This Boy's Life

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TOBIAS WOLFF

Tobias Wolff was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1945. His father, an aeronautical engineer, was the son of a Jewish doctor, but his family had covered up their Jewish roots and joined the Episcopal Church. Wolff's parents separated when he was five and his older brother was twelve; the young Tobias and his mother lived a transient life, traveling all over the country and eventually settling down in Concrete, Washington, when his mother remarried. The years they spent there, living in the household of an abusive worker for Seattle City Light, became the basis of Wolff's most successful and notable book, the memoir *This Boy's Life*. After an unsuccessful stint at the Hill School in Philadelphia—he was expelled for forging his transcripts and letters of recommendations—Wolff served in the U.S. Army from 1968 to 1972 and fought in the Vietnam War. He attended college at Oxford, and, after returning to the U.S., was offered a prestigious fellowship at Stanford—the Stegner Fellowship, a grant of which many notable writers have been recipients. Wolff wrote and taught at Syracuse for a number of years, where he mentored notable contemporary writers such as Alice Sebold and George Saunders. He currently teaches writing and humanities at Stanford University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This Boy's Life is set in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The young Tobias—or Jack—observes many significant cultural moments unfold around him over the course of his early teen years. His mother works on John F. Kennedy's political campaign, and as Jack and his friends roam the streets of the towns surrounding theirs, TVs in shop windows run programs glorifying the Allies' victory over the Nazis and the Axis powers over a decade after the end of World War II. As the young Tobias observes the world around him, the narration—delivered by the older Tobias—is tinged with a sense of exhaustion with the patriotism and optimism of the country in the fifteen or so years following World War II—while TV shows like *The Donna Reed Show* proliferated an image of wholesome, squeaky-clean American families, Tobias's own home life was a disastrous maelstrom of fear, abuse, and misery. At the end of the text, Tobias reveals that after being expelled from his boarding school, he joined the Army in 1968 and "prayed" for a war, so that he would have something exciting to involve himself in; he would soon go off to Vietnam, and would learn to be careful what he wished for. No doubt the violence, corruption, and brutality the older Wolff witnessed in Vietnam has tinged his past recollections.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Tobias Wolff's seminal memoir is both inspired by and the inspiration for several other key titles within the genre. Frank Conroy's *Stop-Time*, published in 1967, is a memoir of his American adolescence as he wrestles with many of the same trials and tribulations the young Toby faces in *This Boy's Life*: hardships at home and at school, life on the road, and figuring out what it means to become a man. Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*—though written and sold as fiction—is a largely autobiographical text published in 1992, just a few years after *This Boy's Life*, and set largely in the same time period—the mid-to-late 1950s. *Bastard*, which also details a child's hardships in the face of their mother's abusive partner, was, like *This Boy's Life*, critically acclaimed and later adapted into a popular film.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *This Boy's Life*
- **When Written:** Late 1980s
- **Where Written:** Syracuse, New York
- **When Published:** 1989
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Seattle, Chinook, and Concrete, Washington
- **Climax:** Jack's mother, Rosemary, decides once and for all to leave her abusive husband, Dwight, and get Jack out of his house.
- **Antagonist:** Dwight
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Life on the Big Screen. *This Boy's Life* is arguably Tobias Wolff's best-known work; it was so successful that in 1993, several years after its publication, it was adapted into a film starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Ellen Barkin, and Robert De Niro. The film was critically and commercially well-received, and cemented the book as one of the landmark memoirs of its time.

PLOT SUMMARY

The young Tobias Wolff—who, in his youth, went by Jack—and his mother Rosemary are driving across the country from Florida to Utah. Rosemary is fleeing an abusive relationship and she hopes that in Utah, she and her son will be able to strike it

rich in the uranium boom. When they get to Utah, however, they find that the mines have all dried up. Even worse, Rosemary's abusive lover, Roy, has tracked them across the country, and as he begins worming his way back into Rosemary and Jack's lives, Jack struggles with feelings of insecurity, anger, and the desire to get into trouble—feelings that are intensified when Roy buys him a **rifle** and teaches him how to shoot. After a few months, Rosemary and Jack flee Utah one afternoon while Roy is off on a hunting trip, boarding a bus bound for Seattle.

In Seattle, Jack and Rosemary take up residence in a boarding house while they get settled. Jack makes two good friends at school, both named Terry—he calls them by their last names, Silver and Taylor. The boys spend their afternoons lusting after girls on *The Mickey Mouse Club* and getting into trouble, egging cars, stealing cigarettes, and breaking windows around town. After several months, Jack and Rosemary move into a real house with two women from the boarding house, Kathy and Marian. When Kathy and Marian each get engaged, they urge Rosemary to start dating, too—they don't know what Jack knows, which is that she has a history of striking up with violent men.

Rosemary begins dating a man named Dwight—though Jack doesn't like him and thinks he's oafish and dumb, Rosemary insists he's a nice man. Rosemary begins spending more and more time with Dwight, and soon brings Jack up to Chinook, the village where he lives with his three children from a previous marriage, to meet Dwight's family for Thanksgiving. After Thanksgiving, Jack begins getting into more and more trouble at school. One afternoon, Rosemary tells Jack that Dwight has proposed to her; she is unsure of whether she should accept his offer, and wants for Jack to move up to Chinook for a while to see if it's possible to blend their families before she makes any serious decisions. Jack doesn't want to go along with this plan, but feels he has no choice.

As soon as Jack arrives in Chinook, he begins seeing another side of Dwight—a side that is sullen, cruel, and just plain strange. On the way up to Chinook, Dwight purposely hits a **beaver** in the road, then urges Jack to pick up its carcass and load it into the trunk, as it's valuable. When Jack is afraid to touch the carcass, Dwight does it himself, berating Jack for being so spineless. That evening, Dwight stops off at a tavern, leaving Jack alone in the car for several hours. Dwight emerges from the tavern drunk, and as he drives Jack home along the curving mountain roads, he berates him for being lazy, stupid, and cruel. Things get worse from there—Dwight subjects Jack to miserable and menial tasks such as shucking spiny **horse chestnuts**. He forces Jack to take on a paper route, but collects every cent Jack earns, claiming to be putting it in a savings account for Jack to use in the future. He signs Jack up for Boy Scouts, which Jack actually enjoys, but does so only so that he can observe Jack at all times and make sure all of Jack's time is occupied. In the spring, Rosemary decides that she wants to accept Dwight's proposal—on a trip up to Chinook, she asks Jack in private if everything with Dwight has been going all right, and insists it's not too late to back out. Jack, again, feels trapped and tells his mother that everything is fine.

Jack struggles to make friends, avoiding nice and respectable boys like the "sissy" Arthur Gayle in favor of hanging out with older, wild high schoolers. He tries and fails to grow close to his new step-siblings Skipper, Norma, and Pearl, who have each in their own way been touched themselves by Dwight's controlling nature. Dwight begins abusing Rosemary verbally and emotionally in front of the children, and as his disregard for her intensifies, Jack reaches out to Rosemary's brother, who lives in Paris, writing a letter begging him to help them flee to France. Jack's uncle writes back and offers to adopt Jack as his own son, but Jack knows he cannot leave his mother behind. Even though Dwight wants Jack out of the house and urges him to accept the offer, Jack declines it. Norma moves to Seattle and gets engaged to a terrible man named Kenneth; when she brings him home to meet the family for Christmas, Dwight suggests Jack get all the chestnuts he shucked out of the attic so that they can roast them together, but when Jack gets up there he sees that both the neglected chestnuts and the untreated beaver carcass have molded over into pulps.

By the time Jack starts high school, he is constantly fantasizing about alternate lives for himself and coming up with plans to run away from Chinook. He never follows through with any of them, and Dwight's abuses get worse. Jack begins struggling in school, and starts drinking and getting into more and more trouble with his older, unruly friends Chuck Bolger and Jerry Huff. Jack begins writing letters to his estranged brother, Geoffrey, who is a student at Princeton; one afternoon, after Dwight beats Jack, Jack calls his brother and tells him what's really going on. Geoffrey promises Jack that they'll find a way to get him out of Washington, and he suggests Jack apply to some prestigious boarding schools. Jack has done miserably in school for years, though, and when the time comes to apply to these schools, he realizes that the image of himself he has constructed in his head does not match up with who he actually is. With the help of his sometimes-friend Arthur, Jack steals stationery and transcript forms from the school office, and forges his grades and letters of recommendations. Jack and Arthur begin fighting more and more, and when a teacher, Mr. Mitchell, recruits them for a boxing match, they face off against one another; as Jack lands blows against his friend, he worries that he has become someone Dwight is proud of.

Jack is rejected from all of the schools he applied to except one—the Hill School in Pennsylvania. An alumnus of the school, Mr. Howard, contacts Jack to inform him that the school is "interested" in admitting him, but wants to hear more about him first—Mr. Howard takes Jack out for a milkshake and informally interviews him. He warns Jack that prep school is

not for everybody, but Jack insists that he badly wants to go to Hill. After Jack severs the tip of one of his fingers in shop class one day, he is hospitalized for a week; when he returns home, he is desperate to numb the pain, and steals some of Dwight's whisky. When Dwight confronts him about the theft the two exchange verbal barbs. Dwight pushes Jack, causing him to fall on his bad finger; Rosemary tells Jack that she is getting him out of the house right away and putting a stop to the abuse. Chuck Bolger's family agrees to take Jack in, but when Jack goes to live with Chuck, he realizes that his friend is an alcoholic who is subject to fits of drunken rage and self-harm. The boys get into more and more trouble, and when they are caught stealing gasoline from some neighbors, Mr. Bolger kicks Jack out of the house. Rosemary begs Mr. Bolger to keep Jack on for just a while longer, as he has nowhere else to go, and Mr. Bolger reluctantly agrees.

Chuck gets into more trouble when a girl he's accused of impregnating threatens to press rape charges if he doesn't marry her. The crisis derails Chuck's life and sends him into a tailspin, as he tells the sheriff several times over a number of weeks that he'd rather go to prison than marry someone he doesn't care about. The atmosphere in the Bolger house becomes miserable, but Jack receives some good news—he has been admitted to Hill on a nearly-full scholarship. Jack tells his mother the good news, and they rejoice together, though there is a dark spot in their celebrations; Dwight has stolen and hidden all of Jack's paper route money. Nevertheless, Jack and Rosemary—who has secured a job in Seattle and is living there full-time—look forward to their futures. Chuck gets off the hook when his friend Jerry Huff agrees to marry the pregnant girl, and for a little while everything seems right.

Chuck and Jack break into Dwight's house in the middle of the night one night. Jack steals all of Dwight's hunting rifles, and, the following day, when Chuck drives Jack into Seattle so that he can meet with Mr. Howard and get fitted for clothes for school, the boys pawn the guns. Though they get almost no money, Jack rejoices in the simple act of taking something from Dwight just as Dwight took from him. Jack spends the summer in California with his father and brother, but his father suffers a mental breakdown and is admitted to a sanitarium. Jack goes off to school in the fall, and Rosemary follows him east, taking a job in Washington D.C. Over the Christmas holidays, Dwight shows up at her new apartment and tries to strangle her, but she fights him off and has him arrested. Jack struggles in school, having been woefully unprepared for such rigorous academics. He slacks off and gets into trouble again and again until, in his senior year, he is expelled and decides to join the army. The book ends as the older Tobias reflects on his youth and the "assurance" he once felt that his dreams were his right—an assurance that all young people feel, and which burns brightly for a few years before it fades away forever.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jack / Tobias – Tobias, the protagonist, renames himself Jack after Jack London early on in the story and continues to go by that name until he is admitted to boarding school towards its end. Jack is a dreamer with a wild streak. When readers first meet Jack, his mother, Rosemary, is dragging him across the country in order to escape an abusive relationship with her former lover, Roy. This rocky, transient lifestyle—not to mention witnessing abuse, fear, and manipulation at such a young age—makes Jack wary and suspicious, comfortable existing mostly on the fringes of his friend groups and school communities. As he grows up, Jack becomes something of a troublemaker. He eventually becomes the object of his mother's new partner Dwight's ire, and when Jack moves to the town of Chinook, Washington, to live with Dwight and his children, Jack is forced to endure cruelty, abuse, and manipulation at the hands of his new stepfather. As the abuse intensifies, so too does Jack's rebellious streak; as he tests the limits of his own capacity for rebellion, contrarianism, and anti-authoritarian leanings, he finds himself retreating into his inner fantasy life and the various personas he has contracted for himself in order to cope with difficult situations. The older Tobias Wolff writes of his younger self with a charming, self-deprecating, but wistful eye; his distance from his younger self is symbolized by his childhood nickname, Jack, and this separation permits Wolff to bring Jack to life in full color. Jack is clever, daring, and desperate to rise above the unfair circumstances of his life; as the novel progresses and Jack dreams more ardently of escape, the older Wolff reflects on how his unorthodox upbringing both wounded and aided him as he grew from a boy into a man.

Dwight – Dwight, Jack's mother's new beau in Seattle, appears at first to be a somewhat bumbling, odd man whose devotion to Rosemary is both wholesome and serious. When Rosemary has a hard time deciding whether or not she should marry Dwight, however, she sends Jack to live with him and his three children from a previous marriage—once Jack is alone with Dwight, the man's cruelty surfaces, and his attempts to manipulate and control Jack through bullying and abuse begin. Dwight is the book's primary antagonist; an insecure and stupid man, he seeks to control everyone around him because of his own inability to exact control over the lackluster, somewhat depressing circumstances of his own life. As Dwight's abuse extends to Rosemary and takes on a disturbing psychological facet, Jack realizes that he must escape his stepfather's house. Throughout his adolescence, Jack learns to define himself in opposition to Dwight, and seeks to rebel against his overbearing stepfather any chance he gets.

Rosemary – Jack's mother, Rosemary, is a kind woman with a painful past marked by abuse since her childhood. Rosemary

often treats Jack as her equal, but doesn't always fully divulge the truth of her feelings or impulses to him. Rosemary moves from one abusive relationship to another over the course of Jack's childhood, and often unknowingly puts her son in harm's way as a result. Rosemary seems unable to escape the trauma of her past, and seeks out relationships with controlling men because it's all she's ever known. She truly loves Jack, and as soon as she actually witnesses Dwight abusing him, gets him out of Dwight's house as soon as possible. Rosemary is feisty, emotional but withdrawn, politically active, and, in a case of a Chekhov's gun that never quite goes off, an expert markswoman.

Pearl – Dwight's youngest daughter, who is the same age as Jack. Pearl is odd and unattractive, and though Jack initially dislikes her, they soon bond. Even after Dwight's violence becomes so bad that Jack and Rosemary move out, Jack continues to be friends with Pearl at school, comforting her and sharing lunches with her.

Roy – At the start of the story, Rosemary and Jack are fleeting to Utah from Florida in a desperate bid to escape her abusive, controlling lover named Roy. Roy catches up to them, though, and talks Rosemary back into a relationship. As he attempts to cement his stronghold over her, he follows her to and from work each day—often with Jack in tow—and tries to ingratiate himself to Jack by buying him gifts such as a **rifle**. Eventually, Rosemary decides it's time to escape Roy once and for all, and she and Jack secretly board a bus bound for Seattle.

Arthur Gayle – One of Jack's friends at school. A "sissy" who is often picked on by the other boys, he is one of the "uncoolest" boys in school, and yet Jack feels himself pulled towards Arthur by the idea that they "recognize" each other. Jack and Arthur share active fantasy lives and trade unbelievable lies about their family lineages and wild fantasies about what they'll accomplish in their lives. They both believe that the real lies are "told by [their] present unworthy circumstances," and bond over this feeling of being out of place.

Geoffrey – Jack's older brother and a student at Princeton. Though the two brothers aren't particularly close, they keep up a written correspondence and send short stories back and forth. When Geoffrey gets wind of what's really going on with Dwight, he is helpful in getting Jack more information about boarding schools so that he might have a way of getting out of Washington.

Mr. Howard – An alumnus of the prestigious Hill School, Mr. Howard meets with Jack to do an informal interview during the admissions process and to advise him on the joys—and difficulties—of life at boarding school. Mr. Howard has a vested interest in Jack's success, and, after he is admitted, takes him shopping for suits, shoes, and other fashionable clothes he'll need to fit in at Hill.

Mr. Wolff – Jack's biological father, an aeronautical engineer who lives in Connecticut with his new wife. Jack's father seems to make a lot of promises he can't keep—most notably, towards the end of the text, he offers to spend the summer in La Jolla with his sons, but suffers a breakdown just a few days into the vacation and is forced to go to sanatorium.

Chuck Bolger – One of Jack's closest friends in high school. Chuck is a preacher's son, but has a serious drinking problem. When drunk, he is "haunted and wild"; when sober, he is kind, gentle, brotherly, and the kind of person everyone wants to be friends with. Chuck and Jack frequently play pranks and get into mischief, and though they have lighthearted fun together often, Jack notices that when Chuck gets too drunk, he seems to want to hurt himself.

Mr. and Mrs. Welch – A couple who own a farm not far from Chinook. Their sons go to school with Chuck and Jack—the Welch boys are all "sad, shabbily dressed, and quiet to the point of muteness." Chuck, Jack, and their friend Huff siphon gas from the Welches' tanks, but are caught the next day and are forced to apologize to the farmers, who are shocked and disappointed by the boys' betrayal and do not accept their apologies.

Tina A fifteen-year-old girl whom Chuck gets pregnant. Chuck is told that he either has to marry Tina or go to jail. Chuck refuses to marry Tina — his dreams for his future life are different from that path — and somehow Chuck finds a way out of the predicament when Tina ends up marrying someone else (perhaps through Chuck's manipulation of the situation).

MINOR CHARACTERS

Norma – Dwight's eldest daughter, a beautiful and sweet girl that Jack has a crush on.

Skipper – Dwight's eldest son.

Terry Silver – One of Jack's friends in Seattle. A clever but malicious child, Silver harbors anti-Semitic feelings and enjoys looking up people with Jewish-looking last names in the phone book and prank calling them in fake German.

Terry Taylor – One of Jack's friends in Seattle.

Sister James – A kind nun who teaches Jack's catechism classes in Utah. She seems to intuit that something is not right in Jack's home life, and attempts to help him and offer him a chance to talk about his problems, but he dodges her attempts to get through to him.

Jerry Huff – A vain bully who is one of Jack's friends in high school.

Psycho – A "big and stupid and peculiar" boy who is one of Jack's friends in high school.

Bobby Crow – Norma's high school sweetheart.

Kenneth – Norma's husband. An obnoxious contrarian whom everyone in the family hates.

Marian – The housekeeper at the boarding house where Jack and Rosemary first live in Seattle. She eventually moves into a ramshackle house on the city's outskirts with the two of them and a woman named Kathy.

Kathy – One of Rosemary and Jack's roommates in Seattle.

Gil – A shady man who briefly dates Rosemary.

Judd – A friend of Gil's.

Mr. Mitchell – The civics teacher at Jack's high school. An ex-military man who fought in World War II, Mr. Mitchell also teaches PE and organizes annual boxing matches in which the general public pays to watch the boys "beat the bejesus out of each other."

Mr. Bolger – Chuck Bolger's father, a preacher who agrees to take Jack in for several months after Dwight attacks him.

Father Karl – An Episcopalian minister who preaches in Chinook every few weeks. After Jack and Chuck Bolger get into trouble over at Mr. and Mrs. Welch's, Mr. Bolger enlists Father Karl to talk with the boys, hoping that a discussion about religion will help them to stay out of trouble.

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.

STORYTELLING AND ESCAPISM

In *This Boy's Life*, Tobias Wolff tells the story of a youth marked by violence, transience, rejection, and abuse. As the older Wolff looks back on his formative years, he recalls how storytelling functioned for him as a means of escapism—a way to stave off the pain of his actual life by imagining other lives for himself. Throughout the text, Wolff uses the theme of storytelling and escapism to suggest that in truly abusive situations, even the most determined, fantastical methods of escapism often fall short, and sometimes even further entrap victims in dangerous relationships and circumstances.

The memoir opens with a literal escape; Toby, who has recently renamed himself Jack after Jack London (itself a way of telling a new "story" about his life), and his mother Rosemary are driving across the country in an attempt to escape her abusive ex-boyfriend, Roy, who is stalking her. Roy eventually catches up with them and worms his way back into Rosemary's life. Wolff shows through this early anecdote how escape from truly harrowing situations is often logistically impossible. As Jack and his mother—along with Roy—start a new life in Utah, Jack begins attending catechism classes at the local Catholic church. In confession, Jack struggles with honesty; when Sister James, hoping to make Jack feel more comfortable with admitting his "sins," shares her own childhood transgressions, Jack simply repeats these stories to the priest. They are easier than telling the truth: that he and his mother are being abused, that Roy is attempting to draw Jack into his constant surveillance of Rosemary, and that Jack, against all odds, longs for Roy's approval. Jack tells Sister James's stories as his own in a desperate bid to escape the truth of his own fractured youth.

After fleeing Utah for Seattle, Jack and Rosemary find themselves on their own at last, in a new place where they are strangers to everyone. Jack makes two friends, both named Terry—he calls them by their last names, Silver and Taylor—and the boys spend their afternoons making prank calls, fantasizing about buying **guns**, and watching *The Mickey Mouse Club*. They all have raging crushes on one of the cast members, Annette, and Jack begins writing Annette fan letters in which he describes himself as a wealthy young man whose father, a sea captain, owns a fleet of fishing boats. Back in Utah, Jack had exchanged letters with a pen pal named Alice as part of a class project, and had written lengthy letters describing his life on his rich father's ranch—Alice wrote back "terse" responses and eventually stopped responding. Now, as Jack's letters to Annette grow bolder and more fantastical, it becomes clear that his desire to spin stories about himself is directly tied to his feelings of isolation and to the abuse and neglect he has suffered. Jack's letters to Annette, like his letters to Alice, receive lukewarm replies, and soon whoever has been writing him back stops responding altogether. Wolff uses this anecdote to show how his early attempts at spinning fantastical stories had no impact on his ability to change his situation or even truly engage in escapism; in fact, he was left feeling more alone than ever, and as his ongoing letters to Annette turned macabre, with Jack imagining "a terrible accident in front of her house that would almost but not quite kill [him,] leaving [him] dependent on her care and sympathy," Wolff makes it clear that the abuse and pain Jack has suffered has actually become an inextricable part of his storytelling.

After Jack and his mother move to Concrete, Washington, with Rosemary's new husband, Dwight—who turns out to be just as controlling and abusive as Roy—Jack's dependency on telling stories about himself in order to survive intensifies. In Concrete, Jack's storytelling expands outwards. By the midpoint of the text, he's no longer telling stories about himself *to* himself, playing pretend with the rifle Roy gave him, or writing missives to members of *The Mickey Mouse Club*. Now the stories he tells become a way to connect with others, cement friendships, and paint himself as someone worthy of the love, attention, and validation he's been denied. At this point in the narrative, it becomes clear that storytelling as a method of escapism is not something unique to Jack. The boys he meets through the Scouts and his classmates at high school

in Concrete also use storytelling as a way to make themselves seem more interesting, and even as a way to deny the truth of who they are. Jack's closest friend at school is a boy named Arthur, a "sissy" who may or may not be gay. Arthur is picked on by everyone, even Jack, who feels embarrassed about having made friends with Arthur. A large part of Jack and Arthur's friendship centers around telling each other wildly outlandish stories about themselves, their families, and their heritages. They are each other's "perfect witness," enthusiastically believing every word the other says, and what the boys have most profoundly in common is the belief that the true lie is "told by [their] present unworthy circumstances," not the stories they spin to one another.

Towards the end of the story, it seems as if all of Jack's practice at storytelling as a way of escaping his present circumstances will actually pay off; with Arthur's help, he writes his own letters of recommendation in support of his application to the prestigious Hill School in Pennsylvania, and is admitted. He goes off to school, leaving Washington and all his painful memories behind him. However, after three years, Jack—who now goes by Tobias—is expelled. After briefly detailing his expulsion and subsequent enrollment in the armed forces, Wolff, in the final paragraphs of his memoir, travels back in time to the end of a road trip with his friend Chuck, to and from Seattle. Tobias—still Jack, then—had just been admitted to Hill and had just escaped, with his mother, from Dwight's house, and everything seemed full of hope for the first time of his life. Wolff's willful retreat into a memory is a metatextual comment on the ways storytelling and escapism function. To end the memoir on a note of failure would be too painful; to arrive at his ending, Wolff engages in one final feat of escapism, retreating into a story that's easier to tell.

IDENTITY AND PERFORMANCE

Throughout the memoir, the young Jack's abusive stepfather, Dwight, often accuses his stepson of duplicity and deception, or being a "performer." This is true, to a certain extent; Jack is a born performer who adopts different personas depending on what any given social situation necessitates. He's not the only one in the family, though; in their own ways, Dwight, Jack's mother Rosemary, and even his step-siblings are all "performing" for one another almost constantly. As the story progresses, these deceptions and confusions of identity snowball and become impossible to ignore. The truth of who each character really is and what they truly desire shines through in the end, revealing the depths of their deceptions once and for all. Throughout the memoir, Wolff argues that the personas and performances individuals put on to convince each other that they are the perfect husband, the devoted wife, or the studious child—just to name a few stock identities—will eventually crumble, leaving the truth bare for all to see.

Wolff opens his memoir with an epigraph from Oscar Wilde: "The first duty in life is to assume a pose. What the second is, no one has yet discovered." In many ways, the memoir is an exploration of the various "poses" Jack and those around him adopt or assume in order to try and figure out the truth of themselves, or to convince those around them that they already know what that truth is. Though Dwight is the first to accuse Jack of being a "performer," it is Dwight who performed his way into Rosemary's life by adopting the pose of a considerate, unintimidating, "puppyish" man. While Dwight is courting Rosemary, only Jack is able to "detect [the] effort" Dwight is putting in to appearing this way. As Rosemary debates whether or not she wants to marry Dwight, her suitor comes up with an idea: she should send Jack to live with Dwight and his three children, Skipper, Norma, and Pearl, to see if they all get along, while Rosemary deliberates back in Seattle. Rosemary agrees to the somewhat harebrained scheme, but soon after Jack moves in, he realizes that Dwight is a malignant alcoholic. As Dwight drunkenly drives Jack home one evening, he asks Jack if he is a "hotshot," and accuses him of being a "performer" and a "liar." Jack is forced to be compliant and act polite as Dwight sizes him up as a lazy smart aleck and forcing him into activities and tasks both menial (shucking hundreds of **chestnuts** encased in stinky, barbed shells) and character-building, such as joining the Boy Scouts and taking on a paper route—two arenas which require further "performances" from Jack as he negotiates the social aspect of his new town and his new life.

Though Dwight's attempts at manipulating Jack are cruel, there is a nugget of truth in his harsh words—Jack is indeed a performer, capable of convincing his mother, his teachers, and his classmates that he is several different people at once, depending on the situation. Jack and his friends—who often lie or tell stories to one another to make themselves seem cooler or older than they are—are obsessed with image, and carry combs around so that they can painstakingly style their hair in the coolest fashions, even though the older Wolff recalls how ridiculous they must have looked emulating older, tougher "Greaser" boys. Jack's most difficult performance, though, is of the person Dwight is trying to make him into. Ultimately, Jack finds himself unable to fully live up to the performances Dwight's mandated activities require; he shirks his paper route duties and gets himself in trouble at school when he falls in with a group of rough kids, despite Dwight's best efforts to make Jack's whole life about scouting. After Rosemary finally moves to town and marries Dwight, Jack's hatred of the man intensifies. Jack, who has spent the last several years trying on different identities, names, and "poses," now at last has a way of defining himself: "All of Dwight's complaints against me had the aim of giving me a definition of myself," Wolff writes. "They succeeded, but not in the way he wished. I defined myself by opposition to him." None of Dwight's accusations are able to "hurt" Jack because he hates Dwight so violently and has such a

low opinion of him; Jack also increases his rebellious behavior directly in opposition to Dwight's attempts at manipulating or "posing" Jack himself.

The memoir's tertiary characters, too, adopt poses and performances of their own to try and make their own lives a little bit easier. Rosemary settles again and again into the familiar role of a submissive housewife—even though the early pages of the memoir make it clear that she is fiercely independent and desperate for a better life. Dwight's abuses of her are "more boring than dangerous," as she must face his repetitious indictments of her failure to respect him more often than she must face any real physical threat. Still, the emotional aspect of the abuse wears on, and Rosemary retreats further and further into her performance of a woman unable to take control of her own circumstances until that's exactly what she is. Even this performance, though, crumbles when Dwight violently attacks Jack while Jack is still recovering from an accident in shop class. When Rosemary sees Dwight kicking Jack while he's down, so to speak, she abandons the performance she'd been playing at in pursuit of stability, love, and the "traditional" family life she always thought she should have.

As Tobias Wolff reflects on his youth—much of which was spent "performing" for others and adopting the roles they thrust upon him—it becomes clear that the writer himself still struggles to understand just how his younger self and those around him used one another to create false versions of themselves and embody preconceived notions of what it meant to be a man, a wife, or a boy. All of Jack's own personas—Boy Scout, tough guy, dutiful son, troublemaker, greaser, prep school student—have fallen away by the end of the text, and yet the older Wolff reflects on how even as his adolescence came to an end, he was still desperate for a way to define himself based on the world around him rather than who he felt he was, or could be, on the inside.

ABUSE

Though throughout his memoir, Tobias Wolff's painful childhood memories are often recast in a darkly comical light or otherwise relayed in such a way that demonstrates his own worst instincts and impulses, *This Boy's Life* is, at its heart, a story of the abuse Wolff and his mother suffered at the hands of his first stepfather. When Jack's mother, Rosemary, already in flight from an abusive relationship and hoping to make a new start, meets Dwight—a seemingly oafish, benign, and slightly odd man—Dwight offers to fold Rosemary and her son into his own family, giving them a home and a sense of stability. Dwight quickly proves himself to be a cruel, controlling addict, a man who emotionally and physically abuses both Rosemary and Jack. As the story of Rosemary and Jack's time under Dwight's roof unfolds, Wolff reflects on his mother's suffering—and his own—and ultimately argues that long-term suffering in an abusive situation "trains" victims not just to accept abuse, but to perpetuate it against others both physically and emotionally.

Before Wolff even gets to the abusive triad at the heart of his youth—the relationship between him, his mother, and his stepfather Dwight—he relays several other stories of abuse from his own childhood, and his mother's, in order to show how abuse takes root in an individual and a family, and then proves difficult to eradicate. The novel's opening chapters are concerned with Jack and his mother's flight from Florida to Utah in search of uranium, a valuable ore that had recently exploded in popularity. This motive seems like more of a cover, though, as Rosemary is also trying to escape a controlling and abusive lover, Roy, who has begun stalking her. Roy tracks Rosemary all the way to Utah, and when he finds her there, she is forced back into a relationship with him—a relationship in which Roy follows her home from work every day, often with Jack in the car beside him, in order to demonstrate the control he has over both Rosemary and Jack. Roy even buys Jack a **rifle**, perhaps as a way of further intimidating Rosemary and attempting to show her the extent of his influence on Jack. Jack digresses into a series of anecdotes from his mother's own childhood—her massively wealthy father, referred to in the text only as Daddy, both spoiled and abused her. The young Rosemary lived a life of luxury, but was also subject to daily beatings—Daddy assumed that each day, Rosemary had, while at school, done at least one thing deserving of a spanking. This atmosphere of simultaneous doting and abuse created a confusing conflation of love and hatred in Rosemary, who has, clearly, sought out—perhaps subconsciously—relationships that mirror that abusive dynamic even in her adult life. Through his mother's story, Wolff sets up a lens through which his readers can understand—and, sadly, predict—the continual cycles of abuse she will subject herself to, and drag Jack into as well.

Once Rosemary marries and moves in with Dwight, she realizes that she has, once again, committed herself to an abuser. Dwight, a drunk, berates Rosemary for less-than-perfect behavior, and verbally, emotionally, and physically attacks Jack in the same manner. Dwight is not a great father to his own children Skipper, Norma, and Pearl, either, but it is clear that Rosemary and Jack bear the brunt of his violence, and that his goal is to keep them under his thumb through intimidation and deceit. Dwight's abuse of Jack almost always happens when Rosemary can't see it happening, such as when Dwight and Jack are at Boy Scouts, or on a drive, or home alone. In making Jack feel as if there is no witness to his abuse—and no one, thus, who will believe him—Dwight is both preying upon Rosemary's willingness to turn a blind eye to what's happening to her son due to the decades of abuse she's already faced, and is also counting on Jack to have learned these same coping and avoidance mechanisms from his mother. As Jack, however,

grows more and more strong-willed, his clashes with Dwight escalate, and soon Dwight can't even stop himself from hiding the abuse from Rosemary. When he attacks Jack in front of her, pushing him to the ground and causing him to land on a recently-injured finger, Rosemary is finally able to see past the ways she has been trained (and has trained herself) to look the other way. She gets Jack out of the house—and herself, too.

Towards the end of the memoir, after Rosemary and Jack have escaped from Dwight, Rosemary remarks to her son how odd it is that Dwight continues to pursue her. "I don't get it," she says to Jack in one passage, "He doesn't even like me. He just wants to hang on." In these few sentences, Rosemary herself sums up the mechanism behind many cycles of abuse and entrapment that keep victims in compromising and dangerous positions; abuse is never about extremity of feeling, but rather about control and manipulation. Repeated abuse—such as the kind Rosemary has suffered throughout her life—relies on getting the victim to believe that the opposite is true: that abuse is motivated by love and feeling, not by the desire to perpetuate the sense of isolation and entrapment victims feel so that it seems as if escape is truly impossible.

EDUCATION

Though a good deal of the book is concerned with Wolff's recollections of his home and family life throughout his adolescence, in many ways the world of school is the place where the young Jack discovers the most about himself. As a new kid in a small, strange town outside of Seattle, Jack must find a way to navigate his abusive home and the more banally cruel world of middle and high school. Jack's education, though, is not just academic; through Jack's training as a dutiful, attentive Boy Scout (pushed upon him by Dwight) and his often raucous, dangerous social life, Wolff explores what it is to live a "boy's life" and what it was to be educated in the ways of the world by such a strange confluence of exceptional circumstances, ultimately arguing that the most profound educations are attained outside the bounds of a classroom.

Because Jack is an adolescent, the majority of his life is structured around school. School, though, is not a place where Jack seems to learn a lot; his education is not important to him, and only becomes important when it emerges as a means of escaping his miserable, abusive household. At school, Jack feels, and is seen as being, "colorless and mild." He is not a "tough guy," though he longs to be, and he and his friends spend most of their time breaking windows, drawing graffiti, and getting into other kinds of petty trouble. His lessons and readings are of little importance to him, and he regards his teachers with either fear (in the case of the volatile, military-bred Mr. Mitchell) or contempt (in the case of his spacey speech teacher Miss Houlihan, and his desperate-for-relevance shop instructor, "Horseface" Greeley). Jack rarely pays attention in school—just going to class sometimes seems like "too much" effort for him. He is mostly concerned with his burgeoning social status—after he at last falls in with a group of "notorious older boys" who introduce him to alcohol and attempt to help him lose his virginity, the academic aspect of school all but fades away.

School is mainly a social place for the young Jack, a place where he can make friends and goof off—though for Mr. Wolff and Jack's brother, Geoffrey, where they were educated is a definitive part of their identities. Geoffrey attends Princeton, and went to boarding school at the prestigious Choate; the boys' biological father attended similarly flashy, respected schools and is now a successful engineer. Though Jack vaguely misses his father and brother, their prestigious paths in life haven't really held much allure for the young Jack, until he and Geoffrey begin exchanging letters and short fictions, and during a phone conversation with Geoffrey in which Jack confesses to being abused by Dwight, and Geoffrey suggests Jack try and secure a scholarship to Choate. Realizing that admission to a prestigious boarding school would mean being able to escape Concrete—and Dwight—Jack launches himself into the plan to secure an offer of acceptance, and painstakingly forges his transcripts, letters of recommendation, and list of extracurricular activities in a bid to make himself seem like the kind of student he has, underneath it all, always wanted to be.

As Jack, for the first time in his life, considers seriously pursuing his education, he's forced to confront the ways in which his education has been rather nontraditional. Jack isn't book-smart, but he fancies himself a writer; he's not on any school sport teams, but his Boy Scout training has equipped him with some athletic prowess; his social activities and penchant for mischief make him seem immature, and yet due to his fraught, painful, and traumatic childhood, Jack has witnessed and endured things other kids his age cannot yet fathom, lending him an adult air of sober knowledge and defiance. Jack's "education" has largely stemmed from the pressures of his abusive stepfather and the coping mechanisms he himself has developed in order to survive. When an alumnus of the prestigious Hill school, Mr. Howard, interviews Jack as a pretext for recommending him to the school, he describes the unique challenges that accompany boarding school life—prep school, he says, is not for everyone, and Jack may do more harm than good by taking on a challenge he isn't ready for. "Life in a boys' school can come as a bit of a shock to someone who's led a sheltered life," Mr. Howard tells Jack; Jack replies that his life has not been sheltered, a statement whose gravity Mr. Howard cannot even begin to understand.

Ultimately, Jack's "education"—his experiential and academic education combined—do take him to the Hill School. He succeeds for a time, but whenever things get tough, he "panic[s] and [does] Wildman things" that get him in trouble. During Chapel, he prays fervently for the will to pull himself up again so that he can stay; he professes to "secretly and deeply love" his

school, but his desperation to remain a part of its student body no doubt stems from his fear of being sent back to the last place he was educated—a place which left him with an impression of the world and its evils far too unforgiving for a boy his age. Jack has been educated by institutions, to be sure, but his real education has been his own tumultuous and uniquely difficult life. It is not what school has taught him that has shaped him, but the trials and tribulations he has faced that have "educated" him on the path from boy to man.

SYMBOLS

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

THE RIFLE

While Jack and Rosemary are still living in Utah, Rosemary's abusive boyfriend Roy—who has stalked Rosemary and Jack to Utah from Florida, refusing to give up his grip on them—gifts Jack a Winchester. 22 rifle just after Easter. Jack has longed for the rifle for a while—he sees it as "the first condition of self-sufficiency and of being a real Westerner" and feels the rifle "complete[s]" him. Despite Rosemary's protestations, Roy purchases the rifle for Jack to practice his shooting. The rifle, then, is a symbol of the larger way in which abuse and manipulation works. Having been traumatized by watching his mother being stalked, abused, and cowed into staying in a toxic relationship, Jack feels the only way to be complete and self-sufficient is to possess a firearm, a means to violence. Roy, despite knowing the rifle's lethal potential, gives it to Jack as a way of attempting to cement the boy's attachment to him and frame himself as a benevolent force in his life rather than what he actually is: a manipulative abuser who wants total control over both Rosemary and Jack.

THE CHESTNUTS AND THE BEAVER

When Jack moves into Dwight's home, he finds himself subject to abuse and manipulation of all kinds—physical, emotional, and psychological. Dwight berates Jack for being lazy, selfish, deceitful, and useless; in order to assert his control and authority over the young boy, he forces him into community activities (so that Jack's time is always occupied with engagements prescribed directly by Dwight himself) and menial, difficult tasks (so that Jack feels like a servant in his own home.) One of the tasks is shucking horse chestnuts, which are encased in hard, spiky, stinky shells, the removal of which stains Jack's hands yellow and embarrasses him at school. Dwight also forces Jack to endure and look at acts of violence—while driving home one afternoon, Dwight purposefully swerves to hit a beaver crossing the road. Dwight orders Jack to pick up the dead, bleeding beaver; its pelt, he says, is worth a lot of money. Jack refuses to touch the beaver, and Dwight berates him for being afraid of something that's "just meat." Dwight himself picks up the beaver, puts it in the trunk, and carts it home; the incident is quickly forgotten as just another dark and manipulative episode in Jack and Dwight's checkered relationship. Almost two years later, Dwight urges Jack to follow him up to the attic so they can finally eat the chestnuts which Jack once worked so hard to shuck; one they were cleaned, Dwight put them away, seemingly to make Jack feel even more thankless and useless. As the two of them climb up to the attic, Jack sees that the box in which the chestnuts were stored has bloomed with mold; it is puffed out of the top "like dough swelling out of a breadpan." When Dwight shines his flashlight across the attic, Jack spots something even more horrifying; the basin where the beaver, "also forgotten," has been left to "cure"—the carcass, however, has turned into a "pulp" covered with a white, transparent kind of mold that has "flowered to a height of two feet or so."

The discovery of the moldy chestnuts and decomposed beaver shows how deeply and acutely Dwight has been abusing and manipulating Jack for the last two years. Jack has been forced to endure humiliating and even painful tasks, and has been shamed when he's failed to do exactly what Dwight has wanted him to do; now, in the dark of the attic, Jack sees how little these things actually matter to Dwight. Dwight never wanted chestnuts for the family to eat, or a valuable pelt to sell; he simply wanted to control Jack, subjugate him to his own will, and break his spirit. In the attic, Jack finally sees the chestnuts and beavers—horribly rotted and barely recognizable—as tangible symbols of the abuse he has suffered. Their decomposed state reflects the broken, irreparable relationship between Jack and Dwight, and the ways in which Dwight's malice has seeped into every aspect of Jack's life, infecting all it touches.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *This Boy's Life* published in 1989.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Our car boiled over again just after my mother and I crossed the Continental Divide. While we were waiting for it to cool we heard, from somewhere above us, the bawling of an airhorn. The sound got louder and then a big truck came around the comer and shot past us into the next curve, its trailer shimmying wildly. We stared after it.

"Oh, Toby," my mother said, "he's lost his brakes."

The sound of the horn grew distant, then faded in the wind that sighed in the trees all around us.

By the time we got there, quite a few people were standing along the cliff where the truck went over. It had smashed through the guardrails and fallen hundreds of feet through empty space to the river below, where it lay on its back among the boulders. It looked pitifully small.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias, Rosemary (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

The opening lines of Tobias Wolff's memoir hold a brief but potent anecdote which foreshadows all of the suffering that the young Toby and his mother Rosemary will face over the next several years. They are out on the road together, hoping to escape an abusive and dangerous situation, but as they flee into the heart of the country, they witness a large truck lose control of its brakes and careen off the side of the road and down into a ravine. As Jack looks at the truck lying at the bottom of the ravine, he thinks how small and pitiful it looks. He and his mother, unbeknownst to both of them, are very close to losing their own "brakes" and sliding off past the point of no return towards a pitiful and dangerous fate which will make both of them look and feel smaller than they are.

Chapter 2 Quotes

I was subject to fits of feeling myself unworthy, somehow deeply at fault. It didn't take much to bring this sensation to life, along with the certainty that everybody but my mother saw through me and did not like what they saw. There was no reason for me to have this feeling. I thought I'd left it back in Florida, together with my fear of fighting and my shyness with girls, but here it was, come to meet me.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker), Rosemary

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11-12

Explanation and Analysis

At the start of the book, Jack is still a child—despite his young age, he already has a very complicated emotional life and deep-seated feelings of unworthiness. He feels that everything about him is a fraud, though he hasn't yet had the time, or the need, to figure out who he is and thus shouldn't feel he's inhabiting any kind of fake persona. This passage shows that the feelings of insecurity, confusion, and baseless fault that Jack will struggle with throughout his adolescence started in his youth—perhaps as a result of all the traumatic things he has witnessed at such a young age.

Chapter 3 Quotes

Roy stored his ammunition in a metal box he kept hidden in the closet. As with everything else hidden in the apartment, I knew exactly where to find it. There was a layer of loose .22 rounds on the bottom of the box under shells of bigger caliber, dropped there by the handful the way men drop pennies on their dressers at night. I took some and put them in a hiding place of my own. With these I started loading up the rifle. Hammer cocked, a round in the chamber, finger resting lightly on the trigger, I drew a bead on whoever walked by—women pushing strollers, children, garbage collectors laughing and calling to each other, anyone—and as they passed under my window I sometimes had to bite my lip to keep from laughing in the ecstasy of my power over them, and at their absurd and innocent belief that they were safe.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker), Roy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack "plays" with the Easter gift he's recently received from his mother's abusive partner, Roy. Roy gifted Jack a Winchester against Rosemary's protestations—she insisted the gun was no kind of gift for a boy, and yet Jack and Roy both insisted he was old enough to have it. Now, alone in the apartment with the gun, Jack takes it out and loads it, even though he's not supposed to. He enjoys pointing it out the open window at passerby on the street,

reveling in their ignorance of the danger he's putting them in. Jack's violent impulses are born out of his exposure to Roy's violence towards his own mother. The gun symbolizes the inherited cycles of trauma and violence which Roy and Rosemary are, together, passing down to Jack.

❝ Though I avoided the apartment, I could not shake the idea that sooner or later I would get the rifle out again. All my images of myself as I wished to be were images of myself armed. Because I did not know who I was, any image of myself, no matter how grotesque, had power over me. This much I understand now. But the man can give no help to the boy, not in this matter nor in those that follow. The boy moves always out of reach.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

As *This Boy's Life* is a memoir, there is a lot of retrospective narration in which the older Tobias reflects on episodes from his youth. In this passage, he looks back on his competing desires, as a child, to do something "bad"—playing with his rifle when he wasn't supposed to—and to be "good" by abstaining from such negative impulses. The older Tobias dissects the impulse behind his "bad" drives: the desire to become an image of a Westerner, a tough guy, and an outlaw without first knowing who he really was. Throughout the book, the older Tobias will paint pictures of his younger self as an adolescent so confused about who he was, what he wanted, and what he believed in that he was easily corrupted by negative influences and spent most of his time trying to convince himself that he could play the roles others thrust upon him—or ones he concocted for himself. Here, the older Tobias laments that his older self cannot help his younger self to understand who he even is—or who he will become.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ At the end of every show the local station gave an address for Mousketeer Mail. I had begun writing Annette. At first I described myself in pretty much the same terms as I had in my letters to Alice, who was now very much past tense, with the difference that instead or owning a ranch my father, Cap'n Wolff, now owned a fleet of fishing boats. I was first mate, myself, and a pretty fair hand at reeling in the big ones. I gave Annette some very detailed descriptions of my contests with the friskier fellows I ran up against. I also invited her to consider the fun to be had in visiting Seattle. I told her we had lots of room. I did not tell her that I was eleven years old.

I got back some chipper official responses encouraging me to start an Annette fan club. In other words, to organize my competition. Fat chance. But when I upped the ante in my letters to her, they stopped sending me anything at all. The Disney Studio must have had a kind of secret service that monitored Mousketeer Mail for inappropriate sentiments and declarations. When my name went off the mailing list, it probably went onto some other list. But Alice had taught me about coyness. I kept writing Annette and began to

imagine a terrible accident in front of her house that would almost but not quite kill me, leaving me dependent on her care and sympathy, which in time would tum to admiration, love . . .

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43-44

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack describes writing fan letters to Annette Funicello, a member of the Mickey Mouse Club cast. Jack had previously written letters to a pen pal named Alice through a school sponsored program; the wild fantasies of his life he brazenly described to Alice are now given new life in his letters to Annette. Jack wants to impress Annette, for sure, but it is almost as if the letters he's writing are as much for himself as they are for Annette. His fantasies—of luxury, of healthy father figures, of adventure, and even of illness and pain—directly reflect a desire to try on other "selves" and to hold other versions of himself in his head.

Chapter 9 Quotes

I listened from the living room. My mother argued at first but Marian overwhelmed her. This time, by God, she was going to make my mother see the light. Marian didn't have all the goods on me, but she had enough to keep her going for a while and she put her heart into it, hitting every note she knew in the song of my malfeasance.

It went on and on. I reheated upstairs to the bedroom and waited for my mother, rehearsing answers to the charges Marian had made against me. But when my mother came into the room she said nothing. She sat for a while on the edge of her bed, rubbing her eyes; then, moving slowly, she undressed to her slip and went into the bathroom and drew herself a bath, and lay in the water for a long time as she sometimes did when she got chilled coming home at night in a cold rain.

I had my answers ready but there were no questions. After my mother finished her bath she lay down and read, then fixed us dinner and read some more. She turned in early. Answers kept coming to me in the dark, proofs of my blamelessness that I knew to be false but could not stop myself from devising.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker), Marian, Rosemary

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack has gotten in trouble at school for writing profane graffiti on the bathroom wall. When the vice-principal brought Jack into the office and attempted to suspend him, Rosemary came and went to bat for her son, insisting that he would never lie—Rosemary's staunch belief in Jack's innocence (or perhaps her denial) ultimately convinced the vice-principal and the principal to let Jack off the hook. Back at home, though, Rosemary's roommate Marian tries to let her know what kind of kid Jack really is—she has witnessed him coming home late and knows what kind of trouble he's getting into with his friends. After hearing Marian's testimony, Rosemary goes upstairs and doesn't mention anything about it to Jack. Jack's disbelief at having gotten off scot-free not just once but twice in a single day is palpable in this passage, as is the learned behavior of lying on his feet. It is almost as if Jack is anxious for the chance to lie—and thus engage in a fantasy or a half-truth about himself which allows him to exist outside of himself even for just a moment.

I wanted to do what Dwight expected me to do, but I couldn't. I stood where I was and stared at the beaver. Dwight came up beside me. "That pelt's worth fifty dollars, bare minimum." He added, "Don't tell me you're

afraid of the damned thing."

"No sir."

"Then pick it up." He watched me. "It's dead, for Christ's sake. It's just meat. Are you afraid of hamburger? Look." He bent down and gripped the tail in one hand and lifted the beaver off the ground. He tried to make this appear effortless but I could see he was surprised and strained by the beaver's weight. A stream of blood ran out of its nose, then stopped. A few drops fell on Dwight's shoes before he jerked the body away. Holding the beaver in front of him with both hands, Dwight carried it to the open trunk and let go. It landed hard. "There," he said, and wiped his hands on his pant leg.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias, Dwight (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dwight is driving Jack up from Seattle to Chinook to come stay with him and his three children in a kind of trial period while Rosemary, back in Seattle, continues working and waiting to see if Jack fits in with her new beau and his family. This is the first time that Jack and Dwight have been alone together, and as they make their way north, Dwight purposely runs over a beaver in the road. In this passage, as he urges Jack not to be "afraid" and just handle the carcass, Dwight reveals his true self—a cruel, desperate man with no regard for the lives or feelings of others.

Chapter 11 Quotes

Now I saw her only when Dwight agreed to drive me down with him. He usually had reasons for leaving me behind, the paper route or schoolwork or something I had done wrong that week. But he had to bring me sometimes, and then he never let me out of his sight. He stuck close by and acted jovial. He smiled at me and put his hand on my shoulder and made frequent reference to fun things we'd done together. And I played along. Watching myself with revulsion, aghast at my own falsity yet somehow helpless to stop it, I simpered back at him and laughed when he invited me to laugh and confirmed all his lying implications that we were pals and our life together a good one. Dwight did this whenever it suited his purpose, and I never let him down.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker), Rosemary, Dwight

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

While Jack is living up in Chinook, he rarely sees his mother—he only gets to visit with her when Dwight agrees to drive him. During these visits, Jack is surprised—and disgusted—by the behavior he himself exhibits as he plays along with Dwight's lies and essentially becomes a different person. In this memoir, identity and performances are almost always at play—Jack and Dwight are both guilty of "performing" for other people and attempting to convince those close to them that they're other than what they are or believe different things than they actually believe. Jack is aware of the strange and dark double act he and Dwight are putting on for his mother, and yet cannot stop performing. He has become so adept at crafting other identities for himself and inhabiting out-of-character behaviors that he has begun to lose sight of who he really is.

[The piano] was just a piece of furniture, so dark in all this whiteness that it seemed to be pulsing. You really couldn't look anywhere else.

I agreed that it stood out.

We went to work on it. Using fine bristles so our brush strokes wouldn't show, we painted the bench, the pedestal, the fluted columns that rose from the pedestal to the keyboard. We painted the carved scrollwork. We painted the elaborate inlaid picture above the keyboard, a picture of a girl with braided yellow hair leaning out of her gabled window to listen to a redbird on a branch. We painted the lustrous cabinet. We even painted the foot pedals. Finally, because the antique yellow of the ivory looked wrong to Dwight against the new white, we very carefully painted the keys, all except the black ones, of course.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker), Dwight

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dwight is preparing for Rosemary to at last come live with him and his family in Chinook and marry him. As he prepares the house for her arrival he paints everything within it—even the keys on his piano—a bright, clinical white. This symbolizes Dwight's desire to cover up the truth of who he really is and what really goes on in his house when Rosemary isn't around. It could also indicate that he wants a clean slate—but the dictatorial way in which he enlists Jack's help and makes his soon-to-be stepson paint a piano white with a fine-bristle brush indicates that Dwight is, more likely, just attempting to control an uncontrollable situation, as he is in all his relationships and endeavors.

Chapter 13 Quotes

I also missed my father. My mother never complained to me about him, but sometimes Dwight would make sarcastic comments about Daddy Warbucks and lord High-and-Mighty. He meant to impugn my father for being rich and living far away and having nothing to do with me, but all these qualities, even the last, perhaps especially the last, made my father fascinating. He had the advantage always enjoyed by the inconstant parent, of not being there to be found imperfect. I could see him as I wanted to see him. I could give him sterling qualities and imagine good reasons, even romantic reasons, why he had taken no interest, why he had never written to me, why he seemed to have forgotten I existed. I made excuses for him long after I should have known better.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker), Mr. Wolff, Dwight

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explores the inverse idea of one of the novel's major themes—performance and persona. Mr. Wolff, Jack's father, isn't around to construct an identity or inhabit a "pose." Since he is an absent parent, Jack does that for him. Jack misses his father so much that he constructs ideas of what his father must be like, and what things would be like if he were around; Jack is imposing an identity onto his father rather than, as he is with so many characters in the novel, observing and absorbing the faux identity they have themselves constructed.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ Whenever I was told to think about something, my mind became a desert. But this time I had no need of thought, because the answer was already there. I was my mother's son. I could not be anyone else's. When I was younger and having trouble learning to write, she sat me down at the kitchen table and covered my hand with hers and moved it through the alphabet for several nights running, and then through words and sentences until the motions assumed their own life, partly hers and partly mine. I could not, cannot, put pen to paper without having her with me. Nor swim, nor sing. I could imagine leaving her. I knew I would, someday. But to call someone else my mother was impossible.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker), Rosemary

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack is offered the chance to move to Paris to live with his uncle—Rosemary's brother—on the condition that he allows his uncle's family to permanently and formally adopt him and give him their last name. Jack has been desperate to get out of Chinook and away from Dwight's clutches, but in this passage, when the stakes involve changing the only piece of his identity he understands—his role as his mother's son—he balks at the opportunity and decides it's more important to stay true to this one sure piece of who he is than seek a better life for himself which requires him to abandon Rosemary.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ We climbed up into the attic and worked our way down to where I'd put the boxes. It was cramped and musty. From below I could hear faint voices singing. Dwight led the way, probing the darkness with a flashlight. When he found the boxes he stopped and held the beam on them. Mold covered the cardboard sides and rose from the tops of the boxes like dough swelling out of a breadpan. Its surface, dark and solid-looking, gullied and creased like cauliflower, glistened in the light. Dwight played the beam over the boxes, then turned it on the basin where the beaver, also forgotten these two years past, had been left to cure. Only a pulp remained. This too was covered with mold, but a different kind than the one that had gotten the chestnuts. This mold was white and transparent, a network of gossamer filaments that had flowered to a height of two feet or so above the basin. It was like cotton candy but more loosely spun. And as Dwight played the light over it I saw something strange. The mold had no features, of course, but its outline somehow suggested the shape of the beaver it had consumed: a vague cloud-picture of a beaver crouching in the air.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker), Dwight

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 153-154

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dwight brings Jack up to the attic on Christmas Eve because he wants to at last roast the chestnuts he forced Jack to shuck one by one for months when he first moved to Chinook. Up in the attic, though, Jack and Dwight discover that the chestnuts have sprouted a "swelling" spout of mold, and the beaver's carcass has similarly decomposed into a pulp. This represents the futility of all Jack has done under Dwight's influence. The things Dwight wanted to Jack to do were simply ways to manifest power over the boy and force him into menial, humiliating, or grotesque tasks. As Jack realizes how worthless all of his work was—and how at the heart of all of Dwight's behavior there has been only a desire for meaningless control—the rotting, disgusting atmosphere in the room reflects the decay that has infiltrated Jack's childhood and adolescence.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ Arthur's disappointment was more combative. He refused to accept as final the proposition that Cal and Mrs. Gayle were his real parents. He told me, and I contrived to believe, that he was adopted, and that his real family was descended from Scottish liege men who had followed Bonnie Prince Charlie into exile in France. I read the same novels Arthur read, but managed not to notice the correspondences between their plots and his. And Arthur in tum did not question the stories I told him. I told him that my family was descended from Prussian aristocrats--"Junkers," I said, pronouncing the word with pedantic accuracy—whose estates had been seized after the war. I got the idea for this narrative from a book called The Prussians. It was full of pictures of Crusaders, kings, castles, splendid hussars riding to the attack at Waterloo, cold-eyed Von Richthofen standing beside his triplane.

Arthur was a great storyteller. He talked himself into reveries where every word rang with truth. He repeated ancient conversations. He rendered the creak of oars in their oarlocks. He spoke in the honest brogue of the crofter, the despicable whine of the traitor. In Arthur's voice the mist rose above the loch and the pipes skirled; bold deeds were done, high words of troth plighted, and I believed them all.

I was his perfect witness and he was mine. We listened without objection to stories of usurped nobility that grew in preposterous intricacy with every telling. But we did not feel as if anything we said was a lie. We both believed that the real lie was told by our present unworthy circumstances.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker), Arthur Gayle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack talks about his friend Arthur Gayle—his "perfect witness." Arthur is widely known as a "sissy," and he is arguably as uncomfortable in his own skin as Jack himself, though for different reasons. The two boys, desperate for an escape from their boring, painful, or otherwise unsatisfactory lives, turn to storytelling and a mélange of various identities, both personal and familial, in order to distance themselves from the truth of their lives—that they feel better than, and disdainful of, their "present unworthy circumstances." As the boys trade stories and family histories, each knows the other is lying—but they indulge one another, because they know that this is the greatest gift they can give: the chance for escape, even if just for a little while, and even if only through fantasy.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ I brought home good grades at first. They were a fraud—I copied other kids' homework on the bus down from Chinook and studied for tests in the hallways as I walked from class to class. After the first marking period I didn't bother to do that much. I stopped studying altogether. Then I was given C's instead of A's, yet no one at home ever knew that my grades had fallen. The report cards were made out, incredibly enough, in pencil, and I owned some pencils myself.

All I had to do was go to class, and sometimes even that seemed too much. I had fallen in with some notorious older boys from Concrete who took me on as a curiosity when they discovered that I'd never been drunk and still had my cherry. I was grateful for their interest. I wanted distinction, and the respectable forms of it seemed to be eluding me. If I couldn't have it as a citizen I would have it as an outlaw.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

As Jack grows older and ages into high school, he remains confused about his identity and committed to trying on different personas and "poses" until he finds the truth of himself—but with age comes a desire for "distinction," more than likely born out of how ignored and slighted he feels in his home. Negative attention is better than no attention—and as Jack is failing to set himself apart as a scholar, he decides to cozy up to a crew of bad boys and try to gain some notoriety as an "outlaw."

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ I declined to say I was a football star, but I did invent a swimming team for Concrete High. The coach wrote a fine letter for me, and so did my teachers and the principal. They didn't gush. They wrote plainly about a gifted, upright boy who had already in his own quiet way exhausted the resources of his school and community. They had done what they could for him. Now they hoped that others would carry on the good work.

I wrote without heat or hyperbole, in the words my teachers would have used if they had known me as I knew myself. These were their letters. And on the boy who lived in their letters, the splendid phantom who carried all my hopes, it seemed to me I saw, at last, my own face.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack—with Arthur's help—has secured blank letterheads and transcript forms from the school's office, and is now using them to write his own letters of recommendation for admission to the Hill School. Jack considered abandoning his applications when he realized that the image of himself he had in his head did not match up with what his performance in school had been like (his grades were poor and his extracurricular activities lacking). Now, though, Jack has the freedom to engage in his favorite activity—escapism through storytelling—and, more than that, all his years of practice at him have prepared him to tell large-scale, high-stakes lies about who he is. Jack is able restrain himself, though, and writes without hyperbole as he describes himself as the "splendid phantom" he longs to be; someone worthy of recognition, someone who has been singled out as special, someone who is destined for great things.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ We had been close. Whatever it is that makes closeness possible between people also puts them in the way of hard feelings if that closeness ends. Arthur and I were moving apart, and had been ever since we started high school. Arthur was trying to be a citizen. He stayed out of trouble and earned high grades. He played bass guitar with the Deltones, a pretty good band for which I had once tried out as drummer and been haughtily dismissed. The guys he ran around with at Concrete were all straight-arrows and strivers, what few of them there were in our class. He even had a girlfriend. And yet, knowing him as I did, I saw all this respectability as a performance, and a strained performance at that.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker), Arthur Gayle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack reflects on the changes he has observed in his friend Arthur—a "sissy" and social outcast who once kissed Jack during a sleepover. As Jack and Arthur have grown apart over the years, Jack has taken on one identity—"outlaw"—while Arthur has striven for goodness and convention. Though Jack's own identity is in many ways a performance, he recognizes in Arthur's identity a very transparent performance as well; perhaps it is because Jack is so attuned to the various poses he and Arthur have both tried to strike with one another over the years as they pursue their respective identities.

❝ After I got up [Arthur] rushed me, and without calculation I sidestepped and threw him an uppercut. It stopped him cold. He just stood there, shaking his head. I hit him again and the bell rang.

I caught him with that uppercut twice more during the final round, but neither of them rocked him like that first one. That first one was a beaut. I launched it from my toes and put everything I had into it, and it shivered his timbers. I could feel it travel through him in one pure line. I could feel it hurt him. And when it landed, and my old friend's head snapped back so terribly, I felt a surge of pride and connection; connection not to him but to Dwight. I was distinctly aware of Dwight in that bellowing mass all around me. I could feel his exultation at the blow I'd struck, feel his own pride in it, see him smiling down at me with recognition, and pleasure, and something like love.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker), Dwight, Arthur Gayle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Arthur and Jack are physically fighting one another as part of the annual boxing match set up by their PE teacher, Mr. Mitchell. As the boys face off in a "grudge match," all of their confusing and conflicting feelings for one another are finally brought to a head. As Jack rains blows down on Arthur, he feels a malevolent force within him stir. He realizes how profound Dwight's influence has been on him, despite all of his efforts to define himself in opposition to his cruel, abusive stepfather. As Jack wounds Arthur, he realizes that perhaps part of him has wanted Dwight's "love" all along, even in the face of the man's intolerable cruelty. This idea blindsides and repulses Jack, and yet he realizes that he has given into his darkest impulses and most desperate grabs at love, attention, and recognition.

Chapter 26 Quotes

❝ Everyone liked Chuck. Sober, he was friendly and calm and openhanded. When I admired a sweater of his he gave it to me, and later he gave me a Buddy Holly album we used to sing along with. Chuck liked to sing when he wasn't in church. It was hard to believe, seeing him in the light of day, that he had spent the previous night throwing himself against a tree. That was why the Bolgers had so much trouble coming to terms with his wildness. They saw nothing of it. He lingered over meals in the main house, talked with his father about the store, helped his mother with the dishes. His little sisters fawned on him like spaniels. Chuck seemed for all the world a boy at home with himself, and at these times he was. It wasn't an act. So when the other Chuck, the bad Chuck, did something, it always caught the Bolgers on their blind side and knocked them flat.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker), Chuck Bolger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jack describes his close school friend, Chuck Bolger, whose family takes Jack in after the abuse he's suffering at Dwight's hands gets out of control. Chuck is kind, calm, and gentle when sober—but when drunk, which he is almost every night, Chuck becomes violent, rageful, and self-hating. As Jack considers the idea of identity throughout the book, these "doubles" often come up—Dwight, who is sugar-sweet to Rosemary at first but a violent monster once he ensnares her; Arthur, who is a "sissy" but does everything he can to perform masculinity; and now Chuck, who masks his violent self-hatred with a gregarious and gentle exterior. Jack's observation that the Bolgers are knocked "flat" each time they discover part of their son's dual identity reflects the disorienting nature of all such discoveries. Identities are carefully made until they're not, and when they fall apart, what's laid bare is often frightening, or at least staggeringly unfamiliar.

Chapter 29 Quotes

❝ Mrs. Howard arranged the scarf so it hung casually between the lapels of the overcoat. She glanced at me again and then stepped back so that I was alone before the mirror. The elegant stranger in the glass regarded me with a doubtful, almost haunted oppression. Now that he had been called into existence, he seemed to be looking for some sign of what lay in store for him.

He studied me as if I held the answer.

Luckily for him, he was no judge of men. If he had seen the fissures in my character he might have known what he was in for. He might have known that he was headed for all kinds of trouble, and, knowing this, he might have lost heart before the game even got started.

But he saw nothing to alarm him. He took a step forward, stuck his hands in his pocket, threw back his shoulders and cocked his head. There was a dash of swagger in his pose, something of the stage cavalier, but his smile was friendly and hopeful.

Related Characters: Jack / Tobias (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mr. Howard—an alumnus of Hill School who has helped Jack through the admissions process—takes Jack shopping for new clothes. He wants for Jack to succeed at Hill, and has warned the boy several times about what a difficult environment prep school can be. Still, Jack has remained determined to matriculate. Proud of Jack, and knowing the boy cannot afford the clothes he will need to look the part of a prep school boy, Mr. Howard and his wife bring Jack to Mr. Howard's tailor, where they purchase for him a new wardrobe and spend an extravagant amount on suits, shoes, sweaters, ties, and other accessories. As Jack, trying on his new garments, looks at himself in the mirror, he sees himself as an "elegant stranger." In many ways, the journey of Jack's adolescence has been a journey of figuring out who he is—or, if not who he is, then who he wants to be, and who he can try to pass himself off as. As he encounters the newest version of himself—a cavalier and confident young man full of swagger, he has no idea of the trials and tribulations that lie ahead. Like earlier in the book, though, the older Tobias cannot connect to his younger self and warn him of what's to come.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

The young Tobias and his mother Rosemary are on a road trip across the Midwest when their car boils over and stalls. While they are waiting for it to cool down on the side of the road, they hear a horn approaching; they watch helplessly as a large truck, which has lost its brakes, careens around a curve. They follow the truck down the highway, and by the time they get to the cliff where the truck has gone off the road and down into a ravine, a large crowd has gathered to observe the accident. At the bottom of the valley, the truck looks "pitifully small," and Toby's mother comforts him as they look down at the wreckage. Once the crowd clears out, Toby knows that the "time [is] right" to make a play on his mother's sympathies; by the time they get back on the road, he has talked her into buying him several shiny souvenirs from the rest stop.

This introduction to the memoir, rather macabre in nature, sets up the dynamic between Tobias (who is mostly called "Jack") and his mother, and it also foreshadows the painful and "pitiful" circumstances that are awaiting the two of them. Though they don't yet realize it, they, too have lost control of their brakes, and are careening off the edges of their own former lives, into a dark, deep, and dangerous unknown.

The year is 1955, and Toby and his mother are driving from Florida to Utah to get away from a man his mother is afraid of—they also hope to get rich on uranium and "change [their] luck." Their car is old and overheats every few hours. Still, they press onwards; Rosemary believes that everything will change for them once they get to the West. Rosemary grew up in Beverly Hills, in the days before the stock market crash. When she was a child, her family was extremely wealthy, and she believes that in Utah, where people are frenetically mining uranium and striking it in rich, she will be able to get back the life of comfort and ease she once knew. She also hopes to make up for the time she has lost during her "long affair with a violent man" in the five years since her marriage to Toby's father dissolved.

Rosemary's painful past is hinted at in stages during this passage—she is fleeing a "violent man," and believes, because of her childhood wealth, that she is bound for success and luxury despite all evidence to the contrary. The patterns of neglect and violence in Rosemary's life are established here, if only briefly and at arm's length, in order to foreshadow the fact that Rosemary will soon become entrapped within these cycles once again.

The day after the truck goes over the cliff, Rosemary and Toby arrive in Utah, but find they are months too late—the uranium boom has filled up all the motels and places to stay, and there are no jobs. The boom has brought violence and crime to the state, and many locals tell Rosemary to keep moving West—there is nothing for her in Utah. Rosemary, however, decides to stay and try her luck; she buys a Geiger counter and a black light, tools to track uranium traces, and they head for Salt Lake City, where she hopes to get a job with a mining company. On the drive to Salt Lake, Toby and Rosemary sing at the top of their lungs. They are excited because their journey is, they believe, near its end.

Despite the pain and bad luck they have encountered so far on their road trip, Rosemary and Jack sing in a carefree, excited manner as they continue on. Within the first chapter, Wolff has established an atmosphere of instability and fear, while managing to render the road trip through the eyes of his own youth; as a fun adventure with his mother, and as a fresh start to both their lives.

CHAPTER 2

In Utah, Toby has plans for his own reinvention. He has "Western dreams" of freedom and self-sufficiency, and wants to remake himself into someone worthy of such dreams. He decides to rename himself Jack, after Jack London, believing that the name is both less effeminate and more representative of the kind of boy he wants to be. His mother doesn't like the idea, but agrees to it on one condition—that Jack attend catechism classes, so that he can be baptized as Jonathan and take Jack as a nickname.

The idea of identity and performance will become one of the book's most prominent themes as it continues to unfold. Here, the young Toby experiments for the first time with making a change to his identity and adopting a persona; he wants to become the archetype of a "Western" boy, and feels he must change parts of himself in order to successfully strike this new "pose."

When Jack's father hears of his plans to change his name, he calls from Connecticut to try and discourage his son, insisting that Tobias is an old Protestant family name. Later, the older Tobias will learn that his father's family was actually Jewish and converted to hide their religious background. Jack's mother, however, "pleased by [his] father's show of irritation," decides to take her son's side, and supports him in "shedding" the name his father gave him as a kind of retaliation. Her ex-husband, despite having remarried a millionairess, sends the two of them no money.

The idea of constructed identities is further complicated in this passage as Tobias's father calls him up to urge him not to change his identity—despite the fact that Wolff family's entire identity seems to be predicated on a significant lie about who they really are and where they really come from.

Once a week after school his first fall in Utah, Jack attends catechism classes at the church under the instruction of a nun called Sister James. She is a faithful and passionate woman who tries to keep her students out of trouble by forming clubs for them. Jack joins the archery club, but he and his friends spend their afternoon trying to hit stray cats in the churchyard. Soon, the game evolves, and the boys surreptitiously try to hit one another. Looking back, the older Tobias doesn't recall that trying to hurt each other was the object of the game, as they were almost immune to the thought they could actually wound one another.

The boys from Jack's catechism class are playing a dangerous game, but paying no mind to the idea that they could actually hurt one another. What it means—and indeed what it takes—to hurt another person will be further explored as the narrative unfolds.

The young Jack is "subject to fits of feeling [...] unworthy." Though the feeling is unfounded, he worries that no one actually likes him, other than his mother. He especially worries that Sister James feels he is flawed and bad, and he begins skipping archery and some catechism classes to avoid her. He isn't worried that his mother will find out—she has recently taken up again with Roy, the man she'd left Florida to get away from.

Though he is young, Jack already worries that he is insufficient, or somehow intrinsically bad. His feelings of unworthiness emerge again once his mother takes up with Roy, seeming to indicate that the young boy's bad feelings about himself are directly tied to witnessing the cycles of pain and abuse his mother falls into again and again.

Jack, hungry for connection, spends his time running around with boys from school or talking to strangers on the streets downtown. His class begins a pen pal program, and he writes to his pen pal, Alice, with furious frequency. He sends her up to fifteen pages at a time, detailing a fantasy version of his life in which his father is the owner of a ranch. Jack describes racing "his" palomino horse, Smiley, through the deserts in pursuit of rattlesnakes and coyotes. Alice, however, responds irregularly; when she does, her letters are short and terse.

In order to escape the strange and increasingly dangerous circumstances of his life, the young Jack retreats into fantasy, spinning stories about a faux, grandiose life to stranger who couldn't care less.

Each night, Jack goes home to his mother—and to Roy. Roy has followed them to Utah, and though he's rented a room across town, he spends most nights and Jack and Rosemary's apartment. Roy doesn't work—he lives off a small inheritance and disability checks from the VA. He loves hunting and fishing, and often takes Jack with him on trips out to the desert, where they hunt and look for uranium ore. Roy teaches both Jack and Rosemary to shoot, and Jack mostly admires him, as his mother shields him from the fact that Roy often threatens and abuses her. Some nights, Rosemary can do nothing but sit and cry, and Jack comforts her, though he does not know the source of her pain.

This passage shows how abusers and violent people can often worm their way into their victims'—and their friends' and families'—lives with little effort. Roy is "posing" as a stand-up guy, when in reality he is hurting both Rosemary and Jack; Jack, despite knowing that something is off, isn't sure that Roy is what's wrong, and actually begins looking up to the very man who is the source of so much of his and his mother's pain and suffering.

Many afternoons, Roy, with Jack in the car, drives to the building where Rosemary works, waits for her to leave and start her walk home, then follows her in his car. Though Roy sometimes treats this like a game, Jack knows it isn't—at the same time, he isn't quite sure what it is. One afternoon near Christmas, Roy misses Rosemary coming out of the office building and becomes miserable and irate, losing his temper and growing crazed. He drives through town speeding and crying, startling Jack, who begs Roy to drive him home.

In this passage, Jack's involvement with Roy extends to participating in Roy's abuse of Rosemary. Though Jack is too young to know what's really going on, Roy is setting a foundation for Jack in which monitoring his mother's behavior and making games of controlling her is the norm. This passage also shows how Jack's unorthodox "education" in the ways of the world has started at an early age.

Back at the house, Rosemary is cooking and listening to Christmas music. Roy interrogates her about her day, and when he accuses her of trying to "fool" him, she grows quiet. That night, dinner is silent, but after the meal, when Jack goes to bed, he hears his mother and Roy arguing about her right to go shopping on her own.

As Roy's behavior becomes more shameless and controlling, it is harder and harder to keep Jack from the truth.

That Easter, Jack is baptized with several others from his catechism class. To prepare themselves for communion, they must make confession, and Sister James makes them each appointments to come to the rectory and see the priest. Jack is nervous as his approaches, unsure of what to confess—he feels an overwhelming amount of guilt, but can't figure out what his particular sin is. When Jack fails to come up with anything to confess to the priest, Sister James takes him aside, offering to take him back to try again after a warm glass of milk.

Jack struggles with feelings of being inherently bad and unworthy—when it comes time to make confession to a priest, confronting these feelings proves too overwhelming for Jack, who isn't even sure where to begin when it comes to talking about who he is and what he has failed at in his life thus far.

In the kitchen, Sister James tells Jack there's nothing to be afraid of, and begins "confessing" to him some of her own childhood sins. He sees the nun in a new light, and can tell that Sister James is an anxious woman, about his mother's age, who just wants to help him. After she tells Jack about stealing pennies and nickels from her father's wallet as a child, and the additional sin of being a "backbiter" and talking behind her friends' backs in order to show him that everyone sins, she takes him back to the rectory.

Sister James shows Jack kindness and attempts to impress upon him the idea that just because one has sinned or erred, it doesn't mean they're unworthy of love and forgiveness. Sister James must know she's dealing with a troubled boy, but she can't imagine the extent of the very adult issues Jack is facing down each day.

Jack sits down in the confession booth once more and tells the priest that he steals nickels and pennies from his mother's wallet and talks badly about his friends behind their backs. The priest gives Jack his "penance" and absolves him, and then they both step out of the booth. Sister James approaches them; the priest tells Sister James that Jack is a "fine boy."

Jack is so afraid of admitting the truth about himself and his life that he adopts Sister James's stories—and thus her identity—as his own in order to escape reality.

CHAPTER 3

Just after Easter, Roy gives Jack a present: a **Winchester .22 rifle**. Roy had carried it as a boy, and he now passes it on to Jack, who has had his heart set on it for months; Jack believes a weapon is the "first condition" of the Western self-sufficiency and grit he longs to espouse. Rosemary protests, insisting the gun is not an appropriate present, but after a few days of Roy's whining, she relents. She tells Jack he can only have the rifle if he promises never to take it out or even touch it except under her or Roy's supervision. Jack agrees to this condition, but after just a week, he decides to take it out and clean it while he's home alone in the apartment one afternoon.

In this passage, as Roy gives Jack a highly inappropriate and potentially dangerous Easter gift, Wolff employs the rifle as a physical symbol of the trauma, violent thinking, and perversion that Roy is passing down to Jack both consciously and subconsciously.

Jack cleans the **rifle**, then puts it together and marches around the apartment with it, then dons one of Roy's old army coats and poses in the mirror with the gun. The coat makes him feel like an army sniper—and soon he begins to act like one. He sets up a "nest" on the couch by the front window, and follows people on the street in his sights.

Jack knows he isn't supposed to play with the rifle, but the allure of escaping into a fantasy story and an alternate identity is just too strong.

Jack loads the **gun** with ammo—he knows where Roy's hiding place is—and continues playing sniper at the front window. He is in "ecstasy" over his power over other people, and their "absurd and innocent" beliefs that they are walking safely down the street. Jack plays this game day after day, and soon the innocence of the people he's aiming at begins to annoy him.

Jack enjoys the feeling of power over others. The gun, a symbol of the traits Roy is passing down to Jack, mirrors Roy's methods of control over Rosemary: as Jack considers sheer, unadulterated power, he can't know that Roy must feel the same thing whenever he stalks or threatens Rosemary.

One afternoon, aiming out the open window, Jack, shoots at a squirrel and kills it. Jack hurriedly puts his **gun** away, and when his mother comes home, he tells her that there is a dead squirrel into the street. Together, they go out and gather it up in a plastic bag, then bury it behind their building under a cross made from popsicle sticks. Jack cries the whole time, and continues crying that night in bed.

Jack, tempted by violence, fires the rifle and takes a life—symbolically engaging the legacy of violence Roy is trying to pass onto him. The experience doesn't make Jack feel powerful, though; it makes him feel miserable.

For several days, Jack stays away from the apartment at times he knows he would be home alone. Even as he occupies himself by playing with his friends, he cannot "shake the idea" that sooner or later he will get the **rifle** out again. All his images of himself as he wishes to be are armed. Because he does not know yet who he is, any image he conjures of himself has a "power" over him.

Jack doesn't know who he is yet—he keeps constructing images of who he should be or what he could be, but these images prove too powerful; they overwhelm Jack and lead him to make poor decisions.

As the days go by, Jack begins taking out the **rifle**, cleaning it, and playing with it again without loading it. One afternoon, playing with his unloaded gun, he sees a car approaching the building—it stops at the front, and Sister James gets out. She has an envelope in her hand. She knocks on the door of the apartment, waits for an answer, and knocks again. Jack stays still and silent, frozen, with his rifle in his hand; he is dressed in a fur hat and Roy's uniform. He wonders what Sister James would think of him if she discovered him dressed in such a "ludicrous" getup.

Jack knows that Sister James is one of the few people who has shown him kindness. This makes him feel vulnerable, though, and when Sister James gave him the chance to redeem himself, he exploited her openness. Now, Jack wonders what Sister James would think if she could see him continuing to play at false identities, desperately trying to convince himself of his power over others—and himself.

After a few moments, Sister James gives up and slides an envelope under the door. Jack hears her go back to her car and start it up; he peeks out the window and sees her in the driver's seat. This is the last glimpse he will ever get of her, though he doesn't know it. Once she's gone, he goes over and retrieves the envelope. He reads the note inside; it is addressed to Rosemary, and asks for her to give Sister James a call. Jack burns the letter and envelope in the sink and washes the ashes down the drain.

Jack doesn't want Sister James to get any closer to him or discover the truth about him—he burns her letter in an effort to cut off all communication with her, and hide himself away from her knowing eyes for a while longer.

CHAPTER 4

One afternoon, Roy and Jack are home alone in the apartment. Roy asks Jack what he thinks about the idea of having a baby brother, and tells him that he and Rosemary are thinking of starting a family together. Jack doesn't react much to the idea, responding numbly and in one-word answers. The next morning, Roy sets out on a fishing trip; Jack doesn't know that it will be the last time he ever sees the man.

Roy clearly wants to continue his relationship with Rosemary and cement their connection to one another; he wants to bring another life into the world as a way to entrap her, not because he loves her and wants to build a healthy life with her.

When Jack comes home from school, Rosemary has almost all of their things packed. She asks Jack to make sure there's nothing she's forgotten in his room; he asks if they're going somewhere, and she replies that they're going to Seattle—without Roy. Jack retrieves his **rifle**; Rosemary says it can't come with them, but Jack insists, and she adds it to their things. She voices her disappointment in the fact that the rifle means so much to Jack. Shortly thereafter, a cab pulls up and drives Rosemary and Jack through the rain to the bus station, where they board a bus bound for Seattle.

Though Rosemary doesn't want to bring along the rifle—a symbolic token from Roy which stands for all he has "taught" Jack—she allows him to bring it anyways. This symbolizes Rosemary's resignation to the fact that her mistakes affect Jack, too; she wants to deny the truth of this fact, but ultimately cannot.

CHAPTER 5

In West Seattle, Jack and Rosemary take up residence in a boardinghouse. They spend their time wandering the streets of their new city, pointing out nice houses and dreaming of living in them one day. Their actual room at the boardinghouse is small and mildewy. Rosemary befriends two women there—a pregnant woman named Kathy, who seems to be on her own, and the housekeeper, Marian, a large and boisterous woman. Jack and Marian dislike one another—she believes he is a troublemaker, and Jack resents her for thinking so.

Jack dislikes Marian because he knows that she sees through his act and understands what kind of kid he really is. Jack is, as the previous chapters have shown, petrified of encountering the truth about himself, or showing it off to anyone else. Marian should represent a way towards truth and acceptance, but instead she comes to represent, for Jack, a threat.

Jack makes two friends in school, Terry Taylor and Terry Silver. All three boys have single mothers, and they spend their afternoons stealing cigarettes, bumming about town, and staring in the windows of pawn shops at guns and televisions which play documentaries about the Second World War and the dangers of fascism. Terry Silver, who is a clever but cruel child, owns a Nazi armband that he made himself and often prank calls people with Jewish-sounding last names to speak to them in fake German. He treats the other Terry and Jack like his lackeys, and the three of them together spend a lot of time practicing "looking cool." Despite all their efforts to comb their hair just right and wear their pants slung low, all three boys are plagued by inescapable "uncoolness."

Jack's new friends aren't just bad kids—they're actually cruel, and relish seeing other people suffer at their hands. They don't equate coolness with cruelty, per se, but it's clear that because of this friendship, the two will, for Jack, forever be inextricably intertwined.

Many afternoons, the boys watch *The Mickey Mouse Club* on television and lust after one of the beautiful cast members, Annette. Jack begins writing fan letters to Annette in the same vein as his letters to Alice, describing his wild and adventurous life with his father, a captain who owns a fleet of fishing boats. When his letters receive lukewarm responses, Jack's fantasies of Annette veer towards the violent, and he imagines being injured in a terrible accident, which Annette witnesses, and is so moved she decides to help nurse Jack back to health.

Jack, still unhappy with his life and uncertain of who he is, continues spending his time fantasizing through stories and letters—as his fantasies become more violent and self-deprecating, though, it becomes clear that his fantasies and explorations of other identities are perhaps doing more harm than good.

Some afternoons, after *The Mickey Mouse Club*, the boys go up on the roof of Silver's apartment building and throw eggs down at passing cars on the street below. The boys often hurl insults along with eggs—one afternoon, they pelt a cool teenager in a Thunderbird with eggs while Terry Silver screams "Yid!" at him again and again.

Terry Silver's antisemitism and blatant cruelty foreshadow the kinds of friendships that Jack will continue to seek out almost against his will as his adolescence marches on—mirroring the ways in which Rosemary selects her ill-fated romantic partners.

CHAPTER 6

One afternoon, Rosemary takes Jack down to the harbor to watch a mock naval battle and airshow. As they watch the show, two men approach Rosemary and begin talking to her; one offers Jack use of his binoculars so that he can see better. The men ask Rosemary if she wants to watch the show from one of their apartments; she insists she and Jack have to get home soon so that they can have lunch, but one of the men turns to Jack and asks him what he likes to eat. Jack answers that he likes hamburgers, and then man promises him a hamburger if he and his mother eat lunch with the two of them.

The situation at the airshow quickly becomes shady, as Rosemary shirks her responsibility to Jack in favor of flirting with two strange men.

Back at the man's house, his friend Judd makes Jack a baloney sandwich while the other man, Gil, and Rosemary watch the show from the window. As the men ask Jack questions about himself, like what he does for fun, it comes out that Jack doesn't have a bike—Gil shames Rosemary for not buying her boy a bicycle, and promises to buy him one himself.

One of the men, Gil, shames Rosemary for not providing for her son, and promises to give Jack what it is he wants. Like Roy, Gil is using manipulation and gift-giving to worm his way into Rosemary and Jack's lives.

That evening, back at the boarding house, Rosemary gets ready for a date with Gil—he has invited her out. She gets all dolled up in a fancy outfit and asks Marian and Kathy to watch Jack while she's out. Jack can't fall asleep until his mother gets home—when she comes back to their room, she is crying softly, and Jack holds her wordlessly while she cries herself to sleep. The next morning, Jack doesn't ask her any questions about her evening; the following night, though, unable to help himself, Jack asks when Gil is bringing him his bike. His mother does not answer him, and Jack does not ask again.

This passage uses what's unseen to paint a portrait of what Jack and Rosemary's lives have been like for many years. Jack, left at home while Rosemary goes out on a date, misses his mother and has trouble sleeping without her; Rosemary, meanwhile, encounters something frightening or saddening on her date with Gil and comes back in shambles.

CHAPTER 7

After a while, Marian, Kathy, and Rosemary decide to rent a house together. Rosemary finds a "scabrous eyesore" of a house in West Seattle; it needs a lot of fixing up, but she convinces Marian, Kathy, and even Jack that if they work together they can make it beautiful and comfortable. Soon after moving in, Kathy gives birth to a baby boy. While Kathy and Rosemary go off to work each day, Marian stays home keeping house. Jack runs around with his friends Taylor and Silver all afternoon and comes home just before Rosemary does each evening. He lies constantly to Marian about where he's been, and though she can tell he's lying, she knows she cannot control him.

Rosemary's belief that their eyesore of a house can be fixed up and made into a dream home for them all reflects the novel's theme of storytelling and escapism. Rosemary, poor and on her own, is forced to take an ugly house ill-equipped for her needs, but nonetheless struggles to convince herself that one day she'll have everything she wants.

Rosemary never disciplines Jack. Her father, a "great believer in the rod," had spanked her every day of her childhood because he presumed that whether he knew about it or not, she'd done something wrong each and every day. Rosemary's mother could not defend her against her brutal father, who left his mark on Rosemary's psyche. The older Tobias observes that his mother always had a "strange docility" about her, and was almost paralyzed by "men of the tyrant breed."

This passage reveals that dark past and childhood traumas allow—or even force—Rosemary to repeat the cycles of pain, subjugation, and self-effacement in her relationships with "men of the tyrant breed."

Jack begins getting into more and more trouble at school with his friends Taylor and Silver. The boys break some windows and get away with it; their perceived invincibility emboldens them, and soon they go around town smashing windows, streetlights, breaking into cars and setting off the emergency brakes, and leaving bags of excrement blazing on neighbors' stoops. They steal from local stores, and Jack hoards his stolen goods like treasure, though once he sees them outside the bounds of the store they mostly lose their appeal.

All of the trouble Jack and his friends get into seems to only excite and enliven Jack in the moment. After all of the hullaballoo is over, he's left with trinkets he doesn't much care for and a sense of guilt which adds to his already insecure, poor self-image.


A few months into their new living situation, Kathy and Marian both receive offers of engagement from their beaus. They try to fix Rosemary up, too, but the many suitors they send her way aren't right for her. They eventually fix her up with a man named Dwight—a short man with sad, restless eyes who always smells of gasoline. He dresses like a dandy, and Rosemary thinks he's kind and considerate. Dwight, however, lives in a place called Chinook, a small town three hours north of Seattle, and has three children from a previous marriage. Jack is certain that his mother won't "let herself get tangled up" in Dwight's "mess" of a life.

Even though Dwight seems benign and even bumbling at first, Rosemary's troubled romantic history clues both Jack and readers into the fact that something must be amiss if Rosemary is drawn to him. Jack's instinct is to urge his mother to steer clear of Dwight, but he is just a child, and his opinions don't hold water.


Dwight keeps coming to call on Rosemary, though, and pays her "puppyish, fawning" attention on their dates. Jack, from what he observes of Dwight's interactions with his mother, feels Dwight is trying way too hard. Jack begins to loathe and pity Dwight, and he perfects an impression of the man, which he performs for his mother, Kathy, and Marian each time Dwight departs. Only Rosemary asks Jack to stop mimicking Dwight, whom she defends as a "very nice" man.

Jack, feeling threatened by Dwight both because the man is taking away the bulk of his mother's attentions and affections and because Jack has seen the painful situations Rosemary has gotten into, mocks and ridicules Dwight, perhaps in hopes of getting his mother to move away from him, but all of Jack's efforts are in vain.

CHAPTER 8

That year, Jack and Rosemary arrive in Chinook the day before Thanksgiving to spend the holiday with Dwight and his children. There are three of them—two girls and a boy. The youngest girl is pinch-faced and scrawny, with a strange bald spot on the back of her head; she is about Jack's age, and she is so happy to see Rosemary that she immediately wraps her in an embrace. Dwight introduces his youngest daughter as Pearl. The elder daughter, Norma, is seventeen (and, in Jack's eyes, "ripe and lovely"), while the oldest of the three, the boy Skipper, is thin and angular and uninterested in both Jack and Rosemary.

As Jack and Rosemary meet Dwight's children, a whole new world opens up for them. The three children are all different, from the scrawny and over-affectionate Pearl to the disengaged Skipper, but what becomes clear right away is that Jack is going to have to adjust to competing with more than just Dwight for his mother's affections.

The house Dwight and his family live in is not really a house—it is a converted war barracks. After the meal, Rosemary and Dwight go out with friends while Norma, Pearl, Jack, and Skipper clean up and play Monopoly. After the game, Jack falls asleep; he wakes up when his mother comes home and climbs into the sofa bed with him. She asks him what he thinks of Dwight and his family; he replies that they're "okay." Rosemary confesses that she's having a hard time deciding whether she should marry Dwight. She is doing well at work, and doesn't really want to get married, even though she fears Jack needs a father. Jack tells Rosemary it's perfectly all right with him if she doesn't get married at all.

Jack has a good enough time with Norma, Pearl, and Skipper, but when push comes to shove, he still wants for things to go back to the way they were—his mother and him against the rest of the world.

On Thanksgiving Day, after breakfast, Dwight packs everyone into the car and drives them all around, giving Rosemary and Jack a tour of Chinook—a company village owned by Seattle City Light. The nearest real town, forty miles away, is Concrete, where the three children go to school. As the children all take turns complaining about the long bus ride to school each day, Dwight yells at them fiercely for complaining.

Dwight's short temper and hatred of being questioned begin to emerge in this passage when his children benignly whine about their long commute to school.

Part of the fun of the trip to Chinook for Jack is the chance to participate in the rifle club's turkey shoot. Dwight essentially bribed Jack into coming by telling him he could bring his **rifle** and participate. When they show up to the shoot, though, at noon on Thanksgiving, Jack is told that he can't participate due to his age. Dwight insists he is as surprised as Jack, but Jack can tell that the man is lying. Rosemary, who is an NRA member, asks an official if she can shoot in Jack's place and signs herself up. When it's Dwight's turn to shoot, he performs miserably; he blames his failures on Jack's faulty rifle, but when Rosemary is up, she wins the whole competition.

Just like all of Rosemary's other boyfriends and suitors, Dwight has lied to Jack about a "gift;" not only is Jack disappointed, but he realizes, perhaps, on a deeper level, that the cycle of abuse is starting up again. Rosemary, however, seems oblivious, and even excited.

Back at the house, their whole group enjoys a peaceful and calm Thanksgiving dinner; Rosemary is electrified by her win and tells stories about her and Jack's past and their adventures together. Jack plays Chinese Checkers with Pearl, and the two of them have a grand time. The next morning, Dwight drives Rosemary and Jack back to Seattle. On the bridge leading out of Chinook, he stops the car to point out the salmon in the river below, who have come from the ocean to spawn and have already begun to die.

Even though the "family" has a nice, peaceful evening in which Jack gets along well with Pearl and at last seems excited about the idea of joining Dwight's family, Dwight pulls a dark and manipulative move when he points out the dying salmon, who have come upriver to Chinook only to perish.

CHAPTER 9

The week after Thanksgiving, Jack tells Taylor and Silver a story about how he participated in the turkey shoot and blew the "fucking head" right off a huge turkey. His friends call his bluff and accuse him of lying before bursting out in peals of laughter. Jack takes out his hair comb and writes the words "FUCK YOU" on the wall of the bathroom, which has been freshly painted over the holiday. He then throws his comb in the garbage and leaves the bathroom.

Jack retreats into storytelling and escapism in the wake of his trip to Chinook, longing to paint a different picture of what really happened there to his friends and avoid all of the strangeness and disappointment he encountered.

That day after lunch, the vice-principal, having found the graffiti, goes around to each classroom and tells each student in the school that they will not stop their investigation of who wrote the obscenity until they find the culprit. Jack becomes anxious and goes to the nurse with a stomachache later that afternoon. The vice-principal comes to fetch him from the nurse's office and drags him out by his ear, telling Jack that his mother is on the way to school.

Though Jack drew the graffiti, when he is in danger of being caught, his tough-guy act comes falling down and he becomes vulnerable, weak, and anxious.

Rosemary arrives and, having spoken with the school nurse, asks the vice-principal how he could have ripped Jack out of the infirmary in such a cruel manner. The vice-principal begins telling Rosemary of Jack's transgression—to which Jack has still not admitted guilt—but his mother defends him, promising the vice-principal that her son never lies. The vice-principal calls in Taylor and Silver, who each corroborate the story that Jack scrawled the graffiti into the wall with his comb. When they leave, Jack and Rosemary insist that the other boys are lying, and Rosemary demands to see the principal.

Rosemary is staunch in her belief—or simply her denial—that Jack cannot be responsible for the graffiti. This says a lot about what "persona" or pose Jack presents to his mother at home, and how different it is from the one he affects at school with his ne'er-do-well friends.

The principal, unsure of how to handle the situation, tries to give Jack a suspension, but Rosemary argues with this punishment, and the principal agrees to let Jack off the hook just this once. Even after leaving the principal's office with his mother, cleared of any punishment, Jack still feels cramps in his stomach. Rosemary takes Jack home, where Marian questions why the two of them are home so early. Rosemary relays the whole thing to Marian, and at the end of her story, Marian asks Jack to leave the two women alone.

Despite having gotten out of trouble in school, Jack's stomach cramps don't subside; he's still miserably guilty over what he's done, and now has the added guilt of realizing that his mother defended him so fiercely when he did not deserve to be.

Jack listens from the other room as Marian tells Rosemary all about what a bad kid Jack is. He hears his mother trying to stick up for him, but Marian has too much dirt on him, and rather than listening to his mother's pitying protestations, Jack goes upstairs. After a while, Rosemary comes up, too, and takes a long bath. Jack is expecting a talking-to when she comes out, but after she's done, she simply reads a book, fixes dinner, and goes to bed. Even after the lights are out, Jack cannot stop coming up with answers the questions he believes his mother will ask him in the morning.

Rosemary, having been filled in on all of the bad stuff Jack's been getting up to, barely reacts at all. It seems as if she would rather go about her evening and continue to live in denial about the different personas Jack is adopting at home and at school.

That weekend, Dwight comes to visit. After he leaves, Rosemary tells Jack that Dwight has made a proposal, which she feels "bound to consider." Dwight has suggested that after Christmas, Jack move up to Chinook to live with him and his children and attend their school. If things work out and everyone gets along, Rosemary will quit her job, accept Dwight's offer of marriage, and move up, too. As Rosemary outlines this plan, she speaks as if she sees in the plan some sort of "duty." Jack feels he has no choice but to give his mother his approval and agree to the idea.

The feeling of inevitability and pressure that Jack feels when his mother brings up going to live with Dwight shows that because Jack is so uncertain about who he is or what he wants, he allows the small measure of agency he has in his own life to be erased, striking whichever pose and agreeing to whichever arrangement makes him most agreeable in his mother's eyes.

CHAPTER 10

Dwight drives Jack up from Seattle to Chinook in a "sullen reverie," barely speaking to Jack the whole three hours. Just outside of Concrete, Dwight hits a **beaver** crossing the road. He swears he swerved to avoid it, but Jack believes Dwight actually tried to hit the beaver. Dwight gets out of the car and urges Jack to do the same; they inspect the carcass, and Dwight decides that the pelt could be worth a lot of money. He tells Jack to pick the carcass up and put it in the trunk; when Jack refuses, Dwight taunts Jack for being weak and afraid of meat, and he loads it into the truck himself.

As soon as Jack and Dwight are alone together for the first time, Dwight's true personality—malevolent, crude, and greedy—emerges in full force. He attempts to shame Jack for not wanting to handle the bloody beaver carcass, demonstrating his utter disregard for Jack's feelings, as well as his desire to remake Jack entirely and bend him to his will.

At the last village before Chinook, Dwight stops off at a tavern. He brings a burger and fries out to the car for Jack and tells him to sit tight for a while. Jack waits for hours in the cold while Dwight drinks inside the tavern, afraid even to play the radio for fear of drawing Dwight's ire. He wants everything to work out with Dwight so that he can be part of a real family.

Dwight's behavior becomes increasingly worrisome, but Jack is too petrified to do anything at all—just as he allowed himself to be talked into the arrangement in the first place, he now allows himself to continue believing that everything will be okay if he just goes with the flow.

After Dwight emerges from the tavern, he drives home drunk the rest of the way. As he takes Jack through a sickening series of curves up the side of a mountain, Jack complains about feeling sick to his stomach. Dwight teases Jack, again, for being weak, and calls him a "hotshot." He asks Jack to see Jack's imitation of him, which he has heard about from Marian. Jack refuses to perform it, even as Dwight taunts and berates him more and more violently. He warns Jack that if Jack pulls any "hotshot stuff," Dwight will "snatch [him] bald-headed." Dwight warns Jack that he is in for a "whole nother ball game" as Jack clings to his seat, bracing himself for the next curve.

As if Jack didn't already realize that he was in for a "whole nother ball game," Dwight clues him into this fact now. The drunken, twisting drive home mirrors the confusion and isolation Jack feels as he realizes what his new life in Chinook is really going to be like.

CHAPTER 11

During his first few days in Chinook, Jack can tell that Dwight is studying him and sizing him up. Dwight calls Jack lazy and accuses him of thinking he's smarter than anyone else. When Dwight decides that Jack has too much free time, he signs the boy up for Boy Scouts, gives him a load of chores, and instructs Pearl to act as a spy when he isn't around, reporting on whether Jack is keeping up with his chores. Some of the chores are normal, but some are bizarre, like the "mean whims" of a villain in a fairy tale.

Dwight swiftly and meticulously takes control over all of Jack's free time, using verbal abuse and manipulation to make Jack feel low about himself. Dwight also weaponizes his own children against Jack, foreshadowing the level of influence Dwight will come to have over Rosemary, as well.

Dwight has filled several boxes with **horse chestnuts**, and charges Jack with husking and shucking them. The husks are hard and covered in spines and bleed a juice which stinks and turns Jack's hands orange. Dwight, though, will not let Jack to wear gloves while he husks chestnuts because he believes they look "effeminate." Every night, Jack is made to shuck horse chestnuts, and the task takes him most of the winter. While he is shucking he is confined to the cramped mudroom, and as his new "siblings" pass him by on their way out the door or to the bathroom, they give him pitying looks but never sincerely offer to help. Norma is busy sneaking around with her boyfriend, Bobby Crow, and Skipper is hard at work customizing his beloved car. Pearl, meanwhile, hovers near Jack, clearly spying on him and reporting back to Dwight about his work ethic.

Dwight forces Jack to submit to the menial, miserable task of shucking spiny chestnuts simply in order to demonstrate his control over the boy's life. Dwight can make Jack do anything he wants—and his calculated system of control, though transparent, is nonetheless effective.

Dwight arranges for Jack to take on a paper route, which he completes every day after school. Jack earns between fifty and sixty dollars a month, but Dwight takes the money from Jack as soon as he gets it, promising that he's putting it into a savings account for Jack to use when he's older.

Dwight controls Jack's life financially, too, refusing to allow him to get his hands on any of his hard-earned money and thus take back a measure of control and agency.

Jack misses his mother, who, in the weeks since Christmas, has still refused to give Dwight a firm answer about marriage. She tells Dwight—and Jack—that she wants to be completely sure before she makes a decision either way. Jack understands his mother's hesitation, but is growing frustrated with the fact that he's only able to see her when Dwight agrees to drive Jack down to Seattle. In front of Rosemary, Dwight is always kind to Jack, smiling at him and talking happily about all the fun things they've done together back in Chinook. With "revulsion" for Dwight—and himself—Jack plays along, never telling his mother about the cruel treatment he's being forced to face.

Rosemary seems to be waffling about whether or not to bind her life to Dwight's but doesn't realize that her reluctance reflects directly on Jack. Unable to control Rosemary, Dwight instead seeks to control Jack—and Jack, despite his hatred of the man, is forced to play along in hopes of convincing his mother to move up to Chinook and thus alleviate his own suffering. The complicated power dynamics between these three are intricate, and will only grow more so as the book unfolds.

At the end of each visit, Jack's mother always pulls him aside and asks if there's anything she needs to know about, but Jack always insists that everything's fine. Each time Dwight drives Jack back up to Chinook, he always stops at the tavern and drinks. For the rest of the ride home, he drunkenly berates Jack for everything he does that is wrong.

Though Jack is suffering immensely, he refuses to tell his mother the truth of what Dwight is doing to him. His reasons are complicated, but a blend of escapism, desire to please, and having been beaten down by Dwight and forced to question even further who he truly is inside all contribute to Jack's complicity in his own misery.

Once a week, Jack and Dwight go to Boy Scout meetings. Dwight, having been a "serious" scout at Jack's age, signs up to be Assistant Scoutmaster for Jack's troop. After the end of every meeting, back at the house, Jack has to sit and listen while Dwight outlines all of the things that Jack did or said wrong in the meeting—goofing off with other boys, handling CPR technique wrong. Still, Jack likes being a Scout well enough; he dreams of the day when he will make it all the way up the ranks and become an Eagle Scout. He enjoys reading Skipper's old Scout handbook, and *Boy's Life*, the official Scout magazine, which profiles particularly adventurous Scouts around the country.

Even a benign activity like Boy Scouts isn't allowed to something fun and carefree for Jack—he is watched constantly by Dwight and is thus unable to feel secure in his actions or identity. Despite the pain he continues to suffer at Dwight's hands, scouting does allow Jack to engage in some escapism as he fantasizes about the things he could see, achieve, and become through the Boy Scouts.

In March, Rosemary finally gives Dwight a date for when she'll move up to Chinook. Dwight immediately begins renovating the house in a frenzy, painting everything in the house white—not just the walls, but the furniture and the piano, as well. A few days before Rosemary is supposed to come up, she calls on the phone and asks to talk to Jack. She asks Jack if he's still feeling "good" about everything, and confesses she has been feeling low herself. She wants to make sure that Jack and Dwight are really getting along well. Jack answers that things are good—Dwight is in the room, but he figures that even if Dwight weren't listening in, he'd give the same answer just to keep everything civil.

Dwight's manic desire to redecorate the house entirely, painting everything (even the piano keys) a stark, blinding white, shows his underlying need to cover up the things he's done to Jack—and, possibly, to his own children—and create a clean, blank slate for Rosemary.

Rosemary tries one last time to impress upon Jack that it isn't too late to change their minds—if Jack wants to come home, Rosemary will keep her job and find them a new place to live. Jack says that he understands, but in reality, feels that all of his suffering is, in a way, "fated." He feels compelled to accept Dwight's home as his own, and to accept Dwight as his father, even though neither make him feel safe or happy. He feels that his mother should know that things have already gone too far—they have sealed their fates.

Jack has one last chance to tell his mother the truth—but he is, perhaps, afraid that even if he confesses what's going on, he'll still be stuck in the same situation; the idea that his mother would choose Dwight over him seems to paralyze him.

CHAPTER 12

Jack meets a new boy who lives in the village of Chinook—Arthur Gayle is the "uncoolest boy in the sixth grade." Arthur is a sissy—his movements and affectations are effeminate, and every time Jack gets into a confrontation with Arthur, he comes away "smarting" from Arthur's words, not his physical blows. Jack can tell that Arthur wants something from him—friendship—and indeed Jack feels that he recognizes Arthur as someone who is supposed to be his friend. He's nervous, however, about what being friends with Arthur in earnest would do to his reputation.

In this passage, Jack comes up against a situation which has the potential to define the kind of boy and man he will come to be. He likes Arthur, but is afraid of what others will think of their friendship, and allows this to interfere with his own desire for friendship.

One spring day, Arthur approaches Jack in the street out front of his house and teases him for his yellow-looking hands, stained by the **chestnut husks**. Though part of Jack wants to let the insult go, and though Arthur is bigger than him, he comes right back at Arthur, calling him "Fatso." As their insults escalate, Jack calls Arthur a sissy, and Arthur begins physically attacking him. The two fight and tussle as Arthur demands Jack "take it back," and eventually Jack relents. When Jack goes back inside, Pearl warns him that he's going to be in trouble.

Arthur is clearly sensitive about being called a sissy—as Jack stoops to the lowest of lows in order to try and assert his dominance over Arthur, he is unknowingly engaging in a frighteningly Dwight-like behavior.

Rosemary helps Jack take a shower and clean his cuts and bruises. Pearl urges Rosemary to tell Dwight about Jack's fight—Rosemary exhaustedly suggests Pearl tell him herself. Rosemary and Dwight have not been getting along ever since they returned two days early from their honeymoon, sullen and grim. For weeks, she has slept late and spent all her time lounging in her bathrobe, but has just recently begun to try in earnest to make a life in Chinook by joining the PTA and the rifle club. She has tried to make everyone feel like more of a "family," but Jack feels her efforts are useless—a "real family" as troubled as theirs would never try to spend so much time together.

Things in Chinook are clearly not going well for Rosemary, either. She wants very badly for everyone to be united like a real family and care for one another, but has grossly misinterpreted the situation she's gotten herself into, and now finds herself powerless to influence anyone around her—least of all Dwight, who is no longer hiding behind his affable, oafish false persona.

When Dwight comes home from work that evening, he comes straight to Jack's door, and Jack worries he'll be in trouble. Instead, Dwight is cheery, and wants to hear all the details of the fight. Jack exaggerates, and Dwight delights in hearing about Jack sticking it to Arthur Gayle. That night at dinner, Dwight tells everyone his own stories of violent schoolyard fights from his youth, and after the meal, takes Jack to the utility room to show him some "moves."

Dwight is not upset to hear that Jack got in a fight and beat up a "sissy"—rather, he's proud. This shows just how cruel and violent he is—he cheers on these behaviors when they crop up involuntarily in Jack. Dwight perhaps feels he still has a chance to mold Jack into the kind of boy he thinks he should be.

One afternoon that summer, Jack runs into Arthur on the street during his paper route. They approach each other nervously—they have not spoken since their fight. Arthur has his dog with him, and introduces her to Jack as Pepper. He tells some jokes about Pepper, and the two laugh good-naturedly—from there, they embark upon a friendship.

Despite Dwight's influence, Jack at last decides to forget about everyone else's opinions and make friends with Arthur—he is beginning, slowly, to define himself by his choices bit by bit.

CHAPTER 13

Skipper has a beaten-up 1949 Ford which he loves fixing up. It is in pieces, but Skipper is still proud of it, and rather than going off to college Skipper has decided to stay at home and work at the power plant so that he can put all his money into fixing up his car. The shed where Skipper works on the car is the only place where he and Jack ever really talk or bond. Over Jack's first summer in Chinook, the car starts coming together, and Skipper covers it in glossy paint and outfits it with hubcaps and fancy exhaust pipes. The interior still needs fixing, and Skipper plans to take the car down to Tijuana to have the work done there for cheap. Jack asks if he can come along, and Skipper says he'll think about it.

Skipper's ugly car, which he is renovating from the outside in, is in many ways a metaphor for the larger shifts—impossible ones—taking place in his family. Dwight, the patriarch of the family, is ugly inside and out; he has tried to change himself outwardly to lure Rosemary in, but has been unable to disguise who he truly is inside. Skipper's fervent need to fix up his car mirrors Dwight's harried attempts to disguise himself.

Jack begins fantasizing about the adventures the two of them will have in Mexico and begins telling his classmates at school all about his impending trip. When the subject comes up at dinner one evening, though, Skipper says he won't bring Jack—he's bringing one of his own friends along.

Jack wants to grow closer to his new "family," but finds his efforts rebuffed at every turn.

After Skipper leaves for Mexico, Jack feels as if the room they share is painfully empty. In addition to missing Skipper, Jack also misses his father—though Dwight often makes snide comments about the man, Jack will not let anyone tarnish the image of his father he has in his mind. The older Tobias, looking back on this time in his life, reflects on "advantage always enjoyed by the inconstant parent"—being missed even when one's contribution is minimal. He wouldn't understand just how irresponsible his own father was being by staying out of his life and sending him no emotional or financial support until he had his own son.

In this passage, Wolff explores the inverse of one of the book's major themes: personas and poses. Whereas most of the characters are trying to fashion new personas for themselves from the inside out, here, Jack is able to superimpose an identity or persona on his father, creating a false identity for the man from the outside in.

Due to Skipper's influence, Jack develops a keen interest in cars. He begins hitchhiking at the end of his paper route for the chance to ride all around in strangers' cars, and dreams that one day someone will be able to take him as far as Connecticut.

Jack takes up hitchhiking as a way of indulging in storytelling, escapism, and the adoption of false personas in real time.

When Skipper returns, the interior of the car is outfitted in white leather—but the exterior, which Skipper worked so hard on, looks as if it has been "sandblasted." It is ruined. Skipper explains that he and his friend were caught in a sandstorm down in Mexico—as he tells the story, Jack can tell that Skipper is trying very hard not to cry. Despite the damage, Jack gets into the car and sits on the creamy leather seats. He plays pretend, making engine noises and working the gears; as he looks through the dusty windshield, he can almost convince himself he is moving.

Skipper's efforts to update and remodel his car have failed; by the time he got to fixing up the inside, he'd damaged all his hard work on the outside. This metaphorically demonstrates the futility of a lot of the changes to their personalities or personas that characters in the book are trying to make.

CHAPTER 14

Jack joins the basketball team at school, and as such needs new sneakers. Dwight refuses to buy them for him, though, and chastises Jack for outgrowing his old shoes so fast. Because Jack's games are at night, Norma and her boyfriend Bobby Crow often drive him—Jack knows this is a way for them to steal time together. Still, Bobby gives Jack basketball tips, and Jack comes to idolize Bobby.

Even when participating in a benign activity, Jack finds himself subject to Dwight's ire and insults. There is nothing that Jack can do right in Dwight's eyes.

After a game one night, Norma and Bobby are late picking Jack up. As Jack gets into the car with them, he notices how warm the air is inside; as he watches Norma play with the hair on the back of Bobby's neck, he realizes that the two of them are sleeping together. He feels disappointed and sad, but continues to nurse his little crush on Norma.

Once again, Jack's efforts to get close to one of his new "siblings" is met with the realization that he is profoundly unimportant to them.

CHAPTER 15

Rosemary, meanwhile, is excelling in the rifle club and having a grand time, making all kinds of friends and winning shooting matches frequently. Dwight is a member of the club too, but he never wins any matches. He buys several guns, claiming that each one is malfunctioning.

Dwight is so desperate to come off as successful and enviable that he blames his failure in shooting on the equipment rather than acknowledging his own lack of expertise.

When there are shooting matches in other towns, Dwight makes Jack and Pearl come along with him and Rosemary. After each match Rosemary wins, Dwight becomes sullen and cruel, and on the drive back he berates, teases, and verbally abuses Rosemary. He always stops off at the tavern, goes inside, and drinks. Sometimes, Rosemary joins him.

Dwight is a cruel partner to Rosemary; rather than taking happiness from her achievements, he sees any measure of success she attains as a direct threat to his masculinity and his ability to control her.

During this period of time, Jack is a self-described liar, constantly trying on different versions of himself. He also becomes a thief, with a goal of saving up enough money to run away—he will do anything it takes to "get clear of Dwight." He even fantasizes about killing the man, and sometimes, when he can hear Dwight and his mother fighting in the next room, he takes out his **Winchester** and assembles it. Rosemary is not the only one subject to Dwight's violent taunts—he often turns on Jack, too, but Jack feels immune to Dwight's complaints against him. One by one, the slights give Jack a "definition" of himself, as he begins to define himself "by opposition to [Dwight.]"

As a result of the anxiety and misery at home, Jack begins resorting to unsavory behavior and escapist fantasies. Even in the darkest of times, though, Jack takes solace in his hatred of Dwight—he realizes that, going forward, he needs to always define himself by his opposition to Dwight, and undertake any small acts of resistance he can, both for his mother's sake and his own.

One evening, after Rosemary wins a rifle match and she and Dwight go into the tavern to drink, Pearl and Jack are left alone in the car and try to come up with ways to entertain themselves. They sing along to the radio and play games until Dwight and Rosemary come out of the tavern—Jack thinks his mother no longer looks like a "winner." Dwight gets into the car and starts it up, but Rosemary refuses to let him drive. After a time, she relents and gets in. As they drive the twisting road home, with Dwight driving fast and reckless, Pearl, Jack, and Rosemary sit helpless in the car while Dwight laughs and laughs every time he nearly runs off the road.

Any time Rosemary has any happiness or success that she's won on her own, Dwight debases her until all of the light is sucked out of her, leaving her feeling ashamed and embarrassed of her own triumphs and agency. Again, the twisting road and Dwight's drunken driving along it are metaphors for the crazed, twisted path down which he is taking his "family."

CHAPTER 16

One afternoon, rifling through his mother's things while she's out, Jack finds a letter to her from his uncle, who lives in Paris. That night, Jack writes his uncle a long letter, painting a "nightmare picture" of his and Rosemary's lives in Chinook. He does accurately detail Dwight's abuse—he exaggerates, getting carried away with his own story. At the end of the letter, he begs his uncle to bring him and Rosemary to live in Paris.

Jack's old impulses towards storytelling serve him well here—though he has been known to exaggerate (or just plain invent) stories of his life in the past, here he only goes a tad overboard as he describes the misery he and his mother are being forced to endure, doing so to enhance rather than invalidate his claims.

One afternoon, weeks later, Rosemary catches Jack at the front door as he's coming back from his paper route and asks him to take a walk with her. As they set off, she asks him what in the world he wrote to her brother and how he got the address—Jack confesses to taking the letter from her bureau. Rosemary hands Jack a new letter from his uncle, expressing "shock and sympathy" at how bad things are Chinook and yet stating that there's not enough room for both Jack and Rosemary to come live with them.

Rosemary is never cruel towards Jack, even when he's gone behind her back to do something—she takes his claims and ideas seriously, and sees him as an ally rather than as a thing to be controlled.

Jack's uncle, however, makes an interesting proposal: he wants Jack to consider coming to Paris by himself to live with their family for a year, while Rosemary leaves Dwight and finds work stateside. Rosemary asks Jack what he thinks about the plan, and he says it sounds all right. They are both grinning at one another as they return to the house.

Rosemary loves Jack so much that she herself is elated at the prospect of his getting out of Chinook—even if it means that she will have to stay behind and continue to endure Dwight's abuses.

They tell Dwight about the idea of Jack going to Paris, and Dwight is "all for [it.]" Pearl, meanwhile, is insanely jealous. Jack begins telling his friends at school about his impending year abroad, and even manages to take time off his regular studies to work on some "special projects" about French art, history, and culture.

It turns out that Dwight is just as excited by the idea that Jack could go away from Chinook as Jack himself is. Dwight seems to want Jack out of his hair, as he sees the boy as a nuisance and a threat to his relationship with Rosemary.

As the start of the summer and Jack's date of departure nears, another letter comes from Jack's uncle in Paris—it states that he has reconsidered his original idea. It doesn't make sense to go to all the trouble, he says, of uprooting Jack's life for just a year in Paris; by the time he acclimates and learns some of the language, it'll be time to go home. Instead, they offer to adopt Jack formally and permanently and allow him to live with them for five years, until he finishes high school.

The original offer made by Jack's uncle is rescinded here, but a new one is made in its place. It seems like a great opportunity for Jack, who would be able to escape Dwight's clutches permanently and indulge his own fantasies of living abroad with a new family and making a new life for himself.

Jack is disheartened, but Rosemary urges Jack to seriously consider his uncle's generous offer. Jack is concerned about having to change his name and give up who he is, but his mother insists the decision is his. Dwight, meanwhile, unleashes "a frenzy of coaxing and bullying and opinion-dispensing," delighted, seemingly, at the thought of getting rid of Jack forever. Dwight tells Jack he'd better think fast and make up his mind.

Jack encounters a serious moral conundrum—but all Dwight can fixate on is his newfound (or perhaps just newly-voiced) goal of getting Jack out of the house.

Jack knows, however, that there is nothing to think about—he is his mother's son, and cannot be anyone else's. He feels this on an instinctual level, and also intuits that his mother, deep down, does not want him to go. Later in life, he will learn that this was true—though she will admit that she dreamed of fleeing their situation constantly.

Jack has struggled to define himself and his identity throughout the book—but in this situation, he is firm in who he is, and knows that he cannot be disloyal to his identity as his mother's son.

A few days after the letter, Jack announces at dinner one night that he's not going to Paris. Dwight insists that Jack must go. When Jack says he doesn't want to change his name, Dwight points out that Jack has already changed his first name and "might as well" change his last name, too. Rosemary interjects, begging Dwight to stop badgering Jack.

This passage makes it clear just how desperately Dwight wants Jack out of the house—he is pulling out all the stops and using any excuse he can in order to try to control and manipulate his stepson.

CHAPTER 17

Dwight's favorite thing to watch on TV is the Lawrence Welk show. He is a huge fan of the conductor and owns several of his records. Dwight once played saxophone, and sometimes, when swept up in the music on the show, will get his own sax out and play along with the bandstand.

Dwight is so insecure that he can't even enjoy benign entertainment without having to prove his own musical prowess, too—though he's clearly had no success as a musician.

After Norma graduates from high school, she moves down to Seattle where she works in an office and takes up with a man named Kenneth—though she often calls Rosemary for advice, as she misses her old boyfriend Bobby terribly. Kenneth is ambitious and successful, but nobody likes him; he is opinionated, religious, and obnoxious. One day, though, Norma calls to announce that she has decided to marry Kenneth, and wants to bring him home for Christmas to meet the family.

Norma—like Rosemary—has developed unhealthy patterns in her relationships due to past abuse. Norma, having grown up in Dwight's house and under Dwight's thumb, now makes poor choices in her own romantic life, because the only model for relationships she's ever had involves abuse, misery, and subjugation.

Dwight gets excited about Norma's impending visit, and decides to spray paint a Christmas tree white to match the rest of the house. The paint, though, dries the needles out and causes them to fall off while the family tries to hang ornaments on its boughs, and by the time Norma and Skipper arrive from Seattle—Kenneth is coming up the following day—the tree is half-bare. That night, Bobby comes over and takes Norma out for a while. Jack is in bed by the time she comes back, crying loudly to Pearl and Rosemary in the kitchen.

Just as Dwight painted the house over in white before Rosemary's arrival, he now spray-paints the Christmas tree white, symbolically demonstrating how much worse things have gotten and how much more there is to cover up—but as the Christmas tree sheds its needles, it becomes clear that some things can't just be painted over.

The next day, Kenneth arrives and everyone hates him. He is fussy and pompous and complains about everything. He French-kisses Norma in full view of her family and refuses to drink, comparing alcohol to heroin. Norma sits mute on the sofa while Kenneth embarrasses himself—and her—again and again, and eventually she stands up and urges him to go with her for a drive around town.

Norma has chosen a partner who doesn't seem to be as cruel as her father, but is certainly as fatuous and embarrassing.

Everyone can see that Norma doesn't really love Kenneth, but she goes on to marry him, anyway. The older Tobias writes that, over the years, the light and happiness in Norma went out, and she became drawn, haggard, and addicted to cigarettes.

This passage shows how the cycles of abuse and subjugation Norma has learned throughout her childhood repeat again and again.

On Christmas Eve, the family sits around the TV watching the Lawrence Welk show. When a group of singing sisters performs "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire," Dwight nudges Jack and asks him to follow him. He takes Jack towards the attic and announces it's time to at last eat the **chestnuts** Jack worked so hard to shuck. They climb up into the attic and make their way towards the boxes of chestnuts, only to find that the boxes have bloomed with mold and grown completely covered in fungus.

Upstairs in the attic, the chestnuts have moldered. This shows just how pointless and useless all the hard work Jack did ultimately was. Shucking the chestnuts was only ever a way for Dwight to exert control over Jack and make him miserable.

Also rotting in the attic is the carcass of the **beaver** Dwight killed with his car; only a "pulp" covered with thin strings of mold remains. Dwight doesn't say anything, and the two wordlessly leave the attic. Dwight sits back down in front of the TV, picks up his saxophone, and begins silently playing along with the Lawrence Welk orchestra.

The decaying beaver carcass, up in the attic along with the rotting chestnuts, reflects just how decayed and unrecognizable Jack's relationship with Dwight and with himself has become.

CHAPTER 18

By the time Jack is preparing to start his first year at Concrete High School, he has saved up eighty dollars and concocted a plan to use the money to run away to Alaska under an assumed name. He plans to send for Rosemary once he's gotten settled there, and spends a lot of time fantasizing about the tearful reunion they'll have at the door of his rustic cabin in the wilderness. He is planning to run away from Dwight in November, in Seattle, at the Scouts' annual Gathering of the Tribes. He knows Dwight will be drinking with the other Scoutmasters, and he will have time to slip away. Jack has told Arthur about his plan, and after Arthur begged to join, he reluctantly agreed to take Arthur with him on his journey.

As things at home have gotten worse and worse, Jack's fantasies of his own escape—and of delivering his mother from Dwight's horrible household—have intensified to the point where he believes he can make them into a reality.

Arthur's family life is not violent like Jack's, but he's nevertheless dissatisfied with his parents. Arthur spends a lot of his time telling Jack lofty stories about how his "real family" is descended from Scottish royalty who were forced to go into hiding in France. Jack, who reads the same books for school as Arthur, recognizes that he is stealing from the plot of novels to lie, but because Jack tells so many lies and stories about his own ancestors, he accepts Arthur's stories excitedly. He thinks that they are one another's perfect witnesses—they do one another the favor of believing each other's outlandish tales, feeling that the "real lie" of their lives is their "present unworthy circumstances."

Arthur has his own set of problems, and, like Jack, uses storytelling, invention, and fantasy to escape the feeling that he is stuck in a life he does not want and will never be able to thrive in. Jack and Arthur bond over their shared feelings of being alone and out of place, and they feed one another's fantasies without realizing what the consequences of such symbiotic behavior might be.

As Arthur and Jack have grown closer, they've spent more and more time together, sleeping over at one another's houses. One night, they share a kiss; it is a one-time incident, and it leads to an increase in tension between the two boys for a time. They "often" have blowups, and after a few days apart, resume their friendship as if nothing had happened.

Arthur and Jack sublimate the tension—sexual and otherwise—in their relationship by abusing and harassing one another and getting into fights. Violence is the only way they know how to deal with their confusing feelings.

Jack packs a change of clothes in a duffel bag for the Gathering—he doesn't want to be recognized in his Scout uniform as he makes his way up to Alaska. During the Gathering he and Arthur stay clear of one another, participating in their separate events. Jack finds himself transfixed by a troop from a neighboring town, whose smart uniforms and success as a drill team are flashy and exciting. At lunch, Jack talks to some of the boys, and they trade stories and jokes. Arthur sees Jack going off with the boys to smoke cigarettes, but doesn't join them. When Arthur comes back inside, Arthur approaches him and says he wants to leave and start out for Alaska, but Jack deflects and tells Arthur to "hold his horses" while he plays games with the boys from the other troop.

Arthur is dependent on his friendship with Jack, and when he gets wind of Jack's plan to escape to Alaska, he wants to join him. Jack, however, perhaps never intended to truly run away; he is easily distracted by the prospect of new, better friendships. This shows that perhaps Arthur needs the dual fantasies that he and Jack concoct even more than Jack does.

After the Gathering, Jack stands with the rest of his troop, waiting to be picked up. He knows that Dwight will be drunk, and doesn't want to be alone with him. He begs Arthur to drive back with them, but Arthur won't talk to him. Jack tries to give Arthur one of the prizes he won playing a carnival game at the Gathering, and Arthur reluctantly takes it.

Jack tries to repair things with Arthur in this passage, but it's clear that he has let his best friend down enormously and shattered something between them.

CHAPTER 19

One night, when Jack gets home from school, there is a big, ugly, mangy dog in the utility rom. It growls as Jack approaches. Jack sneaks past it and tells Dwight, who is waiting in the other room. Dwight tells Jack that he has gotten the dog—whose name is Champion—just for Jack; Jack has wanted a dog for a long time. Jack, however, insists that this kind of dog is not the one he wants. Dwight tells Jack it's too bad; it's Jack, after all, who paid for him. Jack goes upstairs to discover that his **Winchester** is gone—Dwight has sold it and purchased the dog with the money from it. Jack is upset, but Dwight accuses Jack of being ungrateful for the gift of a "valuable hunting dog."

Dwight continues to abuse and manipulate Jack through new and insidious routes. He sells one of Jack's prized possessions in order to get something that Jack doesn't want. Dwight is disguising his own desire for a hunting dog by couching it in an invented desire of Jack's. Dwight is attempting to gaslight his stepson, but Jack has grown stronger, and realizes what is going on.

Dwight and Jack take Champion out hunting at a gravel quarry where some skinny ducks are known to congregate. Dwight is a poor hunter, and his lack of success on hunting trips always makes him angry. He takes potshots at rodents and endangered eagles, but never manages to shoot any real game, and he blames his failure on his equipment. As they set off for the quarry, Jack realizes that though Dwight bought Champion "for" Jack, Dwight really plans just to use the dog to improve his hunting game. At the quarry, Champion proves a miserable hunting dog, and Dwight only manages to shoot one duck. At the sound of gunshots, Champion runs back to the car and hides underneath it; on the drive home, he urinates and defecates all over the backseat of the car.

Dwight's miserable attempt at bolstering his own hunting prowess backfires. He used deceit and theft in order to take from Jack and do something for himself, but now, he finds that his attempts to secure something selfishly have ended in disaster. Champion is a terrible hunting dog—and clearly weak and poorly-trained to boot—and now Dwight must live with the consequences he has brought upon himself.

Champion and Jack have an uneasy relationship at first, but soon Champion will hardly leave Jack's side, and barks any time he leaves the house. This causes Jack some trouble, as ever since he started high school, Jack has been sneaking out at nights to take the car for joyrides. Now, any time Jack wants to sneak out, he has to bring Champion with him so as not to wake the whole house.

Jack takes a reluctant interest in the dog more out of necessity than desire. Jack's fantasies of escape have led him to start joyriding in Dwight's car—perhaps as a way of both satiating his own escapist fantasies and slyly getting back at Dwight by taking something that's his.

On one of these middle of the night drives, Jack gets the car stuck in a ditch. Realizing he can't get it out, he and Champion begin the long walk back towards home at three o'clock in the morning. As Jack walks down the road, he feels as if his body belongs to someone else; he sings to himself on the way home in order to comfort himself. Halfway to Chinook, a car comes down the road, and after the man driving reluctantly agrees to take Champion along for the drive, Jack hitchhikes home with him.

Jack is able to drive the car well enough to take it joyriding, but when he actually encounters trouble, he abandons the vehicle, heads home, and prays that the worst won't come his way. His attempts to teach himself to drive—and to get back at Dwight—may have just backfired in a terrible way.

The next morning, Jack says he doesn't feel good, and Rosemary allows him to stay home sick for the day. After lunch, Dwight comes to Jack's room and leans in the doorway. Dwight took Champion out with him that morning, and while at the grocery, ran into the man who'd given Jack and the dog a ride in the middle of the night. The man spilled the beans, and Jack's joyriding has been discovered. Dwight attacks Jack, and though Jack fights back, Dwight beats the boy badly.

Dwight discovers Jack's deception and retaliates physically. His abuse of Jack has always been more psychological and insidious, but in this passage, things take a definite—and, ultimately, irreversible—turn for the worse.

Champion begins killing neighborhood cats, and, after he mangles one in front of a little girl, Dwight is forced to take Champion out to the woods and shoot him. Jack knows what Dwight is doing when he takes Champion away, but doesn't accompany him. From then on, any time Jack does something wrong, his mother—joking darkly—says to him, "'Why don't you take a little ride with Dwight?'"

This passage illustrates that Rosemary doesn't—or refuses to let herself—understand the gravity of what Dwight is doing to Jack. She jokes about Dwight's cruel temperament and violent streak, not realizing the effect her taunts must have on her son.

CHAPTER 20

Concrete is a company town and home of the Lone Star Cement Company. The town is gray, bleak, and dusty. Children from up and down the valley bus into Concrete to attend school, but many get married, drop out, or join the army before graduating. There are not many good teachers there, and though Jack brings home good grades in his first couple years, they are a "fraud"—he copies other students' homework and puts off studying for tests until the last minute. After a while, he stops making A's and starts making C's, but doctors his report cards so that no one at home finds out.

Jack begins struggling in school, and his attempts to adopt a persona or false identity start extending to his schoolwork as he falsifies his grades and cheats in order to get by.

Even going to class sometimes feels like "too much" of an effort for Jack—he has fallen in with a "notorious" group of older boys and is dedicated to becoming an outlaw just like them. His closest friend is Chuck Bolger, who drinks to excess and gets into trouble all the time despite being the son of a preacher. Also in their group is a boy named Psycho, who has already served jail time; Arch Cook, a dumb and skinny boy; and Jerry Huff, a handsome boy who's popular with girls but bullies nearly everyone in school. The boys drive around most afternoons in Chuck's car, looking for ways to siphon gas from other cars, and getting into other shenanigans.

Jack has been unable to succeed on the straight and narrow path, and now takes on a new identity as an "outlaw" in order to explore other facets of his personality and fit in at school. His desire to join a rough-and-tumble group of older boys reflects his inability to feel accepted in his own home—here is a group that embraces Jack, and even if they get into trouble, at least he feels included.

The boys often "share" girlfriends, and they try to help Jack lose his virginity. Jack, though, wants to lose his virginity to someone he loves, and he harbors fantasies of having the perfect first sexual experience. Jack has trouble catching the attention of the girls he likes, and even when a girl is nice to him, he turns around and treats her "swinishly," ensuring all his flirtations go nowhere.

Jack, having witnessed nothing but years of abusive relationships between his mother and a string of cruel men, finds himself unable to treat girls well in his own life, but doesn't seem to understand the connection between the two things.

The older boys do succeed, however, in helping Jack get drunk for the first time. The experience is strange, dreamlike, and transcendent, and ends with Jack alone in the woods after falling off a steep gully. As his friends call for him, he purposefully ignores their voices, and spends the night sleeping in the woods. The following morning when he returns home, Dwight and Rosemary ask him where he's been. When he replies that he got drunk and fell off a cliff, Dwight is surprisingly proud, but Rosemary is stern and worried.

Just as Dwight was proud of Jack for beating up Arthur Gayle rather than angry with him, Dwight is excited and a little proud to see Jack getting into another kind of trouble. Dwight is himself a drunk, and seems to relish any time one of his own behaviors—however shameful or cruel—show up in Jack.

CHAPTER 21

Jack has not seen his brother Geoffrey in six years and hasn't heard from him since he and Rosemary left Salt Lake. In his second year at Concrete High, however, Jack receives a letter and a Princeton sweatshirt from Geoffrey and begins fantasizing about becoming a student at Princeton himself. He decides that he wants to hitchhike his way to Princeton and go live with Geoffrey, but has no money for the trip; he decides to forge a check in order to secure a little cash.

Jack is desperate for a way out of Chinook, and when he reconnects with his brother Geoffrey, he adopts yet another escapist fantasy of Princeton, and elite education more generally, as a way out of his present circumstances.

On a Scouting trip to Bellingham, Jack sneaks away from the group and goes into a bank where he tears a check out of a convenience checkbook. He waits in line for a while, then pretends to have forgotten something, and leaves with the check in hand. He goes to the public library and takes out a card under a fake name; he is surprised how easy it is to deceive people both at the bank and the library. After walking up and down the streets for a while, Jack goes into a corner drugstore. He sees a gray-haired woman behind the back counter with a "guileless, lovely face," and decides to use her in his scam.

Jack continues conflating deception and the adoption of false personas with a way to tell a good enough story about himself so that he can finally achieve the escape he's so desperate for.

Jack brings some magazines, aftershave, and other assorted things up to the register, where the woman adds up his bill. He reaches into his back pocket, pretending to grope for a wallet, but then pretends he has forgotten it at home. He asks if she accepts checks, and makes the one he stole from the bank out for fifty dollars.

Jack has become good—if not great—at deceiving people, and the calculation and manipulation that goes into his various poses and disguises continues to grow with each new scam.

The clerk asks if Jack has any identification; he produces his library card. When she asks for his address, though, he completely blanks on the fake address he gave the librarian. The clerk calls her manager over; she hands him the check and tells him to "take care of it." The manager walks off, and while he's in the back, the clerk tries to engage Jack in conversation. He notices her trembling, though, and realizes that they are going to call the police. Jack hurries out of the store, while the clerk calls out to him using his fake name—Thomas.

Jack becomes too lost in his own fantasy, however, to keep one foot outside of it long enough for it to succeed. He can tell that the woman behind the counter doesn't want to turn him in, and yet has been forced to call his bluff and expose his false identity.

Jack runs down the street and away from the drug store. He ducks into a nearby diner, where he changes into his Scout uniform. As he does, he looks at his many badges; only one badge stands between him and becoming an Eagle Scout. Though he has completed all of the requirements for the badge, Dwight refuses to send in Jack's papers; Dwight doesn't believe that Jack deserves to be an Eagle Scout.

The revelation that Dwight put Jack into scouts as a young boy only to keep him from achieving the dreams Jack developed is just another stunning cruelty in the litany of slights and abuses Jack has been forced to endure.

Outside, Jack can see a police car parked in front of the drug store. He hurries up the street to the hotel where the Scout banquet is to take place, and, once there, helps out an acquaintance from another troop by serving as a greeter at the door, welcoming people and checking their names off a list. After a while, Jack looks up and sees the woman from the drug store; he has removed the disguise he wore into the store, though, and she doesn't seem to recognize him. Jack greets the woman, and another scout gives her a name badge; she heads into the banquet as Jack watches.

This passage—and the fact that the woman from the drugstore doesn't recognize Jack—suggests that perhaps he is very good at being a chameleon and adopting new identities, fooling people into believing he's someone other than who he is with just his attitude and affect.

CHAPTER 22

Geoffrey sends Jack a letter containing a story he wrote about an American imprisoned in Italy for murdering a prostitute. Jack thinks the story is amazing, and sends his brother a story of his own back. Geoffrey's story is so good that Jack considers submitting it as his own in English class, but doesn't, knowing he'd "never get away with it."

Jack is pleased to see that storytelling as a method of escapism is something that even students at Princeton engage in—and more than that, something that can be turned into art.

Geoffrey writes back expressing admiration for Jack's story and filling him in on his life at Princeton; it is his last year of college, and he is planning to travel to Europe after graduation and work on a novel. Geoffrey also updates Jack on their father, who has separated from his wife and moved to California. Geoffrey wants to see Jack, and Jack feels the same—he is elated to have rekindled his relationship with his brother.

The renewed communication with Geoffrey offers Jack an outlet, however small, for his own fantasies, and for the idea that someone who loves him will see him in a light other than the one in which the overbearing and cruel Dwight sees him.

One afternoon, while Pearl and Jack are in the kitchen eating hot dogs, Dwight comes into the room and notices a jar of mustard in the garbage. He fishes it out and demands to know who threw it away. Jack says that he did, because it was empty. Dwight shoves the bottle in Jack's face and remarks that it's not empty. Pearl says she, too, thinks the bottle looks empty, but Dwight doesn't listen to her. He smashes the jar against Jack's face, and at last, Jack relents, saying that the bottle doesn't look empty. As punishment, Dwight makes Jack scrape every last but of mustard out of the jar. Once Jack is done, Dwight asks him if the jar was really empty; looking at the little smudge of condiment on his place, Jack says that it was, and Dwight leans over and smacks him in the face.

This scene demonstrates just how violently Dwight hates Jack. He accuses him of being wasteful, but when Pearl defends Jack, he barely pays his own daughter any mind—he is only focused on systematically and cruelly breaking Jack down and beating all the hope and individuality out of him. Dwight desires control above all else, and doesn't care how far he has to go to get it.

Jack leaves the house and wanders around the village. He gets himself a soda and then decides to call his brother. He goes into a phone booth and has the operator connect him to Geoffrey at Princeton, but once Geoffrey picks up, Jack can barely speak. He at last manages to squeak out that Dwight been hitting and abusing him for years. Geoffrey is astonished and upset, and insists that Jack must get out.

Not knowing where else to turn—since his mother and his siblings either don't see or can't stop the abuse happening at Dwight's hands—Jack calls up his brother to beg for a solution.

After asking a little bit about Jack's schooling—and hearing Jack's exaggerated brags about his academic and athletic success—Geoffrey suggests Jack apply to his old prep school, Choate, and a handful of other prestigious boarding schools. Geoffrey promises to call their father and discuss it with him—he assures Jack that they'll get him out of Chinook "one way or the other."

Geoffrey, in this passage, ignites a new fantasy of escapism for his younger brother—in suggesting that Jack flee to a private school, he will remake his younger brother's relationship both to his education and his identity.

It's not just a tough time for Jack—Rosemary, too, is also suffering at Dwight's hands. Having returned from a fun jaunt campaigning for John F. Kennedy, she is stuck waiting tables at the cookhouse, and has been overcome with boredom and fatigue. She had told a man on the campaign trail that she wanted out of Chinook—Dwight somehow found out about this exchange, and recently pulled a knife on Rosemary, threatening to find and kill her if she ever ran away.

Even though Rosemary and Jack are both suffering at Dwight's hands, they are doing so in isolation from one another—unable or unwilling to see the truth of what the other is being forced to endure.

Jack sends off for application forms from several prestigious schools recommended by Geoffrey, but when they arrive, he finds himself paralyzed by all that they demand. He knows he is not the boy he has led his brother to believe he is—and because the schools all require letters of recommendation from teachers, coaches, and counselors, plus information on Athletic Achievements, Languages, and Community Service, Jack knows that he'll never be admitted. He lies and tells his mother that he has sent the forms off—he tells himself that he is being "realistic," but is filled with bitterness and a feeling of entrapment.

Jack has a very high opinion of himself, knowing—in spite of Dwight's attempts to minimize and erase him—that he is smart, canny, and capable. His miserable performance in school, though, comes back to bite him now. He cannot convince an admissions committee that he is worthy of a place at their school when he doesn't have the records to prove the kind of person he truly knows himself to be on the inside.

One night, Jack's father, Mr. Wolff, calls the house. He assures Jack that he'll get into whatever school he applies to, and will be able to have his pick of the litter. He tells Jack that as soon as school is out for the summer, he should come down to La Jolla to spend the summer with him and Geoffrey. Jack's father confides in him that he wants for Rosemary to come, too, so that they can all be a family again. Before hanging up, he urges Jack to switch his name back to Tobias before starting at prep school. After the phone call, Jack tells his mother about La Jolla—she seems reluctant but secretly excited at the idea of spending a summer with her ex-husband.

Just as things in Chinook reach their nadir, or lowest possible point, for both Jack and Rosemary, it begins to seem as if there is a way of escaping—and reuniting with the family they once knew.

Arthur Gayle hates shop and has managed to negotiate his way out of the class by agreeing to work in the school office. Jack asks Arthur to help him out with his applications, which he has decided to finish after all, by stealing some supplies from the office. At first, Arthur refuses, but several days later wordlessly drops a manila envelope full of blank school letterhead, blank transcript forms, and a stack of official envelops at Jack's seat during lunch. Over the next several nights, Jack writes himself fake letters of recommendation and fills out falsified transcripts.

Though Arthur and Jack have had their struggles, Arthur proves himself a true friend—and, still, in spite of it all, a willing participant in Jack's wildest fantasies. Arthur's actions on Jack's behalf give Jack a renewed faith in his ability to escape Chinook after all, and he excitedly sets to work.

The letters Jack writes about himself reflect the truth of the way he thinks about himself; he does not exaggerate to the point of parody, but writes plainly about himself as a "gifted, upright boy" who has outgrown the resources Concrete can offer and is ready to pursue his education more seriously. He writes without hyperbole, and, in composing the letters, at last sees himself in the "splendid phantom" he has created.

Jack is careful not to exaggerate, as he did in his childhood letters to Alice and Annette. He paints a picture of himself as he would like to be, without too much embellishment, and through this act of kindness towards himself, finally sees himself in a light that's both generous and realistic.

CHAPTER 23

Arthur and Jack have been getting into more and more verbal and physical fights at school. Mr. Mitchell, a teacher who recruits students from his PE class to participate in a once-a-year public boxing match, suggests Arthur and Jack work out their aggressions by participating in the "smoker." The matches are often dirty, and feature several "grudge fights," the fires of which Mitchell himself stokes. As the match approaches, Arthur and Jack purposefully refuse to mend fences, hoping to keep their "grudge" going until the match.

The tension between Arthur and Jack at last comes to a head as they face off in a sanctioned match, permitted to fight one another in earnest after all these years and even congratulated for their desire to enact violence on one another. This passage demonstrates the conflation of abuse and education Jack has faced several times in his young life.

In reality, the two boys have grown apart; Arthur gets good grades and even has a steady girlfriend, while Jack gets into trouble and looks down on the "straight-arrows and strivers" Arthur is friendly with. Jack sees Arthur's respectability as a "performance." Jack can tell that Arthur is petrified of his girlfriend, and seeing his old friend behave so dully and effortfully in pursuit of normalcy troubles Jack.

Jack, a seasoned "performer" himself, recognizes that Arthur, too, is undertaking a great performance. This recognition makes Jack himself feel exposed and spotlit, forcing him to recognize the ways in which his own performances of identity might be just as transparent to others as Arthur's is to him.

At the fight, goaded on by the support his friends and (unlikeliest of all) Dwight, have showed him in the weeks leading up to it, Jack strikes Arthur with a swift, hard uppercut, stunning his friend. Jack can feel the blow hurt Arthur; what's more, as he delivers it and snaps Arthur's head back, he can feel the exultation and pride Dwight, up in the stands, must feel for him in that moment.

As Jack beats up on Arthur in earnest, he feels the insidious ways in which Dwight's influence over him has, in fact, been successful; Jack's cruel streak is a direct result of Dwight's influence, and the strange desire to please Dwight—in spite of hating him—confuses and appalls Jack.

CHAPTER 24

Jack begins receiving rejections from several schools. Some of them he expected, but the one from Deerfield hurts the most, and he begins to believe he will be stuck in Chinook forever. A week or so after the letter from Deerfield, though, the school secretary summons Jack to the office to take a phone call—it is an alumnus of a school called the Hill School. The man, Mr. Howard, lives in Seattle and wants to talk to Jack in person; the school is "interested" in his application.

Jack is afraid that all of his escapist fantasies are about to come to a dead end. When he receives the call from Mr. Howard, though, his hopes for a chance at a great education—and escape from Chinook—are reignited in earnest.

Jack tells Mr. Howard to meet him at the Concrete drugstore—he knows that kids from school will be there, and he wants them to see him with Mr. Howard, who drives a Thunderbird. At the drug store, Howard and Jack sit in a booth and order milkshakes. Mr. Howard asks Jack about his education, and deduces that Jack is "bored" in Concrete. He assures the boy that he won't be bored at Hill—but that it might be difficult for Jack in other ways. The academic work there is hard, and boarding school can be lonely, with social challenges of its own. He warns Jack that prep school is its own world, and is not the right world for everyone.

Jack wants to "perform" success and affluence for his classmates. Simply achieving a goal for his own personal gain is not enough—Jack wants everyone to know just how special he is, and to witness directly the realization of his most deep-seated fantasies.

None of Mr. Howard's warnings, though, put Jack off the idea of prep school; he tells the man that both his father and brother went to prep school at Deerfield and Choate. They continue conversing—when Jerry Huff shows up at the drug store, however, and begins having lewd conversations with a friend one booth over, Jack gets nervous that Huff will expose him for who he is—an outlaw and a fraud. But as Mr. Howard and Jack pay the check and make their way out of the shop, Huff doesn't say a word to either of them.

Jack is so desperate to use prep school as a vehicle for escape that he refuses to even entertain the idea that he wouldn't be able to succeed there. As Jack juggles his different "personas" in public, he feels an anxiety tugging at him, and is relieved when the persona he is presenting to Mr. Howard remains unthreatened by Huff's influence.

As Mr. Howard drops Jack back off at school, he offers him one more warning about the difficulties associated with going to prep school. He worries Jack that rushing into an environment he's unprepared for could do more harm than good, but Jack insists he knows what he's getting into. Mr. Howard bids Jack goodbye, leaving him with a business card and advising him not to worry. Jack watches wistfully as Mr. Howard's Thunderbird pulls away from the school and speeds out of sight.

Despite all of his hopes for his own future, the end of his meeting with Mr. Howard leaves Jack keenly aware of the ways in which all his dreams and fantasies are still—for the moment, at least—decidedly out of reach.

CHAPTER 25

Jack is in shop class, working at the table saw when he feels a sharp pinch—he looks down and sees that the ring finger on his left hand is spouting blood. He has severed part of it at the last joint. He faints, and his teacher takes him to the doctor, who, after assessing the finger, brings him to the hospital in Mount Vernon for surgery. He goes under the knife that very afternoon and awakes the next morning in the hospital, where he stays for almost a week while his doctor observes him to make sure his finger doesn't get infected.

Jack's accident makes him more vulnerable, at a time when he was just beginning to feel in control of his life and circumstances and in reach of a dream of his.

By the time Jack gets home he is addicted to morphine, which his nurses gave him freely as his pain was so bad. Back at home, the pain tablets his doctor has prescribed him do almost nothing for his pain, and he is on top of everything else experiencing the pain of withdrawing from morphine. Since he doesn't know what's happening to him, he wonders if his life is going to be one unending marathon of pain.

Jack continues to be weakened by his injury, and convinced—more than ever—that his fantasies of escapism are untenable and unreachable.

Seeking to find a way to numb the pain, Jack steals some of Dwight's whisky; he can barely swallow it down, though, and adds some water to the bottle before replacing it. A couple of days later, Dwight asks Jack if he watered down the whisky. When Jack, emboldened by his pain, answers that he's "not the drinker in this house," Dwight pushes Jack and knocks him off his feet. As Jack falls, he puts his hands out behind him—and lands on his bad finger. Pain rips through him and he thrashes on the floor, barely conscious. When he comes to his senses, he is sitting on the couch drenched in sweat. Rosemary comforts Jack and tells him that it's "all over;" she promises Jack that they are getting out at last.

This final and climactic encounter with Dwight is rendered in hazy language and spare detail. It is almost as if the pain Dwight inflicted on him in this moment blotted out everything surrounding it. Jack is laid bare by this level of pain—the abuse, combined with his injury, combined with the fear that he will be stuck forever in this cycle of violence, misery, and abuse all crowd his mind and cause him to briefly lose consciousness as his body is wracked by pain.

Rosemary talks to Chuck Bolger's parents, and they agree to take Jack in for a few months until the end of the school year. Rosemary, in the meantime, plans to look for work in Seattle, in hopes of moving Jack down there when she's settled. Though Chuck's father, Mr. Bolger, believes that Jack is a wild child, he is a religious man and does not turn down Jack's request for "asylum." He makes Jack promise that he will help out at the store, go to church each week, and will refrain from smoking, drinking, and swearing in the house. Jack agrees to the conditions.

In the wake of his climactic final encounter with Dwight, Jack is offered the chance at what he has wanted for so long—escape—as well as the opportunity to turn over a new leaf and live under the influence of a positive male role model for the first time in his life.

On the day that Chuck comes to collect Jack from Chinook, Dwight takes Jack aside and says he wants to talk to him. Jack, though, simply shakes his head and walks away, getting into Chuck's car. Dwight comes over to the window and sticks his hand out for Jack to shake. Jack is helpless to stop himself from returning the handshake, though he and Dwight hate each other "so much that other feelings [don't] get enough light." As Chuck drives Jack away, he passes Jack a bottle of liquor; Chuck himself sips from the bottle as they make their way to Chuck's house.

Jack's hatred of Dwight, intense and inescapable, nevertheless is inextricably intertwined with the conditioning and control Dwight has exerted over the boy for years. Jack cannot stop himself from bending to Dwight's will, and kowtowing before him even in the face of all the man has done to him.

Looking back now on his time in Chinook, the older Tobias reflects on how his hatred of Dwight—and Dwight's hatred of him—"disfigured" him and ruined his childhood. Now, when he thinks of Chinook, he has to struggle to see the faces of his friends and the rooms of his home and school. The only thing that remains clear is Dwight's face and voice. Now, when Tobias gets angry at his own children, he hears Dwight's anger in his voice, and becomes frightened.

Despite the overwhelming badness of Dwight's influence over him, the older Tobias finds himself still unable to unlearn some of the ways in which Dwight "educated" him throughout his youth by abusing and controlling him.

CHAPTER 26

Chuck drinks to the point of intoxication almost every night. Some nights he is happy and jolly; others, he is full of rage, and throws himself against walls, trees, and other objects. In the mornings, Chuck asks Jack what he did the night before—Jack is uncertain if Chuck is merely pretending not to be able to remember his own actions.

Chuck Bolger is yet another instance of dual identities and calculated performances of persona Jack has encountered in his youth.

Chuck and Jack live together in a converted storage shed on the Bolger's large property. Each night, after the Bolgers go to bed, the boys sneak out, drive around town, and play poker with their friends. Sometimes when Chuck is drunk, he gives sermons about damnation which parody his father's, and Jack can tell that Chuck truly fears being condemned. Jack is not used to people who take religion seriously, but he is aware that Mr. Bolger really wants him to get in the spirit at church. Jack finds himself tempted to surrender and participate in the "Amen Corner"—a corner of the church where people clap their hands, cry out, and sway to the music—but he always holds back.

Jack is still actively struggling to define himself—he continues choosing "outlaw" behaviors over the straight and narrow path, fearing that if he tries to be good he will fail. It is easier to be bad, and to fall into familiar patterns of cruelty and defiance, than to take a chance on truly changing himself, which risks not being able to measure up to all that is required of goodness and righteousness.

Despite Chuck's excessive drinking and occasionally violent temperament, he is always very kind to Jack, and Jack likes him and values their friendship. Jack marvels at the fact that when Chuck is sober, he is present, kind, thoughtful, and seems "for all the world a boy at home with himself." When "bad Chuck" comes out, though, the destructive actions he takes always blindside his family.

Chuck's duality and competing personas seem, contrary to Jack and Dwight's, completely out of his control. Chuck flails back and forth between his personas, seemingly not being able to choose to consciously "perform" either.

One night, while drinking and playing cards, Jack and his friends decide it might be fun to drive out to Bellingham. Chuck does not have enough gas for the trip—but says he knows where to get some. After collecting some cans and a hose, they set off across the fields towards a neighboring farm. The Welches live nearby, and send their children to school with Chuck, Jack, and the rest of their gang. Chuck siphons gas from the Welches' cars and together the boys carry the cans back to the Bolgers'. By the time they get back they're all so tired that they don't even mention driving to Bellingham.

The boys' petty theft in this passage is just as pointless as Dwight's abuses of Jack; they work together to steal from another family, but the act is more about control and rebellion than about utility, echoing Dwight's influence on Jack's life.

The next morning, Mr. Bolger wakes Chuck and Jack and urges them to get dressed and come to the main house. In the kitchen, Mr. and Mrs. Bolger sit the boys down and tell them that Mr. Welch has just been by, for reasons that should be plain to the boys. Mr. Bolger asks how they could have done such a thing, and asks if they were drinking—they both admit to it. After reprimanding the boys, Mr. Bolger helps them work out a "plan of reparation," which involves them returning the gasoline, apologizing to the Welches, and promising never to drink again.

Mr. Bolger has taken Jack in on a predetermined set of conditions—now that Jack has broken his promises to the Bolgers, it seems that there will be serious consequences in store.

Chuck and Jack drive the cans back over to the Welches' and then bring them up to the house. Mrs. Welch opens the door. Upon seeing the boys, she tells them that she was "surprised" by their actions and never would have expected such malice from them. She tells them where to find Mr. Welch, and they go off to apologize to him, too. Chuck speaks to Mr. Welch at length, and then Mr. Welch, who has been staring at the ground, finally looks at the boys with tears in his eyes. Jack feels deeply ashamed, and as he looks around and sees the squalor of the farm and the Welches' desperation, he realizes the gravity of what he has done.

The idea of forgiveness in the wake of abuse is something that the book hasn't really explored. Jack hasn't forgiven Dwight anything, but has allowed the man to get away with a lot due to his own conditioning. The Welches' reluctance to forgive or absolve Chuck and Jack forces Jack to realize that in the real world—the world beyond Dwight's house—abuses have consequences, and are not always looked away from or allowed to persist.

That afternoon, Mr. Bolger comes to the shed to talk to Chuck and Jack and ask if they made their apologies. Jack confesses that though he wanted to say something to Mr. Welch, he could not. Mr. Bolger resignedly tells Jack that it's clear Jack isn't happy or thriving in his family's home; he says that he plans to call Rosemary that evening to make arrangements to have her come and get Jack. Jack does not argue. He can see that Mr. Bolger's mind is made up. He feels his own mind is, too; he has decided he wants to join the army.

Jack has escaped the most miserable situation of his life, but he is still squandering his chances at redeeming, re-educating, and saving himself. When faced with Mr. Bolger's disappointment, he begins fantasizing about escaping to the army, indulging yet another plan for getting out of his current circumstances, which are still not enough for him.

Rosemary arrives the next day. She talks with the Bolgers for a couple of hours, and then takes Jack for a drive. She tells him that she has had to beg the Bolgers to let Jack stay, and they have finally agreed, on one condition: he must work at the Welches' farm after school in order to put things right with them. Jack says he doesn't want to do that, but his mother ignores him. She tells Jack he has no choice—he is going to have to work for the Welches and, in addition, meet with a preacher named Father Karl—he has nowhere else to go, as Dwight won't let Jack through his door and Rosemary has not yet found a place or a job in Seattle. Rosemary drives Jack back to the Bolgers, drops him off, and drives away fast.

Rosemary is devastated by Jack's betrayal of Mr. Bolger—and, by proxy, of her, as she sought a place where he would be safe and be able to stay out of trouble. She is worried that her son is beyond help—and perhaps recognizes the role her own poor choices have had in influencing Jack's. Even so, she longs to escape from looking into the face of what her son has become.

Towards the end of the week, Father Karl comes to collect Jack from the Bolgers' and asks him to take a walk. Father Karl tells Jack his story: both of his parents, Jews, had been killed in concentration camps, and Father Karl himself had barely survived. He asks Jack what he is doing with his life, and warns him that if he keeps going the way he's going, bad things will befall Jack. He asks Jack what he wants out of life, but Jack feels ashamed to admit that he wants money, success, and status, so he says he wants nothing. Father Karl asks Jack why he doesn't just stop behaving badly, and Jack promises to try. Jack knows that Father Karl understands he has not "reached" Jack, because Jack is not available to be reached—he is "in hiding."

Jack is so traumatized from all he has endured that he has gone into "hiding," putting away the parts of himself capable of acknowledgement of what he has been through and the willingness to change. Father Karl, too, has suffered immensely, and yet his advice and pleas fall on deaf ears.

Later that week, Mr. Bolger tells Jack that the Welches have refused to accept his help—this, Mr. Bolger says, is the "ultimate punishment." Jack is disappointed for a little while, but quickly gets over it.

Jack is self-involved, and doesn't really care about the effects his actions have had on others, showing how he has internalized some of the negative qualities he has been trying to escape for years.

CHAPTER 27

One night, the sheriff comes to the house to tell the Bolgers that Chuck is about to be charged with statutory rape by a girl from Concrete High, and Huff and Psycho have also been named in the complaint. The girl is pregnant, and though she has been keeping the secret as long as she can, she can keep it no longer. The girl, Tina, is just fifteen years old. Tina has told the sheriff that she doesn't want to charge Chuck with anything—she just wants him to marry her, and her father, too, has agreed not to press charges if Chuck consents.

Chuck's morally dubious actions at last catch up with him—he's now implicated in a situation that both embarrasses his family and requires him to change the entire trajectory of his life over a mistake made when he was probably drunk, inhabiting the persona of "bad Chuck."

Chuck comes back to the shed from the main house and tells Jack the whole story. He says he can't marry Tina Flood—and told the sheriff that he'd rather spend his life in jail than do so. The sheriff told Chuck to take some time and think things over, but Jack agrees with Chuck, and says if it were him, he wouldn't marry Tina either. Jack is secretly relieved that Chuck has gotten in such enormous trouble, as it takes the heat off of Jack for a while.

Even in the face of his friend's trouble, Jack is still more concerned with how the whole situation affects him—this is in many ways a byproduct of the survivalist instincts he's had to develop over the years, but it's also simply a selfish impulse rooted in his own insecurity.

As the days go by, the atmosphere in the Bolger household is tense and miserable. Mr. Bolger repeatedly tells Chuck that he must marry Tina, but Chuck cannot be convinced. Even when Huff and Psycho suggest Chuck marry Tina, bite the bullet for a few years, and then dump her, he refuses to marry her. Jack knows that Chuck wants a different kind of wife, and has spent a lot of time fantasizing about the "good life" he would have one day.

Chuck's own fantasies of how his life would turn out prove to be fuel for his present misery. Chuck has nursed these fantasies for years, and now, faced with the idea that they won't come to pass, he grows miserable and irate.

The sheriff begins pressuring Chuck more harshly to make a decision. Jack suggests Chuck run off and join the army, but Chuck doesn't want to do that either. Many nights, Chuck cries himself to sleep. Jack wishes he could comfort him like he used to comfort Rosemary, but he knows there's nothing he can do.

Jack knows that if he couldn't comfort his mother and draw her away from her pain for all those years, there's no way he can console Jack.

In the middle of all the madness, Jack receives another telephone call at school one day from Mr. Howard, who informs him that he has been admitted to Hill and will be receiving his official letter in a couple of days. Mr. Howard wants to get together with Jack again to talk about Hill—and also help Jack find the right clothes for prep school. He offers to pay for everything, and Jack is so shocked by the good news that he cannot focus in class all day.

Despite his friend's misery—and having again found himself in a less-than-ideal home environment—Jack's escapist fantasies have at last come true; he is soon going to be able to get out of Washington forever.


Jack's letter arrives and informs him that he has received almost a full scholarship. The letter also states he'll enter Hill as a sophomore, so that he can catch up in classes and spend more time on campus. Jack reads and rereads the letter obsessively, and studies an enclosed alumni bulletin with reverence. Also included in the letter is an information sheet which asks, among other things, how Jack would like his name to appear in the school catalogue; he writes his name as Tobias Jonathan von Ansell-Wolff III.

As Jack realizes that all of his dreams are coming true, he allows himself to indulge in deeper and deeper fantasies, and imagine what his life at Hill—and beyond—will look like. He also decides to adopt his old name (with some embellishments) as he prepares to adopt a new persona: prep school student.



Rosemary comes to pick Jack up from school one afternoon and takes him out for a Coke to celebrate. She asks Jack what he told the admissions board to get in; Jack sarcastically thanks his mother for the "vote of confidence," insisting he just applied. His mother asks him if he's going to get in trouble at his new school, and he promises he won't. Rosemary shares some good news of her own; she's gotten a job at Aetna Life Insurance in Seattle, and is starting in a week. She's found a place to stay, and will soon be able to get one of her own.

Rosemary seems to know that Jack lied—or at least exaggerated—in order to get into school, but she is too happy for her son to truly call him out or force him to admit what he's done. She is cautiously optimistic about both their futures, hopeful that they'll be able to thrive in their new lives.

Jack and Rosemary discuss Dwight. Rosemary says that she doesn't understand why Dwight even wants her to stick around; she knows he doesn't like her, and just wants to hang onto her. She then tells Jack a piece of bad news—Dwight had never saved any of Jack's money from the paper route, and it is all gone. Jack is miserable, but Rosemary insists she'll get the money. There's nothing else they can do. Jack can't believe that Dwight stole over $1,300 dollars from him, but it's not the money that makes him so angry—it's all the time he spent on the route. As Jack and his mother walk back to the car, having finished their Cokes, Jack notices that for the first time in years, his mother looks light and happy again. They are both their old selves, and are "restless, scheming, [and] poised for flight."

As Rosemary realizes that Dwight's relationship was never about love or genuine care—it was always simply about control, possession, and manipulation—she attempts to apologize for how her own negative choices have influenced Jack's life and caused him his own separate suffering. Despite all they have gone through, Jack and Rosemary both feel elated as they leave the soda fountain. They have escaped, and are finally free to roam and explore once again.

That night, the sheriff comes by one final time. He gives Chuck an ultimatum: "get with the program or else." When Chuck comes back to the shed from the main house, he is elated, and falls to the floor laughing. He tells Jack, through his laughs, that there is going to be a wedding, and it's going to be "fucking great." He retrieves a bottle and drinks from it, and toasts to the bride—Mrs. Tina Huff (implying that Tina is going to marry someone else). Jack is awash in relief—he and his friend are both on their way to bigger and better things, having escaped the "floods" that threatened to drag them down.

Chuck has either lied to the sheriff or otherwise convinced the man to let him off the hook by throwing someone else under the bus. Though this is a cruel manipulation, Chuck and Jack celebrate it nonetheless—they are relieved to have saved their own skins and ensured that their fantasies of their respective futures can remain intact a while longer.

CHAPTER 28

After Rosemary leaves for Seattle, Pearl becomes despondent. Jack often sits with her at school lunch, and the two maintain a friendship. One day, Pearl mentions that she and Dwight are driving down to Seattle—supposedly to spend time with Norma, but really so that Dwight can try and win Rosemary back. Jack doesn't like hearing this—he and Chuck have their own plans to go down to Seattle the next day so that Jack can meet with Mr. Howard and get fitted for some clothes.

Though Jack and Rosemary have both escaped Dwight's house, Jack begins to realize that fully escaping his influence and getting out from under his thumb will be harder than they thought—his abuses will continue, it seems, with no end in sight.

Later that afternoon, Jack gets an idea. That night, after midnight, Chuck and Jack sneak out and drive to Chinook. They get to Dwight's house, and after seeing that his car is not in the driveway, Jack gets out of Chuck's car and goes inside—the door is unlocked, as always. Jack puts on gloves and wanders through the empty house, moving through the rooms and reminiscing. At last he goes into Dwight's room, where he steals some cigarettes—along with the official Scout forms Dwight never sent out. Jack is planning on promoting himself to Eagle Scout. Jack, done reminiscing, then takes all of Dwight's hunting guns out of the house and loads them into Chuck's car, and then the two drive away.

Jack at last thinks of a way to get back at Dwight, and to take physically from the man, symbolizing all the "taking" Dwight did from Jack emotionally and psychologically over the years. The guns are a tool of potential abuse, and also the way Dwight tries to define himself—as a successful hunter when really he's totally incapable. By taking this part of Dwight's identity away from him, Jack executes a successful and punishing revenge.

The boys make it home without being stopped, and the next morning, they join the Bolgers for breakfast to find everyone in good moods. Mr. Bolger tells the boys that their trip to Seattle is a new chance to prove themselves—they mustn't drink, pick up hitchhikers, or take any side trips. Though Mr. Bolger tires to be stern with his order, Jack can tell that he is happy to send the boys off to accomplish some grown-up business.

Jack and Chuck returned briefly to their no-good old ways, but this time have miraculously escaped being caught. They are given one final chance to redeem themselves by Mr. Bolger, but whether they will rise to the occasion remains to be seen.

CHAPTER 29

Jack meets Mr. Howard and his wife for lunch, and over the meal Mr. Howard happily reminisces about his years at Hill. At a certain point, Mr. Howard grows quiet and serious, and asks Jack if he has had any second thoughts about going off to Hill. He lets Jack know that there's no shame in changing his mind, but Jack insists that he still wants to go to Hill—his mind is made up.

Mr. Howard seems both genuinely excited for Jack, and genuinely concerned about the boy's ability to succeed at Hill. Jack, though, desperate to escape Chinook, does not entertain the idea that he could fail elsewhere—he just wants to get going.

Mr. Howard and Mrs. Howard take Jack to Mr. Howard's tailor, where he's fitted for suits. Mr. Howard buys Jack an enormous pile of clothes—jackets, pants, suits, shirts, ties, sweaters, an overcoat, and several pairs of shoes. As Jack looks at himself in the mirror wearing one of his new suits, he sees himself as an "elegant stranger" wearing a "haunted expression." Though Jack has no idea what the future holds, he feels cocky and hopeful as he imagines his new life at Hill.

Jack has spent the whole of his adolescence trying on different identities and personas, trying to find one that fits. Now, as a new idea of himself emerges, he excitedly greets the "elegant stranger" before him, unable to see how he will go on to struggle inside of this identity, too.

CHAPTER 30

Jack meets Chuck outside a movie theater, where Chuck has spent the afternoon at a double feature. Together, they drive around to various pawn shops and try to sell Dwight's guns. At the third pawn shop they go to, the woman behind the counter suspects that Jack has stolen the guns, though he insists his late father left them to him. Nevertheless, she offers to take a look at the guns; Jack brings everything in from the car, and the woman inspects his wares. She says she will buy them for pawn for five dollars apiece. Jack tells her that she must know they're worth a lot more than that, and she tells him to go somewhere else. Jack, though, knows better; he has already been kicked out of two shops. He agrees to give the woman the guns for pawn tickets, which he throws in the gutter as he exits her shop.

Jack and Chuck are up to their old tricks, and narrowly avoid getting into serious trouble while trying to pawn stolen goods. As Jack unloads Dwight's guns for a pittance, he is retaliating against him in the only way he knows how; by cruelly rendering Dwight's things worthless, just as Dwight rendered worthless Jack's own rifle, his hard work on the chestnuts, and his years of subjugation and compliance.

CHAPTER 31

The day after Jack arrives in California to spend the summer with his father and Geoffrey, his father takes off for Las Vegas with his girlfriend and leaves Jack the keys to rented Pontiac. For two weeks, Jack drives along the beach aimlessly, eats nothing but TV dinners, and goes to movies with an acquaintance of his father's. One morning, his father's friend makes a pass at him, and when Jack tells his father, Mr. Wolff tells Jack that there is a gun in one of the closets. He instructs Jack to "shoot the bastard" if he attempts to contact Jack again. That night, the man comes back to the apartment and leans against the front door and sobs while Jack cowers on the other side of the door, silently hugging the rifle.

For much of the book, the young Jack has assumed that in escaping Dwight he will finally be free. Here, though, Jack learns that abuse can take many shapes and forms. His whole life will be the journey of defending himself from those who seek to use or manipulate him. This realization is a lot for him to handle, and he cowers in fear as he considers all of the hardships that still lie ahead.

Jack's father comes back, and then Geoffrey arrives. After picking Geoffrey up from the bus, he drops the boys at the apartment and goes to the grocery store—he never comes back. Hours later, his girlfriend calls the apartment to tell the boys that their father has "gone crazy" and is in police custody. Mr. Wolff is then committed to a sanitarium, and the boys visit him each Sunday to play games and listen to the stories of the women he's dallying with there. Seeing "which way the wind [is] blowing," Rosemary decides not to join the boys in La Jolla.

The escapist fantasy that Jack, Geoffrey, their father—and to some degree, Rosemary—all engaged in when they pictured a family vacation in La Jolla falls apart in this passage as Mr. Wolff suffers a breakdown.

That fall, Jack goes off to school, and Rosemary follows him East, taking a job in Washington, D.C. Over the Christmas holidays, while Jack is visiting, Dwight follows her there, and tries to strangle her in the lobby of her apartment building, but she fights back and escapes. When she stumbles upstairs and tells Jack what has happened, he runs downstairs and tears off down the street, trying to catch Dwight, but he cannot. By the time he gets back home, Dwight has been arrested. Jack watches Dwight as he's carried away in a police cruiser. It's the last time he will ever see the man.

Again, Jack is forced to realize that just escaping Dwight's house—and even fleeing to the other coast—was not enough. Just as Roy tracked Rosemary to Utah, Dwight tracks her now back East to D.C. Both men longed to control and possess Rosemary at any cost, livid at the idea that she could live—and even thrive—without them.

Jack does not do well at Hill—he knows "nothing." He meets a kindly teacher who agrees to tutor him, but most of his instructors are disappointed in him. He barely manages to stay afloat and continues getting in trouble. Though he desperately wants to stay, he wears on the school's patience, and in his final year he is asked to leave. A few weeks later, his best friend at Hill is also expelled, and the two of them run wild for a time before Jack decides to join the army. He feels this is where he has been headed all along, and begins praying for a war.

It turns out that all of Mr. Howard's warnings were right—prep school is not for everybody, and Jack sadly goes on to find that it is not for him, despite all of his fantasies about what boarding school life would be like. Faced with no other options, Jack joins the army and begins praying for a war—not realizing that Vietnam, and all of its horrors, are just on the horizon.

The older Tobias reflects on how when he was young, he believed "that [his] dreams [were] rights." That "assurance burns very bright at certain moments;" Jack recalls one such moment as the afternoon he spent with Chuck in Seattle. The two boys had overcome a lot of difficulty recently and were poised on the edge of relief and freedom. Everything about their lives felt full of possibility, and all they had to do was "pick and choose." As the boys made their way back to Seattle, they sang hymns loudly out the open windows, drinking from a bottle of liquor in between songs. Their voices were strong, and as they sang "for all [they] were worth," they felt they had been "saved."

By flashing back to an afternoon in his youth filled with the assurance that all of his dreams would soon come true, Tobias Wolff the writer engages in his own kind of escapism, years out from the escapist fantasies of his youth. The reality of his failure at Hill and the traumas of Vietnam are too much to face—so he retreats into the past, into fantasy, and lingers on a moment in which anything seemed possible and the worst was over at last.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Tanner, Alexandra. "*This Boy's Life*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 17 Nov 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Tanner, Alexandra. "*This Boy's Life*." LitCharts LLC, November 17, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/this-boy-s-life.

To cite any of the quotes from *This Boy's Life* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Wolff, Tobias. This Boy's Life. Grove Press. 1989.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Wolff, Tobias. This Boy's Life. New York: Grove Press. 1989.