate with Keith, highlighting that social status is a criterion in wartime London society for establishing friendships. Keith's father's indifferent attitude toward Stephen seems to stem from that fact. "Stephen he never addressed at all—never so much as looked at. Even if it was Stephen who was threatening the damage to the greenhouse it was Keith who was 'old bean' and Keith who'd get caned, because Stephen didn't exist." And Stephen's relationship to Keith's mother is much in the same vein: Keith's mother only indirectly addresses Stephen by grouping him with her son, as "you two" or "chaps." However, that soon changes when Stephen becomes entangled within Keith's mother's secret dealings with Uncle Peter.

Unfortunately, even after sixty years, class difference and social status still influences how Stephen understands himself. As he is narrating his own childhood, he fails to concentrate the story around himself in the first place and instead focuses it around Keith's perspective, through both his narrative declarations and by calling the characters names that would be appropriate for Keith rather than himself. Auntie Dee and Uncle Peter, for example, are not his own relatives, yet Stephen names them in the way that Keith would. And even speaking as an old man Stephen is still apologetic to his readers, and grateful for their attention. Finally, at the end of the book Stephen reveals his family as Jewish. Though he wasn't aware of his Jewishness as a child, this could have contributed to his family's "lowly" status and his own sense of not belonging, since anti-Semitism was prevalent throughout Europe at the time (even among the Allies) and it's implied that the kids at school bully Stephen with anti-Semitic slurs.

Ultimately, through the unique and deeply intimate perspective of Stephen—both young and old—Frayn illustrates the force of hierarchical social organization in all aspects of life, including its influence on one's own self-identification and self-positioning in society.

MEMORY AND THE SELF

The narrative of *Spies* relies entirely on the memory of a 70+ year-old narrator, Stephen Wheatley, who returns to his childhood town and tries to recall the events that happened there almost six decades ago. His narration jumps between two distinct periods of time, the past and the present, which immediately considers the role of time as a force of change, resolution, and even unresolved problems. The narrative thus introduces two major "problems" that should prompt the reader to question the integrity and accuracy of the story as a whole.

Several times within the novel, Stephen is honest about the potential inaccuracies of his memories. He frequently modifies his narration with qualifiers like "I think" and immediately confesses his own uncertainty to the reader. In response to Keith's declaration that Keith's mother is a German spy, the older Stephen describes his reaction at the time: "I don't think I say anything at all. I think I just look at Keith with my mouth slightly open." Often, the reader can even follow Stephen's process of working out the past. He begins the story at the tea table in Keith's house where he heard the "soft clinking made by the four blue beads that weighted the lace cloth covering the tall jug of lemon barley. . . No, wait. I've got that wrong. The glass beads are clinking against the glass of the jug because the cover's stirring in the breeze. We're outside…" In effect, Frayn consistently portrays the inherently faulty aspect of human memory through the protagonist, who is always unsure of the actual sequence of events and whether or not they even happened. In fact, many psychological studies on memory have shown that our memories are not as accurate as we think or would like them to be—humans tend to have many gaps in our memories that we fill with details that will make the story more coherent to ourselves. Although as readers we may never know what details are right or wrong in the novel, it is that uncertainty that generates a nuanced meaning and appeal for Frayn's story. Thus, the way in which Stephen remembers the

events at the Close meaningfully reveals how that past has affected him and his initiation into adulthood.

As such, *Spies* is like a psychological excavation of Stephen's memory. The manner in which he tells the story provides an in-depth look into how and what kinds of memories he forms. First, Stephen describes the structure of his own memory as resembling not a timeline, but rather a more impressionistic scattering of fragments, "a collection of vivid particulars." As we experience the replaying of Stephen's childhood, we are given very detailed descriptions, which suggest that Stephen is particularly in tune with his senses. In particular, he pays special attention to his sense of smell. It is the sweetly rank smell of **privet/liguster** that prompts him to go back to the Close in the first place, and throughout the novel, he makes a meticulous effort to list the different scents that capture his attention: for example, the "sad, sour smell of the elders" and "the sawdust, motor oil, swept concrete, car" smells of Keith's father's workshop. In fact, smell is one of the senses in the body that is most deeply connected with the formation of memories, as the actual structures in the brain associated with smell are physically linked to the region responsible for memories. In this way, *Spies* offers an elaborate compositional picture of one man's memory.

The specific details of the memory do not make up the complete picture, but they are further refined by the emotions Stephen felt as those events unfolded. In turn, Frayn illustrates the emotional dimension of memories and, in effect, adds another layer that makes them seem even more vivid and real. For example, as Stephen tries to identify the source of that unsettling smell, he associates specific scents to particular states of feelings by noting that "It's not like the heartbreaking tender sweetness of the lime blossom, for which this city's known, or the serene summer happiness of the honeysuckle."

The product of the novel's structure as a recollection of the past, particularly as a series of associations with specific smells and emotions, is the understanding of how these events personally affect Stephen and allow him to grow, how they make him the man he is in the present. Frayn's *Spies* is classified as a bildungsroman, a genre of books that deals with the formative years of the main character that result in psychological and moral development. This specific time in Stephen's life, when he is sucked into the dangerous secret of Keith's mother and Uncle Peter, is the moment when he realizes how naïve and innocent he is as a young boy. In Stephen's transition to becoming an adult, Barbara Berrill also plays an important role because she not only introduces Stephen to an adult world of freedom by goading him into opening his and Keith's secret box—and effectively subverting the rules created by childhood whims—and smoking a cigarette, but she also shares a kiss with him and leads Stephen into another world of young love and sexuality. As Stephen slowly pieces together the puzzle of Keith's mother's suspicious operations, he describes that he is "leaving behind the old tunnels and terrors of childhood and stepping into a new world of even darker tunnels and more elusive terrors," and he learns that the "very things that seemed so simple and straightforward then are not simple and straightforward at all but infinitely complex and painful." Thus, Frayn's novel follows the common trajectory of most bildungsromans, illustrating the loss of innocence and the realization of a bleaker world as one becomes an adult.

However, this particular series of events does not only introduce Stephen to a more grown-up world, but it also continues to vex him throughout his life. The unsettling smell of privet induces the same emotions he felt back then and provokes the lingering feeling of guilt that he carries for decades. In fact, he admits that he returns to the Close partly hoping to find the scarf that he failed to give to Keith's mother and hid in the Lanes. This all speaks to Stephen's own conception of himself and his belief of how he fits into the world, both his past English one and the present German one. As evident in Stephen's self-comparison with Keith, Stephen is never content with himself, and he even refers to himself as "unsatisfactory." Thus, his failure to deliver the scarf to Keith's mother, the teasing he received from his classmates at school, his gut intuition that "there's something not quite right about him and his family," the difficult start to his new life in Germany, and his homesick return to the Close all point to the unfortunate truth that even as an elderly man Stephen still may not have found a stable footing for himself in the world.

IMAGINATION VS. REALITY

Stephen and Keith wholly make up the idea that Keith's mother is a German spy, completely convincing themselves by misconstruing everything they observe about Keith's mother as proof of her secret espionage. With comical absurdity, the boys see all of Keith's mother's behaviors as indications of her supposed secret, which suggests the vitality of imagination as the driving force for Frayn's novel and reveals the tenuous line that separates imagination from reality. As Stephen aptly states about Keith's initiation of a project: "He told the story, and the story came to life. Never before, though, has it become real, really real, in the way that it has this time."

To sort out what is real and what is made up is difficult in *Spies*. Because the story is told through the eyes of young Stephen, who is faithfully convinced of Keith's mother's secret spy operations, the reader is easily sucked into seeing the events pan out in the way the boys believe is happening. Frayn juggles with the concepts of imagination and reality, and invites the reader to contemplate the fictionality of reality and the realistic-ness of fiction. Although the boys' spy missions are ridiculous, their wild imaginations are not completely uncalled for, because through their persistent spying, Stephen discovers

that Keith's mother *is* actually hiding something—she is secretly hiding and taking care of Uncle Peter—which explains her suspicious behavior that the boys had originally believed to betray her German spy work. In fact, the plot detail of Keith's mother's actual affair with Uncle Peter just plays into Frayn's invitation to consider the difference between reality and imagination and further blurs that line between the two, as the novel establishes that something very *real* about Keith's mother inspired the boys' imaginative intuitions.

In addition to Frayn playfully depicting the innocent creativity of Stephen and Keith's imaginations, he also illustrates how dangerous imagination can be if it is taken too seriously—since it ultimately ends with the death of Uncle Peter. From the moment Stephen accepts Keith's claim that his mother is a German spy, everything that he observes must explain that proposition. He states: "In fact, as I get used to the idea in the days that follow, it begins to make sense of a lot of things." Stephen believes that Keith's mother's secret occupation explains why she sends so many letters in the post, why Miss Durrant's house happened to be bombed by the Germans, and even why Keith's mother was so nice to him in the first place. All the while, Stephen never gives a thought to any other possible explanations that may explain the previous observations. The "**x**" marks that Stephen and Keith find in Keith's mother's diary serve as a perfect example of the stubborn breadth of imagination. Although the tiny "x's" most likely represent Keith's mother's menstrual cycles, the boys assume that they stand for her secret meetings that meaningfully coincide with the new moon, and, as the story progresses, "x" accumulates additional meanings—as a kiss, a mathematical variable, and the name of the German that Keith's mother is hiding. Therefore, Frayn argues that imagination is a generative force of meaning that can spiral out of control.

Although the story depends on the two boys' wild imaginations, *Spies* is constructed, as Michael Frayn himself said, like an autobiography. In fact, many of the story's details about the war were inspired by Frayn's own memories during his childhood. Thus, the novel is constructed upon the basis of reality but brought to life by the inventive creativity of the author. The story follows the narration of the older Stephen, recalling the memories of his childhood, yet it is still striking how real the memories of a fictional character seem, despite being the product of Frayn's own imagination (which itself brings to life the imaginations of Stephen and Keith). In fact, many readers of Frayn's novel have commented on how Stephen's memories, especially his description of the Close, resemble their own experiences in London during the Second World War. Therefore the way in which Frayn brings to life his own literary creation, Stephen, speaks to the power of literature and its ability to represent the real world. It just takes a bit of imagination—in much the same way that Stephen and Keith imagine Keith's mother as a German spy—to create a realistic story.

Tellingly, Frayn's *Spies* is classified as realist fiction. Realism represents a literary movement that began in the mid-1800s to the early 1900s, during which authors artistically attempted to represent reality. This realist novel about imagination thus demonstrates its potency since it has seduced so many of its readers into suspending disbelief that these are real war memories. The book's very existence essentially grapples with the plausibility of Stephen and Keith inventing the story of Keith's mother being a spy.

Finally, Stephen is also self-reflective about the literary nature of his own narration and of his past itself. He is grateful to be involved with the Haywards' family, who "have taken on the heroic proportions of characters in a legend," and he thanks the people around him who "wrote or performed the drama of life in which I had a small, often frightening, but always absorbing part." In effect, Frayn illustrates the literariness of life itself, which is "written" by the people who are part of it, and explores the vast potential of imagination not only as the creative source for literature, but also the drive for life itself.

WAR, PARANOIA, AND BELONGING

Frayn specifically sets *Spies* in a London cul-de-sac during the second World War, what Stephen calls "the Duration," to show how the war affects every aspect of life in the Close. Immediately evident in the novel is the war's physical effect on the provincial landscape of the town. On his return to the Close, Stephen initially makes a note of how even the sky is different from when he was a child, when it was constantly painted with searchlights and flares. War has also left a distinct mark on the land: the dirty pig bins that line the Avenue, the grimy Cottages, and the barren Barns all demonstrate the destructiveness of the War not only at the front, but also at home. The ominous sight of the bombed remnants of Miss Durrant's house right in the middle of the Close is just one of the many presences that serve as a constant reminder to the neighborhood of the impending war threat.

All of these contribute to creating a sense of paranoia in the Close, and the plot of *Spies* itself feeds off that paranoia, which is specifically pointed towards the Germans, and begins with an innocent child's intimation that his own mother could be involved in German espionage. However, paranoia is not restricted only to Keith, but is widely manifest among all the families in the Close. For example, the Haywards store their car in the garage, disassembled from its wheels, to prevent the Germans from taking it away. Neighbors also call the police to investigate anything that seems remotely suspicious, such as the "peeping Tom" that apparently visits Auntie Dee's house. As the main enemy of Britain in World War II, the Germans become a symbol of evil for Stephen, Keith, and the rest of the people living in the Close. In fact, the novel is studded with instances of British antagonism against the Germans, which

seem even more potent since they are articulated through such a young and innocent voice, that of Stephen. Any military accomplishment—by Keith's father and Uncle Peter—is described as glorious for specifically "killing Germans." Stephen asserts that Germans have an "evil ingenuity for which they were notorious," and his obsession with **germs** partially stems from the fact that they were "presumably so called because they were as evil and insidious as Germans." In addition, Stephen uses "Germanness" as a way to describe the identifying essence of the mysterious man that Keith's mother is hiding.

The War also has a profound effect on the households and families of the novel. First, it sends many fathers and sons away, like the Berrills' father, Uncle Peter, and the McAfees' and the Averys' sons. Thus it is telling when, in reference to the Berrill girls, "everyone says they're running wild" after their father left for the war. The war causes disturbance in the home and introduces different pressure points that threaten the stability of the family. Although Stephen dismisses most of Barbara's chattiness as girly gossip, her comment that "lots of ladies have boyfriends while everyone's daddies are away" reveals the specter of infidelity that haunts the home and exemplifies the social imbalance that is created by the war. And Stephen's brief consideration that Barbara's gossip might be true displays another kind of paranoia—one that questions the loyalty and trust within families—that the war introduces into people's lives.

The most prominent affair in the novel is the one between Keith's mother and Uncle Peter, whose relations seem to reach back even before the two were married to other people (suggested by Uncle Peter's assertion that "It was always her"). Although *Spies* initially seems to be about exposing an undercover German spy, a direct product of the War, it turns out that the novel is actually interested in revealing the secret and hopeless affair between two people who are deeply affected by the War in a more complicated way. Keith's mother is the victim of an abusive relationship with her husband, Mr. Hayward, a man who is deeply self-conscious about his exclusion from the current conflict and clings to his past achievement in World War I. The **bayonet** that he wears on his belt acts as a medal to display his past instance of bravery, but it is also a physical object from the war that he uses to sadistically punish his wife. In this way, the War is very much a violent presence inside the home that provokes the disloyal behavior between Keith's mother with Uncle Peter. Likewise, Uncle Peter is also directly affected by the war because he inevitably becomes an outcast after his desertion of the Air Force and is ultimately killed (from running in front of a train) by the war's insistence on militaristic glory and honor, which he immediately loses once he leaves his assigned station. Therefore Frayn argues, especially through Keith's mother and Uncle Peter, that wartime introduces instability into familial relationships—that war makes and breaks bonds. Keith's suspicion of his own mother, the domineering control of Mr. Hayward over his wife, Mrs. Hayward's secret affair with Uncle Peter, and the eventual falling out of Keith's mother and Auntie Dee are all products of the War.

Unlike the straining network of relationships within the Haywards' social circle, Stephen and his family have a relatively healthy family dynamic founded on love that is difficult to find anywhere else in the Close. But Stephen also occasionally references his family's inability to fit in. He states that "In the very marrow of his bones he understands that there's something not quite right about him and his family, something that doesn't quite fit with the pigtailed Geest girls and the oil-stained Avery boys, and never will." At the end of the story, the truth behind the Wheatleys' peculiarity is revealed: they are not actually English, but have resettled from Germany, the very country that is at war with the British. Furthermore, they are Jewish in a time of widespread anti-Semitism. So in fact Keith's mother is not the German spy, but Stephen declares that he and his father are. (Although they aren't actually working on behalf of the German war effort.) Thus the Wheatleys' secret Germanness and Jewishness sets them apart from the other families in the Close, and it contributes to the difficulty that Stephen faces throughout his life to fit in. As he begins to close the novel, the older Stephen explains that he eventually decided to return to Germany because his "life in England had somehow never really taken flight." If for Keith and the Haywards the war introduces familial strain, for Stephen and the Wheatleys it precludes any sense of belonging, especially in a country that is very much mired in blind prejudice against Germans.

Frayn's deliberate setting of his novel in wartime London seeks to expose the ghostly yet real presence of the war and its ability to make and break bonds. In the Close, the boys experience very real extensions of the War: violence, betrayal, fear, intrigue, and heroism. Additionally, the war creeps into the home: notice that Keith's violence and need to dominate was learned at home from his father. As such, Frayn offers a chilling picture of the War's far-reaching effects beyond the battlefield and within the intimate homes of London.

SECRECY

The whole of Frayn's novel, *Spies*, is built upon secrecy. Beginning with Keith's mother's secret affair with Uncle Peter, the story accumulates a myriad of secrets over time: Stephen and Keith's secret game of spying on Mrs. Hayward, Stephen and Barbara's secret kiss, Stephen and Keith's mother's secret collaborations, Geoff and Deirdre's secret rendezvous, the Wheatleys' secret German and Jewish origins, and even the Berrills' mother's secret "boyfriend." Although the story seems to be mainly concerned about discovering the nature of Keith's mother's suspicious

behavior, it also plays with the many possible reactions to secrets: revealing secrets, burying secrets, seeking out secrets, and leaving secrets unresolved.

When Stephen and Keith begin their spy operation on Keith's mother, Stephen is ecstatic about having secret knowledge about a German spy, which no one else knows, and is itching to tell his classmates and the other clueless kids in the Close. In fact, it even helps him endure the bullying from those same kids: "I feel sustained against them by the sheer importance of the secret knowledge lodged between those two abused ears of mine."

Despite gaining a sense of importance, Stephen struggles with a frequent internal conflict throughout the novel: deciding whether to reveal a secret or to risk "telling tales." At one point in the story, Stephen considers reporting Keith's mother to Mr. Gort, but he stops himself because he imagines what his confessing words would be and of "the horrible sneaking tone they'd have. It would be telling tales." And in many other instances, Stephen keeps secrets from his parents and Keith in order to not tell any tales. What is enlightening is the particular phrase "telling tales." Widely used in Britain, "telling tales" refers either to saying something untrue about someone else or revealing another's person's secret. In the context of *Spies*, the latter definition is a bit nonsensical, so it seems that the uneasiness arises more from the potential falsity of what might be said about someone else. Although Stephen never explicitly states his doubt in Keith's claim about his mother, there are several instances in the novel when Stephen unconsciously lets his own doubts about Keith's mother slip. For example, when Barbara speculates that Keith's mother may be buying items from the black market or sending a message for Auntie Dee to Auntie Dee's boyfriend, Stephen briefly considers these possibilities and is even disappointed by how plausible they sound. Yet at the same time, Stephen also displays a kind of wholehearted trust in the validity of Keith's initial proclamation. Thus, Frayn portrays the essential nature of secrecy itself: the validity of a secret can never be confirmed because it is, in fact, kept secret. As such, secrecy also ties into the earlier theme of Imagination vs. Reality, because its position outside of validation always pushes the question of its reality to the forefront.

By characterizing the unstable nature of secrecy and overwhelming Stephen with various secrets, Frayn illustrates the burden of carrying secrets and the immense responsibility that is inherent to protecting another's secrets. But, more importantly, Frayn uses *Spies* to champion the value of secrecy itself. It is obvious from the unfortunate ending with Uncle Peter's death, the falling out between Keith's mother and Auntie Dee, Stephen's eventual return to Germany, and his lingering sense of unsettled matters that maintaining the particular secrets of the novel was preferable to their disclosure and the consequences that follow. And from a meta-narrative standpoint, it is a multiplicity of secrets that make up the bulk of the story in order to create meaning thematically for the reader. Furthermore, secrecy offers fertile ground for the exploration of multiple meanings simultaneously. The "**x**" marks, which served as an example for imagination, are also relevant here because they become the symbolic representation of Keith's mother's secret, "Mr. X." As such, Frayn pays respect to the unknown and its invitation for generating hypotheses and encouraging conjecture. It may be worth noting that in his play *Copenhagen* (1998) Frayn produces his own artistic exploration of the secret meeting between Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg in Copenhagen, and offers his own hypothesis on what happened between the two.

Spies is all about secrecy and the multiple ways in which secrets are dealt with. The secret affair between Keith's mother and Uncle Peter is eventually exposed, while the fate of secret silk scarf that Uncle Peter gave to Stephen to give to Keith's mother remains forever unresolved, as are the many "secret boyfriends" of many mothers whose husbands are off at war. Ultimately, Frayn paints a colorful picture with a mosaic of different secrets that add complexity and ambiguity to his work.

SYMBOLS

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

PRIVET / LIGUSTER

Described as having a harsh, coarse, and vulgar scent, privet ("liguster" in German) is a type of shrub commonly found in Europe. It is also the source of the unsettling, "embarrassingly familiar breath of sweetness" that prompts Stephen, as an elderly man, to return to the Close (the cul-de-sac where he grew up). Stephen associates privet with his childhood because the privet hedges in front of Miss Durrant's bombed house held the hiding spot where Keith and Stephen spied on Keith's mother. Thus, privet symbolizes the tangible memories of that particular time in Stephen's life. The plant's smell elicits various emotions that are associated with Stephen's memories: embarrassment, restlessness, homesickness, lust, and shame. Although, as Stephen says himself, "it seems such a ridiculously banal and inappropriate cue for such powerful feelings," privet represents the material-ness of memories and the way they can latch onto specific objects that then convey those meanings to an individual and his/her unique experiences. Furthermore, "privet" is Keith's misspelling of "private" (and a word the young Stephen doesn't know, but assumes is something shameful to do with the bathroom), which hints at the complexities of language, the

shakiness of memory, and Stephen's constant struggle to deliver an accurate recollection of his ridiculously secretive past that he finds particularly troubling.

THE LETTER "X"

During their investigation of Keith's mother's desk, Stephen and Keith examine her diary and find tiny X marks on specific days in her calendar. They find a pattern in the "X's," which occur once a month and are sometimes "crossed out and entered a day or two earlier or later." The boys discover that the "X's" coincide with the new moon and they assume it as a mark for her secret meetings, though the reader may comically realize that the "X's" probably record her menstrual cycles. Later in the novel, the boys also find a package of cigarettes marked with an "X" in a tin box that further kindles their imaginations. Therefore, the letter "X" symbolizes the unknown and the flexibility with which it allows anyone to attach varied meanings to it. Throughout the novel, Stephen obsesses over the meaning of the X's, and he considers their wide potential to symbolize a kiss, a mathematical variable, Auntie Dee's hypothetical boyfriend, and eventually, the mysterious man that Keith's mother is taking care of and keeping in hiding. In essence, "X" speaks to the novel's larger theme of imagination through the infinite possibilities of meanings that it can harbor.

GERMS

Stephen exhibits what is almost an obsession (perhaps connected to OCD, or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) against getting germs on himself. He finds "germs" on a variety of objects: the slime from the tunnel, the children from the Cottages, and the **bayonet** that Keith pushes into his throat. In general, germs represent anything that is undesirable. First and foremost, Stephen associates them with dirtiness and messiness and uses them to describe the state of his room, which is "a hopeless tangle of string and plasticine and electric cord and forgotten socks and dust, of old cardboard boxes of moldering butterflies and broken birds' eggs left over from abandoned projects in the past." Thus, germs provide one way in which Stephen distinguishes his poorer family from Keith's more affluent and "impeccable" one. Furthermore, Stephen connects the word "germs" with "Germans." Thus, they also symbolize what Stephen sees as the characteristic quality of Germans, who are "evil and insidious," and reveal the general nationalistic hatred of Germans in the England of the novel.

THE BAYONET

A bayonet is a bladed weapon that can be attached to a firearm, like a rifle. Keith's father used one in World War I, and he carries it with him when he goes off to the Home Guard on weekends. Keith claims that his father killed five Germans with the bayonet, but it's more likely that he actually killed them with his pistol. In their **privet** hideout, then, Stephen and Keith pretend that they have a similar bayonet. In reality it is a carving knife without a handle, found in the rubble of Miss Durrant's bombed house, but Keith sharpens it and the boys imagine it as a bayonet to the point that to them, it truly *is* a bayonet. They then swear an oath of secrecy on the bayonet when they start spying on Keith's mother, and the object seems to give the oath great weight through both its importance and its inherent danger (as suggested by the "cut my throat and hope to die" part of the oath).

As Keith's father's weapon and the boys' imagined treasure, the bayonet initially seems to represent bravery, military skill, and the nationalistic "glories" of war. Yet its role as an object of violence—Keith's father uses his bayonet to torture his wife, and Keith in turn uses the boys' "bayonet" to torture Stephen—undercuts these ideas, and shows how war is ultimately cruel, destructive, and anything but glorious. The bayonet thus represents the harsh realities of war being brought into the intimacy of the neighborhood, home, and family.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Picador edition of *Spies* published in 2003.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Glimpses of different things flash into my mind, in random sequence, and are gone. A shower of sparks . . . A feeling of shame . . . Someone unseen coughing, trying not to be heard . . .

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5-6

Explanation and Analysis

On his return to the Close, Stephen immediately describes the vivid memories that come to mind of his childhood in that town. They describe different kinds of senses: a visual image of sparks, a specific emotional response, and an auditory recollection of Uncle Peter's coughing. As such, this concise selection of Stephen's memories illustrates the different modes in which memories are stored and offers a kind of psychological structure of memories. That they are temporary and short glimpses intimates that memory is not an accurate record of what exactly happened, but instead is

manifested in the way the owner of those memories might piece those glimpses together into a coherent whole.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Everything is as it was, I discover when I reach my destination, and everything has changed.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This is how Stephen starts Chapter 2 and several later chapters in the story. As such, he consistently references the effect of time. The novel constantly moves back and forth between the present and the past in order to offer insight on the consequences of past events on the older Stephen—in essence, the story is largely interested in how the passing of time shapes a person's life. Remember that *Spies* is a bildungsroman, a genre which specifically deals with the personal development of a young character. That the structure of Frayn's novel is built around the recollection of an elderly narrator emphasizes that inevitable effect of time on the construction of a self.

Does he know, even at that age, what his standing is in the street? He knows precisely, even if he doesn't know that he knows it. In the very marrow of his bones he understands that there's something not quite right about him and his family, something that doesn't quite fit with the pigtailed Geest girls and the oil-stained Avery boys, and never will.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Stephen describes his younger self here, and his intimation is unique because he isn't solely referring to the low socioeconomic status of his family, but also alluding to something else that just doesn't seem "quite right" about himself and the Wheatleys. In fact, this is one of the few occasions in which Stephen compares his family to another family besides the Haywards, whose affluence is the main point of comparison against himself. It is later revealed that this intuitive feeling also arises from Stephen's secret Germanness and secret Jewishness, which begins in "the very marrow of his bones" and manifests outward to his unkempt and awkward self. His perpetual longing to belong is a direct result of the War, the general climate of anti-Semitism in Europe at the time, and his life in a country that is directly at war with Germany.

Cycling's plainly the right way to go to school; the bus that Stephen catches each day at the cracked concrete bus stop on the main road is plainly the wrong way. Green's the right color for a bicycle, just as it's the wrong one for a belt or a bus.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Keith Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, Stephen constantly puts himself down in comparison to Keith, who does everything right and has all the right things. Thus, even the things that are associated with Stephen are considered to be wrong and in a sad state, like the *cracked* bus stop. Unfortunately, Stephen carries a sense of self-discontentment throughout his life as he fails to fit in both as a child and as an adult. But notice how easily exchangeable the distinctions between "right" and "wrong" are in this passage. Even though Stephen's school belt (which is therefore "wrong" simply because it is Stephen's) is green, apparently green becomes the "right" color for a bicycle (because it's the color of Keith's bicycle). Despite Stephen's rigid adherence to class difference, in this ironic passage Frayn subtly suggests that class differences are largely arbitrary.

The ways of the Haywards were no more open to questioning or comprehension than the domestic arrangements of the Holy Family.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In regards to the one-sided visitations of Keith's mother to Auntie Dee's house, Stephen comments that he never thought to question the behavior of the Haywards. Everything they do is simply "right." The level of reverence and respect Stephen shows towards the Haywards approaches religious veneration. Despite the Haywards' haughtiness and implicitly rude treatment of Stephen, Stephen longs to be more like the Haywards because they occupy a higher social status than he and his family does. What is unfortunate is that his adoration of the Haywards not only places value on the clearly problematic family simply because of their class, but also points to Stephen's undervaluing of himself and discontent with his "unsatisfactory" self.

> Gratitude not only to Keith's mother but to Keith himself, to all the others after him whose adjutant and audience I was, and to everyone else who wrote and performed the drama of life in which I had a small, often frightening, but always absorbing part: Thank you for having me. Thank you, thank you.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Keith's Mother / Mrs. "Bobs" Hayward, Keith Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31-32

Explanation and Analysis

As Stephen recalls his younger self timidly thanking Keith's mother, he repeats that gesture in the present for the effects other people have had in "writing" and performing the "drama of life." It is somewhat peculiar for Stephen to describe life in literary terms, but it specifically emphasizes the fictional character of reality itself. Different people and events "write" the story of reality and determine its trajectory. In a similar vein, Stephen is "writing" the story of the past with the memories he has stored from that time and revealing the very personal meaning it has had on himself.

Furthermore, this quote reveals how Stephen still feels unworthy of other people's time and attention even in his old age. Even after six decades, he is thanking everyone who has had a part in constructing the way life has progressed throughout the years. Notice that he does not even take possession of that said life. It isn't his own life, but it is "life" itself in which he sees himself as holding but a small and unimportant part.

> What I remember, when I examine my memory carefully, isn't a narrative at all. It's a collection of vivid particulars. Certain words spoken, certain objects glimpsed. Certain gestures and expressions. Certain moods, certain weathers, certain times of day and states of light. Certain individual moments that seem to mean so much but that mean in fact so little until the hidden links between them have been found.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

As Stephen tries to place the beginning of his story, he comments that he finds it difficult to remember "the order things occurred in" because his memory isn't structured chronologically, but rather through various sensations, images, and emotions. Notice the semantic structure of this quote, an amalgamation of several sentence fragments, and how it visually demonstrates the way Frayn envisions the actual recollective organization of memory. Thus, the focus is not specifically centered on the accuracy of what happened sixty years ago, but, more importantly, what sticks in Stephen's mind and how he understands his past and its effects on him throughout his life.

> I think now that most probably Keith's words came out of nowhere, that they were spontaneously created in the moment they were uttered. That they were a blind leap of pure fantasy. Or of pure intuition. Or, like so many things, of both.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Keith Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Stephen wonders if certain events, like that policeman's visit to the Close and Keith's mother's fearful facial expression, initially put the idea in Keith's head that his mother was a German spy. But ultimately he figures that it was the product of both pure imagination and gut intuition. In this

quote, Frayn places imagination and reality side-by-side and presents them as being both responsible for Keith's determination about his mother. In effect, Frayn blurs the line between the two and gives equal weight to each in establishing the reality of the story. Furthermore, Stephen also refers to the creative power of words to transform "nothing" into "something."

Chapter 3 Quotes

She just is his mother, in the same way that Mrs. Sheldon's Mrs. Sheldon, and Barbara Berrill's beneath our notice, and my family's slightly disgraceful. Everyone knows that these things are so. They don't have to be

explained or justified.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Barbara Berrill, Keith's Mother / Mrs. "Bobs" Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40-41

Explanation and Analysis

This is Stephen's justification for not asking Keith how he knows that his mother is a German spy. His refusal to question Keith seems to be characteristic of the self-conscious and obedient Stephen, who concedes any kind of power or say to his friend. But it also illustrates the absurdity of blind belief and the wider danger its poses, since the boys' spy operations end up exposing Keith's mother's secret and eventually pushing Uncle Peter toward an unfortunate death. In addition, this quote also portrays how permanent class status seemed to be in wartime London through Stephen's acceptance that his family is permanently marked as "slightly disgraceful."

Yes, there's a sinister unnoticeability about the whole performance, now that we know the truth behind it. There's something clearly wrong about her, if you really look at her and listen to her as we now do.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Keith's Mother / Mrs. "Bobs" Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

From the initial observations of Keith's mother, Stephen makes this comment about the "sinister unnoticeability" of the supposed spy's performance. This quote offers a good example of the transformation of imagination into reality. Once Stephen believes that Keith's mother is a spy, he interprets "nothing" as "something" that must explain her secret. It is a comical phrase, "a sinister unnoticeability," because it clearly refers to the absurdity of the boys' belief that forces to interpret her normal behavior as a sign of evil "mysteriousness." But Frayn complicates the picture, because Keith's mother is indeed hiding a different secret, which questions the validity and trustworthiness of reality and gives more credence to imagination.

I feel more strongly than ever the honor of my association with Keith. His family have taken on the heroic proportions of characters in a legend—noble father and traitorous mother playing out the never-ending conflict between good and evil, between light and dark.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Keith's Father / Mr. Ted Hayward , Keith's Mother / Mrs. "Bobs" Hayward, Keith Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Sitting in the privet lookout, Stephen feels lucky to be able to take part in the exciting story of Keith's life. The literary imagery that colors this quote is quite self-reflective, since Stephen himself is also part of a story written by Frayn, yet it's also presented ironically and even comically as a child's grandiose imaginings—so, in a way, Frayn is poking fun of himself here. Yet on a more serious level, what is reality in the perspective of Stephen is described as a kind of literary product, while the imaginative product of Frayn, *Spies*, is written like an autobiography, as a mirror of reality. Thus Frayn again straddles the line that separates imagination from reality and blurs that division.

Chapter 4 Quotes

There's always been something sinister about Mr. Gort's house and Trewinnick, of course. But there's something sinister about all these silent houses when you look at them like this. The less you see happening on the outside, the more certain you are that strange things are going on inside...

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Mr. Gort

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

On one of their observations from the lookout, Stephen comments on the mysteriousness of Mr. Gort's house and Trewinnick (the name of another house in the Close). This intimation about the two houses originates from a variety of sources. First, it seems to be a manifestation of wartime paranoia that finds anything unknown or different to be suspicious. It is also speaks to the power of imagination and Stephen's assumption of their sinister presence from social absence in the Close. Lastly, it demonstrates how secrecy and the unknown introduces a wider landscape for conjecture about "strange things."

"Anyway," I say, "my father's a German spy, too."...
"Well, he is," I say. "He has secret meetings with people who come to the house. They talk in a foreign language together. It's German. I've heard them."

Related Characters: Stephen's Father / Mr. Wheatley, Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Keith Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

When one of Stephen and Keith's rounds of spying is especially unfruitful and Stephen begins to feel bored, he jokes that his father is a German spy as well. Keith does not believe him for a second, and dismisses it as a sarcastic comment, but the reader will later come to realize that everything Stephen says is actually true. In fact, these words, which were spit out as a joke, represent "reality," in much the same way that Frayn's imagination composes his careful project of "words," *Spies*, into an autobiographical-like novel and believable mirror of reality. This is just another instance in which Frayn demonstrates the weightiness of words, like Keith's six simple words which begin the plot of this entire novel.

Chapter 5 Quotes

It's like the War Effort and the perpetual sense of strain it induces, of guilt for not doing enough toward it. The War Effort hangs over us for the Duration, and both the Duration and the long examination board of childhood will last forever.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Keith's Mother / Mrs. "Bobs" Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

While Stephen is waiting for Keith in the lookout, he thinks to himself about Keith's unfortunate state of having a German spy as a mother and how brave he is for handling that "truth." In turn, Stephen describes life as a series of tests of one's manliness and courage, and equates it with the effect of the War on daily life. Although Stephen's comparison of the War Effort to the tedious test of childhood highlights his limited view of the world, it also speaks to the stressful pressure that the War puts on everyone in the Close, even the children. Note how Stephen refers to the War as the "Duration," which is capitalized to emphasize its intimidating influence on people's lives.

This is also a clear explanation for Uncle Peter's secret hiding after his desertion of the Royal Air Force. Uncle Peter cannot simply return to the Close because he is basically refusing to work for the British army in defeating the Germans. The British Air Force's air raids are and were controversial because they were not specifically targeted against the German army, but they also killed many civilians, too. While Uncle Peter's decision may have been the moral and brave one, it would have been considered dishonorable and cowardly in wartime Britain.

Chapter 6 Quotes

Even before this there were a lot of things piling up that I couldn't tell Keith about. Barbara Berrill's visit. Her stupid stories about his mother and his aunt. Now I've been burdened with another secret that I have to keep from him. But how can we possibly proceed if I don't tell him this one?

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Auntie Dee / Mrs. Tracey , Keith's Mother / Mrs. "Bobs" Hayward, Keith Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

After Keith's mother speaks to Stephen alone in the lookout about discontinuing his spy games, Stephen has trouble sleeping that night because he does not know what to do, and cannot tell Keith about what has happened. This is thus a clear example of the heavy burden of secrets and having to keep them from the knowledge of someone else. In particular, it seems that Frayn argues here that secrecy is built upon an agreed promise to maintain its hidden state—so keeping to his word is more important to Stephen than revealing the secret to Keith. Secrecy is then also a kind of protection from potentially harmful truths or meaningless gossip. Finally, this quote highlights Stephen's (largely self-imposed) dependence on Keith for leadership and direction. He feels that he cannot move onto the next step without having Keith decide for him.

Not that I ever believed those stories for a moment. Or could have said anything about them to Keith even if I had. It would be telling tales. You can't tell tales.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Keith Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

As Stephen is showing Keith the product of his brave midnight journey to the tin box, he momentarily considers the idea that the sock could be payment for an item in the black market or a gift for Auntie Dee's secret boyfriend, which gives credence to Barbara's earlier speculations. However, he only thinks this to himself and refuses to tell Keith about it because it would be "*telling tales*." As such, Stephen is more concerned about the possibility that these conjectures would be false gossip, suggesting that secrecy is intimately concerned with truth value and validity. However, this specific quote also seems to suggest another layer to "telling tales," which involves a kind of shame inherent in revealing someone else's secret.

We've come on a journey from the highest to the lowest—from the silver-framed heroes on the altars in the Haywards' house through the descending social gradations of the Close, from the Berrills and Geests to us, from us to the Pinchers, on down through the squalor of the Cottages and their wretched occupants, and then, reached even lower, to an old derelict taking refuge under a sheet of corrugated iron.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Uncle Peter / the Man, Keith Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

During their venture to the Barns, Stephen does not describe their journey in topological or geographical terms, but he instead maps it out as a kind of social trek down a hierarchical ladder, which begins with the stately Haywards' house and ultimately ends with the old tramp who is hiding under an iron sheet. This quote not only demonstrates Stephen's detailed understanding of the way the Close is organized socially, but it also speaks to the social organization itself, which descends from the center of the Close and out. In fact, a map of the Close illustrates that the houses are indeed organized by social class.

Chapter 7 Quotes

So far as I can piece it together, as the heir to Stephen's thoughts, he neither thought she was nor didn't think she was. Without Keith there to tell him what to think he'd stopped thinking about it all. Most of the time you don't go around thinking that things are so or not so, any more than you go around understanding or not understanding them. You take them for granted.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Keith Hayward, Keith's Mother / Mrs. "Bobs" Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

After Keith's mother had expressed her disappointment in

Stephen for torturing the mysterious man in the Barns, Stephen ponders over his younger self and what he had known at that point in time. The way the older Stephen distinguishes himself from when he was younger, as "the heir to Stephen's thoughts" emphasizes the bildungsroman aspect of this novel and its portrayal of the development of a character through the passing of time. However, this quote also points out Stephen's helplessness without his friend to tell him what to think, and it highlights the potential danger of blind and stubborn faith.

This quote also refers to the nature of imagination, which questions reality and doesn't take things for granted. Through Stephen's regret of his previous childish fervor in suspecting Keith's mother, Frayn emphasizes how imagination and reality straddle a thin line.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Lamorna. I find the word on my tongue over and over again, saying itself of its own accord. Lamorna is the softness of Barbara Berrill's dress as she leaned across me to look in the trunk. Lamorna is the correct scientific description of the contrast between the bobbly texture of her purse and the smooth shininess of its button. Lamorna is the indoor-firework smell of the match, and its two shining reflections in her eyes. But Lamorna is also the name of the softness in Keith's mother's voice…

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Barbara Berrill

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

Stephen's acknowledgement of the summer air, filled with "birdsong and summer perfumes," and his own piecing out of Keith's mother's secret is materialized as this thing he calls "Lamorna." And he describes it as being multiple things at once. It is the texture of Barbara's dress, or her purse, the smell of a lit match, and the quality of Keith's mother's voice. This quote demonstrates how multiple meanings become material and latch onto a specific concept or thing. In technical terms, "Lamorna" is the name of Barbara's house, but it is also represents the intimate feelings that Stephen increasingly has for Barbara, and for Keith's mother.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ What exactly was this unthinkable something? Nothing *exactly*. What's unthinkable can't in its nature be exactly anything. Its inexactitude is what makes it so overpowering.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Keith's Mother / Mrs. "Bobs" Hayward

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

When Keith's mother asks Stephen to deliver a shopping basket to the mysterious man, Stephen wonders to himself why she couldn't just ask her own son to do it. But he realizes that she must keep her secret hidden from Keith as well, because the truth would be more devastating to Keith than himself—and because Keith might not want to be involved, or might even reveal his mother's secret to his father (since he seems to have inherited some of his father's cruel and domineering personality).

This quote also illustrates the nature of secrecy itself, as an "inexactitude" that derives its force from the unknown. It is this kind of inexactitude that drives the plot of the novel, in the same way that "x" marks accumulate multiple meanings because the symbol doesn't rigidly represent one exact thing.

❝ Whoever and whatever he was or wasn't, Stephen was still quite clear about one thing: he was a German. There was no way round that.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker), Uncle Peter / the Man

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

While Keith's mother is giving Stephen a shopping basket to deliver to the man hiding in the Barns, Stephen concludes that he is sure that the man is at least German. In this way, Germanness represents the "unknown" quality of the man and it equally speaks to his "evilness." This quote, then, illustrates how deeply the War had established nationalistic attitudes against the Germans in Britain, so much so that even a young boy would employ the trope of Germanness as evil and alien so readily. It is also ironic to consider the fact that Stephen himself is of German descent, which seems to

explain his eternal feeling of never fitting in anywhere, and perhaps also contributes to his excessive desire to distance himself from and condemn all forms of Germanness.

❝ Once again I feel the locked box beginning to open and reveal its mysteries. I'm leaving behind the old tunnels and terrors of childhood—and stepping into a new world of even darker tunnels and more elusive terrors.

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

As Stephen awkwardly sits in the lookout with Keith's mother, who is crying and breaking down in front of him, he describes the feeling of entering a newer stage in life. It is indeed the nature of growing up, which presents newer fears and more unknown secrets that seem quite disillusioning to the naïve Stephen, who unfortunately gets sucked into Keith's mother's dangerous secret with Uncle Peter. As a bildungsroman, *Spies* not only portrays the personal development and growth of the protagonist, but it also illustrates the harsh realization of reality and the adult world.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ Now all the mysteries have been resolved, or as resolved as they're ever likely to be. All that remains is the familiar slight ache in the bones, like an old wound when the weather changes. *Heimweh* or *Fernweh*? A longing to be there or a longing to be here, even though I'm here already?

Related Characters: Stephen Wheatley (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

As Stephen closes the novel, he describes a kind of homesickness that he feels everywhere he goes, whether he is in Germany or back at the Close. Frayn offers a rather depressing ending by depicting a protagonist who doesn't ever seem to feel a strong sense of belonging, and is haunted by this particular series of events in his childhood. Yet Stephen has also become much like his father, using those once-embarrassing German words to express his own complicated German-English state. *Heimweh* refers to a feeling of homesickness, while *fernweh* denotes a longing for a far-away place. Stephen is torn between missing a place he can call "home" (even though already has one in Germany) and wanting to return his far-off childhood town in Britain. Thus *Spies* is unlike many other bildungsromans, which only depict one specific instance of growing up, and instead it offers a broader picture of how a man's memory of his childhood affects him throughout his entire 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 narrator, Stephen Wheatley, begins the story in the third week of June. It is that time of the year again when he smells an "embarrassingly familiar" scent (later identified as **privet**) in the air, a scent that is both sweet and disturbing because it takes him back to a memory of when he was a child. The smell, he describes, "is something quite harsh and coarse," and it unsettlingly conjures up an array of feelings: restlessness, homesickness, and "a kind of sexual urgency." The smell is moving enough for Stephen to try booking plane tickets back to the place of his childhood, "that far-off nearby land," but he does not follow through with this plan.

The specific smell of privet is enough to elicit an emotional response within Stephen that viscerally brings him back to his childhood. Thus Frayn immediately suggests the way memory is stored not only as a record of what happened when and where, but also as a series of associations between the emotions and senses that were felt and perceived at the time. This also echoes a famous scene from Proust's In Search of Lost Time, *in which the narrator tastes a certain flavor and is brought back to vivid memories of his childhood.*

One day Stephen notices the same smell as he is walking his daughter and two granddaughters to the car. When he asks his daughter to identify the smell's source, she guesses that the "vulgar smell" must be "liguster" (German for **privet**), a dull-looking shrub found commonly in parks. At night, the narrator is pondering over the word "liguster" when he finally looks it up in the dictionary to find out that it is not even English. He laughs at himself, a professional translator, for not realizing this sooner.

This episode becomes even more meaningful after Stephen reveals his German origins at the end of the story, but from the very beginning, Frayn hints at Stephen's German and English roots. It is significant that he is a professional translator because he metaphorically straddles that line between English and German in much the same way that he does not seem to fit in in his childhood in England.

Suddenly, the word starts to bring up more memories and Stephen recalls specific visions: his friend Keith's mother laughing, and then weeping; "A shower of sparks . . . A feeling of shame . . . Someone unseen coughing," and a jug. He even remembers the six exact words that Keith had said, the words that "changed everything." Stephen then decides that he wants to make sense of the unresolved past and its still-uncovered secrets, to "establish some order in it all." He tells his children that he is going to London for a few days, and hides the fact that he is following the **privet** hedges and their unsettling scent.

This particular selection of recollective images offers a more detailed picture of the way memories are formed. Stephen recalls a spectacle of sparks, an emotional response, and an auditory sample of coughing. These are all different types of memories, but it is specifically the way Stephen understands them that provides their meaning and significance, and essentially the content of this novel.

CHAPTER 2

Stephen arrives at his destination and finds that "everything is as it was…and everything has changed." He gets off his train and walks the familiar path to the old cul-de-sac where he once lived, noticing the different changes to the town. Finally he reaches the cul-de-sac, which he calls "the Close," with the same fourteen houses that were there fifty years ago. However, his initial feeling of familiarity soon disappears, and he realizes that the houses actually have changed. They are more standardized now, with asphalt and cars, and their own individual uniqueness gone. The **privet** scent is also gone.

Memory is dependent upon the passage of time, and the Close has changed immensely within the span of five decades. Yet it still retains a familiarity to Stephen that he recognizes from the past. In a similar way, Stephen has completely changed in that same span of time, but he still carries the thoughts and memories of what happened at the Close fifty years ago. Notably, the privet that brought Stephen back to the Close has disappeared from the Close itself.

Stephen says that even the sky, which usually stays unchanged throughout time, is different now. In the past, the war had painted the sky with searchlights and flares, but now it is "mild and bland." As Stephen starts to question his return, wondering if he's been foolish to come back, the familiar sound of a nearby train ushers in a rush of memories of the area. He starts to envision the Close as it was when he was a young boy. The same houses transform back into the houses of the families that lived there before: the Sheldons, the Hardiments, the Geests, the Averys.

The way Stephen's memories materialize in front of him as he is standing in the Close emphasizes their powerful force and plays with the elusive distinction between imagination and reality. Frayn also mentions the War's effect on the landscape in order to hint at its larger influence on Stephen's childhood, which will become more evident further into the story.

The second house in the line, No. 2, catches Stephen's attention in the image of his memory. Semi-attached to the Hardiments' house and the Pinchers', No. 3 was the house Stephen himself used to live in. Though the house is now remodeled and renamed, it still seems "faintly embarrassing," and Stephen recollects how "shameful" it used to seem to him. He remembers the dreary gray of the house in his time, and how depressing and messy the lawn used to be, especially because the Pinchers next door had used their garden as a dump for old furniture. Stephen notes that the Pinchers were "the undesirable elements in the Close—even less desirable than we were."

Notice that Stephen is very meticulous about situating the different families in their respective house numbers. Frayn is already alluding to how the War affects the family structure and is also illustrating how wartime London was organized around class and social status. In fact, pay close attention to the organization of the neighborhood, which is arranged largely by a socioeconomic hierarchy.

Stephen starts to wonder if his younger self would have seen what he sees now. He finally reveals his full name to the reader—Stephen Wheatley—and he recalls his younger self as an awkward boy in colorless clothes, since he remembers himself as he was in old monochromatic photographs. He comments that the name Stephen Wheatley now sounds "strange" to him, and remembers the "delicious silvery serrated texture" of the belt buckle—a metal snake in the shape of an S—to his old school uniform.

Stephen starts to situate the principal narrative as an extended flashback, seen through the eyes of the young Stephen. Again he emphasizes small sensory details (like the texture of the belt buckle), giving his memory a particular vividness but also a scattered quality. Note also the hint that the older Stephen is no longer named "Stephen Wheatley."

The older Stephen sees his younger self leaving the house, and he describes everything about himself, even his various items of clothing, as "inadequate," "hopeless," and "failed." Stephen wonders if he was aware of his social standing even at that age. Speaking of his younger self, he says "he knows precisely, even if he doesn't know that he knows it." Deep down, he can tell that something about him "doesn't quite fit" with the other neighborhood children of the Close.

Through his language Stephen suggests his negative perception of himself as a young boy, both from his perspective at the time and perhaps even now, as an old man. These vague allusions to a feeling of not-belonging immediately refer to a class difference between Stephen and the other children, but also gain more meaning in light of Stephen's later revelation that his family is secretly both German and Jewish.

Stephen imagines himself going through the neighborhood, commenting on the other children of the Close, including the "sly and treacherous" Barbara Berrill and her sister Deirdre, who has been hanging around with Stephen's older brother Geoff lately. The girls' father is away fighting in the war, and "everyone says they're running wild." Stephen continues to watch his younger self, who seems "lost in some kind of vague daydream," and comments on how "unsatisfactory" he seems.

Note Stephen's first mention of Barbara Berrill and her sister. Stephen clearly parrots a phrase he has heard from someone else—that they're "running wild"—and he sees the girls as wholly alien and even antagonistic to him. This passage also shows how the war brings disruption into the home. With so many fathers and husbands away fighting, society sees the women left behind as "running wild" in the men's absence.

Next the young Stephen passes the mysterious Trewinnick house, where the blackout curtains are always drawn and some mysterious strangers have moved in. They only come and go at night, and no one knows their names.

The Trewinnick house seems like an unimportant oddity at first, but it gathers meaning over the course of the book. Ultimately it's suggested that Jewish refugees are living at Trewinnick.

The young Stephen finally reaches his destination: No. 9, the Haywards' house. In the present, he examines it and says that the house is the same as it was before, neatly maintained with white paint and still called "Chollerton," as proclaimed by a copper plate near the door. He sees the younger Stephen waiting at the door, trying to tidy up his appearance. His friend Keith opens the door and Stephen enters. The Stephen of the present proclaims that this is where his story begins, on the fateful day when Keith, his best friend, uttered the six words that "turned our world inside out."

Stephen now approaches the start of the narrative action, and he sets the scene by contrasting his own unkempt appearance with the neat and luxurious Hayward house. It's immediately suggested that the Haywards are wealthier than Stephen's family.

Stephen wonders what the inside of the Haywards' house looks like now. He describes how it looked before: dark oak paneling and different pieces of art and furniture. He explains that he now can picture the color of his and Keith's belts (which he previously remembered in monochrome). Keith's belt was yellow and black, the colors of the local preparatory school, while Stephen wore the green and black belt of the school he and his brother attended, which he describes as the "wrong school."

The inventory of the ornaments and fixtures that adorn the inside of Keith's house should be enough to suggest his family's wealth and high social standing. Coming from a more modest family, Stephen displays discontentment with himself by describing his own school as the "wrong" one. He also starts to fill in his memories with color, whereas before they were only in monochrome—he's now more fully reentering his past and inhabiting his recollected sensations.

Stephen expresses how even then he knew how lucky he was to be Keith's friend. He describes their relationship, in which Keith was the leader and Stephen his loyal follower. They had conducted many projects, all led by Keith because of his "intellectual and imaginative superiority." He then lists Keith's various fantastical projects, like creating an "underground railway" for traveling via "pneumatic tubes." Keith's projects are ingenious and successful—or *would* be successful, Stephen says, "as soon as we put our plans into effect."

That Stephen feels grateful to be able to play with Keith hints at the rigidity of the social hierarchy, which makes it difficult for people to interact across different classes. Notice that early on Frayn establishes Keith's naïve creativity and his absurd stories—wild imaginings that seem entirely real to the young Stephen, and which he defends with what are clearly Keith's own excuses.

For example, Stephen states that it was Keith who discovered that the Trewinnick house was occupied by a secret, sinister organization called "the Juice," who are "behind all kinds of plots and swindles." Stephen says that Keith would have discovered the secret passageway the Juice used—if only Keith's father hadn't called him inside.

It's suggested later that the "Juice" actually refers to "Jews", who are living as refugees in the Close (note also the anti-Semitic stereotype of "swindling" associated with them). This is also an early example of Keith's tendency to make mistakes with words. Stephen again makes excuses, presumably parroting Keith's own words.

Stephen now imagines the two boys standing back in the hall of the Hayward house, deciding what to do. He explains that they could do the chore Keith's father had instructed Keith to finish, which usually was to oil his special bicycle. Keith rode his bike to school, while Stephen took the bus—and Stephen comments that "cycling's plainly the right way to go to school," and the bus is "plainly the wrong way."

Again Stephen sees everything about Keith and the Haywards as being "right," and everything about himself and the Wheatleys as being "wrong." This shows him internalizing at a young age differences in class and social status as actually being differences in morality or value.

Alternately, the boys could play in Keith's playroom, which was filled with expensive toys (and which Stephen painstakingly catalogues). Or they could play in the garden (which contains all kind of fantastical adventures that Stephen describes), or take a walk to the golf course, where Keith claims he's seen a talking monkey and a crashed German plane.

Again Stephen lingers on the material realities of Keith's luxurious existence. We also see more instances of Keith's fantastic imagination and Stephen's submission to his friend's reality. It's also notable that all the boys' "projects" revolve around Keith, and never Stephen.

Although all these different pastimes were equally viable options, Stephen states that going to his own house was never a possibility. Unlike Keith, Stephen shared a room with his brother Geoff. While Keith had a separate playroom, Stephen had to play and do homework in his bedroom. He tries to imagine the unlikely scenario of Keith asking his mother to visit Stephen's house; Stephen believes that Keith's mother would have deferred to Keith's father, and Keith's father would have given Keith another chore to avoid allowing his son to come over. Stephen wonders why Keith's parents even allowed Keith to play with him. He notes that Keith's mother would only refer to Stephen indirectly, and says that Keith's mother rested all the time, spending most of her day on the sofa or in her bedroom—or she would post letters several times a day.

That Keith would have never been able to play at Stephen's house points to the strict maintenance of class difference that dictated London society. Although Keith's parents tolerate Stephen and his daily visits, they still subtly show that they are uncomfortable with a boy of lower class, so much so that they can't even acknowledge his presence or address him directly. But it seems that the war provides enough of a distraction or shakeup of social norms to allow Stephen to continue associating with Keith—although it's suggested later that Stephen is being unnecessarily hard on himself, and in fact it's Keith *who has a hard time making friends and is disliked by most of the children in the Close. This passage also introduces some information about Keith's mother that later becomes more important.*

Stephen then describes Keith's father, who spent most of his time working around the house and the garden. However, his private abode was the garage, where he would do wood- or metal-work. Stephen describes the Haywards' car, which was kept in pristine condition without its wheels until it could be driven after the war's end. Keith explained to Stephen that the wheels were taken off to keep invading Germans from stealing the car, and the wheel nuts were hidden away with the revolver that Keith's father had used in the Great War.

The Haywards' wealth is again apparent in Keith's father's ability to just work around the house all day. It's unclear if the plan to keep the Germans for stealing the car comes from Keith's father or is just another exaggeration of Keith's, but either way it shows the general atmosphere of paranoia and anti-German sentiment in England during the war.

Keith's father was a man of few words, except for the occasional "old boy" or "old bean" that he used to address Keith. Stephen notes that Keith's father did not acknowledge Stephen's existence and never addressed him. However, Stephen also never spoke to him directly, because he was too intimidated by Mr. Hayward, who had won a medal in the Great War for killing five Germans. Keith said he killed them with his **bayonet**, though Stephen privately wonders how Keith's father fixed the bayonet to his revolver. Keith's father then carried the bayonet fixed to his belt when he went away to the Home Guard on weekends (though Keith claimed he was really in the Secret Service).

Keith's father uses seemingly affectionate language, but in fact he is a cold, domineering, and even violent figure. Here the bayonet is introduced as an important symbol in the novel. It's unclear whether or not Keith's father actually used the bayonet to kill the five Germans, but the fact that Stephen believes it to be true makes the matter moot in terms of the narrative. We also see another example of Keith exaggerating or distorting the facts—this time about his father's military service—which Stephen totally accepts as true, and which in turn heighten his awe of the Haywards.

Stephen was the only person in the Close whom the Haywards let willingly into their home. They did not interact with anyone else in the neighborhood, except for Keith's mother's sister, Auntie Dee, who lived three doors down. Stephen describes Auntie Dee as being the opposite of Keith's mother, who was tall, unhurried, and calm: Auntie Dee was short, reckless, and cheerful. Keith's mother did the shopping for Auntie Dee, who was often busy looking after her daughter, Milly. Unlike the Haywards, Auntie Dee directly addressed Stephen. Stephen recounts a time he followed Keith to Auntie Dee's house. He says that Keith had a look of disapproval, much like his father's, because of her messy house.

Despite being part of the Haywards' social circle, Auntie Dee represents a pleasant figure with middle class standing. Notice that she lives three doors down from the Haywards, which suggests her lower social standing in comparison to her sister's family. Furthermore, she has a different and even opposite personality from Keith's mother. She even addresses Stephen directly with his name because she does not pay so much attention to the arbitrary rules of class difference.

Stephen attributes Auntie Dee's recklessness and untidiness to the absence of her husband Uncle Peter, who was a bomber pilot off fighting in the war. Stephen describes how everything in the house reflected the "glory" of Uncle Peter, who seemed almost holy because of his role in the war. Other fathers in the neighborhood were off fighting, but only Uncle Peter was in the RAF (Royal Air Force) and flew on secret missions over Germany.

Stephen glorifies the idea of Uncle Peter, and this ideal comes to distort his perception of later events in the novel. The language describing Uncle Peter also shows the general atmosphere of nationalism and pro-military propaganda at the time. Uncle Peter's exploits may be exaggerated by Keith, but once again the fact that Stephen accepts them as truth makes *them true in his version of events.*

Stephen then thinks about his own family and asks himself if he ever loved them. He disregards the question by considering love to be a kind of inevitable obligation, and then he compares his family to Keith's seemingly perfect family, noting that he was able to appreciate the Haywards because of his own inferior family—Stephen was "encumbered with a brother," for example. He specifically compares his father with Keith's father. Stephen's father was an unremarkable man, who spoke few words and worked a dull job (something to do with "controls on building materials") at an office. He even went away on a work trip for a whole year once. Stephen's father never calls Stephen "old bean" or threatens to cane him, unlike Mr. Hayward with Keith.

Stephen can only describe his family in terms of Keith's, which reveals his inner dissatisfaction with himself and desire to have a higher status. He states that he loves his family because he simply must, and describes his father in a rather unpleasant light. However, pay attention to the differences between Stephen's father and Mr. Hayward. To the naïve young Stephen the Haywards seem far superior, but an outside observer will note that Stephen is actually lucky to have the family he does. Stephen's father seems to actually be doing something interesting with his life (and indeed he's later revealed to be working for the British intelligence), and he doesn't cane Stephen like Keith's father does. Yet because Stephen idolizes the Haywards so, he sees even caning as being a sign of superiority.

Stephen describes his father's unkempt appearance, which was as "unsatisfactory" as Stephen himself. He mentions, in particular, the strange language that only his father used. Stephen's father would call his and Geoff's messy room a "coodle-moodle," and whenever Stephen would say something nonsensical, his father would call it "schnick-schnack." Stephen was embarrassed by these words that his father used. Stephen then recalls telling his father Keith's theory about "the Juice" moving into the Trewinnick house. Stephen's father looked thoughtfully at his son, but seemed relieved to learn that this was only one of Keith's wild imaginings.

Stephen is never proud of anything that is associated with himself and his family. Although that feeling of embarrassment frequently stems from his lower economic status, this particular instance alludes to another kind of quality of the Wheatleys that embarrasses Stephen. In general he finds everything about them provincial, vulgar, or boring, and contrasts these qualities to what he sees in the Haywards. Note also how Stephen's father catches on to the mishearing of "Juice," and he seems worried about his son.

Stephen answers his previous question again, saying that he must have loved his family because it was the "ordinary" thing to do. But he admits that he longed to be at Keith's house. He especially loved being invited for tea and enjoying their chocolate spread and lemon barley. He offers a description of a Wimbledon couples trophy on their mantelpiece—Keith said his parents would have been world champions if they hadn't been cheated out of it by "members of the same sinister organization now entrenched at Trewinnick"—and Uncle Peter's photograph on the sideboard.

The kind of praise and adoration that (young) Stephen expresses for the Haywards will continue throughout the novel. Even the reckless Uncle Peter is rigid and upright in the photograph in the Haywards' house, as the Haywards represent an undefeatable presence of high social class in the Close that does not allow for any disruption of the social order in their house—except for Stephen. Notice more vaguely anti-Semitic language from Keith (which is then repeated by Stephen) as he describes the "Juice" (Jews) cheating his parents out of a victory.

Stephen then describes how he once went into Keith's mother's sitting room and thanked her for inviting him over; even as an adult, he feels immense gratitude to her for letting him come over. Stephen then addresses the reader and everyone else who played a part in the "drama" of his life, saying, "thank you for having me."

It's clear that even as an older man, Stephen still feels awkward and unsure of his own value. He hasn't yet gotten over his childhood insecurities. Here he also makes explicit the "literary" nature of reality, as he describes his life as a "drama."

Stephen returns to the subject of the "disconcerting scent." In the present he is slowly walking down the street to figure out the smell's source, and he stops at No. 4, the remnants of Miss Durrant's house, which used to be called "Braemar" and was destroyed by a German bomb. He notes that he and Keith spent a lot of time hiding in the hedges of Braemar, which had grown wild, and describes the place as "our Arcadia, our Atlantis, our Garden of Eden." Stephen then finally reveals the identity of the smell's source: "plain ordinary **privet**."

This is the first time that Stephen reveals the actual source of the scent that has set off the narrative. His mythological comparisons portray the Braemar hedges as a secret place of imagination and innocence, but the fact that the scent of privet brings such complex emotions with it suggests that this "Garden of Eden" will also become a place of lost innocence. Miss Durrant's destroyed house is another example of the war finding its way even into a quiet London suburb.

Stephen then returns to the story he began earlier, which takes place at the tea table in Keith's house. He recalls the sound of beads clinking against a glass jug—but then realizes that the wind was causing the clinking, so they were outside, not inside. He confirms his correction with an auditory memory of the trains on the railway. He has troubling recalling the exact order of events, the "vivid particulars" of his remembered sensations and the connections between them.

Here, Frayn directly compares the way we want to believe memory is constructed and the way it actually is formed. Stephen vividly remembers the smell of the privet bushes and the background sound of the trains, but he cannot recall the exact order of the events that contribute to his actual story. In fact, he offers a scientifically accurate depiction of human memory and the scattered way that it solidifies itself.

Stephen recounts a time when a policeman arrived at the Close to apparently arrest Keith's mother. But Stephen then corrects himself again, and resituates the memory to an earlier time when a policeman paid Auntie Dee a visit over a complaint about her failure to comply with the blackout. Stephen then thinks of the suspicious look of guilt on Keith's mother's face at the time, and wonders if it planted "the idea" in Keith's head. But Stephen thinks that those six fateful words came out of nowhere, and were simply the product of Keith's wild imagination. Those six words were: "My mother is a German spy."

Stephen's struggle to accurately chronicle the events in his past is frustrating for the reader, but it also reveals the inherent faultiness of memory. On another note, Stephen considers the potential source for Keith's bold claim against his mother, which essentially sets the action of the story in motion. We have seen Keith embark on other "projects" of his wild imagination, but it's clear that this one will have very real consequences.

CHAPTER 3

Resuming the narrative in the flashback, the young Stephen does not say anything at all in response to Keith's claim, but just stands with his mouth slightly open. He thinks to himself that he is surprised, as he often is at Keith's announcements. He is as surprised as he was when Keith had told him that Mr. Gort from No. 11 was a murderer, whose victims' bones they found in his waste ground.

Despite the ridiculous claim that Keith's mother is a spy, Stephen does not for one second think to question his friend, which clearly shows how much control Keith holds over Stephen, even in his wildest imaginings. It also speaks to the danger of unquestioned authority.

The young Stephen also immediately feels excited because of the new possibilities of engaging in spy-like activities. Then he feels a wave of jealousy because of Keith's fortune in having parents who are interesting. The older Stephen states that his younger self was not curious about whether Keith's father knew about Keith's mother's secret. Instead, he felt regretful for having received such kindness from Keith's mother.

The childish exhilaration that Stephen expresses at the state of their new project demonstrates how he does not yet understand the potential consequences of their little game. Stephen continues to refrain from questioning Keith about his mother's secret. Class difference is manifested beyond wealth, as an evaluative criterion of people.

Stephen would rather have Mrs. Sheldon or Mrs. Stott be a German spy. He even considers Keith's father being a spy, but quickly changes his mind since he would be too afraid to spy on the intimidating Mr. Hayward. He does not consider asking Keith how he knows his mother is a spy; instead, he simply accepts that she is who she is. Once he takes Keith's word as true, Stephen starts to think that it explains why Keith's mother sends so many letters. He also believes that it explains why, of all houses, Miss Durrant's house was bombed. If she had figured out Keith's mother's secret, Keith's mother could have easily signaled to the Germans to target Miss Durrant. Furthermore, Stephen thinks that it explains why Keith's mother was so nice to him, offering all that lemon barley and chocolate spread—it's just part of her "false identity."

Keith's father's intimidation of Stephen stems from not only his higher social class, but also his experience in the Great War (WWI). Once Stephen sets his mind on Keith's mother's espionage, he fits everything within that mold and suddenly imagination transforms into the reality that Stephen believes is "real." This is a somewhat comic portrait of a child's imagination run wild, but it also becomes clear that these imaginings will have real-world effects on people besides just Stephen and Keith. The second mention of Miss Durrant's house is another somber reminder of the constant threat of war and violence.

Stephen and Keith begin spying on Keith's mother as she takes care of errands and household duties. They create a notebook for observations, which Keith labels "Logbook—Secrit." Stephen does not correct him. Keith then takes meticulous (yet frequently misspelled) notes on his mother's actions. Stephen observes how Keith's mother "does it all in such a smooth, unhurried way" and how fake she seems now that they know her secret. He then begins questioning everything that Keith's mother does and everyone she interacts with, such as Mr. Hucknall, the butcher, who Stephen thinks may also be a German spy, too. "Everything [they'd] once taken for granted now seems open to question."

Even though Keith misspells "secret" and many other words, Stephen does not correct him, solely because he does not want to upset Keith, further showing the depths of his own insecurity and servility toward his friend (and he even still considers Keith smarter or better educated than himself, despite multiple instances like this). Stephen is learning about human nature as he observes Keith's mother, and Frayn is simultaneously showing how deeply imagination can affect perception.

Stephen runs home for lunch, thinking about their plans to investigate the sitting room while Keith's mother is resting in her bedroom. As Stephen gulps down his lunch, Stephen's mother prods him about not burdening Keith's mother by going over there too often. But Stephen is so immersed in his own thoughts that he ignores her questions and bolts out of the house. Since he is sure Keith's father has not finished his lunch yet, Stephen hopes to pass the time with the other neighborhood kids. He wants to tell the other kids the secret, but decides to instead enjoy knowing something they don't.

This instance displays one of the appeals of secrecy: it can offer a sense of self-importance to the one with secret knowledge. Throughout most of the book Stephen is not confident about himself, yet when he is first gifted with "secret" information about Keith's mother, he feels empowered even against his bullies at school because of his new knowledge.

The Close is empty, since everyone is still having lunch, and Stephen thinks about how unfortunate it will be when Keith's mother is exposed. When he hears Keith's father whistling outside the house, Stephen knows that the coast is clear for him to go inside. Keith is waiting for him there, and when his mother goes to take a rest the boys creep downstairs, feeling very mysterious and important, to examine her blotter (a piece of paper used to blot excess ink when writing). As Keith observes the blotter, Stephen looks at a photograph of a young Keith's mother and Auntie Dee holding hands. Stephen looks at the blotter himself, but can only make out a few numbers and letters. "Code," Keith whispers. Then they look through Keith's mother's drawer and skim through her address book. While Keith is taking notes in their logbook, Stephen looks at the pictures on her desk, which depict the four adults in Keith's life: his parents, Auntie Dee, and Uncle Peter.

The placement and content of the photographs are telling because they visually depict the familial network of the Haywards and Auntie Dee's family. Keith's mother and Auntie Dee seem to have a close sisterly relationship, a picture of which is juxtaposed against the Haywards' marriage and that of Auntie Dee and Uncle Peter's. What should be noticed is the fact that these pictures are displayed on Keith's mother's desk, and Auntie Dee and Uncle Peter are faithfully represented as much as Keith's mother and her husband are. The boys look for secrets on the blotter (where the imprint of any written words might remain) in a semi-parody of other spy novels.

In the meantime, Keith discovers a diary in the back of the drawer. At first, it seems to contain only entries of specific occasions, like Milly's birthday. Then they find a Friday in January that is empty except for a tiny "**x**" mark. Although Stephen starts to feel nervous and tries to put the diary back, Keith continues to look through it and orders Stephen to write down their finding in the logbook.

The finding of the "x" mark signals a major turning point in the story, as it provides physical "evidence" of something suspicious about Keith's mother, and a mysterious variable that the boys can assign limitless meaning to.

Next Keith finds an exclamation point on a Saturday in February. As the two continue skimming, they notice a pattern with more **x**'s—they occur once monthly, and sometimes are crossed out and re-written a day or two earlier or later. There are only three exclamation points throughout the year, one of them on a date marked "wedding anniv." Stephen feels overwhelmed by this discovery, and starts to hypothesize that the x's symbolize a monthly meeting. Keith notices that the x's occur with each new moon, a fact that seems horrifying to Stephen.

At this point the reader likely realizes that the x's probably mark Keith's mother's menstrual cycle, and the exclamation points probably mark the occasions she has sex with Keith's father (notably, only three times in a year). This is humorous in light of the boys' horrified suspicions, and develops a thick layer of dramatic irony in the story—a disconnect between what the characters realize and what the reader knows to be true. The image of a secret meeting on a moonless night will also become an especially potent one for Stephen.

When the clocks in the house start chiming, the boys rush out of the room and run into Keith's mother. She seems suspicious but also curious about what they're doing. She tells them to go play outside, and the older Stephen reflects that this was another turning point in his story.

At first Keith's mother is mostly just amused by the boys' spying games. Notably, it is her command to go play outside that marks the turning point for Stephen, as this provides the boys with an opportunity to discuss what they've seen and let their imaginations run wild.

Stephen and Keith go to their secret hiding spot in the **privet** shrubs at Braemar (Miss Durrant's house) while Stephen waits for Keith's next instructions. Stephen notes how he feels more honored than ever to play the part of the "loyal squire and swordbearer" in the epic "story" of the Haywards. Stephen sees Keith's father and mother as being locked in a battle between good and evil, and Keith himself as both protagonist and creator of this story.

Again Frayn stresses the elusiveness of the distinction between imagination and reality through Stephen's comment of being part of the "story" of Keith's own epic-like life, when he really is indeed just a fictional character of Frayn's novel. It's also notable that the insecure Stephen recognizes Keith's role as "creator"—the inventor of their various projects—while also accepting him as the "protagonist," and himself as the loyal sidekick.

Stephen makes some suggestions of what to do next—like telling Keith's father, or the police, or writing a letter to their neighbor Mr. McAfee, but Keith ignores those ideas. Keith then takes out a black tin trunk that the boys have hidden in the bushes. The trunk, like the items in it, came from the rubble of Miss Durrant's bombed house. From the trunk Keith then takes the boys' most secret and prized possession: "the **bayonet** with which his father killed the five Germans." Stephen then clarifies this—it's not actually the bayonet itself, but rather a carving knife they found in the ruins of Braemar. But Keith sharpened the blade so that it looks like a bayonet, and in its "inward nature…it possesses the identity" of his father's bayonet.

Several important items are revealed in this passage, most notably the tin box and the "bayonet." It is significant that both boys idolize Keith's father's violent achievements in World War I to the point that they essentially will his famous weapon into reality. Also note that Stephen suggests telling authority figures about what they've discovered, but both boys reject this possibility and decide to shoulder the "burden" of their secrets themselves, rather than tattling to others.

Keith holds out the **bayonet**/knife to Stephen, who places his hand on it, and Keith makes Stephen swear not to reveal anything to anyone except as "allowed" by Keith himself—under pain of having his throat cut. They then make further plans to spy on Keith's mother as often as possible, and to use the privet lookout as their headquarters. When Stephen asks what they're going to do on the night of her next secret meeting, Keith only picks up the bayonet and looks grimly at Stephen, who is horrified but also awed. Keith then takes a white tile out of the box, labels it "**Privet**" (a misspelling of "Private"), and places it at the entrance to the hideout.

Keith is in charge, as usual, and it's only Stephen who has to swear himself to secrecy, under threat of violence. This danger is made all the more real by the presence of the "bayonet" under Stephen's hand and Keith's silent threat against his own mother, giving this childish ritual more sinister undertones. This is then followed by the humorous irony of Keith misspelling "private" as "privet," and inadvertently describing the actual bushes he is labeling.

CHAPTER 4

Stephen is daydreaming of spying on Keith's mother when his teacher asks him a question and impatiently waits for him to answer. At lunch, he is teased by his classmates, who take him by the ears and rock him back and forth, but the idea of having secret information helps Stephen feel powerful regardless. After school, Stephen runs straight to the lookout to start spying on the Haywards' house. Keith joins him briefly before they both need to go home for tea, homework, supper, and then bed.

His imaginings of Keith's mother actually influence Stephen's life: they disrupt his daily routine and keep him constantly distracted from his schoolwork. Frayn again depicts how imagination can have a very real effect on reality. Stephen also mentions once more how secrecy makes him feel powerful.

Although Stephen is constantly fidgeting, eager to go back to the lookout, Stephen's mother and Geoff —who mocks Keith's wild imaginings—prevent him from going out, especially since it is a Friday night and Stephen's father is home. Stephen notes that there's an unspoken rule in his family that they stay in on Fridays. Stephen's father, who has been napping in his armchair, wakes up and asks Stephen to talk to him.

Geoff's remarks suggest how other people might see Keith—it seems that only Stephen looks at him with such hero-worship. The special nature of Friday nights for the Wheatleys hints at their Jewishness, though Stephen himself doesn't know this yet. Friday night is usually when the first meal of Shabbat is eaten.

Stephen's father asks Stephen what he did at school, but instead of mentioning the teasing, Stephen says that he was "revising" in various school subjects. Then Stephen's father asks him to solve the equation 7**x**^2 = 63, but Stephen is distracted by the moon outside, thinking of Keith's mother's "**x**" marking the new moon for her own sinister purposes. Stephen then claims that he has not yet learned that kind of math, so his father continues asking him other questions, though Stephen is impatient and distracted by thoughts of Keith's mother.

Although Stephen is clearly annoyed by his father's questioning, the reader should take note of how different Stephen's father is from Keith's father. Mr. Wheatley is obviously caring and takes an interest in Stephen's life, while Keith's father rarely shares a conversation with Keith. Instead, he only gives him chores to do or canes him when Keith does something wrong. Here Stephen also starts to associate the mysterious "x" with the sinister qualities of a moonless night—an image that will influence him for the rest of the narrative.

Stephen's father then asks if Stephen is getting along better with the other boys—if they're not calling him names anymore. The older Stephen explains that this question came because he had once asked his parents what a "sheeny" was. At the time Stephen's father had looked at him searchingly—"the way he did when I told him about the Juice at Trewinnick"—and finally told Stephen to try and forget about it, but to tell him if anyone said something like that again.

"Sheeny" is an anti-Semitic slur, providing a more obvious hint that Stephen's family is Jewish (and its connection to the "Juice" here makes that mishearing of Keith's more clear as well). Yet Stephen's father doesn't tell him the truth—presumably to protect from more bullying.

Stephen's father follows up with more questions about Stephen's best friends and favorite teacher. Meanwhile, Stephen wonders to himself why his family isn't like the Haywards. He thinks that there's "something sad" about the Wheatleys' life, but he can't quite define it. He mentions that sometimes he'll come home to find some "melancholy stranger" waiting to talk in secret with his father.

Stephen's short-sighted comparison of his family to the Haywards seems to be restricted to classist criteria. He is unable to see the compassion that his father shows him (and Keith's father's corresponding lack of compassion), and instead can only complain about the differences between the Wheatleys and the Haywards. The "melancholy stranger" offers another vague hint that all is not as it seems at the Wheatley house, though Stephen discounts these mysteries simply because they belong to his family and not Keith's.

Close to bedtime, Stephen finds a chance to escape to the lookout, where he runs into Keith's mother. Both are startled. Assuming Stephen was headed towards her house and son, she sends him back home. The older Stephen then looks back and explains that Keith's mother seemed lost in her own thoughts during this encounter, and it was also the first time she had addressed Stephen directly.

Keith's mother's appearance outside at night and her first direct address to Stephen signals a change in the story, and hints that there may be something suspicious about her after all.

Stephen and Keith's serious spying begins the following Saturday. Most of their watch consists of unfruitful observations; the morning's most interesting event is the milk delivery. Soon after, Norman Stott from No. 13 passes by with a shovel and bucket. Then they see Mrs. McAfee from No. 8 going to No. 13, talking with Mrs. Stott, and handing her a pair of secateurs (pruning shears). They note the trains passing three times an hour, and observe the Stotts' dog chasing the Hardiments' cat up the street. The dog seems to show interest in the two boys, potentially revealing their hiding spot, but finally it wanders away. They also take note of Mr. Gort, who stands outside briefly and then goes back into his house, and a mysterious hand that opens the curtains at the Trewinnick house.

The uninteresting observations made by Stephen and Keith speak to the ridiculousness of their game of spying on Keith's mother. All they observe is the banality of daily life in the Close, try as they might to add a layer of intrigue and suspense to that life. In fact, the very detailed notes of the goings-on in the neighborhood emphasize their childish naiveté, while also providing an interesting portrait of suburban life in wartime London—seemingly mundane and ordinary, but also vaguely sinister and off-putting.

Stephen starts to feel bored and tired of listening to Keith order him around. Stephen playfully says that Stephen's father, too, is a German spy, declaring that his father does have secret meetings with people at their house, and they speak in a foreign language. Stephen decides that if Keith's mother can be a spy, then so can his father. Feeling frustrated, he thinks that Keith's mother's "stupid" **x**-marks in her diary probably don't mean anything at all.

Tired of waiting for a "lead" in their investigation, Stephen sarcastically throws out the claim that his father is a German spy, too. This is ironic, considering that Stephen will later reveal that his father actually is a German spy—but a German working for the British side. Stephen even briefly loses interest in the unknown "x" variable and all that it could possibly represent.

Stephen is just about to leave when they suddenly see Keith's mother leaving the house to go to Auntie Dee's. At that moment, Stephen begins to realize the "oddity of the whole relationship" between the two. While Stephen's mother rarely visits her sisters, Keith's mother goes to visit Auntie Dee every day. He imagines the two sharing secrets about Uncle Peter and his involvement in the war, and Keith's mother passing these secrets on to Germany, with disastrous consequences. Then he wonders if Auntie Dee could also be a spy, and imagines Uncle Peter coming home to his abandoned daughter and his wife exposed as a spy.

Once again Stephen loses himself in his imagination at the sight of Keith's mother. Also note that Stephen references his own aunts here, but gives them very little attention—he is primarily concerned with Keith's family instead of his own. Uncle Peter comes to more concretely represent a child's idea of British heroism in the war, and so in Stephen's fantasy he is a tragic, innocent figure betrayed by his wife and sister-in-law.

Keith's mother leaves Auntie Dee's house to go shopping for her. Keith runs after his mother to follow her, but they lose her after she turns a corner at the end of the Close—"she's vanished." Stephen then describes the town's spatial arrangement. The end of the Close forks into the Avenue to the left. To the right, the street turns into a rough track that leads to an unused tunnel that the trains rumble over. Stephen and Keith attempt to look for Keith's mother, but she is nowhere to be found. They start guessing where she could have gone, but then simply find her leaving Auntie Dee's house again. Keith's mother sees the boys and comes up to them, asking them what they have been doing all morning. Baffled, they don't answer her questions.

The descriptive illustration of the Close and the other parts of the town is so realistic that many of Frayn's readers have said it reminds them of their own childhood towns in London during WWII. Thus Frayn's novel does a good job of representing reality as a piece of realist fiction. Frayn is also skilled at inviting the reader to step into the shoes of young Stephen and experience that there really is something "wrong" about Keith's mother and her apparent ability to travel between two places more quickly than is natural.

In the following days, Stephen and Keith try to find the secret passageway taken by Keith's mother, as they keep watch in the lookout. They look under a manhole cover and underneath a loose board in the Hardiments' garden, but find both unlikely to be a secret passageway. Meanwhile, the older Stephen tries to remember the events as they happened in the correct order, but he is confused about whether a certain policeman came before the story began or if he had come again later. The older Stephen describes consequent images of Uncle Peter returning home, surrounded by the neighborhood kids who are in awe of the military decorations on his uniform. He is not sure whether this is an actual memory or a product of his imagination. Stephen then briefly brings up an older memory of standing behind his father at night, with soldiers running in the streets.

Again Stephen expresses difficulty in trying to figure out the chronology of specific events, but this particular part of the story is unique because he is not sure whether a certain vision of Uncle Peter is a part of his memory or is a potential product of his imagination. Both of them seem equally vivid and real, so much that it is easy to confuse them (though in light of later events, it's obvious that his memory of Uncle Peter returning home in glory is a false one). As such, Frayn introduces another potential obstacle to the idea of memory as a wholly accurate medium: the disturbance of imagined visions. What is also striking is that imagination can be as detailed and concrete as a memory, or even as present, lived reality.

Back in the flashback, Stephen is at the lookout alone and tries to follow Keith's mother to the Avenue, but the same thing happens again and he finds her at Auntie Dee's immediately. Somehow she's delivered a letter and returned to Auntie Dee's without Stephen being able to find her. He feels shaken, and wonders perhaps if this is a ghost story, instead of a spy one. The next time, Stephen is with Keith and they follow closely behind Keith's mother, only twenty steps behind, and keep her in their sight. But she goes on walking normally down the street, past the pig bins and to the shops. They follow her again a few more times when she is delivering letters and going shopping with Auntie Dee and Milly, but they don't observe anything suspicious. The boys start to grow restless.

The mysterious whereabouts of Keith's mother and her strange disappearances and reappearances establish a kind of suspense that prompts Stephen to briefly consider re-classifying the story into a ghost one. Again, he is extremely aware of the fictionality of his reality, and his attempt to categorize his own life as a type of story speaks to Frayn's frequent exploration of the difference between imagination and reality.

One day, Barbara Berrill comes up to Stephen and Keith while they are in their lookout, and asks them what they are doing. She tries to expose their secret, and as she's leaving she yells down the street that they are spying. The exchange makes the boys feel immature and embarrassed, but they stay in the lookout.

Whenever they are faced with the real world or other people's perspectives, the boys' spying fantasies seem immature, but within the dynamic of their friendship the game is deadly serious. Here Barbara starts to take an interest in the boys' activities—her appearances at the lookout will grow more frequent as the book progresses.

As it is getting darker, the boys find Keith's mother going to Auntie Dee's house again and coming out to turn around the corner. They follow her, but lose her again. They then expect to see her come out of Auntie Dee's, but instead find her coming out of the Haywards' house. Keith's mother scolds Keith for being out so long, and the two enter their home. As they are going inside, Stephen notices that Keith's mother is brushing her hair and slapping her shoulders, as if trying to rid them of something. Finally, she wipes her hand of something that Stephen believes is slimy—and he realizes where she's been disappearing to.

After a series of fruitless spying endeavours, the story finally offers a new development with the slime that Stephen notices on Keith's mother's hands. At this point, Keith's initial claim that his mother is a German spy seems partially validated, as it's at least established that there is something suspicious about her. The boys' intuitions proved to be reasonable, and to a certain degree their imagination has now become a reality.

CHAPTER 5

The chapter begins back in the present, when the older Stephen has returned to the Close. He describes how the town had been a newly erected village when he first lived there. It had started outward from the railway and it gradually grew as more and more families settled down. He describes the topography of the unsettled part of town that lay to the right of the Avenue. It first began as an embankment, which led into a tunnel that opened up to the Lanes, a narrow trail that disappeared within lush greenery. Beyond that were the Cottages, a bunch of barking dogs, and an abandoned farm. Past the farm was a no-man's land, where colonization had ceased at the start of the war. Each time Stephen and Keith ventured there, it was an ordeal "to test [their] coming manhood"—and the first ordeal was the tunnel, with its green slime and the roar of the train passing overhead.

Stephen meticulously describes the topography of his town, a landscape that is specifically shaped by the War, since Stephen mentions that it is completely changed when he returns. Thus, the War not only affects the multiple secrets that are operating in this novel, but it also provides the setting that breeds those secrets. As usual, Stephen and Keith see their adventures beyond the Close in epic terms.

Stephen states that the slime on Keith's mother's hands was from the tunnel. She does not go to the Avenue, but instead turns right to the tunnel—and they have no idea what she's doing there. Stephen and Keith then go to the tunnel to find out why Keith's mother ventures out there, with Keith taking the lead as usual, even though this discovery came from Stephen. Keith decides that his mother comes here to spy on the trains. Stephen is nervous and wants to turn back, but Keith presses on farther into the tunnel. Following footprints they see in the mud, they emerge from the tunnel, crawl through a hole in a wire fence, and climb onto a parapet. Ahead of them is the train track. Keith speculates that his mother is building a bomb, and is waiting for a certain train with something on it she needs.

This setting—the tunnel, fence, and train tracks—becomes the site of several important events later in the novel. Once again the boys have concrete evidence of something suspicious going on with Keith's mother, though the idea that she is actually a German spy (or even terrorist, as Keith suggests here) remains unlikely.

Suddenly hearing footsteps approaching, the boys hide behind some undergrowth and see Keith's mother, going through the hole in the fence and walking back towards the Close with a letter in her hand. After she has left, Stephen tries to head back, but he finds that Keith has discovered something in the undergrowth. It's a large tin box, about four feet long. The top of the box is inscribed: "Gamages of Holborn. The 'Home Sportsman' No. 4 Garden Croquet Set." Despite Stephen's warnings, Keith opens the box. Inside they find a small red package inside containing twenty cork tips (filters) attached to cigarettes, and a scrap of paper with a single "**X**" written on it.

Although the boys' story began with Keith's naïve imagination, it turns out that Keith's mother really is involved in something secret. Take notice of the past life of the tin box as a container for croquet pieces, which should suggest that the owner of the box participates in a sport that is commonly enjoyed by the upper classes in Britain. The meaning of this particular "X" is never explained in the story, but it adds to the increasingly mysterious meaning of the letter in the boys' minds.

That night Stephen is haunted by the mystery of the "**X**", and he dreams of both his own mother and Keith's mother. The next day Stephen waits for Keith in the lookout, thinking about Keith's mother kissing him goodnight—his mind associating the X with the symbol for "kiss"—and how terrifying the tunnel now seems.

"X" is sometimes a symbol for a kiss, so Stephen starts to add this meaning to the mysterious variable. His recurring thoughts of Keith's mother's kiss also show his confused feelings regarding her.

Keith never shows up, and instead Stephen is visited by Barbara, who makes fun of the mistake of the "**privet**" sign. She teases Stephen for not knowing the meaning of "privet"—though he tries to pretend he does, and thinks it's probably something shameful to do with the bathroom—and asks him if Keith is his "really really best friend." She asks Stephen why he likes Keith at all, when "everyone except you really hates him." Stephen tries to ignore these words, but he feels them take root in him like insidious "**germs**."

The multiple meanings of "privet"—imagined, misspelled, and actual—emphasize the blurred lines between imagination, perception, and reality in the novel. Note also Barbara's assertion that all the other neighborhood kids hate Keith—clearly undercutting Stephen's idealization of his friend—and Stephen's preoccupation with "germs."

Barbara keeps trying to talk to Stephen about Keith, and he keeps trying to ignore her. Then Stephen sees Keith's mother walking empty-handed to Auntie Dee's house; she immediately comes out with a shopping basket and heads towards the shops. Stephen then remembers seeing croquet hoops rusting in Auntie Dee's lawn and—connecting this to the empty croquet box—confirms that Auntie Dee must be involved in some way too. Barbara crouches next to Stephen to watch and he can't help but notice her closeness. Barbara mentions that Keith's mother is always doing Auntie Dee's shopping, and that it is strange to be going shopping in the evening. Stephen almost blurts out his secret—"she's a German spy"—but doesn't say it (or, as older Stephen corrects himself, he doesn't *think* he says it).

Slowly, different clues begin to piece together: Auntie Dee has croquet hoops in her lawn that most likely are from the tin box that Keith and Stephen found in the overgrowth near the tunnel. As such, the story gradually becomes more and more real and involves some kind of secret operation between Keith's mother and her sister. The older Stephen once again wrestles with his memory even as he tells his story in real time.

Barbara then suggests that they follow Keith's mother. Barbara speculates that she may be buying items from the black market. Stephen dismisses her guess and is offended to have Keith's mother's "high treason" so belittled, but secretly thinks that this theory—that Keith's mother is sneaking off to put cigarettes in the tin box in exchange for black market groceries—seems all too likely, and his "heart sinks."

In light of the different speculations about Keith's mother, Barbara's hypotheses actually seem the most believable. Stephen even briefly considers them, despite his insistence that he "knows" Keith is right about his mother's secret spy operations.

Then Barbara wonders if Keith's mother is taking a message to Auntie Dee's boyfriend. She explains that Deirdre and Geoff have seen the two kissing in the tunnel, and that Mrs. Hardiment once saw this boyfriend sneaking into Auntie Dee's house at night and called the police, thinking it was a "Peeping Tom." Stephen is incredulous at this information, but then thinks of Uncle Peter and feels sure that Barbara is making things up.

Again Barbara's suspicions about Keith's mother seem more probable than Keith's assertion that she's a German spy, but Stephen remains loyal to Keith's idea and to his own ideal of Uncle Peter as a glorious hero whose wife could never cheat on him. Ironically, the "boyfriend" probably is Uncle Peter, as it's later revealed that he has deserted the RAF and is hiding near the Close.

Barbara, her face very close to Stephen's, states that many mothers have boyfriends while their husbands are at war. Then Barbara's mother calls for her to come home. As she crawls out, Barbara whispers that even *her* mother has a boyfriend. Barbara then tells Stephen that her best friend is Rosemary, but that he could be her next-best friend. Stephen feels shameful for having let Barbara invade the lookout, for listening to her silly chatter, and for having entertained a "momentary suspicion that [Keith's mother is] not a German spy at all." He sees Keith's mother returning to Auntie Dee's house and handing her a full shopping basket—even though it's evening and all the shops are closed.

Barbara's casual comments about the prevalence of secret boyfriends show how wartime makes and breaks bonds in secret ways. Notice also that Barbara is beginning to show an attraction towards Stephen. Stephen is having experiences and ideas apart from Keith, and he feels guilty for that. Meanwhile Keith's mother continues her mysterious activities.

The following day, Stephen is in the lookout alone when Keith's mother, who is feeding the pigs, speaks to him from outside the bushes. She says he seems to be looking for someone, and asks if it's her. Overwhelmed, Stephen can only say no. She then leaves but looks back, and Stephen is confused how she knows that he's watching her "when it's supposed to be secret." Keith's mother goes into the house and then comes out with a plate, and asks Stephen if she can join him the hideout. She has to crawl awkwardly to enter the **privet**, and Stephen is terrified to be so close to her.

Once again the real world clashes with Stephen and Keith's imagined reality. Stephen assumes that the lookout is impenetrable and secret, but here it's made clear that other people can see the boys spying. Reality doesn't act as it's "supposed" to.

Keith's mother gives Stephen two chocolate biscuits and apologizes that Keith cannot play today. She comments on the "**privet**" sign and looks through their "logbook—secrit", laughing when she realizes that both are misspelled (and recognizing that it's "Keith's handiwork"). Meanwhile, Stephen fails to utter any words. Keith's mother asks Stephen if they've seen anything suspicious, and says that their spying could get out of hand and insult the neighbors—particularly, she says, if they were to actually follow someone around. Stephen then realizes that "she's seen us."

Stephen believes so fervently in the idea that Keith's mother is a German spy that he is legitimately afraid to be so close to her and to learn that she knows of their spying activities. Keith's mother knows her son's tendency to misspell words, and her confusion about the "privet" sign underscores the layers of meaning in the word.

Keith's mother tells Stephen that she's glad that Keith has found a friend in him, since "he doesn't make friends easily," but "Keith's easily led, as I'm sure you realize." Stephen is astonished at this, since Keith is always the leader in all their activities. Keith's mother then informs Stephen that she will not let Keith play with him anymore if they don't stop spying. She says that sometimes "people have things they want to do in private," even innocent things, and it's not right for the boys to be spying on them. She then asks him to keep this conversation secret and invites him to tea the next afternoon. Keith's mother then says "thank you for having me" and returns to her house, only to come back out with a shopping basket. Stephen does not follow her.

Once again it's revealed that Stephen is relatively unique in his view of Keith—even Keith's own parents can see that Keith doesn't get along well with other children, and isn't the heroic leader that Stephen perceives him to be. Keith's mother essentially acknowledges that she has a secret, confirming Stephen's fears. The problem is she doesn't realize just how dramatic Stephen and Keith's suspicions of her are.

CHAPTER 6

Stephen has trouble falling asleep. His mind is racing, and he goes to the window to observe the stillness of the Close underneath the light of the full moon (noting that the new moon, when Keith's mother's "**x**" meeting will be, is thus not far away). He feels conflicted, since he has all but promised Keith's mother to stop spying on her and to not tell Keith about their conversation, but he also feels loyal to Keith and to their own oath of secrecy. Stephen feels burdened by all the secrets he has to hide from Keith, such as Barbara's intrusion, her gossip about Keith's mother and Auntie Dee, and his own conversation with Keith's mother.

Stephen starts to feel the burden of many secrets and conflicting obligations. His life is more complicated when he has individual responsibilities and secrets to keep, instead of just letting Keith tell him what to do, but this is an important part of growing up. Stephen continues to associate the "x" with moon, and particularly the sinister image of a moonless night.

Suddenly, Stephen decides to go to the tunnel at night to check the tin box and prove once and for all that Keith's mother is a spy. He decides that this will be a "single heroic deed" that he can offer to Keith and that will solve all his problems. Although he becomes completely terrified at the thought of going alone at night, Stephen braves his fear and gets dressed and leaves the house. Everything is still and dark and frightening. Stephen goes through the tunnel, getting **germs** on his hands from the slime, and finally makes it into the open, through the fence, and to the tin box.

Stephen is more concerned with proving himself to Keith than discovering the truth, but this motivation is enough to send him out after the box at night, despite being completely terrified. Stephen is unaware of his own potential, unlike Keith, who is more talk and less action. Stephen again shows his preoccupation with germs.

Stephen opens the box, and inside feels some clothing. He also feels the presence of another object with ridges and furrows. Then he hears the breathing of man. Stephen freezes, and hears the mysterious man feel his way towards the box and gasp as he sees Stephen. Paralyzed with fear, Stephen doesn't turn around, and he hears the man running back toward the tunnel. Stephen stays frozen with fear for what seems a long time, and then flees back through the tunnel towards home.

This is the first encounter of the mysterious man and Stephen, and it certainly solidifies the fact that Keith's mother is indeed involved in some kind of secret or dangerous business. What that is will be revealed later in the story, but for now it adds suspense and real-world consequences to a story that seemed initially to be about a bored child's whim. Instead, it has become a story of darker secrets and a bleaker reality that is yet to be exposed.

When he returns to the Close, Stephen finds his parents worried and looking for him out in the night with flashlights. It seems Geoff has told on him. Stephen's parents scold and question him, making sure he hasn't gotten Keith involved in this as well (and Stephen is again incredulous that people think *he* could possibly be the leader, not Keith). As Stephen's mother dries him off and Stephen's father demands answers, Stephen feels that he has failed Keith because he could not turn around and look at the man. Stephen then finally looks at the "ridged and furrowed" item from the box, which is still clutched in his hand—it's a blue woolen sock.

The image of the sock is somewhat humorously juxtaposed against the terrors of the dark tunnel and the encounter with the mysterious stranger. As usual Stephen is primarily concerned with what Keith will think of him, and ignores his parents' concerns.

Time fast-forwards and Keith is examining the sock. Stephen has told him about the man but didn't say that he had the opportunity to see the man—instead, he says, he hid when he heard the man and the man didn't see him. Keith is unhappy that Stephen took the sock out of the box, and Stephen feels like a failure.

As Stephen had feared, Keith acts disappointed, and points out the holes in Stephen's story. But it's easy for Keith to judge when he wasn't even there.

Keith declares that they have to go check on the box, and though Stephen tries to dissuade him, he confidently tells his mother that they are going out to play. Keith's mother reminds Stephen to avoid causing any mischief. They go through the tunnel, with Stephen feeling like he is breaking his promise to Keith's mother. The box is gone. Keith is disappointed, and says that the man must have seen Stephen. Assuming his father's demeanor, Keith scolds Stephen for being so child-like. Keith goes on to cruelly mock Stephen for his weakness, and Stephen cries in embarrassment.

This episode does not paint Keith in a positive light, unlike the many praises that Stephen pays to his friend. In fact, Keith is extremely insensitive and verbally abusive to his supposed best friend. It also becomes more clear that Keith learns this behavior from his father, as he adopts his father's mannerisms when he is being especially cold or vicious.

As Stephen starts to head back in shame, he hears footsteps—Keith's mother is approaching. The two boys hide, with Stephen pressing his face to the ground in fear and again feeling like a coward and failure. Then they realize the footsteps are going up into the Lanes. Stephen notices a grass stain on Keith's face—he too hid his face in terror. Keith says they should follow his mother, but Stephen refuses to go. Keith won't go without him, however. Stephen feels grateful to know that Keith needs him—"without me there's no one for him to be braver than." Eventually they go together.

Despite his air of superiority, in the face of real danger Keith is just as afraid as Stephen is, hiding his face and failing to go any further past the tunnel without Stephen. The two boys' relationship seems rather toxic, as Keith constantly bullies Stephen and Stephen worships Keith, and both boys use each other for validation in different ways.

Stephen and Keith walk past the Cottages, where dogs bark and dirty children (who are "plainly laden with **germs**") stare at them. Stephen feels like a member of an alien race here, but realizes that these children probably know about "**x**" and have seen him. Keith walks past with a look of superiority. A man emerges from a cottage and Stephen wonders if it could be x, but then decides it can't—"because if it is there's no way in which we can proceed with the matter." Stephen knows that Keith is thinking this too.

Stephen's world expands as he ventures into this area beyond the Close, a neighborhood that is clearly much poorer than he's used to. While Stephen is disturbed, Keith seems able to maintain his usual snobbishness and aloofness. The boys recognize that they wouldn't know what to do if they actually had to confront "x"—the game would be over.

Eventually the boys make it through and stop at a field filled with collapsed buildings and scrap metal, which is called the "Barns." An old tramp had been living there the previous winter. The boys start throwing rocks, and Keith accidentally hits an old corrugated iron sheet, which sounds hollow. They investigate and discover that the sheet is the covering to a secret hideout. They believe the tramp is hiding there, so Stephen and Keith start hitting the iron sheet to frighten the tramp and make him come out. They get carried away, striking the iron hard and imagining the man cowering behind it.

The cruel manner in which the boys torture the "old tramp" demonstrates the kind of paranoia and unreasonable behavior that is bred by the war. They are taught to glorify violence and demonize their perceived enemy, so when their emotions erupt like this they get easily carried away, to tragic results.

When the boys stop and hear nothing, they run back to the Close, afraid that the old tramp may have died from fear. At the Haywards' house they find Keith's father, dressed in his Home Guard uniform and waiting for Keith's mother, who is not back from Auntie Dee's. Keith's mother then appears with a shopping basket, looking rushed and out of breath. Keith's father tells her she should have "supper on the table in ten minutes." As Keith and his father enter their house, Keith's mother disappointedly asks Stephen: "was it you two?"

The ending of this chapter establishes that Keith's mother is aware of the "old tramp" in the Barns and is most likely helping the man hide there. Stephen again feels guilty, both for betraying his promise to Keith's mother and for the violence he found in himself in the Barns. Keith's father again shows himself to be cold and domineering.

CHAPTER 7

The chapter returns to the present, with Stephen staring at a tub of geraniums situated at what was once the **privet** lookout point. He notices a boy watching him from the window of the new house that stands there now (where Braemar once was), but he ignores the boy and keeps contemplating the geraniums, questioning what his younger self had understood at that time. He mentions that he sat in the lookout alone for hours, since Keith had stopped coming out to play after their trip to the Barns.

Stephen continues to reflect on his past and also on the nature of memory itself, even as he sees another boy "spying" on him in the present just as he spied on other fifty years ago.

Stephen questions what he had known at that time and what he understands even now, and the nature of "understanding" itself. He conjectures that his younger self had probably been thinking that he had broken his promise to Keith's mother and let her down. He decides that younger Stephen both did and did not think Keith's mother was a German spy.

In his examination of his younger self, Stephen often reaches contradictory conclusions. As a boy he was able to believe mutually exclusive ideas without unpacking his own confusion.

Back in the flashback, Stephen states that he stopped thinking, since he didn't have Keith to decide what to think for him. He mentions that regardless of whether or not Keith's mother was a spy, he was sure that she acted suspiciously (and he doesn't really know what spies do other than act suspiciously). He then shifts his focus onto "**x**" from the Barns. He assumes that the man is German, but simultaneously believes he is an old tramp, because tramps are covered in **germs** and "germs" are similar to Germans. He also visits the possibility that "x" could be Auntie Dee's secret boyfriend, but he quickly abandons that idea. But above all, Stephen wishes that his dizzying array of thoughts would stop and Keith would come up with a new project.

Stephen feels lost without having Keith to decide what he should be thinking—but then he starts to think for himself, in a sign of growing maturity and independence. Stephen also begins to use "x" as a symbol for the man hiding in the Barns, or possibly Auntie Dee's secret boyfriend. In that way, Stephen begins to delve deeper into secrecy and the infinite possibility of meanings that an unknown entity can hold.

Stephen finally gathers up the courage to knock on the Haywards' door. Keith's mother opens the door and invites Stephen in to play. He finds Keith quietly cleaning his playroom. After an awkward conversation, Stephen realizes that, although everything seems to have returned to normal, everything has changed and there will be no more projects with Keith. Keith heads to the garage to polish his cricket bat when Keith's father asks him for their thermos.

This seems like a potential conclusion to the game of "spies," as Keith is clearly no longer wedded to the idea that his mother is a German spy. Keith's father's request for the thermos then upsets everything once more, however.

Keith states that he doesn't know what happened to the thermos, and Keith's father makes him go inside and hits his hands with a cane. Stephen, feeling guilty, waits outside. Keith comes back out, and his father tells him that he'll be punished every day until the thermos is returned. Keith's father then asks about Keith's mother—who's supposedly at Auntie Dee's—and smiles a strange smile. Then he goes into the garage and starts sharpening his **bayonet**.

Up until now, the reader is only told that Keith's father threatens to cane his son, but in this part of the story, he actually physically punishes Keith for taking the thermos flask. Frayn finally offers a darker glimpse into the actual personality of Keith's father, who certainly has a tendency towards violence. He also seems to suspect something about Keith's mother, and his act of sharpening the bayonet seems especially ominous.

Stephen runs off, feeling that he must do something to make things right. He knows the thermos is in the Barns (where Keith's mother had taken it), and he decides to go back to retrieve it, hoping to find Keith's mother on the way. Running through the tunnel, Stephen crashes into Keith's mother and they both fall down, Mrs. Hayward getting slime on her dress. Keith's mother starts to get angry at Stephen, but then Stephen tells her that Keith's father is looking for the thermos flask, and caned Keith thinking he had taken it. Keith's mother looks worried, but thanks Stephen and leaves.

Stephen tries to make things right, but again causes new problems. The slime on Keith's mother's dress will be nearly impossible to hide or explain away. Keith's mother thanking Stephen then marks a turning point in their relationship—she is addressing him not only directly, but as a peer, rather than just a naughty child. Her situation is clearly growing more desperate.

CHAPTER 8

Stephen now realizes that he is shut off from the well-ordered world of the Haywards forever. He sees Keith and Keith's father outside the house once in a while, but never Keith's mother. He considers the idea of telling a grown-up everything he knows, so he tries to tell his own family, but he can't. Stephen then tries to write what he has seen in a letter to Mr. McAfee, but he does not send the letter because "telling tales" is wrong.

Although he tries to report Keith's mother to Mr. McAfee, Stephen stops himself because he does not want to be "telling tales." The idea of "telling tales" relies on the validity of the secret, because it is wrong to say something untrue about someone else. Thus Frayn explores the relationship between secrecy and reality—only if the secret is true, rather than imagined, is it worth telling.

Stephen is in the lookout alone when Barbara joins him again. They see Keith going shopping for Auntie Dee—he now does it instead of his mother. Stephen feels guilty because he thinks it is his fault that Keith's mother cannot leave the house. Barbara speculates that Keith's mother was caught with a boyfriend and isn't allowed out of the house. Then Stephen and Barbara see Keith's mother leaving the house with letters in her hand. Keith's father comes outside to walk with her to the post, which Stephen initially thinks is strangely "affectionate" of him. Stephen then realizes that Mrs. Hayward is effectively a prisoner of her husband now. The slime on her dress (from her collision with Stephen in the tunnel) gave her away, and now Keith's father won't let her go anywhere without him.

It seems that Keith's mother's secret (which increasingly seems to be that she's having an affair) has been partially discovered by Keith's father, who now keeps a strict watch on her and does not allow her outside of the house. As was suggested before, the sense of paranoia and fear created by the War extends to the home and the very structure of the family. Although Stephen consistently dismisses Barbara's chatter, the reader will later find out that she is entirely correct.

Stephen and Barbara continue to watch the Haywards. Keith's mother lingers, contemplating the sky, and then pretends that her heel strap is broken and sends Keith's father on alone with the letters—except for one. She then comes over to the hideout, looking for Stephen, but when she sees Barbara there as well, she only invites him to tea. Barbara suspects that Keith's mother wanted Stephen to deliver the letter for her, and Stephen feels awful.

Stephen once more feels guilty, as if he were the one responsible for the Haywards' problems. Keith's mother now seems to seek out Stephen as a trustworthy friend, since she has no other friends to turn to.

One day Stephen sees a crowd of children surrounding Auntie Dee's house, because a policeman is inside talking with her. The children say "the man was hanging round again last night," speculating that it could be a peeping Tom or even a sexual deviant. Barbara is there with the other children, and she looks significantly at Stephen, showing that she won't reveal what she knows to the others—for Stephen's sake.

The visit of the policeman is a spectacle for the entire neighborhood, and the paranoia that originates from the war spurs the children's imaginations about the reason for the police visit. Stephen and Barbara also reach a new closeness with this significant glance, marking a secret shared between them.

The policeman then comes out of the house, passes by the suspicious Trewinnick house—which the children think he'll enter—and heads to the Haywards' house. Stephen sees Keith coming home from school, but he is unable to say anything to him, and Keith looks at Stephen with contempt.

While Stephen has complicated new relationships with Keith's mother and Barbara, it seems that Keith himself has cut him off. Keith clearly allies himself with his father rather than his mother.

Later Stephen sits in the lookout with Barbara, feeling like a failure. Barbara tells him that it must be Keith's mother's boyfriend that caused the whirl of events. She says that her mother went out last night looking for Deirdre, and saw the mysterious man. Barbara then says that she knows where Deirdre was—with Geoff. She says that Deirdre and Geoff meet up to smoke together and kiss. Stephen pretends to already know this.

This conversation brings up more instances of secrecy among the inhabitants of the Close, ranging from the innocent to the potentially criminal. It's becoming increasingly likely that Auntie Dee's "boyfriend," the tramp, and Keith's mother's mysterious man are all the same person.

Barbara asks Stephen if he has ever smoked a cigarette, and he claims that he has, "loads and loads." She clearly doesn't believe him, but pretends to and asks him more about it. Then she finds a stubbed-out cigarette in the dirt, and Stephen feels dizzy to think that other strangers are coming into his and Keith's secret hideout. Barbara plays with the cigarette and puts it in her mouth, and Stephen cries out that she'll get **germs** from it. Barbara suspects that Geoff and Deirdre were here smoking and kissing, and Stephen is horrified.

The various invasions of Stephen's lookout symbolize a kind of infiltration of private space that occurs on many different levels in the book—people are invading the lookout from which Stephen and Keith invade others' privacy. Stephen is overwhelmed by the thought that he is not alone in having so many secrets.

Barbara asks Stephen for a match, and then leans over Stephen to examine the locked box that he and Keith keep in the lookout. She asks Stephen if he'll open it, and he obediently gets the key from under the rock where it's hidden. He then opens the box and lets Barbara see what is inside, and she asks about the carving knife (which he insists is a **bayonet**, but then starts to doubt himself) and the blue sock.

Stephen feels helpless to resist Barbara, as she seems to have taken Keith's place as the domineering figure in his life. Already the imaginations that had seemed so real to Stephen (like the identity of the "bayonet") start to crumble.

Barbara finds a box of matches and the two start smoking the cigarette. Stephen feels a dizzying sense of freedom from breaking "meaningless oaths" and opening locked boxes, like he's entered a wide new world of adulthood. Stephen and Barbara keep smoking, lie down in the dirt, and "talk about things." Barbara speculates about Keith's mother's boyfriend, and Stephen wants to tell her that Keith's mother is a German spy, but realizes that the situation is more complicated than that. He then wonders if the cigarette Barbara found in the hideout actually came from the mysterious man.

Barbara and the cigarette play an important role in Stephen's initiation into adulthood. Stephen states that he no longer feels bound by childish rules, and he also discovers a dizzying new feeling of young love, which comes with its own new world of contradictions and complexities. Yet though everything seems to have changed very suddenly, the mysterious "x" still lingers in Stephen's mind.

Stephen proclaims that everything has changed once again, as he starts to notice the scent of Lamorna (Barbara's house) everywhere. The word "Lamorna" then becomes stuck in Stephen's head, representing both Barbara and Keith's mother for him, and some of the mystery of the word "bosom" and women in general.

As with other words and sensations (like the x), Stephen becomes obsessed with Lamorna and the multiple meanings its sound and aroma carry for him. Lamorna is the name of Barbara's house, but in Stephen's senses and emotions it also represents Barbara herself, and interestingly enough, Keith's mother.

Stephen then begins to piece together the puzzle: he thinks Keith's mother isn't a spy, but is instead taking care of "**x**," a German airman who was shot down. Stephen imagines the airman parachuting down, Keith's mother finding him, and eventually her "taking him to her bosom." He feels relief that she's not a spy, but is still disturbed because of the man's Germanness and because of the "generalized excitement" Stephen feels in the air, which is associated with Barbara Berrill and Keith's mother's "softness" when Stephen ran into her in the tunnel. Stephen again smells the perfume of Lamorna, but over it is a "harsh" and "coarse" aroma coming from the bushes around him. He ends the chapter saying that one afternoon, Keith's mother approaches him when he is alone in the lookout, and asks him to do something for her.

Stephen's blossoming sexuality is bound up in his imagined world of spies and the real secrets of the people of the Close, so he connects the "softness" and general mystery he finds in women to certain words, ideas, and sensations (note the allusion to the "harsh" privet creeping into Lamorna). Because of this, his imaginings of Keith's mother's spy activities now touch upon sexuality as well, inadvertently bringing him closer to discovering the truth. A new world seems to be opening up to Stephen, but it is still confusing and even frightening in its complexity.

CHAPTER 9

The older Stephen is seeing his memory unfold in front of him, as his younger self sits in the lookout with Keith's mother. She seems even more "perfect" than she was before, because she has more make-up on and a scarf around her neck. Only now does Stephen realize how desperate she must have been to be asking a child like him for help. He tries to piece out the way she broached the subject of asking Stephen to deliver a shopping basket to the man. He wonders if she ever explained to him why she couldn't ask Keith, but Stephen knew there was something "unthinkable" about it. Stephen remembers that his younger self had been sure that the man was a German, regardless of his complete identity.

Although Stephen does not yet know all the details of Keith's mother's secret, she is now desperate enough to confide in him and ask him for help. The way Stephen describes Keith's mother suggests again that he may be attracted to her in a confused way. It is also worth noting that Keith's mother chooses to trust Stephen and not her own son, who seems to have inherited many of his father's worst tendencies. Notice also that Stephen again associates Germanness with a set of negative qualities, rather than a particular nationality.

Keith's mother explains that the man (who she only refers to as "he") does not have a ration book and is really sick. She pleads with Stephen to deliver the basket, but in his mind he's caught up in the thought that the man is a German, making all this indefensible. Stephen finally suggests that Auntie Dee could deliver the basket, but then Keith's mother starts to cry and he realizes that though Auntie Dee had been helping Keith's mother before, she won't anymore—because, Stephen thinks, Auntie Dee was the one who first found the German airman and "took him to her bosom," but then, because Stephen made the croquet box be taken away, Keith's mother had to deliver the messages and supplies in person, and so she became the man's lover instead.

Stephen is now pulled into the adult world and asked to play a part in the dangerous mission of Keith's mother's rendezvous with the man hiding in the Barns. With this he is initiated into the protection of a secret that is graver than the made-up secret he and Keith had originally believed. Stephen is now close to figuring out the identity of the man in the Barns, but he is still too caught up in the idea of his German-ness to realize the truth.

Keith's mother cries harder, and Stephen feels awful. Stephen thinks that he has turned Keith's mother and father against each other, and Keith's mother and Auntie Dee against each other. Feeling that he's "ruined everything", he apologizes. Then he sees Keith's father come from the backyard and start looking around for his wife. As Keith's mother tidies herself up to go back to the house, she tells Stephen that he doesn't have to worry about the basket—she'll "think of some other way to do it."

Keith's mother is now truly a tragic figure, broken by external circumstances, her own actions, and the brutal man she is married to. She has become completely vulnerable in front of Stephen, and this situation becomes another painful step in his growing maturity.

Keith's mother keeps speaking, mostly to herself, about how cruel life can be sometimes, and how much things have changed from how they once were. She looks at Stephen with a "wan smile" and Stephen feels as if he is leaving his child's world, which contains its own terrors, and entering a newer, adult world with even darker secrets. Keith's mother says she has to go, and tries to take the basket with her, but Stephen stops her and takes the basket out of her hand. Keith's mother is surprised and grateful, and she kisses Stephen on the forehead.

Stephen makes a brave and mature decision here, and he feels the accompanying emotion of taking a dizzying step into the unknown. His feeling of leaving a child's world and entering an adult's is an important moment in the book and in his personal development. He is learning more about himself, about people in general, and about the nature of secrets.

After Keith's mother leaves, Barbara comes into the lookout, asking what Keith's mother had said. Stephen tries not to reveal anything, and in turn, Barbara starts mocking him, but also expressing subtle jealousy at Stephen's silence. Stephen is upset by Barbara's attitude and feels miserable. Barbara accuses Stephen of possibly being Keith's mother's boyfriend, and Stephen finally cries out that he thought Barbara wanted to be friends. Barbara then smiles and starts acting nicer again. She takes out a cigarette from her purse, which they light together and start to smoke.

This is the first moment when Stephen reaches out to Barbara, who usually is the one visiting him and telling him things that he hasn't asked about. It's clear that after their last encounter he had developed expectations of how their new "friendship" would go, and Barbara herself seems confused about how to act around Stephen—a reminder that she too is likely going through her own coming-of-age struggles.

As they are smoking, Barbara looks through the basket, which contains eggs, bacon, potatoes, carrots, Spam, corned beef, and medicine for a fever. Barbara then finds a sealed envelope, which she tries to open. Stephen takes it out of her hands, and Barbara leans forward and kisses him. Stephen can't help thinking about the **germs** from her mouth, and he suddenly thinks "I've found a value for **x**." Barbara then sits on top of Stephen and reaches for the **bayonet**. She uses it to slit the letter open, despite Stephen's desperate protests.

The fever medicine in the basket confirms that the mysterious man is sick. Frayn then portrays an important step in Stephen's abandonment of young naivety—like his earlier dismissal of Barbara as girly and intolerable—and makes it official with his first kiss. The kiss brings together several of the important symbols of the novel: the "x," "germs," and the bayonet, which Barbara grabs in Stephen's post-kiss confusion. She has none of the qualms about keeping secrets that Stephen does. The fact that the bayonet is used to slit open the letter suggests the violence associated with revealing secrets, especially secrets having to do with the war.

At that moment Keith's father approaches the lookout and asks Stephen to have a word with him. Barbara hurriedly puts the items back in the basket, and whispers to Stephen that he mustn't let Keith's father have it. Keith's father tells Stephen to bring the basket with him, and they walk to the garage. Stephen notes that Mr. Hayward is finally addressing him directly, calling him "old chap" as if he were Keith. Stephen steels himself and resolves to not hand over the basket.

This begins a tense and frightening scene for Stephen, as Keith's father seems to have entirely caught on to his wife's activities and is now turning on Stephen, as her "accomplice." Once again Keith's father's casual, even affectionate language is merely a cover for his coldness and brutality.

In the garage, Keith's father goes to his workbench and tells Stephen to stop playing silly games. Stephen notes that this conversation must be difficult for Keith's father to have as well, and Stephen realizes that adults are not all that different from himself. Keith's father then says "game over" and asks him to hand over the basket. Stephen initially refuses, shocking Keith's father, who cannot do anything but keep asking. Stephen states that deciding not to hand over the basket is the bravest thing he has done in his entire life. But when Keith's father finally says "please" in a pleading voice, Stephen gives in and hands over the basket. He feels awful, and says that this is "the weakest and most cowardly thing" he's done in life.

Stephen's observation that adults are not so different from himself shows that he has begun a new stage of his life, gradually discarding his former childish viewpoints and behavior, while also realizing that adults can be just as petty, immature, and cruel as children. Unfortunately, Stephen is unable to stand up for himself in front of Keith's father for long, quickly descending from displaying the most courage of his life to betraying that bravery and handing over the basket to Mr. Hayward. This resembles a kind of military loss, and surely means tragedy for Keith's mother's future.

Keith's mother suddenly comes into the garage and finds the two. She sees the basket, which has clearly been rummaged through, and tries to take it, but Keith's father moves it out of her grasp. There is a long and terrifying silence, and finally she tells Stephen to go find Keith and "cheer him up." Stephen runs out and finds Keith, who is struggling with his math homework. Neither boy says anything. Stephen then runs into the street, where Barbara tries to question him, but he keeps running all the way to his "Mummy."

This is a tragic and dramatic moment, as Keith's mother essentially sees her fate sealed and yet must keep up her cheerful exterior and appearance of normality. Even worse, from her perspective it looks like Stephen purposefully betrayed her, going through the basket and then bringing it to Keith's father. This is then very traumatizing for Stephen, who finally turns to his own family in his moment of desperation.

Stephen cries uncontrollably as his parents try to comfort him. They ask him what's wrong, but he won't tell them. Stephen's father suggests that his troubles might seem not so bad in the morning. Stephen goes to bed but has trouble falling asleep, and he notices that the new moon will be the following night. Stephen thinks about the man dying in the hole in the Barns, and feels guilty and unhappy. Finally he gets up and goes to sleep between his parents, like he used to when he was younger, but this doesn't comfort him and he feels claustrophobic. His parents wake up to find Stephen crying next to them, but he still won't explain what's wrong.

Stephen feels guilty and conflicted about many things, as the childish game he and Keith began has turned into a real-world tragedy. In his low moment here Stephen tries to return to the comforts of childhood—like sleeping with his parents—but finds that he cannot go back to that world. His step into adulthood is not just about young love and new secrets, but also means the loss of a particular kind of comforting sureness about the world.

When the morning comes, Stephen finds that none of his problems are gone, but he does realize what he needs to do—he needs to go find the man and bring him some food and medicine. Stephen then spends his whole day at school lost in thought. When he comes home, he gathers food from the pantry (his parents' emergency rations) and pills from the medicine cabinet, and makes a makeshift package for the man. Stephen then goes to the Barns by himself to deliver it.

Stephen is at least responsible enough to make up for his previous show of fear and defeat, and makes a mature and brave decision here in compiling a package to deliver to the man in the Barns. In this way, Stephen is depicted as a genuinely compassionate and humane person, who decides to keep his promise to Keith's mother and deliver food to a man he still believes is an enemy.

Stephen again passes through the Cottages, with their barking dogs and dirty children. The dogs lunge at him and a child throws a stone at him, but he makes it through. He then reaches the Barns, and hears the man coughing under the sheet of corrugated iron. Stephen imagines Keith's mother coming here, leaving her world of "silver ornaments and silver chimes" and descending into this "underworld." Finally Stephen leaves the things at the top step of the man's hiding place. He turns to go, but then the man calls out his name: "Stephen?"

Stephen seems to be facing all his childhood fears directly on this journey, as the dogs and children of the Cottages are actively antagonistic to him, yet he presses on. The fact that the man knows Stephen's name, then, is a new surprise (and a kind of "cliffhanger" to end the chapter), as this implies that the man isn't German at all, and in fact is someone Stephen knows.

CHAPTER 10

The older Stephen wonders if his younger self had finally understood who it was that called him. He remembers his reaction—frozen and unable to move. He describes the voice: it was not foreign or tramp-like, but familiar. The man asks if "Bobs" (Keith's mother's nickname) had sent him, and this shocks Stephen because he had previously only heard Keith's father call her that. The older Stephen states that at that point, he did not think the man was an old tramp, but certainly a "German who was entirely English."

Despite the familiarity of the man's voice and the fact that he knows Stephen's name, Stephen refuses to let go of the idea that the man is a German. In fact, that idea is so deeply engrained in his mind that it probably prevents him from realizing earlier that the man is Uncle Peter. His inability to concede the man's "Germanness" speaks to the stubbornness of imagination and also the War's effect of perpetuating nationalistic prejudice against Germans. Stephen has come to associate "Germanness" not with a country at all, but rather with a set of negative and alien qualities.

The man asks for Keith's mother, but Stephen , who can mostly just shake or nod his head in response, says she can't come. The man then realizes that Keith's father, "Ted," must have found out the truth, and he groans. He then asks Stephen to tell Keith's mother that he is sorry. Stephen just keeps nodding, unable to answer the man fully. The man finally says that there's nothing else to say—"it's over."

The story slowly unfolds its truth as Frayn offers the reader clues about the man's true identity—clues that the young Stephen still cannot or will not see. Furthermore, in his fear and confusion Stephen is frustratingly unable to speak clearly, when the man obviously desires company and answers to his questions.

Stephen then tries to leave, but the man asks him to stay. He asks why Keith's mother picked Stephen for this task, but Stephen can only shrug. The man comments on how Stephen and Keith were such a "nuisance" before with their spying games. The man then asks how Milly and Auntie Dee (who he only calls "Milly's mother") are. Stephen still can't help thinking of the man as being German (and giving off **germs**), even though the man clearly knows Stephen and the other people of the Close.

It's established that the man knows the more intimate names of Mr. and Mrs. Hayward, and he is genuinely concerned about Auntie Dee and Milly, though he has a complicated relationship with them all. All this makes it rather obvious that the man is Uncle Peter, but Stephen still cannot accept this fact and clings to his convictions about the man's Germanness (and germy-ness). We also see once again how Keith and Stephen's spying games are perceived by and affect people in the real world.

The man then starts ruminating to himself, talking about playing the "game" of war and eventually, "up there in the darkness five hundred miles from home," finding a sudden darkness and terror within himself. He starts to cry, and describes how he's failed those who trusted in him, and is now an outcast. He says the only thing that keeps him sane now is keeping track of the trains. He also tells Stephen that "It was always her. From the very beginning." The man then hands Stephen a piece of silk to give to Keith's mother, and he tells Stephen to tell her, "forever." Stephen takes the silk and runs out.

This brief conversation contains most of the explication for the backstory of the book—Uncle Peter was always in love with Keith's mother even as he was married to Auntie Dee; he deserted the Air Force, whether out of fear, PTSD (suggested by his description of an inner terror and "darkness"), or discomfort with the bombing of civilians, and has been hiding in the Barns; and Keith's mother has been taking care of him and probably conducting an affair with him. This is a tragic and emotional goodbye, then, as it seems that Uncle Peter and Mrs. Hayward will never see each other again, and there is only a frightened child to deliver their final messages to each other. Stephen's role is thus once again placed in the context of a larger, more complex story.

Stephen keeps the piece of silk, which is a pale green map of Germany ("his homeland," Stephen thinks), with him all the next day, trying to figure out how to get it to Keith's mother and tell her the word "forever." In hopes of meeting her, after school Stephen goes to the lookout and finds that Barbara has made it tidy and changed the sign from "**Privet**" to "Private." At first he is worried that Keith will see this, but then he thinks that Keith will never come to the lookout again.

While it seems that Uncle Peter wants to give Keith's mother the scarf primarily because it's one of the few possessions he has left, and he wants her to have something to remember him by, the fact that it's a map of Germany connects to the boys' original suspicion of Keith's mother being a German spy, and contributes to Stephen's idea of Germanness as representative of certain sinister and mysterious qualities, rather than a real country. The fact that the "privet" sign is corrected is telling, because it suggests that the multiplicity of meanings it held before is now being reduced to one truth, and that the novel is approaching the actual meaning of "x."

Stephen sees Auntie Dee and Milly leaving the Haywards' house, with Milly crying loudly. Keith's mother follows them, but when she reaches Auntie Dee's house the door is shut. Keith's mother knocks, but Auntie Dee doesn't open the door. Stephen notices that Keith's mother is wearing another scarf around her neck today. He feels like he'll never be able to deliver the man's message to her.

Keith's mother and Auntie Dee are now estranged as well, which likely means that Auntie Dee has learned that Keith's mother was having an affair with Uncle Peter. Mrs. Hayward is totally alone now, a prisoner in her home.

After dinner Stephen goes back to the lookout, and he finds Keith waiting for him, the **bayonet** in his hand. Stephen considers showing Keith the piece of silk as a way of avoiding his anger, but decides that he cannot. Keith, his eyes "cold," angrily accuses Stephen of showing "her" their things. Stephen denies it, and Keith, calling Stephen "old bean," reminds him of their oath. He then makes Stephen swear again that he didn't reveal their secret things. Keith then opens the box and takes out the cigarette packet Barbara had brought—proof that she did see what was in the box.

This is the ultimate break between Stephen and Keith. Keith seems to be wholly following in his father's footsteps now, mimicking both his language and his cruelty. The Stephen at the novel's start might have shown Keith the scarf in hopes of winning his approval, but by this point Stephen is brave and mature enough to keep this important secret from his unkind, immature "friend."

Stephen, ashamed, denies it again, but Keith smiles and pushes the **bayonet** against Stephen's throat. He keeps pushing it harder until it draws blood, and Stephen can feel the "**germs**" on the blade entering his body. Stephen starts to cry and bleeds more, and he considers that Keith is taking out his anger against his mother as well against Stephen. Stephen then realizes that Keith has learned this kind of torture from his father, and he suddenly realizes why Keith's mother wears a scarf in the middle of the summer.

Keith's show of anger as physical torture clearly exemplifies that the War has been welcomed into the home, since it is at home where Keith has learned how to torture Stephen. Keith's father punishes Keith's mother in the same way, and she covers her wounds by wearing a scarf around her neck, making all her previous scenes even more tragic in retrospect. Despite Stephen's earlier praise of his friend, it now becomes abundantly clear that Keith is in fact a brutal, even sadistic child, and the other children of the Close might avoid him not because of his wealth but because of his cruelty.

Stephen again considers showing Keith the silk scarf in order to make everything better, but again he decides he cannot. Finally Keith removes the **bayonet**, and coldly mocks Stephen before turning to go. Stephen realizes that Keith "lost his nerve a fraction of a second before" Stephen lost his, and that the world has changed once more.

Once again Stephen makes a brave decision to keep the scarf a secret from Keith, and he comes to an important realization—he is braver than Keith is. This is yet another shift in Stephen's perception of the world, and it's clear that he and Keith will never be friends again after this moment.

Stephen goes home and tries to hide his neck wound, but his parents notice it and are horrified. As Stephen's father cleans the wound, Stephen cries, but he doesn't answer any of their worried questions and says nothing about what happened. His parents also ask about the missing rations, and Geoff speculates about what could have happened. Barbara then knocks on their door to ask for Stephen, but he continues crying.

Until the very end, Stephen protects Keith by keeping anything he does wrong secret. He does not rat out Keith to his parents, and doesn't condemn him in his memories. Once again Stephen's parents show themselves to be compassionate and supportive, despite his lack of appreciation for them.

Time skips forward, and Stephen wakes up from a deep sleep. He briefly panics because he does not remember where he put the piece of silk. He then finds it under his pillow, now smeared with his blood, and decides to go out in the night to hide it. Once again he is afraid to sneak out, especially because tonight is finally the new moon, but he gets dressed and goes outside.

Stephen takes responsibility for the burden that has been placed on him, and makes one last brave journey into the night. The fact that it is finally the night of the new moon—when Keith's mother's "x" meetings were supposed to take place in the sinister darkness—makes this all the more symbolic, as Stephen is facing another of his greatest fears.

Stephen decides that the only safe place to hide the scarf is beyond the tunnel. As he passes through the tunnel, something seems wrong, as if "the whole sound and shape of the world has become in some way dislocated." Stephen makes it to the fence, and buries the scarf in the place where the croquet box had been hidden. Stephen then hears voices, and sees people coming through the tunnel and a vehicle (suggested to be an ambulance) heading towards the Barns. Stephen hides and watches, and realizes that the people are coming not for Stephen, but for the man.

Something has gone horribly wrong, and Stephen can sense it even before he realizes what has happened. At first he fears the men are looking for him, but then it becomes apparent that they're actually looking for Uncle Peter. In an ironic symmetry, Stephen buries the scarf where the croquet box had been, since by now it is too late for both Uncle Peter and Keith's mother.

Stephen sees the men searching about with flashlights, and sees a stopped train on the tracks. Part of the train's cargo is scrap metal from a broken airplane wing. The men then return to the vehicle carried a "load," and they speak to each other, saying they got "most of him." One of the men looks at the burden they're carrying and vomits at the sight. Stephen feels sure that he is responsible for this tragedy—he imagines the man running away from these authority figures, slipping on the train tracks, and being cut to pieces by a train. Finally the ambulance drives off and the stopped train starts up again. Stephen returns home, and thinks "the game's finally over."

Although the novel never explicitly gives a reason for Uncle Peter's death, it is likely that he killed himself because his secrets (his desertion of the Air Force and affair with Keith's mother) were discovered and he knew he could never return to his family or home again. He had previously mentioned keeping track of the trains going by, and now it's suggested that he killed himself by lying down on the tracks when he knew a train was coming. This then adds new meaning to the fact that it was the sound of a train that brought back the older Stephen's memories. This eerie and tragic scene then brings the "game" of spying to a brutal end, as a child's imagination is transformed into a bleak reality.

CHAPTER 11

Again, the older Stephen states that "everything in the Close is as it was, and everything has changed." The story is back in the present, and Stephen is revisiting the tunnel and the Lanes. There is a new electric substation where the rusty wire fence used to be. He feels embarrassed to think that he may have come back after all this time to check if the scarf is still there where he had hidden it, but he reminds himself that it could not have survived the decades.

It is the beginning of the end, and the story returns to the present to demonstrate again the effects of time and the inevitable force of change that comes with it. That Stephen returns to the Close perhaps just to find if the scarf is still there suggests that his failure to deliver the scarf to Keith's mother has haunted him throughout his life, and most likely contributes to a sense of discontentment and disappointment with himself.

Stephen then describes what happened after that night. Life simply went on; he never played with Keith again. He finds out that Uncle Peter has gone missing and Auntie Dee has fallen out with Keith's mother. Barbara started ignoring Stephen and hanging out with another boy, causing Stephen great pain at the time. Stephen then reveals that there really was a German spy that summer—but that it was him. He admits that he is now "Stefan Weitzler."

Tragically, Stephen was never able to deliver Uncle Peter's final message to Keith's mother, and we simply never learn what happened to Keith's mother after that. In a kind of parody of traditional spy novels, Stephen waits until now for a big reveal—he was German all along. This was hinted at from the start, but now it's made explicit.

Stephen explains that he was reborn as "Stephen" when his parents left Germany in 1935. His mother was English, so the whole family became the Wheatleys. He explains that after his parents died, he had felt a longing to leave England, where his life had "never really taken flight" (he had even gotten married and divorced), and to learn more about his father's life. When Stephen returned to Germany, he had a rough start, learning the language in an unfamiliar environment. He learned that his father's family had all been killed in the war—his parents and two brothers "taken and murdered" (presumably in the Holocaust) and his sister and her two children killed in an air raid like the ones Uncle Peter had taken part in.

That Stephen never feels a sense of belonging in England can be explained by his German origins and the War's influence on the British perception of Germany. However, he states that he initially has trouble fitting in Germany as well, as he must relearn the language. The fact that Stephen's father's family all were killed in the war is another suggestion that they were Jewish—they were probably murdered in the Holocaust.

Stephen stayed in Germany, and became a professional translator and translated English maintenance manuals. Then he met a German woman, married her, started a family, and melded with the German culture. Now his children are all grown up and tend their mother's grave every week.

When Stephen marries a German woman, he seems to have finally found a footing in Germany, but he still returns to the Close to recall his childhood in London years later. Thus Frayn suggests that Stefan never truly finds that sense of belonging and closure, no matter where he goes.

Stephen reveals that there were actually two spies in the Close: himself and his father. Stephen's father was a German spy on the British side, offering economic intelligence and helping decode secret German messages. This explains why his father used strange words (like coodle-moodle and schnick-schnack), which were actually German. Stephen also reveals that he and his family were the "Juice" (the name of the "secret society" Keith at Trewinnick), which is why Friday nights were important for his family. Though Stephen himself eventually returned to Germany, he says that his brother remained "Geoff Wheatley" and stayed English, only speaking German on his deathbed.

It is in the final moments of the novel that the reader will realize that earlier imagined "scenarios" (like that Stephen's father was a German spy, too) were actually representative of reality. In addition to being Germans in a country hostile to Germany, Stephen finally reveals that the Wheatleys were also Jewish (as the "Juice" was Keith's mishearing of "Jews"), who observed the Sabbath meal every Friday night. As suggested previously, this would have further contributed to Stephen's feeling of alienation and lack of belonging in England.

Stephen continues to give accounts of what happened to the rest of the children at the Close and the effects of the war on the neighborhood: notably, Keith became a barrister (lawyer). Stephen finally reveals that the man at the Barns was Uncle Peter, and Stephen wonders when he himself realized that fact, or if he knew it all along. The silk scarf, he now knows, was a map of Germany given to all British airmen in case they became stranded in enemy territory. Stephen also wonders when Peter realized he had married "the wrong sister."

As Stephen describes the fates of the other children in the Close, he is not only speaking of the effects of time on everyone's lives, but he is also revealing all the secrets that time has created, hidden, and exposed throughout the years. He finally makes the events of the novel explicit, but by now it's apparent that their power lies not in the bare facts but in the subtleties of memory, sensory detail, and emotion.

Stephen then thinks about Uncle Peter flying over and bombing Germany, and Stephen's own aunt being killed in those bombings. Stephen announces that all mysteries have now been resolved, or as resolved as they'll ever be, and again he thanks his audience for listening and participating. The book ends with Stephen catching another whiff of the **privet** scent, "even here… even now."

Frayn ends the novel on a wistful note, as Stephen steps back and looks at the big picture of the war and his own small role within in it, and then finds himself again brought back to the minute details of sensation and perception, as the scent of privet elicits raw emotions and memories that will presumably never leave him.

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