

The Vanishing Half



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BRIT BENNETT

Brit Bennett was born in Oceanside, California, where she spent the next 17 years of her life. Upon graduating from high school, she majored in English at Stanford University before pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing at the University of Michigan. She also briefly studied at Oxford, making her the first person in her family to leave the country. In 2014, Bennett wrote an article for *Jezebel* called “I Don’t Know What To Do With Good White People.” The piece was published in response to the fact that police officer Darren Wilson—who shot and killed 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri—was not indicted for his crime. “I Don’t Know What To Do With Good White People” attracted millions of readers in only several days, spreading Bennett’s name throughout the literary community and beyond. Two years later, when she was just 26, Bennett published her debut novel, *The Mothers*, earning her a place on the National Book Foundation’s “5 Under 35” list of breakout writers. Her second book, *The Vanishing Half*, was published in 2020 to wide acclaim.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The novel’s exploration of “passing” builds on the United States’ long history of racism and, more specifically, the many opportunities Black Americans were denied long after the end of slavery. It was very common during slavery for enslavers to rape and impregnate enslaved women. The offspring of such circumstances were born into slavery, even if they had light skin. Desiree and Stella’s great-great-great-grandfather in *The Vanishing Half* was born into this exact situation, which is why he later founded Mallard, a place devoted to light-skinned people whom society technically considered Black. Some Southern states in the early 20th century even had what was known as the “one-drop rule,” which stipulated that people with just one Black ancestor were automatically considered Black. Many light-skinned multiracial people therefore faced racism and discrimination, which is partially why Desiree and Stella’s great-great-great-grandfather wanted to specifically carve out a “third” place in society (of course, the other reason he founded Mallard was that he was colorist and didn’t want to associate with dark-skinned Black people). The existence of the “one-drop rule” is a clear sign that Southern society was intent on denying rights to anyone who wasn’t completely white, though it’s also the case that many multiracial people who looked white actually were able to “pass” and, in doing so, avoid the dangers and challenges posed by life in the United States during the Jim Crow era.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Vanishing Half builds on a literary tradition of novels about racial “passing,” which is when a light-skinned Black person lives as a white person. The most prominent work in this genre is undoubtedly Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, which was published in 1929. Like *The Vanishing Half*, Larsen’s *Passing* focuses on two Black women who were close as children but then grew apart; one of them starts “passing” as white while the other continues to live as a Black woman, thus resembling Stella and Desiree’s respective trajectories. Another prominent novel about passing is James Weldon Johnson’s *An Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, which follows a Black man who witnesses terrible acts of racist violence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and, as a result of what he’s seen, decides to “pass” as white. More broadly, Brit Bennett’s writing has a lot in common with the work of Toni Morrison, who—like Bennett—explored what it means to be Black in the United States, doing so through stories about family, history, and generational trauma.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Vanishing Half
- **When Published:** June 2, 2020
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel, Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Louisiana, California, and New York in the mid-to-late 20th century.
- **Climax:** When Kennedy sees Jude in New York, Jude gives her a photograph of their mothers as children, proving once and for all that Kennedy’s mother, Stella, isn’t actually white.
- **Antagonist:** Racism

EXTRA CREDIT

Adaptation. Brit Bennett has teamed up with the poet Aziza Barnes and the playwright Jeremy O. Harris to adapt *The Vanishing Half* as a limited television series for HBO.

Awards. *The Vanishing Half* won the Goodreads Choice Award for Historical Fiction and was included on the longlist for the National Book Awards.



PLOT SUMMARY

Desiree and Stella are identical twins. They grow up in Mallard, Louisiana, a town that consists entirely of light-skinned Black people. It’s frowned upon in Mallard to marry dark-skinned people, since everyone has colorist ideas and values light skin

tones. Although the Black people of Mallard have carved out a space for themselves, they still live under the constant threat of racism—as made clear by the fact that Leon Vignes, Desiree and Stella’s father, is brutally murdered by a racist mob of angry white men. This experience binds the twins together in their trauma.

Desiree and Stella are very close. Desiree is bold and independent, whereas Stella is shy and reserved. In their sophomore year of high school, Stella spends her free time teaching younger students. She’s extremely smart, dreaming of someday going to college. But her dream falls flat when her mother, Adele, takes her and Desiree out of school and sends them to work as housecleaners for a rich white family in the neighboring town of Opelousas. Unbeknownst to Desiree and Adele, the father of this rich family sexually abuses Stella. She doesn’t say anything about it, but the traumatic experience is enough to make her go along with Desiree’s idea for them to run away to New Orleans. At the end of the summer, the twins set out on the night of the Founder’s Day dance, when everyone in town is preoccupied.

In New Orleans, Desiree and Stella find work in a laundromat, though they’re not technically old enough to have jobs. One day, Stella isn’t paying attention and almost gets her hand caught in the laundry press. Her boss fires her for her carelessness, making it hard for Desiree and Stella to survive on their own. But this event doesn’t make Stella want to go home—in fact, whenever Desiree floats the idea of returning to Mallard, Stella subtly convinces her to stay. The twins need to make enough money to survive, so Desiree shows Stella a job listing for a good position as a secretary at a marketing firm in a fancy building called the Maison Blanche. Stella would make a good secretary, but the sisters know that no company in the Maison Blanche would ever hire a Black woman. Accordingly, Desiree tells Stella not to mention that she’s Black. Stella isn’t sure at first, but she goes along with the idea and ends up getting the job.

In the Maison Blanche building, Stella works for Blake Sanders, a good-looking white man. He takes an interest in her and asks her out to lunch. Once they’ve grown close, Blake gets a new job in Boston and asks Stella to come with him. She knows going with him would mean permanently stepping into the life of a white woman—which, in turn, would mean severing ties with Desiree and everyone else from her past. But the idea excites her, so she agrees. She slips away without saying goodbye to Desiree, merely leaving her a note saying that she has to go her own way.

Fourteen years later, Desiree returns to Mallard. After Stella disappeared, she moved to Washington, D.C. because she couldn’t bear living in a city that reminded her of her twin. She worked in D.C. as a fingerprint analyst and met Sam, a dark-skinned Black man who eventually became her husband. They were deeply in love and had a daughter named Jude, but then

Sam became physically abusive. After several years, Desiree decided to run away with her daughter, fearing what Sam might do if they stayed. She goes back to Mallard and seeks shelter in her mother’s house, though Adele makes it clear that she doesn’t approve of the decision Desiree made to marry a dark-skinned man. Jude hates living in Mallard, since she’s the only dark-skinned person in town. Everyone at school bullies her and calls her racist names, so she focuses on running, which is the only thing she enjoys.

Meanwhile, Desiree reignites a romance with a man named Early, who lived for a short while on the outskirts of Mallard as a teenager. Unlike the town’s other residents, Early doesn’t have light skin, so Adele never wanted Desiree to spend time with him. After catching them together on the front porch one night, she chased Early away and he never came back—until he travels to Mallard as an adult to find Desiree. Sam hired him to find Desiree, since Early works as a bounty hunter. But when Early actually finds Desiree, he learns that she ran away because Sam was abusive. He promises not to tell Sam where she went. And as Early and Desiree rekindle their romantic feelings, he also offers to look for Stella. They go to New Orleans together and learn that she moved to Boston when she initially disappeared. In the coming years, Early makes an effort to piece together Stella’s path while also continuing to take other bounty hunting jobs. When he’s not on the road, he comes back to Mallard and stays with Desiree. Try as he might, though, he doesn’t find Stella.

Jude attends college at UCLA on a running scholarship. Feeling out of place at a party one night, she talks to a man named Reese. Originally from Arkansas, Reese is a Black photographer living in Los Angeles. He and Jude become very close, though it takes a while for them to act on their romantic feelings. Reese tells Jude that he’s trans. He asks Jude what she thinks about his transition, and she says that it doesn’t strike her as surprising or unheard of—she has always felt that it’s possible to be “two different people in one lifetime.” Once they finally start a romantic relationship, Jude is a little taken aback by Reese’s unwillingness to take off his clothes in front of her. She tells him he doesn’t have to wrap his chest, which makes him angry—he *doesn’t* do it for her. They have their first real fight, but they soon make up, and Reese tells Jude that he’s saving for top surgery (a gender-affirming surgery to give him the chest he wants). The problem, though, is that the surgery is very expensive.

Jude gets a new job as a caterer to help Reese save for surgery. While she’s catering a party for rich white people, a young blond woman named Kennedy starts talking to her about how her own mother hasn’t yet arrived at the party, which is for her father. As Jude opens a bottle of wine, Kennedy’s mother finally strides into the party, much to the surprise of Jude, who drops the wine bottle on an expensive rug—the woman who walks in is Stella.

Stella has been living in a wealthy housing development in Los Angeles with Blake and their daughter, Kennedy. She was worried when she first got pregnant that her child would have dark skin, but Kennedy's skin is even lighter than Stella's. Stella practically never interacts with Black people these days, but that wasn't the case when Kennedy was young and a Black family, the Walkers, moved into the house across the street. Everyone in the neighborhood was enraged that the Homeowners Association allowed a Black family to move in. Even Stella voiced strong disapproval, but the family threatened to sue the Association if it blocked their purchase of the house. Stella feared that the Black family would sense that she, too, is Black. However, she ended up secretly befriending Loretta Walker, the wife and mother of the new family. She enjoyed spending time with Loretta, who reminded her of Desiree. But her white friends started talking about her friendship with Loretta, which she'd been keeping secret from Blake. What's more, Kennedy called Loretta's daughter the n-word, saying she didn't want to play with Black people. Loretta said Kennedy must have picked up this racism from Stella and Blake, so she cut ties with Stella. Stella then lied to her white friends by saying that Reginald Walker once looked at her in a sexually charged way. Several days later, people started throwing bricks through the Walkers' windows, prompting them to move away for their own safety.

After Jude sees Stella at the fancy party, she obsesses over tracking her down again. By a stroke of luck, her friend, Barry, is cast in a musical in which Kennedy plays the lead, so Jude meets her once again. To get closer to Kennedy, she gets a job at the theater as an usher. The two cousins become friendly acquaintances. Every night, Jude hopes Stella will be in the audience, but Kennedy tells her that Stella won't be there because she disapproves of Kennedy's acting career. Instead of acting, Stella wants her daughter to go to college. She was enrolled at USC but dropped out to become an actress—something Stella thinks is ridiculous. Finally, on the night of the final performance, Stella comes to the show. Jude talks to her outside at intermission. She reveals that she's Desiree's daughter, but Stella clearly isn't open to the idea of reconnecting. She hurries away, missing the second half of Kennedy's show. At the cast party that night, Kennedy is upset because she thinks her mother didn't come to the musical. She makes a racist comment to Jude about how Black men like Reese usually like light-skinned women, not dark-skinned women like Jude. Offended, Jude tells Kennedy the truth about Stella (that she's actually Black) and then leaves the bar.

Although Stella denies Jude's claims, Kennedy remains suspicious, sensing that Jude is telling the truth. She brings up Stella's past frequently, but Stella keeps lying. After a while, Kennedy moves to New York to continue acting. As luck would have it, she runs into Jude and Reese in New York, since they've come to the city for Reese's top surgery. Jude gives Kennedy a

photograph of their mothers as little girls, and finally Kennedy knows the truth. But when she goes back to Los Angeles and shows the picture to Stella, her mother *still* lies by saying she's not in the photograph. Enraged, Kennedy leaves and decides to travel the world to "find" herself. Meanwhile, Stella returns to Mallard with the intention of asking Desiree to tell Jude to stop contacting her daughter. When she gets there, she discovers that Adele is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Her reunion with Desiree is strained at first, since Desiree doesn't want to forgive her. But the sisters eventually embrace and revel in each other's presence, sharing a bottle of gin on the front porch of their childhood home and talking about the past. The next day, Stella slips away without saying goodbye, returning to her life with Blake in Los Angeles.

Soon after Stella leaves, Adele dies. Jude—who's attending medical school in Minneapolis—returns to Mallard with Reese, who feels like he finally has the male body he has always wanted. As for Desiree, she leaves Mallard once again, moving to Houston, Texas with Early, who works in a refinery while she works at a call center.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Desiree Vignes – Desiree Vignes is a light-skinned Black woman who grew up alongside her identical twin, Stella, in Mallard, Louisiana. Desiree always considered herself the bold, independent sister, since she was the more dominant and strong-willed one. She even convinced Stella to run away to New Orleans when their mother, Adele, had them quit school to start work as housecleaners for a rich white family. The novel begins when Desiree returns to Mallard after many years. Her reappearance creates a fuss in town, especially because she returns with her daughter, Jude, who has very dark skin. Mallard is a town made up of light-skinned Black people who have racist and colorist ideas about skin tone, so everyone judges Desiree for running away, marrying a dark-skinned Black man, and returning with Jude. But Desiree *had* to come back because her husband, Sam, was abusive, and she knew he might end up killing her if she stayed. She has nobody to turn to for support except her mother, since Stella abandoned her a year after they moved to New Orleans, deciding to start passing as white. Back in Mallard, Desiree gets a job at the local diner and rekindles a romantic relationship with a man named Early, whom she knew when she was a young girl. Early eventually reveals that Sam hired him to track Desiree down, but he cares more about Desiree than completing the job, so he tells Sam that he can't find her. Desiree and Early continue their relationship even after Jude moves to Los Angeles for college. Finding it too painful to dwell on Stella's disappearance, Desiree mostly tries not to think about her sister, having realized that she really was dependent on Stella when they

were children (even though she saw herself as the independent one). But when Stella eventually comes back to Mallard for a short stay, Desiree still shows her love and support, despite her anger.

Stella Vignes – Like Desiree, her identical twin, Stella is a light-skinned Black woman who grew up in Mallard, Louisiana. She was always the quiet, passive sister who was content to let Desiree make important decisions. She excelled in school and dreamed of going to college, so she was disappointed when her mother, Adele, pulled her and Desiree out of school after their sophomore year in high school and sent them to work as housecleaners for a rich white family. She never told anyone, but the father of the rich white family sexually abused her in hidden closets throughout the summer, an experience that pushed Stella to go along with her sister's idea of running away to New Orleans at the end of the summer. In New Orleans, she started working in a fancy office building that only employed white people, meaning she had to pass as white—something she always enjoyed doing as a child, when she used to enter fancy stores and pretend to be white. When the novel begins, Stella is long gone, having disappeared into her own life after deciding to permanently take on the identity of a white woman, requiring her to sever all ties with her past life and, of course, her twin sister. Above all, Stella believes that people have to create their own identities, so instead of dwelling on what she has lost, she focuses on her current life in Los Angeles with Blake, her white husband (whom she originally met at work). She and Blake have a daughter, Kennedy, who looks very white. Because Stella has never been truthful about her own racial identity, Kennedy has no idea that she herself isn't fully white. Stella sees her daughter's ignorance on this matter as a gift of sorts—according to her, she has made great sacrifices in order to give Kennedy a life of privilege and opportunity, so she resists telling Kennedy the truth, even when Kennedy meets Desiree's daughter, Jude, and finds out about her mother's past. In the end, though, Stella opens up to Kennedy and even returns to Mallard to reconcile with Desiree.

Jude Vignes – Jude is Desiree's quiet and studious daughter. Because Desiree married Sam, a dark-skinned Black man, Jude isn't as light skinned as her mother. Everyone in Mallard, Louisiana values light skin, so Jude's skin tone causes a stir when her mother brings her to town after escaping from Sam's abuse. Jude hates Mallard and feels out of place among its light-skinned residents, but her mother insists that they stay. In school, the other students make fun of Jude and call her racist names, though the ringleader of the bullies is actually attracted to her and starts taking her to nearby horse stables to kiss at night—something Early (who acts as Jude's father figure) puts an end to when he discovers them becoming intimate. To cope with how much she dislikes life in Mallard, Jude focuses on her passion for running, eventually earning a track scholarship to UCLA. While living in Los Angeles, she meets Reese, a trans

man from Arkansas. They start spending all of their time together, but it takes a long time for them to actually kiss and acknowledge their romantic feelings. When they do become lovers, Jude tries to convince Reese to take off his shirt when they sleep together, but Reese doesn't feel comfortable and later tells her that he's saving up for surgery that will give him the chest he wants. Jude starts working as a caterer to help Reese pay for the surgery. At a fancy party full of rich white people, she meets Kennedy, though she doesn't know Kennedy is her cousin. But then she sees Stella, learns that Kennedy is her daughter, and puts two and two together. From that point on, she makes a point of getting to know Kennedy in the hopes of meeting Stella. But Stella wants nothing to do with her, and in a moment of frustration, Jude tells Kennedy the truth about her mother. After graduating from UCLA, she and Reese move to Minneapolis, where Jude attends medical school.

Kennedy Sanders – Kennedy is Stella's daughter. She doesn't know that Stella is Black, meaning that she sees herself as a white person—which is exactly how Stella and her husband, Blake, have raised her. Kennedy grew up spoiled and privileged, and she hasn't outgrown her sense of entitlement as a young adult. Although her grades in high school were terrible, she got into USC because her parents made a sizable donation. Instead of seizing this educational opportunity, though, she spends her time getting high and goofing around. After being put on academic probation, she drops out of school to become an actress. Stella can't believe her daughter would do such a thing, especially since Stella herself sacrificed so much to give Kennedy the opportunities and privileges that come with being white. When Kennedy stars in a local musical, Stella tries to convince her to stop acting and return to school, but she doesn't listen—she just feels unsupported by her mother, whom she's never felt close to because Stella keeps her at an arm's length, not wanting Kennedy to learn about her past. But Kennedy soon becomes close with her cousin Jude, since Jude's friend, Barry, is in the same musical as Kennedy. Through Jude, Kennedy learns that Stella is a light-skinned Black woman who left her twin to lead the life of a white woman. Kennedy resents her mother for lying to her and doesn't know what to do with this new information about her own racial identity—after all, she has lived her entire life as a white person. Although she has spent the years since she left college pursuing an acting career, she abandons her dreams to travel in Europe, hoping to “find” herself. When she returns, she works as a real estate agent, finding it easy to help clients imagine new lives for themselves. This outcome suggests that she, like her mother, has come to believe it's possible for people to take control of their own lives and determine for themselves how they want to live.

Reese – Reese is Jude's boyfriend. A trans man, Reese used to live in Arkansas, where everyone knew him as Therese. When he moved to Los Angeles, though, he cut his hair, started going by Reese, and officially transitioned from female to male. In Los

Angeles, he found someone to sell him steroids to help him more fully inhabit his male identity. When he tells Jude about his past life as a woman, his transition doesn't strike her as particularly surprising—she has always felt that it's "possible to be two different people in one lifetime." Even though Reese feels very comfortable with Jude, he doesn't like it when she tries to get him to undress in bed, always preferring to leave his clothes on when they become physically intimate. Similarly, he gets angry when Jude suggests one day that he doesn't have to wrap his chest when they're at home together. She says he doesn't need to make his chest flat for her, to which he angrily says that he *doesn't* do it for her—he does it for himself. It's their first real argument, but they eventually make up, at which point he tells her that he's saving up for top surgery (a gender-affirming surgery that, in Reese's case, would make his chest flat). Although Reese doesn't want to burden her, Jude helps him save money for the surgery, making it clear that their relationship is very supportive. In turn, Reese supports Jude emotionally when she becomes acquaintances with Kennedy and attempts to meet Kennedy's mother, Stella. He doesn't try to stop Jude from reaching out to her estranged aunt, but he *does* express his worry that nothing good will come of the pursuit. After Jude finishes college, she and Reese move to Minneapolis, where Jude attends medical school and Reese finally has top surgery. They grow closer and closer over the years, and Reese can hardly remember when he used to feel uncomfortable taking his shirt off in front of Jude.

Blake Sanders – Blake is Stella's husband and Kennedy's father. A wealthy, privileged white man, he meets Stella while working for a marketing firm in a fancy New Orleans office building called the Maison Blanche. He's Stella's boss and doesn't know that she's Black, since the company only hires white people. Stella keeps her history a secret even when she and Blake become intimate, enjoying the fact that he sees her as a white woman. He eventually asks her to move to Boston with him, and though she knows it will mean leaving Desiree behind, she agrees. In the coming years, she and Blake move from Boston to Los Angeles and have a daughter, Kennedy, whom they raise in a wealthy neighborhood. Blake has no problem spoiling Kennedy, wanting to give her everything he can. After dropping out of college to pursue acting, Kennedy tells her parents that she met a Black girl named Jude, who told her that Stella has an identical twin and that she's Black. Blake immediately dismisses the story, insisting that Jude must have seen Kennedy's fancy car and decided to scam her—a good indication of his inherent distrust of Black people. Blake also has traditional ideas about gender roles, as evidenced by his disapproval of Stella's decision to earn a college degree and start teaching as an adjunct professor. Blake would rather Stella stay at home, even if doing so bores her. And though this aspect of his personality frustrates Stella, she still feels connected to him, regardless of the fact that he knows nothing about her past.

Adele Vignes – Adele Vignes is Desiree and Stella's mother. She is the direct descendant of Alphonse Decuir, the founder of Mallard. A group of racists murdered her husband, Leon, when Stella and Desiree were little girls, leaving Adele to raise them herself. She works as a housecleaner for rich white families but needs her daughters to help her earn money, so she takes them out of school after their sophomore year of high school and sends them to work as cleaners—prompting them to run away from home and start new lives in New Orleans. When Desiree comes home years later with her daughter, Jude, Adele makes it clear that she disapproves of Desiree for marrying a dark-skinned Black man. She especially resents Jude's dark skin, often trying to show her granddaughter how to lighten her skin, though none of her tactics work. Despite her internalized racism, Adele welcomes Desiree and Jude into her home and lets them live with her. She never thinks about Stella, not wanting to dwell on the fact that her daughter abandoned her life to become a white woman. In fact, she doesn't talk about Stella until years later, when she starts suffering from Alzheimer's disease and can't keep track of things. Stella returns home during this period, but Adele acts as if it's not a big deal, apparently unable to register that Stella has been gone for so long. By the time she dies, Adele has learned to overlook her colorist ideas, having accepted Desiree's dark-skinned partner, Early, as an important person in her life.

Early – Early is Desiree's romantic partner. As a teenager, he briefly lives on the outskirts of Mallard, where he works on a farm with his aunt and uncle. He's not from Mallard, so his skin isn't as light as everyone else's. For this reason, Adele doesn't approve of him and doesn't want Desiree to date him, so she chases him off their porch one night. He never returns, and his family eventually moves to a farm in another town. But Early comes back to Mallard years later, when Sam hires him to find Desiree. Early is a bounty hunter who spends a short period in jail for small crimes and now works with a man named Ceel to track down fugitives. He agrees to find Desiree, but when he actually locates her, he can't bring himself to tell Sam where she is. He learns that Desiree ran away because Sam was abusive, so instead of helping Sam, he starts rekindling his relationship with Desiree. He also offers to help her look for Stella. A kindhearted man, he enjoys spending time with Desiree and trying to make her life better. Over the next few decades, he becomes Desiree's romantic partner, though he doesn't permanently move in with her. Instead, he stays with her at Adele's house for short periods and frequently leaves town to track people down. As he gets older, though, he stops his work as a bounty hunter and gets a job at the local refinery in Mallard, finally living full-time with Desiree in Adele's house. He acts as a father figure of sorts to Jude and helps Adele as she succumbs to Alzheimer's disease. After Adele's death, he and Desiree move to Houston, Texas, where he works at a refinery and she works at a call center.

Loretta Walker – Loretta Walker is a Black woman who moves into a large house in Stella’s wealthy neighborhood in Los Angeles. She and her husband, Reginald, are the first Black people to live in the neighborhood, and their presence disturbs the racist community. Even Stella (or perhaps *especially* Stella) tries to argue against allowing a Black family into the neighborhood, but she ultimately has no power to stop Loretta, Reginald, and their daughter from moving in. To her own surprise, she develops a strained friendship with Loretta, who never wanted to move to the neighborhood in the first place but did so to satisfy her husband. Stella sees Loretta as someone with whom she can actually connect, though Loretta has no idea that Stella is Black. Soon, though, the neighbors start talking about seeing Stella sneak over to the Walkers’ house, causing trouble for Stella because she has been hiding her friendship with Loretta from Blake. But their friendship comes to an abrupt end anyway, since Kennedy calls Loretta’s daughter the n-word and says she won’t play with Black people. Loretta intuits that Kennedy picked up these racist views from Stella and Blake, so she cuts ties with Stella. Shortly thereafter, Stella tells a made-up story to her white neighbors about Reginald looking at her in a sexual way. Several days later, white residents start throwing bricks through the Walkers’ windows and generally vandalizing their property. It doesn’t take long for the family to move away, leaving Stella with a feeling of guilt and regret.

Reginald Walker – Reginald is Loretta Walker’s husband. He’s a famous actor who plays a Black police officer on a popular television show. Stella doesn’t interact with him much, but he does help her carry groceries inside one day. After Loretta and Stella have a falling out, Stella tells her white friends about Reginald carrying her groceries. She lies and says that Reginald looked at her in a sexual way before leaving her house. Her comment sparks violence in the neighborhood, as the white residents start vandalizing the Walkers’ house shortly after Stella tells her friends the lie. Reginald and his family move away to escape their racist neighbors’ violence and hostility.

Sam – Sam is Desiree’s husband, whom she meets while working as a fingerprint analyst in Washington, D.C. A charming man at first, Sam woos Desiree and makes her feel beautiful, though he later resents her for having lighter skin than him. He becomes physically abusive after they get married and have Jude, leading Desiree to worry about how she and Jude will survive if they keep living with him. When he suggests that they have another child, she hesitates. That night, he lashes out at her, grabbing her by the neck and pointing a gun in her face. She runs away with Jude when he falls asleep, making her way to Mallard. But Sam isn’t one to give up easily, so he hires a bounty hunter to track down his wife and daughter. That bounty hunter, however, ends up being Early Jones, who has a romantic history with Desiree and, as a result, lies to Sam about her whereabouts, ensuring that he won’t be able to continue

harming Desiree.

Ceel – Ceel is a loan shark and bounty hunter who gives Early his assignments, providing him with information about the fugitives he tracks down. Ceel is the one who puts him in contact with Sam, who wants Early to find Desiree. Early continues to work with Ceel for the majority of his life.

Barry – Barry is one of Reese and Jude’s friends in Los Angeles. Older than both of them, Barry met Reese when Reese first moved to the city. He recognized that Reese needed support and friendship, so he let him stay at his apartment for a while. Most people know Barry as a high school chemistry teacher, but in the evenings, he transforms into Bianca, a drag queen who performs at drag shows in Los Angeles’s vibrant queer community. Barry helps Jude make sense of her feelings for Reese, urging the two young lovers to start officially dating.

Alphonse Decuir – The founder of Mallard, Alphonse Decuir was Desiree and Stella’s great-great-grandfather. His mother was an enslaved person impregnated by her enslaver, meaning that Alphonse was half-white. He inherited the land of Mallard from his father and decided to create a town meant for people with the same skin color as him. White society didn’t accept him because he was Black, but he also felt ostracized from Black culture because his skin was so light. He therefore dreamed of turning Mallard into a place where everyone marries light-skinned Black people so that each generation becomes whiter and whiter.

Leon Vignes – Leon Vignes was Stella and Desiree’s father. He died when the girls were very young. A group of angry, racist men stormed into his house, dragged him outside, and tried to murder him. They didn’t end up succeeding, but they returned when he was in the hospital and shot him in the head.

Frantz – A erudite scholar, Frantz is Kennedy’s boyfriend in New York. Perhaps because he’s the first Black man she has ever dated, she tells him that she’s not entirely white, eager to hear what he says. Frantz, however, thinks she’s only joking. They break up not long after she finds out for sure that Stella is Black.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lou LeBon – Lou LeBon lives in Mallard, Louisiana, where he owns a diner called Lou’s Egg House. When Desiree returns to Mallard after many years, she works as a waitress at the diner.



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.



RACE AND IDENTITY

The Vanishing Half suggests that racial identity is shaped by much more than the color of a person's skin. The novel follows Desiree and Stella, two

light-skinned Black women who are identical twins. They grow up in Mallard, Louisiana, a town that values light skin above all else. Although Mallard is technically populated by Black citizens, everyone in town marries light-skinned people so that each new generation becomes lighter and lighter. When Desiree and Stella run away as teenagers, Stella cuts ties with Desiree and begins passing as white. Desiree, on the other hand, marries a dark-skinned Black man and later moves back to Mallard. As a result, the twins lead incredibly different lives: Stella and her light-skinned daughter benefit from the many societal privileges of being white, whereas Desiree and her dark-skinned daughter struggle with the racism that's so prevalent in the United States. The fact that the two sisters look exactly alike is significant, since it illustrates the extent to which behavior and self-presentation become a person's identity. Stella's decision to pass as white is, above all, a kind of identity performance, as she adheres to the various cultural expectations that society applies to white people. And yet, the book doesn't necessarily frame her identity performance as a superficial act that is completely separate from who she really is. Rather, the novel invites readers to consider that "maybe pretending to be white eventually ma[kes] it so." After all, *The Vanishing Half* isn't a book about a Black woman who temporarily acts like a white woman; it's about a Black woman who lives the life of a white woman for *the rest of her life*.

Although passing as white is certainly emotionally difficult, then, it also shapes who Stella is, suggesting that identity isn't as fixed and unchanging as people might otherwise assume.

The novel features two women whose race can't necessarily be identified just by looking at them, which raises the question of what, exactly, racial identity is when it's not tied to physical traits. In many ways, the book suggests that racial identity—or perhaps identity in *general*—is something that people can construct for themselves. For Stella, "all there [is] to being white is acting like you were." In other words, embodying and inhabiting an identity can be a transformative act. Of course, she's able to inhabit a white identity because her skin is light, but her transition from Black to white suggests more broadly that society often attaches a surprising amount of importance to the mere *idea* of race. Stella and Desiree's contrasting experiences of job-hunting demonstrate this notion quite well: when Desiree applies to work as a fingerprint analyst, the white sheriff initially thinks she's white and is outwardly impressed by her credentials and skills. But then he finds out she's Black and immediately turns her down. In contrast, Stella poses as a white woman and quickly gets a job as a secretary at a respected marketing firm, despite her lack of experience in an office setting. Desiree and Stella look exactly the same, and Desiree is

extremely qualified for the job she applies to because she worked as a fingerprint analyst in Washington, D.C. And yet, Stella—who has less experience—is the one who gets hired. It's therefore clear that what matters to society isn't how Desiree and Stella look or whether or not they're qualified. Rather, their success in life depends on an arbitrary distinction: namely, whether they're officially considered white or Black. In this sense, the novel suggests that racial identity can be fluid, since it's tied not only to skin color but also to how people think of and present themselves.

Of course, this is not to say that race is completely meaningless or trivial, since identifying as a certain race undoubtedly *does* inform and enrich many people's lives—it's just that the novel complicates the idea that a person's identity is set in stone. For instance, when Stella's daughter, Kennedy, travels to Europe to "find" herself, Stella dislikes the notion that there's a single identity out there waiting for her. Instead, Stella would prefer her daughter to think of identity as something that she can define for herself: "You didn't just find a self out there waiting—you had to make one," Stella thinks. "You had to create who you wanted to be." Stella, then, has "create[d]" the person she "wanted to be," even if it meant making great sacrifices by leaving behind her old life. She took control of her life and the person she wanted to be, demonstrating the role of personal agency in identity formation.

Indeed, *The Vanishing Half* doesn't pass a negative judgment on Black people who take on a white persona, suggesting that the identities people create for themselves are just as valid as those they're born into. Becoming white certainly complicates Stella's life and puts a strain on her relationships, but this has less to do with her than it has to do with the racist society in which she lives—after all, she passes as white because it opens the door to better opportunities and more stability, so she's really just seeking out a more comfortable life. Furthermore, when Kennedy finds out about her mother's past and suggests that she doesn't even know the real Stella, Stella insists that this isn't true; Kennedy really *does* know the real Stella, since people aren't defined by the identities they inherit but by the identities they *create* for themselves. Just because Stella constructed her current identity doesn't make it any less real. The novel's unwillingness to criticize Stella for passing as white is also made evident by the fact that Stella doesn't abandon the life she's built for herself as a white woman. She doesn't have some kind of epiphany that leads her to renounce her new identity. Instead, she continues to live the life she constructed for herself, a decision that—in and of itself—underscores the novel's implication that the identities people choose for themselves are no less legitimate than the ones they're born with.



LOSS, MEMORY, AND INHERITANCE

The Vanishing Half is a novel about loss and how people respond to it. For some of the characters, the thing they've lost is straightforward and obvious—Desiree, for example, loses her twin sister (and closest companion) when Stella runs away to pass as white. Both twins also lost their father when a group of racist white men murdered him. In both cases, Desiree and Stella simply tried to move on and focus on the present instead of dwelling on the past. For instance, Desiree ends up moving away from New Orleans because everywhere she goes reminds her of the year she spent in the city with Stella before Stella disappeared. Stella, for her part, cuts all ties with her previous life once she starts passing as white, and she tries to never think about how much she misses Desiree. But other characters' losses are less tangible and more complicated to address. For example, when Stella's daughter, Kennedy, learns that her mother is actually Black (meaning that she, too, is partially Black), she feels cut off from her own family history and lineage. Her mother has passed as a white woman and, in doing so, has given Kennedy the many privileges of being white—but Stella also prevented Kennedy from inheriting her Black culture. In contrast, Desiree's daughter, Jude, has dark skin and knows her family's history, but she desperately wants to know about her aunt Stella's life, which is why she tracks her down in Los Angeles. Unlike their mothers, both Jude and Kennedy actively seek out the things they've lost, whether that's a sense of cultural identity or family history. By spotlighting the different ways in which the characters respond to loss, the novel implies that loss impacts everyone differently, and that there's no one right way to cope with it.

Through Desiree and Stella's experiences, the novel shows that one possible coping strategy for loss is to focus on the simple fact that life goes on. Desiree and Stella become acquainted with tragedy and loss early in their lives, since they're only little girls when a racist mob breaks into their house, drags their father outside, and tries to beat him to death before eventually shooting him in the head while he's in the hospital. The memory of such a traumatic event obviously stays with them, but they have no choice but to keep living their lives. Their resilience in the face of their father's murder is perhaps why they're both capable of easing into new existences when they later lose each other. As twins, they're used to doing everything together, so it's undoubtedly jarring when Stella leaves Desiree behind to pass as a white woman—suddenly, they feel like they have been “cleaved in half,” as if they haven't just lost a sister but an actual part of themselves. Stella was the one to leave, but even she feels the acute loss of her sister's daily presence. In order to survive, though, she focuses on the present, throwing her energy into building a new life for herself as a white woman. Similarly, Desiree leaves New Orleans because it reminds her of Stella. Her decision to start over in Washington, D.C.

illustrates her understanding that she can't just let her life screech to a halt in the aftermath of Stella's disappearance—instead, she makes a point of moving on.

Yet through Kennedy and Jude, the novel also illustrates that people can experience loss in a secondhand way, which they may cope with differently than someone who has experienced loss firsthand. Whereas their mothers face very straightforward, tangible forms of loss, the things Kennedy and Jude miss out on are a bit more abstract—and this is perhaps why both girls find it difficult to move on. For instance, Jude inherits her mother's feelings of loss because she knows that Stella ran away and, as a result, thinks constantly about her estranged aunt. The idea of Stella looms large in Jude's life, but she doesn't meet her until she tracks Stella down in Los Angeles as an adult. Her fixation on finding Stella suggests that Jude has been significantly impacted by Stella's disappearance and the effect of this loss on Desiree, showing that it's possible for children to take on somebody else's sense of loss.

Kennedy also experiences a vicarious kind of loss, since Stella raises her as a white person and doesn't tell her about her roots in Mallard or in Black culture. Therefore, Kennedy doesn't get to make a conscious decision about her own identity—she doesn't know she's part Black, so she's cut off from the possibility of embracing a Black or multiracial identity. This is a complicated kind of loss, since Kennedy was previously unaware that she'd been estranged from her own Blackness. When she *does* find out that she's part Black, she isn't content to simply move on like Stella did when she first left behind her Black identity. Instead, Kennedy is hurt that her mother kept the truth from her for so long, feeling as if she has been deprived of an important aspect of her own cultural and familial inheritance.

By outlining both the direct and indirect ways that people experience loss, *The Vanishing Half* suggests that loss of any kind is an unavoidable part of life, and that how a person responds to it is individualized. Nothing illustrates this better than the predicament Kennedy finds herself in when she learns the truth. Although Stella's decision to lie about her past causes Kennedy to lose out on her own Blackness, the truth brings on a *different* kind of loss. After all, when Kennedy finds out that she's Black, she effectively stands to lose the identity she has already cultivated as a white woman. There is, then, no way for her to avoid some form of loss, which the novel implies is an inherent part of life. The question, then, becomes how people *respond* to loss—something that the novel suggests depends on the person, the nature of the loss, and the surrounding circumstances.



COMPANIONSHIP, SUPPORT, AND INDEPENDENCE

The Vanishing Half highlights the human tendency

to yearn for support and companionship. As identical twins, Desiree and Stella are used to depending on each other, especially in the aftermath of their father's murder. However, the novel suggests that companionship shouldn't be taken for granted. Desiree learns this difficult lesson when Stella leaves her to start a new life passing as a white woman, cutting all ties and, therefore, putting an end to their system of mutual support. Before Stella ran away, Desiree always thought of herself as the bold, independent sister who made the important decisions and motivated Stella to take chances. She drew meaning from this personal narrative—or, as the novel puts it, "This was the story Desiree needed to tell herself and Stella allowed her to. They both felt safe inside it." The word "needed" is significant here, implying that Desiree depended on her relationship with Stella to affirm her own sense of self. The novel is particularly interested in looking at imbalanced relationships in which one character wants companionship and support but doesn't fully receive it from the other person—like, for instance, the relationship between Kennedy and Stella. Kennedy wants to connect with her mother by learning about her past, but Stella keeps her at an arm's length because she can't let herself rehash those memories. In a way, then, the novel suggests that emotional support between two people can really only happen when both people are willing to open themselves up to each other.

The book implies that relationship dynamics aren't always as cut-and-dry as they seem. Although everyone sees Desiree as the more adventurous and independent twin, she herself knows—on a certain level—that she needs Stella. Desiree is the one who wants to go to New Orleans, which makes her seem like she's courageous. In reality, though, she would never venture off on such a daring journey without Stella, since they've never been apart. Desiree isn't sure she "could even survive the separation." It's clear, then, that Desiree depends on Stella to make her feel safe. Anything that would require true independence scares her, so she rules out the idea of striking out on her own, which is exactly what Stella ends up doing when she decides to run away to begin a new life as a white woman. Until this point, Stella and Desiree have lived as if they're a single person, and Stella has always "allowed" Desiree to think of her as meek and dependent. In reality, though, she's strong-willed and willing to break out on her own—and, in doing so, leave behind the constant companionship and support of her sister. In turn, her sudden independence reveals that mutual support and companionship shouldn't be taken for granted, regardless of how close two people might seem.

Similar to how Stella keeps her ambitions secret from Desiree, she refuses to open up to Kennedy about her past, thus straining her ability to act as a supportive mother. In fact, even after Kennedy finds out about her mother's past, Stella lies to her and won't be forthcoming about the fact that she's from Mallard and that she's Black. Of course, it's her choice whether

or not she wants to keep her personal history a secret, but it's worth noting that her past *does* have implications for Kennedy, who suddenly finds herself grappling with her own racial identity. At the same time, though, the reason Stella doesn't want to tell Kennedy that she's Black is because she wants Kennedy to have the opportunities and privileges that come along with being white in the United States. She has made an effort to raise Kennedy as a white person so that Kennedy doesn't face the same racist challenges that Stella herself faced when she was growing up. Her good intentions, however, don't change the fact that her dishonesty interferes with her ability to provide Kennedy with a more immediate kind of motherly support. When Kennedy pursues acting, for example, Stella can't bring herself to encourage her daughter—after all, Stella gave up so much to give Kennedy a life in which she could attend college, so it's painful for Stella to see Kennedy drop out of college to chase an unstable acting career. The problem, however, is that Kennedy doesn't *know* the underlying reasons driving her mother's disapproval, leaving her to assume that Stella is simply uncaring and unsupportive. In other words, Stella's unwillingness to open up to her daughter undermines her broader attempt to support her.

To that end, the healthiest relationships in the novel are the ones in which people are open with each other and give each other equal amounts of support. Jude and Reese, for example, are honest with each other about who they are, how they feel, and what they want. Reese doesn't keep his identity as a trans man a secret from Jude, and his openness makes it possible for Jude to support him by helping him save for gender-affirming surgery. In turn, Jude is open with Reese about her family's turbulent past and her desire to track down Stella, and he supports her while also protectively urging her not to become too invested in establishing a relationship with Stella, which he thinks might end up hurting Jude. Their willingness to share with each other and turn to one another for help is, it seems, a good illustration of what healthy companionship can look like, making it quite clear that successful relationships require honesty and mutual support.



CLASS AND PRIVILEGE

Within the novel's broader examination of racial identity, *The Vanishing Half* looks at who, exactly, gets to live a prosperous life in the United States.

When Stella transitions into white society, her identity as a Black woman isn't the only thing she leaves behind—she also leaves behind a life of rural poverty and steps into a world of privilege and opportunity. The fact that she ends up with Blake, a successful white man from a wealthy family, isn't necessarily a coincidence. After all, when she starts presenting herself as a white woman, she suddenly has access to an entirely new world full of opportunities, and these opportunities quickly build on one another. First, Stella poses as a white woman and secures a

well-paid job at a respectable marketing firm. And as a result, she becomes friendly with her new boss, Blake, developing a relationship that eventually leads to a life of riches and worldly comforts. The path she follows, in other words, all begins with her decision to pose as a white woman, since these opportunities wouldn't have been available to her if she had been forthright about her racial identity. In turn, the novel suggests that white people in the United States have easier access to life-changing opportunities than Black people do, since wealth and social class are often directly related to the various privileges—or disadvantages—that come along with a person's racial identity.

All of Stella's reasons for passing as white can be traced back to the fact that racism and discrimination made it extraordinarily difficult for Black people to financially support themselves in the mid-20th century. The intersection of racism and economic class is apparent very early in *The Vanishing Half*, when Stella and Desiree have to quit school to help their mother earn money—all because a group of racist men murdered their father and thus made it much harder for the Vignes family to stay afloat financially. Then, while Stella and Desiree work as housecleaners, their white employer sexually abuses Stella. Because he's a powerful white man, Stella doesn't think she can tell anyone about what he does to her, so she does the only thing she can think to do: she flees. Once she and Desiree reach New Orleans, they find work at a laundromat, but Stella eventually gets fired. If she doesn't find a new job, she and Desiree won't be able to survive in the city, which is why she ends up applying to a job at an all-white marketing firm. The reason she starts passing as white, then, is because it's a necessary means of survival. She doesn't pose as a white woman just because she wants to try out a new identity, but because the racist environment of the United States in the mid-20th century has deprived her and Desiree of stability and success.

Having shown how hard Stella worked to secure wealth and opportunity, the novel emphasizes the fact that white people living in a racist society begin life with an automatic advantage. Stella's own daughter is a good example of how whiteness often comes with inherent privileges. Because Kennedy looks white and was raised in a white community, she doesn't face the same challenges that Stella faced as a child and teenager. Of course, it's true that part of the discrepancy between their lives has to do with the fact that Stella grew up poor, but such concerns cannot be separated from a discussion of race. After all, Stella's financial struggles began when a racist mob killed her father, thus hindering her family's ability to support themselves. There are also systemic ways that racism impacts economic class, like the fact that well-paying jobs like the one Stella finds in New Orleans only hire white people. To that end, while there are many impoverished white people who face extremely difficult challenges, the fact remains that they—at the very least—don't

have to deal with racist discrimination and exclusion on top of everything else they're facing. Kennedy, for instance, has both the privilege of presenting as a white person *and* the privilege of coming from a wealthy family. Consequently, she doesn't have to work as hard as her mother in order to attain stability. When it's time for her to attend college, it doesn't matter that her grades are terrible, since her parents make large donations to USC in order to bribe the admissions office into admitting her as a student. The novel therefore spotlights the glaring discrepancy between what it takes for white and Black people to succeed in the United States, ultimately implying that white people have an easier path to prosperity than Black people do.



SYMBOLS

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



STELLA'S WEDDING RING

Stella's wedding ring is a physical reminder of everything she gave up in order to lead a prosperous life as a white woman. Her initial decision to start passing as white began when she applied to work for Blake in the Maison Blanche building, but the *real* turning point came when Blake asked her to come to Boston with him—a question influenced by his romantic feelings for her. By later marrying Blake, she committed once and for all to living as a white woman, so her ring represents that commitment just as much as it represents her love for Blake. It's quite meaningful, then, when she returns to Mallard and gives the ring to Early, asking him to pawn it and use the money to help care for Adele. The ring symbolizes the many things she left behind by disappearing into a new life, so it makes sense that she tries to make up for her absence by parting with the ring itself, which, in turn, comes to represent not just the life she left, but also her guilt about the decision she made to abandon her loved ones.



THE PHOTOGRAPH

Because it puts Kennedy's burning questions about Stella's past to rest, the photograph Jude gives her of their mothers symbolizes how meaningful it can be to gain a sense of emotional closure. Before seeing the photograph, Kennedy obsesses over what Jude tells her about Stella, simultaneously refusing to accept that her mother is Black *and* yearning to know more. Unfortunately for her, though, Stella won't talk about her past and does nothing but deny what Jude said. But when Jude finally gives Kennedy a picture of their mothers standing side by side as children, Kennedy no longer has to wrestle with the ambiguity that has taken over her life—she now knows the truth. And yet, the truth doesn't

necessarily make things easier for Kennedy, who suddenly has to reexamine her own racial identity. Although the photograph brings Kennedy closure, then, it also opens the door to broader, more challenging questions, suggesting that sometimes discovering the truth can be both satisfying and emotionally complex.

☞ The father now dead, the now-freed son wished to build something on those acres of land that would last for centuries to come. A town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes. A third place. His mother, rest her soul, had hated his lightness; [...] Maybe that's what made him first dream of the town. Lightness, like anything inherited at great cost, was a lonely gift.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead Books edition of *The Vanishing Half* published in 2020.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ In Mallard, nobody married dark. Nobody left either, but Desiree had already done that. Marrying a dark man and dragging his blueblack child all over town was one step too far.

Related Characters: Desiree Vignes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

When Desiree Vignes returns to Mallard after a 14-year absence, everyone is shocked to see that her daughter has very dark skin. The townspeople are astounded by Jude Vignes's skin color because Mallard is made up entirely of light-skinned Black people. In fact, the entire idea of Mallard is that it's a place where Black people with light skin can live a separate existence from the rest of society. As such, "nobody marrie[s] dark" in Mallard, meaning that it's socially taboo for a person with light skin to wed a person with dark skin. But Desiree ran away from town as a teenager and eventually married Sam, who had much darker skin than her. Jude's skin is dark like her father's, so everyone in Mallard is taken aback, seeing Desiree's decision to have a child with a darker Black man as a transgression of sorts. To that end, the townspeople seem to see Jude's mere *existence* as a transgression, ultimately subjecting her to prejudice without even getting to know her.

Related Characters: Alphonse Decuir

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Alphonse Decuir—who happens to be Desiree and Stella's great-great-great-grandfather—founded Mallard shortly after the end of slavery. His father was an enslaver who enslaved and impregnated his mother. He himself was born with light skin, but his father knew he was Black and—because his father was obviously very racist—didn't accept him. Unfortunately for Alphonse, his mother also didn't accept him, since he had light skin and therefore must have appeared to her as a constant reminder of her wretched enslaver. When Alphonse gained his freedom and inherited the land his father used to own, he decided to create a "third place": a place where light-skinned Black people like him could live in peace without having to assimilate into white or Black society. In other words, the entire town of Mallard is based on the idea that skin color is important, thus laying the groundwork for the town's prejudice against dark-skinned Black people—prejudice, of course, that Jude later faces when Desiree brings her to Mallard as a child.

☞ She wanted to go to college someday and of course she'd get into Spelman or Howard or wherever else she wanted to go. The thought had always terrified Desiree, Stella moving to Atlanta or D.C. without her. A small part of her felt relieved; now Stella couldn't possibly leave her behind. Still, she hated to see her sister sad.

Related Characters: Desiree Vignes, Stella Vignes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis


When Desiree and Stella are young, Stella dreams of

excelling in school and someday attending college, which would be a significant (but not unheard of) achievement for a Black woman living in the mid-20th century. However, Desiree and Stella's mother takes them both out of school when they're sophomores, claiming that they've learned enough and that she needs help earning money to keep the family financially afloat. It thus becomes clear that the racist white people who killed Desiree and Stella's father didn't just deprive them of a loved one, but also deprived them of financial stability.

Furthermore, whenever Desiree thinks about Stella going to college, she can't help but feel "terrified" about the idea of her sister leaving her behind—an interesting reaction, considering that Desiree is supposedly the courageous, independent twin, whereas everyone sees Stella as the shy, unadventurous one. In reality, though, Desiree knows that she'd be completely overwhelmed and frightened if Stella left her, and though Stella doesn't end up going her own way because of college, she *does* eventually leave when she starts passing as white. Desiree's thoughts in this section thus foreshadow her devastation when Stella actually disappears into her own life.

☝ She was beginning to feel as if an escape door had appeared before her, and if she waited any longer, it might disappear forever. But she couldn't go without Stella. She'd never been without her sister and part of her wondered if she could even survive the separation.

Related Characters: Desiree Vignes, Stella Vignes

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13-14

Explanation and Analysis


The summer that Desiree and Stella start working as housecleaners for a rich white family, Desiree can't stop thinking about running away to New Orleans. She doesn't want to lead the same life as her mother, who has spent so many years cleaning the homes of wealthy white people for very little compensation. Simply put, she doesn't see such an existence as something that could ever feel rewarding. At first, though, she doesn't have much success convincing Stella to leave, since Stella isn't the type of person to run away (not yet, at least). As a result, Desiree finds herself unable to escape, since she feels as if she could never venture off without Stella, worrying that she wouldn't "even survive the separation." It therefore becomes quite clear that Desiree feels extremely dependent on her sister, not

wanting to do anything adventurous without Stella's support—something that will later make it even harder for her when Stella disappears in order to start passing as white.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ But even here, where nobody married dark, you were still colored and that meant that white men could kill you for refusing to die. The Vignes twins were reminders of this, tiny girls in funeral dresses who grew up without a daddy because white men decided that it would be so.

Related Characters: Leon Vignes, Desiree Vignes, Stella Vignes

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Although the Vignes family lives in Mallard, where everyone in town has light skin, their father's grisly death at the hands of a racist mob proves that they aren't safe from racism. In a way, it's as if the people of Mallard think they've managed to avoid the effects of racism by making sure that the town's residents are light-skinned Black people. The townspeople even perpetuate racist ideas about skin color by disapproving of dark-skinned Black people, but the truth is that, regardless of the distinctions they make within their community about skin tone, white society still sees the people of Mallard as Black. They're therefore just as vulnerable to racist violence and scorn as any other Black person. It even seems as if Desiree and Stella's father didn't do anything to provoke the group of racist white men who murdered him, underscoring the extent to which people in Mallard still have to deal with the nonsensical and dangerous hatred that many white people show toward Black people.

☝ "Don't you have something brown?" her mother had asked, lingering in the doorway, but Desiree ignored her, tying pink ribbons around Jude's braids. Bright colors looked vulgar against dark skin, everyone said, but she refused to hide her daughter in drab olive greens or grays. Now, as they paraded past the other children, she felt foolish. Maybe pink was too showy. Maybe she'd already ruined her daughter's chances of fitting in by dressing her up like a department store doll.

Related Characters: Desiree Vignes, Jude Vignes, Adele Vignes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 40



Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Desiree returns to Mallard, she enrolls Jude in the local school. On Jude's first day, Desiree dresses her in colorful clothing—much to her own mother's dismay, since Adele thinks that bright colors look "vulgar against dark skin." Even as a little girl, Jude is subject to this blatant colorism (discrimination based on the tone of a person's skin). But Desiree refuses to let these problematic ideas interfere with her parenting: she wants to dress Jude in pink ribbons instead of trying to hide the fact that Jude is dark-skinned. In other words, she wants to teach Jude to *celebrate* her skin color instead of being ashamed of it. And yet, the fact remains that everyone in Mallard subscribes to very colorist ideas and thinks the same thing as Adele when it comes to how dark-skinned people should dress. As a result, Desiree is forced to question whether or not her decision to dress Jude in colorful clothing was all that wise—it teaches Jude a positive lesson about embracing who she is, but it *also* puts her in the difficult position of dealing with everyone's judging eyes.

☛ She'd finished quick, the deputy said, laughing a bit in amazement, might have been a record. He pulled out the answer guide from a manila folder to check her work. But first, he glanced at her full application, and when he saw her address listed in Mallard, his gaze frosted over. He slid the answer key back in the folder, returned to his chair.

"Leave that there, gal," he said. "No use wasting my time."

Related Characters: Desiree Vignes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis



A few days after returning to Mallard, Desiree seeks out a job as a fingerprint analyst at the sheriff's office in the neighboring town of Opelousas. During the interview, the sheriff is impressed by her experience—she has, after all, worked as a fingerprint analyst for the federal government in Washington, D.C., making her extremely qualified to work

in the much smaller setting of the Opelousas sheriff's department. She even completes an aptitude test in record time, further wowing the sheriff. But then he takes a closer look at her personal information and sees that she's from Mallard, and he therefore gathers that she's Black, so he doesn't give her the job.

The entire exchange highlights just how petty and ridiculous racism can be: nothing about Desiree's race would have changed her ability to carry out the job in a successful way. The sheriff was even deeply impressed by her before he found out that she's Black, underscoring the fact that his decision to turn her down is based on nothing but a stubborn, close-minded unwillingness to hire a Black person. If Desiree had simply posed as white, she would have easily gotten the job.

☛ If she hadn't believed, even a bit, that spending time with Early was wrong, why hadn't she ever asked him to meet her at Lou's for a malt? Or take a walk or sit out by the riverbank? She was probably no different from her mother in Early's eyes.

Related Characters: Desiree Vignes, Early

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

After Desiree's mother chases Early off her porch because she doesn't approve of her daughter spending time with a dark-skinned young man, Desiree worries that she herself secretly has the same colorist prejudices against people with dark skin. Of course, Adele was the one who told Early to leave Desiree alone, but Desiree now acknowledges that she never fully embraced their relationship. Instead of dating him in a public way by asking him for ice cream at the local diner, she only ever saw him on her porch in the evenings, as if she believed that what they were doing was wrong—even though they were simply spending time together. The fact that she never felt comfortable being seen with Early in public implies that she internalized the racism and colorism that everyone else in Mallard clung to so fiercely. Otherwise, she would have gone about her relationship with Early in a less clandestine way.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛☛ This was how Desiree thought of herself then: the single dynamic force in Stella's life, a gust of wind strong enough to rip out her roots. This was the story Desiree needed to tell herself and Stella allowed her to. They both felt safe inside.

Related Characters: Desiree Vignes, Stella Vignes

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Upon leaving home and reaching New Orleans, Desiree and Stella have a hard time supporting themselves, especially when Stella gets fired from their job at the laundromat. Stressed out by their tough circumstances, Desiree says that she should have left home without Stella, implying that she should have spared Stella from having to experience such hardship. But Stella dislikes her comment and says that Desiree would never have left without her—a comment that both twins understand is true, even if they've always acted like Desiree was the independent, courageous sister. Desiree has always seen herself as “the single dynamic force in Stella's life,” meaning that she has assumed Stella would never do anything on her own and that she needed Desiree to push her. Now, though, it becomes clear that Desiree is at least as dependent on Stella as Stella is dependent on her. The only reason she feels like the bold, independent twin is because Stella goes along with this narrative, allowing her sister to think of herself in this flattering light.

☛☛ Stella needed to find a new job, so she'd responded to a listing in the newspaper for secretarial work in an office inside the Maison Blanche building. An office like that would never hire a colored girl, but they needed the money, living in the city and all, and why should the twins starve because Stella, perfectly capable of typing, became unfit as soon as anyone learned that she was colored? It wasn't lying, she told Stella. How was it her fault if they thought she was white when they hired her? What sense did it make to correct them now?

Related Characters: Desiree Vignes, Stella Vignes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

After getting fired from her job at the laundromat in New Orleans, Stella needs to find a way to help herself and Desiree stay afloat financially. Driven by necessity, she applies to a job at a fancy company in an all-white building, but she isn't sure she should actually interview for it. However, Desiree encourages her to go through with the interview, since they badly need the money. In trying to convince her sister to go out for the job, Desiree inadvertently pushes Stella down the path that eventually leads her to disappear completely from her life—after all, passing as white in the Maison Blanche building is the first step she takes toward her new life as a white woman, which ends up taking her away from Desiree. But Desiree doesn't know that at this point and is focused solely on figuring out how she and Stella will make enough money to support themselves. It's significant that Stella's decision to pass as white begins with this conversation, since it illustrates that she doesn't pretend to be white simply for the thrill of taking on a new identity—rather, she does it because white people have access to more opportunities to support themselves.

☛☛ “She don't want to be found. You gotta let her go. Live her life.”

“This ain't her life!” Desiree said. “None of it woulda happened if I didn't tell her to take that job. Or drag her to New Orleans, period. That city wasn't no good for Stella. You was right all along.”

Related Characters: Desiree Vignes, Adele Vignes, Stella Vignes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 68



Explanation and Analysis

Because Early Jones tells Desiree that he'll try to find Stella, she becomes hopeful that he'll finally locate her sister. Adele, however, isn't so sure that tracking Stella down is such a good idea. She feels confident that Stella doesn't “want to be found” and that Desiree and Early should therefore leave her alone to “live her life.” The fact that Desiree is unable to accept her mother's point underlines not just her yearning to reunite with her twin, but also her failure to grasp that the new life Stella has taken on isn't meaningless or expendable—rather, Stella's new existence is her life, regardless of whether or not the people around her know about her personal history. But Desiree can't see her

way to embracing such an idea, instead thinking that Stella isn't leading her real life but instead merely pretending. The implication in the novel, however, is that living out a lie doesn't erase a person's lived experience. It's true that Stella isn't necessarily living as her authentic self, but it's *also* true that the idea of an authentic self is hard to pin down in the first place; if Stella is happy in her new identity, there's no real reason she shouldn't continue to inhabit that identity and take it on as her own?

☛☛ Desiree only knew the failures: the ones who'd gotten homesick, or caught, or tired of pretending. But for all Desiree knew, Stella had lived white for half her life now, and maybe acting for that long ceased to be acting altogether. Maybe pretending to be white eventually made it so.

Related Characters: Desiree Vignes, Stella Vignes

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

After her conversation with Adele (in which Adele insists that Stella clearly doesn't want to be found), Desiree thinks about her twin sister's new life. The problem, she realizes, is that she doesn't know anyone who has successfully managed to build an entirely new life while passing as white—or, if she *has* met people who have done this, she wouldn't know, since that's the whole point of passing. Desiree has only ever heard of the “failures,” or the people who tried to pass but for whatever reason weren't able to sustain their new white identities. Consequently, Desiree doesn't have a framework for thinking about Stella's new life. Still, she's able in this moment to recognize that maybe Stella no longer has to actively pretend to be something she's not, since it's possible that “pretending to be white eventually ma[kes] it so,” meaning that identity is, in many ways, more of a performance or way of behaving than anything else.

☛☛ She passed through the perfume aisle with the confidence of a woman who could buy any bottle she wished. She stopped to smell a few, as if she were considering a purchase. Admired the jewelry in the display case, glanced at the fine handbags, demurred when salesgirls approached her. In the lobby, the colored elevator operator gazed at the floor when she stepped on. She ignored him, the way Stella might have. She felt queasy at how simple it was. All there was to being white was acting like you were.

Related Characters: Desiree Vignes, Stella Vignes, Early

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Having promised Desiree that he'd try to track down Stella, Early takes her to New Orleans and teaches her a few things about finding people. Working together, they go to the Maison Blanche building, where Stella used to work. Hoping to find some information about where she went, Desiree goes into the building but fails to gain access to the correct floor. But then Early tells her that finding people is all about acting with a sense of belonging—in other words, he tells her to act like she's white. With this advice in mind, she goes back inside and saunters through the perfume department of the Maison Blanche, walking with the unconcerned confidence of a white woman who knows that nobody would ever ask her to leave. Perhaps the most striking thing about this experience is that she realizes how “simple” it is to pass as white; “All there was to being white was acting like you were.” The idea, then, is that taking on a new identity isn't quite as difficult as it might sound, since identity itself is largely a performance, not something that is set in stone.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☛☛ Now, as he watched the photo, she watched him, trying to picture Therese. But she couldn't. She only saw Reese, scruffy face, shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows, that loop of hair always falling onto his forehead. [...] She'd always known that it was possible to be two different people in one lifetime [...].

Related Characters: Jude Vignes, Reese

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis



Working alongside Reese in a photography darkroom, Jude tries to imagine him as Therese, which was his name when he still presented as female. Try as she might, she can't see anyone other than Reese, suggesting that she takes him for the person he is now, not the person he used to be. In other words, she doesn't superimpose a female identity onto him simply because he used to present as a woman. Instead, she interacts with him on the basis of his *current* identity. The novel implies that she's especially capable of grasping his trans identity because she has "always known that it was possible to be two different people in one lifetime." Of course, it's not necessarily the case that Reese feels as if he's been "two different people," since it's possible that he *always* felt like Reese, even when his outward presentation didn't reflect that feeling. Still, the novel attempts to draw a parallel between his transition from female to male and Stella's transition from a Black identity to a white identity.

“You should take that thing off,” she said. “If it hurts you. You don’t have to wear it here. I don’t care what you look like.”

She thought he might be relieved, but instead, a dark and unfamiliar look passed across his face.

“It’s not about you,” he said, then he slammed the bathroom door shut.

Related Characters: Jude Vignes, Reese (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Before they officially start dating, Jude comes home one night and sees Reese without his shirt on. She catches a glimpse of the bruises on his torso from the bandages he uses to wrap his chest (something many trans men do to flatten their chest). Thinking she's being kind, Jude urges him to take the bandages off; she doesn't want him to be in pain just because he's worried about her seeing that his chest isn't naturally flat. Unbeknownst to her, though, this is an insensitive thing to say because it ignores the fact that wrapping his chest helps Reese feel grounded in his male identity. He doesn't wear the bandages in order to impress Jude. Rather, he wears them for *himself*, so it's offensive when Jude offhandedly tells him to stop, as if what he wants doesn't matter. When he says that whether or not he binds his chest isn't "about" Jude, he hints that she shouldn't tell

him how to live his life, nor should she assume that his male identity is meant to please other people—after all, being a trans man isn't a style, it's an identity.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ If he pitied her, he wouldn't be able to see her clearly. He would refract all of her lies through her mourning, mistake her reticence about her past for grief. Now what began as a lie felt closer to the truth. She hadn't spoken to her sister in thirteen years. Where was Desiree now? How as their mother?

Related Characters: Blake Sanders, Desiree Vignes, Adele Vignes, Stella Vignes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

As a way of keeping Blake from asking too many questions about her past, Stella lied when they first started dating and said that her family died in an accident. By making up such a tragic story, she ensured that Blake would tread lightly whenever the topic came up. He would, in other words, "refract all of her lies through her mourning," thereby assuming that any strange behavior on her part was just a product of her grief about losing her loved ones. Her tactic worked, since he rarely asks her about her childhood or her family. Unfortunately for her, though, this means she never gets to talk about her loved ones, and the experience of staying silent almost starts to make it feel like they really *did* die. Indeed, Stella hasn't talked to Desiree in 13 years and doesn't even know where she lives. In a way, then, Desiree might as well be dead to Stella—a depressing, morbid idea that really highlights the sacrifices Stella had to make in order to pass as white.

☝ She couldn't tell what unnerved her more, picturing a colored family moving in or imagining what might be done to stop them.

Related Characters: Stella Vignes

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 160



Explanation and Analysis

Stella lives with Blake and their daughter, Kennedy, in a wealthy housing development that has historically been made up solely of white families. But when a Black family puts an offer on the house across the street from Stella's, the neighborhood goes up in arms, enraged by the idea of their community becoming racially integrated. Strangely enough, Stella is one of the most vocal defenders of the neighborhood's all-white policy, standing up at a Homeowners Association meeting and urging the association's president to do whatever he can to stop the Black family from moving in. Everyone applauds her, but in the coming weeks, Stella begins to feel "unnerved." It's true that she doesn't want a Black family to move in, since she worries they might somehow find out that she, too, is Black; and yet, she also seems to regret riling up her white neighbors. She realizes that the white people in her community might actually take drastic measures—even violent ones—to stop the Black family from entering the neighborhood. She's therefore torn between her fear of living near other Black people and her fear of the racist white people with whom she has surrounded herself.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ She'd moved to Los Angeles for Blake's job and sometimes she felt like she'd had no say in the matter. Other times, she remembered how thrilling the possibility of Los Angeles had seemed, all those miles between there and her old life. Foolish to pretend that she hadn't chosen this city. She wasn't some little tugboat, drifting along with the tide. She had created herself. Since the morning she'd walked out of the Maison Blanche building a white girl, she had decided everything.

Related Characters: Loretta Walker, Stella Vignes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 172


Explanation and Analysis

As Stella and Loretta Walker—the Black woman who moves in across the street—become friends, they talk about what brought Loretta to Los Angeles. Loretta says that she never actually wanted to move to the city but that her husband wanted to pursue his dreams of becoming an actor—a comment that causes Stella to reflect on her own reasons for coming to Los Angeles. In some ways, she feels like she passively followed Blake, as if she didn't have her own sense of personal agency. But even if this were the case, the mere fact that she decided to pass as white in the first place

means that every choice she's made in the subsequent years has been deeply intentional. Passing as a white woman required her to give up everything. Moreover, it forced her to "create[] herself" anew. She therefore has *tons* of personal agency, even if it sometimes seems these days like she simply does whatever Blake wants. Above all, her thought process in this moment serves as a reminder of how monumental and life-changing it was for her to leave behind her identity as a Black woman.

☝☝ She couldn't share any memory of her youth without also conjuring Desiree; all of her memories were cleaved in half, her sister excised right out of them, and how lonely they seemed now, Stella swimming by herself at the river, wandering through sugarcane fields, running breathlessly from a goose chasing her down the road.

Related Characters: Desiree Vignes, Loretta Walker, Stella Vignes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

Stella enjoys spending time with Loretta Walker because Loretta feels like an old friend, perhaps because she's the only Black woman in her life—or simply because Stella doesn't have many close relationships with other women. Either way, one problem with getting closer to Loretta is that Stella can't speak openly about her past, since doing so would inevitably mean talking about Desiree. Unable to tell Loretta about her twin sister, Stella feels as if everything she says about her childhood has been reduced to something lonely and empty—her memories have been "cleaved in half," a phrase that recalls the novel's title, *The Vanishing Half*. It develops the idea that living without her twin sister makes Stella feel somehow incomplete. Her feelings about losing Desiree accentuate just how much she had to give up in order to lead the life of a white woman with privilege and opportunity. Although she ended up getting what she wanted in life by passing as white, her current existence doesn't feel complete because she had to make such a staggering sacrifice.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ “I’m not one of them,” she would say. “I’m like you.”
 “You’re colored,” Loretta would say. Not a question, but a statement of blunt fact. Stella would tell her because the woman was leaving; in hours, she’d vanish from this part of the city and Stella’s life forever. She’d tell her because, in spite of everything, Loretta was her only friend in the world. Because she knew that, if it came down to her word versus Loretta’s, she would always be believed. And knowing this, she felt, for the first time, truly white.

Related Characters: Loretta Walker, Stella Vignes

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

Stella and Loretta have a falling out after Kennedy calls Loretta’s daughter the n-word. In the aftermath, Stella lies to her white neighbors and says that Loretta’s husband once looked at her in an inappropriate way—a comment that sparks anger throughout the neighborhood, causing people to throw stones through the Walkers’ windows and intimidate them into moving away. As Stella watches them leave, she fantasizes about what it would be like to go over before Loretta departs and come clean about her past, revealing to her former friend that she’s Black. As she fantasizes in this way, she realizes that she could tell Loretta about her past without even worrying, since nobody would believe a Black woman’s word over a white woman’s. Part of the privilege of being white, she comes to see, is that it comes with a certain feeling of comfort; she knows white society will protect her against anyone trying to harm her, taking it for granted that she’s in the right. Black women, on the other hand, don’t have this privilege, since society often assumes the *worst* of Black people, not the best.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☞ Only a lazy girl would get caught, and her daughter was clever but lazy, blissfully unaware of how hard her mother worked to maintain the lie that was her life.

Related Characters: Kennedy Sanders, Stella Vignes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

When Stella thinks about Kennedy’s sense of entitlement, she remembers that her daughter got caught smoking marijuana in the dorms at USC. Kennedy wouldn’t even have gotten into USC if her parents hadn’t made a sizable donation, but she doesn’t seem particularly grateful for the opportunity to go to such a great school. To the contrary, she almost squanders her privileged position as a student at a respected college by smoking marijuana in the dorms. What *really* seems to bother Stella isn’t necessarily that Kennedy smoked pot, but that she was careless enough to get caught doing it. The implication here is that it wouldn’t have been so hard for Kennedy to do marijuana off-campus, where she might have had a smaller likelihood of jeopardizing her college career. But part of Kennedy’s entitlement comes from the fact that she doesn’t know “how hard her mother worked to maintain the lie that was her life”—in other words, Kennedy doesn’t know that she’s partially Black, so she has lived the privileged, unconcerned life of a wealthy white person. As such, she doesn’t mind taking risks. Stella, on the other hand, would never do anything to risk an opportunity like going to USC, since she knows what it feels like to be unable to attend college.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☞ “You know I don’t mean anything by it. I’m just saying. Your men usually like the light girls, don’t they?”

Years later, she would always wonder what exactly pushed her. That sly smile, or the way she’d said *your men* so casually, as if it didn’t include her. Or maybe it was because Kennedy was right. She knew how lucky Jude felt to be loved. She knew, even though Jude tried to hide it, exactly how to hurt her.

Related Characters: Jude Vignes, Kennedy Sanders

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

At the cast party after the final performance of Kennedy’s musical, Jude and her cousin sit together and talk for a while. Kennedy is upset because she thinks her mother never came to the show, and Jude is upset because she met Stella for the first time and realized that her aunt wanted nothing to do with her. Suddenly, Kennedy takes out her anger on Jude by making a racist comment about how Black men “usually like the light girls”—what she means is that she’s surprised Reese likes Jude, who has dark skin. The comment enrages Jude, who now knows that Stella herself

is partially Black. But Stella doesn't know about her own mother's history, and even if she did, it wouldn't change the fact that Kennedy has a racist worldview; just because Kennedy is partially Black doesn't mean her views about skin color aren't problematic. For her entire life, Jude has been dealing with people who advance this kind of prejudiced rhetoric, and Kennedy's comment just builds on the seemingly endless stream of racist insensitivity.

☝ But sometimes lying was an act of love. Stella had spent too long lying to tell the truth now, or maybe, there was nothing left to reveal. Maybe this was who she had become.

Related Characters: Kennedy Sanders, Blake Sanders, Stella Vignes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 259



Explanation and Analysis

After Jude tells Kennedy that Stella is from Mallard, Kennedy can't stop asking her mother if it's true. Stella continues to deny what Jude said, and though Kennedy doesn't always press her on the topic, she *does* keep bringing it up. Finally, Blake overhears her talking about it and promises that it's not true—he reminds Kennedy that he and Stella love her and that, because they love her so much, she can rest assured that they would never lie to her. Except, Stella privately thinks that “sometimes lying” can be an “act of love.” Stella's thinking in this moment suggests that she sees herself as protecting Kennedy from a disturbing and damaging truth—namely, that Kennedy is partially Black. For Stella, who gave up so much to reap the benefits of living as a white woman, Kennedy's own belief that she's fully white is a gift of sorts. Whereas Stella has to work hard to maintain her own whiteness, Kennedy doesn't have to do anything except enjoy the privileges that come along with being white. In turn, Stella thinks that keeping the truth from her daughter is an “act of love,” one that spares her from having to struggle with racism and discrimination.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ “You shouldn't tell people the truth because you want to hurt them. You should tell me because they want to know it. And I think you want to know now.”

Related Characters: Jude Vignes (speaker), Kennedy Sanders

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

Jude speaks these words to Kennedy when they see each other in New York several years after having a falling out in Los Angeles. Their falling out happened after Kennedy's show, when Kennedy made a racist comment and Jude responded by telling her the truth about Stella's past. Now that some time has passed, Jude feels sorry for confronting Kennedy with life-altering information in such a blunt way. She recognizes that “you shouldn't tell people the truth because you want to hurt them.” She also intuits that Kennedy actively wants to know the truth now. Although she certainly wasn't ready to discover that she's partially Black back when Jude originally told her, Kennedy really is prepared now to know more about her mother's past and, thus, her own racial identity. In the intervening years, she has been unable to stop thinking about what Jude told her, constantly asking Stella where she's from and if she has a sister. But Stella has denied everything Jude said, leaving Kennedy to reconcile Jude's plausible comments with her mother's implausible denials. By reappearing with the intention of telling her more, then, Jude provides Kennedy with the opportunity to gain some closure on an issue that has been eating at her for a long time.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝ The language bothered Stella most of all. You didn't just find a self out there waiting—you had to make one. You had to create who you wanted to be.

Related Characters: Kennedy Sanders, Stella Vignes

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 305

Explanation and Analysis

When Kennedy learns once and for all about her mother's past, she decides to move out of New York and travel in Europe to “find” herself—this, at least, is what she tells Blake. Stella, for her part, doesn't like the idea of her daughter trying to “find” herself, believing that searching for oneself is the wrong way to go about establishing an identity. For Stella, identity formation is exactly what it

sounds like: a *formation*, meaning that people have to construct the person they want to be. She doesn't believe that there's a specific "self out there waiting" to be found. Instead, she thinks people have to actively "make" their own identities, which—of course—is exactly what she herself did

when she left behind her old life as a Black woman and started passing as white. The life she built isn't perfect, since she misses Desiree and can't be open with her husband about her past, but at least she can say that she became the person she wanted to be.



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

Lou LeBon rushes into the diner he owns in Mallard, Louisiana and informs the townspeople that Desiree Vignes has returned after many years. Everyone knows Desiree as one of the “lost twins” who suddenly disappeared at the age of 16. The people in the diner are scandalized by the mere sighting of Desiree after all this time, but what really shocks them is what Lou tells them next: Desiree was holding the hand of a young Black child—a little girl so dark, he says, that her skin looks “blueblack.”

The townspeople in Lou’s Egg House gossip about why Desiree would have a young child with such dark skin. Nobody in Mallard ever marries dark-skinned people. It’s possible, the diners say, that Desiree decided to take in an orphan—but nobody really thinks of her as the type to do that. She and her twin, Stella, disappeared from Mallard on Founder’s Day 14 years ago. It was eventually discovered that they’d gone to live in New Orleans. Everyone thought they’d soon return, but Stella ran off again a year later, leaving Desiree behind. She started passing as a white woman, whereas Desiree continued to live as a light-skinned Black woman.

The founder of Mallard, Alphonse Decuir, inherited the land from his father in 1848. His father was an enslaver; his mother was one of the people he enslaved. Alphonse was light skinned, but he knew white society would never fully accept him. Similarly, even his own mother resented him because his skin wasn’t dark like hers. Torn between two groups that wouldn’t accept him, he decided to found Mallard: a place for light-skinned Black people, where everyone would have lighter and lighter children over the generations. To him, the whiter his community became, the better it would be.

It’s clear right away that Mallard is a racist place, given that the townspeople are so scandalized when Desiree Vignes returns with a dark-skinned Black girl. The fact that Lou LeBon is so shocked by the little girl’s skin color hints that Blackness is considered taboo in Mallard. The town’s disapproval of Blackness seems to also spread to Desiree herself just because she’s with a dark-skinned girl—a good indication of how pervasive and petty the town’s racism really is.



The fact that Desiree’s twin, Stella, started passing as a white woman reveals that she and her sister are light-skinned Black women. Mallard, it seems, is a place full of light-skinned Black people who want to distinguish themselves from darker-skinned Black people, which is why the townspeople never marry anyone with dark skin. It’s clear, then, why everyone in Lou’s diner makes such a fuss about seeing Desiree with the dark little girl: if this girl is Desiree’s child, it could mean that Desiree has a dark-skinned husband, which the people of Mallard would certainly frown upon.



Alphonse Decuir’s decision to establish Mallard as a place for light-skinned Black people hints at a desire to carve out a space for people who would otherwise occupy an ambiguous place in society. Because Alphonse was technically Black, his racist enslaver of a father wouldn’t fully accept him as his son. But because Alphonse’s skin was very light, his Black mother didn’t fully accept him either, most likely seeing him as a painful reminder of her ruthless enslaver. Alphonse’s choice to found Mallard was thus based on an unshakable feeling of otherness in American society. Unfortunately, though, founding a town based on skin color just perpetuates racist ideas.



By the time Desiree and Stella Vignes—Alphonse Decuir’s great-great-great-granddaughters—were born, everyone in Mallard was so light-skinned that sometimes people visiting the town were confused; they thought Mallard was a Black town, so why weren’t there any Black people living there? Desiree didn’t like living in Mallard. It was too small and stifling. She constantly talked about leaving, but Stella never went along with the idea. She was more practical than Desiree and didn’t want to leave their mother behind; a group of racist white men murdered their father, despite his extremely light skin. So, to leave Mallard would be to abandon their mother. Instead of fantasizing about the wider world, then, Stella focused on her studies, dreaming of going to college someday. She even taught some of the younger classes at school.

On the final day of the twins’ sophomore year in high school, their mother, Adele, informed them that they wouldn’t be continuing their education. They’d learned enough, and now it was time for them to help her earn money. They started working with her the next day, cleaning a rich white family’s enormous house in the neighboring town of Opelousas. Stella was crushed, feeling her dreams of college slip away. As she cleaned the rich family’s house, Desiree often caught her staring off into space.

That summer, Desiree realized that her and Stella’s only opportunity to have a better life would be to run away. On the morning of the Founder’s Day dance—when the entire town would be distracted—she told Stella that they had to go. Stella was hesitant, but Desiree knew she couldn’t go without her sister. They had never been apart from one another. To her surprise, though, Stella eventually agreed. They snuck out that night, making their way to New Orleans.

Fourteen years later, Desiree returns to Mallard. She tries to make her way to her mother’s house, but she can’t remember the route. All the while, she tries to comfort her daughter, Jude, who is tired of traveling and eager to reach their destination. Desiree is on the run from her abusive husband, Sam. Their relationship was full of love at first, but she soon learned about his horrific temper. By the time he fully revealed his violent ways, they’d already gotten married and had Jude. Just before Desiree decided to leave, Sam had grabbed her by the throat and pointed a gun in her face. Knowing he would eventually kill her if she stuck around, she knew she had to go.

Although Mallard is intended to be a place where light-skinned Black people might be able to escape some of the racism running rampant in the United States, the reality is that its residents still face the dangers of living as Black people in a racist society. The murder of Desiree and Stella’s father is a perfect example of how having light skin doesn’t actually protect Black people from violent acts of racism. White society, it seems, sees race as a simple binary, meaning that people are either white or Black, regardless of what they look like. In Mallard, though, that distinction is a bit more complicated—everyone in town is Black, but the community places value on light skin, thus creating more complex social hierarchies.



As residents of Mallard, the Vignes sisters enjoy a certain level of privilege, since they’re light-skinned and therefore are able to gain acceptance from their community, which values lightness. At the same time, though, their privilege within Mallard doesn’t necessarily extend beyond their small community. Anywhere else in the United States, it seems, they will simply be seen as Black and, as a result, will face the many challenges that Black people experience in the United States. Although Stella excels in school while living in Mallard, then, it’s unfortunately not realistic that she’ll be able to leave home and go to college. Instead, she seems destined to struggle with the many hardships of living in a racist country.



Desiree and Stella’s companionship enables them to bravely leave their home as mere teenagers in a search for a better life. Desiree, for her part, seems adventurous and courageous when she suggests that they run away, but it’s worth noting that she wouldn’t be able to commit to the idea if her sister didn’t come along. It’s clear, then, that she depends on Stella quite significantly, looking to her twin for support as she tries to navigate her way into the daunting world of adulthood.



It now becomes clear that Desiree has returned to Mallard as a way of protecting herself and her daughter, Jude. Given that she’s been gone for 14 years, it’s significant that she decided to come to Mallard of all places, since it’s obvious that she cut ties with her hometown in the aftermath of running away as a teenager. Now, though, her return suggests that she truly has nowhere else to go, thus underlining just how desperate she is for support from people like her mother, even if she cut Adele out of her life all those years ago.



It was the right choice to leave Sam, but Desiree is weary of how her mother will respond when she sees her. She worries that Adele will throw her out right away, chastising her for marrying a dark-skinned Black man—her mother will think she deserves what she got. Six months after Stella left her in New Orleans, Desiree moved to Washington, D.C., where she got a job reading fingerprints for the government. Even though it had been half a year since Stella left, Desiree still wasn't used to living without her. She would often turn to say something to her twin before realizing that Stella wasn't by her side.

Desiree met Sam at work and, at first, he was kind and loving. He soothed her when she worried about Stella, assuring her she'd come back. Later, though, he would insult her and accuse her of acting like Stella, insisting that she thought she was white and too good for a dark-skinned Black man like him.

When Desiree and Jude reach Adele's house, Desiree faces her mother for the first time in years. She once called home after Stella left. She cried into the phone about her sister's disappearance, but her mother simply said, "You did this." Now, back at her childhood home, Desiree gets into a small argument with her mother, who is surprised to see that she has a daughter—who, she says, looks nothing like Desiree. But Desiree won't let her mother speak poorly of her daughter, so she threatens to leave. Adele, however, simply notes that she has a right to be surprised. Desiree didn't even invite her when she and Sam got married, but that's just because Desiree knew her mother would insist that she was only marrying a dark-skinned man to enrage her.

Although Desiree hasn't said anything about Sam, Adele knows why she has returned: to escape her abusive husband. But instead of gloating and suggesting that this outcome was inevitable, Adele tells Desiree not to worry: Sam is gone, so she should relax and eat the cornbread now sitting in front of her on the table in her childhood home.

Desiree needs her mother's support, but she isn't sure she'll get it, since she abandoned Adele. She also blatantly went against her mother's wishes by marrying Sam, defying Adele's racist disapproval of dark-skinned Black people. All the same, Desiree needs help, especially because she no longer has Stella to lean on. The difficulty she had when she was first getting used to Stella's absence is informative, as it underlines just how intertwined Desiree and Stella really were—so intertwined, it seems, that it took a long time for their separation to really set in and begin to feel real.



The residents of Mallard subscribe to something known as colorism, which is a form of prejudice based on a person's skin tone—a kind of prejudice that goes beyond broader definitions of racism by creating hierarchies within a single racial identity. When Sam verbally abuses Desiree by accusing her of thinking she's too good for dark-skinned Black people, he actually ends up playing into colorist ideas, subjecting Desiree to a similar kind of animosity that the townspeople of Mallard harbor for dark-skinned people.



As Desiree expected, Adele is critical and judgmental about the fact that she has a dark-skinned child. At the same time, though, Adele's colorist ideas don't keep her from taking Desiree and Jude in and helping them out—she just can't help but express her feelings upon seeing Jude for the first time. Of course, this isn't to say that Adele's prejudiced, colorist worldview is justifiable, but it is worth noting that this worldview doesn't completely override the fact that she's there for Desiree in a time of need, perhaps suggesting that she will be able to put her prejudices aside to support her daughter and granddaughter.



Adele's supportive, parental impulses kick in when she tries to comfort Desiree. It's true that Adele has always disapproved of Desiree's relationship with Sam, but she's apparently able to overlook this disapproval in order to help her daughter through hardship, indicating that she is, when it comes down to it, a loving and caring mother.



Outside Mallard that night, a man named Early Jones accepts a job from a bounty hunter named Ceel. Early is a lone wolf who makes a living tracking down fugitives and collecting the reward. He himself has been to jail, and he doesn't have many personal relationships—except for his working partnership with Ceel, who tells him the names and information of the people he should chase down. Now, though, Ceel offers him a different kind of job, one that involves tracking down a woman and her daughter. The woman's husband, who wants to know where his wife went with their child, is the one who hired Ceel.

Ceel explains that the woman Early will be tracking is originally from Mallard. Early spent time in Mallard as a boy, but he felt unwelcome there because everyone treated him poorly on account of his dark skin. Still, he had a crush on a young girl named Desiree Vignes, which is why he's shocked when Ceel shows him a picture of the person he'll be tracking. Suddenly, he finds himself staring at what he thinks is Desiree's face.

Given that Early has been hired to track down a woman and her daughter who have run away, it's reasonable to assume that Early's client is Sam and that he's trying to find Desiree and Jude. If so, it's possible that Desiree and Jude aren't quite as safe from Sam as they might otherwise think, despite the care and support they've received from Adele. Sam, it seems, is not content to accept the loss of his wife and daughter without first putting up a fight.



That Early has spent time in Mallard is an important detail, since it suggests that he understands an important part of Desiree's past. More importantly, though, it's revealed that he used to know Desiree on a personal level, meaning that it'll most likely be even easier for him to find her than it would be if he didn't know her at all, since he perhaps knows how she thinks and where she might go. Given that he's working for Sam, though, his potential ability to locate Desiree poses a serious threat to her new life of independence from an abusive husband.



CHAPTER 2

One night, when Desiree and Stella were little girls, their father, Leon, was whittling at home when five white men burst into the house. The girls watched as the men dragged Leon outside and accused him of writing an inappropriate letter to a white woman. It was an obvious lie, since everyone knew Leon couldn't read or write. But the white men didn't care. They shot him four times, but he didn't die. While he was recuperating in the hospital three days later, the white men found him and shot him in the head.

Leon Vignes's brutally violent death serves as a reminder of white society's vicious racism. Although the people of Mallard see themselves as somehow superior to dark-skinned Black people, their colorist ideas don't save them from the very real threat of racist violence, since white racists don't recognize much of a distinction between light-skinned and dark-skinned Black people—to them, anyone with Black ancestry is Black and thus receives the full brunt of the country's racism (unless, of course, light-skinned Black people hide their racial heritage and pass as white, which is exactly what Stella ends up doing). The colorism in Mallard therefore does little more than needlessly advance racist ideas about skin color, simply adding to the already overwhelming amount of prejudice running rampant throughout the country.



Desiree and Stella tried to make sense of why the white men murdered their father. They heard rumors that the men were angry about something related to business, but the explanation didn't add up. And yet, the girls realized that it didn't matter what their father did or did not do—either way, there would have been no reasoning with the white men. Still, their father's murder haunted them and challenged the idea that Mallard was a safe place for Black people in the South. Although everyone in town had light skin and sometimes even looked white, they were still susceptible to racism and violence.

After Desiree's return, Adele feels strange about having just one twin back home—she always had two daughters, and now it feels like she only has one. But she tells Desiree to enroll Jude at the local school, effectively insisting that her daughter and granddaughter stay for a while. On Jude's first day of school, Desiree ignores her mother's advice to dress her daughter in muted colors, instead opting to outfit her in white and pink—colors that Adele thinks emphasize the darkness of Jude's skin. Desiree ignores her mother, but when she walks Jude to school, she realizes that maybe she shouldn't have made such a statement with Jude's outfit, since everyone is staring at her.

After dropping Jude off at school, Desiree hitches a ride to the police station in Opelousas to see about working there in the fingerprint department. The sheriff is impressed by her experience in Washington, D.C. and her fast completion of the department's aptitude test, but then he sees that she's from Mallard, so he tells her to leave and that she shouldn't have wasted his time. Discouraged, she goes to the Surly Goat, a bar on the edge of town that her father's side of the family has owned for a long time. When she sits down and orders a drink, she looks up and is astonished to see Early Jones sitting at the other end of the bar.

Desiree and Stella learned as young girls about the irrationality that comes with racism and hatred. Whether or not Leon Vignes actually did anything to anger the white men was irrelevant, since it's clear that the enraged men were simply eager to turn their violence on a Black man. In other words, they were motivated by racism, not by rationality. Even though Desiree and Stella have light skin, they learn that it can unfortunately be quite dangerous to be Black in the United States, regardless of skin tone—the only way to escape this danger, it seems, would be to pass as white.



By returning to Mallard, Desiree inadvertently puts Jude in a difficult position, since Jude is much darker than everyone else and now lives in a town in which people cast judgment on dark-skinned people. Adele's suggestion to dress Jude in muted colors to downplay the contrast between her dark skin and her clothes is quite colorist, highlighting the extent to which people in Mallard try to lean away from their own Blackness. At the same time, though, Adele seems aware that Jude will feel especially out of place at school if she dresses in bright clothing. In a complicated, problematic way, then, Adele's advice can almost be seen as an effort—albeit misguided—to help her granddaughter avoid extra scrutiny from her colorist peers.



Desiree's experience with the white sheriff is a perfect example of how racist people often make petty and arbitrary decisions based on race. If Desiree had never revealed where she's from, the sheriff wouldn't have known she was Black and clearly would have hired her. After all, she's extremely qualified for the job, since she worked as a fingerprint analyst in Washington, D.C., thus holding a job in a major city that would undoubtedly have a much higher workload than the police department in a small city like Opelousas. And yet, the sheriff doesn't hire her simply because he finds out that she's Black, which would obviously have no impact on her ability to do her job.



Desiree first met Early not long before she left Mallard. Until then, she had never spent much time with dark-skinned boys. The only dark-skinned young men she ever saw were from farm families who moved to the edge of town and farmed the land for a short while before moving on. One evening that summer, though, Early Jones came to her front porch with a bag of fruit. He was working at the time for a farm on the outskirts of town, delivering fruit to the people of Mallard. He convinced Desiree to step outside and try a fig he had just bitten into. She thought they might kiss, but they didn't. Still, eating the same fig as him felt intimate and thrilling.

Throughout the summer, Desiree and Early spent as much time together as possible. They eventually kissed, even though he told her he would be leaving town in the fall to work in New Orleans. Each evening, Early would emerge from the woods and wait for Desiree to greet him on the porch. One night, her mother stepped outside, looked at Early, and told him to leave. Desiree was upset, but Adele insisted that her daughter would thank her someday.

Early never came by again, and by the end of the summer, he'd left the area altogether. Desiree didn't know how to reach him, but she also didn't know what she would even say if she did get ahold of him. After all, she suspected that, on some level, she saw her relationship with a dark-skinned boy like Early as wrong—just like her mother did.

At the bar, Desiree spots Early and moves toward him. When she asks him why he's there, he says he's in town for business. He then asks if her husband would be all right with her spending time in a bar full of men. She briefly wonders how he knows that she has a husband, but then she remembers that she's still wearing her wedding ring. She's also wearing a scarf around her neck to cover the bruise Sam left when he grabbed her there. She and Early flirt for a while, and then he tenderly lifts her scarf from her neck. For a moment, she enjoys the feel of his hand, but then she pushes him hard and storms out of the bar.

In this scene, Desiree both literally and figuratively eats forbidden fruit, since Early is—as a dark-skinned person—someone she's not allowed to interact with, so eating the same piece of fruit as him is clearly something her mother would consider inappropriate. Her interest in Early is a sign of her skepticism surrounding the many prejudices and rules that define life in Mallard. Whereas everyone else in town subscribes to colorist ideas about people with dark skin, Desiree doesn't see the harm in interacting with dark-skinned people—an initial sign that her values don't align with those of her community members, which will later push her to run away.



Adele's comment about how Desiree will thank her someday suggests that she sees her colorist worldview as something that will protect her daughter from harm. It's not just that she has prejudices against dark-skinned people—it's that she thinks keeping Desiree away from people with dark skin is a way of ensuring her daughter will steer clear of the many dangers of racism. What she doesn't consider, however, is that her own light-skinned husband was murdered by an angry mob of racists simply because they considered him Black, so it's not exactly the case that refusing to associate with dark-skinned Black people will really help a light-skinned Black person avoid racism (unless, perhaps, that person decides to fully pass as white, which is what Stella does).



Desiree clearly has feelings for Early, but she has internalized the colorism (and even blatant racism) set forth by everyone in Mallard. Her mother behaves very unkindly to Early simply because she doesn't think he's light-skinned enough to spend time with her daughter. The fact that Desiree believes on some level that she shouldn't be hanging with Early demonstrates just how destructive and influential such colorist narratives can be.



Early's job is to find Desiree so that Sam can track her down and, presumably, bring her home. On the surface, this assignment might not seem all that sinister to Early, but now he's forced to recognize that Sam's motivations might not be as innocent as he originally thought. His slow realization that Sam was abusive to Desiree will make it more difficult for him to complete the job, especially because he and Desiree have their own romantic history—to say nothing of the fact that they're clearly still interested in one another, as evidenced by their flirting in the bar.



Early didn't actually intend to find Desiree so quickly, so he was surprised when he saw her at the bar. The next morning, he goes to Desiree's childhood home, remembering how Adele sent him away the last time he was there. He'd gone home dejected that night, but his uncle had only laughed at him, asking him what he had expected. The light-skinned people of Mallard, his uncle suggested, saw him in the same way white racists saw Black people. Now, Early hides in the woods and takes pictures of Desiree as she smokes on the porch. When he talks to Sam on the phone that night, though, he doesn't reveal that he has already found her. Instead, he says he needs more time.

Early's experience as a teenager in Mallard is a good illustration of how colorism within the Black community is really just another version of the racism inflicted on Black people by white society. In the same way that racist white people discriminate against Black people, the light-skinned residents of Mallard discriminate against darker-skinned people, subjecting people who look like Early to a similar kind of animosity that they themselves experience when interacting with racist white people. In this way, it's clear that colorism just perpetuates the nation's broader forms of racism.



CHAPTER 3

When Desiree and Stella reached New Orleans as young girls, they found work at a laundromat despite the fact that they weren't old enough for full-time employment. Life was hard, and Desiree often considered calling it quits and returning to Mallard. To her surprise, though, Stella always encouraged her to stay. Although she'd been reluctant to leave home, she now seemed motivated to make it in New Orleans. One day, she said that she should have left home without Stella. She felt bad, she said, for dragging her sister into such a hard life. The comment offended Stella, who said that Desiree would never leave her behind—and it was true, she wouldn't. At that point in their lives, Desiree liked to think that Stella needed her, and Stella was happy to indulge this thought.

The sisterly dynamic between Desiree and Stella takes on a new complexity in this section, illustrating the shifting ways in which the twins support and depend on each other. Desiree has always been the dominant, more adventurous sister, but that doesn't necessarily mean she's more independent than Stella. Rather, she has gotten used to Stella's companionship, which has perhaps given her the courage to present herself as brave and independent. In reality, though, she isn't quite as confident or self-sufficient as it might seem, since her self-assuredness is actually rooted in her relationship with Stella and her sense that her sister will always be there to support her—which, of course, won't always be the case.



In the present, Desiree starts working at Lou's Egg House as a waitress. One day, Early comes to see her. He asks if her husband knows how to find her mother's house. She says no, but he keeps asking questions to make sure Sam won't be able to find her on his own. When he asks why Desiree isn't in touch with Stella, she says that Stella left her 13 years ago because she "took a job." Stella needed a new job after getting fired from the laundromat, so she applied to work in an office in the Maison Blanche building. The office would never hire a Black woman, but Desiree encouraged Stella to apply anyway—the employers never needed to know her racial identity. Stella got the job and then, a year later, disappeared into a new life.

It now becomes clear how, exactly, Stella ended up starting a new life while passing as a white woman. It wasn't the case that she randomly decided to pass as white and left Desiree behind all at once. In fact, Desiree encouraged her to pose as white because it was the only way she would be able to find a good job. The fact that she initially passed as white because it was necessary for her and Desiree's financial survival is a good reminder of just how difficult it was in the mid-1900s to secure economic stability as a Black person facing constant racism. Stella didn't start passing as white simply because she felt like trying out a new identity—she did it because she had to.



Early offers to help Desiree find Stella. He's good at hunting people down, he tells her, and though she's hesitant at first, she goes along with the idea. He has to go to Texas to find a fugitive, but then he and Desiree can go to New Orleans together and see if they can dig anything up about Stella's whereabouts. While on the job in Texas, all he can think about is Desiree. Eventually, he calls Sam and lies to him, saying that Desiree can't be found. Sam insists that Early must not have looked hard enough, but Early just hangs up the phone.

Early's decision to not tell Sam where Desiree is demonstrates two things: that he's a good person who doesn't want to put Desiree in danger, and that he cares more about his relationship with Desiree than he cares about earning money. Having reestablished their connection, he makes plans with Desiree to search for Stella, managing to find a way to help her while also making an excuse to spend more time with her.



Time passes. It's been a month since Desiree came back to Mallard with Jude. Everyone expected her to leave, but she doesn't, which makes some townspeople uncomfortable, since they're not used to having children as dark as Jude in the community. Nonetheless, Desiree doesn't leave, instead spending her days at the diner and talking to Early on the phone at the end of each shift.

Before Early left for Texas, he told Desiree that Sam had hired him to find her, but he promised he wouldn't reveal her whereabouts. He also said he was willing to find Stella without getting paid, and though Adele thinks he's just telling Desiree what she wants to hear, she's hopeful that he might actually be able to help. Adele, however, points out that Stella clearly doesn't *want* to be found, and that Desiree should let her live her life in peace. In response, Desiree insists that whatever existence Stella is leading right now *isn't* her real life—she's just pretending.

Adele informs her daughter that Stella has a history of pretending to be white. Shortly after she and Desiree ran away, their mother learned that Stella had gone to Opelousas and entered a store in which an employee assumed she was white. Instead of correcting the employee, Stella just played along. It gave her a thrill. Throughout their childhood, Desiree and Stella heard stories about people trying to pass as white, but everyone they heard about always got caught. For all of those people, though, Desiree assumes there must be many who successfully transitioned into white society. For all she knows, Stella has acted white for so long that she no longer even has to pretend.

Early finishes his job in Texas and returns to Mallard. He takes Desiree for a drive and asks her about Jude, who is always quiet and spends her time alone. Early notes that it won't be easy for her growing up in Mallard as a dark-skinned Black girl. When he was a child in Mallard, he accidentally stepped in front of a white woman at church, and the woman's husband smacked him on the back of his neck. Early assumed his uncle would stand up for him. Instead, though, his uncle apologized to the man and his wife on Early's behalf. Hearing Early's story, Desiree apologizes for letting her mother drive him away all those years ago. He forgives her, and she gently puts her hand on the back of his neck.

Slowly but surely, Desiree settles into a life in Mallard. Even though she couldn't wait to leave town as a child, she now finds herself living at home once again. The fact that she stays possibly suggests that she was never quite as independent as it seemed—after all, she only felt comfortable leaving Mallard because she had Stella there to support her. Now that she's on her own again, she doesn't mind the idea of living back in Mallard once again.



Desiree and Adele's disagreement about Stella and her new life brings up an important question: does "passing" as white require people to hide who they really are, or does it force people to build an identity that ends up feeling just as authentic as their original identity? According to Desiree, Stella isn't leading a genuine life because she's pretending to be somebody she's not—a viewpoint the novel will support and challenge at various moments throughout the coming chapters.



Even though Desiree has just suggested while talking to her mother that Stella isn't leading the real life of a white woman, she now considers the possibility that acting a certain way has the power to legitimately change a person. The novel therefore begins to explore identity in a more complex way, inviting readers to consider whether identity is fixed or if it's something that changes depending on how people lead their lives. If Stella has been living the life of a white woman for so long—and if everyone in her current life treats her like a white woman—it's not so unreasonable to argue that she has genuinely taken on a white identity.



Again, Early's experience in Mallard as a teenager provides insight into what it's like to live in the town as a dark-skinned person. It seems likely that Jude will experience a similar kind of animosity from the townspeople, who apparently go out of their way to mistreat anyone who's darker than them. For Jude, then, living in Mallard isn't the safe haven from racism that many of its residents seem to think it is (though even if she were light skinned, the grisly murder of Leon Vignes proves that nobody is safe from racism—even if they have light skin and live in Mallard).



Desiree and Early spend time in New Orleans together trying to track down Stella. They visit an old friend who knew the twins when they first moved to the city, and she tells them that she saw Stella once on the street. It was before Desiree moved away from the city. Their friend saw Stella walking with a white man, their arms linked. Desiree is surprised to hear that her sister was with a man—she can't believe Stella would make such a drastic life choice based on romance. But Early tells her that sometimes people don't behave as rationally as one might assume. Emotion, he says, often influences a person's actions.

Early teaches Desiree some tricks about finding people. He shows her how to act assertive when she asks strangers questions about Stella, urging her to pretend like there's nothing suspicious about what she's doing. When they visit the Maison Blanche, where Stella used to work, Early tells Desiree to act like she's a white woman who lost touch with a friend and wants her contact information. To Desiree's surprise, the tactic works. A secretary gives her the most recent address they had on file for Stella. It's no longer her current residence, but it's a start. What really surprises Desiree, though, is that the address is in Boston, Massachusetts.

That evening, Early and Desiree become physically intimate, and Early says he'll keep looking for Stella. He stresses, however, that he might not be able to find her. She might be gone, and Desiree will have to accept that outcome. Slipping her hands under his shirt, she says she understands.

Before Stella disappeared, Desiree was confident that she knew her sister extremely well. Because they grew up so close, it was easy for Desiree to assume that she and Stella would always depend on each other like they did when they were young. She also thought of herself as the dominant, more independent twin, but now she sees that this wasn't the case—Stella has clearly always been quite independent and has had an entire interior life of her own, to which Desiree apparently didn't have access. While it might seem crazy to Desiree that Stella would leave with a man, then, it actually just goes to show that Stella was more independent than Desiree ever knew.



Just like Stella, Desiree is capable of passing as white. They are, after all, identical twins, so it makes sense that they'd both be able to present themselves as white women. What's striking about Desiree's experience in the Maison Blanche building, though, is that acting white so easily gives her access to vital information in her search for her sister. By simply posing as a white woman, she has no trouble getting exactly what she wants from a fancy all-white establishment, underscoring just how easy it is for white people to find success in contexts in which Black people would find themselves at a disadvantage because of racist discrimination.



When Early tells Desiree that he might not be able to find Stella, he ensures that their romantic relationship starts off on the right foot. He wants to make sure Desiree isn't just sleeping with him because he agreed to find Stella, thus demonstrating his overall dedication to her and his hope that they will form a genuine connection instead of something superficial based on the promise he made to look for Desiree's sister.



CHAPTER 4

Jude takes a Greyhound bus from Mallard to Los Angeles in 1978. She has spent the last 10 years living in her grandmother's house and disliking her existence in Mallard. Everyone at school calls her racist names because she has darker skin than them. Wanting to get out of town, she has often fantasized about her father appearing and taking her back to D.C., even though she knows he's not a good man. In fact, she and Early have developed a good relationship, since he's now the closest thing she has to a father. But he doesn't live with Desiree all of the time. Instead, he leaves for extended periods to chase down fugitives, but he always comes back and stays in Mallard for a while.

Jude remembers how her father mistreated her mother. Once, she and Desiree went to the public pool and started taking off their clothes to go swimming, but then Desiree saw that she still had bruises on her legs from Sam beating her, so she put her clothes back on and told Jude to swim without her. Another time, Jude's father told her to be careful around her mother, claiming that Desiree thought she was better than them because she had lighter skin.

To get through high school, Jude focused on running. It's the only thing that gave her a sense of escape. She joined the track team and won multiple races, but everyone at school still treated her poorly. Still, she fixated on running because it was her ticket out of Mallard—and, sure enough, she eventually received a running scholarship to UCLA, which is why she's now on the Greyhound bound for Los Angeles.

Early still hasn't found Stella. Desiree holds out hope that Stella will come back to Mallard on her own someday, but she knows this is extremely unlikely. Nonetheless, Desiree can't bring herself to leave Mallard, feeling guilty about the idea of leaving her mother alone again. Plus, she has built a life for herself. She's not married to Early, but they have a strong connection. Her mother is critical of their relationship, disliking how Early comes and goes, but Desiree doesn't pay attention to Adele's disapproval.

Jude's experience growing up in Mallard has, it seems, been as challenging as Early predicted it would be when he told Desiree about his own experience as a dark-skinned person living in a town full of light-skinned people with colorist ideas. Although returning to Mallard certainly made sense for Desiree and enabled her to protect her daughter from Sam's abuse, it also meant raising Jude in a community plagued by problematic ideas about skin tone, though it's worth noting that Jude would have encountered racism anywhere in the South (and, more broadly, the United States), suggesting that there are certain things from which parents can never fully protect their children.



What Sam says about Desiree thinking she's better than him and Jude is a perfect example of how colorism ends up pitting people in the Black community against each other. However, it's untrue that Desiree thinks she's better than Sam and Jude—Sam is simply insecure and vindictive. Still, his comment underlines just how destructive colorism truly is, since Sam uses it in this moment to infuse tension between members of his own family.



Faced with constant colorism and discrimination, Jude seemingly had no choice but to throw herself into a passion, using running as an escape from the mistreatment she experienced in Mallard. Now that she's going to college, her devotion to this coping mechanism has actually paid off, implying that sometimes the only productive way to deal with hardship is to find an outlet that will lead to a sense of independence—which, in turn, enables people to extricate themselves from undesirable circumstances.



As a young girl, Desiree couldn't wait to leave Mallard. Now, though, she finds herself stuck in her hometown once again. Although she originally had no problem abandoning her mother, as an adult she can't find it within herself to leave Adele behind for a second time, suggesting that she feels a certain sense of responsibility to support and care for her aging mother, perhaps because—in the aftermath of Stella's disappearance—she now knows what it feels like to be abandoned by a loved one.



After discovering that Stella moved to Boston, the trail went cold. There were records of Stella living in the city, but then she must have gotten married and changed her name, making it harder to piece together what happened. But Early isn't particularly upset that he can't find Stella. He's not even sure he wants to successfully track her down. At first, he genuinely wanted to find her, but that was just because he wanted to please Desiree. Now, he realizes that Stella clearly doesn't want to be found, and part of him respects that decision, though he doesn't want to disappoint Desiree.

Nobody Jude meets in Los Angeles has ever heard of Mallard, partially because the town isn't listed on any maps. A young man from Arkansas named Reese doesn't believe Mallard isn't on any maps, so she takes him to the library one day and shows him. As they lean over the map, Jude can feel the proximity of his body. She first met him at a Halloween party. She felt awkward at the party but fell into easy conversation with Reese, who was dressed as a cowboy. She liked his southern accent and his striking good looks, and they started spending all their time together.

CHAPTER 5

Reese's name used to be Therese Anne Carter. When he first traveled to Los Angeles from Arkansas, he slowly changed his appearance and stopped using his old name. He cut his hair at a truck stop, started wrapping his chest, and began to wear different clothes. By the time he'd reached Los Angeles, he felt like he had really become Reese and left Therese behind. He also sought out steroids in Los Angeles, and though he managed to find them, he had to buy them illegally.

Early's respect for Stella's decision to disappear implies that he doesn't see "passing" as an inherently bad thing. Of course, it was somewhat unfair of Stella to abruptly abandon Desiree, but if she wants to pose as a white woman for the rest of her life, that's her decision. For the first time, then, the novel subtly reveals its own neutrality when it comes to the idea of passing. In other words, the novel doesn't necessarily condemn Stella for deciding to live the life of a white person.



Finally, Jude gets to build a life of her own. In childhood, she had no choice but to follow her mother to Mallard—a move that secured her safety from Sam but also forced her to face the colorism running rampant in her mother's hometown. Now, though, she has escaped to Los Angeles, where people are less concentrated on skin color. It's therefore easier for her to work on establishing a new life.



It now becomes clear that Reese is trans. There's a certain parallel at play in the novel between his transition from female to male and Stella's transition from Black to white, ultimately suggesting that it's possible for people to take control of their own identity. Reese's identity as a woman clearly never felt right to him, so he took action to create an identity that better fit who he is. The difference, of course, is that Stella doesn't seem to develop a white identity because she thinks it's a more accurate manifestation of who she is and how she feels as a person—rather, she presumably leans into her lightness because doing so gives her more opportunities to lead a comfortable, prosperous life in a racist society.



Jude starts going to a gym because Reese works there. In their free time, he shows her pictures he has taken and talks about becoming a professional photographer. She tries to imagine Reese as Therese, but she can't—he's just Reese. His identity as a trans person is new to her, but she doesn't struggle to understand. She has always felt that it's possible to be "two different people in one lifetime," even if it has never been possible for her to change her own identity. She tried to lighten her skin while living in Mallard, following her grandmother's home remedies, but it never did anything. When she tells Reese about trying to lighten her skin, he says he's glad it didn't work—she's beautiful as she is.

Reese and Jude are extremely close, but they haven't kissed yet. One day, Jude tells her about her first kiss. It was with a boy in Mallard who used to bully her. Even though he called her racist names and avoided her in public, he secretly had a crush on her, so they met up for a few weeks at night in the local horse stables. One night, Early caught them and dragged Jude away, telling her that she shouldn't be sneaking around with boys—if she wanted a boyfriend, he should come to the house with dignity.

In Los Angeles, Jude becomes acquainted with Reese's friends. She grows especially close with Barry, a high school chemistry teacher who performs at drag shows under the stage name Bianca. Barry is good friends with Reese and doesn't understand why Jude and Reese haven't hooked up yet. One evening while doing his makeup backstage at the Mirage, where he often performs, Barry points out to Jude that she and Reese clearly like each other. Jude ignores him, not wanting to admit that she and Reese obviously have feelings for each other.

The idea that it's possible to be "two different people in one lifetime" resonates with Stella's decision to embrace a white identity. At the same time, some might argue that transitioning from female to male doesn't necessarily mean that a person has been "two different people in one lifetime"—rather, many would argue that trans people feel connected to a certain gender identity even before they transition, and that their transition is just a further confirmation of the person they've always been. But such things depend on the individual, as everyone has their own relationship with gender identity. Suffice it to say, Jude's knowledge about Stella and how she took control of her own identity seems to have made it easier for Jude herself to understand and accept Reese's identity as a trans man.



There's an interesting reversal at play when Early tells Jude to have her secret lover come to the house. When Early himself was a teenager interested in Desiree, he came to her door and stood on the porch whenever he wanted to see her—he didn't hide out as if their affair were inappropriate. And yet, because he's dark-skinned, Adele sent him away, refusing to let her daughter get close to him. Jude's secret lover, on the other hand, is light-skinned, whereas she's dark-skinned. As a result, he only wanted to see her in secret, apparently feeling the same way about her skin color as Adele felt about Early's. But Early didn't let Jude open herself up to that kind of degradation simply because she has dark skin; if her admirer wanted to see her, he would have to get over his colorist prejudices. Otherwise, Early implied to Jude, the young man didn't deserve to be with her.



In many ways, The Vanishing Half is a coming-of-age story. It's easy to lose sight of this element, since the novel is full of so many bigger ideas about race, gender, and identity in general. But as Jude develops a relationship with Reese, there's a growing emphasis on her entry into the adult world of true love and companionship. What's more, the connections she makes with Reese's friends—like Barry—help her ease into adulthood, finally allowing her to feel like people support her and accept her for who she is.



The summer after her first year in college, Jude moves off campus to live with Reese. She doesn't want to go home to Mallard for the summer, so moving in with Reese feels like a better option, though they still haven't acted on their feelings for each other. They slow dance together at the Mirage one night, holding each other close and feeling connected. But then the song ends and the lights come on, so they let go of each other.

On another night, Jude comes home and is surprised to see Reese standing shirtless in the bathroom. His torso is covered in bruises around the bandages he wears on his chest. Without thinking, Jude asks what happened, but Reese quickly puts his shirt on and tries to dismiss her question. She soon realizes that the bandages he wears dig into his body and create painful bruises, so she tells him that he should take the bandages off—she doesn't care what he looks like at home, so he should feel free to avoid the bandages when she's around. Reese tells her in an angry voice that the bandages aren't for her, and then he slams the bathroom door.

Jude rushes out of the apartment and goes to Barry's house. Reese has never raised his voice at her, but she remembers the way her father used to yell at her mother, so she wants to distance herself from this angry version of Reese. Eventually, Reese turns up outside Barry's late in the night. He's drunk, but he admits that he shouldn't have lost his temper like that. He would never hurt her, he says, but he still shouldn't have yelled. He also says that he learned about a doctor who will perform surgery on his chest. It's extremely expensive, but he's saving up. Jude apologizes for acting like she's somebody special in Reese's life—somebody he has to please. But she *is* special, he says, and then they kiss.

At a party the next night, the electricity goes out. As everyone feels their way through the apartment for flashlights, Reese finds Jude in the bathroom. They haven't spoken since their kiss, and Jude assumes that Reese doesn't want to talk about it—she thinks he doesn't like her. She's therefore surprised when he kisses her again as she leans against the bathroom sink. They go back to Reese's apartment and sleep together for the first time, and though Jude loves being with Reese in this way, she realizes once she's naked that Reese himself is still fully clothed.

Again, Jude is slowly learning how to navigate adult relationships. Unlike her secret tryst with the light-skinned young man in Mallard, her burgeoning relationship with Reese is straightforward and real—but that doesn't make it any easier for her to embrace her feelings for him in a public way, suggesting that she's not used to accepting such intimate and genuine companionship.



Reese wraps his chest with a bandage to make it look flat. Although this might sound like a simple way of achieving a body shape that other people perceive as male, chest binding can also be painful, as the bandages can dig into the body, which is what has happened to Reese. Jude's initial reaction is to empathize with Reese's pain, but what she fails to see is that he'd rather her focus on how it important it is for him to have a male-coded body. When she suggests that he doesn't have to bind his chest for her, he makes it very clear that he doesn't do it for her—he wraps his chest for himself because it affirms his gender identity.



When Reese responds so angrily to Jude, he accidentally triggers her traumatic memories of Sam and his abusive ways. He just wanted to clarify that he binds his chest for himself, but he seems to recognize when he apologizes to Jude that she was only trying to be empathetic—even if she miscalculated. Their ability to make up with one another after this episode suggests that they have a healthy relationship based on mutual support and understanding.



Jude is surprised that Reese doesn't take off his clothing, since she knows that getting naked is something lovers normally do when they become physically intimate. But his reasons for staying clothed make a lot of sense. Because he hasn't had gender-affirming surgery, his body in and of itself doesn't align with the way he sees himself. As such, his clothing actually goes a long way in helping him feel grounded in his identity, since dressing in certain ways makes it easier for him to present himself in a masculine way. Therefore, leaving his clothes on during sex with Jude isn't necessarily a sign that he's unwilling to be intimate and vulnerable—it's simply a way for him to feel more like his authentic self while making love to Jude.



CHAPTER 6

The night after they sleep together for the first time, Reese gets into bed with Jude and starts kissing her. She stops him, wanting to define their relationship, and it becomes clear to both of them that they each want to be together. They start kissing again, but Reese stops Jude when she starts to take off his pants. He doesn't want to undress—something she eventually learns as their relationship progresses. One night, she asks if they can keep the light on because she wants to see him, but he shrinks away and says he doesn't want to be seen. He sleeps on the couch that night.

Later that summer, Jude decides to get a new job. She wants to help Reese save up for top surgery, but she can't tell him about her intentions because he never lets her pay for anything—he never accepts help. Still, Jude starts working for a company that caters fancy parties in wealthy places like Malibu. The parties are full of rich white people, many of whom work in the entertainment industry. When she's not catering during the fall semester, Jude spends her time thinking about the human body. She gives Reese his steroid injections, which makes her want to learn more about health and the body, so she enrolls in an anatomy class. To her surprise, she ends up enjoying the class.

One evening, Jude catches Reese staring at her. He says that he just likes to look at her, but she doesn't believe him, which just makes him annoyed—he doesn't like when she acts as if he's lying when he compliments her looks. Regardless of Jude's belief that nobody could ever find her dark skin beautiful, Reese reminds her that he's not like the people back in Mallard.

Jude starts dreaming about her father. One night, she wakes up troubled from one of these dreams, prompting her and Reese to talk about what it's like to be so far from their families. Reese hasn't seen his family in years and has no contact with them. He left because his father caught him kissing a girl while dressed like a man. His father beat him with a belt, saying that Reese would have to take punishment like "a man" if that's what he wanted to be.

Although Jude initially felt as if she understood Reese's transition from female to male, it now becomes clear that she hasn't quite grasped the nuances of his personal journey. The fact that she wants to see him while they make love is a testament to how connected she feels to him, but it also suggests that she still isn't thinking about things from his perspective. For Reese, his body is the only thing that doesn't accord with his identity as a man, so he'd rather not be looked at while having sex. But Jude doesn't seem to understand his hesitancy, thus creating tension in their relationship.



Despite Jude's slight difficulty grasping the challenges Reese deals with as a trans man, she is quite supportive and helps him become the version of himself that he wants to be. She is, in other words, a caring partner who will do whatever she can to help Reese, even if she's still learning about the best ways to support and respect his wishes.



Jude's unwillingness to believe that Reese actually finds her beautiful is evidence of the ways in which she has internalized the racism and colorism she grew up around in Mallard. It's clear, then, how damaging such viewpoints can be to a person's self-image and confidence.



It's clear that Reese has had some traumatic experiences surrounding his family's inability to accept his gender identity. His story about his father's bigotry adds a certain amount of perspective to Jude's experience growing up and facing colorism and racism. Although she had to deal with colorist discrimination in Mallard, she knew that, at the very least, her mother and Early were there to accept her for who she was—Reese, on the other hand, had nobody to accept him until he moved away from home.



Reese sometimes thinks about what it'd be like if he went home. Part of him wants to go back to challenge his father, since he's bigger and stronger now. But another part of him just wants to walk around his hometown as a man, knowing nobody would recognize him. And yet, his mother would still know it was him. Jude listens to Reese talk, and then they start kissing. She reaches for his shirt, but he rolls away and goes to the bathroom. When he returns, his shirt is gone but the bandage is still there—he tells her that he needs the bandage, and she says that's okay, delighting in the feel of his skin beneath her fingers.

When Reese allows Jude to see him without his shirt on, he opens up to her in a very intimate way. It seems as if he does this simply to satisfy Jude, who has wanted to get closer to him in this way. Until now, he has made a point of respecting his own wish to stay clothed during sex. The fact that he makes an exception in this scene suggests that he's willing to go to great lengths to please Jude, indicating just how committed he is to their relationship—they're so close, it seems, that he's willing to step outside his comfort zone because he knows he's safe with Jude.



Reese met Barry not long after moving to Los Angeles. He was at a nightclub when Barry came on to him, but he declined Barry's sexual advance. Later that night, Barry asked him to dinner—not because he wanted to have sex with Reese, but because he could tell Reese was hungry. And it was true: Reese was starving. Barry took him to a nearby diner and asked about his life, eventually saying he could stay at his apartment if he wanted; again, not because Barry wanted to have sex with Reese, but simply because he wanted to help. He also revealed that he knew Reese was trans, something he openly accepted. That night, he gave Reese a haircut, fixing the lopsided job Reese himself had done at the truck stop.

Barry gives Reese the support and acceptance that has been missing in his life. Whereas Reese's parents never came to terms with who he really was and instead wanted him to embrace a female identity, Barry immediately accepts Reese as a man and, more than that, offers to help him. The novel thus implies that it's sometimes necessary for people to actively seek out and build support networks instead of relying on family.



Jude works for the catering company for the entire fall semester. In December, the company is hired to cater the retirement party of an extremely wealthy business executive. At one point during the party, a young blond woman with piercing blue eyes comes over to Jude and asks for some wine. It's obvious that she's not old enough to drink, but she convinces Jude to pour her a glass. She mentions that she's the daughter of the powerful businessman, and that her mother hasn't arrived at the party yet. But then a woman in a long fur coat enters the party—it's the girl's mother. Jude turns to look at the woman and suddenly drops a bottle of wine on the expensive carpet. As she stares at the woman, she can hardly believe her eyes.

The chapter ends on a mysterious note, as it's unclear who, exactly, Jude looks at just before dropping the wine bottle. However, it's reasonable to assume that the woman she has just laid eyes on is Stella, since she probably wouldn't have such an astonished reaction to anyone else. If so, it becomes clear that Stella's decision to "pass" as white ended up leading to great wealth and prosperity, since the party is full of rich and successful people.



CHAPTER 7

Stella now lives in a wealthy housing development in Los Angeles. At an emergency Homeowners Association meeting, her fellow residents are up in arms about the fact that a Black family might move into a house across the street from Stella's house. As everyone yells about how the entire neighborhood might go to ruin, Stella stands up and vehemently tells the president of the Housing Association that he absolutely *must* stop the Black family from moving in. She surprises herself by acting so boldly—she's usually quiet and reserved. Because her outburst is so out of character, it makes an impression on her neighbors, who applaud her for fighting against racial integration.

Blake Sanders, Stella's husband, is also quite surprised by Stella's outburst at the Homeowners Association meeting. On the whole, though, he agrees with her sentiment, believing that the Black family who put an offer on the house across the street ought to be stopped. That night, Blake soothes Stella by assuring her that the neighborhood surely won't let Black people move in—after all, the Homeowners Association has lawyers who will stop that from happening.

Stella and Blake have been married eight years. They met in New Orleans and now have a young daughter who, like Stella, often has nightmares. Stella's own nightmares revolve around her father's murder, but she can't talk about them with Blake because she never mentions her past, for fear of uncovering too much about herself and revealing that she's passing as white. When she was pregnant with her daughter Kennedy, she thought constantly about whether or not the baby would come out with light or dark skin. If Kennedy had ended up with dark skin, Stella might have lied and told Blake that she had an affair with a Black man. In the end, she didn't have to lie because Kennedy looked so white.

As a very young child, Kennedy once asked Stella where she was from. Even though she had never told Blake the name of her hometown, she told Kennedy that she was from Mallard, figuring that Kennedy wouldn't remember. Whenever Kennedy asked about Stella's parents, Stella just said they were "gone." As for Blake, she told him that her parents died in a tragic accident.

Stella's intensity at the Homeowners Association meeting might be surprising to her neighbors, but it wouldn't be all that unexpected from anyone who knows that she's actually a Black woman—after all, people with secrets often violently oppose anything that might expose whatever they're hiding. It's also possible that Stella's aversion to a Black family moving into the neighborhood is the product of internalized racism. After years of passing as a white woman, it's likely that she has established an identity that stands in opposition to her former identity as a Black woman; in other words, she has taken on a racist worldview as a way of more fully inhabiting her new identity as a white person.



The community that Stella and Blake live in is clearly very racist, as evidenced by the fact that there are lawyers who will work to keep a Black family out of the neighborhood. It's clear, then, that Stella has found her way into an environment of wealth and racial segregation—an environment in which nobody is willing to embrace the idea of racial unity.



The fact that Stella would rather have Blake think she cheated on him than admit she's Black is a good indication of just how serious she is about keeping her Blackness a secret. She has lived as a white woman for so long that she's unwilling to jeopardize her current life by revealing the truth about her past, ultimately demonstrating the extent to which she has committed to leaving behind her identity as a Black woman.



One difficult aspect of passing as white is that it requires Stella to completely separate herself from her personal history, which means constantly lying about her past. She can't tell Kennedy about her mother, who is still alive, nor can she speak openly to Blake about where she's from. Instead, she has to find ways to be evasive about her past or—alternatively—lie.



The morning after the Homeowners Association meeting, Stella floats in her private pool drinking gin. She thinks about the possibility of her neighborhood desegregating and fears that the Black family across the street will sense her secret. She's glad that Blake convinced her to get a private pool when the local public pools were beginning to desegregate. Slowly but surely, she has acclimated to the wealthy lifestyle Blake has always led. She has a housekeeper now, a fact that sometimes reminds her of her days spent cleaning for the rich white family in Opelousas. She never told anyone, but the husband of that wealthy couple often cornered her in a closet and stuck his hands down her pants. That's why Stella agreed to leave Mallard in the first place: to get away from that man.

In the coming weeks, Stella and her neighbors learn that the Black family buying the house across the street threatened to sue the Homeowners Association if it didn't let them purchase the property. It's clear that the family is extraordinarily wealthy, which intimidates Stella and everyone else in the neighborhood. Stella gossips with the other families in the housing development, many of whom are adamant about making sure there isn't a trend in which Black people start moving to the neighborhood after the first Black family arrives. Stella agrees with her neighbors about not wanting to live alongside Black people, but she also fears what these powerful white people might do to get their way.

CHAPTER 8

It soon becomes public knowledge that the new neighbors are Reginald and Loretta Walker and their young daughter. Everyone in Stella's neighborhood knows who Reginald Walker is, since he's famous for his role as Sergeant Tommy Taylor, a police officer on a well-known television show. Blake enjoys living near a celebrity, yelling out Sergeant Tommy Taylor's famous catchphrase ("File that form!") whenever he sees Reginald across the street—something that Reginald takes in stride, though Stella can tell he finds it annoying. As for the other neighbors, Stella's circle of wealthy white friends are still suspicious of the new family, insisting that Loretta is "uppity" because she wants to enroll her daughter in the same school that all of the neighborhood's white children attend.

Stella looks out the window one morning and sees Kennedy playing with the girl across the street. Without thinking, she runs outside and grabs her daughter by the arm, pulling her inside. When Kennedy asks why she can't play with the Walker girl, Stella repeats what her own mother once told her—namely, that she can't play with Black people (Stella uses the n-word when she says this). The next day, Loretta Walker rings the doorbell and shoves a doll that Kennedy left behind into Stella's arms.

It turns out that Stella didn't leave Mallard simply because Desiree wanted her to. Rather, she had a specific motivation to leave: the man she and Desiree worked for was sexually abusing her on a regular basis. Because he was a powerful, rich white man, it would have been extraordinarily difficult for Stella to put an end to his abuse, since she was a young Black teenager living in a racist society, making it very unlikely that any law enforcement officials would take her word over her abuser's word. As such, she had few options other than to run away.



Stella is in a strange position, since she aligns with the many racists in her neighborhood while also feeling—on some level—the harmful effects of their bigotry. She doesn't want a Black family to move in, but that means perpetuating the hateful sentiments that her racist neighbors spread about Black people. If her neighbors end up resorting to racist violence, Stella will be horrified because she knows what it feels like when angry white people behave aggressively toward Black people—after all, a racist mob killed her own father.



The fact that Stella's neighbors think Loretta is "uppity" simply because she wants her daughter to have access to the same quality of education as white children is indicative of their inherently racist way of looking at the world. To them, Black children don't deserve the same services as white children. And though Stella doesn't say anything, she clearly recognizes just how bigoted this viewpoint is, considering that she herself always wanted to go to college but—because a group of racist white men killed her father and thus deprived her family of financial stability—she instead had to quit school to support herself.



By repeating her own mother's phrase (which includes the n-word), Stella perpetuates the exact kind of racism that she herself ran from when she initially started passing as white. Kennedy has been raised as a white person and has no idea that she has Black ancestry, but instead of teaching her daughter a message of racial unity, Stella models hatred and bigotry.



Stella avoids Loretta for the next few weeks. She hears from a neighborhood friend that Loretta plans to sue the school system for not letting her daughter attend. Stella's friend finds this absurd, insisting that Loretta must love drama for the sake of drama. When Stella notes that Loretta doesn't seem like someone who wants to create problems, her friend asks how she would know. Immediately, Stella changes her tone, saying that her friend is probably right about Loretta.

Soon enough, Stella's guilt takes over and drives her to bring Loretta a cake. On the day she brings it over, she sees that Loretta has friends over and thinks it's probably a good thing, since it'll make it easier to give Loretta the cake, say sorry, and quickly leave. But when she arrives, Loretta invites her inside. Her friends are polite, but they subtly shame Stella by saying that they've heard a lot about her. When Stella finally tries to apologize, she pauses, hoping that Loretta will jump in and dismiss the matter altogether. But Loretta lets her continue. Finally, Loretta says that she didn't even want to move to the neighborhood in the first place—something Stella empathizes with. After all, she knows what it's like to live “in a world not meant for you.”

Before leaving Loretta's house, Stella suggests that their daughters should play together sometime at a nearby park. Loretta takes her up on this proposal several days later. As their daughters play, the two mothers sit on a park bench and talk about what brought them to the neighborhood. Loretta came to Los Angeles not because she wanted to live in the city, but because Reginald had big dreams of becoming a famous actor. Stella privately reflects on the fact that although she doesn't particularly love Los Angeles, everything in her life since she started passing as white has been a very deliberate choice. She had to completely create her own identity, and though she followed Blake from New Orleans to Boston to Los Angeles, even that feels to her like a choice.

Stella asks Loretta why she chose to live in a white neighborhood when she could easily have found a friendlier place to live—a place where neighbors aren't so hostile toward Black people. Loretta's answer is simple: people are going to hate her anyway, so she might as well live in a big house in a rich neighborhood. After this conversation, Stella and Loretta start seeing each other on a regular basis. All summer, Stella looks forward to her time with Loretta. But she never tells Blake about their friendship. She even asks Kennedy not to mention it, urging her daughter to keep quiet about the frequent playdates she has with Loretta's daughter.

Although Stella used a racial slur in front of Kennedy and forbade her from playing with Loretta's daughter, she now seems to feel uncomfortable about her friend's racist remarks. It's almost as if she's alright with using racist rhetoric herself but struggles to hear white people say the same kinds of things—a contradictory view of bigotry that hints at just how complex it is for her, as a Black woman passing as white, to talk about race.



Stella doesn't say that she understands what it's like to live “in a world not meant for you,” since this would open the door to a conversation about her past and the fact that she's Black. Instead, she presents herself to Loretta as a white woman and hopes that Loretta will relieve her of the burden of having to say why, exactly, she's sorry. But Loretta doesn't jump in to make it easier for her, perhaps sensing that Stella is trying to wriggle out of actually apologizing. At the same time, though, what Stella does is a lot more than any of her white neighbors would do, and this is because she empathizes with Loretta's situation, knowing—of course—what it feels like to be Black in a racist world.



There's an impressive kind of personal agency in the path Stella has taken in life. Although she has largely followed Blake from place to place, the only reason she's with him in the first place is because she chose to present herself as white. In this sense, she has more agency than someone like Desiree, who has ended up living in Mallard for the majority of her life even though she always dreamed of leaving. Yet again, then, the novel refrains from harshly judging Stella's decision to pass as white—to the contrary, in this moment it celebrates her courage to decide what's best for herself.



Although Stella originally disliked the idea of a Black family moving in across the street, she now seems to revel in the chance to have a Black friend in her life. Of course, Loretta doesn't know Stella is Black, but it's clear that Stella values the mere feeling of spending time with another Black person—someone who knows what it's like to experience racism and who certainly notices all of the ways in which white people discriminate against Black people. After all, Stella has spent many years around white people, so she's undoubtedly used to standing silently by while people say and do racist things. To be with Loretta, then, feels like a respite from a constant barrage of bigotry and insensitivity.



Stella goes to Loretta's house one day to play cards with her friends. At one point, Loretta's friends start trying to dissuade Loretta from sending her daughter to the white school, saying it will only do the little girl harm. When they ask Stella what she thinks, she doesn't know what to say. After a moment, she agrees that it'd be better for Loretta's daughter if she didn't go to the all-white school. Plus, she adds, everyone in the neighborhood already speaks so poorly of Loretta, and sending her daughter to the school would only make things worse. One of Loretta's friends points out that Stella probably doesn't defend Loretta when other people say bad things about her—a comment that ruins the entire afternoon.

After Loretta's friends leave, Stella helps with the dishes. She apologizes for the conversation they had earlier about school, but Loretta doesn't want to hear about Stella's guilt. When Loretta reaches for a wet wine glass, she knocks it to the floor. Before she can kneel to clean it up, Stella stops her, saying, "Don't, baby, you'll cut yourself," and cleans it up herself. Several days later, Loretta asks her about her family while they're lying by Stella's pool. Stella says her family died in an accident, but she also mentions that she used to have a twin. It's the first time in years that she has talked about Desiree, and she doesn't know what to say. But Loretta is supportive, empathetically saying that losing a twin must be like losing half of oneself.

The reason the comment made by Loretta's friend ruins the afternoon is that everyone knows it's true: Stella clearly doesn't stand up for Loretta when their white neighbors say bad things about her. To Loretta and her friends, Stella is yet another racist white woman. What they don't know, of course, is that Stella doesn't stand up for Loretta because she's afraid that doing so would reveal that she, too, is Black.



Despite the tense interaction that Stella and Loretta have while playing cards, they still manage to connect on a personal level. When Stella doesn't let Loretta clean up the broken glass, she humbles herself before her friend while using the affectionate word "baby"—a word none of the white woman in the neighborhood would call Loretta. Stella therefore shows that she cares about Loretta and feels close to her, which becomes especially obvious when she later talks to her about Desiree and her past. She doesn't reveal that she's Black, but the mere fact that she opens up about her personal history is a testament to how much she wants to connect with Loretta.



CHAPTER 9

When Stella and Desiree first ran away to New Orleans, they worked in a laundromat. One day, Stella wasn't paying attention because she was thinking about how thrilling it was whenever she pretended to be white. In her distraction, she almost got her hand caught in the clothing press machine. She got fired that day, since the owner of the laundromat couldn't risk having authorities find out that she had two minors working for her. In need of a new job, she heard that an office in the Maison Blanche building needed a secretary with good handwriting and strong typing skills. She wasn't going to apply, since she knew they wouldn't hire a Black person, but Desiree encouraged her because the job would pay so well.

To her surprise, Stella got the job. She served as Blake's secretary, and though all the other secretaries were eager to catch Blake's eye, she tried to stay quiet and keep to herself. Nonetheless, Blake took an interest in her and invited her to lunch one day. She found him handsome and charming, especially because no white man had ever treated her so well. She and Blake started spending more and more time together, and as their bond developed, so did Stella's performance of her new, white identity. Still, though, she felt like she had two distinct identities: the Black Stella and the white Stella.

The novel circles back to remind readers that Desiree was the one who initially encouraged Stella to pass as white to work in the Maison Blanche building. However, Stella had already flirted with pretending to be white and enjoyed the way it made her feel. Desiree's encouragement therefore simply pushed her further in the direction of deciding to pass on a more permanent basis.



In the beginning phases of her transition into white society, Stella still feels like she's pretending. She doesn't, in other words, immediately embody a white identity and take it on as her own. Rather, she slowly gets used to performing this identity, spurred on by Blake's attention and by the new world of opportunity to which she has suddenly gained access.



Back in the present, Stella continues to see Loretta without telling Blake. She even outright lies to him one day when he comes home earlier than expected to find the house empty, telling him that she was visiting one of her white friends. Around Christmastime, Loretta asks Stella what she's doing for the holidays. She lies, saying that they're just having a small gathering. In truth, they're having the entire neighborhood over for a big party, but Stella doesn't mention this to Loretta because the Walkers aren't invited.

At the party, a group of Stella's friends confront her about how much time she has been spending with Loretta. They've seen her walking across the street and entering Loretta's house, so they ask if it's true that the two women are friends. Put on the spot, Stella suggests that it's none of their "goddamn business," which shocks everyone. When the guests are gone later that night, she complains to Blake, but he just wants to know why she didn't tell him about the time she has been spending with Loretta. He's not angry—just worried. In the end, he chalks her secrecy up to loneliness and starts proposing alternative ways for her to spend her time.

Back when Stella and Blake were first getting to know each other, he surprised her by taking her to a restaurant one day. They had yet to kiss, but it was clear they had feelings for each other. He had secured a new job in Boston and wanted Stella to come with him. Instead of taking her time to think it over, Stella told him she'd come, figuring that the most difficult part of becoming someone new was simply deciding to do it—once that decision had been made, it was easy enough to slip into the life of a white woman. Now, looking at Blake in their bedroom on Christmas Eve, Stella thinks about how it's too late for her to leave the life she created for herself.

On Christmas day, Stella looks out the window and sees Kennedy, who has been playing with other children outside. Now, though, there's no other children. Only Kennedy, Loretta, and Loretta's daughter are out there, and both little girls are crying. Stella rushes out and asks what happened and is surprised to discover that Loretta is enraged. Kennedy, Loretta informs Stella, called Loretta's daughter the n-word and said she didn't want to play with her. Loretta tells Stella to stay away from her, remarking that Kennedy must have picked up her views at home.

Despite her fondness for Loretta, Stella can't bring herself to publicly acknowledge their friendship. The implication is that she feels she has too much to lose. If people find out that she's close to Loretta, she fears that they might wonder about her and, in doing so, threaten the white identity she has spent so many years developing.



Stella's public and private lives collide when her white friends ask her about Loretta. For the first time since she started passing as white, she draws negative attention from the white community she has tried so hard to join. She responds harshly to their inquiries about Loretta, as if she's incensed that they would dare pry into her private affairs—an overreaction that undoubtedly comes from her fear that everyone will find out that she's Black.



Stella believes that the hardest part of becoming someone new is simply deciding to do it—an idea that implies that what's difficult about taking on a new identity isn't necessarily the newness of it, but the fact that it requires leaving everything else behind. The decision comes down to whether or not the person is ready to abandon the life they've built for themselves up until that point. Ironically enough, Stella thinks that reversing her decision now, years later, would essentially be like abandoning her life all over again, illustrating just how much she has transformed and settled into her new identity.



Loretta isn't wrong that Kennedy learned to use bigoted language—and cultivated a racist worldview—at home. After all, the very first time Kennedy tried to play with Loretta's daughter, Stella ran outside, dragged her away, and told her what Adele once told her: using the n-word, she said that their family doesn't play with Black people. It's obvious, then, that Kennedy has absorbed Stella's views about race.



A week after Christmas, Stella tells her white friends about a time that Reginald Walker helped her carry groceries into her kitchen. In reality, Reginald didn't even glance at her before leaving, but Stella tells her friends that he looked at her in a way that made her feel uncomfortable. Three days after she tells this story, somebody throws a brick through the Walkers' window. The next week, someone lights a paper bag of dog poop on fire and leaves it on their doorstep. A couple days after that, another brick goes flying into the house.

Not long thereafter, the Walkers move away. Stella watches them pack their things and fantasizes about going over and telling Loretta that she isn't actually white. She would tell her because Loretta is, when it really comes down to it, her only real friend. She would also tell her because she would know that people wouldn't believe Loretta's word over her own if she chose to share her secret—a thought that makes her feel truly white.

Stella's untrue comment about Reginald making her feel unsafe is most likely a strategic way of ensuring that Loretta and her family move away. She knows that the rest of the neighborhood is just waiting for any reason at all to turn their ire on the Walkers, so she makes up this story as a way of distancing herself from Loretta and, in turn, the guilt she feels about behaving like a racist. Above all, what becomes clear is that Stella is willing to go to great lengths to preserve her peaceful life as a privileged white woman.



Part of being white means having privileges that people of color don't necessarily have in American society. The mere fact that everybody would believe Stella over Loretta is a testament to how much power she has simply because she's passing as white. Unfortunately for her, though, the cost of this privilege is that she can't maintain a friendship with Loretta, whose companionship clearly means a lot to her, even if it also triggers her insecurities about her own racial identity.



CHAPTER 10

It's 1982, and Jude spends most of her time thinking about whether or not she'll get into medical school. Reese and Desiree are both confident she'll get in, but she isn't so sure, so she devotes herself to studying. Otherwise, she leads a quiet life with Reese. Sometimes, when they're walking on the street, she thinks she sees Stella, though it never turns out to be her. Still, ever since she thought she saw Stella at the party she catered (the one where she spilled the wine), Jude can't keep herself from looking for her aunt wherever she goes.

When Jude dropped the bottle of wine at the party that night several years ago, her employer fired her on the spot. She was upset when she went home, but Reese tried to soothe her by saying she could just get a different job. Jude then revealed that she'd been working as a caterer because she wanted to help pay for Reese's top surgery. Although he pointed out that he never asked for her help in this regard, he wasn't angry. In the ensuing years, Jude thought about Stella constantly. She even asked her mother if she still thought about Stella, but Desiree said she didn't, saying that it felt to her like Stella no longer existed at all.

Jude's fixation on finding Stella possibly has to do with the fact that Jude herself could never have lived the life of a white woman. Unlike Stella, Jude is too dark to pass as white—much to her dismay as a child living in the colorist environment of Mallard. She has tried to lighten her skin, but nothing she did ended up changing anything. Consequently, she has never had the privilege of posing as a white person in order to reap the benefits of being white in a racist society. The fact that Stella has done this therefore fascinates Jude.



Both Stella and Desiree deal with loss by focusing on the present. They both miss each other, but instead of wallowing in sorrow, they think about moving on. But Jude can't help but think about Stella, perhaps because she feels as if she has been robbed of having a relationship with her aunt. It's not necessarily that she lost an aunt, but that she never got to experience what it was like to know her mother's sister in the first place.



Barry gets cast in the chorus of a low-budget musical. When Jude and Reese go to support him on opening night, Jude is astonished to discover that the musical's lead actress is the girl with the bright blue eyes she saw at the party she catered several years ago. Jude learns from reading the playbill that the girl's name is Kennedy Sanders. After the musical, Jude waits outside until Kennedy comes out. To her surprise, Kennedy actually recognizes her, and they have a short conversation in which Jude flatters her by saying she was excellent onstage—she wasn't actually very good, but Jude wants to endear herself to Kennedy in order to get information out of her.

Kennedy mentions that her parents disapprove of her acting career, instead wanting her to focus on school and pursue a practical profession. Later, Jude asks Barry about Kennedy, and he says that she's a spoiled rich girl. Jude is intrigued, but she's still not completely confident that Kennedy's mother is Stella—the woman she saw at the party several years ago looked like Stella, but Jude can't be sure. Overcome with curiosity, she goes to the musical again and finds Kennedy, claiming that she's there to see Barry. Kennedy invites her into her dressing room and asks her for help as she gets ready. As she gets changed, Kennedy mentions that her mother is from Louisiana and that her maiden name is Vignes.

CHAPTER 11

In the months after Loretta and her family moved away, Stella was depressed. The feeling was similar to the one she experienced when she first parted ways with Desiree. Blake noticed her sadness and urged her to do something to distract herself, thinking that maybe she'd like to take a class. She ended up going back to school, completing her GED, and enrolling in college. She studied statistics and has recently taken a job as an adjunct instructor at Santa Monica College—something that Blake isn't too happy about, since he originally thought she was just going to take a flower-arranging class. They now fight quite often about the time she spends away from home because of her new job.

Jude's desire to find Stella again is apparent in the fact that she goes out of her way to talk to Kennedy. The two young women are cousins, but neither of them knows that for sure—Jude suspects that it might be the case, but she needs to get closer to Kennedy in order to find out. As a result, she tries to develop a companionship of sorts with Kennedy, though this companionship is based on little more than Jude's fixation on finding Stella.



Jude and Kennedy have led very different lives. Whereas Jude grew up without much money and faced constant racism and colorism in Mallard, Kennedy grew up very wealthy and has never faced any sort of discrimination or bigotry. The difference between their lives thus emphasizes just how much importance American society places on racial identity, generally giving white people more opportunities and a chance to live free a life free of adversity.



Blake's disapproval of Stella working as an adjunct professor underscores his lack of support when it comes to Stella cultivating a sense of independence within their marriage. In reality, Stella is a fiercely independent person, as made quite clear by the fact that she decided to abandon her previous life in order to go her own way—but Blake doesn't know anything about that, so he sees her as a dependent person.



Stella takes Kennedy to lunch one day with the intention of gently persuading her to go back to school. Kennedy had been enrolled at the University of Southern California, but she quit in order to pursue an acting career. The only reason she got into USC in the first place was because Blake and Stella made a sizable donation to the school. Still, she didn't seize the opportunity to make the best of her education. Instead, she got caught smoking marijuana in her dorm room, which bothered Stella not because her daughter was using marijuana, but because she was careless enough to get caught. Kennedy has no idea, Stella sometimes thinks, how much her mother sacrificed to give her the opportunities she's had.

At lunch, Stella and Kennedy argue about whether or not Kennedy should return to school. Stella insists that she could easily pick back up where she left off, even though Kennedy was on academic probation before leaving school. Kennedy, for her part, is upset that her mother only cares about making sure she gets a college degree. She tells Stella that college isn't right for everybody, but Stella doesn't listen. Finally, Stella hisses that she sacrificed too much for Kennedy to just drop out of school, but Kennedy says it's not her fault that Stella grew up without any money. As she yells at her mother, a Black waiter comes to refill their water, and the two women go silent. When the waiter leaves, Stella tells her daughter to lower her voice.

CHAPTER 12

Jude becomes an usher so that she can get closer to Kennedy, working at the theater in the hopes of eventually meeting Stella. She and Kennedy develop a casual friendship, but Reese disapproves. He worries that Jude will get hurt, thinking nothing good will come from learning about Stella and her life as a wealthy white woman. Still, Jude spends as much time as possible with Kennedy, chatting with her while she gets ready each night for the show. Kennedy explains that her mother still hasn't come to see her in the musical because she disapproves. When Jude asks Kennedy what her mother's upbringing was like, Kennedy says that Stella grew up in a poor white family, that she was an only child, and that her parents are dead.

It's evident that Kennedy doesn't think much about her own privilege. She has led a very fortunate life, in which many opportunities have been available to her, but she simply does whatever she wants. Whereas Stella would never let herself get caught doing anything that might jeopardize a college career, Kennedy doesn't think that way: for her, opportunity is so commonplace that she doesn't mind taking risks that might threaten her chances of success. The contrast between her carelessness and Stella's own sacrifices is a good illustration that it's all too easy for white people to take their own prosperity for granted.



Kennedy doesn't know about her mother's past, thinking that Stella simply grew up without much money. She therefore doesn't understand what her mother sacrificed in order to build a life in which her daughter could go to college. It makes sense that Stella is upset to see Kennedy squander the opportunity to become a college graduate, but it's also worth noting that, because she has never communicated openly and honestly with Kennedy about her past, it's somewhat unreasonable for her to expect Kennedy to understand why, exactly, the topic upsets her so much.



The fact that Reese worries about Jude tracking down Stella emphasizes just how much he cares about her. Although he undoubtedly recognizes that it's important to Jude that she find a way to connect with her estranged aunt, he feels protective of her and doesn't want her to end up getting hurt—after all, Stella actively chose to leave her past behind, so it's unlikely that she'll be thrilled to see Jude if they ever end up meeting.



CHAPTER 13

On the last night of the musical, Kennedy arrives early at the theater. She talks to Jude about what she's going to do next in life, speaking frankly about her own insecurities. She has no idea what to do and isn't even sure she's a particularly good actor, but she could never admit this to her mother, since it would just confirm Stella's misgivings about Kennedy becoming an actor. That night, Stella finally comes to see Kennedy's show. Having spotted her, Jude follows her outside during intermission. Stella is smoking a cigarette and hardly notices Jude, but Jude introduces herself as Kennedy's friend. She mentions that Kennedy said Stella was from Louisiana, and then she says that she herself is from Mallard. Stella looks surprised but says she's never heard of Mallard.

Jude tells Stella that her mother's name is Desiree Vignes. Suddenly, Stella turns on her and demands to know who she really is—she doesn't believe that Jude is really Desiree's daughter, so she wants to know who sent her to say such outlandish things. Jude simply says that she wanted to meet Stella, but Stella responds by pointing out that Jude doesn't look anything like Desiree. Jude then repeats several stories that only Desiree could have told her, explaining that Desiree returned to Mallard because her husband—Jude's father—used to beat her. Hearing about her sister's hardship softens Stella, though she can hardly believe that Desiree would have returned to Mallard.

Stella asks if her mother is still alive, and Jude says that she is. She tells Stella that they could call Desiree and Adele right now, but Stella becomes defensive again, saying she has to go and that she couldn't possibly "go back through that door" of her past life. Walking away from the theater, she vanishes down the dark street.

After the show that night, Jude goes to the cast party at a nearby bar. Reese comes along and spends the evening taking pictures of the cast while Jude sits with Kennedy, who's upset because she thinks her mother didn't come to see her in the musical. She didn't see Stella in the audience during the first half, so she feels insulted and angry. Jude, for her part, is upset that Stella turned away instead of wanting to reconnect with Desiree, though she knows she shouldn't be surprised.

It's unsurprising that Stella lies about having never heard of Mallard. She has spent decades doing everything in her power to separate herself from the town, so she's certainly not going to just start talking about it with a stranger like Jude. Just as Reese predicted, then, reconnecting with Stella is most likely going to be quite difficult, since Stella doesn't want to relive her past.



Stella's negative reaction here aligns with her overall unwillingness to reconnect with her past. She has, after all, spent many years doing whatever was necessary to cut herself off from her former life. Now, though, Jude leaves her with no choice but to face her past. When she hears that Desiree's husband used to beat her, she can't help but show some empathy for her twin sister. And yet, she's clearly not ready to reconnect with Desiree or, for that matter, with Jude.



What Stella says might disappoint Jude, but it's not altogether that surprising: Stella has worked very hard to create the life she currently leads, so reconnecting with her twin sister and her mother would be like going backward—it would be like reentering a "door" she thought she'd left behind once and for all.



Kennedy's disappointment about her mother not seeing her show is a direct consequence of Stella's secrecy. Of course, Stella really did come to the musical, but she had to leave under mysterious circumstances, since Kennedy knows nothing about the fact that Jude is really Stella's niece. In a way, then, Stella's inability to tell her daughter about her past puts a strain on their relationship, causing her to act in ways that make Kennedy think she's a removed, unsupportive mother.



Jude wants to leave the cast party early. When Kennedy tries to get her to stay, she says that she can't, adding that Reese is ready to go, too. Suddenly, Kennedy's voice takes on an edge. She says that Jude is lucky because Black men like Reese usually like light-skinned women, not dark-skinned women like Jude. Rage washes over Jude, and she thinks about how Kennedy doesn't even know what she's saying—she doesn't know, for instance, that she herself is a light-skinned Black woman. Unable to stop herself, she tells Kennedy the truth, informing her that Stella is her own mother's twin sister. Kennedy just says that Jude is crazy, but Jude pushes on, saying before she leaves the bar that Stella has been lying to Kennedy for her entire life.

The next morning, Stella lies in bed thinking about Jude. Blake, who's lying with his head on her chest, notices that her heart is beating fast. He asks what's wrong, and she claims to have had a bad dream. She says she often dreams of men pulling her out of bed. She even starts to say that she saw something horrific when she was a child, but she starts crying before going on. Blake pulls her close and kisses her, and then they have passionate sex. Afterwards, Stella feels better and realizes that her life is pretty good—she had started wanting more and had been frustrated at Blake for discouraging her academic dreams, but now she thinks she should appreciate what she has, since she sacrificed so much just to have it.

On her way out the door that morning, Stella is surprised to run into Kennedy, who has decided to move in with her parents. And Kennedy, for her part, is surprised to hear that her mother actually *did* see her play (Stella doesn't mention seeing Jude, instead vaguely saying that she had to leave halfway through the show). All seems well for a moment, but then Kennedy says something just as Stella is about to leave: she asks if she's ever heard of Mallard. Stella stops and asks what her daughter means by that question, and Kennedy says that she met a girl who said she knows Stella from Mallard. Stella lies and says she's never even heard of the place.

In the coming months, Kennedy periodically asks Stella questions about her past. Stella tells Blake about Jude, but she makes the entire situation sound like Jude was just trying to get money out of their family. It's an easy lie, since Blake is quick to assume that Jude must have seen Kennedy's fancy car and figured she might be able to take advantage of her.

When Kennedy lashes out at Jude with a racist comment, it seems likely that she's misplacing her anger—she's upset at Stella, but she takes that anger out on Jude. Still, though, the mere fact that she says such an insensitive and bigoted thing to Jude suggests that Kennedy still has a racist way of looking at the world. She hasn't, it seems, managed to rid herself of the racism that Stella herself instilled in her as a child when she used the n-word and told Kennedy not to play with Black children.



Seeing Jude has dredged up all sorts of thoughts about Stella's past—including the traumatic memory of her father's grisly murder. But after she has sex with Blake, she's able to ground herself once again in her present life. What's more, it seems as if meeting Jude reminded Stella of just how hard she worked to get where she is now, making it easier for her to accept her current circumstances instead of continuing to strive for more.



Having committed herself to a life of passing as white, Stella is accustomed to hiding the truth. Consequently, her impulse is to deny that she's ever heard of Mallard when Kennedy asks her about it. The mere fact that Kennedy asks about Mallard means that Jude's comment at the bar must have gotten to her, causing her to wonder about Stella's past. But her mother clearly isn't going to tell her the truth.



Stella knows how to manipulate Blake's privileged worldview. As a wealthy white man with unexamined racist views, he's quick to assume that a Black person would try to take advantage of Kennedy because she's rich. Knowing Blake thinks along these lines, then, Stella suggests that Jude was just trying to scam Kennedy, thereby tricking Blake into helping her hide the fact that Jude is actually telling the truth.



Standing in the kitchen one day, Kennedy asks Stella if she ever had a sister, prompting Stella to once again tell her to stop thinking about “that black girl.” Blake walks in and tells Stella to drop it, assuring his daughter that he and Stella love her and that they wouldn’t lie to her. But Stella privately thinks about how sometimes lying can be “an act of love.” Shortly after this exchange, Stella and Blake rent out an apartment for Kennedy in the Venice neighborhood of Los Angeles. Stella is now willing to support her daughter and encourage her acting career, especially since Kennedy not living at home will prevent her from asking so many questions about Stella’s past.

Stella’s idea that lying can be “an act of love” sheds light on the way she thinks about her own dishonesty. She doesn’t see lying to Kennedy as problematic because she’s only doing it so her daughter can lead the unburdened life of a white person. As long as Kennedy doesn’t know she’s part Black, she has nothing to hide and can therefore fully make use of the privileges afforded to white people in the racist environment of the United States. Thinking this way, Stella sees her lies as a form of parental support.



CHAPTER 14

Kennedy becomes a daytime television actor. In 1988, she lands a recurring role on a soap opera series called *Pacific Cove*. She finds herself thinking one day about a time when she was seven and her mother was frosting a cake. Kennedy asked where Stella learned how to bake, wondering if her mother taught her. But Stella dodged the question by saying that her family didn’t have money for cakes. Kennedy, however, kept pressing for information, wanting to know where Stella’s mother died. Stella angrily said that her mother died in Opelousas, which was where she grew up—but Kennedy corrected her, saying that she didn’t grow up in Opelousas. She then revealed that she remembered a conversation from a long time ago in which Stella had said she was from a place that began with an M.

Kennedy is right: Stella did tell her that she was from Mallard. She revealed the name of her real hometown when Kennedy was just a little girl, figuring that Kennedy would never be able to remember the conversation. The mere fact that she was honest with Kennedy in that moment suggests that she was eager to speak about her past life, even if she could only do so to her young daughter. Now, though, she has to deny that she ever said such a thing, astounded that Kennedy can even remember that conversation.



When seven-year-old Kennedy brought up what Stella told her about Mallard, Stella denied it, acting like her daughter must have misremembered something. But Kennedy could tell her mother was lying. Since then, she has always wondered where Stella really grew up, knowing it must have been some town starting with an M. When Jude said “Mallard” at the cast party several years ago, Kennedy finally recognized the name.

Kennedy has never doubted her mother’s racial identity, but she has doubted her mother’s origins. Ever since she was a child, she has suspected that her mother hasn’t been truthful about her past, which is why Kennedy is so struck by what Jude ends up telling her at the cast party: she has been waiting all her life for confirmation of her mother’s lies.



Before landing her role as a soap opera actor in 1988, Kennedy moves to New York to pursue her dreams of performing on Broadway. She gets cast in several plays, but she’s often distracted by what Jude told her, wondering if it’s true that her mother is a light-skinned Black woman. She resents Jude for saying what she said, but she also resents her mother for not providing more clarity—all Stella ever does is lie and make excuses whenever Kennedy brings up what Jude told her.

Kennedy resents Jude for telling her something so disorienting about her mother, but she also resents Stella herself for being so evasive about the matter. She’s thus torn between Jude and Stella, not knowing who to trust and who to blame for her own newfound insecurity about her own identity.



In New York, Kennedy starts dating a Black scholar named Frantz. One night, she asks what he'd do if she told him she wasn't actually white. She then says that she's partially Black, and he says that he can tell—but he's only joking. Deciding to drop the issue, she tells herself that she would be able to “feel it” if she were actually Black.

Kennedy works at a coffee shop when she's not at rehearsal or giving a performance. While working one day, she's astounded to see Jude standing on the other side of the counter. Reese is there, too, standing in the background and looking as handsome as ever. Jude gives Kennedy the number of the hotel she and Reese are staying at while they're in New York. When Kennedy calls, she learns that Jude and Reese are in town because Reese is having surgery. She also learns that Jude and Reese now live in Minneapolis, where Jude attends medical school. Jude acknowledges that things ended poorly between her and Kennedy, but she says that she has something to show Kennedy. They agree to meet after Kennedy's show that night.

CHAPTER 15

Kennedy gets Jude and Reese tickets to her play and ends up having the best performance of her life. Afterwards, Frantz meets all of them for drinks and is excited to socialize with people from Kennedy's life before she moved to New York. But Kennedy isn't thrilled by Frantz's high energy, instead acting nervous about what Jude is going to show her. When the two men go to get drinks for the table, she apologizes to Jude for what she said years ago at the cast party, claiming that she didn't mean it and that she was drunk—but Jude points out that Kennedy *did* mean it, even if she was also drunk.

Admitting that Jude's right, Kennedy asks why she wanted to meet, and Jude gives her an old **photograph**. She says it was wrong of her to tell Kennedy the truth about her mother in such an abrupt way. It's not right to tell people the truth as a way of hurting them, she says—she should have considered whether or not Kennedy actually wanted to *know* the truth in the first place. Now, though, she senses that Kennedy wants the truth. At this point, the men return with drinks, so Kennedy goes to the bathroom and looks at the photograph: it's of Stella and Desiree as children.

Kennedy clearly doesn't know what to think about the possibility that she's partially Black. She has lived her entire life as a white woman, so it's difficult for her to wrap her head around the idea that she might have a different racial identity. She therefore tests the waters by offhandedly telling Frantz that she's Black. When he laughs, though, it's almost as if he confirms her own doubts, since she then tells herself that she must not actually be Black, insisting to herself that she would be able to sense it if she were.



Given that her last interaction with Jude ended so abruptly, it's possible that Kennedy's plan to meet up with her will provide her with a sense of closure regarding her own racial identity. At the same time, learning more about her mother's past might just further unsettle her, making it that much harder to come to terms with the implications of Stella's personal history.



By pointing out that Kennedy really did mean the racist thing she said about Jude's skin color, Jude doesn't let Kennedy diminish the upsetting implications of her own behavior. Kennedy is accustomed to not taking responsibility for her actions, but Jude doesn't let her do that in this moment, instead saying—in a somewhat nonconfrontational way—that Kennedy surely did mean the colorist thing she said, regardless of whether or not she was drunk (which, of course, wouldn't excuse her behavior anyway).



Jude's comment about telling people the truth for the right reasons suggests that she recognizes how disruptive it might have been for her to tell Kennedy about Stella's past. Unlike Kennedy—who tried to downplay her insensitivity by claiming that she was drunk when she said the offensive thing to Jude at the cast party—Jude takes responsibility for her behavior and expresses regret for using the truth to hurt Kennedy. Now, though, she presents the truth to her for an entirely different reason, sensing that Kennedy is ready to learn about her family history.



After looking at the **photograph** in the bathroom, Kennedy goes home with Frantz. The next morning, she feels overwhelmed by what Jude has shared with her, frustrated that Jude has once again created so much confusion in her life. By midday, however, she's desperate to talk to Jude, but she can't reach her at the hotel. The receptionist tells her that Jude and Reese left a note with the front desk to tell anyone who called that they'll be at the hospital all day. Of course, Kennedy doesn't know *which* hospital, but she nevertheless runs out to find them, eventually encountering Jude in the nearest hospital.

Jude is distracted. Reese is out of surgery, but Jude isn't allowed to see him because she's not considered family. Kennedy feels sorry for her, saying that it's ridiculous she's not allowed in—Reese should marry Jude, she says, to avoid this kind of confusion. But Jude just says she sounds like her mother. Kennedy decides to wait with Jude until Reese can leave the hospital, and though Jude says she doesn't have to, she doesn't mind—she wants to be with Jude. Sitting in the waiting room, they talk about their mothers, Jude explaining that the **photograph** she gave Kennedy is from the funeral of Stella and Desiree's father. She then tells Kennedy the story of their grandfather's murder. The two cousins pass the time swapping stories about their mothers.

Before parting ways again, Kennedy asks Jude what Mallard is like. Jude tells her it's a terrible place where everyone only likes light-skinned Black people—so, Jude says, Kennedy would fit in perfectly. Kennedy is caught off guard. She doesn't think of herself as a Black person. She tells Jude that she's not Black, but Jude says, "Well, your mother is." Kennedy doesn't react well, telling Jude that she can't tell her who she is. It's not necessarily that she cares about her racial identity, but that she doesn't like the idea of somebody else telling her "who she ha[s] to be."

Kennedy stays in New York for a little while after her play ends, and then she wanders around without telling anyone where she's going. Just before leaving for her travels, she visits her childhood home and shows her mother the **photograph** that Jude gave her. Stella is taken aback, but she clings to her lies, insisting that she's not in the photograph. She points to one of the twins and says, "She doesn't look anything like me," and Kennedy can't tell if her mother is pointing at herself or at Desiree. Shortly thereafter, Kennedy travels in Europe for a while, then returns and stars on *Pacific Cove*. By the 1990s, though, her acting career is over, so she becomes a successful real estate agent with a knack for getting clients to envision their new lives in expensive homes.

It's not easy for Kennedy to find out once and for all that her mother has been lying to her for her entire life. She has long suspected Stella of hiding certain elements of her past, but she now knows—because of concrete proof in the form of the photograph—that Stella has gone to great lengths to hide basically everything about her personal history from Kennedy—something that is hard for Kennedy to accept.



Having learned the truth about Stella's past, Kennedy is ready to hear more. Thankfully, she has Jude to help her better understand the side of her family she has been cut off from for so many years. As they talk, Kennedy gives Jude something to take her mind off of Reese's surgery. In this way, the two cousins lend each other emotional support.



Kennedy has always seen herself in a certain way—that is, as a white woman. Now, though, she's forced to reexamine her own self-image—an undeniably difficult thing to do. And though Jude is correct when she points out that Kennedy is partially Black, Kennedy isn't yet ready to incorporate this new information into who she is as a person or how she sees herself.



The fact that Stella points at one of the twins in the pictures and claims that it's not her is a dead giveaway to Kennedy that her mother is lying—after all, how does Stella know which twin to point at, if it isn't her? Kennedy herself certainly can't tell the difference, so her mother's ability to zero in on a specific twin reveals her lie. Still, Stella remains unwilling to tell the truth, since she has sacrificed so much to put her past behind her.



CHAPTER 16

After Stella claims that she's not in the photograph Kennedy shows her, Kennedy accuses her of being a liar. She's so frustrated with her mother that she stops talking to her after leaving Los Angeles. She doesn't even tell her parents where she's going when she leaves the country to travel in Europe, though she eventually sends a postcard to Blake saying that she went abroad to "find" herself. Stella dislikes the wording of the postcard, thinking that people can't just "find a self out there waiting." Instead, they have to "make one" and "create" whatever identity they want for themselves.

Stella blames Jude for derailing her and Kennedy's lives. Hoping to get Kennedy back on track, she decides to finally return to Mallard with the purpose of telling Desiree to stop Jude from talking to her daughter. When she arrives at the station outside Mallard, though, she's surprised to learn that the town no longer technically exists—it has been renamed, though everything is still there, including the diner where Desiree works.

When Desiree isn't working at the diner, she's often on the phone with Jude. She has also visited Jude in Minneapolis, where she and Reese live. Desiree likes Reese and wants him to marry her daughter. As for herself, she and Early are still together, though they aren't technically married. Nonetheless, he now lives at the house with her and works at the local refinery—the first "real" job he's ever had. He also helps out with Adele, who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

Early takes Adele fishing in the nearby river one morning, and when they return, there's a white woman standing on the porch. From afar, Early thinks she must be someone from the county coming to check on Adele's living conditions, so he instructs Adele to say that he's her son-in-law. But Adele tells him to stop joking around because that woman clearly isn't from the county—the woman is Stella. Without any ceremony, Adele walks up the porch and into the house, telling her daughter to help them clean the fishes they brought back.

For Stella, identity isn't something that people just happen to "find." Instead, it's something people have to actively formulate, just like she herself created her identity as a white woman. But Kennedy's experience in life is much different than Stella's—she has never had to think about her identity at all, which is one of the privileges of living as a white person in the United States, where whiteness is highly valued. But now that Kennedy's racial identity has been unsettled, she feels as if she has to go out and discover who, exactly, she is. Whereas her mother went out of her way to create her own identity, Kennedy isn't accustomed to playing such an active role in her own identity formation.



Stella doesn't return to Mallard because she wants to reunite with Desiree. Rather, she comes back simply to protect the life she has built as a white woman, not wanting Jude to interfere with Kennedy's ability to keep living as a privileged white person. It's once again clear, then, that Stella's top priority is ensuring that she and her daughter continue to reap the rewards of whiteness.



Unlike Stella, Desiree still lives in her hometown. She was the one who was always so desperate to leave, but she ended up returning and living the majority of her adult life in Mallard. In a way, it's arguable that Stella's decision to pass as white is what enabled her to leave Mallard behind, opening up the door to an entirely new way of life. Meanwhile, Desiree has struggled to simply stay afloat as a Black woman without many opportunities or resources in the racist environment of the United States.



In a novel in which so many of the characters struggle to move on from the past, it's almost merciful that Adele develops Alzheimer's disease and, as a result, has no trouble moving on from the many hardships of her past. When she casually tells Stella to come inside, it's as if her failing memory has spared her from the shock and heartache of seeing her daughter for the first time in many years—a heartache that Stella herself can't help but feel.



Stella realizes that her mother isn't well. At one point, Adele hears her say "Jesus" and chastises her for taking the Lord's name in vain. Stella apologizes, then starts to apologize even more intensely, but Adele cuts her off and says she doesn't know what she's talking about. Later, Stella goes to the diner to fetch Desiree for dinner. The diner is empty except for a drunk man. Stella stands there for a moment, waiting for her sister to see her. "Oh," Desiree says when she finally turns around and sets her eyes on Stella. Then she says, "Don't," holding up her hand so that Stella won't approach. But Stella doesn't listen. She walks toward Desiree, saying, "Forgive me," over and over until she's right in front of her sister, at which point they tearfully embrace.

The twins go home and have dinner. Afterwards, they stand on the porch and share a bottle of gin. Desiree points out that Stella sounds different when she speaks and asks how she learned to talk the way she does. Stella thinks for a moment and then laughs, admitting that she watched hours of television in order to perfect her new speaking voice. But it wasn't terribly difficult—Desiree could have passed as white, too. But Desiree reminds her that Stella clearly didn't *want* her to become white with her. Stella insists that it had nothing to do with any desire to separate from Desiree. She explains what happened between her and Blake and then says that she couldn't reverse her decision once she had a family.

Stella tells Desiree that Jude found her in Los Angeles. She isn't surprised to hear that Jude never told Desiree about their encounter, considering that Stella herself was so cold to Jude. She pleads with Desiree to tell Jude to stop contacting Kennedy, which offends Desiree, who points out that it wouldn't be the end of the world if Kennedy discovered she's not as white as she thinks. But then Stella breaks down crying, begging her sister to help her because she doesn't want to lose Kennedy. After a moment, Desiree wraps her arm around her sister as she weeps.

Stella tries to sneak out early the next morning, but Early hears her and gives her a ride to the station. Before she gets out of the car, she gives him her **wedding ring** and tells him to sell it—she hopes the money will help him and Desiree take care of Adele.

Stella and Desiree's reunion is a mixture of resentment, sadness, and relief. Both sisters are, on a certain level, happy to see each other, but there's also a lot of anger and regret at play when they come face to face. Stella, for her part, wants Desiree to forgive her, but readers know that her real reason for returning to Mallard has nothing to do with wanting Desiree to accept and forgive her. Indeed, Stella's reasons for returning aren't sentimental, nor is her return a sign that she's finished with her life as a white woman. Rather, Stella has only come home to protect that life, though Desiree doesn't know that yet.



Stella's comments about learning to talk a certain way by watching television indicate that she made a concerted effort to become a new person once she started passing as white. And becoming this person, it seems, meant making a clean break with the person she used to be—which, in turn, meant cutting all ties with Desiree.



Although it might seem somewhat callous that Stella has returned to Mallard simply to make sure Jude stops contacting Kennedy, there's also a more sympathetic way of looking at the situation: Stella simply fears that Kennedy will turn against her, and she can't take the idea of losing her daughter—after all, she has already lost so many other important loved ones because of her decision to pass as white, so she desperately wants to maintain her relationship with Kennedy.



Stella's wedding ring is symbolic of everything she has given up in life. In order to obtain that ring, she had to pass as a white woman—if she hadn't, Blake wouldn't have hired her, nor would they have gotten married. And to pass as white, Stella had to give up her ties with her family. Perhaps because of the ring's symbolic relevance, she gives it up as a way of helping with Adele's care, ultimately using her newfound financial privilege to counterbalance the fact that she abandoned her mother long ago.



Not long after, Kennedy comes back to Los Angeles. Stella is relieved to see her, but when Kennedy asks where her **ring** went, she has to stop herself from lying. She's so accustomed to bending the truth that she almost gives Kennedy the same story she gave Blake about losing it. Instead, though, she tells Kennedy that she gave the ring to Desiree. She says this before she and Kennedy get in the car to drive home from the airport, and when Kennedy starts asking questions about her mother's trip back to Mallard, Stella tells her to get into the car. There's traffic, but she doesn't mind—she plans to tell her daughter whatever she wants to know. The only condition, she tells Kennedy, is that she can't talk about it to anyone else.

Finally, Stella decides to be completely open and honest with Kennedy. Her willingness to talk about the past suggests that she hopes to alleviate the strain her secrecy has placed on her and Kennedy's relationship. Perhaps recognizing how much Kennedy resents her for keeping the truth hidden all these years, she embraces the prospect of having a frank discussion about her former life in Mallard, even though it will be difficult. In doing so, she shows Kennedy just how much she cares about her—enough, it seems, to reopen painful wounds.



CHAPTER 17

Jude is at work as a teaching assistant in medical school when she receives a call from Desiree and learns that her grandmother has died. She goes home upset and takes comfort in Reese's support, telling him the news as he stands shirtless in the kitchen (he's always shirtless these days). Later, Jude calls Kennedy to tell her the news. Kennedy is as upset as she could be about the death of a grandmother she never met, but she tells Jude that she doesn't intend to pass the news along to Stella—Kennedy insists that Stella would rather not know.

Kennedy's decision not to tell her mother about Adele's passing might seem somewhat unfair, since she herself resented her mother for keeping the truth from her for so long. At the same time, though, her decision shows a certain understanding of her mother's desire to focus on the present instead of dwelling on the past. Knowing about Adele's death would only make Stella wish she could go back and mend her relationship with her mother, but she never would have done such a thing anyway, since she's so committed to her current life. As such, telling her about the death would do nothing but cause pain.



Jude asks Reese to come to the funeral with her. Ever since they moved to Minneapolis, Reese has been taking testosterone instead of buying steroids off the streets. Jude found a doctor willing to write him a prescription. He accompanies her to her grandmother's funeral, giving her the support she needs. While he's there, Desiree tells him that she sees him as a son and hopes he will someday give her grandchildren—she thinks he'd be a good father, and he says that he hopes she's right. Not long after Adele's funeral, Desiree will finally leave Mallard again. She and Early will move to Houston, Texas, where Early will work in a refinery and Desiree will work at a call center.

Arguably, the two most successful and healthy relationships in the book are the relationships that Jude and Desiree have with their romantic partners. In both relationships, each partner supports the other and doesn't expect them to be anything other than themselves. At the same time, though, this isn't necessarily to say that Stella's relationship with Blake is unhealthy just because she's passing as white—rather, it's simply the case that their relationship is a bit more complicated because Stella can't be open with her husband about her background.



During the feast after Adele's funeral, everyone in town is eager to glimpse Jude, since the townspeople are astonished to hear that she—the dark-skinned girl they used to judge so harshly—is in medical school. But they don't see her anywhere, since she and Reese slip out of the house and run down to the nearby river, where Reese tugs off his shirt, hardly able to recall a time when he didn't want Jude to see him naked. Jude also takes off her funeral clothing and then, together, they jump into the river.

The novel ends with a sense of personal freedom and happiness, as both Jude and Reese rejoice in their young love. It's clear that they each feel comfortable in their own skin for perhaps the first time in their lives, which is perhaps a testament to their relationship: they have shown each other love and support in a way that makes it easier for them to accept themselves for who they are.





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