The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JEFFREY HOBBS

Jeff Hobbs studied English literature at Yale University, and graduated in 2002. He won several important writing prizes for undergraduate work, including the Willets Prize for fiction. After graduating, Hobbs lived in Tanzania and worked for the African Rainforest Conservancy. His first novel, the story of four recent Yale graduates called *The Tourists*, came out in 2007, and became a national bestseller. In 2014, he published his first work of nonfiction, *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*. The book was critically acclaimed, and won several prizes. Hobbs lives in Los Angeles with his wife.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The book discusses the city of Newark, New Jersey from the 1970s to the 2000s. Around the time of the Newark riots of 1967, many affluent white families began to leave the city of Newark and live in suburban areas instead. The city lost a lot of its funding, the police force became more brutal, and crime rose. In the '80s, the crack epidemic began, and many working-class African Americans in Newark began dealing drugs, in many cases because doing so was the best way of making a living. Crime and drug use in Newark began to fall in the mid-2000s, under the leadership of Mayor Cory Booker. However, crime escalated again after the Great Recession of 2008.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace is one of many books about the quintessential American theme of self-reinvention. The most famous exploration of this theme is probably F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Norman Podhoretz's memoir *Making It* (1967), another story about a brilliant kid from a crime-ridden city who reinvents himself as an Ivy League prodigy, at times evokes a tone similar to that of Hobbs's book. Readers are also encouraged to watch the HBO show *The Wire*, which the journalist Brett Martin called one of the great literary achievements of the 21th century. Like Hobbs's book, *The Wire* studies the struggle of working-class African Americans to achieve respectability, and it takes a pessimistic and even tragic view of their chances of success.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace: A Brilliant Young Man Who Left Newark for the Ivy League
- **When Written:** 2011-2014
- **Where Written:** New York, Connecticut, and Tanzania
- **When Published:** Fall 2011
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction
- **Setting:** Newark, New Jersey; New Haven, Connecticut; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- **Climax:** The murder of Robert Peace
- **Antagonist:** Poverty, crime, and racism could all be considered antagonists of this story
- **Point of View:** First person (Jeff Hobbs), although the first half of the book is essentially narrated in the third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

A last memory. As a sign of his love for and friendship with Robert Peace, Jeff Hobbs gave his baby son the middle name "Peace."

Alma mater. Since the publication of Hobbs's book, a scholarship fund has been established at Robert Peace's alma mater, St. Benedict's Prep. The scholarship, paid for with proceeds from Hobbs's book, is intended for young men who exemplify Robert's talent, enthusiasm, and curiosity.

PLOT SUMMARY

In 1980, a young Newark woman named Jackie Peace gives birth to a baby boy named Robert Peace. The father is a young, intelligent drug dealer named Robert "Skeet" Douglas. Although Jackie loves Skeet, she doesn't want to marry him, since she's afraid doing so will lead to arguing, and ultimately drive Skeet out of the house.

Robert grows up in an impoverished household, at a time when crime and drug use in Newark are increasing rapidly. Robert is clearly an intelligent child; however, he becomes adept at hiding his intelligence and acting tough in order to fit in with his peers. Robert clearly worships his father, who teaches him about boxing, sports, and rap, none of which Jackie approves of, since she's terrified that Robert will be sucked into the world of drug dealing.

When Robert is still a little boy, Skeet is arrested and convicted of killing two women. He protests his guilt, and claims that the criminal justice system was stacked against him. Around the same time, Jackie decides that Robert should attend a private school. She works longer hours to support her child, knowing that he deserves a first-rate education. Robert grows into a smart but moody child, who seems to be concealing a lot of

anger and loneliness.

Jackie takes on another job to pay for Robert's high school education at St. Benedict's Prep, a famous Newark private school that now caters mostly to black and Latino students from below the poverty line. The headmaster of St. Benedict's is a young, passionate man named Friar Edwin Leahy, and he comes to admire Robert for his intelligence and leadership abilities. Robert begins playing water polo in high school, and does very well. He also develops close friendships with his classmates, Victor Raymond, Drew Jewison, Curtis Gamble, Julius Starkes, and Tavarus Hester. They'll remain friends for the rest of Robert's life.

At the end of high school, Robert is accepted to many elite schools, including Yale University, but concludes that he'll be unable to afford the tuition. A wealthy St. Benedict's alumnus, however, offers to pay his tuition, no questions asked. And so, in the fall of 1998, Robert comes to Yale in New Haven, Connecticut, where one of his roommates is Jeff Hobbs—the author of this book.

Jeff hails from a privileged family of Yale alumni, and initially assumes that Robert (who plays water polo and went to private school) does, too. Their other roommates are Dan Murray, from Seattle, and Ty Cantey, a half-black track star. In their first semester at Yale, Robert and Jeff aren't particularly close. Robert begins spending time with other black students and smoking a lot of marijuana. He complains that the Yale campus is biased against students of color, and also says that many of his classmates are "soft" and spoiled. Robert takes part-time jobs on the Yale campus so that he can send his mother some money. These jobs often lead to uncomfortable confrontations with privileged Yale students. Eventually, Robert begins selling marijuana to his classmates.

Sophomore year, Robert and his roommates continue living together. Jeff and Robert become closer—they have long, late-night conversations about their families and their ambitions for the future, and Jeff learns about Robert's relationship with his father. While he knows that Skeet is in jail, he has no idea that Robert has been trying to appeal his father's conviction, and has had his appeals denied. By the end of the year, Robert's room has become "stoner central." However, Robert succeeds academically, even though he's majoring in Molecular Biophysics and Biology, one of the most challenging majors at Yale.

By senior year, Robert has netted $100,000 selling marijuana to his classmates. At graduation, he thanks his mother for loving and supporting him. After graduation, Jeff publishes a book and marries a lovely woman named Rebecca. Before long, he begins to experience all the uncertainties and setbacks of being in his mid-twenties.

Robert goes back to Newark. He talks vaguely about going to graduate school, but doesn't apply anywhere. He takes a month-long trip to Rio de Janeiro, leaving his money with an old family friend, Carl. When he comes back to Newark, however, he discovers that Carl has stolen his money and spent it all to repay his debts. Frustrated and angry, Robert takes a low-paying job teaching biology at St. Benedict's Prep. Although he still hangs out with his high school friends, he finds that it's harder to fit in in his old neighborhood—many people don't know how to treat him, due to his Yale status.

Robert embarks on a series of poor business projects. He buys a house and claims that he'll be able to rent it out to tenants, but doesn't manage to make much money doing so. Some of his old Yale friends tell him to "get the fuck out of Newark" and find a good job, but Robert usually laughs off this advice. One of Robert's closest Yale friends, Raquel Diaz, is particularly hard him on: she tells him that it's his own fault if he doesn't achieve his goals in life, since he's a graduate of one of the most elite colleges on the planet. Nevertheless, Robert proceeds to deal more marijuana in his old Newark neighborhood. Friends notice that he seems burnt out.

Robert and his high school friends invest in a risky but potentially profitable venture: they buy bad marijuana, and then treat it with butane flames to transform it into high-quality "Sour Diesel." The project takes months, and Robert does most of the work—however, the friends begin making thousands of dollars a week selling their product. In the meantime, Robert continues to insist that he's going to apply to graduate schools soon, but never does. Around the same time, Skeet dies in prison of brain cancer.

One night, Curtis and Robert are sitting in Robert's house when Robert hears a car outside. He opens the door, and two or three men immediately push inside. They drag Robert down to his basement, where he keeps his marijuana. Curtis hears a gunshot, and then sees the men running away from the house. To his horror, Robert has been killed.

At Robert's funeral, Jeff reunites with many of his old Yale friends. He also sees Robert's friends from home—some of whom he's met in college, some of whom he's meeting for the first time. He realizes that he never really knew who Robert was—beneath his likeable, cocky exterior, Robert harbored some dark secrets.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Robert DeShaun Peace – Robert DeShaun Peace is the protagonist of the book. He's born and raised in Newark, New Jersey, at a time when the city is quickly becoming one of the poorest and most dangerous places in the country. Even as a child, Robert is a complicated person. A brilliant student, he excels in school, but quickly realizes that his peers will call him a nerd unless he can "act tough." Robert comes to learn the

importance of "fronting"—being able to act a different way around different groups of people. Robert also struggles with his relationship with his father, Robert "Skeet" Douglas. He idolizes his father, even after his father is arrested and convicted of a double homicide. Partly a result, he grows into an angry, moody young man—but because he's brilliant, and because he's so adept at fronting, many of his closest friends don't realize how much anger he feels. Robert attends Yale University, where he excels in class, even as he feels that the school is designed for "spoiled white people." After graduating, Robert goes through a long, conflicted period during which he moves back to Newark, deals drugs, and—at the age of thirty—is murdered in a drug deal gone wrong. Ultimately, Jeff Hobbs presents Robert as a tragic character, in the classical sense: the qualities that have brought Robert so much success in life (his inventiveness, his ambition, and his ability to conceal the way he feels) are the same qualities that bring about his death.

Jeff Hobbs – Jeff Hobbs is the author and narrator of the book, and during his four years as an undergraduate at Yale University, he lived with Robert Peace. Jeff comes from a highly privileged family of Yale alumni, and in many ways his childhood is exactly the opposite of Robert's: he never worries about money, both of his parents are around to give him love and support, and he's confident that he's going to go on to do great things. But in spite of their differences, Jeff and Robert get along surprisingly well; indeed, Robert is later a groomsman at Jeff's wedding. While Jeff doesn't see Robert very often after graduating, he respects Robert's intelligence, calmness, and ambition. In many ways, Jeff admits, he didn't really know Robert, even when they were living together at Yale. But after learning of Robert's death, he felt compelled to write about Robert's life and honor him. Since writing his book, Hobbs has been accused of exploiting his roommate's death for his own profit, an accusation that Hobbs angrily denies. He's also established a scholarship in Robert's name for students of Robert's alma mater, St. Benedict's Prep.

Jackie Peace – Jackie Peace is Robert Peace's hardworking mother. As a young woman, she meets Skeet, and eventually has his child. However, she refuses to marry Skeet, reasoning that marriage is the quickest way to scare a man out of the house—the best way to keep Skeet in Robert's life, paradoxically, is *not* to marry him. After Skeet is arrested and imprisoned, however, Jackie has to work twice as hard. She takes on extra work to send Robert to private school, recognizing that he's a brilliant boy who deserves a first-rate education. Jackie clearly loves her son deeply, and yet, as Robert gets older, she seems strangely nervous about his future. After Robert graduates from Yale and begins dealing drugs to support himself, she begins to spend less time around him, and tells him that she no longer needs him to send her money. Jackie is perhaps the most poignant character in *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*: she's an honest, hardworking woman who clearly loves her son more than anything else in her life. Yet in spite of all the work she does and all the love she gives him, she can't stop him from making some disastrous choices.

Robert "Skeet" Douglas – Skeet is the father of Robert Peace, and one of the most ambiguous characters in the entire book. A brilliant, fast-talking man, Skeet is clearly a role model for the young Robert, and clearly he loves Robert deeply. But when Robert is still a young child, Skeet is arrested and convicted of a double homicide. Hobbs never gives his own opinion about this crime—he never says with certainty that Skeet is innocent or guilty (although he does note the corruption and racism of the Newark police force). What's certain is that Skeet's absence (he spends the rest of his life in jail) hurts Robert, and leaves him lonely, frightened, and angry—both with the world and with himself.

Friar Edwin Leahy – Friar Edwin Leahy is the young, driven headmaster of St. Benedict's Prep at the time when Robert Peace is a student there. He's instrumental in motivating Robert to do great things at a high school student, and it's likely that, had Leahy not spoken to Charles Crawley, Robert would never have been able to go to Yale. In many ways, Leahy is the character in the book who most resembles Jackie Peace: they're both hardworking, selfless people who try to help the people they love, and then experience the heartbreak of seeing those people ruin their lives.

Ty Cantey – One of Robert Peace and Jeff Hobbs's freshman roommates, Ty Cantey is a hugely talented athlete and student who's nonetheless forced to rethink his career ambitions after attending medical school. Like Robert, he's a groomsman at Jeff's wedding, and like Jeff, he endures a lot of frustrations and setbacks in his mid-twenties, after many years of success.

Raquel Diaz – One of Robert Peace's closest friends, Raquel Diaz is a Puerto Rican Yale student who, much like Robert, struggles with the condescending (and in some ways racist) atmosphere at Yale. After graduating, she and Robert remain close friends, and she seems to think of Robert as an older brother—someone she can vent to and talk with about her feelings. Raquel delivers a moving eulogy at Robert's funeral.

Oswaldo Gutierrez – Oswaldo Gutierrez is a talented Yale student who hails from a similar socioeconomic background as Robert Peace, but disapproves of Robert's drug dealing, which he feels only confirms offensive stereotypes about minorities in America. Gutierrez clearly admires Robert, but he also finds Robert frustrating, lazy, and, in a word, "so fucking stupid."

MINOR CHARACTERS

Frances Peace – Jackie Peace's mother.

Horace Peace – Jackie Peace's father.

Charlene Moore – Sister of Estella Moore, and one of the two women Skeet is convicted of killing.

Estella Moore – Sister of Charlene Moore, and one of the two women Skeet is convicted of killing.

Thomas Lechliter – Newark attorney who serves as prosecutor in Skeet's murder trial.

Georgianna Broadway – A friend of the Moore sisters, who later testifies against Skeet at his trial, effectively sending him to prison.

Deborah Neal – A friend of Georgianna Broadway.

Mervin Matthews – A friend of Estella Moore.

Sharpe James – The charismatic and controversial mayor of Newark from 1986 to 2006, when he was convicted of fraud and sentenced to prison time.

Victor Raymond – A childhood friend of Robert Peace, who continues hanging out with Robert (and eventually helping Robert deal drugs) after Robert graduates from Yale.

Coach Wayne Ridley – Coach of the St. Benedict's swim team.

Drew Jewison – One of Robert Peace's closest high school friends, and later one of his fellow drug dealers.

Julius Starkes – One of Robert Peace's closest high school friends, and later one of his fellow drug dealers.

Tavarus Hester – One of Robert Peace's closest high school friends, father of a baby boy, Christopher, and later one of Robert Peace's fellow drug dealers.

Curtis Gamble – One of Robert Peace's closest high school friends, who's in the house when Robert is murdered.

Hrvoje Dundovic – A Croatian high school friend of Robert Peace.

Charles Cawley – Wealthy businessman and St. Benedict's alumnus who pays for Robert Peace's college education, no questions asked.

Chuck Hobbs – Father of Jeff Hobbs.

Dan Murray – One of Robert Peace and Jeff Hobbs's freshman roommates.

Zina – Yale student who Robert Peace dates during his freshman year.

Sherman Feerick – Yale student and stoner who shares Robert Peace's feelings about the racism of the Yale administration, and later becomes a successful consultant.

Laurel Bachner – Head of the Elihu secret society at Yale.

Anwar Reed – New Haven drug dealer.

Simon Rodriguez – Raquel Diaz's husband.

Rebecca – Jeff Hobbs's wife.

Big Steve – Victor Raymond's older brother.

Boobie – Member of the Double II Set gang in Newark, who feuds with Robert Peace.

Inayra "Ina" Sideros – Raquel Diaz's aunt, who briefly dates Robert Peace before joining the Navy.

Lana Kusan – Croatian woman who Robert Peace is dating shortly before his death.

Isabella Peretzian – Yale student who was friends with Robert Peace in college, and later becomes a successful music writer.

Rene Millien – Brooklyn-based artist who Robert Peace dates, and who tells Robert that he needs to get his life together.

Amin – Drug dealer who employs Robert Peace to treat his supply of marijuana.

Kamar – "Drug mule" for Robert Peace, who begins talking about Robert behind his back, and plays a major role in escalating the tensions between Robert and Newark gangs.

Christopher – The young son of Tavarus Hester.

Arthur Turpin – Member of the Elihu secret society.

Carl – A family friend of the Peaces, the man who introduces Jackie Peace to Skeet, and, years later, the man who steals Robert Peace's savings, setting in motion the final, tragic years of his life.

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.

"FRONTING"

One can't talk about *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* without talking about a word: "fronting." Robert Peace, the protagonist, uses this slang word many times; in a nutshell, it means concealing or exaggerating certain aspects of one's personality in order to fit in with different kinds of people. (It's worth noting that fronting is similar to code-switching, a better-known term. However, "fronting" covers a wider range of behavior than "code-switching," which most often describes linguistic behaviors.) While Robert uses the word critically, the central irony of the book is that Robert himself is a master of fronting, and in fact has been doing so for his entire life. Growing up in one of the poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods in Newark, New Jersey, Robert quickly learns how to alter his behavior for different kinds of people. He's tough around his peers, kind and respectful around his mother, Jackie Peace, and brilliant in front of his teachers. Robert becomes even more adept at fronting after his beloved father, Skeet, is jailed for double homicide: he learns how to conceal his anger and loneliness,

even from his best friends. By the time Robert arrives at Yale University in 1998, he's learned how to hide his feelings from other people. Even his own roommate, Jeff Hobbs (the author of the book), know almost nothing Robert's troubled past. Later, when Robert moves back to Newark, he continues to pretend to be calmer, tougher, and more capable than he really is. In short, Robert Peace's short, tragic life is structured around the practice of fronting for different people—appearing to be one thing when, in fact, he's something else.

For much of the book, Robert's fronting doesn't interfere with his success, and in fact, it's the key to his success. Growing up without a father in the house forces Robert to learn to take care of himself and, just as importantly, take care of his mother. He refuses to exhibit any signs of reluctance or weakness, and quickly becomes a master of fronting, showing enormous self-control. As a result, Robert becomes a great, charismatic leader. Hobbs suggests that he develops leadership skills partly because he's highly conscious of the way other people perceive him. Furthermore, fronting allows Robert to succeed academically without being perceived as a "nerd," and losing his friendships with his peers; it allows him to "be all things to all people," and thrive as an athlete, a stoner, and a student. At Yale, Robert's fronting allows him to succeed where many of his friends from a similar racial or socioeconomic background struggle. In the book, many students of color struggle with the oppressively white, preppy atmosphere at Yale, and they allow their frustrations to take a toll on their grades. Robert shares his friends' feelings about Yale, but doesn't let those feelings get in the way of getting good grades and departmental honors. Years of fronting have given him the self-control to swallow hard, go to class, and get his degree—reasoning that, even if Yale is a prejudiced place, it's better to graduate than not.

In the end, however, fronting proves to be Robert's downfall. After returning to Newark following his graduation, Robert chooses to make a living selling marijuana in his old neighborhood. He takes on lots of responsibility and assumes a lot of unnecessary risk. And yet, because he always projects an image of being totally in control, nobody calls him out on his choices. Even Robert's closest friends and family members don't feel comfortable telling him to get out of the drug business. Using the skills he's had since his father went to jail, Robert "fronts," and convinces his peers that he knows what he's doing, even after he makes a series of incredibly risky decisions that anger rival gangs in the neighborhood and ultimately lead to his murder. In the end, then, Robert Peace is a tragic character, in the original sense of the word: fronting, the source of his greatest achievements in life, is also the source of his sudden downfall.

RACE AND RACISM

In *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*, Jeff Hobbs often takes the view that Robert Peace is the architect of his own downfall But in other ways, Hobbs argues, Robert is a victim of racism throughout his life. Over the course of the book, Hobbs examines the racial prejudice, both personal and structural, that exists in all sectors of modern American society. In doing so, he shows how racism, much of it directed at African Americans, prevents Robert and many others from realizing their potential.

Hobbs's book begins with a general look at the history of racism in Newark, New Jersey, one of the most racially divided cities in the United States. Beginning in the late '60s, the influx of African Americans to Newark triggered a "white flight," during which upper- and middle-class white families moved to suburban neighborhoods. The white flight coincided with, and in some ways caused, an escalation in police brutality in Newark, as well as a series of changes in real estate and the credit system that made it increasingly difficult (and were in some cases designed to make it difficult) for black families to live in desirable neighborhoods. The problem escalated still further in the 1980s, the decade in which Robert was born, when the War on Drugs led to a rapid increase in incarceration rates, particularly for black males. In short, Robert grows up at a time in Newark's history when black people have a highly antagonistic relationship with the police, when their families are being torn apart by prison sentences, and when it's difficult for them to live in safe neighborhoods. Even before he can talk, racism is a huge part of his life.

When Robert's father, Skeet, is arrested and convicted of murder, the racism of Newark society begins to hurt Robert more than ever. While Hobbs never says whether he believes Skeet to be innocent or guilty, he emphasizes the racial divide surrounding Skeet's prosecution. All nine of the police officers who testify against Skeet are white. Furthermore, Skeet spends three years in prison *before* being tried, as a result of the enormous incarceration rate at the time. Because of the delay, key witnesses that could conceivably have cleared Skeet's name die. Hobbs's point isn't simply whether Skeet is innocent or guilty. Rather, Skeet is mistreated (his right to a speedy trial is arguably violated) in a manner that reflects the overall racial divide in Newark at the time. Furthermore, Robert grows up highly conscious of this racial divide, and the injustices that arise from it. He develops a deep sense of anger that, Hobbs suggests, is mostly directed at the racial injustices he perceives all around him.

Finally, Hobbs shows that Robert endures racial prejudice during his time at Yale University. Though Yale has been celebrated for its diversity and tolerant, enlightened atmosphere, Hobbs suggests that the students make embarrassingly little effort to move across racial lines. Robert himself sees Yale as a place that implicitly favors white students and white culture, and treats black students with condescension at best and contempt at worst. He points to his interactions with professors and students, and the Yale

administration's refusal to fund events like Af-Am week, as signs of the prejudicial atmosphere. On one humiliating occasion, while Robert is working in the cafeteria, some preppy, white students refuse to bus their own trays. When Robert politely asks them to do so, the white students don't even make eye contact with him, and show every sign of treating him as a second-class person. Overall, Hobbs paints a depressing portrait of college life. Elite colleges are said to lead by example, showing the rest of the country how things should be. But instead, college life seems to mimic the racial divisions of American society in general. (However, some Yale alumni have criticized Hobbs's characterization, either because they deny that their school is so racially divided, or because they interpret black students spending the majority of their time with other black students as a sign of solidarity and racial progress.)

Robert goes through life experiencing the effects of racism again and again. Sometimes, these effects are painfully concrete: his father is arrested and sentenced to jail time by a criminal justice system that overwhelmingly favors whites. At other times, the effects are more psychological: at Yale, he's made to feel like a second-class student, an outsider at his own university. The influential social psychologist Claude Steele has written about the effects of racism on talented black students: the constant pressures of racism leave these students frustrated, angry, and often deprived of the drive they need to succeed. Robert demonstrates Steele's theories all-too well: his anger and resentment make him into an underachiever and influence him to return to the Newark neighborhood where he feels most comfortable. When seen in this light, Robert comes across not simply as a victim of his own personal flaws, but of a society that discriminates against African Americans.

EDUCATION AND THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

The majority of *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* takes place in a school setting: first Mt. Carmel, the private elementary school Robert Peace attends, then St. Benedict's Prep, his high school, and finally Yale University, where he goes to college. In many ways, all three schools share a common mission: even though they're very different, they're all designed to help their students succeed by preparing them for a successful, rewarding adult life. In school, Robert and his peers are taught specific skills, but their teachers also attempt to give them a sense of confidence and ambition, ensuring they'll become successful adults some day. And yet, the book's view of the educational system is in many ways pessimistic: the life of Robert Peace proves that schools can't always prepare their students for life.

Many of the "best" schools are designed to give their students the confidence, ambition, and leadership abilities to succeed. St. Benedict's Prep, a century-old private school in Newark with an endowment in the millions, is one such school. During Robert Peace's time at St. Benedict's, his teachers don't just teach him math, science, and English: they try to shape his character, too. The headmaster, Friar Edwin Leahy, admires Robert for his maturity and willpower, and makes it his personal mission to cultivate leadership abilities in Robert. Similar, Robert's swimming coach, Wayne Ridley, believes that he has a duty to make his boys fine young men, not just fine athletes. The St. Benedict's faculty members are sometime successful in their attempts to nurture good character in their students. But at times, they fall short. Robert succeeds at St. Benedicts and seems to demonstrate his leadership skills. But in fact, Hobbs suggests, he's hiding his "true" character and merely going through the motions for the sake of his teachers. On the one occasion when Coach Ridley tries to get Robert to talk about his drug use and his relationship with his father, Robert yells at Ridley and doesn't talk to him for a week. Robert's behavior suggests a basic problem with the school system: the teachers don't always have the abilities to "get through" to their students, even if they're close with their students. Ridley and Leahy try to help Robert resolve his larger problems in life, but they don't succeed. And in the process, they just make Robert better at concealing his true self.

School isn't just about building character, of course: students are also expected to learn skills that will help them succeed for the rest of their lives. But here again, Hobbs suggests that the school system is flawed: the specific skills that schools teach aren't enough to guarantee success, if they're not paired with lessons in confidence and motivation. At Yale, Robert seemingly acquires every skill he'd need to become successful. He works hard at his classes, gets near-perfect grades, and wins departmental honors. And yet, when Robert graduates, he almost immediately goes back to living in Newark and selling drugs. Conceivably, he could take the MCAT, get into a great medical school, and become a successful doctor, but he doesn't seem remotely interested in taking this path in life.

Robert's Yale education could be said to fail him in two distinct ways. First, it does nothing to build his confidence or inspire his passion. (A famous, and infamous, article by William Deresiewicz made exactly this point about Ivy League educations.) But second, Robert's Yale education fails him, because—according to Robert—it caters to a privileged white student body. (See Racism theme.) Although he has many Yale friends, Robert never really feels welcome at Yale itself. College gives him the skillset associated with being a successful doctor, but not the sense of support and belonging that would motivate him to *want* to be a doctor. Instead, the Yale administration seems to assume that its students already do feel that they belong and that they're supported—a naïve assumption that ignores Robert's perspective as a black working-class student at an elite, traditionally WASP-y college.

In all, Hobbs makes a number of important points about the failures of the American school system: it can't reach its students, it reinforces racial prejudices instead of repairing

them, and it doesn't give all of its students the confidence and acceptance they need to thrive as adults—only those students who already feel a sense of acceptance in an affluent, predominately white atmosphere. When Hobbs puts these points together, they form a convincing explanation for why the life of Robert Peace—a student who on paper should have thrived after graduating from college—came to a sudden, tragic end.

PRIVILEGE

The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace isn't just about Robert Peace. It's also an examination of the effects of racial and socioeconomic privilege. Jeff and Robert, the two principle characters in the book, are very different people. Jeff comes from a wealthy, white, and highly privileged family of Yale alumni, lives with his two loving, supporting parents, and grows up never having to worry about food or money. During Robert's underprivileged childhood, however, food and money are constant concerns. Robert's father, Skeet, spends most of Robert's adolescence in jail, and Robert is the first person in his family to attend any college, much less an elite college like Yale. By focusing on the friendship between Robert and Jeff, the book studies the concept of privilege, and the ways that it colors interactions between people.

From the beginning, Hobbs discusses privilege mostly in terms of the effect it has on his interactions with other people. For the most part, differences in privilege act as a barrier to friendship. Growing up, Jeff is surrounded by other wealthy white children. Living with Robert Peace is one of his first experiences spending so much time with a person whose life and level of privilege are so different from his own. Immediately upon meeting Robert, Jeff becomes conscious of having more privilege than his roommate. In part, this is because Jeff is white and therefore exempt from the kind of racial prejudice that African Americans face. (By his own account, Jeff goes into college already aware of these realities, and has them confirmed many times over the next four years—most often when Robert tells him that he's experienced prejudice or discrimination from fellow students.)

Jeff is also highly aware of his socioeconomic privilege. He can tell that Robert is from a working-class family (based on small but telling signifiers like the fact that Robert doesn't have much luggage), whereas he, Jeff, is the son of a wealthy surgeon. It's for this reason that Jeff initially gets along better with Ty Cantey, another black roommate who comes from a much wealthier family. Differences in privilege seem to interfere with Jeff and Robert becoming friends. They've had such different experiences in life that they're not sure what to talk about, and therefore can't "bond" in the way that many college freshmen do. When making polite conversation, for example, Jeff asks Robert what his father does, to which Robert replies that his father is in jail. Jeff has no idea what to say—a recurring theme of his conversations with Robert for the rest of freshman year. Even after Jeff and Robert become friends, their backgrounds often keep them from becoming closer. Robert's complaints about his spoiled, privileged white classmates sometimes alienate him from Jeff, and Jeff for his part isn't sure how to interact with Robert's friends from back in Newark. At every step of the way, the basic components of college friendship—talking about one's feelings, sharing one's ambitions, complaining about school, getting to know a friend's friends—are thwarted by differences in privilege.

None of this should suggest that Robert and Jeff don't become friends—in fact, Robert later becomes a groomsman at Jeff's wedding. And yet, even after they become friends, Jeff and Robert find it difficult to see eye-to-eye. Four years of somewhat similar experiences at Yale aren't enough to make up for the eighteen years of vastly different experiences, and vastly different amounts of privilege. After Robert's murder, Jeff comes to realize just how different Robert's life was from his: Jeff had no idea what Robert's life in Newark was like, and the kinds of things Robert worried about on a daily basis never even occurred to Jeff. In many ways, Jeff didn't really know Robert. It's remarkable how much of the basic information about Robert in Jeff's book is information that Jeff only learned *after* Robert's death. Privilege doesn't necessarily keep people apart, but it certainly keeps them from seeing the world in the same way.

By writing a biography of his old friend and roommate—and, in the process, getting to know all about him, in a way he never did while Robert was alive—Hobbs seems to come to terms with the harsh realities of privilege. He recognizes that the privileged atmosphere at Yale alienated Robert from his peers and in some ways drove him back to Newark. Furthermore, Hobbs seems to acknowledge that he, his other Yale friends, and Yale University itself didn't do enough to reach out to Robert. In its sheer thoroughness, Hobbs's book shows how privilege keeps people from knowing each other—but perhaps it also encourages people to move past the boundaries of privilege by exercising curiosity, respect, and open-mindedness.

CRIME

One of the most important and most nuanced themes of the book is crime, particularly the sale of illegal drugs (and the various crimes related to their sale). Too often, people portray crime in one of two ways. Either crime is a reflection of the basic inequalities in society, or it's a reflection of the bad decisions that criminals make. Put another way, crime is either something that criminals are driven to do because they're desperate (suggesting that they're the victims of broad societal forces like poverty), or it's something they entirely choose to do (suggesting, oftentimes, that they're inherently bad people). *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*

is about a man who commits many crimes. But it doesn't simplify the facts by portraying Robert in one of the two stereotypical ways. Robert Peace is a victim in some ways, and in other ways he's responsible for his bad decisions.

At many points in the book, Jeff Hobbs questions the nature of crime, and portrays crime as a natural, rational response to society's problems. Robert grows up at a time when Newark is one of the poorest and most dangerous cities in the country. People turn to selling drugs, not because they're immoral but because they see drugs as one of the only good ways to make money. Robert begins selling drugs in part to support to support his beloved mother, Jackie Peace, the woman who's worked hard for Robert's entire life to make sure he's well-fed and gets a good education. For Robert, as with so many others, selling marijuana is a rational thing to do—and furthermore, it's the compassionate thing to do, since it allows him to take care of Jackie. Hobbs further de-stigmatizes the drug business by questioning whether selling drugs should really be considered a crime at all. Robert sells marijuana, a drug that's never shown to cause any direct harm to anyone in the book. *Selling* marijuana is dangerous, of course, but marijuana itself seems perfectly innocent. In this way, Hobbs advances an arguably "liberal" view of crime, premised on the assumption that drug dealers are generally rational, moral people who just want to survive.

But it's not that simple. Hobbs clearly has a lot of love and respect for Robert, but he refuses to let his old roommate off the hook entirely. Robert isn't just the victim of economic need and unfair drug laws: he *chooses* to take outrageous risks, endangering himself and his friends and family, by committing crimes. Even if Robert is partly motivated by economics, his need for money can't entirely explain why he sells marijuana. Again and again, Robert's friends tell him that he should move to a new city, get a well-paying job, and make some money. Robert just laughs off this advice, though on some level, he knows his friends are right. Hobbs suggests that Robert enjoys the risks of selling drugs—he even smuggles weed through an airport, a highly risky act that could easily result in his being arrested by the D.E.A. Robert also seems to take pleasure in breaking rules: he's proud of being smart enough to get away with his crimes.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Robert has always been most comfortable when surrounded by his friends in Newark. It is because he chooses to live in Newark, where economic opportunities are limited, that he makes the further choice to sell drugs to make money. Overall, Robert Peace isn't just the victim of his own poverty—he's a smart, mature adult who's capable of making money in hundreds of different ways, and yet he chooses to make money by breaking the law, endangering his life and the lives of others. This is what makes Robert such a fascinating and frustrating character: he's so clearly a product of his environment, and therefore not wholly accountable for his actions, and yet also so clearly a product of his own bad choices. Or as one of his classmates puts it, "So fucking smart, but so fucking dumb."

SYMBOLS

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

PAPER LANTERNS

The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace ends with Robert Peace's high school friends releasing paper lanterns into the night sky on what would have been Robert's thirty-first birthday. As Jeff Hobbs describes this emotional moment, it becomes clear that the scene is taking on symbolic meaning. Robert—a promising, ambitious young man—had a brief, meteoric life. He "burned bright" with success, but some bad choices, along with the injustices of law and order in America, led to his early death. So in some ways, the paper lanterns symbolize Robert's own life—and the lives of many other promising youths who grow up in underprivileged families.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* published in 2014.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Jackie and Rob would eat their snacks on the blanket (never on park benches, because stupefied addicts peed themselves on them), and she'd follow him closely over the jungle gym while her eyes searched always for nails or glass or older, rougher children who had no business on a toddler playground, anything that posed a threat to her boy.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace, Jackie Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Jackie Peace is the mother of Robert Peace, the protagonist and tragic hero of the book. But in many ways the most "heroic" character in the book is Jackie. Raising a child in

one of the most dangerous and crime-ridden places in the United States, Jackie is terrified that her child will be hurt, and resolves to give him the best education possible. Her goal is very simple: make sure that Robert grows into a fine young man instead of getting caught up in the drug deals common in his neighborhood at the time. To this end, Jackie makes sure that the young Robert stays away from all kinds of danger—older, more aggressive boys, nails and glass on the streets, etc. She clearly loves her son, and puts all her energy into raising him right.

❝ As he did so, his confidence grew that not only would this evidence lead to a conviction, but also that a conviction would represent justice in the world. In other words, the defendant was guilty. He did not overlook the many loose ends presented within the story: the single witness who had been inebriated, strung out, severely overtired, and hungover at the time of the murders, and who had identified a suspect, by voice only, whom she had encountered once in her life and never spoken to directly; the very odd time lapse between when the murder was said to have taken place—seven thirty—and when Georgianna's roommate had first called the police two hours later …

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert "Skeet" Douglas, Thomas Lechliter, Georgianna Broadway

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the local prosecutor in Newark, a man named Thomas Lechliter, prepares to prosecute Skeet, Robert's father, for the crime of double homicide. Lechliter reviews the testimony of the witnesses and concludes that he has a convincing case against Skeet, whom he regards as unequivocally guilty. Lechliter bases his conclusion on a few factors: Georgianna Broadway's testimony that she heart Skeet's voice before gunfire broke out, the fact that he was in the building at the time of the crime, etc. Lechliter is forced to overlook some important evidence to reach his conclusion, however: the facts that Georgianna waited a long time before calling the cops, that Skeet has no motive for killing his two victims, that Georgianna was hung over and strung out at the time, and that Skeet was identified only by voice, not sight.

It's unclear how to interpret Lechliter's behavior. In some ways, Hobbs suggests that Lechliter is a very moral, professional, fair-minded person: he reviews the case and makes the logical conclusion. But in some other ways, Hobbs suggests that Skeet is the victim of racial prejudice: Lechliter decides on Skeet's guilt, overlooking the confounding evidence, partly because Skeet is a black male in a city where black males are arrested for (if not guilty of) the vast majority of crimes. In all, Hobbs never editorializes about Skeet's guilt: he presents the facts, leaves reason to believe both sides of the story, and lets the reader decide.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ But still she saw the anger in him, a gradually thickening shade just behind the sometimes impenetrable veil of his eyes. She knew that any anger could be dangerous, and that this particular variety, seeded so deeply during Skeet's three years in jail awaiting trial—nearly a third of her son's life by the time it was finished—was especially destructive.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert "Skeet" Douglas, Robert DeShaun Peace, Jackie Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

As time goes on, Skeet remains in prison while awaiting his trial for double murder. All in all, he spends three years in jail awaiting trial, during which time Robert and Jackie visit him almost every week. Jackie loves Skeet, but her priority is taking care of Robert. And she's worried that Robert will be devastated by his father's misfortune. As the three years drag on, Jackie sees Robert becoming more sullen and lonely, and also notices that he seems to be harboring (and hiding) immense anger.

The passage foreshadows some of the issues that will plague Robert for the rest of his life. As an adult, Robert continues to struggle with anger and opening up to other people—even people he loves. Here, Jeff Hobbs suggests that many of these issues can be traced back to Robert's conflicted relationship with his father.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ 'Wait, wait, wait, hold up," Rob said. 'You're getting served steak and lobster, getting to sleep in your own bedroom with your own bathroom and a maid—and you're starting shit over some words about shoes?" Rob made *psha* sound. "Don't be such a bitch, T."

Related Characters: Robert DeShaun Peace (speaker), Tavarus Hester

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Robert Peace is now a high school student at St. Benedict's (an elite New Jersey private school). Some of his classmates are invited on a luxurious summer retreat, during which they spend time with wealthy St. Benedict's donors. At one point, Robert gets a call from his good friend Tavarus. Like Robert, Tavarus comes from an impoverished household, but unlike Robert, Tavarus struggles with controlling his emotions. Tavarus has gotten in a fight with another student. Robert's stern advice is that Tavarus stop being "such a bitch," and take advantage of the incredible opportunity that's been given to him.

The passage emphasizes Robert's talent for leadership. It also suggests that he's good at controlling his own emotions—indeed, when he's at Yale, Robert suppresses his disgust with his entitled classmates and concentrates on getting his degree. The ultimate irony of this passage, however, is that Robert ends up ignoring his own advice ten years later, when he becomes petty, aggressive, and unwilling to take advantage of the tremendous advantages he's been given in life.

❝ After Rob called a faculty coordinator back in Newark to let him know they were okay, the homeowner asked if the boys wanted to stay in his garage until the storm let up. Rob declined; now that no one was going to be struck by lightning or washed down a mountainside, he wanted his group to get through this on their own.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

Robert has been selected to lead a group of St. Benedict's freshmen on the annual school ritual: a hike through part of the Appalachian Trail. During the hike, Robert and the freshmen get caught in the middle of a dangerous storm. Exercising clear thinking and excellent leadership, Robert leads his freshmen down out of the mountains, and calls a St. Benedict's administrator to notify her that his kids are okay. Robert is a tough leader: instead of allowing the freshmen to stay in a dry, warm place until the rain subsides, he encourages them to get through the ordeal on their own, braving the wind and the rain. Robert is tough on others, in no small part, because he's so tough on himself: he's been through much worse and survived, and he expects other people to live up to his high standards. In all, the Appalachian Trail incident is an interesting window into Robert's character and the emphasis he places on taking care of oneself.

❝ Now, in the spring of 1997, they were young men, leaders who had earned the right to strut the way they did. And three, ten, twenty years from now? On that night, they were confident, even arrogant, that they would rule the city of Newark.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Julius Starkes, Drew Jewison, Tavarus Hester, Curtis Gamble, Robert DeShaun Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

The chapter ends with an inspiring description of Robert and his high school friends, including his fellow swimmers Curtis Gamble, Tavarus Hester, and Drew Jewison, going to a dance club. They're almost finished with high school, and they're on top of the world. Their futures look extremely bright, and they feel that they're entitled to celebrate. And so they dance the night away.

In many ways, this passage represents the high point of Robert's self-confidence. He's overcome a lot of adversity to become a brilliant student and a talented athlete, so he's justifiably proud of himself. But the passage also foreshadows some of the later frustrations and disappointments that Robert will experience. Notice that Jeff Hobbs describes the teenagers as feeling like the rulers of Newark, not the world. This could be Hobbs's subtle way of signaling the characters' limited ambitions. Robert wants to do great things in the future, but because of his upbringing, he can't entirely conceive of what form his achievements might take. Newark *is* his world—and as he finishes college and struggles with what to do next, that becomes a problem for him.

Chapter 5 Quotes

As Coach Ridley learned that early winter morning of 1998, Rob Peace was one of those students. All the anger Rob felt—at his father's imprisonment, his mother's weariness, his own poverty that tasted like ketchup packets—only seemed to fuel his merits as a scholar and leader, and hide itself behind those ever-rising attributes.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Jackie Peace, Robert "Skeet" Douglas, Robert DeShaun Peace, Coach Wayne Ridley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hobbs conveys the extent to which Robert refuses to open up about his feelings. His coach, Wayne Ridley, has tried to raise a sensitive subject with him: Robert's marijuana use, which Ridley feels is impairing Robert's athletic abilities as well as his potential to succeed in life. But when Ridley makes these points, Robert explodes. Usually a calm, quiet kid, he accuses Ridley of trying to be his father, and insists that he's always gotten by without a father.

Ridley is shocked that Robert reacts so strongly to Ridley's innocent questions. He realizes that Robert is a special kind of student: while he's as troubled as any other St. Benedict's student (his father is in jail, after all), he's developed powerful defense mechanisms that allow him to conceal his pain and frustration. Put another way, Robert is "high-functioning"—he's so intelligent and talented that he can hide his feelings from other people, and even consistently win praise for his achievements. On this one important occasion, however, Coach Ridley peers behind Robert's calm façade and sees him for what he really is—an angry, deeply troubled young man, who also happens to be a genius.

Mr. Cawley took a dinner napkin with a phone number scrawled on it from his pocket, and he pressed it into Rob's hand. He said, "You can go to college wherever you want."

Related Characters: Charles Cawley, Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

In this important passage, a wealthy St. Benedict's alumnus named Charles Cawley gives Robert an incredible gift. Cawley has attended the St Benedict's senior awards night, and he sees that Robert is one of the most impressive young men he's ever met. Dazzled with Robert's work ethic, charisma, and obvious brilliance, Cawley (a multi-millionaire) offers to pay for Robert's college education, no questions asked.

The passage sets in motion the events of the second half of the book—before this, Robert was planning on going to a cheaper and less prestigious school than the one he ends up attending on Cawley's dime. Although Robert thinks of Cawley's gift as a path to success in life, it arguably ends up leading to a series of bitter disappointments.

I learned over the course of our conversation that Rob had gone to a prep school, he "played a little water polo," and his favorite pastime was hiking the Appalachian Trail. Nothing he said shaded him as anything other than well-off and overeducated: a typical rarefied Yale applicant.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to Jeff Hobbs, the narrator and author of the book, and now a character in the narrative. Jeff Hobbs is Robert Peace's freshman roommate and friend. But his first impressions of Robert are very different than those he later develops. Jeff, himself the child of privileged, affluent, white Yale alumni, assumes that Robert is more or less like him: a rich, preppy kid who plays water polo and goes hiking. He has no idea that Robert is from one of the poorest parts of the country, has a parent in jail, and grew up working around the clock to support himself and his mother.

The passage establishes one of the most important themes of the book: the relationship between people with radically different amounts of privilege. Jeff often finds it difficult to communicate with Robert and be honest about his feelings, and Robert seems to feel the same way. For a few brief weeks, however, Jeff believes that he and Robert are more

or less equally privileged, and have had the same sorts of experiences in life. That Jeff would make this assumption speaks volumes about the narrowness of his view of the world, not to mention the affluence of the typical Yale student.

Chapter 6 Quotes

I told him I'd grown up "near Philly," when in fact I had grown up in an eighteenth-century farmhouse on fifteen acres of rolling rural hills in Chester County, thirty miles from the city. I consciously failed to mention that I'd attended private school beginning in prekindergarten, and that my parents, who had been married for almost thirty years, had invested their entire lives (not to mention their finances) into taking care of their four children, removing all uncertainty from our formative years.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

When Jeff meets Robert for the first time during move-in day, he's forced to revise some of his thoughts about his roommate. Robert is not, as Jeff first assumed, a wealthy kid—he clearly comes from a different background than Jeff's. Highly aware of this, and not willing to present himself as "just another spoiled Yale legacy" (even though Jeff is, as a matter of fact, a Yale legacy and the child of wealthy parents), Jeff distorts the truth about his background. He claims to have grown up near Philadelphia, knowing that this will make him sound tougher and more street-smart than he really is.

The passage is a powerful example of the way that real and perceived differences in privilege can act as a barrier to friendship. Jeff conceals the truth about himself because he feels rather guilty about his privilege; in a similar way, Robert is shown to conceal facts about his own life because he doesn't feel comfortable bringing them up in what he perceives to be the spoiled, entitled atmosphere of Yale University. Robert and Jeff are clearly very different people, and both of them are "fronting" to each other in different ways—it remains to be seen how they'll get along for the next four years.

White students went to frat houses, one of five popular bars, outdoor quad parties; black students did something else, of which we knew little except that rap music was most likely playing very loud.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

In his early months at Yale, Jeff notices the firm division between black and white students at Yale. Black students tend to associate mostly with other black students, and white students seem to do the same. White students drink at certain bars, dance to certain kinds of music, and the same is true of black students.

In some ways, Jeff suggests that it's unfortunate that Yale University, said to be a standard-setter for the rest of the country, merely *reflects* the racial divisions in American society instead of repairing these divisions. For not the first time in the book, Jeff suggests that black students' experiences are largely beyond his comprehension—not just because black students tend to spend time mostly with other black students, but because black students have a different experience at Yale, and a different relationship with Yale culture (which, Jeff suggests, is strongly preppy and "WASP-y"). Jeff's characterization of the atmosphere on the Yale campus has come under no little criticism from Yale alumni, who've suggested that the school is less racially divided than Jeff suggests.

This word "fronting" was important to Rob. A coward who acted tough was fronting. A nerd who acted dumb was fronting. A rich kid who acted poor was fronting. Rob found the instinct very offensive, and in college he saw it all around. He felt as though people were in a constant state of role-play before teachers, before each other [...]

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Jeff discusses one of the most important words in the

book: "fronting." As Robert sees it, fronting means hiding or exaggerating different aspects of one's personality, depending on the company one keeps. Robert despises certain of his classmates for the way they "front." For example, his half-black roommate Ty fronts by pretending to be tougher and more street-wise than he really is. Robert considers this an insult to people like himself, who've actually grown up in rough, tough neighborhoods.

Unbeknownst to Jeff at the time, Robert dislikes other people's fronting, in part because *he* is a master fronter. Robert is already adept at being different people at different times—even as a child, he learned how to act tough around other kids, respectful to teachers, etc. And in college, Robert fronts by suppressing some of his feelings of resentment and frustration with the Yale administration. Fronting, one could even argue, is a basic part of being a young, college-aged student. Students experiment with different identities, and manipulate different facets of their own personalities. Fronting isn't a mortal sin—it's a part of growing up.

❝ So what if it's annoying as hell? Instead of sitting around here bitching about it, maybe we just accept that it is what it is, and know that we have the capacity to get way more from them than they'll ever get from us.

Related Characters: Robert DeShaun Peace (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Robert expresses his conflicted feelings about the Yale culture. He dislikes many things about going to Yale: entitled Yale students who've never had to work for a living; the condescending, sometimes prejudiced faculty members; the overall feeling that the school was designed for rich white people. But Robert, ever the master fronter, knows how to conceal and suppress these feelings for the greater good: getting a Yale degree. Robert spends a lot of his time with other black Yale students, and often expresses a milder point of view than theirs: he believes that he and his friends should stop complaining, get their degree, and then go on to use it for their own success.

Robert's ideas make a lot of sense; the tragedy, however, is that he doesn't really follow through on them. As Hobbs will show, Robert doesn't use his Yale degree for his own success—in many ways, he refuses to use it at all, and returns to Newark to deal drugs. Even so, his advice is solid, and Jeff seems to agree with it.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ I was still struggling to equate the irritating but unremarkable encounter he'd described (I had doubtlessly forgotten to bus my own tray once or twice, though I didn't admit that now) with the profound anger still coursing through him, a few hours and a few joints later. I felt guilty for being unable to do so, for lacking the empathy required to connect a careless prep school slight to a fundamental flaw in the social construct in which we lived. All I said was, "That sucks, dude."

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jeff and Robert have just had a serious conversation. Robert is complaining about a recent incident, which involved him working in the Yale cafeteria. He sees some rich, entitled-looking Yale students leaving, and calmly asks them to bus their trays. The students don't make eye contact with Robert, and don't even seem to think of him as a Yale student. Instead, they claim that they have someplace to be, and leave.

Robert's story is a disturbing example of the entitlement, prejudice, and sheer rudeness of certain Yale students—and, more debatably, of the overall sense of entitlement and favoritism for wealthy white students at the university. But while Jeff seems to agree with these points, he's unable to express much sympathy for Robert. All he can say is, "That sucks, dude." He doesn't have the same life experiences that would make such a slight seem so painful and infuriating, but he awkwardly tries to sympathize with his friend. Jeff senses the divide between his own experiences and Robert's, and isn't sure how to breach this divide.

Chapter 8 Quotes

Though he hid that anger well behind the grin and the laughter and the marijuana, Arthur felt it in the jokes Rob made to Laurel and others about their privileged upbringings, in his heavy quietude whenever socioeconomic topics came up in conversation, and in his general disdain of Yale and Yalies. Arthur saw a closed-mindedness that was, he felt, self-propagating and innately limiting. More broadly, he believed these qualities explained precisely how an intelligent guy like Rob would always make life harder on himself than it needed to be.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace, Arthur Turpin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Robert has just delivered a long speech before other members of the Elihu secret society. Robert, who was inducted into the society the previous year, is required to give a speech about his life's story. To everyone's surprise, Robert delivers a thorough, moving speech about his relationship with his father, and his anger about the treatment of black people in American society. He argues that white culture consciously tries to attack black people and keep them downtrodden, either by belittling them, killing them, or sending them to jail.

There's a lot of truth in Robert's speech. But it's also masochistic in some ways—or at least that's the impression Arthur Turpin, one of Robert's friends, gets after hearing it. Robert seems to refuse to get along with his classmates. Though he has many friends at Yale, he continues to believe that the majority of Yale students are weak, entitled, and not really worth knowing. Turpin considers Robert's views self-limiting: Robert seems to be refusing to make close friendships with white students, or take advantage of the huge opportunities that he's given at Yale. Perhaps this explains why Robert chooses to return to Newark after his graduation instead of getting a good job elsewhere. Instead of living up to the advice he gave in the "Weed Shack," he chooses to give up the advantages his Yale degree affords him because of his deep resentment for Yale culture.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Whenever that word, "Yale," was uttered, even in the lightest way possible, Rob did what he could to undermine its connotation. An exchange might begin with someone saying, "I still don't believe a punkass like you went to no Yale; you're just *lying*" and Rob would shake his head with a doleful smile and say, "Yeah. I did that shit."

Related Characters: Robert DeShaun Peace (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

After graduating from Yale, Robert returns to Newark—a decision that Jeff Hobbs tries and largely fails to understand. During his time in Newark, Robert finds that things have changed. He can no longer fit in effortlessly with his old peers—in large part because he's now a Yale graduate. Many of Robert's old friends and peers think of Yale as a sign of being inauthentic and not really a part of the Newark community. It's for this reason that Robert plays down his Yale alumnus status and makes fun of it whenever possible. At the same time that most of Robert's classmates are bringing up their Yale status whenever possible, Robert brings it up as little as possible. This suggests that he still wants to be a part of the Newark community, and has genuine contempt for Yale culture, which he regards as shallow, weak, and generally beneath him.

Later, Rob told Curtis, "The man's like a dog. You can't blame a dog for eating up a steak if you leave the steak on the floor."

Related Characters: Robert DeShaun Peace (speaker), Curtis Gamble, Carl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Robert comes to terms with the actions of his family friend, Carl. Robert has gone on a vacation to Rio de Janeiro and left his money with Carl. However, when he returns, he finds that Carl has broken into his box, stolen the money, and used it to pay off his debts. At first, Robert is understandably furious. But in the end, he forgives Carl,

explaining that Carl is like a dog—he'll eat anything on the floor, whether he "deserves" it or not.

There's more to Robert's statement than just forgiveness. Robert still wants to be a part of the Newark community, to the point where he plays down his Yale alumnus status and risks his own safety to sell drugs. So perhaps the fact that Robert forgives Carl is indicative of Robert's desire to fit in with his community. Instead of leaving Newark in disgust and getting a job elsewhere, Robert sticks around and comes to terms with the same people who have caused him so much frustration.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ Oswaldo's advice was the same that, a few years ago, he himself had refused to hear from others: "Get the fuck out of Newark. Get the fuck away from people who won't get the fuck out of Newark."

Related Characters: Oswaldo Gutierrez (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

After Robert's graduation, he goes through many years during which he's not sure what he wants to do. However, he keeps up with many of his old Yale friends. One such friend is Oswaldo Gutierrez, who comes from a similar socioeconomic background to Robert's own. Oswaldo is much more cynical about selling drugs than Robert—he sees drugs as a dead-end and a huge danger. Furthermore, he considers Robert a fool for moving back to Newark, when Robert could easily get a good job almost anywhere. His advice is simple: get out of Newark before something bad happens.

In many ways, Oswaldo is right to encourage Robert to leave Newark. Back at home, Robert regresses, becoming pettier, more irritable, and less ambitious than he was as a teenager. But Oswaldo doesn't acknowledge Robert's deep connection to the people of Newark. Robert feels that he has a duty to take care of his mother and spend time with his old friends, even if being back in his old neighborhood leads him to sell drugs.

❝ As a financial master, Mr. Cawley looked at the world in terms of investments, of risk and reward. In 1998, the "investment" in Rob had struck him on paper as one of the lowest-risk and the highest-return; he saw no possible downside in giving this rare boy the slight push (Yale's four-year tuition of $140,000 being slight for a bank CEO worth nine figures) he needed to reach the pinnacle for which he was already headed. Almost a decade later, as Rob broke off eye contact to gaze down at the floor as if there were a pit between them, Mr. Cawley understood that a life wasn't lived on paper.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace, Charles Cawley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

In this painful scene, Robert reunites with his old benefactor, Charles Cawley, the man who paid for his college. Cawley recognized Robert as a brilliant young man with a lot of potential. Now, just a few years later, Cawley is amazed to see that Robert has become a sullen, confused Yale graduate, without any strong ideas about what he wants to do in the future. Cawley is vaguely disappointed that Robert hasn't become a more impressive person.

The passage is ambiguous in the way it characterizes Cawley. On one hand, Cawley seems rightly surprised with Robert—here is a student who, just a few years ago, acted as if he could do anything. Now, the same young man shows every sign of being an underachiever. On the other hand, Cawley's treatment of Robert seems shallow and at times offensive. Cawley says that he thinks of Robert as an investment—a known quantity of talent and ambition that he ventures a certain amount of money upon. This is an exceptionally simplistic and narrow-minded way to think about any human being, let alone one as complicated as Robert.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ "I don't need you to," she replied. "I never have. Don't you go worrying about me. Take care of yourself. I just want you happy foremost, and I want you around if it works that way. I want you settled."

Related Characters: Jackie Peace (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 305

Explanation and Analysis

In this moving scene, Jackie Peace gives Robert some strong words about his future. She loves Robert, and depends upon him for comfort, love, and in some ways, financial support. But she also wants to see Robert succeed in life, and, it's becoming very clear, this is impossible as long as Robert remains in Newark.

With all this in mind, Jackie tells her son that she doesn't need him. This is, to state the obvious, not true—Jackie worships her son, and gets more pleasure out of being with him than from any single thing in her life. However, Jackie really wants to see Robert do well in life. For this reason, she encourages him to go back to school and find a good job, probably far away from his childhood neighborhood. Jackie has always made personal sacrifices for the good of her son. Here, after Robert is done with college and no longer depends on Jackie financially, she makes arguably the toughest sacrifice of her entire life—she tells her beloved son to move away.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ And Rob left, rolling his eyes like this scene was just part of a comedy in which he was the focal point of the farcical behavior of those around him. And Oswaldo understood now with a clarity he'd never had before that all of Rob's troubles were self-inflicted—that on Yale graduation day Rob had stood within reach of everything he now didn't have.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Oswaldo Gutierrez, Robert DeShaun Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 316

Explanation and Analysis

In this tense passage, Robert has just asked Oswaldo Gutierrez, his old Yale friend, for help getting in contact with drug dealers. Robert has been out of college for a few years, and he wants to sell marijuana for a living. Oswaldo knows drug dealers, but he refuses to help Robert. In fact, he tells Robert to get out of his house.

The passage is important because it conveys the extent to which Robert is the cause of his own unhappiness. Robert is a brilliant, Yale-educated man. He could probably get a great job with relative ease. And yet he chooses to return to Newark and sell drugs—partly because of his sense of pride, partly because of his family and friends, and partly because he's always felt alienated from the elite Yale culture. In large part, Robert allows his pride and stubbornness to get in the way of his success. Family obligations are in some ways an alibi for Robert, concealing the fact that he doesn't want to succeed in life, and in fact has no idea what he wants to do with himself.

❝ Her son made sense with numbers. He always had. And now he was thirty years old, taking her through the tiers of retirement benefits. She wished that these calculations hadn't always been so challenging, not in terms of the math but its implications. She knew that he wished the same thing. But she didn't fix any anger, as her son did, to that wish. She'd entertained many such wishes during the course of her life and had long since accepted the reality that very few of them would come true. She'd wished that Skeet had been innocent. She'd wished for jackpots with each crank of an Atlantic City slot machine.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert "Skeet" Douglas, Robert DeShaun Peace, Jackie Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 367

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Robert and his mother, Jackie Peace, sit down to calculate Jackie's finances. By this point, Robert is selling marijuana to support himself, and often gives Jackie money to support her, too. Jackie is nearing retirement age, but Robert encourages her to work for another two years in order to qualify for better social security for the remainder of her life. Jackie is still impressed with her son for his calmness, intelligence, and careful planning. But she's also saddened by the direction his life has taken. She sees how he wastes his talents doing jobs that anyone could do, and feels that she's failed him. In many ways, Jackie is the most tragic character in the book: she tries to raise her child right and prepare him for a lifetime of happiness and success. But in the end, Robert becomes a drug dealer, and Jackie can only sit back and wish that things had turned out differently.

Chapter 16 Quotes

She parked and placed one foot in front of the other until she stood in the cold, metallic room that smelled of chemicals, and watched the coroner fold the white sheet down from her son's face. She nodded and said, "Yeah, that's Shawn, that's my son." From there, she drove straight to work.

Related Characters: Jackie Peace, Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 384

Explanation and Analysis

Robert Peace has just been murdered. His mother, Jackie Peace, the woman who loved him more than anyone, is called to the morgue to identify the body. She does so with an eerie sense of disconnection, and then proceeds to work.

For years and years, Jackie has worked hard and sacrificed her own comfort and happiness for her child. She earned extra money to support him through high school, always with the understanding that her sacrifices were worthwhile, since they'd give Robert a better life. The tragedy of Jackie's life is that her sacrifices, in many ways, turn out to be in vain: although she's trying to save her son from the dangers of Newark, these very dangers end up claiming his life at the age of thirty. The bitter coda to this story is that Jackie doesn't know what else to do with herself, now that her son is dead. And so, without any other purpose in life, she just goes back to work.

Chapter 17 Quotes

And yet they still rendered the predictable media spin of potential squandered, the gift of education sacrificed to the allure of thug life, etc., not only simplistic but offensively so.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Robert DeShaun Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 386

Explanation and Analysis

The final chapter of the book is about the aftermath of Robert Peace's sudden, tragic murder. Leading up to Robert's funeral, Jeff Hobbs speaks to many of his old classmates at Yale. In his opinion, they offer fairly traditional, simplistic responses to his death. Some argue that Robert "squandered" his education by going back into the world of drug dealing. Others take the position that he was "seduced" by gang life.

Hobbs's problem with these interpretations of Robert's life isn't simply that they're simplistic; rather, it's that they present Robert as being completely, one hundred percent responsible for his own failures in life. This is partly, but not completely true. Throughout his book, Hobbs has taken pains to show the ambiguities and contradictions in Robert Peace's short, tragic life. In some ways, following the logic expressed by Oswaldo Gutierrez, Robert *is* responsible for his mistakes—his misery is self-inflicted. But in other ways, Hobbs has shown, Robert is a victim of racism, poverty, and other factors that many Yale students never have to deal with. In short, Hobbs's goal in writing this book is give a sense for the complexity of Robert's character—which makes Robert both frustrating and fascinating.

At a certain point, the lights disappeared from view beyond the trees and eaves of the neighboring homes, leaving the Burger Boyz to sit down once again in the plastic fold-out chairs and wonder how long it would be before the flames flickered out and the lanterns began their descent. And once that happened, they wondered where each would fall.

Related Characters: Jeff Hobbs (speaker), Julius Starkes, Curtis Gamble, Drew Jewison, Tavarus Hester, Victor Raymond

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 401-402

Explanation and Analysis

The book ends with a moving, symbolically loaded passage. In this passage, Robert's old high school friends, including Victor, Tavarus, Drew, Julius, and Curtis (who goes to jail a year and two months after Robert's murder), gather together to release paper lanterns into the night sky, celebrating what would have been their friend's thirty-first birthday. Hobbs describes the paper lanterns as fading into the darkness, eventually flickering out and falling to earth. One could argue that the lanterns symbolize the life of Robert Peace: it burned bright, but ended all-too quickly. Furthermore, the fact that there are *many* paper lanterns, not just one, suggests a greater tragedy: Robert Peace is not

entirely unique. There are too many other talented, troubled youths in America who show a lot of potential, but pass away too soon.

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

On a warm June night in 1980, a woman named Jackie Peace carries a new baby boy named Robert DeShaun Peace. Jackie has just left the hospital, and she and her baby, along with her mother, Frances, are headed back to their home on Chapman Street in Newark, New Jersey. Chapman is a quiet block, compared with some of the others in the neighborhood, which are usually crowded with drug dealers after dark.

The first part of the book (before Jeff Hobbs himself becomes a character) is set in Newark, at a time when the city was quickly becoming one of the poorest and most violent parts of the country. Jackie is a devoted mother who's trying to keep her child safe in the midst of a vast, dangerous city.

Jackie lives at home with her eight siblings, her mother Frances, and her father Horace. At home, she passes the baby around to her parents and siblings. She wonders where Skeet, the baby's father, might be.

Jackie, who comes from an impoverished family, lives with her parents and siblings to save money. Jackie's partner Skeet also seems to be something of an "absentee" father, who doesn't even show up for the birth of his child.

Jackie has lived on Chapman Street, in Newark's Orange Park neighborhood, since she was eleven. Nearby, there are federal housing projects, first built in the 1950s to accommodate the influx of Southerners coming to Newark in search of work. Horace works in a General Motors factory near the house.

The presence of housing projects in the neighborhood suggests that the government is (ostensibly) trying to improve the poverty crisis in Newark. However, Jackie hails from a relatively stable family, since her father has a reliable job.

Although Jackie grows up in a big family, she decided early on that she didn't want more than two children of her own. She spent much of her twenties taking care of children who aren't hers.

Jackie is portrayed as being very practical and forward-thinking, and has seen first-hand the dangers of having more children than she can support.

In 1979, Jackie—aged thirty—meets Skeet. Jackie has just lost her job and moved back in with her parents. She first meets Robert "Skeet" Douglas through her family friend, Carl. Carl introduces Jackie to his friend Skeet—a fast-talking, charming guy. Jackie is skeptical of Skeet's charms, but she changes her mind after Skeet asks her about little brother, who's working on a homework assignment on the life of Frederick Douglass. Skeet proceeds to rattle off facts about Douglass's life, and Jackie, in spite of herself, is impressed with Skeet's intellect.

Jackie admires men for their intelligence, not just for their looks or charisma. She also seems to appreciate that Skeet is interested in the rest of her family; he strikes her as an unusually thoughtful and attentive person.

After Jackie gives birth to Robert, Skeet complains that Jackie spoils her baby. Skeet is also frustrated with Jackie for not marrying him. Jackie's reasoning is that marriage, contrary to what others say, is the best way to *end* a relationship. Married couples make each other miserable—the best way for Jackie to remain close with Skeet, she concludes, is not to marry him. Jackie is also reluctant to marry Skeet because Skeet sells drugs.

Again, Jackie shows herself to be a thoughtful person who's always considering the long term. The passage shows two further things about Jackie. First, she's willing to sacrifice her own short-term happiness (presumably, marrying Skeet would make her happy, at least at first) to achieve a long term goal. Second, she disapproves of the drug market that represents a basic component of life in her neighborhood.

Jackie grows up in Newark at an important time in the city's history. In 1967, the violent Newark riots occur, incited by an altercation between a black cabdriver and white police officers. As a teenager, Jackie often witnesses fights between black and white people on the streets. In the 1970s, much of the white population in Newark leaves the city and moves to suburbs. Horace often complains that the real estate market in Newark is openly racist; however, he counts himself lucky to have a stable factory job.

In Robert's lifetime, Newark underwent a series of rapid changes that reflected the growing racial polarization of the city. One major consequence of these changes was that Newark became a predominately black city for the first time in its history. However, many authorities in the city, such as police officers and landlords, remained predominately white, leading to a pattern of exploitation. (Readers are encouraged to read the sociologist Robert J. Sampson's book Great American City *for more information on the racism of the American real estate and credit systems.)*

In the late 1970s, the factories of Newark begin to shut down or relocate. Unemployment and crime rise. These trends continue throughout the 1980s, when Robert is born. While Robert is growing up, East Orange contains the second-highest concentration of black people living below the poverty line in the country. Violent crime is alarmingly high, and crack cocaine use rises. Skeet continues to ask Jackie to marry him, but she refuses, partly because she's afraid of living in the same house as a drug dealer.

The absence of stable factory jobs in Newark creates a need for working-class people to find job opportunities. When none present themselves, many impoverished people in Newark turn to selling drugs—one of the few reliable ways of making money left to them. But there are also many, such as Jackie, who despise the drug trade and refuse to allow it to play any part in their own lives.

Jackie takes great care to raise Robert right. She reads books to him, and notices that he excels at reading when he's only two years old. Skeet is appalled that Jackie spends so much time reading to Robert. He thinks that his son needs to learn how to be tough. Jackie notices that Robert is a lot like his father: he has an incredible memory. In daycare, Jackie learns, the adults call Robert "professor" because of his intelligence. On Sundays, Jackie is careful to keep Robert away from the south side of Orange Park, because she knows that drug dealers work there.

As Robert gets older, it becomes clear that he's brilliant. This makes Jackie even more concerned about raising her child the right way: she wants to make sure he gets the education and support he deserves, and this means keeping him far away from drug dealers.

By the time Robert is four years old, Jackie has decided that she wants to move to a new house. She manages to rent an apartment in East Orange, the only part of town she can afford. Jackie resolves to send Robert to a private school one day. This will be very expensive, meaning that she'll need to save money now.

Jackie makes enormous sacrifices for her child. Again and again, she places his short- and long-term needs ahead of her own.

To save money, Jackie finally begins to consider moving in with Skeet. Skeet is thirty-eight years old at the time, and has never been involved in any kind of violence, despite being a drug dealer. Skeet is a cautious man who never flaunts the money he makes dealing crack. But before Jackie can accept or reject Skeet's offer, Skeet's home burns down.

It's a sign of Jackie's love for Robert that she considers moving in with Skeet, something she clearly didn't want to do. Jackie is so committed to educating her child that she's willing to make sacrifices like this (even if it will mean Robert being closer to Skeet, something that Jackie seemingly has wanted to avoid).

Robert begins kindergarten at the local elementary school. Jackie wanted to send him to a private elementary school, but her parents refused to help her out, insisting that Robert will be fine. Jackie finds affordable Catholic schools in the city, and suggests that she and Skeet split the tuition. Skeet agrees.

Skeet's agreement to pay for half of Robert's education proves that, in spite of some of his past behavior, he's committed to raising his son right, and he admires his son's intelligence.

As Robert grows older, he spends more time with Skeet. Robert clearly worships Skeet, and Skeet introduces him to boxing and rap music, neither of which Jackie approves of. However, Skeet is an intelligent man, and he's genuinely excited when he sees signs of his son's intelligence.

Jackie seems to interpret rap and sports as reflections of a lifestyle that she despises. (This was the era of N.W.A. and other rappers who seemed to glorify violence and selling drugs.) Jackie wants her son to be ambitious and successful instead of spending his life selling drugs in Newark.

On August 9, 1987, Jackie gets a call from Frances, explaining that the police are looking for Skeet. Jackie becomes nervous. But that evening, she proceeds to take care of her child as usual. Late at night, after Robert falls asleep, she gets a call explaining that Skeet has been arrested for killing two women.

Jackie is so devoted to her child that, even when she's clearly distraught about her partner, she continues taking care of Robert as usual. However, she won't be able to pretend that everything is normal for much longer.

CHAPTER 2

Five days have passed, and Skeet is in jail. Jackie goes to visit him. She doesn't know anything about the crime Skeet is said to have committed. During visiting hours, Skeet tells Jackie that he wants her to arrange for a lawyer to handle bail and prepare his defense. Jackie becomes uncomfortable—she wonders if Skeet really did murder two people. The two murder victims are sisters, Charlene Moore and Estella Moore, but Jackie knows nothing about them.

Notice that Hobbs never editorializes about whether Skeet is really innocent or guilty; by depicting the scene from Jackie's point of view, however, he captures her uncertainty, suggesting that Jackie doesn't rule out the possibility that Skeet is capable of murder (perhaps explaining why she was so reluctant to marry or move in with him).

Meanwhile, Robert spends his time playing football, and quickly makes a name for himself. Robert has always enjoyed playing sports with Skeet. Now, some of Robert's friends ask where his dad has gone. Robert doesn't know—Jackie can't bear to tell him the truth. Eventually, she tells him that Skeet has taken a trip to visit family.

Robert excels at sports as well as school. For the time being, Jackie keeps him in the dark about his father, perhaps reasoning that the truth would be too harmful for a little boy to know.

A few days before Robert starts the first grade, Jackie tells her son the truth about Skeet: he's in jail for murder. Robert doesn't ask any questions—he just asks how soon Skeet will be back. Jackie replies, "Soon."

The fact that Robert, usually talkative, doesn't ask any questions foreshadows the way he'll keep his anger and confusion about Skeet bottled up in the years to come.

The investigation into the double murder proceeds slowly. The prosecutor, Thomas Lechliter, determines that two women named Georgianna Broadway and Deborah Neal went to visit their friends Estella and Charlene Moore on the night of August 7. Georgianna walked Deborah home but then went to buy cocaine. After she came back, Estella went out drinking with a man named Mervin Matthews. Estella came home around five thirty. Mervin headed back to his own place, but realized he still had Estella's keys. While walking into the Moore sisters' building complex (where Estella, Georgianna, and Charlene were sleeping), Mervin passed Skeet, who was sitting outside. Skeet followed Mervin into the building.

The evidence surrounding the Moore sisters' murder is confusing and inconclusive. However, it's undeniable that Skeet was in the vicinity at the time of the murder, and that he followed Mervin into the building, meaning that he conceivably could have entered the sisters' apartment. Notice, also, that cocaine seems to be an ordinary part of the Moore sisters' entertainment, a sign of how quickly the drug trade has taken over the city of Newark.

What happened next is unclear. Around six, Georgianna saw Estella walking through the kitchen, apparently annoyed. Then the bedroom door opened, and Georgianna heard a gun being fired. The shots killed Charlene and Estella and wounded Georgianna.

Georgianna hears the sound of a gun being fired but doesn't see who pulled the trigger—leaving a crucial ambiguity regarding Skeet's guilt.

Hours later, the police received a call from Deborah Neal's place. Strangely, Georgianna had traveled all the way to Deborah's place instead of asking for help or going to the hospital, which was just a few blocks away from the Moore sisters' place. Georgianna claimed that Skeet had shot her. On further questioning, she admitted she hadn't seen Skeet's face, but insisted that she'd heard his voice. The next day, the police arrested Skeet.

There are some pretty big holes in Georgianna's story, in particular that she doesn't see Skeet's face and that she goes back to her friend's home. While Hobbs doesn't really explore these holes, he suggests that there's at least a reasonable amount of doubt that Skeet was really the killer.

Thomas Lechliter quickly convinces himself that Skeet is guilty. However, he recognizes that there are many loose ends in the story. Georgianna was hung over and "strung out" when she witnessed the shooting, and she never saw the shooter's face. But Lechliter believes these questions will be answered soon enough.

Lechliter's behavior leading up to the trial is arguably prejudicial: instead of proceeding like a good lawyer and working from the facts, he works backwards, believing that Skeet is guilty and hastily assuming that he'll be able to tie up the loose ends. He also chooses to rely on fairly questionable testimony. Again, Hobbs doesn't come right out and say that Lechliter is being unfair, but he implies that the investigation was improper in some ways, and may even reflect Lechliter's racial bias and assumption that a black male is, more likely than not, guilty.

In the midst of the preparation for Skeet's trial, Jackie takes Robert to the Essex County jail. She's been in regular contact with Skeet, who continues to insist that he's completely innocent. During the visit, Skeet tells Robert that he didn't do anything wrong. Robert confidently replies, "Yeah."

Robert still seems to idolize his father, but it's hard to tell—even as a child, he's becoming adept at concealing his thoughts and feelings.

Robert begins the school year, and he starts to behave violently. He has a fistfight with another student, and he's sent to the principle's office. Robert also begins to gain weight and spend too much time sitting around the house watching TV.

Robert is clearly devastated by his father's incarceration, even if he won't admit it: his behavior suggests that he's angry and frustrated, and is taking out his anger on other students.

Skeet prepares for his trial by working with the public defender he's been assigned. Later in the fall, however, Skeet's public defender is taken away from him, supposedly because Skeet is unable to prove "indigence": his house is valued at $100,000, meaning that he could conceivably afford his own lawyer. Skeet protests the ruling, which takes months.

The trial takes a long time to begin because there's so much bureaucracy to wade through. The Constitution guarantees all citizens an attorney, but only if they can't afford one themselves—in Skeet's case, the state argues that Skeet could *hire his own lawyer.*

In March of 1989, Skeet is finally appointed a public defender. The pretrial hearings begin in September. After months, the trial is scheduled for September 10, 1990. Skeet spends three full years in jail.

It's outrageous that a murder trial takes three full years to begin—the Constitution guarantees all American citizens the right to a speedy trial. But the incarceration rate during the 1980s has become so high (and remains high to this day) that prisoners are often kept waiting months or years to begin their trials, even for minor crimes.

The trial proceeds. In the winter of 1990, Robert is called to testify before Thomas Lechliter, regarding whether "the death penalty would be sought." Robert, who's now almost ten, testifies that he's never seen his father using drugs. In the end, however, Lechliter convinces the judge to use the death penalty.

The stakes of the trial are high, since the death penalty is now on the table.

Robert proceeds with his schooling. Sometimes, one of his classmates will tell him that his father Skeet is a "hero" for committing murder, and he seems to take pride in hearing this. Jackie is terrified that her son is growing into a criminal. She decides to take night classes to become a kitchen supervisor at the University Hospital—with this extra employment, she hopes to pay for Robert's education. In the fall of 1990, a few days before Skeet's trial, Jackie enrolls her son in a private Catholic school.

In Robert's neighborhood, where the police are symbols of racism and brutality, crime is sometimes interpreted as a form of rebellion and even heroism. Robert begins to embrace this kind of thinking, suggesting that on some level, he accepts the possibility that his father really is a murderer, but still wants to idolize Skeet. Meanwhile, Jackie continues to devote herself to caring for her child—she's the real hero.

CHAPTER 3

Robert begins attending Mt. Carmel Elementary School, a Catholic school where most of the students are black or Hispanic. The tuition is expensive, and Jackie knows she's taking a gamble—hopefully, the school will prove to be a good influence on Robert.

Jackie is so committed to giving her son the best education possible that she's willing to take this gamble: the potentially high payoff of giving Robert a first-class education justifies the expense.

From the beginning, Robert stands out at Mt. Carmel. He's a big kid, and he gets straight A's. However, he's quiet and sometimes sullen—he spends a lot of time thinking about his father.

Robert is clearly saddened by having a father in jail, but because he gets great grades, his sadness doesn't raise any red flags among his teachers—as far as they're concerned, he's just a great student.

After three years in prison, Skeet proceeds with his trial. The trial itself lasts only one week. Lechliter accuses Skeet of double homicide, and argues that the bullets found in the dead women could only have been fired from Skeet's gun. He brings in nine police officers, all white, to testify against Skeet. The defense is simple: there are only three witnesses, who essentially just vouch for Skeet's character.

The racial dynamics of the trial raise questions about he legitimacy of the investigation itself. The prosecution, led and substantiated by white men, has a large budget and produces an overwhelming amount of evidence. The defense, led and substantiated by black witnesses, lacks the resources to make its case very convincingly.

The jurors retire to deliberate. They can't decide whether to believe Georgianna's testimony—in particular, they find it odd that Georgianna is so sure the murderer is Skeet, considering she didn't see his face. The jurors are also uncomfortable with the image of nine white police officers testifying against one black man. In the end they convict Skeet on two counts of murder. Skeet is sentenced to life in prison.

There are significant doubts in the jurors' minds about the accuracy of Georgianna's testimony, but they choose to convict Skeet anyway. (Notably, Hobbs doesn't mention if the jurors are white or black, a detail that seems highly relevant, given some of Hobbs's points about racial bias during the investigation.)

After the sentence, Skeet is given the opportunity to make a statement. He delivers a long, articulate speech about his innocence. He emphasizes that Georgianna's testimony isn't consistent with the positioning of the entrance wounds—a fact he claims was never brought up at trial. Skeet concludes by mentioning his young son, a "straight-A student."

In many ways, Skeet does a better job than his own public defender: he raises doubts that his lawyer should have raised days ago. But these doubts are too little, too late.

Shortly after Skeet is convicted, Jackie buys Robert a copy of the *A* volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica. Jackie is worried that Skeet's conviction will make Robert even lonelier than he's been. Unbeknownst to Jackie, Robert hasn't told his friends at Mt. Carmel anything about his father.

The one constant in Robert's early life is his mother's concern for him and for his education. However, Robert continues to hide his feelings about his father, and refuses to share them with his friends.

While Robert is growing up, Newark is going through important changes. One in three people in Newark live below the poverty line, and violent crime is very high. Beginning in 1986, when Sharpe James is elected mayor of Newark, many of the large housing projects of the '50s and '60s are torn down and replaced with smaller-scale housing. James's reforms are important for Newark, not only because they improve living conditions for those below the poverty line but because James is a successful black politician and a role model for black youths.

Sharpe James was the mayor of Newark for twenty years, before finally being convicted of fraud and sentenced to jail time. His tenure as mayor is still very controversial, with many praising him for helping impoverished residents and others criticizing him for not doing enough.

Robert is one of the many black youths in Newark who idolizes Sharpe James. In the fifth grade, Robert asks Jackie to take him downtown to listen to James's speeches. Jackie later says that James is a surrogate father for her son.

In the absence of a father who's present in his life, Robert turns to other father figures for inspiration.

As Robert grows up, he sees how hard his mother works to put him through school. He begins working odd jobs on weekends to make extra money. Jackie admires her son's discipline—a quality that she's always believed is a better symbol of manhood than toughness. But Jackie can also see how angry Robert is, and she worries that some day he'll take out his anger on his peers.

Robert clearly loves his mother and understands how hard she works for his sake. Jackie, in turn, worships her child and respects him for his hard work, not just for his intelligence. There are plenty of smart, lazy people who never make much of their lives—but Robert, it would seem, isn't going to be one of those people. However, the passage foreshadows the way that Robert's sadness and anger will interfere with his success in life.

In school, Robert loves to read. But his greatest passions are math and science. He's so good at these subjects that his teachers are convinced that he's cheating on his homework—something that Jackie angrily denies. Robert is particularly irritated that the teachers make him show his work—he tells Jackie that he can work out the answers in his head. Although Robert is showered with praise from his teachers, he rarely seems happy.

Robert seems highly ambitious—he wants to move past the drudgery of showing his work and learn as much as possible as quickly as possible.

Robert faces many challenges while growing up. His good grades lead some students to call him a nerd, but he also excels at football, and understands how important it is to seem tough around the other kids.

Robert quickly learns how to be different things to different people: around his teachers, he's a model student; around his friends, he's a tough athlete.

In the seventh grade, Robert makes a new friend—a student named Victor Raymond. Victor's parents have died of illness, and he lives with his aunt. Robert includes Victor in his football games. Victor notices that Robert is good at fitting in his community, even though he stands out by virtue of his good grades and private school education. At different times of the day, Robert is a good student, a tough athlete, and a loyal, loving son. Robert refers to the process of making himself seem tough and hiding his intelligence as "Newark-proofing" himself.

Victor sees Robert learning how to adjust his behavior to different groups of people, a process that he finds impressive and yet a little frightening. Because he's so adept at Newark-proofing, Robert continues to conceal his feelings, in particular his feelings about his father's conviction and arrest.

Jackie and Robert visit Skeet in Trenton State prison. The prison is a frightening place, and Jackie comes to dread bringing her son there. As soon as she leaves the prison with Robert, she feels relief. She notices that visiting Skeet seems to energize Robert. Robert grows up quickly. Before he's done with middle school, he's become strong and fast, learned a huge amount of math and science, and developed serious crushes on girls.

By the time he's in middle school, Robert has gone through more than a lot of people do by the time they're in their twenties. He's effectively lost a father, he's worked a lot, and in general he's grown up very quickly.

In 1993, Jackie loses her job at the University Hospital. This means that she has no choice but to pull Robert out of Mt. Carmel and send him back to Oakdale. Robert begins giving all of his work earnings to Jackie. Public school is a challenge for Robert, because he has to devote a lot of time to fitting in with his classmates. Jackie learns from Robert that some of the students sell drugs, and she decides that she needs to find a way to send her son to a private high school next year.

Jackie continues to prioritize Robert's education. She wants to protect him from the influence of drugs and drug culture. In return, Robert seems to recognize how hard his mother works on his behalf, which is why he gives her all his extra money.

Jackie finds a new job in a health care company. The job is a demotion from her previous post, but she makes enough money to send Robert back to Mt. Carmel. Meanwhile, Robert begins drinking and smoking marijuana. Some men in the neighborhood—especially Carl, who Robert considers his "uncle"—know that he's Skeet's son and offer him drugs and alcohol all the time.

Evidently, Jackie can't protect Robert from the influence of his neighborhood forever.

Robert continues to spend a lot of time with his friend Victor Raymond. Victor notices that Robert is very adept at hiding his drinking and drug use from his mother. He's also a little disturbed by how comfortable Robert is around grown men and women who spend their days drinking and getting high.

Spending time with Skeet's old friends further trains Robert to "Newark-proof" himself: he can turn his intelligence on and off, concealing and exhibiting it when necessary. Robert's behavior might suggest a tacit admiration or acceptance for the lifestyles of junkies and alcoholics in the neighborhood.

Robert tells Jackie that he wants to attend St. Benedict's Prep, a Catholic school with a reputation for sending its students to good colleges. Tuition is high, but Jackie agrees to send him there. Victor is accepted to St. Benedict's, and though Robert is at first waitlisted (probably because of financial statements on his application, rather than his grades), he's eventually accepted. Robert and Jackie calculate how much they'll have to make every week, and Robert assures his mother that he'll work odd jobs to help her out with the payments.

Two things to notice here. First, Jackie continues to make sacrifices for her son's sake. But second, notice that Robert is taking a stronger position in deciding his own future: he's the one who convinces Jackie that she'll be able to pay for school, not the other way around. Even though he's barely a teenager, Robert is already a natural leader.

CHAPTER 4

In the summer of 1994, Robert arrives at St. Benedict's to begin the "Summer Phase" of school. His new classmates are mostly from impoverished or middle-class families.

Robert will be among other students who come from a similar background to his own.

Robert and his classmates proceed with a full course-load, followed by athletics and group bonding activities. All freshmen are required to memorize the names of every headmaster in the school's 126-year history. In part, these activities are designed to build spirit. But they're also intended to cut down on fighting and theft between the students, some of whom think of this behavior as an ordinary part of life.

St. Benedict's is designed to give its students a first-rate education, a task for which the teachers believe it's necessary to first train the students to respect and cooperate with one another.

The students are assigned their summer reading, including two books—Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and William Faulkner's *A Light in August*—that Robert has already read for fun. However, Robert acquires a reputation for knowing complicated rap lyrics—"a feat that inspired awe in the freshman class."

Robert is a voracious reader, but his love of language doesn't alienate him from his classmates. Indeed, his talent with words makes him something of a celebrity, proving that his passion for rap has a "social payoff."

St. Benedict's Prep was founded in 1868. For most of the 20th century, it was a school for Newark's elite white families. But after the Newark riots of 1967, the student body became predominately black. During Robert's time at St. Benedict's, the headmaster is a twenty-four-year-old named Friar Edwin Leahy. Leahy believes that he has a duty to provide a good education for working-class people. He raises an astounding five million dollars, making St. Benedict's one of the best-funded schools in the state.

In a nutshell, St. Benedict's has the demography of post-1967 Newark but the resources and social cachet of pre-1967 Newark. The faculty is made up of passionate people who sincerely want to help disadvantaged students succeed in life by gaining some self-confidence and going to good schools.

At St Benedict's, there are fencing, water polo, and chess teams, but no football. Robert and Victor apply to play football for Orange High School. Every day, they catch the six am bus to school, go to school, and then catch a bus to Orange High for football practice. Robert has almost no time for socializing, but he takes pleasure in football practice. Playing for another school allows him to hold the culture of St. Benedict's at an arm's length.

In many ways, St. Benedict's resembles the elite prep schools of New England: the sports, for example, are stereotypically "WASP-y." Robert's continued interest in playing football suggests that he doesn't quite accept the culture at St. Benedict's, and wants to do the same things he did before going to school there.

By halfway through his freshman year, it's become clear that Robert is a brilliant student. This surprises some people, who think of him as a tough athlete. Some believe that Robert is a "rich kid" who pretends he's from "the hood." This changes after Robert is abruptly pulled from the Orange High football team due to an insurance technicality. Jackie then forces Robert to try out for a St. Benedict's sports team. After some hesitation, Robert decides to try out for swimming.

Because Robert doesn't go to Orange High, he doesn't qualify for insurance; therefore, he has to join a St. Benedict's sports team.

Robert meets with Wayne Ridley, the St. Benedict's swim coach, and says that he wants to join the team. However, he admits that he has no idea how to swim. Coach Ridley agrees to teach Robert. To his amazement, Robert learns quickly—so quickly that he makes the swim team and, in the fall of his sophomore year, the water polo team.

Even though Robert has always been a fast learner, his swimming achievement is especially impressive: he goes from not even knowing how to swim to becoming one of the best aquatic athletes in his school.

During his time on the swim team freshman year, Robert makes four close friends. Drew Jewison is from a middle-class suburb outside of Newark. Julius Starkes is an easy-going kid from a poor family in the inner-city. Curtis Gamble is a popular, funny student who lives near Robert. Finally, Tavarus Hester is a talented swimmer who lives with his aunt and grandmother, since his father—a man he idolized—died of cancer. When Robert notices his fellow swimmers' low GPAs, he suggests that they have weekly study sessions. Over the course of the year, the boys become good friends.

Hobbs suggests some reasons why Robert may have befriended these students: they seem to hail from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and, furthermore, some of them seem to have gone through similar family tragedies.

At the end of their freshman year, the boys of St. Benedict's Prep set out on a beloved school ritual: walking the Appalachian Trail to the Delaware Water Gap. By the end of the day, the students are tired but "pumped full of endorphins."

By the end of their first year, Robert and his friends have begun to embrace their identity as St. Benedict's students.

The summer after freshman year, Tavarus goes to a summer retreat organized by a wealthy St. Benedict's alumnus. The retreat is designed for students who come from "troubled" circumstances. Early on in the retreat, Tavarus starts a fistfight with another student. Furious, he calls Robert and complains: apparently, another student made fun of his shoes. Robert laughs and replies, "You're getting served steak and lobster … and you're starting shit over some words about shoes? Don't be such a bitch."

It's notable, considering what eventually happens to Robert, that Robert encourages his friends to stop being petty and accept the opportunities they're been given in life. In ten years, it'll be Robert who needs a lesson on the "big picture," not Tavarus.

When Tavarus comes back to school in the fall, Robert notices that he seems calmer and more eager to do well in school. In fact, Tavarus has been impressed by Robert's intelligence and discipline. Tavarus signs up for extra tutoring, and studies with Robert. He forces himself to think about "the big picture," as Robert has encouraged him to do: going to college.

Robert's talent and hard work inspire his friends to try harder. In short, Robert is a natural leader, one who leads by example. He's highly disciplined (perhaps because of Jackie's influence), and knows how to swallow his pride and focus on the long-term plan (for now).

During his sophomore year, Robert joins the water polo team with his four friends. Water polo is a popular sport in part because the team gets to travel to other states. On one trip, Robert brings marijuana and brandy, and the friends spend all night drinking and getting high. Afterwards, it becomes clear that Robert is "the guy who could hook you up." Students ask Robert if he can find them drugs. Initially, Robert refuses.

Although Robert is an excellent student, he clearly enjoys the attention and respect that come with breaking the rules. For the time being, however, this quality isn't a major flaw so much as a central part of his charisma. And for now, Robert has no desire to become a full-fledged drug dealer, either.

One day, Curtis tells Robert that a big fight is going on between kids from Central High and St. Benedict's. Traditionally, these two schools have a bitter rivalry. When Robert hears the news, he immediately decides to "take part" in the fight. By the time they join, however, the police have already arrested seven people, and the fight is basically over.

Robert believes that he has a duty to fight alongside his fellow students, even if he doesn't have a personal stake in the fight. This suggests Robert's loyalty, his commitment to seeming tough, and, finally, the fact that he's accepted his identity as a St. Benedict's student.

In the aftermath of the Central / St. Benedict's fight, there are rumors that Friar Leahy will resign. Robert and his friends have a private meeting with Leahy in which they beg him not to resign, and claim that they'll convince the students to stop fighting. Leahy—who was never thinking of resigning—is impressed by Robert's leadership. He asks Robert to lead the freshmen on their Appalachian Trail hike.

It's strange that Robert promises to stop the fighting, just a few days after being on the verge of taking part. This suggests the two sides of Robert's character: a calm, wise leader, but also an impulsive risk-taker.

During the hike, a storm breaks out, and many of the freshmen become scared. Robert stays calm and orders his freshmen to stick together. Moving fast, Robert leads the freshmen down from the mountains, and remembers to call a faculty coordinator to let the school know that his students are okay.

Robert demonstrates his talents as a leader by encouraging his freshmen to stay calm and work together.

In the fall of Robert's junior year, a new student named Hrvoje Dundovic comes to St. Benedicts. Hrvoje is originally from Croatia, but his family has settled in East Orange. He's a talented water polo player, and he loves punk music. Robert and Hrvoje become friends, and remain so for many years.

Robert makes many other friends during his time at St. Benedict's. Some of his friends, including Hrvoje, are very different from him, but he learns how to embrace these differences.

That fall, the water polo team does well. Robert is one of the top athletes on both the swim team and the water polo team. One reason the water polo does well against other schools is that it's adept at "talking trash" and intimidating opponents. That year, the team comes close to winning the Mid-Atlantic championships. In school, the teammates begin talking to college guidance counselors. Julius realizes that he could get a full scholarship to a good school like UMass. Robert, meanwhile, has done so well in school that the counselor tells him to apply wherever he wants.

The passage emphasizes Robert's leadership qualities. By working hard and doing well in school, he's inspired his friends and admirers to do the same. Robert is on the verge of a major change in his life: he's done so well in high school that he could go to college almost anywhere he'd like.

At the end of their junior year, Robert and his friends walk to a dance at Columbia High. The dance is boring, and Curtis arranges to walk to a different part down the street. The friends walk out of Columbia High—unaware that dozens of students are following them, in search of a better party. The friends arrive at a dance club, where they get high, dance with beautiful women, and bask in their own confidence. The year is 1997, and Robert and his friends feel that they "rule the city of Newark."

The chapter ends with a stirring scene: Robert as the coolest kid in town, followed by a mob of his admirers wherever he goes. The future looks very, very bright for Robert and his friends.

CHAPTER 5

Early one morning during senior year, Coach Ridley goes to the St. Benedict's pool, where he finds Robert lifeguarding as usual. Ridley has planned this meeting to ask Robert about his drug use. Ridley gently asks Robert why he's jeopardizing "his lungs, his mind, his future" with marijuana. To Ridley's amazement, Robert explodes. He screams at Ridley, "I haven't had a father since I was seven years old! What makes you think I need one now?"

This is one of the only points in Robert's high school career when he lets down his guard and reveals the anger he's been harboring. This makes the scene very important, as it gives us (and Hobbs) a glimpse of the "real" Robert behind all his various "fronts." The scene also shows how much of a distance there is between Robert and his teachers. Ridley wants to help Robert, but he doesn't really know how to communicate with him.

Coach Ridley comes to realize the truth: Robert comes from a "difficult family life," like most of his classmates—but unlike these other classmates, Robert's grades have prevented his teachers from noticing any problems in his life. A few days later, Ridley meets with Robert to talk strategy for an upcoming water polo game. Robert is his usual calm self. In the game, Robert does well, and Ridley never mentions marijuana to him again.

Robert is a troubled kid, but he doesn't show any of the usual signs of being troubled: he's a great leader, a brilliant student, and a talented athlete. In a way, Robert is a victim of his own talent: he's naturally so high-functioning that he never seems to need to resolve any of his problems (and few other people notice them), and instead buries them deep.

Early in his senior year, Robert is elected "group leader"—essentially, president of his class. Around the same time, Robert spends lots of time with Curtis, whose father has died of cancer recently. This tragedy brings Curtis and Robert even closer together.

Even if Robert finds it hard to open up to his teachers, he opens up to Curtis, one of the few people his own age who knows what he's going through—they've both lost fathers (albeit in very different ways).

Unbeknownst to any of his friends in school, Robert has spent much of the last two years conducting research for Skeet's legal appeal. Late at night, he reads legal textbooks, trying to find record of a precedent that might help his father's case. He visits Skeet in prison and goes over his research. In late 1997, Robert helps his father file a petition for post-conviction relief, on the grounds that his father's right to a speedy public trial was violated. Robert argues that in the three-year delay between arrest and trial, key witnesses, such as the man in whose home Skeet was arrested, died. A judge sides with Robert and Skeet and throws out Skeet's indictment. More than a decade after his arrest, Skeet is released from jail. He may have to return to jail when the state files a counter-appeal, but the fact that the judge sides with Skeet suggests that Skeet may be released from jail permanently.

Robert works very hard in high school—not only does he succeed athletically and academically, but he also spends long hours trying to help his father. For the time being, the future looks bright for Skeet: with his son's help, he's managed to make a convincing argument that his rights were violated. Notice that Robert makes his case not simply by emphasizing the length of time Skeet spent in jail (three years), but by showing how having to wait for this stretch of time seriously damaged the defense's case. There are plenty of plaintiffs who spend years in prison waiting for their trials—the relevant factor is whether the waiting period interfered with achieving justice.

After the judge throws out Skeet's indictment, Skeet moves in to Jackie's house. The house immediately begins to feel crowded. Skeet doesn't leave the house—he seems nervous about walking through the streets. Jackie is worried that Skeet will be a bad influence on Robert. She sleeps very little, and works long hours to support Robert's education. The additional stress of having Skeet back is very difficult.

Jackie has always been wary of the influence Skeet has on Robert, and now, she seems especially uncomfortable with their relationship. Jackie has spent so many years sacrificing her needs for her son's that, very poignantly, she's finally beginning to slow down.

Robert struggles with having Skeet back in his life. Skeet almost never leaves the house, but he constantly asks Robert where he's going and what he's been doing. For years now, Robert has been living as an adult, with total freedom. Now, his father pesters him with nagging questions. In January, the state of New Jersey files a counter-appeal to Skeet's post-conviction relief ruling. Skeet returns to jail, as he's known he'll have to do.

Skeet knew he'd have to go back to jail, so he's mentally prepared for the return. At this point, however, he's still optimistic that he'll win his case and have his indictment thrown out, leaving him a free man.

One spring evening in 1998, Robert and Victor are sharing a joint. Robert has applied to Yale, Penn, Columbia, and Johns Hopkins. Earlier in the day, Robert has learned of his acceptance, full-ride, to Montclair State. Tearfully, Robert admits to Victor that he doesn't know what he wants to do. He excels at many different subjects, but doesn't know how to focus his ambitions. In the next two weeks, he's accepted to Johns Hopkins, Yale, and Penn. However, Robert thinks that he'll have to attend Montclair in order to avoid accumulating further debts.

Robert experiences a problem that's common among highly gifted people: he's good at so many things that he can't decide which ones he'd like to pursue seriously. The extremely high tuition at Yale and other elite colleges makes Robert think that he'll have to attend a cheaper school—he loves his mother and doesn't want to burden her any further than he already has.

In April 1998, the seniors attend their senior banquet. Other attendees include Charles Cawley, the CEO of MBNA. Robert gives the keynote address for the evening, and Cawley is struck by Robert's confidence. Friar Leahy informs him that Robert carried a near-perfect GPA, got up at forty-thirty every morning to work as a lifeguard, and got into Yale.

Cawley is naturally impressed by Robert's achievements: he's won enormous academic success and, furthermore, achieves this success despite having to work hard to support himself and his family.

At the end of the evening, Cawley greets Robert and congratulates him on his success. He says, "You can go to college wherever you want." Robert thanks Cawley, not entirely sure what this means. But soon, he understands: Cawley has effectively given him a blank check for his college expenses, "no questions asked." Robert is so overcome that he begins to cry. Friar Leahy later informs him that Cawley has never made an offer like this in the twenty-five years that he's been a benefactor to St. Benedict's.

Cawley will pay for Robert's college, meaning that Robert no longer has to worry about paying his high tuition. As a result of this incredible gift, Robert is free to attend any of the elite colleges to which he's been accepted.

Robert isn't sure where to go to college. He likes Johns Hopkins, partly because he believes the students have "worked harder and sacrificed more." On the final date for committing to Hopkins, Jackie is preparing to drop off Robert's signed documents. But her boss makes her stay. Frantic, she drives to the nearest post office, praying that she'll be able to get there before midnight. In the end, she arrives ten minutes too late. A few weeks later, Johns Hopkins calls to inform Robert that his folder wasn't postmarked in time, meaning that Robert has been placed at the end of the waiting list. In the end, Robert opts to go to his second choice, Yale.

Robert chooses to attend Johns Hopkins because it seems like the best combination of elite status and hard-working students (whereas Yale and Penn, presumably, would have a larger number of spoiled, entitled students). Because of Jackie's intense work schedule, however, Robert ends up attending his second choice—one of the most highly regarded schools in the country, and the world.

Jackie is overjoyed that her son is attending an Ivy League school. She tells all her friends and family the good news. Frances, who's sick with emphysema, is extremely proud that her grandson has been so successful.

Robert's success is a cause of celebration for his entire family.

During the summer of 1998, Robert enjoys a "last hurrah" before going off to school. Most of his friends are going to college, with the exception of Julius, who can't afford college, and is going to work as a lifeguard. Together, the friends drink, smoke, enjoy good food, and fantasize about their futures.

Robert is about to embark on what seems destined to be a great career: he's going to get an elite degree, which presumably will enable him to do any number of great things with his life.

In August, Robert receives a letter, which begins, "Dear Robert, looks like we're going to be roommates." The letter is from Jeff Hobbs, the author of this book.

At this point, we're introduced to Hobbs, the author and narrator who now becomes a character in the story. Hobbs's relationship with Robert will be one of the focal points of the book.

A few weeks before starting college, Jeff misses a call from Robert. He calls back, and Jackie picks up the phone. Confused at first, she realizes who's calling, and puts Robert on. Jeff's first impressions of Robert are of his deep voice, and long pauses. Jeff learns that Robert went to prep school, played water polo, and enjoys hiking—all of which lead Jeff to conclude that Robert is yet another "well-off and overeducated" Yale student. Jeff comes from a long line of Yale alumni, and both of his siblings went to Yale. His conversation with Robert is short and awkward.

It's a sign of Hobbs's privilege and limited life experience that he naturally assumes other Yale students will be more or less like him: prep school educated, wealthy, and familiar with traditionally WASP-y sports such as water polo. Jeff seems to recognize that Robert is black (based on hearing Robert's voice), but because he makes assumptions about Robert's class, he doesn't think that his and Robert's life experiences are very different.

At the beginning of September, Robert spends a full day visiting his friends before he leaves for Yale. Skeet is still waiting for his post-conviction hearing, so Robert visits him in jail. He also visits his grandparents. Then he packs his things, and Jackie drives him ninety miles to Yale. Robert is quiet on the drive—a little scared of the moment when he'll have to say goodbye to Jackie.

The chapter ends on a note of uncertainty. Robert is brilliant and hard-working, but he's about to enter a world very different from the one where he's spent the first eighteen years of his life.

CHAPTER 6

Jeff Hobbs walks into his new home, Lanman-Wright Hall, with his parents. He meets Robert, who's carrying a single duffel bag. The two freshmen shake hands, and Robert respectfully greets Jeff's parents. Jeff's father, Chuck Hobbs, a successful surgeon, tries to make conversation with Jackie, but Jackie seems unwilling to engage. It never occurs to Jeff to wonder where Robert's father is.

When Robert and Jeff meet for the first time, they don't exactly hit it off. Robert, and Jackie even more so, seems uncomfortable with being in such a different place—a place where a significant portion of the students are white and affluent, and don't share many of their experiences.

Jeff and Chuck make many trips to their car to bring Jeff's things into his dorm room. Every time Jeff returns to the dorm, he sees Robert and Jackie sitting there, silent. Then, Jeff says a slightly tearful goodbye to his parents, and they head home.

Robert and Jackie don't seem to fit in during move-in day. While Hobbs doesn't say why, he implies that it's because of their background and their sense of alienation from the Yale atmosphere.

Jeff finds Jackie still sitting in the dorm room. He feels a little uncomfortable, and wants to prove to her that he's not just another "wealthy legacy," even though he is, in fact, both wealthy and a Yale legacy. He offers to get Jackie water, but Jackie says she's fine.

Jeff is highly conscious of the way others—especially those who aren't white and affluent—perceive him. He seems more than a little guilty about his status as a rich Yale legacy.

Meanwhile, Jeff and Robert's other two roommates arrive: Dan Murray, a preppy "white guy from Seattle," and Ty Cantey, half-black, half-Asian, and like Jeff, a track star. Ty and Jeff end up sharing a bedroom, reasoning that they'll be waking up early for track practice. Dan and Robert take the other room. There's an unspoken acknowledgment that "mixing the races" was the right thing to do.

The roommates feel that they have a duty to get to know each other and become friendly with people with different types of backgrounds than their own—and also there seems to be a purposeful aversion to seeming "segregated."

The first week of college, at least in Jeff's memory, is a big "celebration of freedom." Teenagers binge drink, dance, and have sex. Jeff notices that Robert is very neat and doesn't talk much.

Jeff continues to notice Robert's alienation from the university: he doesn't seem to be willing to open up to others, perhaps because he feels he and the other students have little in common.

Jeff thinks about having two black suite-mates, and thinks he's lucky. Jeff thinks of himself as an "honorary black man," since he likes rap and since, as a national-caliber hurdler, many of his teammates are black. Jeff tells Robert that he's grown up "near Philly," even though this is a big exaggeration. He makes a point of not bringing up that he's gone to private school, grew up in an 18th century farmhouse, and goes to Florida for summer vacation.

Jeff's thoughts about his roommates reflect his privilege, ignorance, and immaturity—he seems to think of blackness as a combination of music, athletic prowess, and having "black friends." And as before, he seems to feel guilty about his privileged background, hence his desire to hide details of his life from Robert. Jeff, too, is fronting.

Early on in his relationship with Robert, Jeff asks him what his father does. Robert calmly replies that his father is in jail for manslaughter. Jeff doesn't ask anything else. Robert never mentions that he appealed Skeet's decision, or that the hearing is coming up.

This is one of the many scenes in the book during which Jeff isn't sure what to say to Robert: Robert's situation is so far outside Jeff's own experiences that he falls silent.

Jeff's older brother has told him about the racial dynamics at Yale: black students spend all their time with each other. Jeff's early months at Yale confirm this—the black students tend to sit with each other. White students also eat with each other, and they spend their free time going to frat houses and bars, always with a vague sense that "black students did something else."

In this rather tragic section, Hobbs suggests that, instead of bringing different kinds of people together, Yale University reflects the racial differences common in American society as a whole. White students—or at least those like Jeff Hobbs—seem clueless about black culture and black student activity, and seem uncomfortable making any effort to learn more.

Jeff and the other Yale freshmen spend their first semester taking classes, joining clubs, partying, and generally trying to create experiences worthy of remembering at a tenth anniversary reunion. The students feel a sense of excitement at being able to reinvent themselves.

Self-reinvention is one of the central themes of the book. But while the self-reinvention Jeff is talking about is fairly modest (e.g., a high school nerd reinventing herself as a stoner), Robert's self-reinvention at Yale is much more sweeping.

Twelve percent of the Yale freshman population is black, and of that group, a fifth grew up below the poverty line. Throughout freshman year, Jeff's impression of Robert is that he's very quiet and very good at concealing details about his life back in Newark.

Hobbs gives the impression that the pervading atmosphere at Yale is overwhelmingly white and upper-class. He allows that a significant portion of Yale students are neither white nor affluent, but also makes statements suggesting that these students feel marginalized on campus.

In the fall semester, Robert meets a young woman named Zina. She's a senior from Jamaica, and she and Robert begin dating. From Jeff's perspective, they spend almost all their time together. Robert and Zina seem to fight a lot, sometimes about small things and sometimes about bigger issues. Once, Jeff overhears Zina accusing Robert of eating and smoking too much. Robert tells Zina to shut up so that he can concentrate on studying. The argument goes on for hours. Once, Robert tells Jeff that Zina is "a real woman, not like these Yalie bitches."

Robert and Zina have a pretty stereotypical freshman-year relationship, full of arguing, passion, and passionate arguing. Notice that Robert makes a distinction between people who are "real" and the average Yale person, suggesting that he finds Yale culture superficial, "soft," and not worth his time.

The infamous "Freshman Screw" dance is rapidly approaching. As part of this Yale tradition, each freshman's roommates arrange a date for the evening. Robert, much to Jeff's relief, has taken his responsibility very seriously. He goes over some options with Jeff, all of whom Jeff finds attractive.

Although Robert has some problems with the Yale culture of white affluence, he apparently gets along with Jeff, and takes his "Freshman Screw" duties seriously.

Robert also confesses that he's trying to "screw" Ty by setting him up with an unattractive date. Robert and Ty generally get along well: they're both hard-working and brilliant, although Ty is more competitive than Robert. But Robert dislikes Ty's "thug" persona. Ty comes from an affluent suburban family. As a result, Robert often tells Ty to "quit fronting," meaning that Ty is pretending to be tougher and "harder" than he is. At the time, Jeff has no idea that Robert himself is a master of "fronting"—of exaggerating or masking aspects of his personality.

This passage gives a name to one of the book's most important concepts: fronting. Robert, who hails from an underprivileged black neighborhood, has no problem seeing through Ty's affectations of realness and ruggedness: he suggests that Ty is fronting because of the social reward of being perceived as having these "exotic" qualities.

Just before Thanksgiving, it's time for Yale Parents' Weekend. Robert has plans to head back to Newark for a few days. During his time back at home, Robert smokes marijuana with Julius. Julius has been enjoying his lifeguarding job, and he's rented an apartment with his girlfriend. Robert tells Julius that he finds Yalies "hard to take." It's also difficult for him to adjust to having so much free time. Julius tells Robert that he's been making extra money by selling marijuana. He suggests that Robert make some money by selling marijuana to his classmates.

For the time being, Robert is still holding Yale at arm's length (much the way he did with St. Benedict's during his freshman year). He's skeptical of Yale students, whom he finds trivial and superficial. It's also in this passage that Robert first begins thinking about selling drugs at Yale—a decision that will influence the direction his life takes.

That evening, Robert walks home. He passes by Valisburg Park, one of the city's main sites for buying and selling drugs. At home, Robert eats dinner with Jackie. Jackie has found it difficult to adjust to Robert being away from home, and Robert has called her from Yale almost every night. The next day, Robert visits Skeet in prison and gets up-to-date on the appeal process.

Robert remains a devoted son, and also probably finds comfort in remaining close with his mother and his familiar world of Newark. He remains in close contact with his father as well, recognizing that Skeet still needs to win his appeal to get out of jail for good.

During his freshman year, Jeff enjoys getting letters from his father. These letters calm him and remind him that, even if the world is big and complex, his own life is simple and secure. For Robert, marijuana plays a similar role: it allows him to relax and understand that nothing has changed.

Jeff sees Robert's drug use as playing an important psychological purpose: it calms him and reminds him that he's secure in his existence.

Robert spends at least four hours a day getting high with his friends off-campus. He likes to hang out in a building called the Weed Shack, where a junior named Sherman Feerick is the lease-holder. Robert and Sherman get along well, and Robert feels comfortable asking Sherman about selling marijuana on campus. Sherman gives Robert advice about how to deal without attracting unwanted attention.

Robert begins to consider more seriously the possibility of selling marijuana to his classmates.

Robert values his time in the Weed Shack partly because it allows him to air his grievances about Yale University with like-minded students, most of whom are black. He argues that Yale is designed for wealthy white students. He also finds it racist that the university doesn't sponsor the annual Af-Am Week, an annual party and convention for black students and lecturers. However, Robert is often more moderate than the other students in the Weed Shack. Instead of "bitching about" the oppressive atmosphere at Yale, he suggests, black students should work hard "and know that we have the capacity to get way more from them than they'll ever get from us."

Robert's time at the Weed Shack provides him with a culture of people who, like him, go to Yale but remain skeptical of the Yale administration and other Yale students. However, Robert wants to use his Yale education to empower himself, rather than dismissing it altogether. The passage is very similar to the earlier passage in which he encourages Tavarus to stop "being a bitch" and work his way through St. Benedict's, concentrating on the "big picture."

As final exam season begins, Robert begins selling weed to his classmates.

Robert becomes a drug dealer at Yale, partly to make money and partly as a sign of his "rebel" status. Yet this decision will have important consequences for his future.

CHAPTER 7

It's the winter of Robert's sophomore year. The second half of freshman year has been uneventful: Jeff and his roommates have slowly come to think of Yale as their home. Robert and Zina have broken up, and Robert has begun working in a dining hall. That summer, Jeff has gone back home to work at a school for people with mental disabilities, and Robert has stayed at Yale to work on the custodial staff. Skeet's post-conviction appeal has been overturned, meaning that Skeet is back in jail for good. Jeff is unaware of any of this. Meanwhile, Robert's dorm room has become a "safe haven" for stoners.

Hobbs crams a lot of information into this opening section—so much so that his claim that the intervening time has been "uneventful" could be ironic. Robert has begun selling much more marijuana. Even more importantly, his father is back in jail for good. This suggests that Robert has endured a major disappointment.

One night, Jeff wanders into the room and greets Robert. Robert mutters, "I just hate all these entitled motherfuckers." Robert later explains to Jeff the incident that set him off. In the dining hall, where Robert works, a group of "crew kids" (most of them, more likely than not, from wealthy families) got up to leave without busing their trays. Robert politely asked them to take care of their trays. In response, the athletes claimed they were in a rush and had to go. None of them made eye contact with him. Jeff can't think of anything to say, so he just replies, "That sucks, dude."

Robert continues to experience prejudice and discrimination along racial and class lines. The entitled students seem to treat him as if he's barely human—certainly not a fellow student and equal. Although Jeff is sympathetic to Robert's situation, he doesn't know what to say (it's also possible that Robert is implicitly criticizing Jeff, since Jeff is an affluent white Yale student, too). Although Robert and Jeff seem to be friends, they still find it difficult to understand each other's experiences.

Robert no longer makes a secret of his drug dealing. He sells weed from his room, which he still shares with Jeff (the four of them have agreed to stay together after freshman year). However, Ty has a serious girlfriend, and Dan Murray spends most of his time with "a popular crowd," meaning that Jeff and Robert spend far more time in the dorm room than Dan or Ty. Jeff and Robert don't talk often, but Robert tells Jeff that he likes Jeff's laid-back nature.

Robert and Jeff have a peculiar friendship. They don't talk to each other very much, and Jeff knows next to nothing about Robert's life outside of Yale. However, they seem to respect one another in a way that transcends their experience, race, or class (at least in Hobbs's portrayal of their friendship).

Jeff excels on the track team, meaning that he doesn't smoke marijuana. He's not a stoner, but he's not entirely comfortable with the athletic crowd, either. He spends many of his weekends at the Af-Am House, where he's often a source of amusement for black students who live there.

Jeff remains highly conflicted about his identity—he doesn't really fit in with any crowd.

In general, Robert has many friends at Yale. He's seems to enjoy meeting new people. Many of his closest friends are black or Puerto Rican, and struggle with the social atmosphere at Yale; they respect Robert for supporting them and giving them a chance to vent. One important friend for Robert is Raquel Diaz, a Puerto Rican woman who treats Robert like an older brother, and often "vents" to him about her frustrations with spoiled students.

Although Robert has disagreements with Yale culture in general, he gets along well with many Yale students. He's a good listener and a calming presence, meaning that he tends to have lots of close, trusting friendships.

During sophomore year, Robert "saves" Jeff twice. The first time, Jeff gets in a fistfight with a big, drunk Yale student. Then, suddenly, the student backs off. Jeff turns and sees Robert standing next to him—somehow, his presence is enough to frighten the student. The second time Robert saves Jeff takes place after Jeff begins dating a woman. After she breaks up with him, Jeff becomes depressed. One night, he drafts a long, rambling email to the woman. Just as he's about to send it, Robert says, "You want to share your feelings with someone? Share them with me." Robert listens carefully as Jeff talks about his relationship. (In the end, Jeff sends the email, anyway, and, of course, it "did not accomplish what it had been designed to.")

Two things to notice here. First, it's suggested that Robert's presence as a large, intimidating black man is what scares off the other student, reinforcing some of Robert's claims about the prejudicial culture at Yale. Second, Robert and Jeff seem to have gotten more comfortable opening up to one another—and yet it is Jeff who opens up to Robert, not the other way around. Jeff still knows remarkably little about his roommate's feelings, ambitions, and background.

Robert begins to study Molecular Biophysics and Biology, one of the hardest majors at Yale. He also joins the water polo team. He gets A's, seemingly without trying too hard, and smokes lots of weed. He and a close friend, Oswaldo Gutierrez, start a science club. He later begins working at the Yale Medical School. As time goes on, he becomes more comfortable with his Yale life. He continues selling lots of marijuana, and—Jeff guesses—making lots of money. Jeff assumes that he's sending money to his mother, or saving for graduate school.

In the past, Robert has excelled at fitting in in different crowds. At Yale, he perfects his abilities, succeeding in the classroom, as an athlete, and as a drug dealer. By the same token, this means fitting in with very different kinds of people (athletes, science majors, and rebellious stoners).

Although Oswaldo is one of Robert's best friends, he doesn't approve of Robert's drug dealing. He criticizes Robert for selling out of his dorm room, and warns that he'll be caught. Robert sometimes hosts his old friends Victor, Tavarus, and Julius. Jeff likes these friends, although he often finds it difficult to talk to them about their lives.

Oswaldo is one of the first students to warn Robert about his drug selling. Notice, also, that Jeff finds it very difficult to connect with Robert's friends, largely because there's very little "experiential overlap" between them.

One night sophomore year, Robert comes back to his dorm, along with Victor, with a big welt on his forehead. Robert explains that somebody hit him and ran away, probably because he thought Robert was somebody else. Jeff impulsively says that they should go "find the guy." Robert agrees, and they all pile into Victor's car. Even though it's obvious they're never going to find the culprit, they drive around for hours.

It's never explained how Robert gets the welt on his head. More important to notice are the unspoken "rules of toughness" that run through this passage. Even though it's transparently obvious that Robert and his friends aren't going to "find the guy," they refuse to back down until they've been driving for hours, because doing so would be a sign of weakness.

Junior year, Jeff, Ty, and Robert have moved off campus to live in their own apartment. Tavarus and Julius come to visit Robert during Af-Am Week. Tavarus has dropped out of college, and Julius hasn't been working due to injuries. One night, Robert invites a few friends to an apartment party. "A few friends" turns out to mean dozens of people, only a couple of whom Jeff knows. Jeff begins to get uncomfortable, and decides to leave. The next day, Jeff finds out that the police showed up. Nevertheless, Robert seems happy to have thrown a big party.

Robert's social life becomes wilder, and Robert seems to take great pride in being friends with so many people. However, the passage foreshadows some of the difficulties that Robert will have later on in life, since the party ends with the police showing up.

As Robert goes through college, he falls in love with travel. He goes to Costa Rica after his sophomore year, and henceforth begins planning a trip to Rio de Janeiro. But as he comes to the end of his undergraduate career, the administration summons him to discuss "the drugs he'd been selling."

Robert is exceptionally curious about the outside world, and wants to explore as much of it as possible. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger—what will the Yale administration do about Robert's drug dealing?

CHAPTER 8

In February of Junior year, Robert goes to speak with the master of Pierson College. The meeting is short, with the master telling Robert that he's destroying his potential by selling drugs. Robert doesn't deny anything, and says, "I'm sorry." Robert realizes that the Yale administration isn't going to discipline him for selling drugs—as he tells Oswaldo, "It looks bad for the university if someone like me goes down like that." Soon afterwards, Oswaldo has a nervous breakdown.

Robert knows that the Yale administration won't expel him for selling drugs—as a black student, he knows that the administration will want to avoid a controversy that could tarnish Yale's image as a "diverse" place. Oswaldo's nervous breakdown doesn't seem to be linked to Robert's drug dealing in any direct way, but it's also abundantly clear that Robert's behavior causes his friend a lot of stress.

At the end of his junior year, Robert begins receiving mysterious emails that say things like, "We are watching you." Robert has been tapped for Elihu, a Yale secret society. As part of the initiation process, Robert has to memorize chants and drink obscene amounts of alcohol. After being confirmed, Robert has to pay one hundred dollars in membership dues. When his check bounces, Laurel Bachner, the wealthy, white head of Elihu is on the verge of paying Robert's dues instead of confronting him. But Robert gives her the check, explaining that the bank changed his account number. At the initiation party, Robert gets very drunk and loud. This displeases Oswaldo, who worries that minority students at Yale are just reinforcing the stereotypes about them—"that they get stoned all the time, dress like thugs," get angry, etc.

Yale's secret societies are often seen as representing the university's closed-off, traditional nature. So it's surprising, and even refreshing, that one of the most prominent secret societies recruits a black student from a working-class family. Notice, also, that Oswaldo is concerned that Robert's behavior strengthens white prejudice by conforming to black stereotypes—essentially placing the burden of dispelling racism on its victims, not its perpetrators. (Versions of this argument are also often made to criticize gangster rap and other aspects of black culture perceived as glorifying violence and crime.)

In September 2001, senior year begins. Jeff vividly remembers sitting in his dorm room with Ty and Robert, watching the collapse of the Twin Towers. Robert spends the evening at Anwar Reed's house. Anwar Reed lives in a dangerous part of New Haven, and he sells drugs. Following 9/11 and the heightened security on the Yale campus, Robert becomes more cautious with dealing drugs.

Many universities increased campus security after 9/11, and Yale was no exception. But the passage also shows that Robert is becoming more mature and careful in the way he sells marijuana, showing that he doesn't want another clash with the Yale administration (even though he's cockily claimed that he'll never be kicked out).

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Jeff recalls, many Yale students dive deeper into hedonism. One night, Jeff and Robert drive north to go to a casino. Robert plays blackjack late into the night. In November of senior year, Robert convinces Jeff to smoke marijuana for the first time. He tells Jeff that the weed is "on the house"—but he says it in a way that makes it clear that "this would be the last freebie."

Robert is responsible for getting Jeff high for the first time ever—a milestone that Jeff seems to remember vividly. Robert clearly considers Jeff a friend, but he's not going to let their friendship get in the way of his business: ultimately, Jeff is also just another one of his customers.

As senior year goes on, science majors prepare to take the MCAT. Surprisingly, Robert says he won't be taking the test. Unbeknownst to Jeff, Robert has netted over $100,000 selling marijuana. Meanwhile, Jeff develops an ambition to become a writer, and completes a (terrible) novel.

Robert's decision not to take the MCAT (something that the bulk of biology majors at Yale would do) might seem odd. But on the other hand, he's saved a lot of money, and is entitled to enjoy some time to himself. And furthermore, his goals for the future don't seem much vaguer than Jeff's goal of becoming a writer.

One night, Jeff and Robert talk about their futures. Jeff plucks up the courage to ask Robert about his father, and Robert claims that he doesn't really think about his father at all.

This is one of the only times in the book when Robert opens up to Jeff—and yet even here, Robert doesn't reveal much, and seemingly lies when he says he doesn't think about Skeet much.

As spring rolls around, Jeff and Ty realize that they've never seen Robert play water polo, even though he's captain of his team. The two roommates attend one of Robert's games, and they're amazed with his energy and grace, and the way he yells at the opposing players to intimidate them.

Water polo, as Hobbs has already made very clear, is a WASP-y sport. In many ways, Robert's behavior during a water polo game mirrors his experience at Yale more generally. Instead of being quiet and trying to fit in with the predominately white, affluent culture, he rebels in various ways while still achieving great success.

Robert prepares for the defining ritual of the Elihu society—the "bio." All senior members of the society are required to tell the story of their lives to their fellow members. To everyone's surprise, Robert—usually pretty quiet in Elihu meetings—delivers a four-hour bio in which he talks about his father. He says Skeet was the victim of a system designed to persecute black men, and concludes, "the white establishment would always keep the common black man down in order to cover their own asses." That night, Arthur Turpin, a wealthy white student in Elihu who gets along well with Robert, sees for the first time how much anger Robert is guarding.

Robert reveals that he's been bottling up a lot of anger and frustration. Some of this anger seems directed at the people who arrested and convicted his father. But some of his anger seems directed at white culture and white society in general: as he sees it, white society is actively waging war on black people. Given what Hobbs has already written about life in Newark in the 1980s, Robert has a point.

Jeff isn't sure what Robert plans to do following graduation. He visits Robert in East Orange in the spring. Jeff is nervous about being, quite literally, the only white person in the neighborhood, but everyone is very friendly. Jeff and Robert attend a cookout, and Jeff experiences a degree of warmth from Robert's friends and family that he's "never experienced in my own WASP upbringing." Jeff also notices that the only person who doesn't seem overjoyed with Robert's accomplishments is Jackie.

Hobbs evokes some of the stereotypes about working-class black people and WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants): black people are honest, open, and "real," while WASPs are chilly and austere. But the passage also foreshadows some of Robert's impending misfortunes: it's almost as if Jackie knows that something is about to go wrong for her son.

Yale graduation is a two-day process, during which Robert smokes a lot of marijuana. After the speeches, Robert takes Jackie to a cocktail party at the Elihu house. The final event of the graduation season is the diploma ceremony. When Robert accepts his diploma, he makes a brief speech, as is the custom, in which he dedicates the moment to "my motivation and heart, my mother."

This is, in some ways, the happiest moment in the entire book. Robert has achieved a great success: a Yale degree. By thanking his mother, he acknowledges the enormous amount of work she did to send him to school, showing that he's a good, loving son.

The next morning, after a night of partying, Jeff wakes up and packs his things. Robert isn't in his dorm, so Jeff leaves without saying goodbye. Jeff reasons that he and Robert will see each other again soon—"There would always be time."

Jeff's words should be taken as darkly ironic, since, as we know from the book's very title, Robert does not have unlimited time left on this earth.

CHAPTER 9

Robert spends the summer after Yale working as a custodian. While cleaning out dorms, he discovers a huge amount of "free stuff," some of it very valuable. He also works in the medical school lab, where he researches the structure of proteins.

Robert's post-graduate work isn't particularly glamorous; moreover, Hobbs has established that Robert has no material reason to continue working in this capacity. The mystery of why Robert doesn't try to find other, better-paying work is one that Hobbs will try to solve for the rest of the book.

Robert spends the summer living with his friend Raquel Diaz, who's stressed about her future. Robert has always had a way of getting along with platonic female friends—he gives them emotional support without making them feel uncomfortable.

Robert continues to keep in touch with his close Yale friends.

Meanwhile, the last four years have been the hardest of Jackie's life. She's worked hard, and lived alone for the first time in her life. She's also confused about what Robert plans to do with his future. However, Robert is a good son, and always leaves money for her when he visits. In these four years, life has gotten more violent in Newark. There are more gangs then ever, and homicides are at an all-time high.

Jackie makes sacrifices for the sake of her son, but in return she wants to see her son succeed as an adult. As Newark becomes more and more violent, she wants her son to move on and find success in the field he's studied at Yale.

Dealing weed has become more complicated for Robert, for the simple reason that he's now a Yale graduate. He travels down to Newark, picks up weed from a supplier for a low price with the help of his "uncle" Carl, pays Carl a "kickback" for his help, and then sells it back at New Haven for much more than he paid for it. But Robert is careful to keep his Yale status a secret from this supplier, for fear of seeming like an outsider.

During college, Robert has to conceal or downplay his Yale status from his marijuana "connects." This is because being a Yale alumnus alienates Robert from his peers, most of whom think of Yale as an alien place, practically a foreign country.

In August 2002, Jeff visits Robert, still living at Yale. Robert tells Jeff that he's planning on traveling to Rio in the spring. At the time, Jeff has no jobs lined up, though he aspires to write books. Eventually, he moves to New York and gets a job as a grant writer. He gets the job thanks to his brother's business contacts.

In many ways, Jeff and Robert are equally clueless about their futures. But Jeff at least finds a stable, halfway-interesting job after college—not because he's wonderfully talented, but because he has family connections. This might suggest that some Yale graduates succeed not simply because their educations have given them valuable skills, but because they were already affluent and well-connected before going to Yale, and continue relying on these advantages.

Around the same time, many of Robert's Yale friends are beginning fellowships at elite graduate programs. Many of Robert's childhood friends, however, are still completing college or struggling to support themselves. Other of Robert's Yale friends, such as Oswaldo Gutierrez, are living with their families, and don't know what they want to do for a living. Robert offers Oswaldo some money, but Oswaldo refuses.

Many of Robert's working-class Yale friends are unsure what they want to do with their lives. They have Yale degrees, but they're still unsure how to use them. However, they stay in touch with each other, and even offer each other financial support.

Robert has one short-term goal: launder the money he's made dealing drugs. In reality, Robert probably doesn't have to launder the money. He spends almost nothing, and he's pretty unlikely to be audited. Nevertheless, he buys equipment from the Yale med school lab, and then returns the equipment for cash reimbursements. This is a highly risky way to launder his funds, especially since it could embarrass Yale med school. Perhaps knowing this, Robert doesn't tell anyone what he's doing, including Raquel Diaz.

For neither the first nor the last time, Robert takes ridiculous risks to launder cash that he probably doesn't have to launder in the first place. Robert clearly knows that he's doing something stupid, which is why he doesn't tell his friends: but why, exactly, he chooses to con Yale remains unclear. It's almost as if Robert enjoys the risk, and takes pleasure in doing the opposite of what a traditional Yale grad is supposed to do.

Raquel Diaz, meanwhile, falls in love with a Yale graduate named Simon Rodriguez. Simon is about to begin medical school in New York. Five years later, Simon and Raquel will get married.

Shortly after graduating, many of Robert and Jeff's Yale friends start doing traditional "adult" things—like getting married.

On Valentine's Day 2003, Robert leaves for Rio. He leaves his drugs and money with Carl, in a padlocked trunk. When he arrives in Brazil, the Copacabana is every bit as beautiful as he'd imagined. He spends his vacation dancing, drinking, swimming, and practicing Portuguese. Rio is a lot like Newark in some ways: it's divided between upscale neighborhoods, dominated by descendants of Europeans, and impoverished neighborhoods (or favelas) dominated by descendants of native Brazilians and African slaves. Both cities have huge drug problems.

Robert loves Rio in part because it's both familiar (in its racial inequality, for example) and different. In some ways, his trip to Rio represents the pinnacle of his achievement: he's done well at Yale, and now he's celebrating his successes.

As the vacation goes on, two of Robert's Yale friends pass through Rio and stay with him, and they all go out dancing together. Also during his trip, Robert befriends custodial workers who live in the favelas, telling his friends back home that he admires their honesty. He also experiences the wonders of Carnival, Rio's annual world-famous party.

Much as he did at Yale, Robert makes friends with working-class people in Rio, feeling more comfortable around them than he did with many of his wealthy Yale friends.

Robert returns to Newark in April, a few weeks earlier than planned. The reason he returns early is that he gets a call from Carl, and senses that something is wrong. In Newark, Carl takes Robert to his place, where Robert notices that his trunk has been tampered with. Robert furiously opens the trunk and sees that his savings—four years of hard, risky work—are gone. Carl mutters that he's been in debt lately, that he feels Robert owes him, and that he intends to pay Robert back. Robert is too furious to respond.

The chapter ends on a horrible note: Robert's friend Carl has betrayed him, stealing Robert's money and spending it to relieve his own debts. Just like that, four years of hard work go down the drain.

CHAPTER 10

Shortly after the events of the previous chapter, Robert approaches Coach Ridley about joining the faculty at St. Benedict's. The summer of 2003 has been hard for Robert: he has no money and no job. He's moved back in with his mother, and depends on her. Robert's friends all have stable jobs—while Robert, who's worked harder than any of them, does not.

Robert has experienced a major setback: he's lost all the money he made selling drugs at Yale, not just because of Carl's dishonesty but because of his own naiveté.

Friar Leahy has been paying close attention to Robert since Robert has come back to Newark. Because of his experience as a teacher, he's not too surprised that Robert had fallen on hard times. He remembers a black student from years ago, who earned a Rhodes Scholarship. Outrageously, the student wasn't able to find work after finishing his program. Eventually, the student committed suicide. Leahy offers Robert a job teaching biology, and Robert reluctantly accepts. He also coaches water polo.

Friar Leahy is clearly a concerned, compassionate man. He genuinely wants Robert to succeed in life—furthermore, unlike many of Robert's friends and mentors, he's realistic about the pressures of success and the opportunities available to black, working-class Yale graduates. Therefore, he gives Robert as much help as he can give.

One night, Robert is relaxing with his friends, including Julius and Tavarus, in a friend-of-a-friend's house. The host confronts Robert about having gone to Yale, and orders Robert to get out. Robert and the host begin yelling at each other. Soon, they begin hitting each other. Tavarus and Julius break up the fight, and Tavarus tells Robert that he can't fight like that. At a time when most of Robert's classmates treat their Yale status as a badge of honor, Robert hides his.

Robert is clearly frustrated with his situation in life, and takes out his frustration on his Newark peers. Robert is "neither here nor there"—he's something of an outsider both among his Newark friends and his Yale classmates. His attempts at fronting don't prove as successful as they did in high school.

That summer, Jeff emails Robert, but the email bounces back. He calls his old house on Chapman street, but gets no answer. Jeff realizes that he has no way of contacting his friend. Eventually, Ty emails Jeff Robert's new number. Jeff calls Robert, and Robert explains that he's been teaching high school. Robert seems a little distant, and Jeff assumes that, just as Robert is fading from his mind, he's fading from Robert's.

Jeff claims that he keeps in touch with Robert but doesn't think about Robert all that often. This raises some questions about how close Jeff and Robert were in the first place: it's not as if Jeff knows much about Robert's life, perhaps explaining why he's not motivated to talk to Robert all that often.

Jeff doesn't realize that, just a few days before he calls Robert, one of Robert's weed suppliers pulls a gun on him during a price negotiation. Robert realizes that he's gotten too complacent at Yale—he's used to people paying him whatever he asks for. He decides to stop dealing drugs. He also seems to forgive Carl for taking his money, saying, "You can't blame a dog for eating up a steak if you leave the steak on the floor."

Robert gets a frightening reminder that he's not at Yale anymore. He seems to be coming to accept his situation, even forgiving Carl. This is indicative of Robert's incredible self-control and sense of responsibility; instead of staying angry, he forces himself to move on.

Robert is a good teacher at St. Benedict's. He has no problem telling students when they're being lazy, and often motivates them to succeed. He doesn't broadcast his Yale degree but instead focuses on teaching his students good study habits. On one occasion, Robert tells a student to "shut the fuck up," and the student's mother complains. Robert apologizes, but he's irritated—he's sure he's done the right thing.

Robert is a good leader, partly because he's capable of being tough with his students when he needs to be. He pushes his students to succeed in a way that other, milder teachers wouldn't. However, Robert can be hardheaded and reluctant to back down—never good qualities for a teacher to have.

Robert buys a house for himself near Chapman Street. Jackie is confused: Robert is making even less money than she makes, and she expects him to spend his savings on his family. Robert takes care of his aging grandparents, cooking for them and leaving them a few hundred dollars a month. He insists that his purchase is an investment—he'll rent out the house to people. Jackie finds Robert's decision unwise, but she knows she can no longer control what her son does.

Robert continues to care for his mother and grandparents, and yet in other ways seems to be pushing away from them. His business plans seem impractical and misguided, but he's at a point in his life where nobody can stop him from doing what he wants to do.

Oswaldo Gutierrez comes down to Newark to help Robert fix up his new house. The house is old and dilapidated, but Robert seems proud to be living there. Privately, Oswaldo thinks Robert is foolish to imagine that he's going to make a profit renting out this property. But he helps Robert repair the house.

One of the key themes of this chapter is that Robert's friends and family know he's making mistakes, but don't say anything. Robert has always been so confident and self-assured that the people in his life have learned not to give him advice.

Robert contacts his old friend Hrvoje, who played water polo for the University of Vermont. They get together on weekends to play water polo. Before playing, Robert always goes to visit Skeet. Skeet and Robert continue to search for a way to get Skeet out of jail. Ingeniously, Robert finds that the judge in Skeet's 1999 trial misquoted a standard of review—an error which could lead to a mistrial. Furthermore, Skeet has been a model inmate. Robert begins to use this to draft an appeal.

Robert keeps in touch with his friends and his family. He continues to love his father deeply and wants to remain attached to him, hence the fact that he continues to devote a lot of time to drafting an appeal.

In the winter of 2005, Skeet begins to notice that Robert asks him for advice. Robert is keeping tenants in his house, and he finds it hard to extract rent from them. Meanwhile, Skeet has begun to feel tired. However, he doesn't visit the prison doctor.

Skeet is one of the few people whom Robert feels comfortable asking for advice. But the passage foreshadows the impending tragedy in Skeet's already tragic life.

In 2005, Jeff is happily engaged to a woman named Rebecca. He and his fiancé visit the Penn Relays, a popular sporting event in Philadelphia, and meet up with Robert, Ty Cantey, and some other Yale friends. Jeff notices that both of his roommates seem worn-out by their jobs and studies. In private, Robert tells Rebecca, almost gravely, "You picked a good one."

The years immediately following graduation are hard for almost all of Jeff's friends: they've been succeeding for so many uninterrupted years that the prospect of real adult challenges fills them with anxiety. Jeff and Robert apparently continue to respect one another, explaining Robert's comments to Rebecca.

Jeff and his Yale friends are adults, faced with all the joys and frustrations of their mid-twenties. Their lives are changing quickly. Strangely, though, Robert's life seems not to be changing at all. He still lives in Newark, hangs out with friends from high school, and goes to St. Benedict's five days a week. That summer, however, Robert experiences a major change when Skeet collapses in prison.

At the time, it seemed as if Yale would give Robert a chance to reinvent himself. And yet, it would now seem, Robert hasn't reinvented himself at all: he's the same person he always was, and hasn't escaped his environment at all. The chapter ends on another cliffhanger, hinting at another tragedy in Robert's life.

CHAPTER 11

Jeff is just a few days away from getting married to Rebecca. On a Friday, he drives down to Newark to get lunch with Robert, who's going to be one of his groomsmen. They have a long, drunken lunch, during which they reminisce about Yale. During the lunch, Robert also tells Jeff about his challenges as a schoolteacher. The work is hard, but Robert is looking forward to being able to travel back to Rio. Jeff tells Robert that he's just sold his first novel, and Robert proudly tells Jeff, "I'll pick up a copy."

Robert and Jeff seem to be on roughly equal footing following their graduations, at least in Jeff's mind: they've had some limited successes as well as some notable failures. But notice that, just like before, Robert says very little about what's going on in his life—he certainly doesn't mention selling drugs or being threatened at gunpoint.

Both Robert and Ty are groomsmen at Jeff's wedding. The former roommates have a great time drinking and dancing. At the end of the night, Robert thanks Jeff and says good night. That's the last time Jeff ever sees his old friend.

The last time Jeff sees Robert alive, he has no idea that Robert has been selling drugs or experiencing serious difficulties. As far as Jeff knows, they're both in similar post-Yale situations.

One night, Robert, Victor, and Big Steve, Victor's older brother, are discussing Robert's decision to deal drugs. Big Steve says that Robert doesn't need to sell drugs, but Robert calmly replies, "doing what I gotta do." Oswaldo, who's beginning medical school, tells Robert, "Get the fuck out of Newark." Robert doesn't listen.

Again and again, Robert's friends tell him to get away from his neighborhood, which is clearly a bad influence on him. The problem is that, while Robert knows that they're right, he still loves Newark. His family and his oldest friends live there, and Robert seems to feel a responsibility to live near them—or else he's afraid to leave his comfort zone again.

Why doesn't Robert just leave Newark? Hobbs asks. To begin with, he's loyal to his family. Furthermore, he likes being around his old friends, to whom he's extremely loyal, and who are very loyal to him. Robert is very generous with his time and money, even though he's barely getting by himself. In his own way, Oswaldo later says, Robert is "fronting," pretending to be tougher and more capable than he really is. Around this time, Robert learns that Skeet has brain cancer.

Robert genuinely likes being around his friends and family. But he also likes having a group of friends who idolize him and depend up him for leadership and financial support. Robert's "fronting," previously the source of his success as an athlete, a leader, and a student, is now becoming an obstacle to success—it's influencing him to do the same thing, year after year.

Meanwhile, Raquel Diaz is living in New York while her soon-to-be husband is in medical school. Robert visits her all the time, usually bringing weed. He also visits Rio a few more times, thanks to a cousin who works for an airline. Robert tells Raquel that he wants to live in Rio part-time. Raquel tells him, "You went to *Yale*. If you can't figure out how to do what you want to do, that's your own damn fault." Robert admits she's right.

Raquel is yet another close friend who calls out Robert for his complacency: if he really wanted to achieve his ambitions, he could do so with some focus and work. The reality is that Robert doesn't know what he wants to do with himself.

In his spare-time, Robert works on a new appeal for his father, this time on medical grounds. He writes letters to prison officials, emphasizing his father's good behavior and begging that he be allowed to leave jail. But because New Jersey prisons are tightening security at this time, Robert's requests are denied.

Robert continues to fight on his father's behalf, knowing that his father doesn't have much longer to live. Robert's relationship with Skeet has always been complicated, and now he seems desperate not to lose his father yet again.

Friar Leahy senses that something is wrong in Robert's life. But, just as he's always done, Robert conceals his emotions. He works intensely with his students and athletes and refuses to open up to Leahy.

Even though he's surrounded by people who love him and care about him, Robert refuses to open up to them—and as a result, he becomes angrier and more frustrated.

Robert finds it hard to deal drugs in Newark, because it's hard to find good marijuana. Robert begins to grow his own mixed strain of marijuana, growing the plants in his basement and treating them with butane—a task that consumes much of his time. Robert's friends ask him why he's still dealing drugs—surely he could find a better job somewhere else. Robert never gives them a straight answer.

The reason Robert doesn't answer his friends is because he doesn't have a good answer. He likes being in Newark because he likes being around his friends and being "the man," and because he's loyal to his father. But as for why he's still dealing and taking so many unnecessary risks, he doesn't even seem to know himself.

Robert spends a lot of time visiting Skeet in prison. It becomes clear to him that Skeet doesn't have much longer to live. In August 2006, Robert learns that his latest appeal has been denied: Skeet will be kept in prison, in spite of his medical history and the circumstances of his conviction. Later that month, Skeet dies of respiratory failure. The funeral is simple. Robert tells Victor, "I lost my father three times. First when he went to jail. Second when he went back to jail. And now he's in the ground."

Robert's words to Victor sum up the immensity of the pain that he's been dealing with for all these years. Robert has had to go through all the sadness of being separated from his father—but also the uncertainty and anxiety of having to fight for his father's freedom. This struggle has left its mark on Robert's character: it's made him strong and patient, but also angry and deeply conflicted.

As the 2006-2007 school year begins at St. Benedict's, Robert begins to plan a career in real estate. He thinks that he can make money by "flipping homes," and cockily believes he'll be able to pass the real estate exam. To his amazement, he fails the test the first two times that he takes it. On his third attempt, in 2007, he passes. Robert tells his friends that he intends to get into real estate, continue teaching, make enough money to support Jackie, and go to graduate school. Yet Robert's friends—as well as Friar Leahy—notice that he seems burnt out.

Robert's plans for supporting himself become increasingly over-confident and poorly thought-out. He doesn't seem to be putting the same energy and intelligence into his plans as before—perhaps explaining why he seems burnt out. Notably, this is also seemingly the first time he can't breeze through a test using only his natural brilliance. Robert keeps coming up against more and more obstacles in the "real" world.

One night, Robert is growing marijuana in his basement when he gets word from Tavarus that Boobie, a member of the Double II Set gang, has a beef with Robert. Robert has been selling his product to Boobie's usual customers. Later Boobie's car is parked outside Robert's house. Robert chooses to go outside and greet Boobie. They sit in the car, and before long, the two of them are laughing.

Robert's charisma, intelligence, and quick humor make him a surprisingly effective drug dealer, one who's capable of resolving conflicts with other gangs. Here, it's suggested, Robert befriends Boobie and smoothes out any difficulties between them.

The following spring will be Robert's last at St. Benedict's. He's informed Friar Leahy that he'll be taking time to travel and then applying to graduate school. At the end of the school year, Robert attends the senior banquet, where he sees Charles Cawley. Though Robert has seen Cawley from time to time since returning to St. Benedict's, the meetings are usually awkward. Cawley greets Robert and says he's sorry—Leahy has told him about Robert's father. Robert tells Cawley that he's thinking of applying to graduate schools, but doesn't specify which ones. As Robert speaks, Cawley notices anger in Robert's eyes. Cawley, a financier, thinks of Robert as a "poor investment." He's invested six figures in Robert's future, but Robert hasn't realized his potential.

By accepting Cawley's money, Robert accepted a certain unspoken obligation to Cawley: he effectively promised to use his Yale education to succeed. Now, Robert is very aware that he's not making the best use of his degree, and this contributes to the awkwardness of his interaction with Cawley. On the other hand, Cawley's behavior seems remarkably callous and tone-deaf. To think of a student as an "investment," good or bad, is dehumanizing and insulting. Like the businessman he is, Cawley expects immediate results, and for this reason he can't understand what Robert is going through.

Robert never applies to a single graduate school. Instead, he focuses his attention on real estate. But he comes to realize that it's not a good time to get into real estate in Newark, so he's going to need another job. A few weeks after the senior banquet, he begins a job at Newark International Airport.

Robert knows he's capable of doing great things, but instead he takes easy jobs that don't even require a college degree. Of course, Robert's apathy is partly the result of his confused and conflicted place in his community and the world in general.

CHAPTER 12

Robert works at Newark International Airport, wearing an orange uniform that reminds him of his father's prison outfit. His coworkers are older than he is, and he gets along with them. Jackie is furious that Robert has taken such a low-paying job, for which he didn't even need a high school diploma.

The chapter begins by echoing the prison imagery of the previous ones. In a way, Robert has become a prisoner of his apathy and his troubled past. The result is that he remains in Newark and takes a low-paying job, even though he could easily find something better.

While working at the airport, Robert continues to plan his real estate career. He researches properties in Cleveland and Florida, most of which are seriously damaged and need a lot of repairs. Robert complains to his friends that he didn't think it would be so difficult to get into real estate. By this time, Tavarus has a son, and Julius has been with his girlfriend for six years. Curtis has a boring but decent-paying job in marketing. The friends continue to get along, although Robert hasn't been smoking weed for fear that he'll be drug-tested at work. As a result, he's been irritable.

Robert continues to experience setbacks with his real estate research. He's also irritated about not getting to smoke marijuana—raising some questions about why he chose to work at an airport in the first place, and also suggesting that Robert's love of getting high might be turning into an unhealthy dependence.

That year, Jeff talks to Robert just a few times. Robert doesn't say much about his life. Jeff conceals the facts that he and Rebecca have been unable to start a family, or that his second book wasn't accepted by any publishers on the first go-around. In short, Jeff is fronting to Robert—and Robert, Jeff later realizes, is fronting to him.

The two friends misrepresent themselves and act as if life is going better than it really is. This suggests that neither friend was ever wholly comfortable with the other, and that they're uncomfortable letting their guard down around each other.

Robert has always had success with dating women. But in the mid-2000s, he begins to become more "bold, crass, and too often mean" with the women he's dating. He yells at his girlfriends over the phone. Raquel Diaz often tells him "the only thing that will save you is a good woman." Shortly after this, she gives birth to a boy.

Robert seems to be taking out his anger and frustration on women—something he's never done before.

Robert begins dating Inayra Sideros, Raquel Diaz's aunt. "Ina" is only a year older than Raquel (Raquel's mother and grandmother got pregnant around the same time). Robert goes to visit her in Miami all the time. He tells her about his dreams of becoming a college professor, and seems to love her deeply.

Robert expresses vague dreams of becoming a college professor but takes no concrete steps toward realizing that goal. Having a girlfriend—contrary to what Raquel claims—doesn't seem to be saving him at all, but rather gives him another way of deferring action.

Robert uses his airport job to travel for free. He makes "business trips" to Liberty City to buy cheap weed, and then brings the weed back to Newark by hiding it in his boots. This is extremely risky, since he could be arrested by the DEA. Ina sometimes worries about Robert's work, but she admires that he has a plan. However, she worries when Robert begins to speak about a new business venture involving guns.

Robert takes outrageous and unnecessary risks for the sake of selling marijuana—and later when he proposes selling guns. On some level, Robert seems to enjoy the risk and the machismo that accompanies it.

In March 2008, Robert attends the birthday of Tavarus's son. Lately, Robert has been away from Newark for weeks at a time, supposedly because he's been traveling to exotic destinations like Croatia and Tokyo. He hasn't applied to any schools, but claims he'll begin in 2009. One morning, during a visit to Rio, he wakes up naked in a favela, with his wallet gone. When he returns to Newark and tells Jackie what happened, Jackie says, "I don't need you. I never have. Don't you go worrying about me. Take care of yourself." Her only advice for Robert is, "Go back to school. That's what I want to see."

By 2009, it's becoming clear that something is wrong in Robert's life. He has a Yale degree, but seems to feel no motivation to get a good job or make something of his life. Jackie, who's worked so hard and sacrificed so much for her son, now seems frustrated with him, and urges Robert to take care of himself and get his graduate degree. While Hobbs doesn't say so, this seems to be Jackie's way of encouraging Robert to get on with his life, rather than staying in Newark with the excuse that he needs to take care of his mother.

CHAPTER 13

One night, Robert and his old friend Hrvoje meet in a bar. Hrvoje asks Robert about his life, and Robert explains that he's been selling drugs. Hrvoje points out that Robert could easily find other work if he wanted to, and Robert—as usual—just laughs.

Robert never has an answer when people tell him that he's better than a drug dealer—he knows he is, but for some reason he doesn't look for better work.

Robert goes to Pula, Croatia, Hrvoje's hometown. There, he meets Lana Kasun, a Croatian woman, and later starts dating her. He begins to develop a scheme to move to Croatia and make a fortune selling ice-makers—which, it would seem, don't exist in Croatia.

Robert continues to pursue unusual, sometime risky-seeming business ventures rather than finding regular work.

In the fall of 2008, Robert approaches Ina with an idea: Ina can get her gun license, buy handguns, and then file claims saying the guns have been stolen. Robert will then sell the handguns for double the price. Ina's initial reaction is simple: "Fuck no." She's always been able to accept Robert's drug dealing, but selling guns is intolerable to her. Soon after, she joins the navy and leaves Newark.

Robert's business schemes become increasingly foolish and risky, and his friends tell him that he's absurd. While Ina doesn't join the navy simply because of Robert's business proposal, she's clearly drifting apart from Robert, in part because of his inability to focus on any goals in his life.

Around the same time, Robert gets a promotion at work. The work allows him to sit at a desk, and it pays much better. In his new position, Robert spends time studying chemistry to stay up to speed. Some of his colleagues talk behind his back, saying that a Yale graduate has no business working with them. Meanwhile, Oswaldo is coming to the end of his time in medical school. When he sees Robert, he notices that Robert seems pettier and less curious than he was at Yale. When Robert asks him for drug contacts in Philadelphia, Oswaldo replies, "Get the fuck out." In this moment, Oswaldo realizes that Robert's "troubles were self-inflicted."

Oswaldo notices that Robert seems to have lost some of his ambition and open-mindedness, the very qualities that made him such a successful young man. Oswaldo refuses to tolerate Robert's aspirations of being a big drug dealer. While many of Robert's problems and underlying issues are a product of his background, family situation, and various oppressive systems, Oswaldo here indirectly calls him out for the problems that are direct results of bad choices.

Jeff and Ty get together and reminisce about college. They admit they haven't heard from Robert in a long time. Ty and Jeff have had their share of successes and failures. Ty is expecting a child, and he's about to become a doctor, but he's desperate for money. Jeff's second novel wasn't accepted by any publishers, meaning that he's had to do copy-editing to support himself. They agree to reunite with Robert soon, but never get around to arranging the details.

In many ways, the book paints a pessimistic portrait of an elite college education and its aftermath. Students spend four years believing that the world is at their feet, and that they can do anything. Because they've been living in a cloud of success and optimism for so many years, they find it tough to adjust to the pressures of post-college life—the real world is a lot tougher than they've been led to believe.

Robert and Tavarus keep planning their real estate company. They envision convincing some St. Benedict's alumni to invest in the company, and then presenting a business plan to urban planners. Privately, Tavarus thinks that Robert's Yale credentials will be helpful for attracting interest in the company, although he worries that Robert's current job at an airport will undermine his credibility.

Even Robert's close friends, once dazzled by his intelligence, begin to see that Robert is underachieving, hence Julius's worry about Robert's airport job.

Robert gets a visit from an old Yale classmate, Isabella Peretzian, who used to spend a lot of time with Robert listening to hip-hop. These days, she writes about rap music for various music websites, and has generally outstripped Robert in her music knowledge. Isabella continues to worship Robert, however—he seems "real" in a way that none of her friends are.

It's somewhat poignant that Isabella has become more knowledgeable than Robert, her old mentor, when it comes to hip-hop. This symbolizes the way that Robert's progress has been arrested, while his friends go on to surpass him in various ways.

Robert begins dating a woman named Rene Millien. Rene lives in Brooklyn and works as a digital artist. The two meet at Raquel's thirtieth birthday party in Soho, New York; Rene is an old friend of Raquel, but Robert promises Raquel that he'll treat her right. In the coming months, Rene comes to know Robert as a kind, surprisingly tender man.

Robert is a gentle, good-hearted man, but he lacks the motivation or even the desire to make changes in his life. He keeps dating different women (it's very unclear, based on Hobbs's account, if these girlfriends overlap or not), but seems to treat them better than he did his earlier girlfriends.

It's November 2010, and Robert is busy at the airport. One day, he makes a huge mistake: while disengaging the conveyer belt that transports baggage from the plane to the airport, he forgets to fold down the steel rails on the conveyer. As a result, an airplane hits the side of the conveyer belt, damaging the door. Robert recognizes what he's done, but decides that the airplane door is fine. Soon, it's discovered that the door needs to be replaced. Robert admits he was the last person to handle the door. His superiors ask him for a urine sample, which he refuses to provide, since he's been smoking weed. Instead of going through the usual union appeals process, Robert simply leaves his job and never comes back.

Robert makes a careless error here. Although he shows maturity by standing up for his error, he refuses to stick around and appeal his dismissal, as is the standard practice. It's as if he never really wanted to work for the airport in the first place, meaning that he has little to no incentive to stick around and fight for his job.

In August 2010, Jeff gets a Facebook message from Robert. At this time, Jeff and Rebecca have had a baby daughter, and they're badly in debt. Jeff sometimes envies people like Robert and Ty, whom he believes to have majored in subjects that can provide them with more career opportunities. He knows that Robert is working in an airport, but he assumes this means some kind of corporate job.

Ironically, Jeff believes that people like Robert have it good, since they studied a hard science at Yale. He has no idea that his good friend, one of the groomsmen at his wedding, is going through much harder times than Jeff is. Robert is still "fronting" to Jeff, again calling into question just how good of friends they ever were.

Meanwhile, Jackie becomes increasingly saddened by Robert's path in life. Robert leaves money for her, but he seems worn-out and depressed. He rarely spends time with her.

The spark that motivated Robert to succeed in high school and at Yale seems almost extinguished. For Jackie, who's always dreamed of her son's success in life, this is heartbreaking.

CHAPTER 14

In the second half of the first decade of the 2000s, Newark experiences an overall decrease in crime. The police force is bigger than ever before, and there's a citywide camera system in place. And yet the poverty crisis in Newark is as bad as it's ever been. And following the Great Recession, crime escalates again.

Newark experienced a decrease in crime, but many criticized the police tactics that led to the decrease, especially since the incarceration rate went up.

Robert begins applying for graduate schools, beginning by writing his statement of purpose. In this essay, he explains that he's always loved science. At Yale, he studied molecular biology, and worked closely with world-class scientists. Research, Robert explains, has taught him persistence and patience. Also in his essay, Robert explains that he held off on applying to graduate schools because he wanted to experience his own world, in Newark. He goes into great detail about his years teaching science and his world travels.

Robert finally appears to be getting around to applying to graduate schools. In his essay, he claims that he returned to Newark after college because he wanted to get to know his neighborhood even better. But this seems untrue—as Hobbs has shown, Robert returned to Newark in part because he didn't know what else to do, and because he'd lost all his money.

Robert sends his essay to Isabella Peretzian to edit. Isabella offers a few comments, most notably that the mentions of his world traveling should be cut down, since they suggest a lack of focus. Robert calls Isabella and testily explains that his travels are an important part of his character. Isabella backs down, saying, "It was just a suggestion."

Robert exhibits some of the old hardheadedness that's prevented him from succeeding since graduating college—he won't accept even the simplest criticism of his statement of purpose. The point here isn't that Isabella is right or wrong—rather, it's that Robert is unwilling to accept or even listen to advice.

While he's applying to school, Robert needs to get a job. Following Oswaldo's advice, he cuts his dreadlocks, buys a suit, and prepares to interview for administrative positions at real estate firms. Robert resents having to change his appearance for the sake of finding a job. But he hates having to collect unemployment checks even more. Robert has proven that he can live happily on a teacher's salary, but he wants to make more money, partly because he wants to be "the Man" and impress the people around him.

Robert again shows that he's unwilling to change his life in any way, even if it's for the sake of getting a good job. He seemingly just wants to keep living the same way he's been living for the last ten years, surrounded by people who idolize him.

That fall, Robert drinks a lot and spends more time than usual with his high school friends. He doesn't buy a suit and he doesn't apply for jobs. Oswaldo talks to him on the phone, and becomes furious when he realizes that Robert isn't really looking for work at all—he's still selling marijuana. Oswaldo notices that Robert's friends take from him without seeming to give much in return.

Oswaldo takes a darker view of Robert's relationship with his friends than Hobbs has presented earlier in the book. As Oswaldo sees it, Robert's "friendship" with his high school friends is an unhealthy one, largely based on his giving his friends money and drugs and receiving little in return.

At the end of 2010, Robert gets a job working for a drug dealer named Amin. Amin has several business fronts through which he launders his drug earnings, and he's good at staying under the radar. Robert respects Amin, though he finds it difficult to adjust to the pressures of having a boss. His job is fairly simple: he converts Amin's product into a hybrid strain, and then delivers it to a supplier outpost. Robert's work for Amin is more dangerous than anything he's done previously.

Robert takes on more and more ambitious drug dealing assignments, undercutting his claims that he's ready to get a "real" job, and again showing his tendency toward self-sabotage.

Robert's friends warn him not to get "in too deep" with Amin. As the year goes on, Robert prepares to apply for a graduate program at NYU while also working for Johnson & Johnson. He's confident that he'll be accepted. In March 2011, however, Curtis proposes a risky new business plan—one that could solve all of Robert's problems.

Robert pursues plans to get a real job and a graduate degree at the same time that he pursues big drug deals. This makes it unclear what Robert is actually trying to achieve in the future.

CHAPTER 15

Robert, Julius, Tavarus, Drew, and Curtis sit together, planning their next move. Curtis has just made a big proposal: that they sell fifty pounds of marijuana, making a profit of $400,000. Julius is nervous about this idea, but Robert is more enthusiastic than he's been about anything in a while. In the end, the group unanimously agrees to buy the weed through Curtis's connection and sell it for a big profit.

Robert seems to like the idea of selling a large amount of marijuana and making a big profit all at once. In the past, he's assumed a lot of risk, much of it needless (for example, when he smuggled marijuana through an airport). Because he's not worried about the risk, and even seems to welcome it, he's enthusiastic about the drug deal.

Robert calls Oswaldo to ask for some money. Oswaldo agrees to give him the money, but adds, "After you pay me back, you and I will never speak again." Robert agrees. Shortly afterwards, Curtis obtains the fifty pounds of weed. As Robert looks at the product, he wonders if it was worth losing Oswaldo's friendship.

Robert burns a bridge with his old friend Oswaldo for the sake of his drug deal—apparently, making money is more important to him than his friendship.

According to the plan, Robert is going to convert the marijuana into top-quality "Sour Diesel" by treating it with butane. This will take lots of work—probably a month of fifteen-hour workdays—but he works hard to enrich the product.

Robert seems to be doing most of the work surrounding the drug deal. This reinforces the perception that Robert is "the Man," and the leader of his high school friends—but also the one who does most of the work and assumes most of the risk.

In April, Robert and Ina talk on the phone. Ina is stationed on a naval base in California, and she tells Robert she's worried about him—she hopes he's staying safe.

Ina's concern foreshadows the tragedy that's about to occur.

As Robert treats the marijuana, he comes to realize how much work is still ahead of him. He has to package the weed and sell it in small bags. His friends are unwilling to transport the product, since they're afraid of being arrested. They decide to hire drug mules to reduce their risk. Robert does all the work of recruiting mules.

Again, Robert does the majority of the logistical and chemical work regarding the drug deal, while his friends take more passive roles and still see the same payoff.

Robert visits Rene in Brooklyn. Rene is a talented artist, and she's been supporting herself for many years. She wants Robert to move in with her—something that Robert isn't yet ready to do. Recently, Robert tells Rene, someone was murdered near his home in a drug deal gone wrong.

The passage foreshadows the tragedy that's about to occur. Robert is surrounded by friends, family, and well-wishers who warn him against becoming a serious drug dealer. But instead of listening to these people, Robert proceeds with his plan.

Robert recruits four drug mules to sell his product. The weed sells quickly, almost a pound a day. Robert and the others make lots of money, though less than they'd anticipated (since they have to pay employees). However, Robert begins having a problem with one of his mules, a young man named Kamar. Kamar talks about Robert behind his back, making fun of him for his Yale degree. Julius hears Robert yelling at Kamar, but Robert just tells Julius, "Nothing's going on." In reality, Robert fires Kamar.

Robert has been careful to conceal his Yale degree from many of his business connections, and the passage reminds reader of why this is: having a Yale degree is a liability among drug dealers, because it makes Robert look like an elite outsider, instead of somebody who can be trusted. Robert's Yale connection, previously the source of his success as a drug dealer, is now the cause of his downfall.

As time goes on, Robert begins carrying a handgun. Amin and the Double II Set gang learn from Kamar that Robert has been selling weed, even though he's technically still working for Amin. Kamar lies and says that Robert has been encroaching on the gang's turf. Robert finds out that the gang is angry with him. He suspends dealing for a few days, and tries to get in touch with the gang personally.

Robert gets more than he bargained for when he angers a rival gang. As with his plans to get into real estate and go to graduate school, Robert seems not to have calculated the risks involved with selling so much marijuana—and none of his friends was willing to point out these risks, because Robert is so good at "fronting" confidence and capability.

While Robert tries to straighten things out, he spends time with Jackie. Jackie is contemplating retiring soon. She's lived through a lot, but she's not angry. Instead, she just wishes things had worked out differently. She wishes Robert, now aged thirty, had made more of his education. And she wishes Skeet hadn't been arrested.

Jackie looks back at her life and is filled with regrets. She's put her son's interests ahead of her own again and again, and yet she's been unable to exert the positive influence on Robert that she wanted—mostly, she's been unable to keep Robert away from the world of drugs.

By the middle of May, Robert thinks that the danger from the Double II Set gang has subsided. Nevertheless, he continues to carry a gun in his car—something that Raquel Diaz finds outrageous. One weekend, Robert and his old friends have a barbeque, and invite the whole neighborhood. Guests remember Robert seeming unusually quiet.

This passage conveys the calm before the storm: Hobbs subtly gives the sense that a tragedy is about to occur, but at the barbeque, everyone is laid-back and happy.

Later in May, Robert drives to visit his old Yale friend Sherman Feerick. Sherman has become a successful consultant, and he also runs a camp for at-risk children. Robert explains that he needs work, and suggests that he work as a counselor at Sherman's camp—Sherman promises to find work for him. Sherman is stunned by how defeated Robert seems: "Too much time has passed," he thinks, "too many opportunities had come and gone, for Rob Peace to still not have his life figured out." Had Robert asked him for work just a month earlier, Sherman could have found him a good job.

Even though he's pursuing this big, risky drug deal, Robert continues to try to find other, more legitimate way to make a living. However, Robert again shows that he's a victim of his own pride and apathy: had he asked Sherman for work a little earlier, he could have gotten a good job.

Two days after visiting Sherman, Robert is back in Newark. He spends the evening watching TV with Curtis. Instead of going to bed, he tells Curtis he has some work to do. Suddenly, "they heard a car pull up in the driveway."

The chapter ends on an ominous note, considering everything Hobbs has written about Robert's relationship with rival gangs in Newark (and the title of the book itself).

CHAPTER 16

Immediately following the events of the previous chapter, Curtis hears Robert open the door and say, "Ah, *shit*!" Two or three men walk into the house, and Robert says, "Chill, chill, chill." The men sound like they're pushing Robert down into the basement. Loud yelling breaks out from downstairs.

In this chapter, Robert has a violent confrontation with a mysterious group of men. It's entirely possible that these men come from a rival gang, and believe that Robert has been trying to steal their customers. (While it's impossible to now for sure, it may be the Double II Set gang mentioned earlier.)

Terrified, Curtis prepares to run outside and yell for help. But he sees a man keeping watch, and quietly backs away from the door. Meanwhile, Robert and the other men are still yelling in the basement. Curtis knows that these men must be involved in the drug business—that's why they pushed Robert down into the basement, where he's been keeping his weed, without a second's hesitation.

Curtis is understandably terrified—these men might be coming to murder Robert. The next few sections cover a period of time no greater than a minute or two, but they feel like much longer, reflecting the intense, panicked mood.

Curtis goes to the closet to pull out the gun Robert has been carrying around lately. Curtis has never fired a weapon before, but he's prepared to use it to save his friend. He goes down to the basement and calls to Robert. His voice is shaky—clearly, he's frightened. Suddenly, the men in the basement fire toward Curtis. Curtis tries to fire back, but the gun is jammed. Meanwhile, Curtis can hear Tavarus on the first floor—Christopher, his little boy, is in the house, too. Curtis screams for Tavarus to go back upstairs.

Curtis tries to defend his friend, but fails. However, he arguably succeeds in protecting Tavarus and Tavarus's child Christopher—had he not cried out, they might have come downstairs and gotten themselves killed.

Curtis hears the sound of the men running out of the house. Curtis rushes outside again and shouts for help. An elderly neighbor shouts that she's called the police. Curtis rushes back inside, to find Robert on the basement floor, bleeding profusely.

Robert is mortally wounded, the victim of brutal violence that seems a world removed from his "ivory tower" past.

Late that night, Jackie is woken up by the sound of Julius knocking on her door. Tearfully, Julius explains that something has happened to Robert. Eerily calm, Jackie nods, and then drives to Robert's house, following Julius. The police won't let her into the house, however—they just explain that a man has been taken to the hospital. Jackie begins to weep, quietly. By this time, Tavarus and Carl already know the truth: Robert is dead.

Jackie is struck by the news of her son's shooting, but she also seems eerily calm, almost as if she's been expecting something like this to happen for a long time. In a way, Jackie has been trying to keep her son from getting into the drug world for as long as he's been alive. Yet in spite of all her efforts, Robert became a drug dealer, and paid the ultimate penalty.

By the next next day, the police have raided Robert's house and confiscated all the drugs inside. The house that used to be full of fun and happiness is empty. Meanwhile, Curtis is arrested and kept in a holding cell. Curtis says he doesn't know anything about the marijuana in the basement. Jackie is summoned to the morgue to identify her son's body. She does so, and then, instead of going home, drives straight to work.

This is perhaps the most painful and poignant part of the entire book. Jackie has worked her entire life to support her son. Now that Robert is dead, she doesn't know what to do besides go back to work.


CHAPTER 17

On May 19, just one day after Robert's death, Jeff notices that he's received a new Facebook message. Victor Raymond informs him that Robert has passed away. Jeff is stunned.

Jeff is stunned by the news of his friend's death—as far as he's concerned, Robert is working an executive job at the Newark Airport and preparing for graduate school.

In the coming days, Jeff proceeds with the surreal, painful experience of informing his Yale friends that one of their classmates has been murdered in a drug deal gone wrong. Most of his friends are shocked. They interpret the tragedy in predictable and offensively simplistic ways: "potential squandered," "the allure of thug life," etc.

Jeff finds the immediate reactions to Robert's death simplistic, and therefore offensive. Over the course of his book, Hobbs has chosen to offer a more nuanced account of Robert's life, one that acknowledges both his incredible achievements and his tragic failures; his victimhood and his role in bringing about his own death.

The night before Robert's funeral, Jeff and some Yale friends go out drinking. The next day, tired and hung over, they make their ways to St. Mary's Church. Robert recognizes many faces—Yale graduates who are now doctors and lawyers and bankers. There is one common theme in these people's lives: "Nobody was fulfilling the dreams harbored on graduation day."

Hobbs pauses to note the mood of cynicism and failure among his old Yale friends—nobody has achieved what they'd dreamed of doing at the age of twenty-one. In this sense, Robert was very different from his Yale friends: instead of trying to achieve his dreams (and inevitably compromising on these dreams), he held off on trying to realize his dreams at all, and sold drugs in the meantime, a choice that led to his tragic murder.

Jeff and some of his friends speak briefly about how they knew Robert. Jeff mentions being Robert's roommate, and how much he enjoyed Robert's big grin. Raquel Diaz gives a long eulogy about Robert's kindness and supportiveness. Robert is buried in Rosedale Cemetery, next to his father's plot. Afterwards, everyone drives to St. Benedict's for a luncheon. Finally, the guests go to a bar called A.S.H. that Robert liked. Jeff notices Oswaldo looking grim. Later, Oswaldo tells Jeff his opinion of Robert: "So fucking smart, but so fucking dumb."

The funeral captures the alluring, fascinating, and frustrating sides of Robert's character. He's an incredibly charismatic, brilliant, likeable guy, and yet he makes many frustrating and foolish decisions. It would be easy to say that Robert is the victim of poverty, oppression, and circumstance—and it would be equally easy to say that Robert brought this on himself. The truth, as Hobbs has tried to suggest over the course of his book, is probably somewhere in between. Oswaldo's pithy statement is thus a remarkably concise description of Robert's multifaceted character.

Jackie has requested that Robert's high school friends, including Julius and Drew (Curtis is still in prison) stay away from the funeral. Julius is furious, but he agrees. They hold their own private ceremony for Robert. During the ceremony, they talk about the night of the shooting. It's not clear if the men came to the house intending to kill Robert—it's possible that Robert tried to overpower the men, leading to his murder. They also note that Robert made no sound after being shot—almost as if he was trying to conceal his own pain to protect his friends, just as he'd done in life.

Jackie seems to be furious with Robert's old friends, and even seems to blame them for his death (when, in reality, it was Robert who led and organized most of the group's drug deals). Whether or not it's true that Robert concealed his pain in order to save his friends, there can be no doubt that Robert was highly adept at hiding his feelings—and at various times this quality was the source of both success and disappointment in his life.

When the local paper posts an online story about Robert's murder, the comments section is insensitive and hotly divided. Some people express sympathy for Robert, while others fault him for squandering his elite degree.

Again, the reaction to Robert's death appears to be polarized between those who regard him as a victim and those who regard him as wholly responsible for his own misfortune.

Charles Cawley hears of Robert's death, and is immediately shocked, saddened, and angry. He thinks about the choices Robert made in his life, and how they led him to his death. Then he realizes that "not all [the choices] had been his to make."

Cawley never knew Robert particularly well, but he gets at a point that Hobbs appears to agree with: Robert is responsible for some of the choices in his life, but not all of them. Put another way, Robert is a victim of poverty, racism, and an absent father, but also a rational, adult actor who makes some bad decisions with tragic consequences.

Raquel tries to raise money for Jackie's funeral expenses. To her fury, many of the elite Yale students who bought weed from Robert ignore her or refuse to donate money due to the nature of Robert's death.

Raquel is angry with the hypocrisy of Robert's Yale classmates: people who encouraged Robert's drug dealing by buying his product and now sanctimoniously judge him for selling marijuana back in Newark.

In the years following Robert's death, very little changes in Newark. Drugs are sold throughout Robert's old neighborhood, and crime continues to ravage the community. St. Benedict's continues to do all it can for children from impoverished families, sending many of them to good schools. Jackie continues working.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of Robert's murder is that it's only one death out of many in the city of Newark. Crime remains ubiquitous in the area, devastating countless families like Jackie's. In the face of all this tragedy, however, Jackie continues working, and life moves on.

On what would have been Robert's thirty-first birthday, Raquel and Rene visit Jackie. They provide her with nearly five thousand dollars in donations—almost enough to cover Robert's funeral expenses. Later that day, Robert's friends and family gather at one of Robert's favorite bars. That night, Jackie cries at the sight of the birthday cake Robert's friends have baked in his memory.

Robert's friends get together to honor his memory—a celebration that proves emotionally overwhelming for Jackie. Jackie has worked hard to support her child, and yet in the end, he dies in a drug deal gone wrong—just as she feared he might one day be killed.

Late that night, Robert's old friends gather together and release tiny **paper lanterns** into the night. The lanterns float off into the distance, and Robert's friends watch them disappear. They wonder how long it will be before the flames flicker out—and where each one will fall.

The book ends with a sad, symbolic image: lanterns burning out. These lanterns seem to symbolize the meteoric life of Robert Peace: Robert "burned bright" while he was alive, but burned out all too soon. The lanterns could also be said to symbolize the lives of other young people growing up in various troubled situations: nobody knows how much they'll accomplish in life, or even how long those lives will last.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Arn, Jackson. "*The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 13 Sep 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Arn, Jackson. "*The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*." LitCharts LLC, September 13, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-short-and-tragic-life-of-robert-peace.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Hobbs, Jeffrey. The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace. Scribner. 2014.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Hobbs, Jeffrey. The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace. New York: Scribner. 2014.