

Turtles All the Way Down



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN GREEN

John Green was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, though he grew up primarily in Orlando, Florida. He graduated from Indian Springs School in Alabama. In 2000, Green graduated from Kenyon College with a double major in English and religious studies. He has said he studied mostly Mark Twain and Islam. Following graduation, he worked as a student chaplain at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Ohio with the intent of becoming an Episcopal priest. However, his experience working at the hospital, coupled with another job writing book reviews for Booklist, inspired him to begin taking writing seriously. His first novel, [Looking for Alaska](#), was published in 2005 and became an immediate success. His second, [An Abundance of Katherines](#), was published the following year. Although it's his least popular novel, it is the novel most commonly taught in schools, which he hypothesizes is because it contains the fewest mentions of sex out of all his novels. In 2007, Green began a videoblog with his brother, Hank, which is regularly updated and has led to a number of other media projects and humanitarian fundraising. Green published [The Fault in Our Stars](#) in 2012, which was met with overwhelmingly positive critical acclaim and was adapted into a film in 2015. Following [The Fault in Our Stars](#), however, John Green struggled with the pressure to write a novel that would live up to the reputation he had earned, and suffered a temporary upsurge in his own mental illness as a result (like his character Aza, he suffers from anxiety and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). He lives in Indianapolis, Indiana with his wife and two children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Aza struggles with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), a mental illness that was first identified in the early twentieth century—though it has been written about under different names for centuries dating back to Ancient Greece. OCD causes a person to obsess about something (in Aza's case, a bacterial infection known as *C. diff*) and then act on compulsions to relieve the fear or stress caused by the obsession (Aza's wound on her finger). Today, most individuals with OCD treat it with a combination of medication and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), particularly exposure therapy. Exposure therapy entails exposing a person to whatever triggers their obsession and then not allowing them to carry out their compulsion, the idea being that the person eventually becomes more comfortable not performing the compulsion. *Turtles All the Way Down* makes a number of contemporary references, including to the boy band One

Direction (which split up in early 2016) and to the idea of corporate personhood—that is, the idea that corporations and companies can utilize rights and responsibilities enjoyed by human beings (hence why David Pickett Sr. can leave his fortune to a foundation that works with tuatara).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Aza's character includes references to several literary sleuths: her last name, Holmes, is borrowed from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, and her car is a nod to the Nancy Drew mystery series. The characters mention a number of classic literary works including James Joyce's *Ulysses*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's [The Great Gatsby](#), and William Shakespeare's [The Tempest](#). They also draw from the work of poets like Robert Frost. *Turtles All the Way Down* is considered an "issue" novel, which encompasses young adult novels that address teen issues like alcohol use, pregnancy, or, in the case of *Turtles*, mental illness. Other novels in this genre include Laurie Halse Anderson's [Speak](#) and Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Reviewers have also compared John Green's work in general to that of J. D. Salinger, particularly Salinger's [The Catcher in the Rye](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Turtles All the Way Down
- **When Written:** 2012-2017
- **Where Written:** Indianapolis, IN
- **When Published:** October 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult "Issue" Novel
- **Setting:** Indianapolis, Indiana, 2010s
- **Climax:** When Aza suffers a mental breakdown and drinks hand sanitizer in the hospital
- **Antagonist:** Aza's anxiety and OCD, bacteria
- **Point of View:** First person, narrated by Aza

EXTRA CREDIT

The Great Gatsby. The many *Gatsby* references throughout the novel are intentional. John Green has said that he believes that because nearly all high school students read [The Great Gatsby](#), all other texts are read in the context of *Gatsby*. Green has said, however, that Daisy's name isn't supposed to be a reference to Daisy Buchanan.

A Genre of his Own. *New York Times* writer A. J. Jacobs suggested in a 2010 review of *Winger* by Andrew Smith that

John Green's books have created a new genre of teen lit: Aspiring John Green, or GreenLit. Qualities of this genre, according to Jacobs, include a "funny, self-aware teenage narrator," sharp dialogue, and heartbreaking twists.



PLOT SUMMARY

Aza addresses the reader and wonders if she's fictional. She sits in the school cafeteria eating and says that the human body is made up of about 50% **bacteria**. Aza has anxiety problems and can barely concentrate on the conversation around her: her best friend, Daisy, is talking with another friend, Mychal, about Mr. Pickett, who mysteriously disappeared after being accused of bribery and fraud. Aza wonders if she has C. diff, a serious bacterial infection, and she opens a crack in her finger and re-bandages it. After school, Aza and Daisy head to Applebee's to do homework. They hear on the radio that Pickett Engineering is offering \$100,000 to anyone with information about Mr. Pickett's disappearance. Daisy reminds Aza that she knows Mr. Pickett's son, Davis, and the two decide to sneak onto the Pickett property to access a motion-activated camera that might have captured Mr. Pickett's departure. Daisy and Aza paddle down the White River in Aza's canoe. At the Pickett residence, Aza downloads a picture of Mr. Pickett from the camera before the security guard, Lyle, catches them. Daisy tells Lyle that their canoe has a hole in it, and that they know Davis. Lyle takes the girls to Davis, who remembers Aza. Davis introduces the girls to Malik, who cares for the tuatara, Tua, that lives on the property. Davis drives Aza and Daisy home. Later that night, Daisy shows Aza an article online that says Tua will inherit the Pickett estate when Mr. Pickett dies.

The next day, Aza drives around the circular freeway for a while before heading home. She meets Daisy at Applebee's after Daisy gets off work at Chuck E. Cheese's, and the two begin to look for clues about Mr. Pickett's disappearance. Aza finds Davis' social media channels, but he stopped posting after his dad disappeared. Daisy phishes a junior reporter and obtains the missing person report for Mr. Pickett. At school the next day, Aza reads the report and realizes that she and Daisy know more than the police since they have the picture from the motion-activated camera. Aza insists on talking to Davis before they go to the police. She and Davis text that night. The next morning, Daisy tells Aza that she agreed to go on a date with Mychal, but made it a double date with Aza and Davis. Aza invites Davis and he agrees to come. After school, Aza has an appointment with Dr. Singh, her psychologist. Aza wonders aloud if she's soulless and insists she's crazy, though she lies and says she's taking her medication regularly. As the session goes on, Aza's stomach hurts and she fears she has a C. diff infection.

On date night, Aza's mom insists that Aza be careful with Davis because wealth makes people careless, but Aza brushes her off.

At Applebee's, Aza floats in and out of the conversation, which is mostly about Star Wars and the fanfiction stories that Daisy writes. After dinner, Davis suggests they go to his house and watch a movie since he has a theater in his house. When the group gets to the Pickett mansion, Mychal and Daisy look at the art while Davis shows Aza the theater in the basement. Davis uses the sound system in the house to tell Mychal and Daisy that he and Aza are going outside and then leads Aza to the golf course. He points out stars and takes her hand. Aza admits that she hates living inside a body, and tells him that she opens the cut on her finger to prove to herself that she's real. The conversation turns to the subject of Davis' father. Davis insists that he can't trust Aza and Daisy to keep quiet. He leads Aza to a cottage, where he pulls \$100,000 out of cereal boxes and gives it to her. Aza runs back to the house and interrupts Daisy and Mychal kissing. On her way out of the house, Davis' little brother, Noah, asks Aza if he can give her the notes from his dad's phone to help her search. He cries, and she suggests he go to bed.

Aza texts Daisy in the morning and they agree to meet at Applebee's. Aza researches items from the list of notes off of Mr. Pickett's phone, but is stumped by the phrase "the jogger's mouth." She gets to Applebee's early and goes through her dad's old phone. He liked taking pictures of the **sky** through branches. She remembers how he died: he just dropped dead while mowing the lawn. Daisy arrives and Aza shows her the money. Daisy nearly cries and believes she'll be able to go to college and quit working at Chuck E. Cheese's. They eat and order more expensive items than they usually do, and tip their server, Holly, very well. Davis' lawyer, Simon Morris, calls Aza the next day. He explains that he set up an appointment for her to deposit her money, and explains that Mr. Pickett won't be legally dead for another seven years if they don't find his body.

On the way to make the deposit with Daisy, Aza's mind begins to **spiral**. She changes her Band-Aid several times before Daisy finally encourages her to finish driving to the bank. After they deposit their money, Aza drops Daisy off. When she gets home, Aza takes a pill to help her deal with feelings of panic. Aza avoids her mom and accepts an invitation from Davis to watch a meteor shower on Thursday. On Thursday, Aza finds Daisy in the school parking lot with a new, orange VW Beetle. Aza thinks this is an irresponsible purchase, but Daisy hands Aza a guide to colleges and Aza spends the day engrossed in the guide. Aza and Daisy go to Aza's house after school, where Daisy pulls out a newly-purchased laptop. Aza is disapproving, but Daisy insists that Aza knows nothing about being poor. When Davis arrives to pick Aza up, Aza's mom insists on talking to Davis. She tells him that his money doesn't entitle him to Aza, which makes him cry. Aza apologizes for her mom in the car. Davis and Aza pick at dinner and then go outside to look at the sky, even though it's cloudy and they can't see the meteor shower. Davis admits that he writes poetry, and Aza kisses him. They kiss until Aza begins

to panic about Davis' bacteria inside her. She frantically checks her phone and finds out that Davis' bacteria will be inside her forever. Davis suggests they watch a movie and they both try to act normal. After Davis finally takes Aza home, Aza's mom sings Aza a lullaby to help her fall asleep.

Aza and Davis decide to unofficially date. She has an appointment with Dr. Singh the next day, and she tells Dr. Singh about her panic attack while kissing Davis. She says that she fears she's a fictional story told by her body and her out-of-control thoughts. Dr. Singh insists that Aza is indeed real, but that she gives her thoughts too much power. Aza and Davis text later that night, and Aza enjoys it. On Monday, they see each other again at Davis' house. Davis says that Noah got suspended for bringing pot to school. They watch *Jupiter Ascending* and kiss in the theater, but Aza has to stop. She goes to the bathroom and drinks hand sanitizer, and Noah catches her on her way back downstairs. He asks why his dad isn't contacting him, and Aza feels her spiral tightening.

Later, Aza successfully discovers Davis' secret blog. The two facetime (that is, talk over a video call), and Aza feels close to Davis. They continue to facetime nightly for weeks. One night, Aza decides to read Daisy's fanfiction. One character, Ayala, is horrible: she's anxious and ruins everything. Aza realizes that the character of Ayala is modeled after her and that Daisy sees her as useless and helpless. Aza and Daisy watch a movie after school the next day, and the two argue a little before Daisy goes to hang out with Mychal. Later that night, Aza goes to see Davis. Davis says that he read Daisy's fanfiction and likes Ayala. He's spinning his **Iron Man** action figure and tells Aza about how the galaxy is a spiral. Aza tells Davis about her spirals, and then the two swim in the heated pool. Afterwards, Davis shows Aza his telescope. He tells her that he looks at the stars to remember his mom. When she gets home, Aza checks Davis' blog and then reads more of Daisy's fanfiction. She comes across a Wikipedia article about how gut bacteria communicate with the brain, which she finds horrifying. She drinks hand sanitizer and wonders if she's a threat to herself.

Aza's mom wakes Aza up the next morning. Aza is sick and exhausted. She thinks she's never going to get better. On the way to Applebee's after school, Aza confronts Daisy about the fanfiction. Daisy angrily talks on and on about how Aza is exhausting, spoiled, and a bad friend. Aza turns to Daisy and yells that she can't escape from her mind. They rear-end the car in front of them, and two cars behind them collide into Aza's car. Aza is dizzy with pain, but knows she has to get her dad's phone out of her car's trunk. The phone is broken. A firefighter assures Aza she's okay and Aza blacks out. She wakes up in the hospital. The doctor finally tells Aza and her mom that Aza lacerated her liver and will need to stay in the hospital for several days. Aza panics and is afraid she'll get *C. diff*. She tries to distract herself, but her brain tells her she's going to die. It tells her to get up and drink hand sanitizer. Aza does, and Mom

catches her as Aza starts vomiting. Aza realizes she's not possessed: she herself is the demon. When Aza wakes up the next morning, she tells her mom that she's in big trouble.

Aza offers an alternate ending in which she walks into the sunset with Davis or Daisy. In reality, Dr. Singh arrives and tells Aza she has to take her medication and that she will survive. She continues to check on Aza even after she goes home from the hospital. Aza doesn't accept visitors for the two weeks she spends in bed, and returns to school in December. Daisy meets her at the steps of the school and tells her everything that happened in the last two weeks. They eat lunch outside together, and Daisy tells Aza a story about a woman who insisted that the world rests on the back of a turtle, which rests on the back of another turtle: turtles all the way down. Aza thinks it perfectly describes her mental state. Later that night, she tells her mom about the money Davis gave her and agrees to meet Davis for dinner. At Applebee's, Aza panics again about Davis' bacteria and tells him they can't be in a relationship because this is as "better" as she's going to get.

The next day, Daisy invites Aza to go with her and Mychal to an art show in the sewer. Aza agrees. At the show, she and Daisy walk through the sewer and view the work. When Aza gets anxious, she asks Daisy to take a walk and explains to her that walking in a sewer with light isn't scary, but feeling constantly in the dark is. The two talk at the opening of the Pogue's Run tunnel until they realize they're in "the jogger's mouth." They remember the stench and walk back to the gallery to get Mychal. At home that night, Aza tells her mom that she fears she discovered Mr. Pickett's body. Aza tells Davis the next day, and Davis cries. Davis doesn't text Aza again. Months later, Aza sees on TV that the police discovered Mr. Pickett's body in the Pogue's Run tunnel. She texts Davis, who tells her that he and Noah told the police. In April, Davis knocks on Aza's door. He gives her a gift—it's the spiral painting by Pettibon—and tells her that he's moving to Colorado. Aza then addresses the reader directly, explaining that she didn't know at that time that she would go on to grow up and have children, though she'd get too sick to care for them twice. She wrote this story when a psychiatrist asked her to write how she got where she is now. She learned through writing that she would always go on as a singular being.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Aza Holmes – Aza is the sixteen-year-old protagonist of the novel. She has struggled for most of her life with anxiety and OCD. She spends much of her time wondering if she's real or not and as a child, developed a compulsion to test if she's real: she presses her thumbnail into the pad of her middle finger, opening up a cut that she believes proves her reality. However,

she also fears **bacteria**, particularly *C. diff*. She has to compulsively re-open her finger wound, clean it, and re-bandage it several times per day to keep it clean and free from bacteria. Aza's fear of bacteria sends her into what she terms "thought **spirals**," in which her fearful thoughts take over her mind and send her into a panic. At these times, she doesn't feel as though she's in control of her own thoughts. Aza resists taking her medication regularly, as she doesn't like the feeling that something else is determining who she is and how she behaves. Beginning a romantic relationship with Davis sends Aza's thought spirals into overdrive—particularly when they kiss, as Aza can't stop thinking about Davis' bacteria entering her body. These factors, coupled with her discovery of her best friend Daisy's insufferable fanfiction character Ayala, precipitate Aza's mental breakdown. After Aza is hospitalized following a car crash, Mom catches her drinking hand sanitizer. The confrontation finally enables Aza to admit that she is not well and needs help. In the weeks following the crash, Aza takes a new medication regularly and becomes more comfortable with the fact that her illness is always going to be a part of her. She realizes she's never going to be completely well, and that she will have to struggle to come to terms with being an "integrated plurality" rather than a singular "I." At the end of the novel, the reader learns that the novel is the product of Aza's third mental breakdown later in life, and that a psychiatrist told her to write her story down. The act of writing teaches Aza that she will go on, and that she is deserving of love.

Daisy – Daisy is Aza's best friend. She is bubbly, outgoing, and absolutely loves boys and Star Wars. Her life motto is "break hearts, not promises." She writes weekly installments of an ongoing fanfiction about Chewbacca's love life and is diligent about replying to reader comments about the story. The story features a character named Ayala, who shares all of Aza's personality traits that Daisy finds insufferable. When Daisy hears that Pickett Engineering is offering a reward for information that helps the investigation to find the disappeared Mr. Pickett, Daisy ropes Aza into her plan to find Mr. Pickett and get rich. When Davis gives Aza and Daisy money to keep quiet about what they discover about Mr. Pickett, Daisy uses her half of the money to get on more equal footing with Aza: she quits her job at Chuck E. Cheese's, buys a car, and buys a laptop. When Aza tells Daisy that she finds these choices irresponsible, Daisy finally admits that she thinks Aza self-centered, spoiled, and thinks she's a horrible friend. They make up after Aza recovers from their car accident, and Daisy decides to kill off Ayala in her fanfiction. Daisy is adamant throughout the novel that being poor doesn't make a person noble.

Davis Pickett Jr. – Davis is Aza's love interest. He comes from a very wealthy family; his father, Davis Pickett Sr., owns the largest engineering firm in Indianapolis. His mother died when he was a child, and he originally met Aza at "sad camp," a camp

for children who have lost a parent. He has a plastic **Iron Man** figure that he's loved since he was a child, and he keeps it for comfort throughout the novel. When Davis's father mysteriously disappears after he's accused of fraud and embezzlement, Davis is thrust into the role of a parent to his thirteen-year-old brother, Noah. He struggles to fill this role alone, but tries to separate himself from other people because he fears people just want to be close to him for his money. He loves **astronomy** and is blind to the privileges afforded to him because of his wealth. Although he abandons his social media channels after his father disappears, Aza discovers Davis' private and well-hidden blog, where he writes poetry and short musings about his life. More than anything, Davis wishes that his father had been, or would be, a true father figure to him and Noah. He feels unloved because Mr. Pickett leaves his entire estate to a reptile named Tua rather than his sons. When Aza tells Davis that she may have discovered his father's body, Davis finally decides to go to the police and give Noah closure. He moves to Colorado with Noah and finishes high school at a public school after realizing that being a good brother to Noah is more important than money.

Mom – Mom is Aza's mother. She's a math teacher at Aza's high school and is a widow—Aza's dad died of a heart attack about eight years before the beginning of the novel. Although Mom does everything she can to help Aza, such as encouraging her to go to therapy and asking her about her sessions, she doesn't truly understand Aza's anxiety. She encourages Aza to "just not think about" whatever triggers her thought **spirals** and continues to ask Aza about her mental state, even though neither of these things helps Aza at all and sometimes even makes Aza feel worse. Nevertheless, Aza and her mother are very close and have a mutually respectful relationship.

Davis Pickett, Sr. – Davis Pickett, Sr. is one of the most successful businessmen in Indianapolis, though he disappears mysteriously right before the start of the novel after the police try to arrest him for fraud and embezzlement. He owns Pickett Engineering, the engineering firm that was commissioned to design a tunnel system to keep the sewers from overflowing into the river when it rains, though his firm never completed the project. Despite his financial success, Mr. Pickett is cold and generally disliked: Daisy discovers that he's been accused several times of workplace misconduct and has been sued a number of times, and Davis tells Aza that his father has never been there for him. On the extreme end of his un-fatherly tendency, Mr. Pickett makes news by willing his entire estate to his pet tuatara, Tua, and not leaving his sons any of his money. Pickett Engineering offers a \$100,000 reward for information leading to Mr. Pickett's discovery, which Aza and Daisy decide to try to win. Aza spends weeks puzzling over notes from Mr. Pickett's cell phone and fears that she inadvertently discovered his body in the Pogue's Run tunnel—one of the tunnels that Pickett Engineering constructed and never finished. Aza relays

this information to Davis rather than go to the police herself.

Mychal – Mychal is a classmate and friend of Aza and Daisy, and for a short time he's Daisy's boyfriend. He's a talented art student, though he's often very uncertain of himself. His photographic work *Prisoner 101* is accepted to a pop-up gallery in an unfinished section of the Indianapolis sewer system, where it's positively received by critics and other artists.

Noah – Noah is Davis' younger brother. At thirteen, he still believes that his dad, Mr. Pickett, loves him, and he becomes depressed and starts acting out after his father disappears. He asks Aza to keep looking for his father even after Davis asks Aza not to. Aza feels bad for Noah and promises him she'll keep looking.

Dr. Singh – Dr. Singh is Aza's therapist. She uses both cognitive behavioral therapy and medication to help control Aza's anxiety and OCD. She encourages Aza to remind herself that her thoughts are just thoughts and don't actually control her, though Aza struggles greatly to accept this. According to Aza, Dr. Singh's catchphrase is that whatever Aza is experiencing is "not uncommon." After Aza's mental breakdown, Dr. Singh encourages Aza to take her medication and reminds her that she will get through this difficult time.

Dad – Dad is Aza's father, who died of (presumably) a heart attack while mowing the lawn about eight years prior to the start of the novel. Mom describes her husband as "a worrier" like Aza, and thinks that he would've understood Aza's anxiety better than she does. He enjoyed taking cell phone photos of the **sky** through tree branches, and Aza keeps his phone in working order so she can revisit the photographs on the phone. Aza's car, Harold, also belonged to Dad.

Tua – Tua is Davis Pickett Sr.'s female tuatara, a very primitive species of reptile. She's about 40 years old and is expected to live to at least 150 years old. She's also set to "inherit" Mr. Pickett's fortune upon his death, though the money will actually go to the foundation that cares for her. Davis is scared of Tua and resents her because his father favors her over his own children.

Ayala – Ayala is a character in Daisy's Chewbacca fanfiction stories. She's modeled after Aza and shares her worrying personality. She's a horrible character who ruins everything for the other characters. Azyala serves as a point of contention in Aza and Daisy's friendship when Aza discovers that Daisy has been writing stories that paint Aza (through the character of Ayala) in an unfavorable light.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lyle – Lyle is the groundskeeper at the Pickett estate. He seems to care deeply for the wellbeing of Davis and Noah and is initially very suspicious of Aza and Daisy.

Malik – Malik is the onsite zoologist at the Pickett estate. He

cares for Tua, the tuatara that will receive the entirety of the Pickett inheritance upon Davis Pickett Sr.'s death. He's very passionate about his work, which Aza finds refreshing.

Rosa – Rosa is the house manager at the Pickett estate. She acts as a parent of sorts to Noah and Davis, though she leaves at six every night. Even though she seems to genuinely care for Noah and Davis, Davis insists that she's paid to do so.

Holly – Holly is Daisy and Aza's regular server at Applebee's. She doesn't find the girls charming because they habitually use coupons and never tip well.

Simon Morris – Simon Morris is Mr. Pickett's lawyer. He arranges to have a bank accept Daisy and Aza's deposits of the cash they received from Davis.

Elena – Elena is Daisy's eight-year-old sister. Daisy often has to babysit Elena when their parents have to work.



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.



IDENTITY, SELFHOOD, AND MENTAL ILLNESS

While questions of identity are par for the course in coming of age novels and young adult novels alike,

Turtles All the Way Down goes a step further in exploring the subject of identity. Rather than simply questioning who she is, Aza is consumed by more fundamental and heady questions about whether she exists at all and how much control, if any, she has over her own thoughts, actions, or circumstances.

Aza's questions of identity and control are complicated by the fact that she struggles with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), a mental illness that makes her feel as though she's not in control of her own thoughts. Aza conceptualizes her OCD as a demon or evil alter-ego that rises up at intervals to remind her about the teeming **bacteria** inside and around her, the wound on her finger, or the dangers of kissing (and sharing bacteria with another person). The demon is only one instance in which the reader sees that Aza think of herself as a being who isn't singular: rather, she sees herself as possessing many separate and different identities. These multiple identities are represented by the different names Aza responds to, as well as the voice of the demon itself. To Mom and to Davis, Aza goes by her first name, while to her best friend Daisy, she's Holmesy, and to other students at school, she's Ms. Holmes' daughter. In Daisy's fanfiction stories, Aza's personality shows up in a character named Ayala—and although Aza hates Ayala, she

begins to consider Ayala a part of herself. These different names crystallize Aza's belief that she's not in control of herself as a single, autonomous being. The voice of her demon takes this one step further, as the demon truly exists only in Aza's head—it's actually a part of her own mind, not just a different name that people call her. Particularly when she's in the hospital after a car accident, the text of the novel becomes a block of dialogue between Aza and her demon as they argue about drinking hand sanitizer, underscoring the way in which Aza's very sense of self is split into distinct personae.

Although Aza's questions about identity are complicated by her demon, she's entirely unable to think of herself as a single autonomous person even when her demon is quiet. She tells the reader early on that the human body is about 50% bacteria, or organisms that are decidedly not human. Although this is objectively true, this fact is only terrifying to her because of her struggles with mental illness. It's significant that Aza thinks of herself as being made up not only of different identities, but literally of different beings. She's obsessed with the relationship between her bacteria and her self, and becomes particularly agitated when she learns that the brain and the bacteria in one's stomach communicate with each other. For Aza, this is proof that she's not in control of her own thoughts: her bacteria are running the show. They have actual power to influence what and how she thinks, and there's no way for her to know which thoughts are truly hers and which thoughts belong to the bacteria. Aza suffers another bacteria-related identity crisis when she kisses Davis. After a frantic internet search, Aza learns that Davis' bacteria will not just be inside her forever, but will actually permanently alter her microbiome. This is terrifying for Aza. It was one thing for her to know that she herself is made up of multitudes, but it's another thing entirely for her to learn that other people have the ability to actually add to and alter her identity.

Aza's therapist, Dr. Singh, humors Aza's musings about singularity and her paranoia about who's actually running her mind during their therapy sessions. However, Dr. Singh encourages Aza to see herself as an "integrated plurality" and uses the metaphor of a rainbow that is made up of many colors. Although it takes Aza the entirety of the novel to see the wisdom of Dr. Singh's suggestion, that's eventually what happens: Aza begins to integrate her different identities by taking her medication, something she was previously afraid of doing. Dr. Singh also tells Aza regularly that Aza's questions about identity "aren't uncommon," which alludes to the overarching idea that although Aza's struggle with mental illness is unique and makes her journey towards identity particularly difficult, the struggle to integrate seemingly opposite identities into one singular being is a struggle that all young people face. At the end of the novel, adult Aza suggests that she did indeed manage to integrate her many identities into a cohesive whole—and indeed, the novel itself, written by

Aza, is a testament to that.



CHAOS VS. ORDER AND CONTROL

Simply by nature of Aza's mental illness, she's extremely interested in making order out of the chaotic situations in which she finds herself. Often, the novel examines the idea of "order" through circular or spiral patterns: not only is Aza's name a circle of sorts (her name goes from the beginning of the alphabet to the end, then back again), but she often describes her intrusive thoughts as "thought spirals" that leave her with little control over her thoughts or actions. In this way, Aza's word choice illustrates her attempt to make meaning and order out of what feels like chaos. Aza's mental illness in particular complicates her quest for creating order out of chaos, as she often becomes a prisoner of her own spiraling need—and failure—to find a sense of control over her thoughts and her body.

When readers meet Aza, she's reasonably functional: she's able to eat, drive, go to school, and respond to Daisy's questions. However, as she begins seeing Davis romantically and refuses to take her medication regularly, Aza slowly begins to spiral in on herself until she has spiraled so tightly, she nearly fractures into two people. In that fractured state, she's not in control of herself anymore—rather, her "inner demon" is in control, and she's at the mercy of its whims. It's important to note that Aza's relationship to medication is one that's grounded in her fear of something else controlling her. In this case she's afraid of the medicine controlling her, just as she fears that **bacteria** are controlling her. Aza is so intent on figuring out if she's actually the one in control, she refuses to do the one thing that could offer her some degree of relief and a degree of control over her destructive thought spirals: taking her medication. After her mental breakdown in the hospital, Aza is able to "loosen" her spiral, becoming less anxious, controlling her intrusive thoughts, and involving more people in her life than just herself and her paranoid brain. When Aza isn't so caught up in her own spirals of thought, she's able to connect more with Mom and Daisy, and in doing so she becomes a better and more engaged friend. By changing her medication and making an effort to take it every day, she's also able to obtain a degree of control over her own thought spirals and experience fewer of them.

The idea of circling also encompasses the cyclical nature of mental illness like the OCD that Aza experiences. OCD isn't something that Aza will ever fully recover from, and the novel makes this very clear: she'll never fully get "better." Aza can only slow down the spirals by taking her medication, staying in therapy, and using breathing exercises. However, intense bouts of OCD return to Aza in adulthood: in the final chapter, readers learn that the novel is written by Aza sharing the story of how she got to the point where she is in the present. At that point in her life, she has been hospitalized for her mental illness two more times. This serves as a final reminder that, for Aza, life is

made up of circles, spirals, and the time in between. Although the chaotic spirals themselves are inescapable and at times terrifying, the very act of naming them and describing her experience allows her to create order out of chaos, giving her a sense of safety and control in her life.



LANGUAGE AND MEANING

All the characters in *Turtles All the Way Down* are intensely interested in the English language.

They're all very well read, and the novel is filled with allusions and references to a number of classic novels, like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The characters are also interested in the mechanics of language itself. They ask questions about parts of speech and sentence structure, as well as the words the English language offers to describe different intangible things. As the characters borrow language from authors, poets, and each other, borrowing words from others to create meaning out of their own lives through language becomes, for the characters, an integral part of the process of forging identities.

Many of Aza's questions about language have to do with her inability to describe her pain and her thought spirals to her friends or her therapist, let alone to herself. Her therapist, Dr. Singh, offers the insight that although pain is undeniably real, there are few words to truly describe the depths or the particulars of someone's pain. This leads Aza to one of her scariest questions: if she doesn't have the words to describe herself, is she even real? In this way, Aza creates an equivalence between being real and being able to articulate the meaning of one's experience. In turn, Aza wonders if she's not just unreal, but fictional and literally made up of words written by someone else.

As Aza continues to question her own reality, her increasingly intense thought **spirals**—along with her inability to articulate her feelings—lead her to feel increasingly isolated. Daisy and Davis, on the other hand, use language as a tool for processing their emotions, by writing Star Wars fanfiction and poetry, respectively. Daisy's weekly Chewbacca installments allow her to mentally escape from reality while making sense of what reality throws at her. Her characters take on the qualities of individuals in Daisy's real life, and the anonymous online platform gives her the opportunity to write what she actually thinks about those individuals. Davis, on the other hand, uses his blog as a public diary. He follows a very specific format in which he responds to a quotation (usually from a novel or from Shakespeare) with a short musing about his life that loosely ties in with the quote. In both cases, Daisy and Davis find a sense of purpose and some relief from their daily struggles by putting their thoughts not just on paper and out of their heads, but literally into the public sphere of the internet. Notably, John Green himself has said about his own novel that he achieved a similar sense of purpose and relief by engaging with Aza,

writing her story, and sharing it with others.

This idea that language can be healing echoes throughout the novel: Davis achieves a sense of closure for himself through writing on his blog, and Daisy eventually kills off Ayala, the character who resembles Aza, in order to make amends with Aza. Meanwhile, Aza continues seeing Dr. Singh for talk therapy to manage her illness and her intrusive thoughts. Dr. Singh, however, has a very specific idea of how language can be used to heal and bring closure and comfort. She often nitpicks Aza's word choice when Aza describes her mental illness and encourages her to use language that paints her as more powerful than the illness. In this way, Dr. Singh makes it abundantly clear to Aza that the specific language people use is very important. Language can give a person power or take their power away. In this sense, Dr. Singh suggests that language not only helps people understand their reality—it can also help *change* a person's reality. The fact that Aza chooses to write a book is perhaps the ultimate testament that she internalizes this lesson about the importance of language.



PRIVILEGE, POWER, AND WEALTH

Turtles All the Way Down presents a cast of characters from a variety of different financial backgrounds. Davis's family is exceptionally rich:

they collect art, have a golf course on their property, and built an onsite sanctuary for Mr. Pickett's pet tuatara, Tua. Aza and Mom, by contrast, are solidly middle class—Aza's mom works as a high school teacher, and Aza has a car. Finally, Daisy works at Chuck E. Cheese's to earn money so that she can one day afford to attend night school, shares a bedroom with her younger sister, and types her Chewbacca fanfiction on her phone because she doesn't have a computer. As the characters interact with each other and encounter problems that money can't solve and others that it can, they learn how wealth can make people blind, but doesn't have to determine everything about who a person is.

Although Davis leads a very comfortable life because of his family's financial situation, he feels trapped by the reputation and the name that accompany his wealth. His father, Davis Pickett Sr., is one of the most powerful men in Indianapolis, but also one of the most hated. Davis is well aware of his father's reputation and fortune and therefore fears that anyone who befriends him is doing so because of his money. He believes that others see him as having an immense amount of power because of his financial situation. While it's certainly true that Davis can afford to drive a luxury car and is guaranteed to attend a prestigious private college, the actual degree of power that he has is far less than people think he has. Rather than leave his money in a trust for Davis and his brother, Noah, Mr. Pickett instead leaves all of his money to Tua, a lizard-like reptile with a lifespan of up to 150 years. This makes Davis feel unloved by his father, which is notably not a problem that the

money itself can solve. Even after Mr. Pickett's disappearance, Davis speaks about his father as though he was often absent and never loving. For Davis, the issue is less about the money and more about the fact that his father was never there for him.

Both Aza and Daisy are shocked at their good fortune when Davis gives them \$100,000 to not go to the police with the information they have regarding his father's disappearance. The girls split the money evenly, but both do very different things with it. For Aza, her future after high school suddenly opens up as she realizes that, with the money from Davis, she'll be able to more easily afford to go to college and can possibly even afford to go out of state. For her, her newfound wealth is freeing, though she feels no compulsion to spend any of it right away. Daisy uses her money to "catch up" financially with Aza: she quits her job at Chuck E. Cheese's and buys a car and a laptop—actions that Aza sees as misguided and irresponsible. What Aza doesn't realize is her own privilege in comparison to Daisy. Daisy's life is much harder than Aza's because Daisy doesn't have the same financial advantages as Aza, such as a car, a computer to use for schoolwork, and the privilege of not needing to work. This is verified later, when Daisy remarks how much easier school is when she's not spending all of her non-school hours working.

Rather than come to clear conclusions about how money is best spent or used, the novel instead focuses on the simple fact that possessing money can make a person powerful, though it can also make them blind. When Davis decides to move with Noah to Colorado to attend public school while Noah attends a special school for troubled boys, it's a choice to put love and his relationship with his brother over what his money can buy for him. Similarly, Daisy's parents force her to create a college savings account for her little sister with some of the money she received from Davis. Both Daisy and Davis share their financial power with others, ultimately using their financial power to alleviate someone else's burden.



IRON MAN

Davis has had his Iron Man figure since he was a child, and he tells Aza that it's the only physical thing in the world that he truly loves. Iron Man represents how Davis sees himself in the world, particularly in relation to his father and money. Though Iron Man the superhero is powerful and strong, the action figure is only a representation in colored plastic of that strength. Davis feels the same way. Others see that he has access, power, and privilege because of his family's money: they see him as an actual Iron Man who can do and have whatever he wants. In reality, however, Davis feels as powerless as his Iron Man action figure to actually harness any of his material wealth or power, particularly since Mr. Pickett leaves Davis out of his will, denying him the power of the family money. Further, the Iron Man figure's decals and paint have worn off, making it so Iron Man is faceless and featureless. This symbolizes how others see Davis as not an individual person, but just in terms of his money.



THE SKY, STARS, AND ASTRONOMY

The ways the different characters see the sky highlights the differences between them, mostly their financial differences. Aza and her dad see the sky as fractured, as represented most often by Aza's dad's photographs of the sky through tree branches. Though Aza thinks it's beautiful, the branches are obstacles to her seeing the entire sky. Davis, on the other hand, views the sky most often from his treeless estate or through his telescope. For him, the sky is clear, endless, and vast. His ability to move through life is similar to how he sees the sky clearly. He can afford to look far away to school in Colorado or a prestigious college. Aza can only look far away in her dreams about college; in reality, she knows she'll likely stay close to home and go to school in Indiana.



CIRCLES AND SPIRALS

Circles and spiral patterns are how Aza tries to make sense of her mind and her world. She consistently picks up on the circular patterns around her as she talks about the circular freeway system around Indianapolis and the light cycle that's created between her phone and Davis' phone on facetime. She struggles with thought spirals that trap her in a conversation with her own mind, and listens to Davis talk about how the galaxy is actually a very large spiral. By identifying these patterns, Aza begins to create a sense of order, or at least provide a name for her chaos. In this way, the circles and spirals are symbolic of Aza's greater project of finding her place in the world and beginning to make sense of the world's natural chaos--and the human tendency to find patterns in the chaos.



SYMBOLS

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



BACTERIA (C. DIFF)

Aza shares with the reader that the human body is made up of about 50% bacteria; essentially, half of a person's cells aren't technically that person. Aza's OCD makes this knowledge unbearable for her and she's obsessed with keeping herself as clean and bacteria-free as possible. The way she conceptualizes bacteria as controlling, invasive, and malicious symbolize a literal split in Aza's identity: the bacteria provide Aza proof that her identity is not her own.





QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dutton Books edition of *Turtles All the Way Down* published in 2017.

Chapter 1 Quotes

... and meanwhile I was thinking that if half the cells inside of you are not you, doesn't that challenge the whole notion of me as a singular pronoun, let alone the author of my fate?

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Mychal, Daisy

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis


Aza sits eating lunch with Daisy and Mychal but is unable to concentrate on their conversation because she's in a thought spiral. Her musing introduces one of her central questions of the novel: is the idea of "self" singular, and how does one define one's self? Notably, she attempts to define it in terms of language and grammar, rather than through more conventional markers of identity like a person's personality. Although language can be extremely abstract, grammar is fairly concrete, with rules, exceptions, and guidelines. Using grammar, then, to consider these questions illustrates Aza attempting to create a sense of order in her life and define the self as something that follows rules.

For Aza, this question is complicated by her fear of and fixation on bacteria. She doesn't just see that her mind is made up of different sides of her personality, she literally sees that her body is made up of hundreds of different organisms that are all intrinsically a part of what makes her a person. Thus, Aza's question grows and changes to include these microscopic parts of her that aren't actually her.

Chapter 3 Quotes

I've got a theory about uniforms. I think they design them so that you become, like, a nonperson, so that you're not Daisy Ramirez, a Human Being, but instead a thing that brings people pizza and exchanges their tickets for plastic dinosaurs. It's like the uniform is designed to hide me.

Related Characters: Daisy (speaker), Aza Holmes

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis


Daisy and Aza dig through Mom's closet to find something for Daisy to wear instead of her Chuck E. Cheese's uniform, and Daisy talks about uniforms in general. Here, we see that Aza isn't the only one concerned with identity and personhood, but that to differing degrees it's something that every character in the novel is also dealing with. Because Daisy's job requires her to wear a uniform, she has a unique opportunity to experience life as a "nonperson" without an identity outside of the function she performs at her job. This suggests that the idea of uniqueness is important to Daisy's identity, as Daisy feels she doesn't even *have* an identity when she's not somehow unique or identifiable.

Chapter 5 Quotes

I have these thoughts that Dr. Karen Singh calls "intrusives," but the first time she said it, I heard "invasives," which I like better, because, like invasive weeds, these thoughts seem to arrive at my biosphere from some faraway land, and then they spread out of control.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Dr. Singh

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis



Aza explains her intrusive thoughts and thought spirals for the reader as she fixates on Davis holding her hand in the car. The way that Aza describes these thoughts shows that she conceptualizes them as things that are entirely foreign to and separate from her. She doesn't see her intrusive thoughts as part of her identity, but rather, they're something that threatens to *change* her identity. This is also represented in the language Aza chooses to describe them. Rather than use Dr. Singh's term "intrusive thought," she chooses to call the thoughts "invasive." In this way, she shifts the character of these thoughts to be separate and foreign, rather than a part of her that's simply unpleasant or uncomfortable. Using language in this way also allows Aza to achieve some sense of control over her thoughts simply


because she can name and describe them in a way that makes sense to her.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ And he was obviously a person. Like, what even makes you a person? He had a body and a soul and feelings, and he spoke a language, and he was an adult, and if he and Rey were in hot, hairy, communicative love, then let's just thank God that two consenting, sentient adults found each other in a dark and broken galaxy.

Related Characters: Daisy (speaker), Aza Holmes

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 66


Explanation and Analysis

At Applebee's one night, Daisy has an argument with someone on the internet about whether or not Chewbacca is a person. She's angry that this person believes Chewbacca isn't a person, and proceeds to name, for Aza, some qualities that constitute personhood. Daisy's definition of personhood requires that a person have a language to describe themselves, and that they have already come of age. The passage shows that, while Aza herself is consumed with questions regarding her own personhood, Daisy by contrast seems to have a confident and clearly developed opinion about what constitutes a person, and doesn't have patience for a heady debate about the technicalities.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ I wanted to tell her that I was getting better, because that was supposed to be the narrative of illness: it was a hurdle you jumped over, or a battle you won. Illness is a story told in the past tense.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Dr. Singh

Related Themes: 


Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

In the car on the way to one of her therapy sessions, Aza thinks about what she's going to tell Dr. Singh about how she's doing. Here, she identifies that illness is something that someone gets over. Mental illness, however, is often not like that. For many, it's something that they'll suffer with their entire lives, in varying degrees of intensity or relative wellness. It's uncomfortable for Aza to realize that her illness doesn't fit this prescribed narrative, as it means that rather than use this narrative, she must come up with her own. Although this leads ultimately to her writing the novel, at this early stage, this is extremely uncomfortable for her until she finds her voice and is able to use it to write her own story.

☞ You're right that self isn't simple, Aza. Maybe it's not even singular. Self is a plurality, but pluralities can also be integrated, right? Think of a rainbow. It's one arc of light, but also seven differently colored arcs of light.

Related Characters: Dr. Singh (speaker), Aza Holmes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

When Aza asks if the idea of "self" is singular in her therapy session, Dr. Singh encourages her to see herself as many different *integrated* identities, rather than just the collection of different and often disparate identities. What Dr. Singh is asking is for Aza to consider her seemingly opposed identities and personalities as all normal parts of her singular self, not something to be afraid of. Aza fears that the different identities mean that there's something wrong with her, while Dr. Singh insists that her questions and fears about identity are common to the teenage experience. She quietly and subtly suggests that adulthood will mean that Aza integrates her proverbial rainbow and finds a sense of peace, in spite of and because of her different identities.

☞ And we're such language-based creatures that to some extent we cannot know what we cannot name. And so we assume it isn't real.

Related Characters: Dr. Singh (speaker), Aza Holmes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. Singh explains to Aza why physical or psychological pain can be so difficult for people to explain. She suggests that there simply aren't words in the English language to describe most kinds of pain. For Aza, this insight means that she's traveling uncharted territory as she struggles with her mental illness—she's truly unable to use the stories or the language of others to create meaning out of her own situation, as the language just isn't there for her to draw from.

Moments like these also draw attention to the silent and hidden nature of unseen illnesses in general, and mental illness in particular. By showing readers—in sometimes painful and shocking detail—that Aza most certainly experiences a great deal of pain as a result of her anxiety and OCD, John Green insists that the reader take seriously illnesses that aren't easily described. He asks that the reader believe what language there is to describe mental pain, even though much of the vocabulary doesn't yet exist.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝ ... now I was talking about parasite-infected bird feces, which was more or less the opposite of romance, but I couldn't stop myself, because I wanted him to understand that I felt like the fish, like my whole story was written by someone else.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Davis Pickett Jr.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Aza and Davis are lying out on the Pickett golf course and Aza is describing the life cycle of a particular parasite that infects fish and birds. The parasite causes infected fish to try to get eaten by birds so the parasite's life cycle can continue in another organism. For Aza, this is disturbing proof that bacteria, and “things unseen” more generally, have power to control a being's thoughts and actions. Here, bacteria-driven thoughts can literally kill, and this story gives Aza a way to try to make sense and give voice to her own fears. This shows that she has a very acute sense that she's not in control, which is a scary thought for her. Her particular word choice—especially her assertion that her story is being written by someone else—shows that she understands at

this point that words have power, but that she's just not yet convinced of her own power to wield them.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝ I'd probably killed myself with sepsis because of some stupid childhood ritual that didn't even prove what I wanted it to prove, because what I wanted to know was unknowable, because there was no way to be sure about anything.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Daisy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis


On their way to the bank to deposit the money from Davis, Aza has to re-bandage her finger several times after she becomes worried about a possible infection. In this anxiety-ridden moment, Aza feels entirely powerless to save her life from sepsis or even to know anything about who or what she is.

The fact that Aza opens her finger pad to prove she's real hearkens back to Dr. Singh's insistence that, although pain is indescribable, it's one of the most real things humans experience. In hurting herself, Aza experiences something that, even if it doesn't prove she's real beyond any doubt, nevertheless grounds her in the reality and the knowledge that her finger hurts. Although this is a pretty dark and hopeless moment for Aza, the novel ultimately goes on to suggest that Aza does come to learn that she's real. She learns this once she's able to describe her pain with language.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝ "I know you think you're poor or whatever, but you know nothing about being actually poor."
"Okay, I'll shut up about it," I said.
"You're so stuck in your own head," she continued. "It's like you genuinely can't think about anyone else." I felt like I was getting smaller.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes, Daisy (speaker)

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 140


Explanation and Analysis

Days after Daisy and Aza deposit the money from Davis, Daisy purchases a car and a laptop. Aza isn't shy about showing her disapproval for these purchases and here, Daisy insists that Aza is blind to Daisy's financial situation. Daisy blames Aza's inability to empathize with her on Aza's mental illness, which causes her to spiral inward and exclude people from her inner world, keeping her trapped in her own mind. Although this is a hurtful thing for Aza to hear, Daisy is, in many ways, right: Aza doesn't understand what it's like to have to spend all of her free time working to save for college. Her anxiety keeps her tuned into herself and *only* herself, because Aza feels that her own self (along with the bacteria that make up parts of her self) are the most pressing threat to her existence.

☞ He's, just... I guess at some point, you realize that whoever takes care of you is just a person, and that they have no superpowers and can't actually protect you from getting hurt. Which is one thing. But Noah is starting to understand that maybe the person he thought was a superhero turns out sort of to be the villain.

Related Characters: Davis Pickett Jr. (speaker), Davis Pickett, Sr., Noah, Aza Holmes

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 147


Explanation and Analysis

Davis explains to Aza that Noah is struggling with the knowledge that his dad might not be the good guy he thought he was. In this regard, Noah struggles with some of the same things that Aza does. Noah's closely-guarded image of his father suddenly becomes not just unhelpful, but actually harmful. By insisting that the world exists the way he thinks it should, Noah refuses to see the truth (that his dad might be a villain) and use that to move on and begin to grow up. Instead, he tries to use idealistic language to describe what's going on, which proves in the end to be a futile attempt.

☞ When my thoughts spiraled, I was in the spiral, and of it. And I wanted to tell him that the idea of being in a feeling gave language to something I couldn't describe before, created a form for it, but I couldn't figure out how to say any of that out loud.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Davis Pickett Jr.

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

After realizing that love is the only emotion or feeling that people get to be "in," Aza applies this idea to how she experiences her anxious thought spirals. She conceptualizes them as something that wholly consumes her and robs her of any agency or sense of safety. It's not something she merely *experiences*, either; her entire identity *becomes* the spiral.

It's important to note here that although she can't put any of this into words for Davis, she does put the words together for herself and for the reader. This shows Aza developing a language and a vocabulary for herself to make sense of what's happening to her—something that will be very important as she works through the ups and downs of mental illness throughout her life. The novel itself, in its final pages, shows that Aza as an adult was able to create a language and a cohesive narrative for what happened, even if she couldn't verbalize it at this point when she was sixteen.

☞ His bacteria would be in me forever, eighty million of them, breeding and growing and joining my bacteria and producing God knows what.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Davis Pickett Jr.

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis



After Aza and Davis kiss for the first time, Aza experiences a


thought spiral and is terrified to learn that Davis's bacteria will change her microbial makeup and, by extension, her identity. For Aza, the study that confirms her fears is horrifying proof that another person has the power to very literally change her identity, which makes Aza feel even more out of control. To Aza, this is proof that she isn't in charge of her own body or mind at all. While she certainly decided to kiss Davis, she has no control over what would happen next, now that she has his bacteria forever. Notably, it's this discovery that seems to hasten Aza's inward spiral towards her mental breakdown in the hospital, which suggests that what she truly fears is being changed by outside forces over which she has little or no control. This, of course, probably relates to the traumatic and sudden loss of her father, and the ways in which that changed her life forever in ways that she could not control.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ Him: When you're on a Ferris wheel all anyone ever talks about is being on the Ferris wheel and the view from the Ferris wheel and whether the Ferris wheel is scary and how many more times it will go around. Dating is like that. Nobody who's doing it ever talks about anything else.

Related Characters: Davis Pickett Jr. (speaker), Aza Holmes

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

Texting the morning after their first kiss, Aza tries to insist that she can't date Davis. In response, Davis says that dating is silly and cyclical, and likens it to being on a Ferris wheel.


This analogy shows that Davis, too, looks for circular and spiral patterns to make sense of his thoughts and his inner world. For Davis, dating is a circular trap: he sees that a couple just goes round and round talking about dating and nothing else, and never actually doing anything else. However, unlike Aza (who generally finds comfort in discovering these circular patterns), Davis wants to skip the Ferris wheel and the circle altogether by technically *not* dating. He believes that it will be more comfortable for both of them to put the classic narrative of dating aside and write their own story for how their relationship should look.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ As I looked at his face looking at mine, I realized the light that made him visible to me came mostly from a cycle: Our screens were lighting each of us with light from the other's bedroom. I could only see him because he could see me.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Davis Pickett Jr.

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 191



Explanation and Analysis

The first time that Aza and Davis talk over facetime, Aza is fascinated when she realizes that she and Davis can see each other because they've created a cycle of light. This shows once again that Aza gets a great deal of comfort out of identifying these circular patterns when they pop up in her day-to-day life. When she's involved in this particular cycle with Davis (they go on to facetime in the dark almost nightly for several weeks), she feels safe and secure in their relationship. The light and the distance allow Aza a buffer and protection from having to worry about bacteria, unlike when the two see each other in person.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝☝ When I was little, I knew monsters weren't, like, real. But I also knew I could be hurt by things that weren't real. I knew that made-up things mattered, and could kill you.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Ayala, Daisy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 196



Explanation and Analysis

Aza considers that non-real things can be harmful as she drives to school the morning after reading Daisy's fanfiction. Daisy's fanfiction is so disturbing for Aza because she realizes that Daisy's feelings towards Aza aren't all positive: the character Ayala is based off of Aza, and ruins everything for the other characters. Ayala is certainly not real—she's very much fictional—but Aza recognizes that her discovery of Ayala, and by extension, her discovery that Daisy feels this way about her, have the potential to do real

harm. Aza is, of course, right. The fictional Ayala leads Aza and Daisy to their major fight on the highway, which ends in the car accident that lacerates Aza's liver and destroys her dad's phone. Ayala has the power to create change in the real world, as does Aza's imagined C. diff infection, and neither create change that is by any means positive.

☝ It's just, like, this isn't going to be some story where the poor, penniless girl gets rich and then realizes that truth matters more than money and establishes her heroism by going back to being the poor, penniless girl, okay?

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Davis Pickett, Sr., Daisy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis



Daisy watches a Star Wars movie while Aza looks up articles about Mr. Pickett, and Daisy tells Aza again to drop the case. Daisy insists that the case is closed: she and Aza got the money, and for her, that's more important than learning the truth about what happened to Mr. Pickett. This illustrates the girls' respective financial situations. For Daisy, \$50,000 is enough to be able to quit her job and abandon a compelling mystery. For Aza, that same amount is enough to make her believe she has options for college, but it's not tempting enough to make her actually drop her search for answers. Daisy insists that Aza's view is misguided and inconsiderate of Daisy's financial situation. She fully believes that they are better off with the money and without Mr. Pickett, and that finding Mr. Pickett and not having the money wouldn't help anyone. She finds Aza's insistence on keeping the narrative of the poor heroine alive ridiculous and insulting.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝ It was saying that my bacteria were affecting my thinking-- maybe not directly, but through the information they told my gut to send to my brain. Maybe you're not even thinking this thought. Maybe your thinking's infected.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 210



Explanation and Analysis


On Wikipedia one night, Aza comes across the "gut-brain informational axis," which is the cycle that allows gut bacteria to interact with a person's brain and indirectly influence their thinking. For Aza, this is ultimate proof that she's not in control. Her greatest fear—bacteria—is in control, and there's no way for her to know if or how much her bacteria is controlling her thinking. This shows the final tightening of Aza's thought spiral that culminates in her mental breakdown in the hospital. Her desire to be clean and disinfect everything—including her body and her mind—causes her to consume hand sanitizer in an attempt to kill all the malicious bacteria that plagues her.

It's important to note that, for all intents and purposes, Aza isn't in control here. Her mental illness is, and it's truly making Aza's mind a horrifying place to live. It thrives on the fear incited by the Wikipedia article and in doing so, has the power to convince Aza to drink hand sanitizer and not trust her own thoughts.

☝ Please just let me out. Whoever is authoring me, let me up out of this. Anything to be out of this.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis


As Aza tries to sleep after consuming hand sanitizer, she implores "whoever is authoring[her]" to let her out of the novel and out of her thought spirals. This request serves several purposes. First, it hearkens back to Dr. Singh drawing Aza's attention to James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, in which a character asks Joyce to let her out of the novel. It shows a character acknowledging that they're fictional and begging their creator to write them something more bearable. However, for Aza, this takes a different tenor after she reveals that she's actually the author of the novel. Until the very end, Aza believes that she's not in control of her thoughts or actions. When it turns out that Aza wrote the novel, it becomes clear that Aza did realize that she has the


power to control her thoughts. Thus, this request becomes a request from Aza, to Aza, to accept her agency and power to use language to help free herself from the thoughts that trap her.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝ ... the stupidity of Ayala, Aza, and Holmesy and all my irreconcilable selves, my self-absorption, the filth in my gut, think about anything other than yourself you disgusting narcissist.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Ayala

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 226



Explanation and Analysis

As Aza rests in the hospital, her thoughts spiral and she considers all the different identities she assumes. To her mom and Davis, she's Aza; to Daisy, she's Holmesy; in Daisy's fanfiction, she's a character named Ayala. Rather than see these different identities as different facets of one identity, Aza sees them as entirely separate and autonomous identities that happen to inhabit one body. This is complicated further by the existence of "filthy" bacteria in her body, which she believes taint and infect these identities. When Aza fixates on these identities, it shows that she's in the very middle of her spiral—one that makes her turn inwards and causes her to be unable to think about others. This "low point" becomes the center of her spiral. From here, she spirals back outward and is able to include others in her life again, ultimately learning, as she tells herself here, to think about things other than herself.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☝ My whole life I thought I was the star of an overly earnest romance movie, and it turns out I was in a goddamned buddy comedy all along.

Related Characters: Daisy (speaker), Aza Holmes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

Daisy walks Aza to class on Aza's first day back to school after the accident and tells her that she misunderstood the kind of movie or story she was in. This shows that, just like everyone else, Daisy is trying to apply the tropes and conventions from other stories to the life she experiences in order to make sense of what's going on. Daisy was unable to make sense of events because she believed herself to be in a romance movie and neglected Aza, her counterpart in the buddy comedy that is her life.

Notably, Daisy's comment about being in a buddy comedy in particular shows that she understands that she's not the protagonist of the novel. Rather, she's *one of* the protagonists. Just as Aza learns that she can be the narrator, the sidekick, and the protagonist all at once, Daisy accepts that she's not the star of this particular story.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝ You're the narrator, the protagonist, and the sidekick. You're the storyteller and the story told. You are somebody's something, but you are also your own.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Mychal, Daisy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 257



Explanation and Analysis

As Aza and Daisy sing along with a pop song on the radio, Aza experiences this revelation that she actually fills many roles, both in the novel and in her life as a whole. Although she positions herself as Daisy's sidekick mere pages into the novel, at this point she begins to accept that she's the protagonist of her own life in addition to being a sidekick to Daisy. In particular, when Aza says that she's the storyteller, it shows that she's discovering that she *does* have the power to use language to control her situation—and further, that language itself is a powerful agent of change when used appropriately. By accepting that she's autonomous, a single self, and the narrator of this story, Aza begins to take control of her life and of her mental illness.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝ I would always be like this, always have this within me. There was no beating it. I would never slay the dragon, because the dragon was also me. My self and the disease were knotted together for life.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 280


Explanation and Analysis

Aza has just heard that the authorities found Mr. Pickett's body and she's scared for Davis' future, leading her to pick at her finger, which has finally healed. As she picks, she realizes that her illness will always be a part of her. This represents one of the first times that Aza truly accepts that her illness is a part of her that's not going to leave or get completely better. She understands that, in some ways, she's her own worst enemy and when she battles her illness, she's battling herself. In making this connection, Aza finally begins to feel as though her multiple identities are integrated and part of the same person. She's no longer conceptualizing her illness as something foreign.

☞ ... I realized something Davis must have already known: Spirals grow infinitely small the farther you follow them inward, but they also grow infinitely large the farther you follow them out.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker), Davis Pickett Jr.

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

When Davis stops by Aza's house to say goodbye, they look at the stars and Aza realizes why Davis finds the vast size of the universe (which is a spiral) comforting. With this realization, Aza learns that spirals can trap her when she allows them to take her deep inside herself, but can free her and bring her comfort if she allows them to grow. At this point in the novel, Aza has widened her spiral: she's had conversations with Mom that were meaningful and allowed Mom to feel close to Aza, and she and Daisy have repaired

their relationship. By framing spirals in this way, Aza finds a way to take control of something that previously controlled her. By changing the way she talks and thinks about spirals, she can use them for good.

☞ I know that girl would go on, that she would grow up, have children and love them, that despite loving them she would get too sick to care for them, be hospitalized, get better, and then get sick again. I know a shrink would say, Write it down, how you got here.

So you would, and in writing it down you realize, love is not a tragedy or a failure, but a gift.

Related Characters: Aza Holmes (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

Aza steps out of the novel to explain that she's actually writing this story as an adult after a psychiatrist asked her to write how she got to where she is now. As Aza offers a brief picture of what her life looked like after the end of the novel, she makes it very clear that her mental illness is something that's with her forever, and something that fluctuates in intensity. Her experience in the hospital at 16 wasn't the final endpoint of her illness—rather, it was one of several landmark moments in a long journey. This makes it very clear that mental illness in particular isn't something that she'll recover from. As she mentioned earlier, mental illness isn't an illness that's spoken about in the past tense, but rather something that's always in the present.

This statement also shows how Aza learned to take control of her illness by using language to frame what happened to her in a different way. She finally understands that language has the power to control how she experiences her thoughts and her illness. By writing down what happened and by being able to look at it as an author, Aza is able to realize that what happened to her wasn't a tragedy, but was an integral part of her growing up, integrating her many identities, and becoming an adult.



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

Aza addresses the reader and says she first realized she might be fictional when she was in high school. She considers that there are forces much larger than herself at work that decide when her lunch period is and considers that if those forces had assigned her a different schedule, her story would've turned out differently. However, it's at this point that Aza begins to realize that a person's life is a story told *about* the person, not something the person tells, try as a person might to be the author of his or her own story.

Aza describes sitting in the cafeteria and listening to the din of the many loud conversations going on around her. As she sits, she thinks that everyone thinks that they're all heroes in their own personal epics when in reality, they're all the same. She's eating a sandwich and tells the reader that she finds eating disgusting. She tries not to think about it. She's sitting with Mychal, an artistic friend, and Daisy, her best friend since elementary school. Aza shivers as she realizes she can hear the **bacteria** in her stomach digesting her sandwich.

Daisy interrupts Aza's reverie by asking if she went to camp with Davis Pickett. Aza assures Daisy she's been listening to the conversation, but instead thinks only about the sounds of the **bacteria** inside her. She explains that humans are made up of about 50% bacteria. Aza's palms start sweating. She tells the reader that she struggles with anxiety, but feels that being anxious about bacteria isn't at all irrational.

Mychal explains that Davis's dad, Mr. Pickett, disappeared mysteriously the night before a police raid was planned to bring him in on charges of bribery. Daisy seems to want Aza to say something, but Aza can't figure out what because she's worried she has contracted a parasitic infection. Mychal goes on to tell Daisy about his new art project that uses Photoshop to average people's faces. Aza thinks his idea is interesting and wants to listen, but is too distracted by the sounds of her stomach.

Aza explains that excessive abdominal noise can be a symptom of an infection from the bacteria known as *Clostridium difficile*. She pulls out her phone and rereads the Wikipedia article about **C. diff**. Aza has no other symptoms, hasn't been hospitalized, and has no fever, but her "self" reminds her that she doesn't have a fever yet.

The novel begins with Aza emphasizing how little control she feels she has over her thoughts and her life. She's entirely at the mercy of forces larger than herself and sees no space or opportunity to take on and challenge these forces. By placing this idea in terms of one's life being a story that's told about them, it suggests that literature and language are going to be other important concerns for Aza.



Aza's suggestion that she doesn't see herself as the hero or protagonist is ironic considering she is the protagonist of this book. Again, by putting these thoughts in terms of literature and storytelling elements, Aza tries to create a framework that will help her understand herself. Storytelling provides her with a system for organizing different people and events in her life.



This is readers' first introduction to Aza's mental illness: she struggles with anxiety and a fear of bacteria. These fears will guide and dictate her actions throughout the novel, as her fear of bacteria increasingly complicates her questions about identity and control.



Mychal's project of averaging people's faces shows another character grappling with questions of identity and selfhood. Just as Aza struggles to understand what it means to be one person if people are made up of other organisms, Mychal toys with the idea of a single portrait made up of pictures of other people—a portrait of one person that, like all people, contains multitudes.



Here, we learn that Aza has a voice in her head that feeds her anxious thoughts. In this way, she is made up of two different beings or voices. Readers hear "her" voice, and meanwhile she hears a voice that is also her, but a more intense and fearful version of her.



Aza only partially hears Daisy make some suggestions to Mychal about his art project. Aza wonders if "me" should still be considered a singular pronoun if half her cells aren't even her cells. She explains that as a kid, she began opening up a crack in her finger. The crack opens easily now and is always bandaged, but sometimes Aza worries she has an infection. When this worry starts, Aza splits the crack open, drains it, and re-bandages it. She begins this process at the cafeteria table as Daisy asks Aza if she's noticed her newly-pink hair. Aza manages to call Daisy's hair bold.

Daisy turns back to Mychal and Aza fears she's going to vomit. Daisy asks Aza if she's okay and Aza nods, though she begins to sweat. She puts a new Band-Aid on her finger and practices her breathing exercises her therapist, Dr. Singh, taught her to calm herself down. Aza checks the "Human Microbiota" Wikipedia article again, though she knows Dr. Singh would tell her not to. She tells the reader that **spirals** never end, they just keep tightening.

As Aza gets up to throw her sandwich away, Daisy asks Aza (calling her Holmesy, and refers to her by this nickname for much of the novel) if she's okay again. Aza only says "thought **spiral**" in reply. Daisy suggests they hang out later as a classmate informs her that her pink hair is also staining her shirt pink. Daisy brushes off the classmate and tells Aza that they'll watch a Star Wars movie before she has to go to work. Aza agrees but can't think of much else to say as she continues to spiral anxiously. She thinks that she remembers being at camp with Davis. The two of them didn't talk much, but they looked at the **sky** together.

CHAPTER 2

On her way to history class, Aza checks the "Human **Microbiota**" Wikipedia article again. Her mom yells at her from her classroom to put her phone away, and Aza goes into her mom's classroom. Aza's mom (to whom Aza refers throughout the rest of the book as "Mom") asks Aza if she's "not anxious," and confirms that Aza has been taking her meds. Aza tells the reader that she takes her meds about three times per week, though she's supposed to take them daily.

Aza exists in a liminal space between the fear and worry that goes on in her mind, and the real world going on around her. This creates a sense of chaos and a feeling that she's not in control, which leads her to repeat obsessive rituals like splitting open the cut on her finger. By performing this ritual, Aza creates something that she knows she can rely on: the cut will always be there for her to fuss with, and it therefore provides her a sense of control.



Checking Wikipedia is another compulsion of Aza's. Like re-bandaging her finger, it gives her a sense of control over her fears by giving her language and information to understand the bacterial world inside of her. Notice that when she describes spirals here, she describes them as tightening rather than spreading. For her at this point, spirals only go one direction: inward. This is expressive of her general mental state, in which her anxiety causes her to feel out of control.



Aza's extremely anxious internal world very clearly keeps her from fully experiencing the world around her. This continues to create the sense that there are two Azas: the one inside her head, and the Aza that others see. Aza already has some of the language to describe her inner world to others (telling Daisy she's in a thought spiral), which helps integrate these two selves, though they're still very separated at this point.



Aza is receiving two kinds of care for her anxiety: she has already mentioned Dr. Singh, her therapist, and now it becomes clear that she also receives help in the form of medication. Although it seems she tries to use what she's learning in sessions with Dr. Singh (breathing exercises), she's much less willing to use the medication to help herself feel better.



Mom begins to say that Aza looks anxious, but Aza interrupts and asks who decides when the school bells ring and how long class periods are. Mom says that someone at the superintendent's office decides those things and that Aza's brain seems an intense place. Aza muses out loud that she's living on someone else's schedule, and Mom remarks that in regard to bells, schools are much like prisons.

Mom asks if Aza is going straight home after work, and Aza explains her after-school plan with Daisy. When Aza says that Daisy is working at Chuck E. Cheese's to save money for college, Mom begins her "cost of college rant." Aza says that if she doesn't win the lottery, she'll sell meth to pay for school. She leaves for History class when the bell rings.

After school, Aza finds Daisy already sitting in Aza's car (which she calls Harold) drinking a carton of school milk. Aza reminds Daisy that there will be no non-clear liquid inside Harold and makes her throw the milk away. Aza tells the reader that she takes the idea of real love very seriously and found it with Harold, a teal Toyota Corolla that used to belong to Aza's dad. When she turned 16, Aza spent all of her saved money to get his clunky engine running.

While driving Harold, a person had to choose between driving in silence, listening to the radio, or listening to Side B of a Missy Elliott cassette that won't eject from the player. Aza says that this imperfect system changed her life as she and Daisy scan radio stations. Daisy stops on a news report about Davis Pickett Sr., who disappeared mysteriously the night before the police were set to raid his home and arrest him for fraud and bribery. Mr. Pickett's company, Pickett Engineering, is offering a \$100,000 reward for information regarding his disappearance.

Daisy yells excitedly that Aza knew Mr. Pickett's son. Aza explains to the reader that for two years after fifth and sixth grade, she and Davis both went to "Sad Camp," a camp for kids with a deceased parent. They saw each other intermittently while not at camp since they lived just across the river from each other: Aza on the side that floods, and Davis on the side with stone walls that cause Aza's side to flood. Aza insists to Daisy that Davis wouldn't remember her, but Daisy assures her that nobody could forget her.

Aza is extremely concerned with the fact that she's not in control of her life at school, and Mom's comment about prisons suggests that she at least shares some of Aza's thoughts, if not concerns, about the regimented nature of schools.



Although this conversation suggests that neither Daisy nor Aza are able to pay for college outright, Daisy is taking concrete steps to save money while Aza's comment is obviously a joke. This shows that the question of how to pay for school isn't as pressing for Aza. Nevertheless, it also shows that going to college is not a privilege to be taken for granted by either character.



The novel continues to subtly suggest that there is a class difference between Aza and Daisy's families: Daisy is actively working to earn money for college, while Aza spent her life savings on fixing a car with sentimental value to her. Giving her car a name gives it an identity—making it a "he" rather than an "it"—a further testament to its importance to Aza.



Again, Aza recognizes that there are forces beyond her control that influence her fate. In this passage, she is focused on the selection of sounds inside Harold. For both Daisy and Aza, \$100,000 is clearly a lot of money, which makes this report particularly intriguing for them. Money and class are a major theme in the novel, as the desire for money provides the characters' primary motivation for getting involved in Mr. Pickett's case.



Although the novel makes it very clear that Davis is wealthy while Aza is solidly middle-class, their shared experience of loss acts as an equalizer here. At "sad camp," kids are the same because they've lost a parent, regardless of their families' financial situations. The knowledge that Aza lost a parent also explains why Harold is so important to Aza: he gives her a way to remember her dad.



Daisy continues to talk about the reward money, and Aza says she has homework and can't solve the mystery of Mr. Pickett tonight. Daisy quotes a pop song to convince Aza to join her in solving the mystery. They laugh and Daisy begins reading an article on her phone about Mr. Pickett's disappearance. She reads that there are no surveillance cameras on the Pickett property and therefore no information on Mr. Pickett's disappearance. Daisy asks what billionaire doesn't have security cameras. Aza thinks about it and remembers that Davis and his brother had a motion-activated camera with night vision.

The reward money is a huge motivator for Daisy, while it doesn't seem particularly intriguing for Aza. This suggests that Daisy has more to gain by earning the money than Aza does. Quoting pop songs becomes a way for Aza and Daisy to use language to connect with each other. The songs can be fun to sing, but the girls can also plumb them for more or different meanings as needed. It's one of many examples of literature and art providing a means for characters to express themselves to each other indirectly.



Daisy insists that she and Aza now have a lead. She tells Aza to exit off the freeway. Aza does and gets back on the freeway in the other direction, which will take them back to Aza's house. Daisy calls her boss and says she has the stomach flu, then asks Aza if she still has her canoe.

Again, the possibility of \$100,000 is far more compelling for Daisy than the \$8.40/hour she makes at Chuck E. Cheese's. Her determination to get the money marks her as a character who is very much rooted in the real world, unlike Aza.



CHAPTER 3

Aza explains that she and Mom used to paddle down the White River in their canoe, but Aza hasn't been on the river in years. She says it smells of sewage because every time it rains, the sewer overflows into the river. When Aza and Daisy get to Aza's house, Aza pries open the garage door and parks Harold. Inside, Aza sits in front of her air conditioning unit and Daisy decides she needs to change out of her Chuck E. Cheese uniform. Aza and Daisy go through Mom's closet to find something as Daisy tells Aza about her theory that uniforms are designed specifically to make a person a nonperson.

Evidently Aza isn't the only one thinking about questions of personhood. Daisy is concerned specifically with what deprives a person of personhood, and the uniform suggests that sameness does just that. Looking through Mom's closet then becomes an exercise in borrowing another person's identity by borrowing their clothing. Remember that Daisy just dyed her hair pink: she's not going to let a uniform entirely deprive her of her selfhood.



Mom's closet is filled with ugly clothes, and Daisy decides she'll stick with the uniform. Aza hears Mom get home and feels nervous. Daisy grabs Aza and leads her outside to the canoe before Mom gets in the house. Daisy sweeps dead spiders out of the canoe and asks Aza to help her get it into the water. Aza mentions that the river is half urine, but follows Daisy into the canoe and pushes off with her paddle.

Daisy decides that being a uniformed nonperson is preferable to assuming the identity of a ninth grade math teacher. It seems that Daisy is very in tune with Aza—she notices her nervousness and helps remove her from the situation. Aza, it seems, is often unable to move herself to action in times of stress.



Aza remembers playing on the river with Daisy when they were little. Daisy would throw daddy longlegs spiders at Aza. Aza would run and scream but wasn't actually scared. She says that then, all emotions were experiments. Now, she's stuck with fear, which she says is the true meaning of terror.

Aza conceives of childhood as a time when she could try on different identities and emotions, while she thinks of adulthood as a state that traps her. Her choice to use the word "terror" makes it abundantly clear how very scared she is of the world.



Daisy explains that the White River is the only reason Indianapolis exists. Right after Indiana became a state, people decided to build the capital city in the middle of the new state on the convenient river before they realized the river was only six inches deep and non-navigable. Daisy explains that her dad told her that as her phone rings. It's her dad asking if she can switch shifts to be able to watch her little sister, Elena, that night. Daisy agrees, hangs up, and tells Aza that their destiny is coming into focus.

As Aza and Daisy float down the river, Aza looks up through dead tree branches that fracture the **sky**. She tells the reader that her dad used to take pictures of the sky through branches like that, and she still has her dad's phone and its charger in Harold. Finally, Aza and Daisy get to an island in the river. They get out of the canoe and wander in different directions. Aza remembers a birthday party she had on the island and thinks that she was really good at being a kid. When Aza wanders back to Daisy, Daisy asks Aza if she remembers the birthday party. Aza remembers that Davis lost his beloved **Iron Man** action figure, but Mom found it. Daisy asks Aza again if she's okay, and Aza can only say "yeah."

After sitting for a while, Aza and Daisy wade through the river until they get to the bank of the river. Aza climbs the floodwall and then helps Daisy up. They walk through a small forest and notice the Picketts' golf course and their mansion in the background. Daisy finally finds the night-vision camera. The camera isn't password protected, so Aza connects her phone to the camera and begins downloading photographs of animals. Daisy quietly says that a golf cart is coming their way. Aza continues going through photos and finally comes to a photograph of Mr. Pickett in his nightshirt, with a 1:01am timestamp. Aza takes a screenshot of the picture as Daisy nervously says that the golf cart is coming closer.

The next photo (the one after the photo of Mr. Pickett) won't load. Aza is calm as she waits, but Daisy is obviously agitated and runs off. When the photo finally loads, Aza sees it is just a photo of a coyote. Aza looks up at the man in the golf cart and runs after Daisy. As she scrambles down the floodwall, Daisy is prepared to smash a rock into the canoe. Daisy explains that she's going to "damsel-in-distress this situation." After she creates a hole in the canoe, she lets it take on water.

The man in the golf cart calls down to Aza and Daisy from the top of the wall. Daisy explains that their canoe has a hole in it and that they're friends with Davis Pickett. The man introduces himself as Lyle, head of security, and says he can get the girls home.

Daisy's description of the White River paints the city of Indianapolis itself as some type of a fluke rather than an important city with a rich and illustrious history—and is perhaps revealing of Daisy's outlook on her hometown. The request from Daisy's dad is suggestive again of her family's financial situation, as it implies that her parents have jobs with irregular and unreliable hours and need their oldest daughter to provide free childcare.



Aza still takes active steps to remember and grieve for her dad, even though he died many years ago. She also continues to hold up childhood as a time when life and existing were easy, which suggests that she's not enthralled with the business of growing up, coming of age, and formulating her adult identity. When the girls separate on the island, it shows that they can be independent while having a shared experience. However, when Daisy brings up the birthday party, it shows that they're more connected than not.



The picture of Mr. Pickett represents the first major clue that Daisy and Aza have uncovered in their search for information about Mr. Pickett, though it's not immediately clear that the information will be useful. Notice that Aza isn't afraid that she and Daisy are going to be caught trespassing, while Daisy obviously is. Daisy fears real-world things, while Aza fears what happens in her own mind. The golf cart is a symbol of wealth and power, which throws Daisy's lack of wealth and power into sharp relief and makes her feel vulnerable and out of place.



Daisy uses a literary trope to help them in their real-life predicament, which begins to show how the characters borrow phrasing and conventions from the things they're reading to create meaning out of what's happening in their own lives. Notice, though, that Daisy takes active steps to do something about their perilous situation, while Aza still seems too caught up in her own head.



Though Daisy and Aza certainly didn't help their case by running, Lyle seems more interested in being helpful and kind than in punishing the girls, perhaps because he knows he's in control.



CHAPTER 4

Lyle drives Aza and Daisy down a path through the Pickett estate. Aza notices that the estate is more majestic than she remembered and thinks that she loves the silence and how big the estate is. Daisy begins to ask Lyle about his work as head of security for Mr. Pickett, but Lyle seems aware that Daisy is interrogating him and won't give her any useful information. He offers up that Mr. Pickett doesn't like staff on the property before dawn or after dark before telling them that if Davis doesn't know the girls, he's taking them to the police station.

Lyle, Aza, and Daisy drive by the pool. The island in the middle is now covered in a geodesic dome, though the waterslides are still there. Lyle drives around to a patio where Davis is reclining on a pool lounge in his school uniform. Davis stands up when he sees the golf cart coming and confusedly greets Aza by name. He asks her emotionlessly why she's on the Pickett estate, and Daisy introduces herself and explains that their canoe sustained a puncture.

Davis asks Aza if she can get her a Dr. Pepper, which he says he remembers is her favorite soda. Aza says yes, Lyle goes to fetch the Dr. Peppers, and Daisy looks at Aza with an I-told-you-so expression before wandering off. Davis says he's not good at chit-chat, and Aza suggests he say what he's thinking. He smiles and says that he wishes she weren't after the reward.

Davis explains that he thought of Aza when his father first disappeared. The newscasters kept using Mr. Pickett's full name, which is also Davis's name, and he found it weird. Aza insists that Davis isn't just his name. Davis says he remembers Aza telling him about her own name, which her parents gave her so she'd have something to call her own, while his dad by contrast made him a "Davis Jr".

Davis says that many old friends have been in touch over the last week but insists he doesn't know where his father is. Daisy suddenly appears and explains the "truth": she heard about Mr. Pickett on the radio, Aza said she had a crush on Davis when they were kids, so Daisy arranged for them to shipwreck their canoe, just like in [The Tempest](#), and now Aza and Davis can live happily ever after. Daisy promptly disappears again.

Subtlety is evidently not Daisy's strong suit: her use of language here is obvious and doesn't get her much useful information. Readers learn that Mr. Pickett was a private man in addition to being wealthy and a criminal, which begins to add layers to Mr. Pickett's identity. He's a man who very much desires to create order and control in his life, just like Aza does.



The fact that Davis has to wear a school uniform suggests that he attends a private school, and is therefore indicative of his privilege and his wealth. Aza is notably silent to the people she's with, so the reader is the only one privy to her thoughts at this point. Daisy takes on the responsibility of actually communicating.



Davis believes that anyone who unexpectedly shows up at his house these days is obviously after his father and the reward money. Notably, he's not wrong here, but it suggests that he feels trapped and isolated by his name and the wealth attached to it.



Davis doesn't feel as though he's an autonomous being because he has to share a name with his father. In this way, Davis suggests that sharing his father's name makes him a nonperson in much the same way that Daisy's work uniform makes her a nonperson by robbing her of individuality.



Again, Daisy uses a Shakespeare reference to give the situation meaning and context, whether or not that meaning is actually true. We also see that despite Davis's fears that he isn't his own person, his father remains enough of a mystery to him that he doesn't seem to have any idea what may have become of him.



Aza insists that it's not exactly like *The Tempest*, and Davis says that Aza looks very grown up. Aza can't decide if she's scared or excited. She tells Davis she's sorry about his dad, but Davis says that his dad is a "huge shitbag." Aza thinks that when people talk about their dads like that, it almost makes her glad to not have a dad. Davis continues that anyone who knows where his father is won't say anything, because Mr. Pickett can pay more than \$100,000 to keep them quiet. Davis says that the reward isn't even a lot of money.

Aza stares at Davis, and Davis apologizes for saying that it isn't a lot of money. He insists that his dad will get away with his escape. Daisy appears with a man whom Davis introduces as Malik, their zoologist. Daisy says they're going to meet a tuatara as Malik presses a button at the edge of the pool. A path emerges from the edge of the pool to the island in the middle, and the group walks across the bridge.

They enter the dome, which is climate-controlled and tropical inside. Malik locates the tuatara, a female reptile named Tua, and brings her to the girls. Daisy pets the tuatara, but Aza refuses. Malik explains some facts about tuatara and asks again if Aza wants to pet her. Davis offers to give Aza and Daisy a ride home.

Davis has to get something from the house, and Daisy pushes Aza to go with him. When they enter the house, Davis's little brother, Noah, is playing a **space** video game in the living room and casually greets Aza without turning around. Davis goes up the stairs and a woman dressed all in white tells Aza that one of the paintings is a real Picasso. Aza looks at the woman and remembers Daisy's observation about what uniforms do. The woman tells Aza to go upstairs to look at the Rauschenberg. Aza goes upstairs and passes a pile of trash before looking into a room she believes is Davis'. There's a telescope pointing at the ceiling and his old **Iron Man** action figure is on his nightstand.

Aza picks up the **Iron Man** figure as Davis comes up behind her. Davis tells her to be careful with "the only physical item I actually love," and the two head back downstairs. Davis asks the woman in white, Rosa, if she'll stay until he gets back. As they walk to the car, Davis explains that Rosa is the house manager and is kind of a parent, though she only stays until six at night. Daisy is leaning against Davis's Escalade, and Lyle tells Davis to be safe as they all get in the car.

Davis betrays just how wealthy and privileged he is when he insists that \$100,000 isn't that much money. The reward money the entire reason that Daisy and Aza are even on the Pickett estate in the first place, so it's obviously a lot of money for them. Mr. Pickett must have a great deal of power and wealth if he is able to pay more than that to keep people silent.



The Pickett estate has an onsite zoologist, another thing that's indicative of the Picketts family's wealth. Notice that even though Davis is blind to the value of money itself, he's not blind to the privileges his dad enjoys because of his money (e.g., getting away with this escape). In other words, he recognizes that there's much more to having money than the money itself.



Even though Aza doesn't like Tua, it's important to consider that Tua lives in an environment that's highly controlled and ordered, which is something that Aza craves in her own life.



Aza doesn't have the knowledge to appreciate or even recognize modern art (the "trash pile" is the piece by Rauschenberg), which is a direct result of her lack of privilege in comparison to Davis. Both Pickett boys are looking at the sky: Noah at the fictional sky of his video game, and Davis at the actual sky through his telescope. This suggests that the brothers see things very differently. Noah prefers to see the world as a fantasy, while Davis is interested in seeing the entirety of the world.



Again, Davis's car is a symbol of his wealth: it's large and imposing. However, his comment about loving his Iron Man figure suggests that the things that money can buy are less important to him than his Escalade and his fancy telescope might indicate.



Davis says that it's exhausting to have everyone watching him all the time. Daisy suggests that they all think Davis knows where Mr. Pickett is, but Davis insists he has no idea and doesn't care. He explains that the best thing his dad can do for Noah is to stay away.

Davis feels more like an actor performing his life than he actually feels like himself, which adds another set of question to the already pressing question of identity faced by many of the novel's characters: is one's identity just an act?



At Aza's house, Daisy gets out of the Escalade. Aza takes Davis's phone to type in her phone number. When she gives Davis his phone back, he grabs her right hand and says that he remembers her Band-Aid on her finger. Aza pulls her hand away. When Davis asks if it hurts, Aza says it's irrelevant. As they part, they tell each other that it was good to see one another.

Aza's finger is a constant and memorable part of her own identity, though she seems less than thrilled that it's something others notice and remember about her. This suggests that she'd like to keep this part of her identity private, even though that's impossible since it's her very visible finger.



CHAPTER 5

As Aza drives Daisy home, they argue about whether or not Aza has a crush on Davis. Daisy declares that Davis is part of the "vast boy middle" of boys that would be fine if they'd dress well and listen. Aza insists she doesn't want to date anyone and explains to the reader that although she certainly experiences attraction to people, the normal activities of a relationship like kissing, holding hands, and having to say the right thing make her endlessly anxious. Daisy declares that she'd love to date Davis if he weren't obviously in love with Aza.

Aza's anxiety hinders her ability to make meaningful romantic connections with others, which works to isolate her further and make her mind an even less fun place for her to be. Aza is especially anxious about needing to control what language she uses to talk to a potential partner. She fears that the way she currently uses language and thinks aren't romantic or "appropriate."



Daisy asks Aza if she knows who will inherit Mr. Pickett's fortune when he dies. Aza makes a few guesses and Daisy says that Tua the tuatara will inherit all of it, not Davis and Noah. Daisy reads a news article from the previous year out loud announcing the decision. Mr. Pickett is quoted as saying that his estate will benefit "Tua and only Tua," until she dies, and then it will benefit tuatara everywhere. Daisy remarks that it's quite the insult to the Pickett children to leave them nothing.

The decision to leave his estate to an animal rather than his sons shows very clearly where Mr. Pickett places value—and it's not on creating relationships with his children. This is verified by Davis's earlier statement that his dad was a "huge shitbag," though this knowledge takes Davis's assessment a step further.



Daisy wonders if Davis would turn in Mr. Pickett if he knew where his father was. Daisy and Aza wonder who might have helped him disappear, and Aza says that it must be kind of awful for Davis having people in his house all day that aren't family. Daisy laughs about thinking servants are awful, rattles off their respective to-do lists for the Mr. Pickett mystery, and slams Harold's door as she gets out.

Remember that Daisy has to do everything for herself and a lot for her family. For her, having help in the form of servants would make life much easier, while for Davis, having these people around to help him is stifling. His privilege blinds him to the fact that his nightmare is someone else's daydream.



Aza watches TV with Mom when she gets home, but she starts to struggle with intrusive thoughts about Davis holding her hand. She explains that she calls the thoughts "invasives," because they take over her mind like invasive weeds until she can't think of anything else. She thinks she needs to check her finger for infection and since it's an invasive thought, she can't make the thought go away. Finally, Aza excuses herself to the bathroom and finds moisture on the pad of the Band-Aid. Though it could be sweat, it could also be nasty river water or drainage from an infection. Aza squeezes hand sanitizer onto her finger and scrubs her hands before reopening the wound on her finger pad. She re-bandages it and feels relieved to have given in to the invasive thought. Aza says that the same thing will repeat and the **spiral** will continue to tighten.

When the intrusive thoughts start, Aza feels entirely at the mercy of the thoughts and what they tell her to do. Notice that Aza pits herself against both her body and her mind. The way she sees it, no part of her is on her side. This passage shows that giving into the intrusive thoughts can bring Aza a sense of comfort and order: she can breathe easy knowing that she prevented the infection in her finger for today, though she makes it very clear that this process will repeat again and again.



CHAPTER 6

The next day after school, Aza changes her Band-Aid before heading out to Harold. Aza texts Daisy and asks her if she wants to do homework at Applebee's later. They agree to meet at 8pm, after Daisy gets off work. Daisy instructs Aza to not text Davis until 24 hours have passed since their last meeting.

Aza and Daisy create a sense of order and control in their relationship by creating plans like this, while Daisy ensures that Aza's relationship with Davis will be as it should be by observing arbitrary rules about texting time frames.



Aza begins to drive home, but she remembers that she could drive several hundred miles and still make it home for curfew. Instead, she turns up the radio and drives the **circular** highway around Indianapolis until she returns to where she started, and then drives home. She feels better after her drive. When Aza gets home, she has texts from Daisy saying that Daisy drew the short straw and had to wear the Chuckie costume, but survived.

Aza's entire life follows circular patterns—even the city she lives in has a circular highway around it. Here, both knowing she has access to these circles as well as actually traveling the path of the circle gives Aza relief. Daisy's work is decidedly unpleasant, and she has little power to choose what role she fills at work.



Mom is inside grading quizzes. Aza sits down on the couch with her and Mom says that Lyle from the Pickett estate brought over their fixed canoe and told her that Aza and Daisy hit a rock on the river. Mom asks if Aza had wanted to run into Davis and whether the plan worked, and Aza finally says that she wanted to check on him, but most people don't seem to like their dads. Mom wonders out loud if Aza would've clashed or gotten along well with her father, since he was a worrier. Aza insists that life is worrisome and worrying is only correct. Mom smiles and says that she can't believe Dad left, and Aza notes that she says it like Dad chose to fall down dead.

Mom suggests that Aza's anxiety and mental illness came from her father. This suggests that what Aza experiences may be inherited, rather than something she learned. This is an early indicator that mental illness is something that Aza will never actually escape from, and that as much as she characterizes it as something separate from herself, it truly is an integral part of who she is.



Aza and Mom cook dinner, watch TV, and do dishes. Finally, Daisy texts and says she's at Applebee's. Aza tells the reader that the year before, a boy scout came to her door selling a coupon book with 60 Applebee's coupons for two burgers for \$11, and Aza and Daisy have been using them ever since. When Aza arrives at the restaurant, Daisy is engrossed in her phone since she doesn't have a computer. Daisy asks Aza if she's ever received a "dick pic" (a text message containing a photo of the sender's penis). Aza says that she's seen one, and Daisy hands over her phone, which has an unsolicited dick pic on the screen.

Both girls like to use coupons, which places them on slightly more even footing financially. However, we learn that despite their shared love of coupons, Aza enjoys privileges that Daisy doesn't, since she has a computer. It's worth noting that unsolicited dick pics in general complicate ideas of identity and selfhood, as it distills one person's entire identity into a photo of a single body part and contains no other identifying information: in this situation, as in many others, it's anonymous.



Holly, Daisy and Aza's usual server, approaches the table. Aza stops Daisy from asking Holly if she's ever gotten a dick pic. Aza places an order for a to-go burger for later, and Daisy orders a burger and tries to order a glass of wine. Aza gives Holly their coupon and as soon as Holly leaves the table, Daisy returns to the subject of the dick pic. She wonders how the sender made the mental leap from liking Daisy's fanfiction to deciding to send the photo. Aza says that boys, and people in general, are gross, and asks to change the subject.

Daisy is now engrossed in interrogating what the meaning of the dick pic is, and what it's supposed to convey. She's aware of what it's intended to convey (a positive reaction to her fanfiction story) but also sees that it's not exactly having the desired effect. This shows a situation in which language breaks down, though here it creates a humorous rather than tragic effect.



Daisy says that on her break at work, she read up on wills. She found out that you can't leave money to an animal, but you can leave money to a foundation that cares for an animal and there's no law saying that anyone has to leave their kids anything. She says she's going to do her calculus homework and get a copy of the police report for Mr. Pickett's disappearance.

Daisy doesn't appear to take any time to "do nothing" or relax. She spends her breaks at work doing other things, which shows that her time is at a premium. This is a direct result of her financial situation and lack of privilege: between work and school, she literally doesn't have the privilege of time to spare.



Aza looks through Davis's Facebook page and discovers his Instagram username. His Instagram is filled with quotes typed in typewriter fonts. Aza discovers a girl that Davis dated a year ago and through her, finds Davis's Twitter and YouTube profiles. Finally, she finds Davis's blog. The posts all feature a quote and then a paragraph that loosely relates to the quote.

The format of Davis's blog and the prevalence of quotes on his Instagram show that he's very much pulling from the language of others to help make sense of his own life. Essentially, he's using meaning that others have already created to impose order on and create meaning out of his own thoughts.



One of the quotes from William James reads, "the greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another," under which Davis wrote that he cannot at all choose his thoughts. Aza thinks that Davis understands the way that she experiences thoughts.

Both Davis and Aza see their thoughts as being outside of their control to some extent. Although it's yet to be seen if Davis finds this as troubling as Aza does, this shared experience creates closeness between them in Aza's mind.



The blog stops the day Mr. Pickett went missing. Hard as she tries, Aza can't find more of Davis's online presence. Daisy suddenly calls Aza's attention back to Applebee's. Aza tells Daisy what she found and Daisy instructs her to find info on the case, not just on Davis. Aza discovers that Mr. Pickett had been sued many times by employees and other people, and notices that a lawyer named Simon Morris represented Mr. Pickett in every case. Aza finds a website called Glassdoor which allows people to anonymously review employers. All the reviews of Mr. Pickett say that he's "skeezy" and not above breaking the law.

Aza discovers that even though Mr. Pickett settled his lawsuits out of court, the criminal investigation wouldn't go away. She learns that 15 years ago his company, Pickett Engineering, had secured the contract to clean up the White River and the sewage system. The company hadn't finished the work, the project ran over budget, and when the government tried to find someone else to finish the job, Pickett Engineering got the contract again by bribing government officials.

Daisy smiles a big, victorious smile. Aza notices her crooked teeth. Daisy explains that she tricked a junior reporter into sending her the police report. Aza tries not to think about it, but finally asks Daisy if the junior reporter will get in trouble when his bosses find out what he did. Aza's thoughts **spiral** and she insists the junior reporter will find them. Daisy insists that he'll learn an important and "minimally harmful" lesson about phishing, and then returns to an argument with someone on the internet about whether Chewbacca is a person or not.

Holly drops off the check and Aza puts her mom's debit card down, noting that Daisy never has money. Daisy angrily explains that the guy she's arguing with is saying she writes about bestiality because Chewbacca and Rey are in love. Daisy insists that Chewbacca is a person because he has a soul, feelings, and a language. Aza's **spiral** loosens. She asks if Chewbacca is a person because he's sentient. Daisy grumbles on about consenting adults who just so happen to be Wookiees, and explains the Wookiee language to Aza. In the Wookiee language, Daisy tells Aza to text Davis.

CHAPTER 7

Aza drives Mom to school the next morning. Mom notices Aza pressing on her finger, something Aza does when she's nervous, and asks Aza how the "med situation" is and about her upcoming appointment with Dr. Singh. Aza offers noncommittal answers but explains to the reader that she doesn't like the idea of having to take a pill in order to "become herself" and therefore she doesn't take them regularly.

Mr. Pickett's character becomes increasingly troubling the further the girls dig: he's not just a bad father to his children, he's a bad businessman in his dealings with his employees and the people he works for. Daisy points out that Aza is far more interested in Davis than in the case, which is indicative once again of Daisy's desire to earn the money and Aza's desire to connect with someone who understands how her thoughts work.



The story of Pickett Engineering's involvement in cleaning up the river is demonstrative of Mr. Pickett's financial power: he can do a terrible job, fail to deliver what he promises, and then find a way to keep his contract. This shows what power and privilege can become when unchecked. Notably, Pickett's behavior harms many other people who suffer because the river remains unsanitary.



Daisy's crooked teeth are a clue that she didn't have braces. Again, readers see that despite Daisy's lack of financial power, she's more than capable of creating a sense of power in other ways—in this case, by impersonating the junior reporter's superior. Daisy moves right on to debating personhood with internet strangers. It's implied that she fully believes Chewbacca is a person.



Daisy offers some potential signs of personhood, suggesting that perhaps she has a more developed or clearer conception of personhood than those around her (like Aza) who seem to struggle with such fundamental questions. Perhaps Aza's spiral loosens because Daisy provides her with a welcome distraction, or perhaps because Aza feels momentarily assured by Daisy that she herself is a person.



Even if Aza doesn't find her own head a particularly comfortable place to be, she's disturbed that she can take a pill that will make her head more manageable. This illustrates a distrust of things outside her influencing things inside her, as well as an underlying fear of change.



At her locker, Aza looks up the reporter that Daisy phished and sees that he appears to still have his job. Mychal jogs up to Aza. Aza is thinking about how her self seems to be in multiple places at once and can barely concentrate on what Mychal is saying. She thinks that Mychal is trying to ask her out, but Mychal explains that he wants to know if Daisy would go out with him. Aza tells him to talk to Daisy, leaves the conversation, and texts Daisy from her biology class. Daisy insists that Mychal looks like a giant baby and she can't date him, and asks Aza if she has read the police report.

Aza hasn't read the report, so she sneakily reads it throughout the day. It consists of mostly witness statements from Noah and Davis. Davis's statement says that it was a normal evening. Noah's statement says that Davis and Mr. Pickett were arguing some, but it was an otherwise normal evening. Hundreds of photos of the Pickett mansion follow, showing nothing out of place. Aza realizes the police don't know about the night vision camera.

When Aza gets in Harold after school, Daisy scares her by appearing out of her backseat. After Aza recovers, they discover that they know slightly more than the police do since they know about the night vision camera. Daisy points out the reward is for information, and Aza insists on talking to Davis about it before they go to the police. She takes Daisy to work.

Later that night, Daisy calls Aza and says that she spoke with the tip line. She discovered that it's up to Pickett Engineering to decide what information is relevant, and the reward money might never be distributed if they never find Mr. Pickett. Daisy sees receiving the money as a sure thing, but Aza gets a text and hangs up on Daisy.

The text is from Davis. He sends several texts wondering if his money is part of who he is, saying how lonely he is, and apologizing for the texts. Aza finally replies with "hi," and they text about how to define "I." They talk about **stargazing**, and Davis says that he and Noah are all alone. Aza asks if sharing the information she has will make the situation better or worse, and Davis says that if Mr. Pickett gets caught even though he never reached out to his sons, Noah will be crushed because he believes his dad loves him.

Davis texts that his mom's birthday is today, but Noah barely cares because he never knew her. He continues that after you lose a loved one, you realize you'll lose everyone. Aza agrees, and she and Davis say goodnight.

Although Aza seems very quiet to Mychal, her mind is moving extremely fast and thinking about many things that are distracting enough to keep her from being able to concentrate on the conversation. Perhaps because of her own struggle to put her thoughts into language, she refuses to talk to Daisy on Mychal's behalf—it's hard enough for her to speak for herself.



The police report contains little information to suggest that the police have any evidence to work with, putting Daisy and Aza at a major advantage, given that they are in possession of the phot of Mr. Pickett from the night vision camera. The report does, however, suggest that arguments with Mr. Pickett had become a routine part of life at the Pickett estate.



Although Daisy insists that she and Aza have power in the form of the night-vision photo, Aza isn't so sure. Aza's hesitancy is again indicative of the fact that she places more value on the emotional wellbeing of Davis than she does in getting the money.



Pickett Engineering has a great deal of power in this situation, as they have the final say about what information counts as useful. While Aza sees this situation as chaotic, Daisy sees it as under control and a sure thing.



Davis conflates his identity with his money. He seems to insist that his money, not his relationships, define him, as evidenced by his texts about being so lonely. However, Davis fully accepts his role of caregiver for Noah, and is doing his best to try to protect Noah from the unfortunate fact that his father is not a good person.



Davis's insistence that he'll lose everyone may be sad, but it's a way for him to bring order to his world. He sees it as an objective truth, and feels that reminding himself of it will protect him from feeling surprised when he does inevitably lose someone.



CHAPTER 8

The next morning at school, Daisy announces she has a crisis. She explains that she agreed to a date with Mychal, but told him it would be a picnic double date with Aza and Davis. Aza says she hates eating outside and asks why they can't go to Applebee's. Daisy lists her four concerns, none of which concern the location of the date, and Aza texts Davis before school starts and asks if he'd like to get dinner with friends on Friday. Davis agrees.

After school, Aza drives to her appointment with Dr. Singh. Aza tries to think about what to say to Dr. Singh. She wants to say that she's getting better because "that was supposed to be the narrative of illness." In the office, Aza tells Dr. Singh that she feels like she's not driving the bus of her consciousness. Aza describes Dr. Singh: always in motion, but with an amazing poker face that never betrayed surprise. Dr. Singh asks Aza about her intrusive thoughts and when she last put her Band-Aid on. Aza insists that she's still crazy.

Dr. Singh tells Aza she's being cruel to herself by calling herself crazy. Aza asks how a person can be anything to their self, since that would make the idea of self not singular. Dr. Singh suggests that self is an integrated plurality, like a rainbow. She asks Aza if her thoughts are impeding her daily life. Aza describes her thoughts of cleanliness and **bacteria** and not being able to find the part of her that's clean, which she thinks might be evidence that she's soulless like the bacteria. Dr. Singh says this isn't uncommon and asks Aza if she'd try exposure response therapy again. Aza refuses and remembers how scared she was when she tried it before.

Dr. Singh asks Aza if she's taking her medication. Aza says she is, but says it freaks her out because it makes her wonder who's in control. She doesn't know if the people who manufacture the pill (Lexapro) are then in control of who and what she is, but says that she hates the "demon" and takes the pill to get rid of it. Dr. Singh comments that Aza tries to understand her thoughts through metaphor. She says that pain is hard because language can't represent pain like it can represent physical objects. Dr. Singh continues to say that to some extent, people can't know what they can't name, which makes it seem as though pain isn't real.

Life moves on, even if the case is stalled. Aza and Daisy will continue to grow up, go on dates, and figure out who they are as they experiment with new relationships. Aza's fear of eating outside is likely due to her fear of bacteria, which shows again how much her fear and anxiety control her life.



Aza expresses discomfort at the fact that she's not adhering to the generally accepted narrative of illness. This shows an instance when Aza tries to use the language or ideas of others to describe and make sense of her situation, but the language she's trying to use fails her. This suggests that she'll have to come up with her own language or story to make sense of her illness and come to terms with the self she has.



Dr. Singh encourages Aza to see that by changing the language she uses, she can actually change the patterns of thoughts in her head. She's also encouraging Aza to accept that although the bacteria may be a part of her, she doesn't need to think of bacteria as foreign invaders. Aza often feels entirely alone in her thoughts, but Dr. Singh's catchphrase (that these thoughts "aren't uncommon") suggests that these are questions that many people struggle to address.



Aza seems to desperately want to be in control of her own thoughts, which explains her discomfort around taking medication and her fear of bacteria. Dr. Singh again insists that it's a common human problem to struggle to find the language that appropriately represents pain and suffering—it's not just a problem that plagues Aza. Essentially, Dr. Singh wishes to impress upon Aza that this is a human problem as much as it's an Aza problem.



Dr. Singh asks Aza to frame her mental state around a word other than crazy. She asks Aza to try "courageous," but Aza refuses "that therapy stuff." Dr. Singh insists that the therapy works, and moves on to talking about a plan for Aza's medication. Aza tunes out and wonders if the twinge in her stomach means she has a **C. diff** infection. She feels she must read the case study from a woman who had no symptoms but a stomachache. Aza starts sweating and decides to tell Dr. Singh her fears, since Dr. Singh is a doctor.

Dr. Singh immediately tells Aza she doesn't have **C. diff**, and runs through the symptoms with Aza. Aza nods but thinks that Dr. Singh isn't a gastroenterologist. Dr. Singh sees that Aza is **spiraling** and leads her in a breathing exercise. She asks Aza to return in ten days. Aza tells the reader that the time between appointments is indicative of how crazy you are.

Aza looks up the case report on her way out to Harold. The woman did have a fever, and Aza tries to think that she's fine since she doesn't have a fever. Her thoughts **spiral** further and her stomach continues to bother her.

CHAPTER 9

Life continues for Aza, and she says that she isn't crazy all the time. On Friday night, she spends two hours getting dressed and trying to do her makeup. When she comes out of her bedroom, Mom fails to disguise her disappointment at Aza's decision to wear makeup. Aza explains she's having dinner with Daisy, Mychal, and Davis, and deflects when Mom asks if she's dating Davis. Mom says that Aza doesn't talk to her, but Aza tells the reader she always feels in tune with her mother. She tells Mom that she doesn't talk to anyone. Mom tells Aza to be careful with Davis, since wealth is careless. Aza insists that Davis is a person, not wealth.

Aza is the last to arrive at Applebee's and takes a seat next to Mychal. Daisy begins a conversation of whether Wookiees are people, and Davis eagerly joins in. Mychal tells Davis that Daisy is a famous fanfiction writer, and Davis looks her up. Holly arrives, Daisy orders waters for the table, and when Davis looks confused as to why Aza isn't having Dr. Pepper, Holly explains they have Pepsi products and the coupon doesn't cover soft drinks. Davis orders everyone Pepsi. Aza realizes she hasn't spoken since she arrived, and she drifts in and out of following the conversation.

Dr. Singh makes another attempt to convince Aza that her words have the power to control how she experiences her mental chaos. Aza once again uses the story of another person to make sense of her own situation, which is represented by the case study she mentions.



Aza desperately wants to trust Dr. Singh, but at this point, her fear of bacteria greatly overpowers her belief in the power of her own words. It's worth noting that the medication Aza is on, Lexapro, is most effective when it's taken regularly and can build up in a person's system. She's likely getting little help from it the way she's currently taking it.



Although Aza gives in to her intrusive thoughts and checks the case study, it doesn't give her much relief and she continues to spiral. She'll have to find a better way of relieving herself, or her condition will worsen.



Mom confirms Davis's fears that people see him only in terms of his money, while Aza shows that she believes the exact opposite. However, Mom also seems to believe that Aza should be her "true self" by not wearing makeup, which suggests that Mom has conflicting ideas about identity and what truly defines a person. Aza also insists that the lack of verbal communication doesn't mean she doesn't love her mother, suggesting that she doesn't need to talk to feel intimate.



The question of what makes a person a person persists. Having these conversations allows these teenagers to talk in a roundabout way about what makes them people, as they're in a life stage in which they're forging their own identities and discovering what makes them unique people. Again, though Aza is silent according to her friends, she continues her mental monologue for the reader: her language never stops.



Daisy tries to include Aza by asking about her internet usage, but Aza insists she doesn't feel the need to contribute to the internet. Daisy insists the world needs Aza's Wookiee love stories, and the conversation shifts away from Aza again. Aza picks at her food when it comes and picks up the check when Holly drops it. Davis insists on taking it, and Aza lets him.

Daisy announces that they should do something like see a movie. Davis suggests they go to his house, since they "get all the movies." Mychal is confused as Davis tries to explain that they actually get the movies at his house when they come out in theaters. Aza makes herself agree to go.

Aza and Mychal drive their cars behind Davis to the Pickett estate. When they get there, Mychal excitedly tells Aza that he's always wanted to see the Pickett mansion, which was built by a famous architect. When they enter the house, Mychal starts rattling off the names of the artists whose work lines the walls. Davis tells him to check out the Rauschenberg upstairs, and Mychal charges up. Aza studies the painting by Pettibon of a colorful **spiral**. Davis explains some facts about the artist, and then leads Aza downstairs to see the theater.

Davis leads Aza into a basement room lined with Mr. Pickett's collection of first edition books. He tells her she can't touch any of them but [Tender Is the Night](#) by F. Scott Fitzgerald. When she touches the book, the bookshelf opens to reveal a theater with stadium seating. Davis suggests that it's obvious he's trying to impress her, but Aza insists she always goes to mansions with hidden movie theaters. Davis asks if she'd take a walk outside and uses his phone, connected to the house's sound system, to tell Daisy and Mychal that they're going outside.

Davis leads Aza to a sand bunker on the golf course. They lay down and he points to Jupiter. Davis begins to explain light time to Aza: traveling at the speed of light, it would take 45 minutes to travel to Jupiter, which means the Jupiter Aza sees from earth is actually the Jupiter from 45 minutes ago. Davis points to other **stars** and says that they're hundreds of light years away, which means that the actual star might have blown up hundreds of years ago. Aza remarks that they're looking at the past.

Aza's comment about not contributing to the internet suggests that she's not interested in using language in a public way. She's much more comfortable with the language in her head and the language of this particular book, which to her, are both private spaces.



Davis's privilege and wealth is confusing for Mychal; it's entirely beyond his comprehension how someone could have a real movie theater inside their house.



The art that Mr. Pickett collects is a strong status symbol because the artists are all important, highly recognizable names. Mychal, as an aspiring artist, recognizes the artists and likely idolizes them to some extent. Davis shows that he has internalized some of his father's art knowledge, as he himself knows and appreciates that what Aza sees as a "pile of trash" is in fact a very important artwork.



The gimmicks like the hidden theater and the pathway over the pool to Tua's geodesic dome are also demonstrations of wealth for wealth's sake—as they serve no real purpose. Green weaves in an allusion to mental illness by including a mention of [Tender Is the Night](#), the plot of which is based loosely on F. Scott Fitzgerald's wife's struggles with mental illness.



By viewing the stars in terms of light years, Davis sees the sky much as one sees a physical book: you can actually see moments that happened in the "past" by turning to different pages in the book. Looking at the sky in this way allows Davis to feel a sense of control over his life. Even if he doesn't always understand what's going on here on Earth, he thinks he understands what's going on in the sky.



Aza feels Davis fumbling for her hand and takes his. Davis turns his head towards her. Aza wants to kiss him, but is scared to turn towards him. Davis resumes talking about **stars** and finally remarks that Aza doesn't talk much. Davis suggests she say what she's thinking. Aza says that she doesn't like living inside of a body. She mentions her sweating hands and wipes her sweating forehead. She thinks that she finds herself disgusting, but she can't really recoil from herself because she's stuck in her body. She tells Davis about a type of **bacteria** that lives in fish that causes infected fish to try to get eaten by birds. She realizes that she's trying to tell Davis that she feels like the fish in that she's not in control.

Aza tells Davis that she presses her nail into her finger pad to convince herself that she's real. Davis is quiet for a bit and then says that his mom was hospitalized for six months after her aneurysm. She was in a coma, but would squeeze Davis's hand sometimes. When she did, Davis felt loved. He says that once his dad came and tried to tell him that his mom wasn't actually "there" and squeezing of her own volition. Davis tells Aza that she's real, but he doesn't know why.

Aza asks Davis what he's thinking, and he says that Aza is too good to be true. He says that he knows she saw the picture from the night vision camera, though Aza insists that she won't let Daisy turn in the picture. Davis insists he can't trust her, and says the picture won't make any difference but the police will wonder why he didn't turn it in. Suddenly, Davis gets up and mutters that this problem is solvable.

Aza follows Davis to the cottage. Davis walks to the bar area and pulls out cereal boxes. He shakes bundles of bills out of the boxes and explains that his dad hid money everywhere. He offers Aza a stack of bills and explains that for his dad, \$100,000 is a mere rounding error, and Aza should take it as a reward for not saying anything. Davis says that Simon Morris will call Aza. Davis insists that from now on, when Aza calls him, he'll know it's not because she wants the reward. He puts the money in a bag and hands it to Aza.

Aza sprints with the bag back to the house. She runs upstairs, hears Daisy talking behind a closed door, and opens it to find Daisy and Mychal kissing. Daisy asks for privacy, and Aza heads back downstairs. She sits down next to Noah, who is wearing superhero pajamas even though he's thirteen. He asks Aza if she's found anything about his father. Noah asks if he can send Aza the notes from his dad's phone. The last note was "the jogger's mouth." Aza gives Noah her number and says that she'll try to figure out what "the jogger's mouth" means.

Davis confirms for the reader that to experience Aza in the "real life" of the novel is to experience being around an extremely quiet person—though the reader knows that Aza's mind certainly isn't ever quiet. When Aza tells Davis about the bacteria that live in fish and birds, she attempts to express how little control she feels over her body and her life. She's also using that story to ascribe meaning to her own life, though in this case, the comparison only makes sense to her.



While it's not clear exactly when Davis's mom died, it seems to have been around the same time that Aza's dad died, which means that Davis was around eight. His dad's reaction here shows that he didn't want Davis to feel better about his mom's condition; he tried to deprive Davis of the types of stories that make life livable.



Even if Davis is blind to his own wealth sometimes, he's not blind to the fact that wealth is attractive to many people. Notice here that Aza is positioning herself as the noble heroine who puts Davis's wellbeing over her friend's financial success, something that Daisy will take issue with later.



This passage is a shocking glimpse into the way that Mr. Pickett (and, to a degree, Davis) view money: it's expendable, endlessly available, and giving away \$100,000 in cash is no big deal. However, his mention of the lawyer Simon Morris shows that he's aware that, legally speaking, \$100,000 is a lot of money and will require special handling after it changes hands.



Noah is very obviously a child, even if he is technically a teenager. He still very much wants to define himself in terms of and in relation to his father, which suggests that he admires Mr. Pickett and desires his attention. Asking Aza for help shows that he's somewhat desperate for someone to find his father—since the police are surely looking and have more tools and intelligence at their disposal than Aza does.



In a small voice, Noah says that Davis thinks they're better off without their dad, but that he still wants him to come home. Noah leans into Aza and starts sobbing. She comforts him as he sobs and says he can't think straight. Noah asks Aza to let him know if she finds anything, and Aza suggests that Noah go to bed. He goes upstairs without saying anything. Aza leaves and thinks about how light the bag of money is.

Davis seems to be trying to convince Noah to grow up and see the truth about the kind of person their father is. Noah shows that he really needs a true parent figure who will provide the order and structure he craves, and one who isn't Davis. Even if Davis is trying to be a good big brother, a big brother isn't a parent.



CHAPTER 10

The next morning, Aza texts Daisy to call her when she can. Daisy calls immediately and begins rambling about her fantastic date with Mychal and how much she actually likes him. She finally asks Aza about Davis, and Aza asks if they can meet up. Daisy has to work, but they agree to meet after work. Daisy hangs up because Mychal is calling, and Aza realizes that Mom is standing in her doorway. Mom asks how the date went, and Aza deflects.

Although Daisy is certainly in a honeymoon phase of her relationship with Mychal, she's already very much shifting her attention to him and away from Aza. She's beginning to identify with him instead of her best friend, which is an example of her experimenting with new ways of seeing herself and relating to others.



Later, Aza goes through the notes Noah sent her. The final notes interest her and seem connected: they include countries where a person might be able to stay without facing criminal charges at home in the US, a memoir by a woman whose father ran from the law, and a news article about the difficulty of faking one's own death, but the mysterious phrase "the jogger's mouth" turns up no results. Aza puts the list aside.

It appears as though Mr. Pickett was researching how to get away with his criminal charges by leaving the country. The memoir suggests that perhaps he was thinking about how all of this would affect his sons, even if he wasn't able to show that he cared in other ways.



Aza shows up early to Applebee's. She fumbles around in Harold's trunk until she finds her dad's phone and charger. She explains that Mom backed up Dad's photos years ago, but she prefers going through them on the phone. She swipes through family photos and selfies taken before phones had front-facing cameras. Aza thinks about the day her dad died: he just fell while mowing the lawn. Mom told Aza to call 911 while she performed CPR. Dad was dead the whole time and later at the hospital, a doctor asked if he'd had a heart condition. Aza tells a photo of her dad that she came upon some money and she misses him.

Aza feels that there's something special and more "real" about seeing her dad's photos in their original form, rather than looking at them on a computer. Keeping the phone is a way for Aza to interact with something that was truly a part of her dad. Modern life undeniably takes place on one's phone, at least part of the time, and so by keeping his phone in working order, Aza can still interact with a part of her dad that's real and "alive."



Daisy arrives a bit later, and Aza calls her over to get in the car, where she tells her to open the bag under her seat. Daisy begins to cry and asks if the money is real. Aza wonders if they can actually keep it and tells Daisy that Davis called it a rounding error. She worries that the money isn't legal, but Daisy says that she doesn't buy the idea that it's noble to turn down money. Daisy stares out the windshield and says that she'll be able to go to college now. She pulls a \$100 bill from the stack and leads Aza into Applebee's.

For Daisy, money is money and coming into it like this is a fantastic stroke of luck. For her, having money means that her life will be easier and more pleasant. Her comment about college shows that her future is opening up as well, making it possible for her to do more than work at Chuck E. Cheese's. For Aza, the money is a liability—she's not as desperate for money, so she's more concerned about being cautious.



Holly is shocked when Daisy and Aza order sodas. Daisy upgrades her side to onion rings, and tells Holly she doesn't have a coupon today. Aza and Daisy fantasize about Daisy's retirement from Chuck E. Cheese's. Daisy suggests mounting the head of the Chuckie costume on her wall after walking out wearing the costume.

Aza mentions that she spoke to Noah the night before and that he gave her the notes off Mr. Pickett's phone. Aza says she feels bad for Noah, but Daisy insists that he isn't their problem since they're rich now. Aza insists that \$50,000 apiece isn't rich, but Daisy does some mental math and figures out that in order to make \$50,000 at Chuck E. Cheese's, she'd have to work eight-hour shifts every day for two years.

Daisy says that Aza is a good friend because she shared the money and asks if the lawyer is going to try to take back the money. Aza says she trusts Davis, and Daisy remarks that they've both fallen in love. After dinner, which only costs \$30, they leave Holly a \$20 tip.

CHAPTER 11

The next morning, Aza picks up a phone call from Simon Morris. She slips outside and away from Mom to talk to him. Aza asks if splitting the money with Daisy was okay. Mr. Morris says he doesn't care. He explains that he set up an appointment for her to deposit the money the next day after school.

Aza tells Mr. Morris that she's worried about Noah and asks if there's other family. Mr. Morris explains that Davis has been declared an emancipated minor and the legal guardian to Noah. When Aza asks what happens if Mr. Pickett is dead, Mr. Morris explains that legal death and biological death are different: if no evidence of life turns up in the next seven years, at that point Mr. Pickett will be dead according to Indiana law. He tells Aza that he only deals with finances and assures her that everything legal is cared for.

Holly knows the girls as frugal coupon users, so this sudden change of identity is shocking for her. It's important to note that being able to quit her job will be a mark of privilege for Daisy. It means she doesn't have to work to meet everyday expenses.



For Daisy, the circular subplot of the Mr. Pickett mystery is complete: they got the money, case closed. Aza betrays her naïveté regarding Daisy's financial situation by insisting that \$50,000 isn't a lot of money, echoing Davis's earlier comment to Aza that \$100,000 isn't that much money. The remark creates clear delineations between the three characters that show what "a lot of money" is for each of them.



Daisy and Aza pay their good fortune forward by finally tipping Holly. When they have the means to do so, they notice another person's need and do their best to make everyone's financial situation better.



Simon Morris represents the entirely legal, emotionless side of money: as long as it's okay in the eyes of the law, he doesn't care at all about the emotional aspects of money.



Again, Mr. Morris sees that his only responsibility to the Pickett children is to make sure their money is available. While it's objectively true that he's a lawyer and that's all he's required to do, it also makes him seem coarse and unfeeling that he doesn't seem to care for Noah's emotional wellbeing. The difference between legal and biological death adds another aspect to the idea of what makes a person, as it's possible for someone to be dead for years before they're "officially" dead.



Aza feels fine the next day until she and Daisy are in Harold on their way to the bank. Daisy chatters about how her most recent piece of fanfiction went viral and retiring from Chuck E. Cheese's while Aza thinks that the medication might be working since she feels better. Suddenly, Aza thinks that the medicine is making her complacent and she hasn't changed her Band-Aid in over 24 hours. Aza's mind persists in thinking that she has an infection and certainly forgot to change the Band-Aid. She argues with the thoughts and even asks Daisy if she went to the bathroom after lunch. Daisy assures Aza that she did, but Aza has to pull over in a parking lot.

When Aza takes the Band-Aid off, her finger is red and inflamed. She shows Daisy and says it's a sign of infection. Aza puts hand sanitizer and a fresh Band-Aid back on and sits, embarrassed. Daisy kindly tells Aza to not be cruel to herself. Aza **spirals**: she wonders why she gives herself an open wound on her finger, which is one of the dirtiest parts of the body. She thinks she's going to die of sepsis and opening her finger doesn't even prove she's real. She puts on more sanitizer and replaces the Band-Aid three more times until Daisy finally tells her that they have to go. Daisy asks if it's better to reassure Aza or worry with her, but Aza only whispers that she gave herself an infection.

At the bank, Daisy introduces herself to a teller. They escort Daisy and Aza to a private office and set them up with new checking accounts. The teller encourages them to not make big purchases for six months while they adjust to having that much money, and suggests investing in stocks or college savings accounts. Aza can't listen—she's too caught up in worrying about her infection.

As Aza drives to Daisy's apartment, she keeps forgetting where and why she is where she is. After she drops Daisy off, Aza thinks that being mentally ill doesn't make her any more intelligent or observant. In fact, she thinks it makes her less observant and a horrible detective.

At home, Aza examines her finger in the bathroom. She cleans and re-bandages it before taking her regular medication as well as medication to use when feeling panicky. When the second pill starts to kick in, Aza feels heavy and sits in front of the TV. Mom comes home and asks Aza how she's feeling. Aza says she's fine and goes to her room to do homework. She struggles to read, so she texts Davis. He invites her to come over to see a **meteor shower** on Thursday, and Aza agrees.

Life is good for Daisy: she's internet famous and no longer has to suffer the indignity of being a uniformed nonperson at Chuck E. Cheese's now that she has money. As Aza experiences these thoughts, the reader sees exactly how much power Aza's fearful mind has over her: she can't finish the task of driving and must pull over to attend to her intrusive thoughts. The fact that this fear arose after wondering if she was in control shows that Aza's greatest fear is that something else may be controlling her.



Daisy's insistence that Aza not be cruel to herself echoes Aza's conversation about selfhood with Dr. Singh, in which Dr. Singh encouraged Aza in a similar way. Notably, Aza's mind takes a decidedly gloomy turn here as she thinks that she's going to die and can't prove she's real. Furthermore, although Aza generally says she isn't in control of anything, she does believe herself to be in control of what (she believes) will cause her death. She believes she has the power to end her life, but not to change it for the better.



The teller acknowledges that suddenly having an extra \$50,000 is a major life change. Although it's somewhat unclear what exactly triggers Aza's downward spirals in the rest of the novel, it's important to note that even changes that are objectively good can trigger anxiety—as much as objectively bad ones.



Aza's anxiety and obsessive thoughts are beginning to overwhelm her to such an extent that she feels disoriented. Aza suggests that people have a tendency to romanticize mental illness, but insists that she can't see a single upside.



Aza's willingness to take both her regular medication as well as what readers later find out is Ativan (a medication that calms, dulls, and can stop panic attacks) suggests that she's grasping for anything to give her a sense of control. Notice, however, that the Ativan doesn't necessarily provide her with relief: Aza still feels out of control, just a different kind of out of control.



Mom comes into Aza's room and asks if she'd like to help make dinner and then if she's scared. Aza says she's scared, but she's not scared of something: she's just scared. Mom says she wants to relieve Aza's pain, and Aza thinks that she hates hurting Mom. Mom finally suggests that Aza needs to sleep, just as Aza had suggested to Noah.

Aza notices that her mother is treating her just like Aza recently treated Noah when she suggested that he go to bed and try to get some sleep. The implication is that Aza herself feels like she is devolving, to the point that her mother has begun treating her like a child once again.



CHAPTER 12

On Thursday morning, an orange VW Beetle is parked in Aza's school parking spot. Daisy is in the driver's seat. Aza reminds Daisy that the banker said to not spend money, but Daisy insists the car, which she named Liam, will only appreciate in value. As they walk towards the school building, Daisy hands Aza the *Fiske Guide to Colleges*. She says that it's obvious that she's only going to Indiana University because college is so expensive. Aza thinks that Daisy won't be able to afford a better college if she buys cars, but asks Daisy again about "the jogger's mouth." Daisy says that the mystery is over and runs to Mychal.

Both Daisy and Aza's cars borrow their names from members of the band "One Direction." Once again the girls make use of the words and stories of others to create meaning and purpose in their everyday lives. Aza is judgmental of Daisy's car purchase, but is far more appreciative of the college guide, suggesting that because Aza has clear priorities, she can't understand why Daisy would purchase a car.



Aza spends the morning poring over the college guide. She explains that she'd never considered going anywhere but Indiana University or Purdue where her parents went, but she allows herself to dream about college and consider the many possibilities as she reads.

Aza's world suddenly opens up: her life in a small circle of Indiana is now widening to include colleges in all of the United States as a positive outcome of the money from Davis.



Aza comes up from the depths of the college guide at lunch, when she listens to Daisy tell the table about purchasing her car. Aza texts Davis and asks what time she needs to arrive for the **meteor shower**. He replies that it's going to be overcast, but Aza insists they see each other anyway.

For Daisy, purchasing her car was an exciting and brand new experience, and a sign that she's moving up in the world. For Aza, having access to a car is normal, and purchasing one like Daisy did is just irresponsible. Aza's inability to see the situation from Daisy's perspective shows that she is sometimes selfish and lacking in empathy.



Daisy and Aza go to Aza's house after school. Daisy comments that school is much easier without a job and pulls a new laptop out of her backpack. Aza quietly tells Daisy to not spend all her money at once. Daisy insists that Aza already had a car and a computer and rolls her eyes.

Aza evidently hasn't considered the fact that having things like a car and a computer opens up other basic opportunities for people. Daisy is investing in herself by buying one.



Daisy scrolls through comments as Aza tries to read for school. Finally, Daisy says that it's infuriating when Aza judges her. She says that Aza knows nothing about being poor, even if she thinks she's poor. Aza says she'll stop talking about it, but Daisy continues and says that Aza is so stuck in her head, she can't think about anyone but herself and it's painful for everyone around her. They study quietly and both apologize at the same time when Daisy leaves.

A few minutes before seven, Davis texts from Aza's driveway. She runs out to meet him and yells a brief goodbye to Mom on her way out. Mom calls her as Davis pulls out and tells her to turn around so she can meet Davis. Davis agrees and turns around. When Aza watches Davis walk through her house, she realizes how small the house is and feels ashamed of the peeling linoleum and family photos.

Mom hugs Davis in greeting and they all sit at the kitchen table. She asks Davis who's looking after him. Davis mentions the lawyer and his house manager. Mom informs him that Aza isn't "some girl from the other side of the river." She continues that Davis can have anything he wants, but he's not entitled to Aza. Davis starts to say something but starts crying. Mom apologizes and tells Davis to be good to Aza. Aza says that they have to get going, and Mom tells her to be home by 11pm.

In the car, Davis tells Aza that he can't have anything he wants, especially a mother. He says that most adults are hollow and try to fill themselves with money or God or fame, which destroys them in the end. He says that adults think they wield power, while the power actually wields them.

At the Pickett mansion, Aza and Davis see two candlelit place settings at the dining room table. Rosa greets them, hugs Davis, and said she made spaghetti for Davis and his "new girlfriend." Davis insists that Aza is just an old friend. Rosa tells him to take food to Noah and do his dishes before she leaves for the night. Aza notes that Rosa acts like a parent, but Davis says she cares about them but is also paid to do so.

Davis says there's a rumor at his school that he killed both his parents. He says he's fine, but he's worried about Noah. Noah got in bed with him the night before and cried, and Davis thinks that Noah is realizing that a caregiver isn't a superhero and his dad might even be a villain. Aza asks Davis about "the jogger's mouth," but Davis explains that his father doesn't believe in exercise because he truly believes that Tua will be the key to "curing death," and that's why he's leaving everything to her.

Daisy is painfully aware of the fact that Aza has more opportunities than she does, but she also realizes that Aza doesn't understand this. Just like Davis, Aza is blind to her privilege and the things her socioeconomic status does get her. Daisy also points out that Aza's silence is hurting other people.



Suddenly, Aza truly does feel poor: her family photos are quaint compared to the modern art that lines the walls of Davis's house. Before she met Davis, Aza's house was what it was. It takes this comparison for Aza to begin to question this part of her identity.



Mom very much wants for both Aza and Davis to see Aza as a strong, independent individual who is in charge of her own story, not a passive person to be taken advantage of by someone with wealth and power. Mom also shows that she sees Davis as little more than a spoiled rich boy. Just as Davis fears, Aza's mom sees him as nothing more than his money and what that can get him.



Davis suggests that people aren't powerful as much as the things they occupy their time with, like money or God, are powerful. He suggests that the people themselves aren't the ones in control: rather, power controls people.



Davis insists on seeing Rosa through a similar lens that Aza's mom insists on seeing Davis: it's obvious that she cares for Davis, but he insists on remembering that she cares about him because she gets a paycheck. He distills their relationship down to their exchange of money, and refuses to acknowledge any true emotions he may have toward her.



Noah is struggling with the process of growing up before he's truly ready to do so. He had a very particular idea in his mind of what the story of his life would be, and now that the story is changing to something entirely unknown, it's a difficult thing for him to deal with. Notice that Mr. Pickett is intent on controlling life and how it's lived, as evidenced by "curing death" via Tua.



Davis says that his dad doesn't owe him anything, but he wishes he'd do the "dad stuff" like take Noah to school and not disappear. Aza apologizes and Davis asks if she's been in love. She hasn't, and neither has he. He says they should go outside to see the **meteor shower**.

Davis leads Aza to two pool loungers set up on the golf course. He deems the cloudy **sky** disappointing, but Aza asks him to describe what they'd be seeing if it weren't cloudy. He explains what the shower would be like and Aza insists that the meteor shower is still beautiful and romantic, they just can't see it. She thinks about the phrase "in love" and how love is the only thing you're ever "in." She thinks it's just like being in her thought **spirals**.

Aza mentions the "widening gyre" in the poem "The Second Coming." She says that the widening gyre isn't scary—what's scary is the tightening gyre. She says it feels like a prison cell. Davis suggests she write a poem in response to Yeats and admits that he writes bad poetry. Aza asks to read some of it and Davis refuses, but finally recites one for her. He says he likes short poems with weird rhyme schemes.

Aza leans over and kisses Davis. When she pulls away, she asks him for another poem. He recites a couplet and they kiss again. Aza thinks she enjoys kissing him until she realizes his tongue has been in her mouth. She begins to **spiral** and thinks she needs to check to see if his **microbes** stay in her body. She tries to resist but finally, the spiral wins and she pulls away. She quickly pulls out her phone and finds a study that says that gut microbiomes are "modestly but consistently altered" by kissing.

Davis tries to touch Aza, but she jerks away and tries to mentally talk herself down from her growing desire to go to a bathroom. Finally, she tells Davis she needs to use the restroom. Aza starts sweating and feels sick and pathetic. Davis directs her towards a guest bathroom. Aza opens up her finger pad and replaces the Band-Aid. She can't find mouthwash, so she gargles water in her mouth a few times before returning to Davis.

Like Noah, Davis also has an idea of the narrative he'd like his father to follow, though he accepts that it won't actually happen. Asking Aza if she's been in love is an attempt to ascribe order and meaning to Davis and Aza's budding relationship.



When Aza draws an equivalence between being "in love" and "in thought spirals," she suggests that both are situations in which she's out of control and at the mercy of her mind or emotions. By calling attention to the language she uses to talk about being "in love" or "in a thought spiral," Aza tries to create a sense of meaning out of an absence of knowledge and control.



What's scary for Aza is being forced to exist inside her own brain, not the rest of the world as represented by the "widening gyre." Davis's poetry shows him attempting to use language to make meaning of what's happening in his life.



Aza's fear of bacteria is far stronger than her enjoyment of this intimate moment with Davis. The study's results represent proof that other people have the power to literally change her identity and her microbial makeup, which reinforces her fears that she's not in control. It also adds another face to her multiple identities, as now Davis will be a part of her forever.



Once again, physical intimacy with Davis makes Aza so psychologically uncomfortable that she has to excuse herself. Her fear of bacteria keeps her from being able to enjoy one of the experiences that are so memorable and exciting for so many teenagers: their first time holding hands or kissing somebody.



Davis leads Aza to sit down with him and asks if she's okay. Aza says she's fine, just panicky, and explains that kissing freaks her out. She says she gets into thought **spirals** and can't get out. Davis says they don't have to kiss, but Aza insists that she's not going to get better and she can't be normal if she can't kiss someone. Davis insists that it's fine, and Aza suggests they watch a movie. Davis leads her downstairs and asks if she'd prefer Star Trek or Star Wars. Aza says she doesn't like **space** movies, but they decide on a Star Trek movie anyway. Her thoughts continue to run wild.

In the theater, Davis asks how Aza can be friends with Daisy and not like **space** operas. Aza worries that they're both trying to act normal, when they both know that nothing is normal. Davis asks Aza if she has read Daisy's fanfiction. Aza hasn't, and Davis suggests she try it. Aza pretends to watch the movie and thinks of the Pettibon **spiral** painting while trying to practice her breathing exercises.

When the movie ends, Aza says she's tired. Davis drives her home and kisses her on the lips on her doorstep. Aza goes into the garage to get her dad's phone and sneaks past Mom, asleep on the couch. She plugs in the phone in her room and scrolls through the photos until Mom interrupts her and asks if she's talking to her dad. Aza says she was telling him secrets. Mom apologizes for hurting Davis's feelings, but Aza only replies by saying she's going to change in the bathroom. In the bathroom, she thinks about how disgusting her body is and changes her Band-Aid.

Mom is waiting for Aza when she comes out of the bathroom. Mom asks if Aza is feeling anxious, but Aza insists she's fine. She crawls into bed and turns out the light. Mom comes into Aza's room and sings a lullaby until Aza falls asleep.

CHAPTER 13

Davis texts Aza early the next morning and asks if she'd like to watch another movie. Aza declines the offer and apologizes for freaking out and sweating. Davis observes that Aza doesn't seem to like her body much and compliments her on her body. Aza says she can't date, and Davis agrees that dating is too much work. He likens it to a Ferris wheel: when people are on a Ferris wheel, all they can talk about is the wheel, and when people date, they can only talk about dating.

Aza is intensely disturbed by the "self" that she is right now, which only increases her fear that she possesses multiple identities. She's aware that what she's experiencing isn't normal, and when her lived experience doesn't match up with the story in her head, it's understandably off-putting for her. Aza has already hinted at what the fix might be for her spirals: following them inward makes her more anxious, but she hasn't tried following the spirals outward.



Aza fears that this entire evening is a play or a fiction. Davis tries to distract her by talking about real fiction in the form of Daisy's stories, but Aza is experiencing too much inner chaos and turmoil to be able to engage in this line of conversation.



Aza's fear of bacteria and infection causes her to actively despise her body, which hosts bacteria and can contract infection. She sees her body as entirely separate from her mind, which continues to heighten the sense of having multiple identities. Her physical body represents weakness and fear, though her mind isn't necessarily safe either.



The lullaby, which is presumably one that Aza is familiar with, shows Mom trying to use past narratives to give Aza a sense of calm and control in the present.



A Ferris wheel is, like Aza's compulsive thoughts, circular—and Davis sees it as a circle that never ends and is entirely consuming. Perhaps Davis's thoughts are, like Aza's, also trapped in repetitive loops. Although the metaphor is a simple one, it shows that Davis enjoys using language to create meaning in unexpected ways.



The next day, Aza has an appointment with Dr. Singh. Aza tells her about Davis and Dr. Singh notes that a change in circumstances can trigger anxiety, even if the change is objectively good. When Dr. Singh asks about intrusive thoughts, Aza recounts her experience making out with Davis and how grossed out she is that his **bacteria** will be a part of her forever. Dr. Singh says it's a fear of intimacy. Aza groans and the conversation turns to her medication, and Aza again tries to explain that she thinks it's disturbing that she can only become "herself" by taking a medication that fundamentally changes her.

Aza tells Dr. Singh that she fears she's a fiction. She explains that she wonders if there's a part of her that would stay the same no matter what her circumstances, and explains that she doesn't control her thoughts, can't control if she gets cancer, and therefore isn't in control of her body, which makes her a story told by her thoughts and her body and not actually real. Dr. Singh deems this idea "interesting," and suggests that it must be scary to feel imprisoned.

Dr. Singh mentions a moment in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* where a character speaks to the author, asking him to let her out of the novel. Dr. Singh tells Aza that she gives her thoughts too much power. Aza asks if her thoughts are her, citing Descartes's dictum, "I think, therefore I am." Dr. Singh says that what Descartes was actually saying was that one's ability to doubt reality actually proves their realness.

When Aza gets home, Mom asks her how her appointment went. Aza says it was fine, and Mom apologizes again for insulting Davis but tells Aza to be careful with him. She says that she can see Aza's anxiety increasing. Aza insists that Davis isn't to blame, but Mom says that she seems trapped in her mind. Aza asks Mom what she wants to hear and says she has to read for school.

Mom mentions that she spoke to Aza's history teacher and he said that Aza's most recent essay was the best he's seen. Aza throws out the names of a few private colleges and says she might want to look at going there. Mom reminds Aza that the application process is rigged and expensive, and says that she thinks Aza would be more comfortable close to home. Aza finally escapes the interaction.

Dr. Singh points out that physical intimacy naturally entails the kind of bacterial exchanges that Aza finds terrifying, but Aza's fear seems to go deeper than a simple fear of intimacy. Remember that she wanted to kiss Davis, and liked it until her intrusive thoughts began. Aza is battling her mind, not the fear of another person. Her continued unwillingness to take her medication represents her underlying fear of changing her self, even if her current self isn't well.



Here, Dr. Singh likens Aza's feeling of lack of control to the feeling of imprisonment, suggesting that she is trapped in her mind. Aza worries again about being "a story," which is interesting in part because she's correct: John Green is in control of her fate and she's not actually real. This in turn raises the question of whether anybody is actually more than the stories they tell about themselves.



Once again, the characters in this novel draw on the words of other writers and thinkers to help them create meaning and order in their own lives. Perhaps Joyce's character in some way inspired Green as he was developing Aza's character. Passages like these owe a lot to Joyce for the ways in which the fiction becomes elaborately self-referential.



Mom is more correct about Aza's mental state than she realizes, though being correct isn't helpful at this point. Aza suggests that she's willing to tell Mom something to make her happy, true or not, in order to make Mom stop worrying about her.



Mom's reminder that the college application process is expensive shows that she not only thinks realistically about the cost of education for a middle class family, but may even have personal reasons for wanting Aza to stay close to home. Perhaps she is making an indirect plea for Aza not to think of college as a way of escaping her problems.



Aza does her homework and then thinks about texting Davis. Finally, she gives in and asks him what he meant when he said he liked her body. Aza is almost asleep when Davis replies. He tells her that different parts of her body are beautiful, and Aza asks why texting is fun but kissing is scary. Davis invites her to watch a movie on Monday, and Aza agrees.

Aza is able to be a flirtier, more confident person over text messages than she can be in person: she likes who she is better over the phone than in real life, perhaps because she has more control over her language and the way it is perceived.



CHAPTER 14

Before school on Monday, Aza tells Daisy about kissing Davis and texting him. Daisy says that kissing is gross when Aza describes it in terms of **bacteria**, but she suggests that maybe it's making Aza healthier. Aza wonders if kissing will get less scary as time goes on. Daisy assures her she'll be fine and runs off to kiss Mychal.

Daisy has a point: though there are a number of theories as to exactly how it works, it's generally accepted that kissing does come with health benefits as a result of sharing bacteria. Even though Aza's mind believes otherwise, kissing Davis was not only not dangerous—on the contrary, it may have been beneficial.



At the Pickett estate after school, Lyle lets Aza through the gate and then takes her to Davis in his golf cart. As they ride, he asks her how Davis is doing. Aza says he's fine, but Lyle insists he's fragile. He asks Aza if she has lost someone and then says that she understands since she has lost someone. Aza thinks that losing someone yourself isn't enough to truly understand someone else's pain.

Even if Lyle is paid to care about Davis, he demonstrates here that he genuinely cares for Davis, and wants to make sure the people that Davis brings into his life feel the same way. Though Lyle insists that the story of loss is one, single story, Aza's thoughts show that she doesn't agree.



At the pool, Davis and Noah are sitting hunched on a pool lounger. He tells Aza that he needs a few minutes, so she gets back in the golf cart with Lyle and they drive to the onsite lab for a tour. Aza tells Lyle her dad is dead as they drive. Lyle lets Aza into the lab, where Malik is looking through a microscope. He remains engrossed for a minute before explaining that Tua's blood doesn't last very long outside the body. He explains that tuatara have been around a thousand times longer than humans. Malik explains that Mr. Pickett loves that Tua is forty years old and still in the first quarter of her life. Aza asks if this is why Tua will inherit the estate, and Malik says there are worse uses for the money. Aza isn't sure she agrees.

It's interesting to note the relationship between Tua, a reptile, and Aza's reptilian or "lizard brain": the limbic system, or the primitive part of the brain that is partially responsible for Aza's anxiety, fear, and intrusive thoughts. Tua represents an actual reptile who is doing just fine in life with her reptilian brain, while Aza struggles to move through life because of the reptilian part of her brain. Aza will have to conquer that part of her brain and become, in a sense, more human if she wishes to become well.



Malik explains that the molecular evolution rate of tuatara is exceedingly slow. He explains that tuatara today look the same as their fossils and change very slowly, but on a molecular level, they evolve faster than any other animal. Malik says that this raises a bunch of questions that are currently unanswerable, which is why he loves science.

Although what Malik describes is somewhat chaotic, it is a controlled chaos. Science is, at root, an attempt to ascribe order to a world that appears chaotic. In contrast to Aza, for whom unanswerable questions are a source of anxiety and dread, Malik sees unanswerable questions as a welcome challenge—and a source of joy and wonder.



Davis comes in the door behind Aza. Aza thanks Malik for the tour and follows Davis out of the lab. He explains that Noah got caught with pot at school and is suspended. Aza thinks that kids get arrested—not suspended—for having pot at her school. Davis says that Noah seems to want to get in trouble and needs a dad. He says that Aza is the only one he can talk to, and Aza fixates on the "only."

In the theater, Davis starts *Jupiter Ascending* and says that if Aza doesn't like it, she can choose the next ten movies. Aza holds Davis's hand and giggles at the movie. She thinks that holding hands feels nice and leans over to kiss him. It's fine for a minute, but then the thoughts flood her mind and she has to pull away. Davis suggests they take it slow and says she'll love the next scene of the movie.

Aza thinks of a poem about counting snowflakes and thinks that you can only count a few before it becomes a blizzard, and her thoughts are the same way. She thinks about Davis's saliva and **bacteria** and finally excuses herself to the bathroom. Noah is playing a video game and calls Aza's name when he hears her, but Aza runs to the bathroom. She tries to shut down her thoughts, but fails. She squeezes hand sanitizer into her mouth and swallows.

When Aza comes out of the bathroom, Noah tells Aza that nobody wants to find his dad. Noah wonders why his dad isn't trying to contact them, or if he is trying and they just don't know it. Aza suggests that Mr. Pickett is waiting until it's safe and that maybe he's scared, but she promises Noah to keep looking.

Back in the basement, Davis asks Aza if she's okay. She apologizes and says she can't talk about it, and tries to hide her hand sanitizer breath. Davis says he heard her talking to Noah, and Aza struggles to stay present with Davis while her thoughts tell her she needs to drink more hand sanitizer. She tells Davis that Noah should see a psychologist, but Davis insists he just needs a father. They decide to watch the movie in silence and Aza's **spiral** tightens.

Aza's remark highlights the difference between Noah's private school with wealthy pupils and Aza's public school in how they deal with illegal substances. Drug possession is a small, excusable offense for Noah, while it could put a public school student in jail.



Aza very much wants to be able to participate in this intimate moment with Davis. She doesn't fear intimacy; she fears the bacteria that come with intimacy. She fears the addition of extra identities to her body in the form of bacteria.



Aza's situation is getting serious. Drinking hand sanitizer is dangerous, as she'll later learn, but at this point it's her last-ditch attempt to clear Davis's bacteria from her body. Noah sees Aza as the one person who truly cares and has agreed to help him bring order to his life, whether or not she truly will.



In Noah's youthfulness, he's more willing to believe that it's a breakdown of language that's keeping his dad from contacting him than a simple desire to not have contact. Believing this allows him to keep believing his father loves him.



Aza's identity is beginning to show signs that it's splitting. She struggles to divide her attention between the war going on inside her mind and her real-world interactions with Davis. Language fails Aza and Davis here, as Aza can't make Davis understand how she feels, or that Noah needs more help than either Aza or Davis can provide.



CHAPTER 15

That night, Aza tries to text Davis, gives up, and pulls out her laptop. She searches for usernames similar to Davis's other ones and finally searches a line from one of Davis's poems. She finds a blog created two months ago that follows the same format as Davis's last blog. Most of the entries are about feeling alone and the vastness of the world. Aza finally notices that a "she" shows up in the blog and realizes it's her. All the entries about her start with a line from [The Tempest](#).

Aza clicks over to the "poems" tab on the blog and reads poems about Davis's parents. Aza's phone vibrates with a text from Davis. He asks if she's on his blog and is relieved that she is: he says he doesn't want his poems published. He asks how she found it and says he doesn't want to have to take the blog down.

Aza asks if Davis wants to facetime. He agrees and when they begin the call, they don't talk—they just silently look at each other on their screens. Aza realizes they can only see each other in the dark because the light from their phones provides the light to illuminate their faces. Aza feels as though they're together in a "non-sensorial place" and closer than they could be in real life. When they hang up, Davis texts that he likes their relationship. Aza believes him.

CHAPTER 16

Aza tells the reader that she and Davis texted and facetimed almost every night for a while, her **spirals** continued, and the medication and changing the Band-Aid kind of worked. One night, Aza begins to read Daisy's fanfiction. The most recent story, narrated by Rey, tells about Rey, Chewbacca, and their companion Ayala, whom Rey deems her "best friend and greatest burden." Ayala is very anxious and Rey describes how she and Chewbacca only shelter Ayala because her father died saving Chewbacca years ago. Ayala habitually pulls out her blue hair.

Aza thinks that Ayala is horrible. She ruins everything for Rey and Chewbacca. Many of the comments say that people love to hate Ayala, and Daisy has replied positively to most of them. Aza reads a bunch of stories and learns that Ayala never does anything right in any of the stories. Aza stays up too late reading, angry and scared. She understands that Daisy sees her as clueless, helpless, and useless.

Davis never stopped writing—he just found a different place to publish his work. It's still public since it's on the internet, but this allows him to maintain a sense of anonymity. Notably, this creation of a new internet identity is comforting for Davis, while for Aza experiencing a similar "split" within her identity is anxiety-inducing.



Leaving aside Davis's own wishes about what happens to his work, it's worth noting that publishing private work on the internet is inherently risky. Davis really has no control over who finds his blog or saves his poems, leaving that part of his identity extremely exposed and vulnerable.



Aza finds this light cycle comforting, and it allows her to feel close to Davis. Video chat in general enables someone to be somewhere without actually being there, which is certainly comforting to Aza: since there's no fear of bacterial contamination over facetime, she can experience the emotional intimacy she craves.



Aza makes it very clear that despite the fact that she lives with these intensely painful spirals, life goes on and the spirals don't consume all of her life. This shows that even within the month-long timeframe of the story, Aza lives in a cycle of relative wellness and illness. Readers now see how Daisy deals with the struggles of everyday life: she transposes the problems in her life onto the lives of fictional Star Wars characters.



Aza sees that Ayala is intended to represent her. What makes Ayala all the more terrifying for Aza is that Ayala is a version of Aza that is entirely beyond Aza's control, since she's Daisy's creation. Aza reads Daisy's positive comments as an endorsement that Ayala (and Aza by extension) are characters that are supposed to be despised.



When Aza sees Daisy at school, she feels like Daisy is only right to deal with her by creating the character Ayala. Daisy asks Aza what's wrong and says that Aza looks horrible and like she needs some sleep. Daisy asks if she can come over after school. Aza wants to say no, but thinks that Ayala always says no. She agrees to the hangout and Daisy explains that she and Mychal are reading [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) to each other for English after Daisy and Aza hang out.

After school, Aza mostly watches Daisy watch *Attack of the Clones* and scrolls through articles about Mr. Pickett's disappearance. Daisy says something about her fanfiction stories and asks Aza what she's doing. When Aza explains, Daisy says that the mystery is over, especially since Davis paid them to drop it. Aza thinks that Daisy is right but is being rude about it.

A minute later, Daisy pauses the movie and says that in their real-life situation, the girl isn't going to get rich, decide the truth matters more than money, and go back to being poor to become a hero. Aza quietly says that nobody is taking Daisy's money away and points out that Daisy spends all her time with Mychal now. They go back to watching the movie, and Daisy says "I love you" when she leaves for Mychal's house.

CHAPTER 17

That night, Davis texts Aza and asks if they can hang out. Aza agrees. It's freezing outside as she walks from Harold to Davis's front door. Davis leaves Noah on the couch playing video games and he and Aza walk outside. Aza tells Davis that she read Daisy's fanfiction and hates Ayala. Davis insists that he likes Ayala.

Aza and Davis stop by the pool and sit on loungers. Davis worries about Noah and twirls his **Iron Man**. Aza tries to tell him that Iron Man isn't much of a superhero, but Davis changes the subject and tells her that the **Milky Way galaxy** is a massively huge **spiral** that rotates around a black hole. He asks Aza about her spirals. She tells him about Kurt Gödel, a mathematician who was deathly afraid of being poisoned. He only ate food prepared by his wife and starved to death when his wife was hospitalized and couldn't cook for him.

Now that Aza has been forced to step outside of her own head and understand how Daisy sees her, her degree of self-loathing increases tenfold. However, notice that Daisy is treating Aza with care (suggesting sleep, asking what's wrong, and asking to spend time together). This complicates Aza's understanding of what Daisy thinks, as it appears that Daisy doesn't hate Aza.



Daisy continues to insist that the mystery is over: she and Aza may not have solved Mr. Pickett's mysterious disappearance, but they received the money they were after. For Daisy, the money was the end result, while knowledge of what actually happened isn't.



Daisy feels threatened by Aza's insistence that the money isn't the end of the mystery. Daisy also implies that one can't be rich and a hero—an indication that she knows that keeping the money is not the most noble thing. However, the money clearly represents a more significant change in Daisy's life than it represents in Aza's, so she's perhaps less willing to give it up.



That Davis finds Ayala appealing only reaffirms for Aza that Ayala is a true-to-life representation of her own personality. In Aza's mind, Daisy's fanfiction proves not just that Aza is a bad person, but also shows Aza that she didn't have any real understanding of Daisy's perspective of things.



Aza's assertion that Iron Man isn't a great superhero is likely somewhat hurtful to Davis because he is so attached to his Iron Man action figure. Therefore, Aza is not just insulting Iron Man—she's actually insulting Davis. Davis introduces the idea that spirals don't have to be small and constricting. They can be the size of galaxies, though the black hole he mentions foreshadows what will happen when Aza reaches the center of her own spiral.



Davis asks Aza if she's worried the same sort of thing will happen to her. Aza says that it's weird knowing that you have a problem but being unable to figure out how to fix it because, like Gödel, you can never be sure the food isn't poisoned. Davis poses his question again, and Aza says she worries about many things.

Davis asks Aza if she'd like to swim. He strips down to his underwear and jumps into the heated pool. Aza asks Davis to turn around while she undresses and then gets into the pool with him. Davis holds her in the water but doesn't try to kiss her. Aza notes that Tua is watching them, and Davis shudders and shares that he hates Tua. When they get out of the pool, they run without towels back to the house.

Davis shows Aza his telescope. He focuses it on his favorite **star**, Tau Ceti, and explains that it's twelve light years away. He likes it because if someone were to see the light of Earth's sun from a planet in Tau Ceti's solar system, they'd see the light of the sun from twelve years ago, when Davis's mother was still alive. Aza wants to tell Davis she loves him, but isn't sure if it's true. She understands why he loves the old stars and realizes that in three years, he'll find a star further away to remember his mother by. She thinks it's much the same reason why she looks at her dad's pictures. Aza leaves and Davis asks if they can hang out at her house next time. She agrees.

When Aza gets home and tells Mom that Davis wants to come over, she answers Mom's questions about whether Davis is her boyfriend and properly listens to her. In bed, Aza checks Davis's blog. She reads one new entry, refreshes the page, and there's a brand new entry that addresses her directly—Davis knows she's reading. He posts a quote about "going out to the meadow," an expression from classical music that describes the feeling of playing music as though a musician isn't in a concert hall. Davis says that their conversation earlier was like that. The feeling they shared was important, not what they talked about.

Instead of going to sleep, Aza decides to read more of Daisy's fanfiction. She wonders how Davis can find Ayala charming, since Aza finds her self-centered and annoying. Aza then reads Wikipedia articles about fanfiction and Star Wars. She comes across an article that talks about the "gut-brain informational axis," which is the relationship between someone's gut **bacteria** and their thoughts. The thought that Aza's bacteria are indirectly controlling her thoughts is horrifying to her. She sneaks to the bathroom, changes her Band-Aid, and takes three swallows of hand sanitizer.

Aza's story about Gödel mirrors her own relationship to medication. She can't bring herself to take it regularly, because she can't be sure that it isn't changing her in a negative way.



Not all the things that money can buy are charming for Davis: Tua is decidedly not charming. This reminds the reader again that Davis is a multidimensional character who, contrary to his worst fears, is not just the sum of his wealth.



Aza and Davis are looking at much the same thing when they look at stars and photographs: they're looking at different arrangements of light that capture or represent a moment in time. Both of these formats for light work to give them a sense of control and order in their grief, and a way to mark the passing time since their parents' deaths.



Aza and Davis are formulating a sense of shared identity in their relationship, whether or not they put a label on it. Davis now uses his blog to address Aza directly, which shows that he's aware and feels in control of his audience on his blog, and is also an example of another way for him to use language to connect with Aza. Addressing her directly turns a static diary entry into something living and interactive.



Reading the fanfiction fuels Aza's sense of self-loathing and continues to break down the closeness she felt with Daisy before she realized that Daisy might despise her. What she finds is even worse than Ayala: proof that bacteria are actually controlling her thoughts and feelings. This only confirms Aza's overblown sense that bacteria are harmful, and it leads her to swallow more hand sanitizer, which is definitively far more harmful than her imagined bacterial infection.



Aza's brain reminds her that clearing out healthy **bacteria** can make room for malicious bacteria like *C. diff*. Her stomach hurts and she tries to tell herself that drinking hand sanitizer won't make her clean or healthy. Back in bed, Aza remembers when Dr. Singh first asked her if she felt like a threat to herself. She wonders how, grammatically, that's even possible if she's both the threat and the self. As she descends into the **spiral** and begins to fall asleep, she asks whoever's authoring her to let her out.

Finally, Aza actually echoes James Joyce's Ulysses by asking the author to let her out of the story. At this point, Aza's identity is splitting further, and she tries to make sense of the split by considering how exactly it works grammatically. Here, she studies and questions the words themselves to understand how they inform her self-understanding.



CHAPTER 18

Mom wakes Aza up at 6:50 and asks if she slept through her alarm. Aza makes it to school a half hour later, where Daisy tells her she looks sleepy. Daisy asks if they can hang out at Applebee's later. Aza feels ill all day and falls asleep sitting in Harold after school while she waits for Daisy to join her. She thinks she should call Dr. Singh but thinks that it won't do any good, since five years of therapy and three different medications aren't helping.

Aza seems to be reaching rock bottom as she decides that five years of therapy has done nothing for her, and asking for help isn't worth her time. She's spiraling deep inside herself and is actively shutting down by falling asleep and by distancing herself from Daisy and from Dr. Singh.



When Daisy gets into Harold, Aza quietly tells her that she barely changed her name in the fanfic and gave Ayala all Aza's personality traits and compulsions. Daisy defends herself by saying that Aza has never even read the stories before now. She concedes that creating Ayala was rude, but insists that Ayala is her own character now. She says that Aza's anxiety does invite disasters, and that being a witness to that anxiety is exhausting. Daisy says that Mychal says that Aza is like mustard: fine in small quantities, but not so great in large quantities.

Daisy confirms that she created Ayala because she struggled to deal with Aza's issues. Her insistence that Ayala is a fully separate entity from Aza is meant to mitigate the damage, but for Aza, it only proves her fear that she is made up of different identities that are despised by others and are at odds with each other.



Daisy apologizes for the mustard comment, but continues. She says that Aza doesn't even know Daisy's parents' names or jobs and hasn't been to Daisy's apartment in five years. She says that Aza is privileged and doesn't know it: Aza got braces, a laptop, and has a parent who helps with homework, while Daisy shares a room with her sister. Daisy insists that Aza wants her to be a selfless, poor heroine, but says that being poor doesn't make a person pure or good. Daisy admits that she thought the money would make her more equal to Aza, but she only realizes now that Aza is privileged and too inside her own head to think about other people.

Daisy deeply feels the pain and the weight of what she sees as many years of Aza being selfish and not caring about anyone but herself. She spells out very clearly how much more fortunate Aza is by mentioning "simple" things like braces and a parent who's able to help. She accuses Aza of embracing a fantasy in which poorness equals goodness, which Daisy understands is a damaging narrative because it suggests that people like Davis, who have wealth, are incapable of being good, while people like Daisy are incapable of being bad.



Aza feels like she's going to vomit. She can't decide if she deserves this or not as she merges onto the highway. As Daisy starts up again, Aza turns to her and asks her to imagine what it's like to actually be stuck in her head with no way out. She says that she's stuck with the mustard all the time as Daisy yells "Holmesy!" They collide with the car in front, the car behind hits them, and another car crashes as well.

Aza finally snaps and actually voices how trapped she feels in her own mind. As Aza loses control of her words (her rant seems more spur-of-the-moment than thought-out and rehearsed), she also loses control of the world around her, resulting in the car crash.



Daisy asks Aza if she's okay. Aza feels dizzy from the pain and sees spots in her vision. When Daisy asks for Aza's phone to call 911, Aza tries to get out of Harold to get her dad's phone out of the trunk. A woman tries to tell Aza to stay in the car, but Aza struggles, half blind, to Harold's trunk. Harold is crushed in front and back, and Aza can't get the trunk open. Daisy starts yelling that they almost died and Aza is upset about the car. Finally, Aza gets the trunk open. The screen of her dad's phone is shattered, and it won't turn on. She sits back in the driver's seat.

A firefighter touches Aza's shoulder and tells her to not move. Aza tries to tell him that the phone is her dad's, and the firefighter assures Aza that her dad won't be mad that she got in an accident. Aza starts to cry and blacks out as the firefighters decide if she needs a backboard.

Aza wakes up for a moment in the ambulance, and then again in the hospital. Mom is next to her, crying. Aza tells her that Dad's phone is broken. Mom assures Aza that it's okay and collapses, crying, into Daisy. Daisy has a red welt on her collarbone from her seatbelt. A nurse takes Aza away to get a CT scan. She asks Aza if she was in a car accident and notes that seatbelts do damage even though they save your life. Aza asks if she's going to need antibiotics, but the nurse says she's not a doctor. After the scan, the nurse wheels Aza back to her room with Mom and Daisy. Mom cries and paces. Aza tells Daisy that she can go home if she wants, and Daisy decides to stay.

CHAPTER 19

A doctor comes into Aza's room and says there's good news and bad news: Aza has a lacerated liver, but it's very mild and she won't need surgery. Mom fixates on the doctor's words that Aza will be okay. Aza asks if she needs antibiotics, and the doctor replies that they won't be necessary unless they end up performing surgery. Aza is relieved. The doctor makes notes about Aza's medications and tells her that they'll get her settled upstairs. Aza begins to panic and tries to tell the doctor that she absolutely cannot stay in the hospital. Mom and the doctor insist she stay, and Aza tries to tell herself that she's at low risk for a **C. diff** infection and will leave healthier than she arrived.

Daisy leaves once Aza goes upstairs. Mom falls asleep in the recliner next to the hospital bed. Aza can feel Mom's breath and microbes floating over her cheek. Mom wakes up momentarily to check on Aza, and then goes back to sleep. Aza can't sleep: she knows the **C. diff** is invading her body. She reads through articles about infections and explains that *C. diff* is actually inside everyone. The problem arises when it gets out of control.

As Aza struggles with her vision, she loses a sense that gives her a way to situate herself in her world and control where she goes. Losing her dad's phone like this also represents the death of that part of her identity and her family, as she can't access the photos in their original format anymore. Daisy is understandably upset that Aza is still so caught up in her own head—the accident was serious and could have been much worse.



The firefighter doesn't know that Aza's dad is dead, which makes this moment even more crushing for Aza. However, it's worth noting that when the firefighter talks about Aza's dad in this way, her dad comes back to life briefly through the firefighter's words.



After the accident, Aza can barely remain conscious, but she's still on high alert about the possibility of being put on antibiotics. Although she doesn't say so explicitly, it's clear that she is concerned about antibiotics because she is still thinking about the balance of bacteria inside her body—demonstrating that even in a moment of crisis where she has far more serious health issues to worry about, Aza is still in the grip of her obsessive thoughts.



Aza really has no choice but to stay in the hospital, since a lacerated liver is no laughing matter, and there's no indication that she has reached a mental "rock bottom" yet that would cause the hospital to prioritize her anxiety and mental health over her physical injuries. Aza is attempting to take control of the fearful part of her identity by telling herself that she's at low risk for C. diff. She's attempting to follow Dr. Singh's advice and use language to change her situation.



Aza's anxiety is ramping up: she believes she can actually feel the bacteria in the air thanks to her heightened anxiety. The bacteria are becoming more real by the minute. However, she also admits that C. diff is already a part of her identity—it's the part she desperately wants to not have.



Aza can't figure out when she last changed her Band-Aid. She thinks about song lyrics that talk about not being able to turn one's thoughts away from someone. Aza thinks that it's how she thinks about **C. diff** and it's not romantic at all.

Aza's thoughts **spiral**: she thinks that Daisy hates her, remembers Davis's tongue, and thinks about Mom's warm breath. She thinks about her "irreconcilable selves:" Ayala, Aza, and Holmesy. She texts Daisy and apologizes for not being a good friend. Daisy assures her that they'll make up and asks if she's on good pain meds. Aza doesn't text back, but continues to fixate on her potential for a **C. diff** infection. She pinches her finger, but it doesn't work to make her feel real.

Aza thinks she'll never have a normal life or be able to share a bathroom with strangers in college. Mom's breath becomes unbearable. Aza tries to ask Mom to turn over, but Mom won't wake up. Aza's brain tells her to stand up and makes a note of the hand sanitizer dispenser on the wall. Aza begins to argue with her brain about the merits of drinking hand sanitizer. Finally, Aza's brain wins. She stands and shuffles with her IV pole to the hand sanitizer dispenser as her brain tells her she's going to die from this. Aza rubs hand sanitizer into her hands and then shoves scoops of the foam into her mouth.

Mom wakes up and asks Aza what she's doing. Aza is embarrassed but can't stop. She puts another scoop of sanitizer in her mouth, gags, and vomits. Mom pages a nurse and tells her that Aza is vomiting from drinking hand sanitizer. Aza knows she's disgusting and thinks that she's not possessed by a demon: she *is* the demon.

CHAPTER 20

Although Aza is still narrating, the point of view changes to second person (with Aza using "you" instead of "I"). Mom tells Aza she made her Cheerios for breakfast, and Aza notices a bouquet of flowers. Mom says they're from Davis.

Aza's brain thinks that she'll never know what she consumed while she was asleep, and Aza thinks it's like her brain is on fire. She wonders if humans invented metaphor as a response to indescribable pain. The thought itself is fully formed and Aza thinks she's better until she feels nauseous. Her brain tells her that the **bacteria** are already inside her and are going to kill her. She manages to tell Mom that she's in big trouble.

Here, words from pop music give Aza a way to conceptualize her relationship to C. diff, which is not healthy or cute—it controls her life and makes her miserable.



In the hospital, the one place that Aza desperately didn't want to be, Aza is stuck considering her multiple identities and how they work (or don't work) together. As she's forced to confront her greatest fear, she's also forced to confront herself. However, she herself doesn't feel real in this terrifying place, making her grasp on reality and her own thoughts more tenuous.



The spiral tightens, and Aza's mind—or "demon"—shows that it's immensely powerful. Aza is no longer in control of her thoughts or her fears, and the style of narration makes it abundantly clear that Aza's mind is both a part of her and separate from her. Structurally, this shows how the visual aspect of written language can work to convey meaning above and beyond the words themselves.



Aza is entirely out of control as she realizes that the dangerous part of her mind is truly a part of her mind, not something foreign. She realizes she's a single self, but now, her entire self is dangerous and turned against her.



Changing the point of view gives Aza some distance from the reader and alludes to her sense of existing above and beyond her own mind and her own physical body.



Finally, from the depths of her spiral, Aza is able to formulate the words to ask for help and involve others in her painful spiral. She's learning that although her identity is fully her own, she needs assistance from others in order to find it and make it a place that's comfortable to exist in.



CHAPTER 21

The narration returns to first person. Aza tells the reader that after she descended into "proper madness," she solved the mystery of Davis Pickett Sr.'s disappearance, using her obsessiveness and becoming a great detective in the process. She walks into the sunset with either Davis or Daisy and realizes she has control over her thoughts.

Aza says that that definitely didn't happen. She stayed in bed in the hospital for a week, and the hospital staff thought she was an alcoholic until they got in contact with Dr. Singh. When Dr. Singh arrives, she sits next to Aza and they talk about Aza's medication. Aza admits that she felt the medication was making her worse, and Dr. Singh explains that drinking hand sanitizer isn't a sign that Aza's mental health is improving, as hand sanitizer is extremely dangerous to ingest. She says they need to find a medication that Aza will tolerate and take regularly, and says they haven't found one that works yet.

Dr. Singh comes every morning and a doctor checks on Aza's liver every afternoon. On Aza's last day, Dr. Singh asks Aza if she thinks she's a threat to herself. Aza admits that she's having intrusive thoughts, but is honest that she hasn't consumed hand sanitizer. Dr. Singh tells Aza that she doesn't have to be afraid of thinking about wanting to drink hand sanitizer, and tells her that only time and taking medication will help. Aza says it feels like a noose is tightening around her and struggling makes it worse. Dr. Singh tells Aza that she's going to survive.

Dr. Singh comes to Aza's house twice per week. Mom makes sure that Aza takes her medication, and Aza isn't allowed to get out of bed except to use the bathroom. This continues for two weeks. Aza doesn't allow Daisy or Davis to visit, and doesn't read or watch TV. She keeps her phone off until the end of the two weeks, at which point she turns it on and finds over 30 messages from Daisy, Davis, other friends, and teachers.

Aza returns to school in December. She says that she isn't wondering whether or not to take her medication, but isn't sure yet that it's working. Mom drives Aza to school since Aza is too scared to drive and Harold is totaled. Mom assures Aza that her friends and teachers will understand.

Aza challenges the idea that illness is only real when others can see it (like when she's compulsively drinking hand sanitizer). Of course, Aza knows this isn't true—she was ill long before she started consuming hand sanitizer.



Medications like those prescribed for anxiety differ from something like hand sanitizer in that they don't always "work" in the way that hand sanitizer does—they're not a one-size-fits-all solution. With Aza's intense fear of bacteria, this makes something like hand sanitizer seem far more reliable, as it's easier to attack the bacteria directly than it is to trust that the medication is calming her anxiety about the bacteria.



Dr. Singh confirms one of the primary underlying messages of the novel: that mental illness isn't something that Aza will "recover" from in a conventional sense. She'll have to continue to take medication and attend therapy in order to manage her thoughts, but if she does, she'll learn to control some of the intrusive thoughts that threaten to split her identity in two or more parts.



Aza takes this time to simply be with herself and her selves. Although Aza never states what medication she is on, it's likely a drug that takes several weeks to begin taking effect. By the end of these two weeks, during which she's taking the pills regularly, Aza is therefore likely beginning to benefit from the effects of the medication.



Aza's fear of driving shows that her anxiety certainly isn't gone now that she's taking her medication as prescribed. She'll still experience it, it just won't be as crippling or as destructive as it was in the hospital.



Daisy waits for Aza on the front steps. Aza notices that she got a haircut as Daisy asks if they can hug without hurting Aza's liver. Aza compliments the haircut, which Daisy deems a disaster. Aza and Daisy both apologize to each other, and Daisy says that Aza has to read her new fanfiction, which is an apology. She continues by saying that Aza is exhausting but endlessly fascinating, and is pizza, not mustard.

Aza tries to apologize again, but Daisy cuts her off. She insists that she wants to be buried next to Aza, and asks Aza if she should keep talking. Aza nods. Daisy explains that she and Mychal broke up, she sold her car, and Elena put gum in her hair, which necessitated the haircut. She says she plans to take Uber everywhere now and asks Aza if she should keep going. Aza nods again, and Daisy says that this is why they're destined to be friends forever. She says that after Elena put gum in her hair, she paid for the haircut out of the college fund her parents made her set up for Elena.

Daisy says that the breakup with Mychal made the lunch table awkward, so they're going to picnic outside today. She tells Aza that a lot has happened since Aza lost her mind. Aza corrects her that she can't lose her mind, since it's inescapable. Daisy responds that she feels that way about her virginity, which is the other reason she broke up with Mychal. Daisy walks Aza to Biology and tells her that she used to think she was in a romance movie, but realizes now she was in a buddy comedy.

At lunch, Aza and Daisy sit outside eating leftover pizza. Daisy says she's been thinking a lot about how Mr. Pickett left his kids without saying goodbye, and feels bad for him. Aza thinks that she feels bad for Noah, who wonders if his father will call and then plays video games to distract himself from the fact that he didn't call. Aza thinks how horrible it must be to know that your father privileged a tuatara over you.

Aza asks what Daisy's parents do. Daisy laughs. Her dad works at the State Museum, and her mom works at a dry cleaners. Daisy explains that her parents weren't at all mad about the money from Davis, and made her set up the college fund for Elena. Aza feels her finger bleeding and knows she'll have to change her Band-Aid before class, but likes sitting next to Daisy for now.

Aza is expanding her spiral by noticing and commenting on Daisy's haircut. She has room in her mind now to involve more people and think about them and how they feel. Daisy's language suggests that she's returning to situating her identity in relation to Aza, and possibly not to Mychal.



Even if Daisy finds Aza unbearable at times, the girls complement each other: Daisy talks, Aza listens. Essentially, the way they use language with each other matches up and allows them to both understand and appreciate each other. When Daisy's parents make her set up a college fund for Elena, they force her to see another's need and do something nice to help make the need easier to bear.



Daisy realizes now, at the end of the novel, that she was moving through life as though it were a different kind of story than it actually is. Daisy's comment about being in a "buddy comedy" asks the reader to take the novel as more of an exploration of the girls' friendship than an exploration of Aza's relationship to Davis—though of course it can be both.



Daisy feels bad for someone behaving cruelly and selfishly, while Aza feels bad for someone who doesn't have knowledge or closure. Eating pizza here is a nod back to Daisy's assertion that Aza is like pizza. Notably, in this case, Aza isn't bothered by eating something that symbolizes her self—a sign that she may be getting better.



Finally, Aza expands her spiral to include Daisy's family by asking these questions that Daisy insisted Aza didn't know about. Readers are given proof that Aza's anxiety is more controlled now when she doesn't feel the compulsion to go change her Band-Aid immediately.



Daisy asks about Davis, but Aza hasn't talked to him or anyone else. Daisy asks Aza if she thought about killing herself. Aza says she's only thought about not wanting to be the way she is. She says she feels non-navigable, like the White River. Daisy insists that the point of the story of how Indianapolis was built is that people managed to build a decent city around a useless river. She says that Aza is the city, not the river. Aza laughs. Both girls lie down and look up through the branches of the oak tree at the **sky**.

Daisy says she wishes she understood how Aza feels. Aza explains that she doesn't hate herself, because she can't find a self to hate. She says that her mind is like nesting dolls, but she never finds the solid nesting doll that's her self in the middle. Daisy tells Aza the story of a scientist who gives a presentation about the history of the earth. At the end of the talk, a woman stands up and informs the scientist that the world is actually flat and resting on the back of a turtle. The scientist asks what the turtle is standing on. The woman says it's standing on another turtle, and that there's no end: it's turtles all the way down. Daisy suggests that Aza is trying to find the turtle at the bottom, but it doesn't work that way. Aza feels like this is a spiritual revelation.

Aza stops at Mom's classroom after lunch and tells her about the money from Davis. She says she's saving it for college. Mom says that much money isn't a gift and that Aza should give it back. Aza says that the money didn't make her sick and that she doesn't feel indebted to Davis. Mom starts to say that she can't lose Aza, but Aza interrupts and asks Mom to stop saying that. She says it makes her feel like she's actively doing something to hurt Mom and it makes her feel worse. Mom says that she is losing Aza, but agrees that Aza should be able to make her own choices. Aza thinks of the way she loves Mom, in a mental refrain of "thank you I'm sorry."

Mychal catches Aza on her way to History and asks her to talk to Daisy about the breakup for him. Aza flags down Daisy and tells her and Mychal to talk to each other about their relationship. A few minutes later, Daisy texts Aza and says that she and Mychal are now friends who kiss. Aza texts Davis and apologizes for not texting him. They agree to meet that night at Applebee's.

Aza suggests that she didn't want death specifically—she just wanted peace and escape. She finds her self to be unknowable and undiscoverable, since her "waterways" are difficult to get through. Daisy's comment that Aza is the city and not the river suggests that if Aza continues treatment, she will become something wonderful despite her difficult waterways.



Even now, Aza still sees herself as being made up of multiple identities, though not all of those identities are visible (as evidenced by the solid nesting doll metaphor). Daisy's story suggests that Aza is an uncountable number of identities, and further, that trying to count them is a futile exercise. For her, simply realizing that there maybe is no "clean self" or solid nesting doll allows her to become comfortable with the chaos inside her mind. This mirrors Malik's statement about science: it just makes more questions, which isn't a bad thing.



Mom begins to understand that her desire to protect and hold onto Aza is somewhat responsible for exacerbating Aza's anxiety, as Aza feels pressure to behave and think in a way that will make Mom happy and comfortable. By conceding that Aza should be able to make her own decisions, she allows Aza to begin to solidify her identity and move ahead in the world. This symbolizes a split in the mother-child relationship, but a solidifying of Aza's identity.



When Daisy uses her own words, she gets what she wants out of her relationship with Mychal. This also shows Aza rejecting a role that Mychal would like to impose on her—that of a messenger. In turn, Aza is able to further solidify what she wants her own identity to be.



CHAPTER 22

Aza struggles to drive Mom's car to Applebee's. She keeps thinking about the accident and thinks that the worst part of the accident was losing her dad's phone. She gets to Applebee's and hugs Davis. Aza thinks that Davis is going to want to "put his **bacteria** in her mouth." She remembers Dr. Singh saying that unwanted thoughts are like cars on the road and you don't have to get in them. Aza gets into the mental car.

Davis and Aza make small talk as Aza's mind begins to **spiral** about the dangers of kissing Davis. Davis brings Aza out of her reverie, and she asks him to sit on the other side of the booth. She says she's generally good, but not good right now, and that she can't do a relationship. She says she probably won't get any better than she already is. Davis insists that he's fine doing things the way they are, but Aza says that he certainly wants to kiss and "do other normal couple things." She tries to explain that kissing is one of the things her brain believes is going to kill her, and she knows she's hurting Davis.

Davis asks Aza if she feels like she's getting better. Aza thinks that everyone wants to hear that she's getting better. She says that she feels fragile and asks how he and Noah are. Davis says that Noah is still struggling. One minute he's a kid who cries, and the next he's a vodka-drinking "dudebro." Davis begins to seem uncomfortable, and it occurs to Aza that Davis probably likes that she doesn't ask many questions.

The conversation struggles. Aza realizes that they're never going to be what they were. She texts Davis when she gets home. He texts back that he feels like Aza only likes him at a distance when she can't be close. She never replies.

At lunch the next day, Daisy grabs Aza and asks if she wants to go to a guerilla art show. She explains that Mychal submitted his photography project to an arts collective and it was accepted into a show that will take place in part of the Pogue's Run tunnel, one of the tunnels that Pickett Engineering was supposed to expand. Daisy says she'd really appreciate it if Aza came. Aza finally agrees and tells Daisy she loves her.

Again, even though Aza appears to be "better" by many standards (and one could even call her courageous here for driving after the accident), she's not 100% well. Her anxiety still has power over her life, and even if Davis himself is fine, the bacterial fear that he represents is not.



Language begins to fail Aza here. Although she's trying to explain the intricacies of her brain to Davis, and is also trying to talk herself down and away from her anxiety, neither is working. As the two characters essentially break up their unofficial relationship, Aza sees once again that Davis can't have everything he wants just because he has money. Money can't solve Aza's mental health problems and make her feel okay with physical intimacy.



Aza again acknowledges that the narrative of illness isn't always appropriate for the realities of mental illness. Noah is still acting out and experimenting with his identity. Drinking vodka is an activity that is supposed to be for adults, while crying in bed isn't. In that sense, he's experiencing a kind of split identity, much like Aza—suggesting that perhaps such splits are just part of growing up.



Davis suggests that the closeness Aza felt when the two were texting and facetimeing wasn't shared. Her control and power was his powerlessness—as he wanted to be closer to her than she would allow.



Aza finally uses her words to actually tell Daisy how she feels about her—something that she hasn't done much in the past. In doing so, she strengthens her relationship with Daisy. The show in the Pogue's Run tunnel brings the story back to the beginning by bringing it back to Pickett Engineering, the company at the center of the mystery of Pickett Sr.'s disappearance.



When Daisy and Mychal stop to pick up Aza that night, Aza feels underdressed. In Mychal's minivan, Daisy and Aza sing along with one of their favorite songs. Aza sings the background vocals that repeat "you're everything," and thinks that it's true. She thinks that a person can be the narrator, the protagonist, and the sidekick. When the song changes, Aza thinks about turtles all the way down. She thinks that the old lady and the scientist were both right. The world is billions of years old, but it's also the stories that people tell about it.

Mychal parks in a business parking lot. He, Daisy, and Aza get out into a crowd of twenty-somethings and middle-aged couples. A woman approaches Mychal. He tells her he has a piece in the show, and she introduces herself as the curator. She begins to lead them down to the gallery, but stops every few seconds to introduce Mychal to someone. Finally, Daisy tells Mychal that she and Aza are going to head down to the gallery.

Daisy and Aza make their way down a hill, guided by a waving flashlight beam ahead. A man at the opening of the tunnel gives the girls hard hats with lights and tells them how to get to the gallery. The tunnel smells of sewage and rot, and they can hear rodents scurrying around. Daisy is scared, but Aza isn't. She follows the headlamps ahead of them and leads Daisy to the gallery, which is lit only by the viewers' headlamps. Mychal's piece is Aza's favorite. Someone sets up a stereo and begins passing around cups of wine. Aza feels sweaty and asks Daisy if they could go for a walk.

Daisy isn't thrilled, but agrees to go with Aza. Daisy says that she doesn't understand how Aza can be so calm in a nasty sewer, but has panic attacks about her potentially infected finger. Aza insists that the sewer isn't scary and tells Daisy to turn off her headlamp. When Daisy finally agrees, Aza explains that her mind feels like this in the dark. She doesn't know where the walls are or which way is up. She doesn't have control over decisions or fears, but says that being able to turn the light on is power. Daisy asks if it's that bad, and asks if Aza's flashlight is working now.

As they walk, Daisy asks if Aza would mind if she killed off Ayala. Aza says that she read the most recent story and is actually coming to like Ayala. Daisy promises Ayala a heroic death, and comments that the smell is getting worse. She wants to go back, but Aza sees a pinprick of light and wants to find it. The end of the tunnel is where the water from the city is supposed to be diverted from the White River, but the water is dripping in the river anyway.

Aza is beginning to integrate her different selves. She's certainly the protagonist of the novel, even though she often positioned herself as Daisy's sidekick through her narration. Finally, Aza seems to realize that her words do indeed have power. She can be all these things and tell stories about herself and the world, and what she tells will influence how she and others think about herself and the world.



Mychal actually gets to try on the identity of a successful artist at the show. Compare this to Mychal's earlier experience in Davis's house: this experience is far grungier and messier than Davis's manicured home, which suggests that being an artist may not be as easy or as clean as Mychal thought it might be.



Aza shows that she's becoming more aware of her reactions to intense situations (like the darkness in the tunnel), and she's far more willing to use her words to express her needs and involve others than she once was: she asks Daisy to accompany her when she gets nervous, presumably about the prospect of drinking anything inside the sewage tunnel.



This metaphor allows Aza to communicate to Daisy what inhabiting her mind is truly like: limitless, but scary because it's limitless. When Aza says that there's power in being able to turn on the light, she's saying there's power in knowledge and control. This thematically ties back to Aza's medication, as the medication can be seen as a way for her to turn on the light. It allows her some control over her dark and worrying anxiety.



Here, the girls are confident enough in their safety and in their control of the situation that they persist in following the tunnel, despite the shockingly bad smell. When Daisy offers to kill Ayala, she offers to give Aza a way to simplify her identity by just getting rid of a problematic part of it.



Aza admires the view of the city from the mouth of the tunnel. Daisy sits down and she and Aza talk about college and life. Daisy wonders if anyone will ever finish the tunnel. Aza says she hopes they don't so they can come back and admire the view. Suddenly, Aza asks where Pogue's Run starts and where its mouth is. Daisy realizes that they're in the *mouth* of the Pogue's Run tunnel: they're in the jogger's mouth. Aza stands up and feels as though Mr. Pickett is behind them.

Daisy asks what they do as they start walking back to the gallery. Aza says that she'll tell Davis, but otherwise they do nothing. Daisy wonders if Mr. Pickett is in the tunnel and comments again on the smell.

In the gallery, Aza thinks that solving mysteries should bring closure, but they really just raise more questions. When she and Daisy find Mychal, they pull him away from the women he's talking to and head out of the tunnel. When Mychal asks how their evening was, Daisy deflects and asks him to talk about his evening.

When Aza gets home, Mom asks her what the smell is. Aza explains that it's a mix of things, and Mom tells Aza to sit down and talk to her about what she was doing. Aza does. She tells Mom everything about the mystery and the jogger's mouth, and that she's going to tell Davis but not the police. She explains that if she tells the police, Tua will get the Pickett house and the money. Mom mumbles about "the madness of wealth" and that if you worship money, it will spend you. Aza says that they need to be careful what they worship, and Mom lets Aza go shower. Aza wonders what she'll worship when she gets older. She realizes she's at the beginning of life and can be anybody.

CHAPTER 23

Aza wakes up the next morning and spends much of her morning procrastinating about texting Davis. She remembers that right after her dad died, she could still think of him as though he were real. Gradually, it became harder to picture him. Aza thinks that he's still dying in her memory.

Aza finally texts Davis and asks him to come over. He agrees to come at 5:30pm. The day moves slowly, and Aza tells Mom at a quarter to five that Davis is coming over. Mom asks if Aza feels anxious, and Aza asks if it's possible for her to just say something when she's having mental health problems rather than have to answer the constant questions.

It turns out that the phrase "jogger's mouth" was a kind of linguistic riddle or code word for the mouth of the Pogue's Run tunnel—and the key to the riddle is the similarity between the words "Run" and "jog." Notably, this light bulb moment doesn't come with celebration and fanfare, only fear.



The smell suggests that Mr. Pickett might be dead in the tunnel—and furthermore that when Mr. Pickett tried to take control of his life, he failed miserably and lost his life in doing so.



Aza and Daisy learn that solving mysteries can happen in the same way that Malik described science for Aza. It leads to more questions, not answers that make things better immediately.



By finally allowing Mom to know what's going on in Aza's life and in her head, Aza continues to loosen her spiral. She and Mom can now talk and try to make sense of Aza's discovery together. This moment marks Aza's moment of true discovery. She finally realizes that life will indeed go on, and she has many years ahead of her. Notably, she realizes that she controls what happens during those years, which represents her taking Dr. Singh's words to heart.



Aza realizes that Davis is still going through the process of remembering and grieving his dad. Davis can likely still picture his father, but Aza fears that telling Davis the truth about his father will cause Davis to begin forgetting his father.



Aza asks Mom for trust, which allows her to be independent and ask for help when she needs it (assuming Mom is able to do what Aza asks). This will allow Aza to further cement her identity and grow up.



Mom goes out to run errands, and Davis knocks on the door a bit later. Aza motions for him to sit down and tells him that the jogger's mouth is the mouth of Pogue's Run tunnel. She says she thinks Mr. Pickett might be down there and that there was a bad smell. Davis looks scared and starts to cry. He collapses into Aza, and she realizes that Noah isn't the only one who misses his father. They realize that there hadn't been communication because he'd been dead the entire time.

Aza and Davis lie on the couch. Davis asks what he should do now. Aza says that he needs to keep going and has seven years until his father is legally dead. When Davis says he has nobody, Aza reminds him that he has Noah, which sends Davis sobbing again. Davis and Aza cuddle until Mom gets home, which makes them jump. Davis insists on leaving, even though both Mom and Aza say he can stay.

Later that night, Aza tries to text Davis. He doesn't reply, so she texts Daisy to come over. An hour later, the girls sit on Aza's bed. Aza reads the new Ayala story and giggles. Daisy notes that everything worked out in the end: the heroes got rich and nobody got hurt. Aza points out that she lacerated her liver, Harold died, and Mr. Pickett is also probably dead. She says that happy endings either aren't actually happy or aren't actually endings, and everyone dies anyway. Daisy insists that you get to choose your beginnings and endings, and pick how you frame your life.

Davis never texts Aza back but does update his blog. His final post says that he knows nothing lasts, but wonders why he still misses everyone.

CHAPTER 24

In January, Aza is eating breakfast in front of the muted TV while Mom hurries around in a rush. Aza sees a breaking news banner on the screen and unmutes the TV. A reporter says that authorities believe they've found Mr. Pickett's body in the Pogue's Run tunnel, and that he likely died of exposure within a few days of his disappearance. The body was discovered after an anonymous tip.

Knowing his dad is likely dead has a very different effect on Davis than it did on Aza. For Davis, this is closure and an answer to a mystery. However, now begins a new process for Davis: that of truly grieving the death of his dad rather than just the possible loss. Davis's emotion here shows that he's also just a kid who needs a parent, much as he tries to assume the identity of a responsible adult.



Davis realizes he now has the responsibility of carrying this secret alone, or of shattering Noah's idealistic ideas about what became of their father. Davis has a great deal of power with this knowledge. How, when, and whether Davis tells Noah will change Noah's life.



Even though the girls are most certainly at the beginning of their lives, they recognize that this chapter is closing for them. Daisy, however, encourages Aza to simply take a different frame and use the power of language to take control of how she sees and makes sense of her life. It's unclear if Aza really takes Daisy's advice, as this is the end of the novel. For readers, at least, Aza's story is coming to a close.



Davis provides himself closure through writing on his blog, though whether or not he actually feels closure is left undetermined.



Finally, the mystery is solved for everyone when it's broadcast on television and Aza and Daisy's suspicions are confirmed. Mr. Pickett's death shows that trying too hard to control the spiral of one's life can have disastrous, and even deadly results.



Aza texts Davis with condolences, and assures him that she and Daisy didn't tell the police. He finally texts back that he and Noah told the police. Mom comes back into the kitchen and suggests that Aza talk to Davis, and Aza relays Davis's text. Mom wonders why the boys decided to let the estate go to a tuatara, and Aza suggests that they couldn't leave their father in the sewer. She wonders if she was wrong to tell Davis about the jogger's mouth, and Mom tells Aza to be kind to herself. Aza opens up the cut in her finger, which had finally healed. As she re-bandages in the bathroom, she thinks that she'll never beat her illness because it's a part of her.

Aza thinks that life goes on and people go on. She texts Davis and asks if they can hang out, but he doesn't reply. When Mom says they have to get to school, Aza sits in the car and mentally tells Davis to go on.

Aza continues to get better over the next few months. She and Daisy start clubs so they can list extracurriculars on their college applications and hang out at Applebee's most nights. Davis never gets back in contact. Aza misses him, her dad, and Harold.

In April, Aza and Daisy are watching their favorite band perform at an awards show when someone knocks on the door. Aza opens it to Davis holding a large box. He gives Aza the box, and Aza leads him to her backyard. They lie down in the grass and Aza shows him the **stars** from her backyard, with the branches overhead. Davis says that he and Noah are moving to Colorado. Noah will attend a special school, and Davis will finish high school at a public school. He says he's leaving the next day.

Aza asks what they're seeing in the **sky**. Davis points out Jupiter and some stars, and Aza asks why they told the police. Davis said that not knowing was eating up Noah. Davis realized that Noah needed to know where his dad was more than he needed money. Aza notices that Davis is crying a bit, and he says that he wants to stay in this moment for a long time.

Aza looks at the **sky** and realizes how big it is. She thinks that Davis must know that **spirals** do get smaller as they go inward, but they also get bigger if you follow them out, and feeling small under the sky is comforting. Aza realizes that she loves Davis and always will, even if they never said it. She thinks that it won't be terrible to miss him forever.

Aza understands that what Davis and Noah needed more than money was the closure that official recognition of their father's death would bring. They needed closure for themselves even if the results aren't as positive as one might hope. Aza's note about her finally-healed finger suggests that she is indeed getting better, though she understands now that this is something she will be dealing with for the rest of her life. However, she's now able to conceptualize that there will be a "rest of her life."



Aza uses her mind and her mental language to control how she thinks about Davis. By mentally freeing herself from him, she begins to make peace with the impact he made on her life.



Although Aza becomes more focused on her future, she also misses the past. This itself becomes a spiral of sorts, though it appears as though Aza is moving along a widening spiral, not a tightening one.



By showing Davis the stars from her house, Aza is finally able to show Davis what her perspective looks like. They look at the same stars, but in an entirely different way: Davis can see them unobstructed from the golf course, while Aza must look up through trees to see them. Moving to Colorado shows Davis privileging his brother's happiness over his own—a mature decision.



Davis confirms that Noah needed knowledge and closure more than he needed money. What Noah wanted wasn't something that money, a big house, or a nice school could buy. He wanted love and a family.



Aza finally becomes comfortable with the knowledge that Davis will be a part of her forever, in her memory and in her gut microbiome. He shaped her and made her who she is in the future and is therefore always going to be a part of her identity.



Aza steps out of the story and says she now knows the secret that she didn't know when she lay on the grass with Davis. She knows now that she would go on to grow up and have children. She knows that even though she loves her children, she'd get too sick to care for them and be hospitalized twice, and a doctor would tell her to write her story down. In doing so, she realized that love is a gift, and a person's first love proves that love is how and why we become people.

However, she says, that night holding hands with Davis under the **stars**, she doesn't know any of that yet. In the box on her table is the **spiral** painting by Pettibon with a note on the back, which says that Davis stole the painting from a lizard. The painting will follow Aza from apartment to apartment throughout her life. Aza and Daisy will continue to be best friends. Aza will go to college, get a job, and start her life over and over again. She says that I, as a singular proper noun, will always go on. But on the grass, Aza squeezes Davis's hand and they say goodbye. Aza remembers that nobody says goodbye unless they want to see you again.

By framing the story in this way, Aza assures the reader that Dr. Singh was right: Aza will, and does, survive. She goes on to challenge her fears and continue treating her mental illness, though she'll always struggle with it. However, by writing her story down, she realizes that she does have agency over her life and how she frames it. Here, she chooses to frame it hopefully. The note about her having children suggests that she eventually moves past her fear of physical intimacy and "containing multitudes," since in pregnancy women's bodies literally do grow and contain another organism.



Readers see that in adulthood, Aza experiences many circles, cycles, stories, and frames, just as she has in the course of this novel. She even leaves it ambiguous whether she ever sees Davis again. However, what is abundantly clear is that in adulthood, Aza integrates her different identities into one that's able to handle the endless spirals and conflicting selves that make up a person's life.





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