

Walk Two Moons



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SHARON CREECH

Sharon Creech was born in South Euclid, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. She grew up in a large family—in fact, Mary Lou Finney’s brothers in *Walk Two Moons* and *Absolutely Normal Chaos* are named after and based off of Creech’s brothers. Throughout her childhood, Creech’s parents regularly took the family on road trips, once all the way to Idaho. (This trip partially inspired *Walk Two Moons*.) It wasn’t until college that Creech discovered literature and writing. After graduating, she taught high school English and writing courses in England in Switzerland and eventually began writing her own novels for adults. But since writing her third book and her first book for kids, *Absolutely Normal Chaos*, Creech has written mostly for young readers. Creech and her husband have lived in England and the United States; they were living in England when Creech received the call that *Walk Two Moons* won the Newbery Medal in 1995. She and her husband returned to the United States in 1998 and currently live in Maine. *Walk Two Moons* is Creech’s most critically acclaimed novel.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sal is so caught up in her grief for her mother that she makes few references to what’s going on in the wider world of the novel. But particularly as Sal travels west with her grandparents, the history of the contentious and violent relationship between white settlers and Native Americans looms large. Native populations began to decline dramatically after Europeans began settling in North America. This was mostly due to diseases (such as smallpox) brought with European settlers, violent conflict with one another and with the white settlers, and forced relocation. Once the United States became a sovereign nation, the government began to systematically coerce tribes into selling their land, often with threats of violence. The United States established the first reservation for Native Americans in 1786 and forced Native Americans onto reservations over the next 150 years. While Native Americans experienced a few victories during the so-called “Indian Wars,” such as at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, many of the battles are now considered massacres of Native Americans (such as Wounded Knee in 1890, and the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864). All of the landmarks that Sal, Gram, and Gramps visit over the course of their road trip are places of spiritual or strategic importance to the tribes that once lived there. As Sal notes, the Sioux tribe considers the Black Hills sacred, and Yellowstone National Park is sacred to 26 tribes.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Though *Walk Two Moons* is a standalone novel, several of Creech’s other novels feature some of the same characters and locations. Mary Lou Finney is the protagonist of *Absolutely Normal Chaos*, and that novel takes the form of Mary Lou’s summer journal for Mr. Birkway (a plot point that also happens in *Walk Two Moons*). Bybanks, Kentucky, where Sal is from, appears in *Chasing Redbird* and *Bloomability*, and it’s also referenced in [The Wanderer](#). Within the novel itself, Mr. Birkway reads his students poems by e. e. cummings and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. *Walk Two Moons* focuses on deceased or otherwise absent parents, and it shares this quality with fellow Newbery Medal winner *Everything on a Waffle* by Polly Horvath and Newbery Honor book [Because of Winn-Dixie](#) by Kate DiCamillo, as well as books like [James and the Giant Peach](#) by Roald Dahl and the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. [Tuck Everlasting](#) by Natalie Babbitt is another novel for young readers that considers death more broadly. And as a story about a journey, *Walk Two Moons* shares similarities with works as varied as Homer’s *Odyssey*, Jack Kerouac’s novel [On the Road](#), and Chaucer’s [The Canterbury Tales](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Walk Two Moons
- **When Written:** 1988–1993
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1994
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Children’s Novel; Bildungsroman
- **Setting:** Bybanks, Kentucky; Euclid, Ohio; tourist attractions between Euclid and Lewiston, Idaho
- **Climax:** Mrs. Winterbottom returns and reveals that Mike is her son; Sal finds the bus wreckage and reveals that Momma is dead.
- **Antagonist:** Margaret Cadaver and the lunatic/Mike Bickle initially, though they cease to be antagonists partway through the novel.
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Old Spiral Highway. The highway Sal presumably takes into Lewiston is known as the Old Spiral Highway. Constructed in 1917, it was considered a major engineering accomplishment: it’s about 10 miles long, features 64 curves, and climbs 2,000 feet in elevation. Since 1975, though, drivers have been able to opt to take a shorter and straighter—but steeper—route down

into Lewiston.



PLOT SUMMARY

In *Walk Two Moons*, the 13-year-old narrator, Sal, tells three interwoven stories. In the present, she's on a cross-country road trip with her grandparents, Gram and Gramps, to visit her Momma, who's "resting peacefully" in Lewiston, Idaho. While on the road trip, Sal tells her grandparents the story of her friend Phoebe Winterbottom, a lunatic, and Phoebe's disappearing mother. And throughout both stories, Sal experiences flashbacks that tell the story of Momma leaving for Lewiston, about a year earlier.

Sal grows up on a farm in Bybanks, Kentucky, the only child of Dad and Momma. Momma loves trees, so when Sal was born, she named her Salamanca Tree Hiddle. Sal and Momma are very close; Sal is happy when Momma is happy and sad when Momma is sad. More than anything, Momma wants to have lots of children. Eventually, Momma she gets pregnant with her second child. But after Sal breaks her leg and Momma carries her home, Momma goes into labor early, and the baby is stillborn. Momma has to get a hysterectomy, and Sal blames herself for this turn of events.

Over the next few months, Momma becomes depressed. She cuts her long black **hair** short and gets on a bus headed west, insisting that she needs to figure out who she is. Momma sends Sal postcards from the various tourist attractions along the route. But two days before the last postcard arrives, Sal and Dad get the news that Momma isn't coming back. Dad flies to Lewiston, Idaho by himself to see Momma. Sal stays home, and she's upset when the **singing tree**—a tree that seems to emit birdsong all on its own—doesn't sing.

A few months later, Dad decides to rent out the farm and move to Euclid, Ohio. In reaction, Sal throws tantrums, especially since she doesn't have a chance to pack the treasures hidden under her bedroom floorboards: Momma's hair and her postcards. Sal hates Euclid, where the houses are all small and close together. Sal especially hates the red-headed Margaret Cadaver, with whom Dad spends a lot of his time. Sal refuses to let Dad tell her how he met Margaret.

In Euclid, Sal meets Phoebe Winterbottom, who lives next door to Margaret. Phoebe has a wild imagination—she suspects Margaret is a witch and that Margaret probably killed Mr. Cadaver and buried him in her backyard. Sal finds all of this far-fetched. As she spends more time with the Winterbottoms, she's intrigued by Mrs. Winterbottom, who seems to be the perfect housewife yet isn't happy.

There's a boy in Sal's class named Ben, who seems to have a crush on her. He lives with his cousin, Mary Lou Finney, and it's unclear where his mother is. He attempts to kiss Sal several times, and he makes a point to try to touch her—he notices that

when another person tries to touch her, Sal flinches. Sal is annoyed at first, but she finds herself hoping that one of these times, she'll actually be able to kiss Ben.

Things start to get strange when a young man, whom Phoebe insists must be a lunatic, comes to the Winterbottoms' door asking for Mrs. Winterbottom. Around this time, Phoebe also starts finding envelopes with cryptic notes inside, such as "Don't judge a man until you've walked two moons in his moccasins." One day, Phoebe comes home to find her mother gone. Mrs. Winterbottom left three notes (one for Phoebe, one for Phoebe's older sister Prudence, and one for Mr. Winterbottom) apologizing and explaining that she had to leave. Phoebe is convinced that the lunatic kidnapped her mother, and she pesters Mr. Winterbottom to go to the police, but Mr. Winterbottom thinks Phoebe is being silly.

Sal tries to support Phoebe through this trying time, but she finds Phoebe insufferable. She starts to see that Phoebe is leaning so hard on the story that Mrs. Winterbottom was kidnapped so that she doesn't have to acknowledge that maybe, her mother just left. Sal starts to wonder if when Momma left, it wasn't because of anything Sal did—maybe Momma was just unhappy.

Phoebe remains unconvinced, though, and becomes increasingly suspicious of Mrs. Cadaver. She becomes even more suspicious when she meets Mrs. Cadaver's elderly and blind mother, Mrs. Partridge, and learns that her English teacher, Mr. Birkway, knows Mrs. Cadaver. When Mr. Birkway decides to read the students' summer journals aloud to the class, he reads Sal's story of Momma eating **blackberries** and kissing a tree, and Phoebe's suspicions about Mrs. Cadaver. After reading Phoebe's story, he comes to Phoebe's house to share that he's Mrs. Cadaver's twin, and that Mr. Cadaver died in a car accident that also blinded Mrs. Partridge. He stops reading the journals after this.

Sal accompanies Phoebe to the police station on two occasions. They speak to a detective named Sergeant Bickle, who doesn't take the girls seriously. But when Sal discovers that Sergeant Bickle's son is the lunatic, she and Phoebe devise a plan and track down his son—Mike's—address. One Saturday, they take a bus with Ben to a nearby city. Ben leaves the girls so he can go visit his mother, and the girls head to the college. There, they find Mrs. Winterbottom sitting on a bench, holding hands with Mike. When Mrs. Winterbottom kisses Mike on the cheek, Sal runs away. She eventually finds Ben at the hospital, who's visiting his mother in the psychiatric ward. As Sal and Ben follow Ben's mother around the hospital grounds, they kiss.

The next day, Mrs. Winterbottom returns home with Mike and introduces him as her son. She gave him up for adoption years ago, and she's never told Mr. Winterbottom about it. Incensed, Phoebe leaves the house with Sal and discovers that Mrs. Partridge has been leaving the notes on her doorstep. Sal suddenly decides to go speak to Margaret and discovers why

Dad is so interested in her: she knew Momma.

Now, in the present, Sal is getting ready to go on the road trip with her grandparents to see Momma. She hopes she can bring Momma home if they get to Lewiston by Momma's birthday, which gives them seven days to make the trip. Gramps makes lots of stops along the way, at all the places where Momma stopped while she was on her trip. They wade into Lake Michigan, dance with Native Americans in Wisconsin, and skinny dip in the Missouri River. This results in Gram getting bitten by a water moccasin and spending a night in the hospital. She's weak after this, but still enjoys the trip—and she especially enjoys seeing Old Faithful in Yellowstone. As they travel, Sal tells them the story of Phoebe and Mrs. Winterbottom.

When Sal, Gramps, and Gram get to Coeur D'Alene, Idaho, Gram has a stroke and is hospitalized again. It's late at night, and Momma's birthday is the next day. Gramps gives Sal the keys in case she needs anything from the truck, but he and Sal both know what Sal is going to do. Very carefully, Sal gets in the truck and drives the last 300 miles to Lewiston. Halfway down the steep, winding road heading down to the town, she stops at a lookout point. From there, she gets out and walks into the brush, out to where there's a bus turned over on its side. This is where Momma died.

The Lewiston sheriff is waiting at the truck when Sal gets back from the bus. When she realizes who Sal is, he drives her to Momma's grave, where Sal says goodbye—she fully believes now that Momma is dead and isn't coming back. Then, he and a deputy drive Sal and the truck back to the hospital in Coeur D'Alene, where they learn that Gram died in the night. Sal also tells the sheriff why Dad is so interested in Margaret Cadaver: Margaret was the only person to survive the bus accident that killed Momma. She sat next to Momma on the bus, and Momma told her everything about Sal and Dad. Dad met Margaret in Lewiston when he flew out to bury Momma.

Not long after the road trip, Dad and Sal move back to the farm in Bybanks. Sal is looking forward to an upcoming visit from many of her friends from Euclid, including Margaret, Ben, Phoebe, and Mr. Birkway. She hopes that she and Ben will be able to kiss some more.

and as she starts to separate her identity from Momma's. Sal was very close with Momma when she was a child and even describes herself as Momma's "mirror." This didn't bother Sal—to her, life was perfect. But this all changed when Momma's second baby was stillborn. Sal watched Momma fall into a deep depression before finally leaving for Lewiston without saying goodbye. This traumatized Sal, and to cope with her grief, she refuses to believe Momma is actually dead. Sal slowly begins to recover once she befriends Phoebe Winterbottom in Euclid. When Phoebe's mother, Mrs. Winterbottom, goes missing, Sal feels as though she's watching the Winterbottoms go through the same process that she and Dad did after Momma left. But watching Phoebe grieve, Sal reaches some important conclusions, most notably that Momma wasn't trying to hurt Sal by leaving, and that her leaving probably had nothing to do with Sal. As Sal and Phoebe try to figure out where Mrs. Winterbottom went, Sal also falls in love with a classmate named Ben. Sal relates Phoebe's story and the story of her budding romance with Ben while on a cross-country road trip with Gram and Gramps. They visit every site that Momma did on her trip, which allows Sal to "walk two moons" in Momma's shoes and develop empathy and a greater understanding of who her mother was. Sal finally accepts that Momma is dead when she reaches Lewiston and sees the wreckage from the bus accident and visits Momma's grave. By the time Sal returns from her trip and moves back to Bybanks with Dad, she's found closure after Momma's death and has come of age in the process.

Momma/Chanhasen "Sugar" Hiddle – Momma was Sal's mother and Dad's wife. She died before the novel's main timeline, though she appears in Sal's flashbacks. She was of Native American descent (though she hated the term "Native American" and preferred "Indian"), and her name, Chanhasen, reflects this. It's a Native American name that means "sweet tree juice," or maple sugar. However, most people called her Sugar. Growing up, Sal and Momma were extremely close. Sal describes herself as Momma's "mirror" in that whatever emotion Momma felt, Sal felt the same. Momma taught Sal to appreciate nature and regularly told her "Indian stories," which are legends from various Native American tribes that explain how the world came to be the way it is. Though in some ways Sal perceives her childhood as idyllic, she offers clues that suggest Momma struggled with her mental health and her role as a wife and mother. For instance, Sal notes that Momma felt that she'd never be as good and kind as Dad, or as good of a gift-giver. And Momma and Dad were open about wanting to have more children, something they were never able to do. Momma did conceive one more child after Sal, but the baby was born three weeks early and was stillborn. This experience physically and emotionally scarred Momma: she had to undergo a hysterectomy to stop internal bleeding after the birth, and the combination of losing the baby and not being able to have any more children sent Momma into a deep depression.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle – Sal is the 13-year-old protagonist of the novel. Sal was born and raised on a farm in Bybanks, Kentucky, the only child of Momma and Dad—but when Momma suddenly leaves for Lewiston, Idaho and dies in a bus accident near the end of the trip, Dad moves Sal to Euclid, Ohio with him. Over the course of the novel, Sal comes of age as she starts to recover from her grief over Momma's death,

Eventually, Momma cut her long **hair** short and got on a bus to Lewiston, Idaho without saying goodbye. She wanted to find out who Chanhassen was—but Momma died in a bus accident just outside of Lewiston. Sal spends most of the novel refusing to accept that Momma is dead, blaming herself for Momma choosing to leave, and resenting Momma for wanting to have more children. But as Sal, Gram, and Gramps follow in Momma's footsteps across the country, Sal develops empathy for Momma. And, when she's able to sit at Momma's grave, she finally accepts that Momma is dead. Sal ultimately realizes that Momma was her own person, and that she wasn't trying to hurt Sal and Dad when she left.

Dad – Sal's father and Momma's husband is someone Sal describes as kind, generous, and simple. He was raised by two eccentric parents, Gram and Gramps, and he loves being a farmer and touching "real" things, like the dirt, plants, and animals around their land. Dad finds joy in simple pleasures and is an excellent gift-giver—throughout Sal's childhood, he regularly brings gifts for her and for Momma that Sal says are the exact things she would've chosen for herself. Dad's kindness and generosity caused some problems in his relationship with Momma: she believes that Momma wanted to keep up with him and match his generosity, but she didn't have the knack for gift-giving that he did. And ultimately, Dad's goodness became something that Momma resented, as she feared she'd never be as good as he was. Sal suggests that this was one of the reasons that Momma left on a bus trip for Lewiston, along with the fact that Dad and Momma's second child was stillborn. To deal with his emotions when Momma left, Dad began chipping away at a plaster wall in their farmhouse, behind which he discovered a hidden **fireplace**. When Dad got the news that Momma died in a bus accident, he didn't take Sal with him to Lewiston. This becomes a point of contention for Sal—she resents that he didn't take her, and she resents that while he was there, he grew close with Margaret Cadaver (who, unbeknownst to Sal, sat next to Momma on the bus trip). Margaret helps Dad get a job in Euclid, and the novel begins with Sal and Dad moving to Euclid because staying on the farm is too painful for Dad; it seems like Momma is "haunting" the farm. Dad is mostly a distant (and sometimes, detested) presence in Sal's life while she and Dad are in Euclid. She hates that he spends so much time with Margaret, as she believes he's moving on from Momma—but Sal also won't let him explain how he met Margaret or why she's important to him. Sal often finds Dad crying or otherwise grieving openly for Momma, however. After Sal's road trip to Lewiston with Gram and Gramps, Dad moves back to the farm with Sal—a sign that he, like Sal, has found closure after his wife's death.

Gram – Gram is Sal's grandmother, Dad's mother, and Gramps's wife. Gramps affectionately refers to her as his "gooseberry." Gram, like Gramps, is quirky and often gets into trouble—she and Gramps have been arrested for stealing tires and pulled

over for driving on the shoulder of the road. But Sal describes her grandparents as extremely kind and giving, if mischievous. Gram has been a huge part of Sal's life all her life; she and Gramps lived on the next farm over when Sal lived in Bybanks, and she often took care of Sal when Momma and Dad couldn't. After Momma's death, Sal, Gram, and Gramps take a road trip to the town where she died, and Sal learns about her grandparents' relationship along the way. They met when Gram was a "wild" teenager, and she agreed to marry Gramps after hearing how well he treated his dog. They had four sons, including Dad, though Dad's three brothers have since died. All Gram and Gramps's children were born in their "marriage bed," which is the bed that belonged to Gramps's parents that Gram and Gramps then received on their wedding night. On the trip, Gram also encourages Sal to tell them a story to keep them entertained, and Gram enjoys hearing Sal talk about Phoebe (whom Gram refers to as "Peeby"). Trouble does find Gram along the trip: when they stop so they can skinny dip in the Missouri River, a poisonous water moccasin bites Gram's leg, necessitating a night in the hospital. Following this, Gram's health continues to decline. After seeing Old Faithful blow in Yellowstone—a sight that Gram desperately wanted to see—Gram develops a bad cough and is diagnosed as having had a stroke when they reach Coeur D'Alene. She dies in the hospital that night, while Sal drives on her own the rest of the way to Lewiston. Gramps arranges for Gram's body to be flown back to Bybanks and buries her in the aspen grove where they got married.

Gramps – Gramps is Sal's grandfather, Dad's father, and Gram's husband. Sal describes her grandparents as good, kind people who nevertheless attract trouble wherever they go. Over the course of their lifetime, they've been arrested for stealing a senator's tires and pulled over for driving on the shoulder of the road. This is one of the reasons why, Sal believes, Dad wants her to go on the road trip to Lewiston with them—Sal will be able to keep them in line. As Sal and her grandparents drive west, Sal hears about their early relationship. Gramps was smitten with Gram the moment he saw her when they were teenagers—and she agreed to marry him when he admitted that he sometimes sang to his beagle. When they were married, the couple received their "marriage bed." This bed belonged to Gramps's parents first, and Gramps was born in it in addition to all of his and Gram's children. Every night when he and Gram get into bed in motels, Gramps pats the bed and says, "this ain't our marriage bed, but it'll do." Sal sees their marriage bed as a symbol of her grandparents' love and devotion to each other. During their trip, Gramps often pulls off the road to see tourist attractions, nap, or cool off in nearby bodies of water. This habit annoys Sal—and it even proves dangerous when, in the Missouri River, a poisonous water moccasin bites Gram's leg. But Gramps continues to pull over at every place of interest—and Sal eventually realizes that Gramps is purposefully stopping everywhere that Momma did when

Momma headed west on the bus. Gramps's devotion to Gram, and his trust in Sal, becomes apparent when Gram falls ill, and in Coeur D'Alene, doctors discover that she had a stroke. Gramps stays in the hospital with Gram and gives Sal the car keys, knowing that Sal—whom he taught to drive on the family farm several years ago—is going to complete the drive to Lewiston. After Sal and Gramps return to Bybanks, Gramps moves in with Sal and Dad. He continues to teach Sal to drive. They regularly play the “moccasin game” (a reference to the titular saying “Don't judge a man until you've walked two moons in his moccasins”), in which they think about other people's perspectives.

Phoebe Winterbottom – Phoebe becomes Sal's best friend in Euclid, Ohio. She has blond ringlets and a round face. Phoebe and her family live next door to Margaret Cadaver, and Phoebe has a wild imagination—so she believes Margaret is a murderer, or a witch, or otherwise nefarious. Sal implies that while Phoebe is, perhaps, unusually afraid and prone to making up scary stories, Phoebe also learned to be this way from her mother, Mrs. Winterbottom; Mrs. Winterbottom also fears intruders and people messing up her perfect world. Phoebe regularly makes assumptions and judges people; she's self-important and believes herself to be an expert on everything. And though Phoebe seldom has anything nice to say about her mother, Sal eventually learns that Phoebe relies heavily on her mother's cooking, presence, and comfort to make her feel secure. This becomes apparent when, seemingly out of the blue, Mrs. Winterbottom disappears. Phoebe is shaken and immediately decides that a young man whom she's seen around town, who she refers to as “the lunatic,” kidnapped her mother (possibly with Margaret's help). As Phoebe throws herself into proving that her mother was kidnapped, Sal realizes that Phoebe is doing many of the same things that Sal did when Momma disappeared. Phoebe, for instance, refuses to believe that Mrs. Winterbottom would leave of her own volition, since she knows that her mother loves her. In her mind, the only possible explanation is that someone *forced* Mrs. Winterbottom to go. Phoebe persists in this line of thinking until her English teacher, Mr. Birkway (who's Margaret's brother), explains that Margaret Cadaver isn't evil, isn't a murderer, and had nothing to do with Mrs. Winterbottom's disappearance. Phoebe is despondent, especially when she later discovers her mother and “the lunatic” sitting together at a nearby college. Sal implies that eventually, Phoebe accepts her mother's explanation: that “the lunatic,” Mike Bickle, is her son whom she gave him up for adoption before she met Mr. Winterbottom. But although Phoebe sometimes seems aware that she's judgmental, there's little indication that Phoebe actually learns to change her ways by the end of the novel.

Ben Finney – Ben is Sal's classmate and love interest. He lives with his cousin, Mary Lou Finney, and for most of the novel, it's unclear where his parents are. Ben regularly draws silly

cartoons of things like a lizard sitting on a chair made out of its hair, or two moons sitting in moccasins. Sal realizes he has a crush on her when one day, after she looks at one of his drawings, he attempts to kiss her—and accidentally kisses her collarbone. Ben makes several attempts to kiss Sal over the course of the novel, most of which end with him kissing her anywhere but her lips. At first, Sal finds Ben's attention annoying. This is mostly because Ben points out that Sal flinches any time anyone tries to touch her, which makes Sal fear that she's becoming uptight. Ben makes a point to touch Sal whenever possible, something that Sal eventually comes to appreciate. Sal finally solves the mystery of Ben's mother on the day that she accompanies Phoebe to track down the lunatic. Ben rides the bus with the girls, and Sal later finds him at the hospital in town visiting his mother, who's in the psychiatric ward. At this point, Sal and Ben finally kiss. Ben is the only person in Sal's class who doesn't tease her for her journal entry about Momma's “**blackberry** kiss” that their English teacher, Mr. Birkway, reads to the class. In fact, Ben gets Sal a chicken as a gift and names her Blackberry. Ben and Sal's romance continues even after Sal moves back to Bybanks at the end of the novel. He sends her a valentine in October, and during his upcoming visit, Sal is looking forward to kissing him some more.

Mrs. Margaret Cadaver – Margaret Cadaver is, for much of the novel, an antagonist in Sal's eyes. From Sal's perspective, Margaret appeared suddenly in Dad's life about the time that Momma died, and she's the reason why Dad insisted they move from Bybanks, Kentucky to Euclid, Ohio. It also doesn't help that because of her wild red hair, her last name, and her job as a nurse, Sal's friend Phoebe insists that Margaret is, if not a witch, at least evil. Phoebe also suspects that Margaret cut up her husband, Mr. Cadaver, and buried him in her backyard. Though Sal finds all of this far-fetched, Phoebe's stories give Sal a reason to hate Margaret. For her part, Margaret does her best to give Sal her space to grieve and takes Sal's standoffish attitude in stride. As the novel progresses, Sal learns things about Margaret that start to change how she thinks of the woman: Margaret is Sal's teacher, Mr. Birkway's, twin sister, and he reveals that his sister isn't a murderer. Rather, she was the nurse on duty in the emergency room when her husband and mother (Mrs. Partridge) were brought in on stretchers after being hit by a drunk driver. Her husband was killed, and her mother was left blind by the accident. Learning this makes Sal wonder how Margaret managed to get past her sadness and live her life again. Ultimately, Sal does seek out Margaret and learn how Dad met her. Margaret met Momma when they ended up on the same bus headed west to Lewiston, Idaho. Over the course of the journey, Momma told Margaret all about Sal and Dad. Margaret was the only person to survive the bus accident that killed Momma, and she met Dad while she was hospitalized in Lewiston for her injuries. She assures Sal that she's not going to marry Dad, at least not any time soon—Dad, she insists, is still grieving for Momma.

Mrs. Winterbottom – Mrs. Winterbottom is Phoebe and Prudence’s mother and Mr. Winterbottom’s wife. She’s a plain woman, with a round face and blond curls, and Sal suspects that she’s used to being ignored and unremarkable. Mrs. Winterbottom is a housewife while Phoebe and her older daughter, Prudence, are on breaks from school; during the school year, she works at a local plumbing business. She makes a point to cook low-calorie, cholesterol-free, vegetarian meals for her family—so Sal finds it odd that Mrs. Winterbottom also makes a number of pies and other sweet treats, like brownies. However, despite her efforts, her family doesn’t seem to appreciate her much—indeed, Phoebe is entirely unwilling or unable to notice that her mother frequently cries. A nervous woman, Mrs. Winterbottom is fanatical about making sure that all the doors and windows are locked, though Sal can never tell what exactly Mrs. Winterbottom is afraid of. Sal notices Mrs. Winterbottom’s anxiety and unhappiness getting more pronounced over time, especially once Phoebe starts finding the mysterious messages on the Winterbottoms’ front porch. The appearance of the lunatic also seems to disturb Mrs. Winterbottom. Not long after the lunatic appears, Mrs. Winterbottom mysteriously disappears. Though she leaves her family members notes, she doesn’t indicate where she’s gone or when she’ll be back. Convinced that her mother was kidnapped and murdered, either by the lunatic or by Margaret Cadaver, Phoebe throws herself into finding her mother. But when Phoebe and Sal finally find Mrs. Winterbottom, they’re shocked: they discover her at a college with the lunatic, Mike Bickle, kissing him on the cheek. The day after, Mrs. Winterbottom returns home with a totally new look: she’s cut her **hair**, wears makeup and earrings, and has stylish clothes. She reveals that Mike is her son; she had him before she met Mr. Winterbottom, gave him up for adoption, and never told Mr. Winterbottom out of fear of disappointing him. Sal implies that everything ultimately turns out okay for Mrs. Winterbottom—she and Mike are accepted back into the family.

Mr. Winterbottom – Mr. Winterbottom is Phoebe and Prudence’s father and Mrs. Winterbottom’s husband. Both Sal and Phoebe think of Mr. Winterbottom as upstanding and stoic. Sal describes him as a stereotypical father: he eats dinner with his family every night seated at the head of the table, with his white shirtsleeves rolled up and his tie still around his neck. He speaks loudly and clearly—and like his daughters, he doesn’t pay much attention to Mrs. Winterbottom. Phoebe believes her father doesn’t care about Mrs. Winterbottom when he refuses to go to the police after his wife disappears. Instead of panicking, Mr. Winterbottom does his best to keep his daughters’ lives as normal as possible, while also trying to reach out and track down his wife. Sal doesn’t believe Mr. Winterbottom cares at all about Mrs. Winterbottom until she and Phoebe catch him crying while doing the dishes one night. When Mrs. Winterbottom returns accompanied by a young

man, Mr. Winterbottom is upset at first—but not for the reasons that Mrs. Winterbottom expected him to be. Mrs. Winterbottom reveals that the young man, Mike, is her son; she gave him up for adoption before she met her husband, and she never spoke about it out of fear of not looking “respectable” enough to Mr. Winterbottom. But Mr. Winterbottom isn’t interested in respectability—what bothers him is that his wife didn’t feel like she could share this with him. He ultimately accepts Mike as a member of the family.

The Lunatic/Mike Bickle – “The lunatic” is a young man of about 18 who appears on Phoebe’s doorstep one day asking for Mrs. Winterbottom. Phoebe starts to call him “the lunatic” because with her wild imagination, it’s inconceivable that a strange man would show up on her porch, ask for her mother, and act nervous and suspicious about it. Sal and Phoebe see the lunatic several times over the next few weeks—and after Mrs. Winterbottom disappears, Phoebe becomes convinced that the lunatic kidnapped and murdered her mother. But Sal discovers that the lunatic’s name is Mike, and he’s actually Sergeant Bickle’s son. Ultimately, Mrs. Winterbottom reveals that Mike is her son whom she gave up for adoption before she met Mr. Winterbottom. A few weeks before she left her home, Mike contacted her. Once Mrs. Winterbottom shares this with her husband, Mr. Winterbottom accepts Mike as a member of the family.

Mr. Birkway – Mr. Birkway is Sal and Phoebe’s English teacher. He’s a lively man who clearly loves his subject, and though Sal describes him as “peculiar,” he also has an endearing ability to make a person feel like he wants nothing more than to listen to whatever they have to say. He helps teach his students the value of difference and perspective, which he intends to teach by reading passages from his students’ summer journals aloud. To some degree, this works: he uses passages to make points about how people see things differently, and he suggests that what a person takes away from a particular literary work will always be unique to them. But Mr. Birkway decides that reading the journals aloud was a mistake when he reads Phoebe’s journal and discovers that Phoebe believes Mrs. Cadaver is a murderer who hacked up her own husband. After this, Mr. Birkway reveals to Phoebe and Sal that Mrs. Cadaver is his twin sister, and that Mr. Cadaver died in the car crash that blinded Margaret and Mr. Birkway’s mother, Mrs. Partridge.

Mrs. Partridge – Mrs. Partridge is Mrs. Cadaver and Mr. Birkway’s elderly, blind mother, though Sal and Phoebe don’t learn for some time that Mrs. Partridge is Mr. Birkway’s mother. She’s a kind, mischievous woman who often uses made up words, like “peculible” (peculiar) and “redible” (ready). Sal is very impressed with Mrs. Partridge because she can “see” things, like Phoebe inspecting spots on the floor, without her sight. She can also accurately guess people’s ages by feeling their faces. Phoebe, however, is disturbed by the old woman. Sal and Phoebe eventually discover that Mrs. Partridge is the

one leaving mysterious messages on Phoebe's front porch. She explains that she thought they'd be nice gifts for Phoebe's family, like fortune cookies.

Mary Lou Finney – Mary Lou Finney is a girl in Sal's class. She often says odd things like “omnipotent” or “beef brain.” This confuses Sal at first—but Mary Lou's mannerisms start to make more sense when Sal visits the Finney house. Mary Lou says “omnipotent” as an alternative to saying God's name in vain, and she refers to her three younger brothers as “beef-brained.” Phoebe and Sal hang out with Mary Lou most Saturdays—except for the Saturday that Mary Lou is out on a date with their classmate Alex. Mary Lou's relationship with Alex goes through a rough patch when Mr. Birkway reads Mary Lou's summer journal aloud. In it, Mary Lou wrote that Alex was a jerk—and though Mr. Birkway doesn't share whose journal it is, Alex and the rest of the class know that Mary Lou was writing about Alex.

Prudence Winterbottom – Prudence is Phoebe's older sister. She's 17 and looks a lot like Mrs. Winterbottom, with a round face and blond ringlets. Like Phoebe, Prudence is totally blind to the fact that her mother is going through a difficult time emotionally. Prudence brushes off Mrs. Winterbottom's attempts to start meaningful conversations about her life and seems to appreciate her mother only for her cooking and sewing skills. Prudence also doesn't seem to take it as hard as Phoebe does when Mrs. Winterbottom goes missing, though she seems genuinely excited when her mother returns.

The Boy/Tom Fleet – Tom finds Sal, Gram, and Gramps sitting in the Missouri River. At first, he brandishes a bowie knife at them and declares that the river is private property. But when a water moccasin bites Gram, the boy accompanies her to the hospital and sucks venom out of Gram's bite on the way. It's not until he gets word that Gram is okay that he leaves the hospital. Before he goes, he gives Sal his address and finally introduces himself by name. Sal writes to him after she returns to Bybanks, sharing that Gram passed away from a stroke.

Sergeant Bickle – Sergeant Bickle is a detective with the Euclid police department. He speaks to Phoebe and Sal about Mrs. Winterbottom's disappearance, though he doesn't take the girls seriously. However, he becomes a person of interest to Sal and Phoebe when Sal discovers that his son, Mike, is the supposed “lunatic” whom Phoebe believes kidnapped Mrs. Winterbottom. It turns out that Sergeant Bickle and his wife adopted Mike as a newborn, when Mrs. Winterbottom gave him up for adoption years ago.

Grandmother and Grandfather Pickford – Sal's maternal grandparents are upstanding and, as Momma once told Sal, “busy being “respectable.” They don't appear in person in the novel, only in others' conversation. Sal explains that the only wild thing her grandmother ever did was to give Momma her Native American name, Chanhassen. When Ben accuses Sal of flinching whenever she's touched, Sal fears that she's becoming

like her Pickford grandparents.

Gloria – Gloria is an old friend of Gram's who, according to Gram, was romantically interested in Gramps long ago. Gram insists that this is because Gloria actually wanted Gramps for herself. Gramps and Gram argue and tease each other about Gloria consistently along their road trip. After Gram dies and Gramps moves in with Sal and Dad in Bybanks, Gloria comes to visit Gramps—but after listening to him reminisce about Gram for four hours, she excuses herself and never comes back.

The Sheriff – The Lewiston sheriff finds Sal inspecting the site of the bus accident a few miles outside of Lewiston, Idaho. When he learns that Sal's Momma died in the accident, the sheriff takes Sal to visit Momma's grave and talks to her about Margaret Cadaver—though he also lectures her for driving alone at age 13. He takes Sal back to Gramps in Coeur D'Alene, and he offers to help Gramps make arrangements for Gram, who has just died.

Mr. Cadaver – Mr. Cadaver, Margaret Cadaver's husband, is deceased and never appears in the novel. Phoebe spends much of the novel convinced that Mrs. Cadaver murdered her husband and buried him under a rhododendron in her backyard. But Mr. Birkway eventually shares that Mr. Cadaver actually died when a drunk driver hit his car. His mother-in-law, Mrs. Partridge, was blinded in the accident.

Mr. Finney – Mr. Finney is Mary Lou's father. Sal observes that Mr. Finney seems very in love with his wife, Mrs. Finney—the two of them remind Sal of how Momma and Dad used to be. Mr. Finney is loving and eccentric; the first time Sal visits the Finneys, Mr. Finney is reading, fully clothed, in the bathtub.

Mrs. Finney – Mrs. Finney is Mary Lou's mother. She works outside the home and seems to enjoy her rambunctious and chaotic family. Sal observes that Mrs. and Mr. Finney seem very in love. They remind her of how Momma and Dad used to be, and she wonders if Momma wanted a large family like the Finneys'.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Tommy Finney – Tommy is one of Mary Lou's younger brothers.

Dougie Finney – Dougie is one of Mary Lou's younger brothers.

Dennis Finney – Dennis is one of Mary Lou's younger brothers.

Christy – Christy is one of Sal's classmates in Euclid.

Beth Ann – Beth Ann is one of Sal's classmates in Euclid.

Megan – Megan is one of Sal's classmates in Euclid.

Alex – Alex is a boy in Sal's class; he's Mary Lou's love interest.

Ben's Mother – Ben's mother is receiving inpatient psychiatric treatment at a hospital a few towns away from Euclid.



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.



JUDGMENT, PERSPECTIVE, AND STORYTELLING

The title of *Walk Two Moons* comes from a mysterious note left on Sal's friend Phoebe's porch that reads, "Don't judge a man unless you've walked two moons in his moccasins." In other words, one should only judge another person if one knows that person's full story or has had the same experiences. This saying underpins 13-year-old Sal's coming of age as she and her grandparents take a cross-country trip along the same route that Sal's Momma took before she died. Along the way, Sal tells Gram and Gramps the story of Phoebe's mother's disappearance, and in the process, she realizes that the story of her own Momma's death is "behind Phoebe's" story. Recounting what happened to Phoebe's family helps Sal look at events from multiple perspectives and better understand what's happened to her own family. Through this, she realizes that the book's titular saying holds true—that people are too complex to judge without first understanding their unique experiences and motivations. The novel thus suggests that understanding others' stories and empathizing with them, rather than making assumptions about them, is a crucial part of maturation. Moreover, it's an effective way to process past events and understand how and why things happened as they did.

The novel suggests that while making snap judgments about people might be understandable, those judgments harm both the person being judged and the person doing the judging. The most obvious example of this is Sal's contentious relationship with her dad's friend Margaret Cadaver. Sal resents Margaret from the outset, as Margaret is the one who helps Dad facilitate their move from rural Kentucky to suburban Ohio. She also thinks that Dad is romantically interested in Margaret, meaning that Margaret is taking Dad's attention away from Momma (whom readers eventually learn was killed in a bus accident and was sitting next to Margaret when she died). For these reasons, Sal hates Margaret, so she's willing to go along with her friend Phoebe's insistence that Margaret is "creepy," might be a witch, and probably murdered her husband. Because Sal refuses to learn Margaret's real story or let Dad and Margaret explain their shared connection to Momma, Sal misunderstands Margaret, prolongs her own grief over Momma, and strains her relationship with Dad.

Phoebe also judges her mother, Mrs. Winterbottom—and while

Sal can't see how judging Margaret harms both Margaret and herself, she does see how Phoebe's assumptions about her mother harms both Mrs. Winterbottom and Phoebe. Phoebe, her sister Prudence, and Mr. Winterbottom think of Mrs. Winterbottom as a reliable fixture in their home who only exists to cook, do chores, and support them emotionally. None of them can see what Sal sees: that Mrs. Winterbottom feels trapped and unhappy in her role as a housewife. And ultimately, this leads Mrs. Winterbottom to leave home for a week without warning—something that reflects her own emotional turmoil, and something that rocks Phoebe's understanding of her family.

In order to counteract these sorts of judgments and understand situations and people for what they really are, the novel suggests that it's necessary to consider other people's perspectives. As Sal watches Phoebe try to make sense of her mother's absence, she realizes that Phoebe is doing many of the same things that Sal did right after Momma left. Phoebe insists it's impossible that her mother could've left her, something that Sal also told Dad. Phoebe makes wild assumptions about a lunatic or Margaret Cadaver kidnapping and murdering Mrs. Winterbottom, much like Sal outright refuses to believe that Momma is dead. As Sal makes these connections between Phoebe's story and her own, the novel shows that seeing one's own experiences reflected in someone else can be a useful tool: Sal isn't willing to acknowledge how stubborn she's being until she watches Phoebe believe just as stubbornly that her mother was murdered. Sal learns this again when she finally agrees to hear Margaret out and learns the real reason why Dad wants to be around Margaret: not because he's in love with her, but because she makes him feel more connected to Momma. This revelation helps Sal see that Margaret isn't a witch or a murderer, nor is she a threat to Sal's family. It also helps Sal decide that since Momma told Margaret all about her family, Momma must have missed them—which helps Sal come to terms with Momma's choice to leave in the first place.

Finally, by retracing her mother's cross-country journey and telling her and Phoebe's interwoven stories along the way, Sal is finally able to understand Momma and come to terms with her past trauma. Prior to the road trip, Sal blames herself for Momma's departure. A few months before Momma left, Sal broke her leg. Momma (who was pregnant at the time) carried Sal inside, which Sal thinks caused Momma's preterm labor and stillbirth that evening. Momma then had to have a hysterectomy, and her depression after this is seemingly what prompted her westward journey in the first place. But as Sal traverses her mother's footsteps and recounts Phoebe's and her own parallel stories, she realizes that Momma's departure didn't have anything to do with her. Like Mrs. Winterbottom, Momma was just unhappy—and unlike Mrs. Winterbottom, Momma was the victim of a tragic accident that meant she was never able to remedy her unhappiness and return to Sal and

Dad. Put another way, Sal's road trip and storytelling along the way help her to empathize with Momma—to "walk two moons in [her] moccasins." Sal is finally able to think about Momma's departure without blaming anyone, and she finally learns to see Momma as a person independent from her husband and daughter, which is an important part of Sal's maturation process. Together, the trip and the stories teach Sal to humanize her mother—and this, the novel suggests, is one of the most meaningful gifts that perspective can offer.



PARENTS, CHILDREN, AND GROWING UP

As Sal travels across the United States with her grandparents, Gram and Gramps, and tells them the story of her friend Phoebe, much of her tale is focused on parent-child relationships. When Phoebe's mother, Mrs. Winterbottom, suddenly disappears, Phoebe is so unwilling to believe that her mother actually wanted to leave that she makes up fantastical stories about her mother being kidnapped and murdered. And as Sal watches Phoebe process her mother's absence, she realizes that she acted similarly when, a year ago, Momma suddenly left Dad and Sal and died soon after. Sal also spends much of the novel angry with Dad, who made Sal move away from their farm in Kentucky after Momma died. Much of Sal and Phoebe's anger at their parents seems to stem from their youth and their immaturity. As young people who rely heavily on their parents and are still developing their understanding of the world, it's inconceivable to them that their parents are flawed people with their own dreams, fears, and eccentricities. But part of growing up, the novel suggests, is accepting that one's parents are their own people, as well as discovering who one is without one's parents.

Initially, both Sal and Phoebe are closely connected to their mothers and, in different ways, take their mothers for granted. As Sal describes life before Momma left their family, she refers to herself as Momma's "mirror." If Momma was happy, Sal was happy—and if Momma was sad, Sal was also sad. Sal was, in this sense, unable to separate her own emotions—and indeed, her own identity—from her mother's. Phoebe isn't as emotionally close with Mrs. Winterbottom, but she clearly takes her mother for granted. Phoebe ignores her mother, speaks rudely to her, and expects her to do things for their family—all of which suggests that she sees Mrs. Winterbottom as a regular, expected fixture in her home. Mrs. Winterbottom is, in Phoebe's mind, always there with healthy meals, pies, and her ironing board and sewing machine. And while Phoebe tries to push her mother away before Mrs. Winterbottom leaves, her reaction when Mrs. Winterbottom disappears—deciding that Mrs. Winterbottom was kidnapped and throwing herself into rescuing her mother—shows how much she actually loved and relied on her mother.

When Momma and Mrs. Winterbottom leave, Sal and Phoebe

are separated from their mothers for the first time—and they lash out in various ways as they navigate this difficult change. Sal, for one, throws tantrums, blames herself for Momma's departure, and refuses to acknowledge that Momma is dead. In particular, the fact that Sal blames herself for Momma leaving shows how connected Sal feels to Momma. It's inconceivable, she believes, that Momma *chose* to leave her only daughter—so in Sal's mind, it follows that she must've done something to cause Momma to want to leave. In a way, Sal lashes out, blames herself, and denies Momma's death in an attempt to stay close to Momma. Because Sal only briefly alludes to how she behaved after Momma left, readers get a much closer look at how Phoebe grapples with her mother's absence. Like Sal, much of Phoebe's angst comes from her unwillingness to consider that Mrs. Winterbottom's departure might not have anything to do with Phoebe. Instead, Phoebe eventually learns that her mother left because she felt unfulfilled and unappreciated in their family, and because she has a secret: Mrs. Winterbottom had a son whom she gave up for adoption before she met Mr. Winterbottom. For both Sal and Phoebe, accepting that their mothers chose to leave them means that they have to accept that they aren't the centers of their mothers' worlds. Their mothers are people too, with their own private dreams and desires outside of their roles as wives and mothers. This is a frightening proposition for both Sal and Phoebe.

Because Mrs. Winterbottom ultimately returns to her family, Phoebe doesn't have to take the final step that Sal does: figure out who she is without her mother there to guide her. Having been Momma's "mirror" for so long, Sal struggles for several weeks after Momma leaves to identify and understand her various emotions. It's a big step for her when, about a month after Momma leaves, Sal suddenly realizes she's happy, meaning that she can still enjoy her life without Momma. In this way, Sal starts to figure out who she is, and through doing so, starts to come of age. An even bigger indicator that Sal is coming of age is her changing relationship to **blackberries**. Sal associates blackberries with Momma—Momma loved blackberries, and Sal has a fond memory of watching Momma kiss a tree and leave a blackberry stain on it. For a while after Momma leaves, then, blackberries make Sal sad. However, after Sal kisses Ben, a boy she likes, Ben asks her if she thinks their kiss tasted like blackberries (he's heard the story of Momma's "blackberry kiss"). This moment signals a shift in Sal's identity, as something that once reminded her of Momma is now associated with her growing independence and maturity as she navigates her first romantic relationship. In this way, coming to understand who she is without Momma is an important part of Sal's personal growth.

With this, *Walk Two Moons* suggests that children might never fully move away from their parents—it's implied that Sal will always associate blackberries with Momma, for instance. But as children come of age, they also come to a more nuanced

understanding of their relationship with their parents, and most importantly, discover that they can exist—and be happy—without their parent right there beside them.



GRIEF

Walk Two Moons is largely the story of how 13-year-old Sal deals with grief—first after Momma leaves Sal and Dad without warning, and then when

Momma dies in a bus accident on her trip to Lewiston, Idaho. Sal's healing process from this trauma takes almost two years: she transforms from being unable to identify her own emotions, to being unwilling to accept that Momma is actually dead, to finally being able to accept that Momma is gone and wasn't trying to hurt Sal by leaving. And by showing several different characters cope with their grief in different ways alongside Sal, *Walk Two Moons* makes it clear that recovering from the loss of a loved one isn't always easy, fast, or straightforward. It can take a long time to heal, and healing can take different forms, some of which may seem strange to other people—like making up fantastical stories to explain a person's absence, or outright refusing to acknowledge that they're gone. The novel thus suggests that every person grieves differently, and that there isn't one right way to do so—but that in order to find closure and heal, a person must eventually accept that their loved one is gone.

One of the most unsettling parts of the grieving process, the novel suggests, is that two people can grieve for someone in totally different ways. Sal runs up against this in the weeks after Momma leaves and dies. At first, she and Dad seem to respond in similar ways: they both wander around the house and farm, unable to function without Momma. But things get far more difficult for Sal when Dad insists that the two of them leave the farm and move to Euclid, Ohio. Especially since Dad chooses Euclid because of his friendship with a woman named Margaret Cadaver who lives there, Sal believes that Dad isn't properly honoring Momma. It seems, to Sal, like Dad is moving on and moving away from the place Sal associates with Momma, without taking Sal's feelings into account. A similar dynamic plays out in Sal's friend, Phoebe Winterbottom's, family when Phoebe's mother disappears. Though Mrs. Winterbottom isn't dead, Sal observes that some of Phoebe's grief over her mother's disappearance is heightened by the fact that neither Mr. Winterbottom nor her older sister, Prudence, seem to care all that much. While Phoebe throws herself into proving that Mrs. Winterbottom was kidnapped and murdered, Prudence focuses on her cheerleading tryouts; and Mr. Winterbottom, in Phoebe's opinion, barely seems to care that his wife is gone. There are clues that Mr. Winterbottom does care about his wife and is worried about her—Phoebe and Sal catch him crying on several occasions—but because he doesn't immediately agree to call the police when Phoebe asks him to, she believes he's betraying her.

The novel also shows that people don't always grieve in ways that make sense to other people. For much of the novel, readers are led to believe that Momma is only convalescing in Idaho—and this is because Sal, the book's narrator, is unwilling to believe her mother is dead until she sees the wrecked bus and Momma's grave firsthand. For Sal, refusing to believe her mother is dead is an act of self-preservation, one that allows her to avoid processing her crushing grief over losing her mother at such a young age. Sal recognizes that Phoebe's insistence that Mrs. Winterbottom was kidnapped and murdered is a similar act of self-preservation. It's inconceivable to Phoebe that Mrs. Winterbottom just left her; in order for Mrs. Winterbottom's absence to make any sense in Phoebe's mind, she has to believe that Mrs. Winterbottom was forced to leave her home and her family. And as was the case with Sal, this means that Phoebe doesn't have to confront her grief. Indeed, Phoebe has little time to dwell on her emotions because she's so busy gathering evidence, going to the police, and otherwise trying to figure out what happened to her mother.

Ultimately, though, *Walk Two Moons* suggests that these nonsensical grief practices must eventually give way to accepting the truth and confronting one's emotions. Phoebe never has to fully complete this process, as her mother returns alive and well after a week or so away. But it's disconcerting for Phoebe when, starting a few days before Mrs. Winterbottom returns, she discovers that all her hunches are incorrect. Her "creepy" neighbor Mrs. Cadaver didn't murder her husband or Mrs. Winterbottom, and the lunatic Phoebe suspected of kidnapping Mrs. Winterbottom is actually Mrs. Winterbottom's son whom she gave up for adoption before meeting Mr. Winterbottom. Faced with nothing to distract her from her grief, Phoebe has to confront that her mother chose to leave and must sit with this uncomfortable fact. Sal, however, finally finds closure when, in Lewiston, she's able to visit the site of the bus accident and Momma's grave. Her journey west with her grandparents, she realizes, was intended to show Sal the truth of what happened to Momma and help her move past her unwillingness to believe that Momma is dead. And it works: as Sal sits next to Momma's grave and hears birdsong (a sound she associates with her mother), she realizes that although Momma is gone, her spirit will always be with Sal. With this, *Walk Two Moons* shows that the grieving process is difficult for everyone and can take many different (and sometimes confusing) forms. But the various acts of kindness throughout the novel—such as Gram and Gramps taking Sal on the road trip and Sal supporting Phoebe in her desperate hunt for the lunatic—suggest that compassion is one of the best ways to help a grieving person, no matter what their grief looks like.



NATURE

Sal is, according to her Gramps, “a country girl at heart.” So, over the course of Sal’s cross-country road trip with her grandparents, as she tells them a story about her friend Phoebe, Sal is always attuned to the natural world around her. She describes the farm where she grew up; the tiny yards in Euclid, Ohio, where she and Dad live for a year after Momma leaves; and the landmarks, such as the Black Hills and Old Faithful, that she sees along her trip with Gram and Gramps. Nature is, for Sal, something that makes her feel safe and comfortable—and most importantly, it connects her to Momma, whom readers eventually learn is deceased. Through Sal’s reverence for the natural world, and the way that nature helps Sal connect with Momma and with her Native American heritage, the novel positions nature as a healing force—one that’s capable of connecting people across time and space.

As a “country girl,” Sal sees the natural world as a powerful (even magical) force that connects her to her family. In flashbacks, Sal explains that she was extremely happy when she, Momma, and Dad lived on the farm together. Living on the farm, Sal could spend her days at the swimming hole, climbing trees, and caring for the farm animals—activities that made her feel alive and fulfilled. Similarly, Sal shows how both Momma and Dad loved and felt connected to the natural world. Dad loved working on the farm and refused to wear gloves in the course of his work because he needed to touch things that were “real,” like the dirt and the animals. And Momma regularly ate **blackberries** fresh from the vine and kissed trees—something that shows how much she loved the natural world. Sal implies that her and her parents’ shared love of their land is what kept the family content, and this deep connection with and reverence for nature imbued the farm with an almost magical quality in Sal’s mind. This is why, when Momma leaves the farm and dies in a bus accident, Sal doesn’t want to leave the farm. She believes so fully in Momma’s emotional and spiritual connection to the farm and the natural world that she thinks Momma will come back to it. And while it’s impossible for Momma to come back, Dad nevertheless echoes the idea that Momma is spiritually connected to their land: in justifying the move to Euclid, Dad explains that Momma is “haunting” the farm. Sal’s connection to and love of the natural world is why moving to Euclid, a suburb without much natural beauty, is traumatic for Sal. Not only is it painful to be away from the specific landscape and animals she loves, but it’s also painful to feel distant from the natural world in general, because this makes her feel distant from Momma.

Nature also connects Sal to her Native American heritage. Both Sal and Momma’s names are nods to the natural world and to their heritage. Momma’s full first name is Chanhassen, a Native American name that means “tree sweet juice,” or maple sugar. Sal’s full name is Salamanca Tree Hiddle; Salamanca is the tribe

her parents (incorrectly) believed an ancestor was a part of, and Tree as a nod to Momma’s name and Momma’s love of trees. In this sense, Sal’s connection to nature and her heritage is evident in her name and therefore in her identity. Sal gets to engage with her Native American heritage over the course of her road trip with her grandparents, another aspect of her identity that’s tied to the natural world. Every place Gram and Gramps stop at along the way is a site of spiritual significance for Native Americans: for instance, the Black Hills are sacred to the Sioux tribe. At several points, Sal also recalls Momma’s favorite “Indian stories” that explain why the world is the way it is—and those stories overwhelmingly try to explain human phenomena, like death, using the natural world. Nature, this suggests, can help people understand where they come from, how the world works, and why things are the way they are.

As Sal embarks on the road trip, reconnects with nature, and connects with her Native American heritage in the process, she begins to heal from the trauma of losing Momma. Gram and Gramps very purposefully stop at all the same places Momma did when she traveled west just over a year ago. This serves two purposes: first, Sal thinks about Momma and what Momma saw or thought at each stop. By engaging in these thought exercises, Sal develops empathy for Momma and begins to heal from her grief and trauma. And second, as Sal also thinks about Momma’s “Indian stories,” particularly the ones that deal with death, she’s finally able to come to the conclusion that death is both “normal *and* terrible.” In this way, nature helps Sal to find closure after Momma’s death. This becomes clear when Sal acknowledges that Dad was right about not needing to bring Momma’s body back to Bybanks to bury her. It’s fine that Momma’s body rests in Lewiston, since Momma’s spirit is everywhere. And this is also why Dad and Sal are able to move back to the farm in Bybanks after Sal’s road trip: because Sal and Dad now realize that they can connect to Momma anywhere in the natural world, the farm is no longer as significant and no longer has the painful associations it once did. Through Sal and Dad’s transformations, *Walk Two Moons* shows that nature, and the stories people tell about it, can be uniquely healing.



SYMBOLS

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



THE FIREPLACE

The fireplace in the Hiddles’ Kentucky farmhouse symbolizes the hidden nature of people’s true thoughts, feelings, and motivations, as well as the idea that different people’s stories are often intertwined with one another. After Momma leaves Sal and Dad, Dad begins to chip

away at a plaster wall in their house. This is a symbolic act in and of itself: just as Dad is trying to expose what's behind the plaster, he and Sal are also trying to understand Momma's private reasons for leaving them. Once they find out that Momma isn't coming back (readers eventually learn that she died in a bus accident), Dad shows Sal that he's uncovered a hidden brick fireplace behind the wall. The fact that he uncovers this secret feature of the house just after learning that Momma has died further associates the fireplace with Momma's mysterious story—he even writes Momma's name, Chanhassen, on the grout between the bricks.

Indeed, Sal reflects that the story of why Momma left and how she died is hidden behind the story of her friend Phoebe Winterbottom's mother's disappearance, just as the fireplace was hidden behind the wall. By this, Sal means that she only begins to understand and empathize with her mother when she reflects on her family's story alongside the Winterbottoms' parallel story, which allows her to think about Momma's inner life and decisions in a more nuanced, objective way. In this way, the fireplace hidden behind the wall corresponds with the idea that people's true stories are often private, complex, and unexpected—and sometimes they're even nested in other stories.

At the end of the book, Sal, Dad, and Gramps move back into the farmhouse. Looking at the fireplace, Sal wonders if there's a third story hidden behind it, just as Momma's story (which Sal thinks of as the fireplace) was hidden behind Phoebe's (which Sal thinks of as the plaster wall). She thinks that maybe Gram and Gramps's story—which they told her parts of as she told them Phoebe's story—is hidden behind Momma's. The fireplace thus represents the interwoven nature of people's stories, and the idea that hearing and telling others' stories can help a person better understand their own.



BLACKBERRIES

Blackberries symbolize Sal's changing relationship to Momma's memory as she processes Momma's death. As Sal tells stories of life before Momma left for Lewiston and died in an accident, she explains how much Momma loved blackberries. And because Sal loves Momma, she comes to associate blackberries with Momma. Indeed, after Sal witnessed Momma kissing a tree and leaving a stain on it after eating blackberries, Sal discovered that all trees, when kissed, taste a bit like blackberries. Thanks to the blackberries, Sal associates not just the fruit, but all trees, with her mother.

As Sal starts to accept and move on from Momma's death, her relationship to blackberries starts to shift. While at first Sal can't even eat a blackberry pie at the Winterbottoms' house because of how much the fruit reminds her of Momma, Sal gradually begins to associate blackberries with happier things. Ben, for instance, is the only person in Sal's class who doesn't

tease her when Mr. Birkway reads Sal's journal entry about Momma's "blackberry kiss" out loud. And as Sal and Ben's relationship becomes romantic, they both talk about their kisses—which are framed as wholly positive—tasting like blackberries. As such, Sal begins to associate blackberries not just with her mother, but with her and Ben's romance—a relationship that's pleasant, exciting, and even revitalizing for Sal. With this, Sal discovers that blackberries, and Momma's memory, don't just have to make her sad. Rather, Sal can remember and honor Momma, even as she grows up and starts to move on after Momma's death.



THE SINGING TREE

The singing tree symbolizes Momma. When Sal was little, she regularly heard a bird singing in a tree near the barn. Sal could never locate the bird in the tree, which made it seem like the tree itself was singing. Momma had a close connection to nature, and so Sal associated the beautiful, magical singing tree with happiness and with Momma—in Sal's opinion, life was perfect and wonderful largely because Momma is in it. So, it follows that when Sal and Dad get the news that Momma has died, Sal can't hear the singing tree sing anymore. Though she, Gram, and Gramps sleep under it the first night after Dad leaves for Idaho, the tree never sings.

As Sal journeys west with Gram and Gramps in the novel's present, Sal finally hears another singing tree. This indicates that Sal is beginning to heal from the grief of losing Momma—the world, she's discovering, still contains beauty and magic, even though Momma is no longer in it. And it's telling that later, as Sal sits at Momma's grave in Lewiston, Idaho, she hears a birdsong that's implied to be the same sort of song that the singing tree always sang. In this moment, Sal realizes that although Momma is dead, Momma's spirit is still all around her, in all the trees. And afterward, as Sal explains how life has changed in the novel's final chapter, she mentions that she's back in Bybanks, Kentucky with the singing tree, which signals that she's finally found closure after Momma's death.



HAIR

In the novel, various characters' hairstyles are associated with their identities, as well as the degree to which they feel happy and free in those identities. One of Sal's defining features is her long black hair—it's a trait that characters like Ben, Tom Fleet, and Mrs. Partridge immediately notice and comment on when they meet her. Momma had the same long black hair, but she cut it off just before she left for Lewiston, Idaho, insisting that she needed to go to Lewiston in order to figure out who she really was. Sal frames Momma's haircut as a symbolic act—something that Momma did to free herself, suggesting that Momma associated her long hair with feeling trapped in Bybanks and in her role as

a wife and mother. The fact that Momma and Sal had their hair in common makes the haircut even more significant, as it set Momma apart from Sal (who calls herself a “mirror” of Momma) physically and emotionally. When Sal then gathered Momma’s hair and saved it, she was symbolically refusing to let go of her perception of and relationship to Momma—it was inconceivable to Sal that Momma would ever need to search for meaning or purpose outside of their family.

Mrs. Winterbottom also cuts her hair when she leaves her family for a week. Phoebe is shocked and angry to discover that her mother cut her hair into a short, fashionable style. Just as Sal rejected the possibility that Momma might feel trapped in her role as a wife and mother, Phoebe does the same. Ultimately, though, Mrs. Winterbottom’s short haircut seems like it’s a permanent change, just as Mrs. Winterbottom’s time away seems to have permanently bolstered her confidence and sense of self. In this way, hairstyles in the novel are tied to characters’ identities, and their satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with who they are.

Furthermore, the reader eventually learns that Sal associates nature with Momma (who recently died) because Momma also loved and deeply respected nature. With this in mind, it’s implied Sal doesn’t just miss specific features of the farm like the swimming hole and her favorite animals. She also misses the farm in a more general sense, because being in a place that she and her mother both loved comforted her and helped her feel connected to Momma. In this way, the novel begins to suggest that the natural world can be a source of healing and connection—and that without close proximity to nature, Sal will struggle even more with the move and with Momma’s absence.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ From what I could gather, Mr. Winterbottom worked in an office, creating road maps. Mrs. Winterbottom baked and cleaned and did laundry and grocery shopping. I had a funny feeling that Mrs. Winterbottom did not actually like all this baking and cleaning and laundry and shopping, and I’m not quite sure why I had that feeling because if you just listened to the words she said, it sounded as if she was Mrs. Supreme Housewife.

Related Characters: Salamanca “Sal” Tree Hiddle (speaker), Mrs. Winterbottom, Mr. Winterbottom, Phoebe Winterbottom, Momma/Chanhassen “Sugar” Hiddle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Sal is having dinner with her new friend Phoebe Winterbottom’s family for the first time. As Sal observes Mr. and Mrs. Winterbottom, she starts to suspect that Mrs. Winterbottom isn’t content with her role as “Mrs. Supreme Housewife,” even if she makes a show of being happy to the rest of her family.

Though Sal can’t identify why she suspects Mrs. Winterbottom is unhappy, the novel implies that Sal is able to perceive this because she’s an outsider to the family. She has only just met Mrs. Winterbottom, and unlike the other Winterbottoms, she hasn’t come to expect Mrs. Winterbottom to cook, clean, and do laundry for her. All of this is unfamiliar to Sal—and sometimes, the novel implies, it’s easier for outsiders with no past history with a person to be able to see the truth.

Sal’s ability to see Mrs. Winterbottom’s unhappiness may





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *Walk Two Moons* published in 2019.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ Tiny, squirt trees. Little birdhouses in a row—and one of those birdhouses was ours. No swimming hole, no barn, no cows, no chickens, no pigs. Instead, a little white house with a miniature patch of green grass in front of it. It wasn’t enough grass to keep a cow alive for five minutes.

Related Characters: Salamanca “Sal” Tree Hiddle (speaker), Dad, Momma/Chanhassen “Sugar” Hiddle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Sal and Dad have just moved from their farm in Bybanks, Kentucky to their new house in Euclid, Ohio. Euclid is a suburb, unlike rural Bybanks—and Sal finds this contrast is difficult to cope with because she loves nature and relies on it as a frame of reference for making sense of the world around her. This is why she compares Euclid’s identical houses to “birdhouses” and describes the lawns as not having “enough grass to keep a cow alive.” Early on, then, the novel establishes Sal as someone with a deep attachment to the natural world—so, Euclid’s lack of wildlife and open space makes the move particularly hard for her.


also stem from the fact that in her own life, she saw Momma become increasingly unhappy in her role as a wife and mother. Sal isn't emotionally ready to make that connection yet, but she has seen this happen before.

☝ Just then, she came in from the back porch. My father put his arms around her and they smooched and it was all tremendously romantic, and I started to turn away, but my mother caught my arm. She pulled me to her and said to me—though it was meant for my father, I think—“See, I'm *almost* as good as your father!” She said it in a shy way, laughing a little. I felt betrayed, but I didn't know why.

It is surprising all the things you remember just by eating a blackberry pie.

Related Characters: Salamanca “Sal” Tree Hiddle (speaker), Momma/Chanhassen “Sugar” Hiddle, Dad, Mrs. Winterbottom

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

The blackberry pie that Mrs. Winterbottom makes for dessert makes Sal remember this interaction between Momma and Dad, when Momma picked dishes of blackberries (one of her favorite fruits) for both Dad and Sal. Because of this memory, Sal associates blackberries with Momma, and it's impossible for her to encounter the fruit without remembering something about Momma.

Sal's memory also hints at tension in Momma and Dad's marriage, as Momma commented that she was “*almost* as good as” Dad. Sal has already explained that Momma never felt she was as generous or kind as Dad, and that this was a major source of upset for her and made her feel inferior. So instead of framing the blackberries as a gift given freely, Momma framed the gesture as something she did to prove that she could compete with Dad—that she could come close to being as good, kind, and generous as him.

This is perhaps what made Sal feel “betrayed” in this moment. Momma's comment was difficult for Sal to accept because, given how she speaks about her love for Momma throughout the novel, Sal didn't see Momma as any lesser than Dad. It didn't matter to her that Momma wasn't quite as skilled at choosing perfect gifts for people, because in her mind, Momma was perfect anyway. But though this is the

truth as Sal sees it, the fact remains that Momma felt somewhat inadequate in her marriage—and Sal wasn't necessarily aware of this fact. So, although Sal describes life as perfect before Momma left, there are also clues like this that for Momma and Dad, life wasn't perfect. More broadly, this begins to suggest that there are always multiple ways of perceiving a situation.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ One day, about two weeks after she had left, I was standing against the fence watching a newborn calf wobble on its thin legs. It tripped and wobbled and swung its big head in my direction and gave me a sweet, loving look. “Oh!” I thought. “I am happy at this moment in time.” I was surprised that I knew this all by myself, without my mother there. And that night in bed, I did not cry. I said to myself, “Salamanca Tree Hiddle, you can be happy without her.” It seemed a mean thought and I was sorry for it, but it *felt* true.

Related Characters: Salamanca “Sal” Tree Hiddle (speaker), Momma/Chanhassen “Sugar” Hiddle

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In a flashback, Sal explains that for the first few weeks after Momma left, she wasn't sure of what emotions she felt because she'd always looked to Momma to know what to feel. But two weeks after Momma left, as Sal watched a newborn calf stand on its own, she realized that she felt happy—meaning that she could control and identify her own emotions without Momma's help.

The fact that this is a new skill for Sal speaks to how connected she was with her mother before Momma left: Sal and Momma were so close that Sal essentially saw them as the same person. She implies that she didn't have her own emotions before and never had to identify what she did or didn't like—she simply followed Momma's lead. But in this moment, just as the baby calf is literally learning to stand, Sal was figuratively learning to stand on her own two feet and face the world without her mother to guide her. This is one of many instances in the novel when Sal finds a sense of comfort and understanding in the natural world, suggesting that animals and nature have lessons to offer and can serve as a frame of reference for understanding human problems. With this epiphany, Sal began to come of age—though this process wasn't entirely comfortable for her. It was “mean,” in

her opinion, to feel happiness without Momma. Later in the novel, Sal suggests that she was going to have to take control of her own emotions at some point anyway—it's normal for kids to grow apart from their parents, and it's essential that they learn how to manage their own emotions, as they won't always have their parents to care for them. Losing Momma is traumatizing for Sal, but having to figure out who she is without Momma around is something that all kids have to go through.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝ Ben touched Phoebe's arm. She flinched. "Ha," he said. "Gotcha. You're jumpy, too, Free Bee."

And that, too, bothered me. I had already noticed how tense Phoebe's whole family seemed, how tidy, how respectable, how thumpingly stiff. Was I becoming like that? Why were they like that? A couple times I had seen Phoebe's mother try to touch Phoebe or Prudence or Mr. Winterbottom, but they all drew back from her. It was as if they had outgrown her.

Had I been drawing away from my own mother? Did she have empty spaces left over? Was that why she left?

Related Characters: Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle (speaker), Ben Finney, Phoebe Winterbottom, Mrs. Winterbottom, Mr. Winterbottom, Prudence Winterbottom, Momma/Chanhassen "Sugar" Hiddle

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Ben has observed out loud that Sal flinches whenever someone touches her, something that Sal finds disturbing. This is, in part, because while Sal likes her friend Phoebe Winterbottom, she doesn't want to be "stiff" like the Winterbottoms. The Winterbottoms are, to Sal, the exact opposite of the Hiddles (Sal's own family). Where the Winterbottoms are "respectable" and "tidy," the Hiddles are fun-loving and mischievous. Sal, much like Momma, wants to be a real Hiddle—lighthearted, relaxed, and affectionate with people she loves.

Seeing the alternative in the Winterbottoms, Sal immediately turns inward to figure out if she's becoming like them. But at this point, all Sal can notice is that Phoebe and Prudence don't seem to accept their mother's affection at all. Seeing this, it makes Sal wonder if she drew away from her own mother before Momma left. Notably, Phoebe acts entitled and takes her mother for granted in a way that Sal

hasn't implied she did with Momma. Nevertheless, Sal seems to suspect that it was her fault Momma left. She can't separate Momma from her role as a wife and mother, so in Sal's mind, she must have caused Momma's departure to happen. In reality, it seems as though Momma had her own private reasons for leaving that likely had nothing to do with Sal. In this sense, while Sal is able to look at her relationship with Momma from a new perspective after seeing how the Winterbottoms engage with each other, she's also not able to see the complete picture of who Momma was or why she left.


Chapter 14 Quotes

☝ "She looked as if she'd been crying. Maybe something is wrong. Maybe something is bothering her."

"Don't you think she would say so then?"

"Maybe she's afraid to," I said. I wondered why it was so easy for me to see that Phoebe's mother was worried and miserable, but Phoebe couldn't see it—or if she could, she was ignoring it. Maybe she didn't *want* to notice. Maybe it was too frightening a thing. I wondered if this was how it had been with my mother. Were there things I didn't notice?

Related Characters: Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle, Phoebe Winterbottom (speaker), Momma/Chanhassen "Sugar" Hiddle, Mrs. Winterbottom

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 81-82

Explanation and Analysis

When Sal and Phoebe get to the Winterbottom house one day after school, Sal can tell that Mrs. Winterbottom is upset—but Phoebe either can't or won't see this.

At first, this is just confusing for Sal. It's obvious to her that Mrs. Winterbottom is in distress, so in her mind, this should be obvious to Phoebe as well. But when Phoebe remains convinced that her mother is fine, Sal is forced to see the situation from a different perspective. When Sal wonders if Phoebe is ignoring her mother's distress, perhaps on purpose because she's afraid, she starts to get at the idea that it can be distressing to see one's parent upset. Phoebe relies on her mother a great deal and expects Mrs. Winterbottom to always be there for her—so, acknowledging that her mother is unhappy would force Phoebe to acknowledge that Mrs. Winterbottom isn't the content, reliable housewife Phoebe thought she was. And not being able to rely on her mother would mean that

Phoebe would have to deal with things all on her own—a frightening prospect for a 13-year-old who's still immature in many ways.

But even more meaningful is how seeing Phoebe act this way forces Sal to consider if she might have acted the same way with Momma. Sal has already left several clues suggesting that Momma wasn't as happy with being a wife and mother as Sal believed she was; she's mentioned interactions that imply that Momma felt inadequate and unfulfilled. But in Sal's mind, everything was perfect. Now, seeing Phoebe blatantly ignore her mother, Sal has to consider whether she similarly ignored Momma's sadness, out of fear of what she'd find if she were willing to acknowledge it.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ My long hair floated all around me. My mother's hair had been long and black, like mine, but a week before she left, she cut it. My father said to me, "Don't cut yours, Sal. Please don't cut yours."

My mother said, "I knew you wouldn't like it if I cut mine."



My father said, "I didn't say anything about yours."


"But I know what you're thinking," she said.

"I loved your hair, Sugar," he said.

I saved her hair. I swept it up from the kitchen floor and wrapped it in a plastic bag and hid it beneath the floorboards of my room. It was still there, along with the postcards she sent.

Related Characters: Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle, Momma/Chanhassen "Sugar" Hiddle, Dad (speaker), Gram, Gramps

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Sal is sitting in the Missouri River with Gram and Gramps, remembering when Momma cut her hair just before she left Sal and Dad. Both Dad and Sal loved Momma's long hair, and in this way, it symbolized her role as a wife and mother. By cutting it off, Momma attempted to assert herself as her own person and not just Sal's mother and Dad's wife—something that neither Sal nor Dad took kindly to. Moreover, Sal and Momma had the same long, black hair—it was a feature that connected the two of them. So, when Dad asked Sal not to cut her hair, he was probably thinking

of Sal and her hair as a connection to Momma as well—and to a time when Momma was happy in her identity as a wife and mother.

Sal decided to save Momma's hair as a keepsake, and in doing so, she essentially clung onto her idealized perception of Momma rather than accepting the full truth of who Momma was. This also reveals why Sal didn't want to leave the farm when Dad insisted they move to Euclid: Sal left her last remaining piece of Momma under the floorboards in Bybanks, and without it, Sal felt lost and unmoored.


Chapter 16 Quotes

☝ The morning after my father learned that my mother was not coming back, he left for Lewiston, Idaho. Gram and Gramps came to stay with me. I had pleaded to go along, but my father said he didn't think I should have to go through that. That day I climbed up into the maple and watched the singing tree, waiting for it to sing. I stayed there all day and on into the early evening. It did not sing.

At dusk, Gramps placed three sleeping bags at the foot of the tree, and he, Gram, and I slept there all night. The tree did not sing.

Related Characters: Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle (speaker), Dad, Momma/Chanhassen "Sugar" Hiddle, Gram, Gramps

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

When Sal, Gram, and Gramps hear a "singing tree" in the parking lot outside a hospital, Sal explains to the reader what the singing tree is and remembers an instance when the singing tree in Bybanks wouldn't sing.

The singing tree was a tree by the barn on the Hiddles' farm. Sal regularly watched it to try to identify the bird that sat and sang in it—but she never could find it, so it seemed as though the tree itself was singing. The tree is, in Sal's mind, representative of nature's beauty and even magic—something that both Sal and Momma deeply appreciated. Because of this, Sal associates the singing tree with Momma. So, when the tree didn't sing in this moment (which readers later learn happens right after Sal and Dad learn that Momma died in a bus accident), it represents Sal's fear that without Momma, she can't connect to the natural world or feel happy the way she used to. Nature might be

grieving for Momma after her death—or, as Sal seems to take it, nature’s magic simply isn’t available to Sal anymore without Momma around.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☞☞ What I started doing was remembering the day before my mother left. I did not know it was to be her last day home. Several times that day, my mother asked me if I wanted to walk up in the fields with her. It was drizzling outside, and I was cleaning my desk, and I just did not feel like going. “Maybe later,” I kept saying. When she asked me for about the tenth time, I said, “No! I don’t want to go. Why do you keep asking me?” I don’t know why I did that. I didn’t mean anything by it, but that was one of the last memories she had of me, and I wished I could take it back.

Related Characters: Salamanca “Sal” Tree Hiddle (speaker), Momma/Chanhassen “Sugar” Hiddle, Phoebe Winterbottom, Prudence Winterbottom, Mrs. Winterbottom

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

After Sal witnesses Phoebe lash out at her mother, she thinks about how she treated her own mother the day before Momma left Sal and Dad. At this point, Sal is still so mired in grief that everything around her somehow reminds her of Momma. Were Sal at a different point in her grieving process, she might be able to look at Phoebe’s attitude in a more objective way, seeing it as normal teenage angst. But instead, Sal can’t help but look at this and remember her own sharp words to Momma.

Although lashing out at parents is typical behavior for many teenagers, Sal suggests that there are consequences to treating one’s parents poorly—it’s always possible that tragedy could strike, and that the last thing a person ever says to their parent could be something mean. Momma left for Idaho the day after Sal refused to walk with her, and she died about a week later when her bus crashed in Lewiston. Sal had no way of knowing this would happen, and so she made no effort to modify her behavior to please Momma or give her a good, final memory of her daughter. So, as Sal processes her grief for Momma, she also has to process this guilt.



Noting that this happened the day before Momma left creates tension in Sal’s story about Phoebe and Mrs.


Winterbottom. It sets the stage for Mrs. Winterbottom to disappear, just like Momma—which Mrs. Winterbottom does the day after this. In this way, the novel begins to suggest that people’s experiences are connected and interwoven in mysterious ways, and that witnessing and telling Phoebe and Mrs. Winterbottom’s story may help Sal make sense of her own.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☞☞ “But for now,” he said, “we have to leave because your mother is haunting me day and night. She’s in the fields, the air, the barn, the walls, the trees.”

Related Characters: Dad (speaker), Salamanca “Sal” Tree Hiddle, Momma/Chanhassen “Sugar” Hiddle

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 104-05

Explanation and Analysis



In a flashback, Sal explains what happened in the weeks before she and Dad moved to Euclid, and she shares Dad’s reason for leaving.

Dad’s reason—that Momma is “haunting” the farm—supports Sal’s belief that Momma is spiritually and emotionally connected to the natural world and, specifically, to the farm in Bybanks. Sal was, at this point, refusing to leave because she believed that Momma would return to the farm. It was unthinkable to her that Momma wouldn’t come back to her beloved trees, chickens, and blackberries—and this is because Sal recognizes how connected Momma is to the natural world.

While Dad didn’t share Sal’s belief that Momma will return, he nevertheless echoed that Momma was connected to the farm. This made it hard for him to go about his day-to-day life, as everywhere he went, he had to confront the fact that his wife left and died in a tragic accident. For both Dad and Sal, Momma is intimately connected to the natural world—and at this point, so soon after her death, this reminder was upsetting rather than comforting for them.

●● On that long day that my father and I left the farm behind and drove to Euclid, I wished that my father was not such a good man, so there would be someone to blame for my mother's leaving. I didn't want to blame her. She was my mother, and she was part of me.

Related Characters: Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle (speaker), Dad, Momma/Chanhassen "Sugar" Hiddle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

Sal is explaining what happened in the days before she and Dad moved to Euclid. Here, Sal struggles to process the fact that she has no idea why Momma left. But Sal can't simply accept that she doesn't know why Momma left; rather, Sal is casting about for someone to blame, and some reason why the person she loved the most chose to leave her.

Though Sal agrees with Momma that Dad is a good, kind, and generous man, this is frustrating rather than comforting right now, because Dad's goodness stands in the way of Sal's ability to blame him for Momma's departure. And Sal also doesn't want to blame Momma, since this would mean accepting that Momma was a flawed person and was perhaps unhappy in her role as a wife and mother.


When Sal notes that Momma "was part of [her]," it speaks to how connected the two of them were. For Sal, this close connection means Momma's departure is even harder to fathom, as it might mean she has to reconsider whether or not her relationship with Momma was as positive and close as Sal thought it was. Put simply, Sal is looking for someone to blame here—and she's not coming up with anyone, which forces her to confront her grief in a way that she isn't necessarily ready for.

Chapter 20 Quotes

●● In my mini journal, I confessed that I had since kissed all different kinds of trees, and each family of trees—oaks, maples, elms, birches—had a special flavor all its own. Mixed which each tree's taste was the slight taste of blackberries, and why this was so, I could not explain.

Related Characters: Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle (speaker), Momma/Chanhassen "Sugar" Hiddle, Mr. Birkway

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 113-14

Explanation and Analysis

In a "mini journal" assignment for Mr. Birkway's English class, Sal writes about Momma and recounts the story of Momma's "blackberry kiss." In the story, Momma ate blackberries and then kissed a nearby tree; later, Sal thought she saw a blackberry stain on the tree.

Sal's description of kissing trees herself shows how much she idolized Momma and wanted to be like her. Momma's love for nature was infectious, and seeing Momma love trees and other natural elements made Sal want to love those things just as much. This has the desired effect—Sal truly does love the natural world, and the novel implies many times that Sal learned to love nature in the way she does because Momma taught her to.

But in addition, Momma's lessons also show Sal that through the natural world, she can connect with Momma. Sal openly admitted earlier in her journal entry that she could've made up the blackberry stain Momma left on the tree; it's impossible to know if it was there or not. But seeing it—and now, tasting blackberries on every tree—shows how connected Sal is to her mother. No matter how long Momma has been gone, Sal will always be able to connect with Momma by kissing trees and tasting those blackberries. And while Sal isn't ready to consider it at this point, this does suggest that Sal can continue to connect with Momma through nature, and through this, heal from her grief.

●● "He probably never took English," Phoebe said.

To me that Y looked like the newly born horse standing up on his thin legs.

The poem was about a newly born horse who doesn't know anything but feels everything. He lives in a "smoothbeautifully folded" world. I liked that. I was not sure what it was, but I liked it. Everything sounded soft and safe.

Related Characters: Phoebe Winterbottom, Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle (speaker), Mr. Birkway

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

Sal and Phoebe are in English class; Mr. Birkway has introduced a poem by e. e. cummings titled “the little horse is newLY.” The poet e. e. cummings is known for not capitalizing his own name, and for using capital letters the way he does in this poem, where the final letter of a word is capitalized instead of the first word of the sentence (or title). To Phoebe, this means that e. e. cummings isn’t educated and doesn’t understand how to properly use English. In her mind, there’s a specific way that one should write—and people should follow the rules, which means capitalizing the first word of a sentence and no more.

But Sal, on the other hand, has a different interpretation of the poem. Because she enjoyed a rural upbringing—and has, perhaps, seen a “newly born horse standing up on his thin legs”—she sees that cummings didn’t make a mistake when he capitalized the Y in “newLY.” Rather, he wrote his poem so that readers wouldn’t just read about this young horse but would also be able to see the horse in the text itself.

Sal also finds the poem meaningful because it articulates for her that she doesn’t have to know everything about something for that thing to feel right. “Smoothbeautifully folded” might not make a lot of sense as a phrase, if one looks at just the three words cummings is using to describe the horse’s world. But writing “smoothbeautifully” as one word creates a sense of softness and fluidity, and referring to the world as “folded” makes it seem safe and small, not big and unwieldy. Sal doesn’t have to know exactly what cummings meant—or assign a formal definition to any of the phrases used in the poem—to know that she likes it, and that it makes her feel safe and like everything might be okay. Later, Sal uses this same idea of being able to judge how things feel to come to terms with Momma’s death in Lewiston.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝☝ And just like Phoebe, who had waved her mother’s sweater in front of her father, I had brought a chicken in from the coop: Would Mom leave her favorite chicken?” I demanded. “She loves this chicken.”

What I really meant was, “How can she not come back to *me*? She loves me.”

Related Characters: Salamanca “Sal” Tree Hiddle (speaker), Momma/Chanhassen “Sugar” Hiddle, Dad, Mrs. Winterbottom, Phoebe Winterbottom

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Winterbottom disappeared yesterday, and Sal realizes that she’s watching Phoebe and the Winterbottoms go through the same anxious, unsure motions that she and Dad went through right after Momma left.

Both Sal and Phoebe struggle to accept that both of their mothers left for no discernable reason—or, perhaps, because they were simply unhappy. This is because, as children, Sal and Phoebe believe that they are the centers of their mothers’ universes—so, in their minds, their mothers love them far too much to just up and leave. This not only reflects the girls’ closeness to their mothers, but also their immaturity. Both Sal and Phoebe are at a point in their development where they’re just starting to pull away from their parents. But they still take comfort in the knowledge that their parents, and their mothers in particular, will still be there, ready to comfort them and attend to their needs. This is something that the novel suggests is normal for kids to feel—and starting to pull away from one’s parent is also normal.

But having one’s mother ripped away, Sal and Phoebe discover, is still traumatic. Both girls are so upset and unmoored without their mothers that they can barely function. In light of this, bringing Mrs. Winterbottom’s sweater and Momma’s favorite chicken to their fathers is a way for the girls to express their fear, their youth, and their disbelief as they cope with their mothers’ respective absences.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝☝ “So you didn’t leave Gramps just because of the cussing?”
“Salamanca, I don’t even remember why I did that. Sometimes you know in your heart you love someone, but you have to go away before your head can figure it out.”

Related Characters: Salamanca “Sal” Tree Hiddle, Gram (speaker), Gramps, Momma/Chanhassen “Sugar” Hiddle, Dad

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

When Gramps curses during the drive to Lewiston, Sal recalls Gram telling her about a time when she left Gramps for three days, ostensibly because Gramps wouldn’t stop cursing. This is somewhat confusing for Sal. Sal wants there



to be a concrete reason why Gram left Gramps, but there doesn't seem to have been one. She didn't appreciate the cursing, but she suggests here that she might have left for that reason, for something more serious than that, or for no reason at all. What mattered was that she felt like she needed to get away from Gramps for a few days so she could reaffirm her love for him and return, happy to continue in their marriage.

Sal doesn't make the connection at this point, but the novel implies at various points that Momma left Sal and Dad for much the same reason. She felt stifled in her marriage and unhappy in her role as a wife and mother. And though Momma never stopped loving Dad and Sal, Dad continually insists that Momma intended to return—presumably, after she figured out that she still loved her husband and daughter. So, this passage offers the reader some perspective, since as outsiders to both Sal and her grandparents' lives, they have the information to make this connection. Sal, though, doesn't come to this conclusion until much later. And though Gram's words no doubt stick in the back of her mind, they don't fully convince her that Momma could love her and still decide to leave.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☝☝ All through dinner, I kept thinking of Bybanks, and what it was like when we went to my grandparents' house for dinner. There were always tons of people—relatives and neighbors—and lots of confusion. It was a friendly sort of confusion, and it was like that at the Finneys' [...] Maybe this is what my mother had wanted, I thought. A house full of children and confusion.

Related Characters: Salamanca “Sal” Tree Hiddle (speaker), Momma/Chanhassen “Sugar” Hiddle, Mrs. Finney, Mr. Finney, Mary Lou Finney, Ben Finney, Phoebe Winterbottom

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

As Sal and Phoebe have dinner with the Finneys, Sal reflects on how much she enjoys the noisy, chaotic meal with Mary Lou's parents, four siblings, and cousin Ben.

Sal implies that when she had dinner with Gram and Gramps as a child, it was normal to her that their house was, like the Finneys', full of people, loud, and happy. It was neutral in her mind, and she never thought anything of it.

But now that Sal is experiencing the same dynamic at the Finneys' house, she looks back on Gram and Gramps's dinners in a new light. She recognizes that being part of a large family can feel warm and exciting—and for some people, this type of life is desirable.

In turn, this helps Sal think more critically about Momma, and what Momma might have wanted. Momma and Dad used to talk about filling their home up with children, an idea that Sal resented after being an only child for so long. But after seeing the Finneys' home and realizing how much she enjoys the noise and confusion, Sal starts to feel as though Momma maybe had the right idea. With this, Sal starts to develop empathy for Momma and for Dad, and to see that Momma wasn't trying to hurt Sal by having another baby or by leaving.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝☝ It went on and on like that. I hated her that day. I didn't care how upset she was about her mother, I really hated her, and I wanted her to leave. I wondered if this was how my father felt when I threw all those temper tantrums. Maybe he hated me for a while.

Related Characters: Salamanca “Sal” Tree Hiddle (speaker), Phoebe Winterbottom, Mrs. Winterbottom, Dad, Momma/Chanhassen “Sugar” Hiddle

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Sal has invited Phoebe to spend the weekend with her, but this becomes trying for Sal—Phoebe is acting out obnoxiously to deal with her fear after Mrs. Winterbottom leaves without warning.

Phoebe's behavior broadly illustrates that people grieve and deal with their fear in ways that don't always make sense or aren't easy for other people to deal with. Sal can know intellectually that Phoebe is grieving and processing her mother's absence, but that doesn't make her behavior any easier for Sal to witness.

As Sal processes her own unkind thoughts toward Phoebe, it causes her to wonder how Dad might have felt when Sal was throwing her tantrums a year ago. With this, Sal starts to develop more empathy for Dad and for the difficult situation he found himself in, as the single father to a grieving teenage daughter. Sal knows full well that she didn't make things easy for him, and perhaps even made things

worse for him. As she makes these connections, Sal starts to heal her relationship with Dad and see that he wasn't trying to hurt her as he chose to move to Euclid and told her that Momma wasn't coming home. Rather, he was doing the best for her that he could—just as Sal is doing as much as she can for Phoebe right now.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☛ I knew Phoebe was convinced that her mother was kidnapped because it was impossible for Phoebe to imagine that her mother could leave for any other reason. I wanted to call Phoebe and say that maybe her mother had gone looking for something, maybe her mother was unhappy, maybe there was nothing Phoebe could do about it.

When I told this part to Gram and Gramps, Gramps said, "You mean it had nothing to do with Peeby?" They looked at each other. They didn't say anything, but there was something in that look that suggested I had just said something important. For the first time, it occurred to me that maybe my mother's leaving had nothing whatsoever to do with me. It was separate and apart. We couldn't own our mothers.

Related Characters: Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle, Gramps (speaker), Gram, Phoebe Winterbottom, Mrs. Winterbottom, Momma/Chanhassen "Sugar" Hiddle, The Lunatic/Mike Bickle, Mrs. Margaret Cadaver

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

As Phoebe continues to look for evidence that Mrs. Winterbottom was kidnapped—maybe the lunatic or by Mrs. Cadaver—Sal sees what Phoebe is doing for what it is: trying to avoid the uncomfortable fact that Mrs. Winterbottom left for reasons entirely unrelated to Phoebe.

It's easy for Sal to see that Mrs. Winterbottom's departure probably didn't have anything to do with Phoebe because she's an outsider. This allowed her to see the Winterbottoms' family more objectively and notice that Mrs. Winterbottom wasn't particularly happy as a housewife. Phoebe was blind to her mother's unhappiness, however, so there's no reason for her mother leaving that would make sense to her. Phoebe also believes that she's the center of her mother's world, which would mean that her mother wouldn't have any reason to leave—Mrs. Winterbottom, in Phoebe's mind, left the most important

thing to her. But accepting all of this would also mean that there's nothing Phoebe can do to bring her mother back—something that she isn't willing to accept. Phoebe is getting some satisfaction out of trying to track her mother down, as it means she doesn't have to acknowledge her grief or her fear. Sal sees all of this, and it helps her empathize with Phoebe.

As Sal tells this part of the story to Gram and Gramps, though, she comes to another realization: perhaps what's going on with Phoebe and Mrs. Winterbottom holds true for Momma, too. Up until this point, Sal has tried to blame Momma's departure on Dad, Momma, and even herself. But in this moment, Sal realizes that it probably wasn't her fault—like Phoebe, there was probably nothing Sal did, or could do, to make Momma leave or return. And with this realization, Sal starts to perceive in a more mature way, as she's able to see people's complexity and flaws. Saying that "we couldn't own our mothers" is an admission that she's not the center of Momma's universe, and that Momma isn't bound to stay with Sal forever.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☛ Instead, I lay there thinking of the poem about the traveler, and I could see the tide rising and falling, and those horrid white hands snatching the traveler. How could it be normal, that traveler dying? And how could such a thing be normal *and* terrible both at the same time?

Related Characters: Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle (speaker), Momma/Chanhassen "Sugar" Hiddle, Mr. Birkway, The Lunatic/Mike Bickle

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

In English class earlier, Mr. Birkway read a Longfellow poem to the class about the ocean snatching a traveler off the beach. In Sal's read, the traveler drowns in the ocean, which disturbs her. The reader don't yet know that Momma died, but with this in mind, it's clear that Sal is trying to make sense of Momma's death here. Momma didn't drown in the ocean—rather, she was killed in a bus accident—but the imagery of "horrid white hands snatching" at people still sticks in Sal's mind. This personifies death—gives it human characteristics—and makes it somewhat more frightening for Sal to think about. The language in the poem arguably gives the sense that death is like the lunatic or one of the axe murderers that Phoebe believes are out to get her, in



that death is a person who hunts people.

Interpreting the poem in this way makes it seem like death is something terrible, sudden, and frightening that happens to people—which, in some ways, is true. But Sal also has to consider that since every living thing will inevitably die, death is also normal. It's normal for people to die—even if it's not necessarily normal for people to die in bus accidents as a relatively young person, as Momma did. As Sal thinks this through, she starts to realize that she doesn't have to decide that death is one thing or the other. Death can be both—Momma's death can be both natural and traumatic, especially since Momma died unexpectedly before she reached old age.

Chapter 33 Quotes

☝☝ I started wondering if the birds of sadness had built their nest in Mrs. Cadaver's hair afterward, and if so, how she got rid of them. Her husband dying and her mother being blinded were events that *would* matter in the course of a lifetime. I saw everyone else going on with their own agendas while Mrs. Cadaver was frantically trying to keep her husband and her mother alive. Did she regret anything? Did she know the worth of water before the well was dry?

Related Characters: Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle (speaker), Mr. Cadaver, Mrs. Partridge, Phoebe Winterbottom, Mrs. Margaret Cadaver

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

Sal learned earlier in the day that Mr. Cadaver and Mrs. Partridge were in a car accident that killed Mr. Cadaver and blinded Mrs. Partridge. Mrs. Cadaver, a nurse, was working in the ER when her husband and mother came in on stretchers.

Sal is "walking two moons" in Mrs. Cadaver's shoes here, and she's trying to develop empathy and understanding for the woman. Up until this point, Sal has treated Mrs. Cadaver as an evil witch who's trying to steal Dad away from Sal and from Momma's memory. But with this history, Mrs. Cadaver becomes more human—and more sympathetic—in Sal's eyes. Now, Sal understands that Mrs. Cadaver probably went through much the same grieving process for her husband as Sal is still going through for Momma. She also suspects that Mrs. Cadaver somehow figured out how to get past her grief—and, because of this, might be able to

teach Sal some lessons on how to do the same.

As Sal thinks this through, she references the lessons from the mysterious notes that she and Phoebe have found on Phoebe's porch. These notes have taught Sal to recognize that people can choose whether to let "birds of sadness" settle in or to react to tragedy in a different way, to consider what really matters in life, to recognize that people are primarily concerned with themselves, and to not take things for granted. Applying all of these ideas to Mrs. Cadaver's situation shows that Sal, unlike Phoebe, is internalizing the lessons they've given her—the notes are helping her look at things from a new perspective.

Chapter 37 Quotes


☝☝ If there *had* been a vase, would have squashed it, because our heads moved completely together and our lips landed in the right place, which was on the other person's lips. It was a real kiss, and it did not taste like chicken.

And then our heads moved slowly backward and we stared out across the lawn, and I felt like the newly born horse who knows nothing but feels everything.

Ben touched his lips. "Did it taste a little like blackberries to you?" He said.

Related Characters: Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle, Ben Finney (speaker), Ben's Mother, Momma/Chanhassen "Sugar" Hiddle, Mr. Birkway

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

Sal and Ben share their first kiss while they're visiting Ben's mother at the hospital. This has been a long time coming—Sal and Ben have been trying to kiss each other for several weeks, but their lips kept missing their target. The fact that they're finally successful in this moment suggests that they're finally on the same page. Sharing their first kiss also signals a leap in maturity—as they experiment with a relationship, Sal and Ben start to get an idea of what romance and a physical relationship might be like as adults.

Sal draws on several other sources to describe the kiss, which shows her pulling in other perspectives as she makes sense of this new experience. Noting that the kiss doesn't taste like chicken is a nod to one of her classmates' summer journal entries, while saying she feels like the "newly born

horse who knows nothing but feels everything” is in reference to an e. e. cummings poem that Mr. Birkway read to Sal’s English class a few weeks ago. As Sal engages with more stories, poems, and other people’s experiences, it’s easier for her to describe her own experiences.


Ben has heard the story of Momma’s blackberry kiss, so his question about whether the kiss tasted like blackberries is an obvious nod to Momma. But in this moment, the symbolism of blackberries starts to shift a bit. While Sal associates blackberries with Momma, childhood, and the love they had for each other, she and Ben also begin to associate blackberries with their kiss and their relationship in general. In this way, Sal is discovering that she can hold onto the things that remind her of Momma but also begin to move on from her grief by forming new relationships and finding new ways to contextualize old memories.

Chapter 38 Quotes

☝☝ “They sat there on the bench having a gay old time. If I could toss rocks like you can toss rocks, I’d have plonked them both in the back of the head. Did you notice her hair? She’s cut it. It’s short. And do you know what else she did? In the middle of talking, she leaned over and spit on the grass. Spit! It was disgusting. And the lunatic, do you know what he did when she spit? He *laughed*. Then he leaned over and *he* spit.”

Related Characters: Phoebe Winterbottom (speaker), Mrs. Winterbottom, The Lunatic/Mike Bickle, Salamanca “Sal” Tree Hiddle

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

Phoebe and Sal are in a neighboring town on a search for the lunatic—and they discover Mrs. Winterbottom kissing the lunatic (Mike Bickle) on the cheek. After seeing them kiss, Sal ran away.

Phoebe makes her displeasure clear as she tells Sal what happened. It’s significant that she mentions Mrs. Winterbottom cut her hair. Just as with Momma, Mrs. Winterbottom’s hair is associated with her role as a wife and mother, and Phoebe saw her mother’s long hair as an indicator that Mrs. Winterbottom was still dedicated to her role as a housewife. But seeing that her mother cut her hair suggests something entirely different: that Mrs.

Winterbottom is no longer content as a housewife, and that she’s taking charge of her identity.

Then, when Phoebe talks about seeing her mother spit, it shows how much Phoebe has bought into the idea of “respectability” that her parents have promoted. Phoebe has been raised to believe that spitting is disgusting and not something that people like her—that is, upstanding and polite people—do. So, seeing Mrs. Winterbottom spit forces Phoebe to reconsider who her mother is, and if Mrs. Winterbottom still embodies this ideal.

Chapter 41 Quotes

☝☝ “It’s not terrible,” my mother said. “It’s normal. She’s weaning them from her.”

“Does she have to do that? Why can’t they stay with her?”

“It isn’t good for her or for them. They have to become independent. What if something happened to Moody Blue? They wouldn’t know how to survive without her.”

While I prayed for Gram outside the hospital, I wondered if my mother’s trip to Idaho was like Moody Blue’s behavior. Maybe part of it was for my mother and part of it was for me.

Related Characters: Momma/Chanhassen “Sugar” Hiddle, Salamanca “Sal” Tree Hiddle (speaker), Gram

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

As Sal sits outside the hospital watching a man’s dog for him, she remembers how Moody Blue weaned her puppies years ago. Sal was horrified when, as the puppies got older, Moody Blue started snapping at them and pushing them away. But as Momma explained, this was a good thing—Moody Blue was preparing her puppies to be independent and to live without her.

Interestingly, Momma framed this as something that’s good both for the puppies and for Moody Blue. It’s unhealthy, Momma implied, for mothers to be too invested in their children and not let them grow up. She also implied that it’s unhealthy for children to rely so heavily on their mothers that they can’t do anything for themselves. Remembering this story helps Sal realize again that Momma didn’t mean to hurt her by leaving for Idaho. Momma was, at the very least, trying to extricate herself from Sal for Momma’s own sake. And, possibly, Momma was also trying to help Sal by leaving. In many ways, this turned out to be the case, whether it was


Momma's intention or not: Sal has learned how to identify and manage her own emotions without her mother to guide her, and she's far more independent than she used to be. This doesn't change the fact that Momma's death was a tragedy, but it does help Sal come to terms with Momma's choice to leave in the first place.

Chapter 42 Quotes

☛ In the midst of the still morning, with only the sound of the river gurgling by, I heard a bird. It was singing a birdsong, a true, sweet birdsong. I looked all around and then up into the willow that leaned toward the river. The birdsong came from the top of the willow and I did not want to look too closely, because I wanted it to be the tree that was singing.

Related Characters: Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle (speaker), Momma/Chanhassen "Sugar" Hiddle

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

As Sal sits next to Momma's grave in Lewiston, she hears what's implied to be another "singing tree" (which she associates with Momma) in the graveyard. With this, Sal not only learns that Momma is truly dead. She also discovers that Momma's death won't keep her from feeling Momma's presence in nature and connecting with the natural world more broadly. Sal stopped hearing the singing tree in Bybanks sing when she got the news that Momma died, and at that time, it seemed as though Sal wasn't going to be able to connect with the natural world anymore. But hearing a singing tree now suggests that this wasn't correct—rather, Sal wasn't able to hear the singing tree until she fully accepted that Momma was dead and began to find closure. Now, Sal can form her own relationship with nature, and she can also find her mother everywhere in the natural world.

However, the aside that Sal doesn't want to look closely and discover the bird singing shows that she's still telling herself stories that might not be true but that nevertheless help her cope. For much of the novel, Sal hasn't done this in healthy or helpful ways, as when she refused to acknowledge that Momma was actually dead. But now, it gives Sal closure to believe that she's hearing the same kind of magical birdsong as she did in Bybanks—and recognizing the beauty and


magic that still exists in the world helps her heal from the trauma of losing her mother.

Chapter 44 Quotes

☛ Lately, I've been wondering if there might be something hidden behind the fireplace, because just as the fireplace was behind the plaster wall and my mother's story was behind Phoebe's, I think there was a third story behind Phoebe's and my mother's, and that was about Gram and Gramps.

Related Characters: Salamanca "Sal" Tree Hiddle (speaker), Momma/Chanhassen "Sugar" Hiddle, Gram, Gramps, Phoebe Winterbottom, Mrs. Winterbottom, Dad

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

As Sal begins to tie up the novel's loose ends, she suggests that she actually told readers a third story in addition to her own and the story of Phoebe and Mrs. Winterbottom. As Sal told those stories, both Sal and the reader also learned about Gram and Gramps and their love over the last decades. With this, Sal shows that she values her grandparents' story and is going to look at it the same way she's learned to look at Momma and Phoebe's stories. Gram and Gramps's story isn't just the story of their love—it offers Sal lessons on how to be a good partner, how to decide what matters in a relationship, and how to show someone she cares for them.

As Sal acknowledges this third story, she also implicitly encourages readers to consider what stories might exist behind other stories. She does so by referencing the symbol of the hidden fireplace that Dad found by chipping away at a plaster wall in their farmhouse, which represents the idea that stories tend to be interwoven or nested in one another—a person simply has to chip away at one story to find another. The novel suggests, on the whole, that a story isn't just a static thing; all stories tell multiple stories, as every character has a point of view and their own agenda. But here, Sal also suggests that it's important to take into account who's listening to the story. Just as Gram and Gramps listened to Sal's story about Phoebe and took things from it, readers can also use lessons from Sal's story to better understand their own stories.



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

According to Gramps, Sal is “a country girl at heart.” This is true: Sal has lived most of her life in Bybanks, Kentucky, a small town that sits along the Ohio River. About a year ago, Dad suddenly moved Sal and all their belongings (aside from Sal’s things, such as the chestnut tree, the hayloft, or the swimming hole) 300 miles north to Euclid, Ohio.

When Dad and Sal arrive in Euclid, they stop at a house that Dad says belongs to Margaret. All the houses on the street are close together, each with a tiny bit of grass. Sal wants to know where the barn and the river are, but Dad just sighs and ignores Sal—even when Sal says she has to go back, since she forgot something under the floorboards. Instead, Dad steers Sal into the house to meet Margaret. But before Sal enters Margaret’s house, she sees a girl’s frightened face in the window next door. This face is Phoebe Winterbottom’s. Phoebe, who has a wild imagination, will become Sal’s friend.

Sal explains that not long ago, she was stuck in the car with her grandparents for six days. On their drive, she told them Phoebe’s story. And as she did so, Sal realized that Phoebe’s story was just like the plaster wall in the Bybanks house. Dad started chipping away the plaster one morning not long after Momma left. It was April, and as Dad waited for Momma to return, he worked on the wall.

Finally, one night, Dad and Sal learned that Momma wasn’t coming home. At 2:00 a.m. that night, Dad brought Sal downstairs to show her that he found a brick **fireplace** hidden behind the plaster. Phoebe’s story reminds Sal of the wall, because Phoebe’s story hides Sal’s story within it.

Given Gramps’s description of Sal as a “country girl,” and Sal noting that she couldn’t bring her chestnut tree or her swimming hole to Euclid with her, it’s clear that Sal values the natural world. Starting the book in this way immediately establishes humans’ connection to nature as a focal point of Sal’s story.



Coming from a more rural locale, Euclid is a shock for Sal; the little bits of grass in the yard seem like the only plant life here. And given how much Sal seems to love nature, it seems in character for her to want to know where the normal facets of farm life are. Sal doesn’t want to be here in Euclid—perhaps simply because of the lack of nature, or perhaps for a reason that’s connected to whatever Sal left behind under the floorboards. And Dad, at this point, seems to not be taking Sal’s emotional distress seriously. It’s not yet clear who Margaret is, but the fact that they stop at her house upon arriving in Euclid implies that Dad’s decision to move here somehow involves her.



Comparing Phoebe’s story to the plaster wall shows that Sal sees the value in looking at things in a new light and uncovering deeper truths, much like Dad was set on uncovering what was behind the wall.



Discovering the previously unknown fireplace shows Sal that stories—or houses—can hold all sorts of secrets. If a person digs into a story, it’s possible to come up with something new, meaningful, or useful.



CHAPTER 2

After Sal and Phoebe's adventure, Gram and Gramps decide to drive from Kentucky to Ohio to get Sal, and from there, drive west to Lewiston, Idaho. The trip is supposed to take a week, and Sal isn't excited for the trip—but she has to take it. Gramps is thrilled to see “the whole ding-dong country,” and Gram is excited to be with her “favorite chickabiddy.” Gramps is also happy that Sal, who's 13, is better with maps than Gram. But this isn't why Sal is going on the trip.

Sal is going on the trip for three reasons. First, Gram and Gramps want to see Momma, who's “resting peacefully” in Lewiston. Second, Gram and Gramps know that Sal also wants to see Momma but that she's afraid. And third, Dad wants to be with Margaret Cadaver—he's already seen Momma on his own. There's also a fourth, less important reason, which is that Dad doesn't trust Gram and Gramps to behave themselves without supervision. This might seem silly, but trouble seems to follow Sal's grandparents, who are Dad's parents. They're good people, but they're very peculiar.

Once Sal and her grandparents' plan is set, Sal suddenly feels like it can't happen fast enough. The wind seems to say “hurry, hurry, hurry” to her. Now that she's decided to go, she knows she has to be there by Momma's birthday. Sal believes that if she can bring Momma home, her best chance is to try on Momma's birthday. Sal doesn't say this out loud, as she knows that Dad, Gramps, and Gram will tell her she's silly.

Finally, the day of the trip arrives. Sal spends the first half hour praying that she won't be in an accident and that they'll arrive by Momma's birthday, which is seven days away. She prays to the trees, since that feels easier than praying to God. Gram interrupts Sal's prayers when they pull onto the Ohio Turnpike. She calls her Salamanca, which is Sal's full first name—her full name is Salamanca Tree Hiddle. Momma and Dad thought that Salamanca was the name of the Native American tribe that an ancestor belonged to, but they were wrong; that ancestor belonged to the Seneca tribe. Trees are Momma's favorite, which is how Sal got her middle name (Momma wanted Sal's middle name to be Sugar Maple Tree, but that seemed like a lot). Most people just call Sal by her nickname, though a few boys tease her by calling her Salamander.

It's not yet clear why Sal is reluctant to go on the trip, nor why Lewiston is their destination. It's also hard to tell whether Gram and Gramps know the exact reason why Sal feels uneasy. They might be oblivious, or they might simply be trying to ensure that the trip is enjoyable for her by not feeding into her worries.



Sal's fear of seeing Momma is why she's dreading the trip, and she hints that something traumatic has happened to Momma in the time since she left Sal and Dad. The phrase “resting peacefully” seems to imply that Momma is relaxing or healing from something in Lewiston, but it's impossible to tell what, exactly, is going on at this point. Gram and Gramps don't seem to share Sal's reluctance to see Momma, so it's possible that they have a different perspective the situation than she does. Meanwhile, it's implied that Sal resents Dad for wanting to be around Margaret and not Momma. Sal is also stepping into an adult role on this trip, as Dad seems to think of her as a sort of babysitter for her grandparents.



Here, Sal seems to confirm that Momma is just convalescing in Lewiston, if her hope is to bring Momma home. But her reasoning for believing that Momma's birthday is the day to do this is unclear. It also seems like there's more going on here than Sal lets on, since she knows Dad and her grandparents would find this silly—perhaps Momma can't, or won't, come back.



It's unclear whether Sal is afraid of accidents because she doesn't trust her grandparents' driving, or if she has other reasons to fear being on the road. Sal's name connects her to both her Native American heritage and to the natural world. It also connects her to Momma, since trees are Momma's favorite element of the natural world. This shows that nature is, in many ways, something that connects Sal to Momma, which further explains why Sal is so reluctant to leave their land in Bybanks behind—she feels like she's leaving Momma behind as well.



Back in the car on the Ohio Turnpike, Gram asks Sal to entertain her and Gramps, maybe with a story. Sal tries to think of one that her grandparents haven't heard; she learned most of her stories from Gramps. She refuses to tell one about Momma but realizes she can tell her grandparents "an extensively strange story" about her friend Phoebe Winterbottom, Phoebe's disappearing mother, and the lunatic.

Sal seems to decide on telling Phoebe's story solely because she believes her grandparents will find it interesting. At this point, Sal doesn't see storytelling as anything other than a method to entertain people, which is why she focuses on sensational, "exceptionally strange" elements like Phoebe's mother's disappearance and the "lunatic." However, the reader knows from the previous chapter that after this trip is over, Sal will recognize that Phoebe's story is like the plaster wall Dad chipped away at to reveal a hidden fireplace. In other words, she will come to see storytelling as a way to uncover hidden truths.



CHAPTER 3

During that first visit to Margaret Cadaver's, Sal sees Phoebe's face in a window next door. She also meets Mrs. Partridge, Margaret's very old mother. Margaret is very nice to Sal, but Sal isn't nice in return—in fact, she's very rude. When the visit comes to an end, Margaret whispers to Dad and asks if he's told Sal yet how she and Dad met. Dad whispered back that he's tried, but Sal doesn't want to know. This is true: Sal doesn't care at all.

There's clearly more going on between Dad and Margaret than Sal is willing to acknowledge. It's unclear whether Margaret and Dad are close because they're romantically interested in each other or because of a different reason. Regardless, at this point, Sal is flat-out refusing to learn anything about Margaret because of how much she dislikes her and how much she resents Dad—and it's implied that this is because Sal thinks Dad is trying to replace Momma with Margaret.



Dad drives Sal two blocks away to their new house. Like Margaret's house, it sits in a line of other tiny houses. There's no swimming hole, barn, pigs, or chickens. There isn't enough grass in the yard to keep a cow alive for even a few minutes. Dad leads Sal on a tour of the tiny house, and soon, the moving van arrives. Once the movers unload everything into the tiny living room, Dad remarks that it's like they've tried to fit all their things in a chicken coop.

As a first-person narrator, Sal shares her personal thoughts with the reader. Noting that there's not enough grass to keep a cow alive shows that Sal thinks of most things in terms of the natural world; this is the only way she knows to quantify how much grass is in their yard. Dad seems to share Sal's way of looking at the world when he likens their small home to a chicken coop, and this sarcastic comment could hint that Dad feels similarly conflicted about leaving the farm behind.



Sal starts school three days later. Phoebe is in her class, but she's quiet and keeps to herself. The other kids all touch Sal's long black **hair**, and one girl, Mary Lou Finney, keeps saying odd things like "Beef brain!" or "Omnipotent." A boy named Ben draws cartoons all day, and Sal's English teacher, Mr. Birkway, is "peculiar."

Sal is a curiosity to her new classmates, especially because of her hair—but in the same vein, Sal seems to find her classmates and teacher just as "peculiar." This suggests that judging people is common (perhaps even natural), and that what makes someone strange is a matter of subjective opinion.



That week, Dad and Sal eat dinner three times at Margaret's house. Sal sees Phoebe's face in the window again, but Phoebe doesn't wave back when Sal waves at her. Finally, at lunch one day, Phoebe sits next to Sal and compliments her for being brave. Sal insists she's not brave. Privately, she's afraid of lots of things, like car accidents, nuclear war, pregnant women, and cancer. But she isn't afraid of spiders, and she revealed this to her classmates earlier by putting one outside. Everyone was impressed.

Back in the car, Gram interrupts Sal to say that Sal is brave because she's a Hiddle. All Hiddles are brave, like Dad and Momma. When Sal points out that Momma isn't really a Hiddle, Gram says she is—she's been married to a Hiddle long enough. Sal remembers that Momma never felt that way. She'd always say, in a sorry tone, that she'd never be a real Hiddle.

Momma's parents are Pickfords, and they're very different from the Hiddles. They stand up straight and starch their clothes. Once, Momma explained that her parents never laugh because they're "just so busy being respectable." Momma also said that the only defiant thing Grandmother Pickford did was to name Momma Chanhassen. It's an Indian name that means "sweet tree juice," or maple sugar. Everyone called Momma Sugar. Sal has always had a hard time believing that Momma came from her parents, since she was so different from them. She only occasionally sounded like a Pickford.

CHAPTER 4

Back in Phoebe's story, Phoebe invites Sal over for dinner. Sal is relieved; she doesn't want to eat with Dad and Margaret again. She wants to be back in Bybanks with the farm animals, and she wants to run into the kitchen and find Momma and Dad peeling apples. But instead, Sal walks home with Phoebe. Sal stops by her house to call Dad at work; he has a new job selling farm machinery. Dad is thrilled that Sal has a friend. As the girls pass Margaret's house, Mrs. Partridge calls to the girls and asks Sal if it's her. Sal starts to move toward Mrs. Partridge, but Phoebe tells her not get any closer.

Again, just as Sal thinks her classmates are odd, Phoebe's standoffishness suggests that she finds Sal strange or even intimidating. But Sal earns Phoebe's respect by seeming brave. But Sal doesn't see putting the spider outside as an act of bravery, because she's so comfortable with nature—spiders aren't frightening for her. Sal's fear of pregnant women stands out from the rest of the list, as it's a less common fear that violence or illness, for instance. Therefore, it seems likely that this fear is rooted in a personal experience she had with a pregnant woman.



Here, Sal starts to hint at the possibility that Momma wasn't as happy in the Hiddle family as people might have expected her to be. Sal must have been particularly close with Momma, since she seems to be the only one aware of Momma's unhappiness.



Though Momma doesn't describe her parents in a way that suggests she admires them, her story about Grandmother Pickford choosing an "Indian name" for Momma nevertheless shows that even the most uptight people can have unexpected quirks. Momma's name, Chanhassen, is something else that connects her to Salamanca, who was named after what her parents thought was a Native American ancestor's tribe. In addition, both mother and daughter are named after trees (Momma's first name means maple sugar, and Sal's middle name is Tree), which further connects them with each other and with nature.



Phoebe offers Sal a convenient way to escape Margaret and Dad, who just annoy and anger Sal. This is in part because Sal longs to be back on the farm, where she felt more connected to nature and where she has happy memories with her parents. Phoebe, meanwhile, seems to judge Mrs. Partridge as threatening, similar to the way Sal writes off Margaret as not worth getting to know.



Mrs. Partridge asks who Sal has with her and then asks to feel Phoebe's face. Gently, Mrs. Partridge feels her face and declares that Phoebe is 13 years old. Sal introduces Phoebe and notes that she lives next door, and then the girls head for Phoebe's house. Phoebe hisses that she doesn't want Mrs. Cadaver and Mrs. Partridge to know she lives next door. She also says it's not at all remarkable that Mrs. Partridge managed to guess her age.

Before Sal can say anything in response, Phoebe launches into a story about a time when she, Mrs. Winterbottom, Mr. Winterbottom, and Phoebe's sister, Prudence, went to a state fair. There was a man there guessing people's ages by looking at them; if he guessed wrong, the person won a teddy bear. Sal privately thinks Mrs. Partridge is more "astounding," but Phoebe continues. The man guessed Mr. Winterbottom's age—and he was 24 years off. Mr. Winterbottom carried his teddy bear all day, but he was miserable wondering if he actually looked 52 instead of 38.

Phoebe leads Sal into the kitchen and explains that Mr. Winterbottom doesn't look anywhere close to 52 years old. Her mother, Mrs. Winterbottom, is in the kitchen, and she asks if Sal likes **blackberries**. She's making a pie. Sal says she loves blackberries, but she has some allergies. She can't admit that blackberries remind her of Momma. The girls join Mrs. Winterbottom at the table, and Phoebe tells her mother about Mrs. Partridge. Phoebe insists that Mrs. Partridge guessing her age is nothing special—but then, Sal shares that Mrs. Partridge is blind. Both Phoebe and Mrs. Winterbottom are shocked.

Later, Phoebe suggests that it's odd that blind Mrs. Partridge can see things about her, but Phoebe was "blind about her." She also says there's something fishy about Mrs. Cadaver. Mrs. Cadaver is frightening, mostly because her last name means "dead body." Sal didn't know this. Then, Phoebe says that Mrs. Cadaver is a nurse—and who wants a nurse with a name like that? Her red hair is "spooky," and she also has a scary voice.

Again, Phoebe's insistence that she doesn't want Mrs. Cadaver and Mrs. Partridge to know she lives next door suggests that she's judging her neighbors as dangerous without even having met them. It's unclear why she feels this way, but it nevertheless prevents her from getting to know the women, who may well be harmless.



Sal doesn't want to jeopardize her budding friendship with Phoebe, so she doesn't voice any thoughts that might make Phoebe feel less important. As Phoebe describes the man incorrectly guessing her father's age, it hints that Mr. Winterbottom may indeed look 52 rather than 38, which could suggest that stress or a particularly uptight personality have made him age more rapidly.



Because Sal hasn't met Mr. Winterbottom yet, it's impossible to tell how old he looks. What is clear, though, is that Phoebe is very loyal to and defensive of her father. The way that Sal reacts to the blackberry pie suggests that remembering Momma is painful for her, possibly because of trauma associated with Momma leaving their family. The fact that both Mrs. Winterbottom and Phoebe are shocked to discover that Mrs. Partridge is blind speaks to how closed off the Winterbottoms are from their neighbors, especially since Sal knows this information despite being a newcomer to the neighborhood.



Phoebe recognizes that she was ironically "blind about" Mrs. Partridge being blind, meaning that her presumptions about the old woman figuratively "blinded" her to the truth. This begins to suggest that judging people the way Phoebe judges Mrs. Partridge (and the way Sal's classmates judge one another) can be harmful, as it can lead to false assumptions that prevent people from getting to know one another. Phoebe clearly hasn't internalized this lesson, though, as she immediately judges Mrs. Cadaver as morbid and "spooky" based only on the woman's name and appearance.



Sal explains that this is Phoebe's power. In Phoebe's world, people are either perfect, or they're axe murderers. So, after this conversation, Margaret *does* look spooky to Sal. Sal is relieved to have a reason to hate her. Back in the story's present, Phoebe agrees to tell Sal a secret. She asks if Dad goes over to Mrs. Cadaver's all the time, and if Sal knows what happened to Mr. Cadaver. Phoebe says she's sure she knows, and it's "purely awful."

Sal goes along with Phoebe's tales about Margaret because she's already looking for excuses to hate her—Phoebe's stories line up with Sal's own preconceived notions about Margaret. Given that Sal has already established that Phoebe makes up stories to suit her own worldview, readers can assume that whatever Phoebe's assumption about Mr. Cadaver is probably wrong.



CHAPTER 5

Gram interrupts Sal's story to say that she knew someone like "Peeby" once. Her name was Gloria, and Gloria lived "in the wildest, most pepped up world." Gram and Gramps argue; Gloria tried to discourage Gram from marrying Gramps, supposedly because she liked Gramps too. Gramps scoffs and pulls into a rest stop. Sal desperately wants to keep going, but a quick rest seems pretty safe. Sal explains that two years ago, when her grandparents visited Washington, D.C., they stole the back tires off a senator's car—something that's fine in Bybanks but is worthy of arrest in Washington, D.C.

Gram suggests that plenty of people live like Phoebe does, making up outlandish stories to reinforce their viewpoints or desires. And as Sal tells her grandparents this story about Phoebe, Sal starts to get a story in return: that of her grandparents' romance and early life together. Through this, the novel begins to hint that stories tend to be nested in one another—one has to chip away at one story (like Dad chipped away at the plaster wall) to get to another. Meanwhile, Sal clearly doesn't trust her grandparents to stay out of trouble, which fits with her more general distrust of the adults in her life. She's especially anxious about not reaching Momma in time, though it's still not clear why she feels so rushed.



A stop at a rest area seems safe in comparison to stealing tires in D.C. But then, Gramps notices a woman poking at her engine. Gallantly, Gramps goes to help the woman. He pulls the "snakes" (hoses) out of her engine, one by one, until all the hoses are on the ground and the "car-bust-erator" is in pieces. The woman calls a mechanic, and once Gramps is certain the mechanic is going to repair the car, he heads back to his own car. As he pulls back onto the freeway, Gram asks Sal to continue her story about Phoebe.

Gramps wants to help, but he only makes the woman's car troubles worse by disassembling her engine—and he seems blissfully unaware that he's not being helpful. This suggests that people sometimes don't see themselves clearly—they can think of themselves in one way, but other people will see them in a totally different light. In this way, this passage calls back to Sal and Phoebe's assumptions about other characters, which likely differ from how those people see themselves.



CHAPTER 6

Gramps reminds Sal that she was just about to tell them what Phoebe thought happened to Mr. Cadaver. Sal explains that just as Phoebe was going to say what happened, Mr. Winterbottom got home, and it was time for dinner. In the story, Sal is sitting around the table with the Winterbottoms. Mr. and Mrs. Winterbottom remind Sal of her Pickford grandparents. They speak quietly, sit up straight, and are very polite. They're also picky about their food; they don't eat meat or use butter, out of fear of cholesterol.

The novel has characterized the Hiddles as free-spirited, outdoorsy, quirky people, so the Winterbottoms are a shock for Sal by comparison. Momma's stories about her own uptight parents implied that being so "respectable" can mean that people don't have much fun. This could explain why Phoebe is so interested in outlandish stories—she may use them as an escape from her otherwise boring life.



Mr. Winterbottom works in an office, while Mrs. Winterbottom is a housewife. She spends her days doing laundry, cleaning, and baking—and Sal gets the impression that Mrs. Winterbottom isn't happy with her lot in life. Though her words make it seem like she's happy, her behavior suggests otherwise. For instance, Mrs. Winterbottom remarks over dinner that she's made a lot of pies in the last week. Nobody comments on her pie when she serves it, and Mrs. Winterbottom sighs. Sal thinks it's strange that she bakes so many pies when the family is so concerned about cholesterol. Later, she mentions that she couldn't find Mr. Winterbottom's favorite brand of muesli, but Mr. Winterbottom says nothing.

Sal is happy for Mrs. Winterbottom when the woman suggests she'll go back to work, now that Phoebe and Prudence are back in school. But again, no one comments on her suggestion, and she sighs. It surprises Sal when Mrs. Winterbottom uses pet names, like "sweetie pie" and "honey bun," to talk to Mr. Winterbottom. This is because Mrs. Winterbottom seems used to being "plain and ordinary." In contrast, Mr. Winterbottom looks like the stereotypical father, still wearing his tie and speaking clearly and seriously. Sal understands why the man thought he was 52 and not 38. Prudence, who's 17, is a lot like her mother. Sal thinks the whole family is peculiar: they're too "tidy and respectable."

Phoebe walks Sal home after dinner. She insists that Mrs. Cadaver is very strong—she suspects that Mrs. Cadaver chopped up Mr. Cadaver and buried him in the backyard. Sal thinks this is far-fetched, but that night, she realizes she wants to believe that Mrs. Cadaver is capable of such a thing. But then, Sal thinks about **blackberries** and remembers picking blackberries with Momma. According to Momma, people should only pick blackberries that were growing "at people-height"; ones up high or down low were for the animals and birds.

Although Sal is young, she's able to intuit that Mrs. Winterbottom feels forgotten and taken for granted. This could simply be because Sal is an outsider and can see the Winterbottoms' dynamic more objectively, or perhaps because Sal's own mother felt similarly dissatisfied before she left Sal and Dad. The other Winterbottoms, it's implied, either aren't aware of Mrs. Winterbottom's feelings or don't care, because this state of affairs is normal to them.



Sal recognizes that work will give Mrs. Winterbottom a sense of identity and purpose outside her role as a wife and mother. But when nobody else reacts, it makes it seem like Mrs. Winterbottom's family members care whether she's happy and fulfilled. Mr. Winterbottom also brushes off his wife's affection, which further contributes to the sense that she's underappreciated at home. On the whole, the family presents themselves as polished and "respectable," yet Sal can see that their dynamic is strained below the surface. This is, in a sense, another example of one story buried beneath another.



Again, given that Phoebe seems to come up with stories that aren't based in reality, it's likely that she's way off in thinking Mrs. Cadaver murdered her husband. Sal can see both points of view: she realizes that it's far-fetched to think Phoebe lives next door to a murderer, but she also appreciates having a reason to hate Margaret. Meanwhile, the way that Momma framed proper blackberry-picking etiquette shows how much she valued nature and taught Sal to care for other beings in the world.



This memory makes Sal think of another one, from when Momma was pregnant. Momma had slept in late, and Dad was already out in the field, but he left flowers on the table for Sal and Momma. Seeing them, Momma led Sal out to surprise Dad. They found him admiring a fence he fixed, and Momma looked like she was going to sneak up on Dad and kiss him. But then, Dad turned around, and it seemed to surprise Momma. Sal was confused when she saw that Momma was crying. Momma sobbed that Dad was too good, and that she'd never be as good. Sal was expecting something happy to happen, but instead, everything was sad.

Momma is pregnant in this flashback, which raises more questions, since Sal hasn't mentioned having a sibling. It's unclear what this means—Momma may have taken Sal's sibling with her when she left, or something could have gone wrong with the pregnancy. Either way, this detail calls back to Sal's earlier mention of her fear of pregnant women—her experience with Momma's pregnancy could very well have inspired this fear. This flashback more generally suggests that Sal was, perhaps, not as attuned to the particulars of her parents' relationship as she thought she was. For instance, Sal assumes that Momma and Dad are going to have a loving interaction, but this isn't what happened. Instead, Momma's emotional reaction suggests that Dad's kind gesture made her feel inadequate by comparison, which hints that their marriage was plagued by misunderstanding and dissatisfaction.



The next morning, Sal found Dad in the kitchen, staring at two dishes of **blackberries**. He explained that Momma picked them. When Momma came in from outside, Dad kissed her, and it was very romantic. Momma said shyly that she was almost as good as Dad, and for some reason, Sal felt betrayed. Lying in bed, Sal thinks it's surprising how much a person can remember when they eat a blackberry pie.

Momma loved blackberries, so they were a way for her to show Sal and Dad she cared—and bittersweet memories like this are why Sal still associates blackberries with Momma in the present. Sal likely felt betrayed because she idolized Momma, and Momma's implication that she wasn't perfect was unsettling because it challenged Sal's perception of who her mother was.



CHAPTER 7

Gramps shouts as he passes the Illinois state line; he pronounces it "Ill-ah-no-way." Gram wants to know what happened to Indiana, and Gramps teases her and calls her a "gooseberry." Suddenly, the road curves, and there's water off to the right. It's Lake Michigan. Gram says she'd like to take a dip, so Gramps cuts across traffic, and within minutes, Sal is standing with her grandparents in the lake. That night, they sleep at a motel outside of Chicago. Sal tries to picture Lewiston, but the dark whispers "*rush, hurry, rush*" to her and makes it impossible.

It's a mark of how much Gramps adores his wife that he's willing to cut across traffic to get her to Lake Michigan, just because she expresses passing interest in swimming. But Sal isn't necessarily able to see this because she's so concerned with making it to Lewiston in time. The way she frames the dark as the entity telling her to rush personifies the natural world, making it seem as though nature (which Sal connects with Momma in her mind) is urging her on.



Instead, Sal thinks of Bybanks and how things were right after Momma left for Lewiston. At first, Sal couldn't understand how Momma could leave her. But over time, Sal realized that she'd been Momma's mirror: happy when Momma was happy, and sad when Momma was sad. For a few days, Sal didn't know how to feel, but then, she suddenly felt happy watching a newborn calf stand. Sal had told herself that night that she could be happy without Momma. The thought felt mean, but it also felt true.

At first, Sal seemed to think that Momma left to intentionally hurt her. And to make matters worse, Sal was also confronted with the realization that she didn't know how to manage or feel her own emotions without Momma to guide her. In this way, Sal's closeness to Momma hindered her ability to be her own person. So, although her realization that she could be happy without Momma felt mean, it also marked the beginning of Sal's coming of age, as she was forced to begin learning how to function independently. It's also significant that Sal had this epiphany while watching a newborn calf stand up on its own, as Sal, like this animal, was learning how to pick herself up and face the world without her mother's help. This is yet another moment when Sal finds comfort in and communion with the natural world.



As Sal is remembering these things, Gram asks if Sal would like to call Dad. Sal refuses; she doesn't want him to think she's a "goose." The next morning, Gramps gets lost leaving Chicago, but they finally find the road heading west. The plan is for them to drive through Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota, Wyoming, then dip into Montana and finally Idaho. Gramps is looking forward to seeing the Badlands and the Black Hills in South Dakota, but Sal isn't so excited to see those places. She knows why they're going there, though: when Momma took the bus to Lewiston, the bus stopped in those places. Sal and her grandparents are following Momma's footsteps.

It's not year clear why Sal and her grandparents are tracing Momma's exact route to Lewiston, nor why Sal isn't excited about seeing these landmarks. Her reluctance again hints that Sal has lingering trauma around Momma's departure and subsequent bus trip to Lewiston. But by following in Momma's footsteps, Sal will have the opportunity to see the same things Momma did on her trip west, which may give Sal a new perspective on her mother's journey.



CHAPTER 8

Once Gramps is on the right road, Gram asks Sal to continue her story about Phoebe and the lunatic. She only wants to hear about the lunatic as long the story isn't bloody, and she remarks that "Peeby" is just like Gloria. Gramps wants to know if Gloria really had a crush on him, but Gram tells him to pay attention to the road.

Again, Sal's story about Phoebe reminds Gram and Gramps of their own story about Gloria. This implies that stories are often interconnected in mysterious ways, and that hearing or telling one story can shed new light on a different one.



In the story, Sal is at Phoebe's on a Saturday morning when Mary Lou Finney invites the girls to her house. Phoebe's parents are out, so Phoebe checks all the doors and windows before she and Sal leave, "just in case." Sal is confused, especially since Mrs. Winterbottom checked everything before she left. Just then, the doorbell rings. There's a nervous-looking young man on the porch who seems to be about 17 or 18. Phoebe grouses that Mrs. Winterbottom hates strangers at the door, as she's certain that a stranger will have a gun and be "an escaped lunatic." Sal offers to open the door, but Phoebe says they can do it together.

Phoebe mimics her mother's habit of checking all the doors and windows before she leaves the house, which suggests that Mrs. Winterbottom is the one who has inadvertently taught her to be so suspicious of other people. This becomes especially clear when Phoebe notes that Mrs. Winterbottom is afraid of "escaped lunatics" with guns coming to her door—a serious threat, but one that's statistically unlikely to happen. Sal doesn't know how to relate to the Winterbottoms in this regard, as she doesn't look at every person she encounters as a possible attacker.



The young man on the doorstep asks if this is the Winterbottoms' house. Phoebe says it is, closes the door on him, and asks Sal if she "detect[s] any signs of lunacy." Sal doesn't, so Phoebe opens the door again. The man asks for Mrs. Winterbottom, and Phoebe lies that her mother is home. As the man looks down, seemingly ready to cry, Phoebe pretends to look for Mrs. Winterbottom. Then, she returns to the door and says her mother went out. She introduces herself and asks if he'd like to leave a message, but he declines and leaves. Phoebe is convinced the man is going to murder her and Sal.

Phoebe is presumably afraid to admit that she and Sal are home alone—her parents have probably been coached to say that she's not by herself, which could very well keep Phoebe safe from a potential intruder. But at the same time, being so defensive and hostile to outsiders means that Phoebe isn't willing to consider that this distraught young man probably isn't a threat and may have a valid reason for showing up at the Winterbottoms' house.



CHAPTER 9

As Phoebe leads Sal to Mary Lou's house, Phoebe explains that Mary Lou's family isn't as "civilized" as hers. Ben is living there too, but he's Mary Lou's cousin, not her brother. The Finneys' house is loud: Mary Lou has an older sister, three younger brothers, and Ben. There are balls everywhere, and the boys are running around and interrupting everyone. Mr. Finney is reading, fully clothed, in the empty bathtub, while Mrs. Finney is lying on the garage roof. Eventually, Mr. Finney gets out of the tub and throws balls in the backyard with Dennis and Dougie.

Phoebe's insinuation that the Finneys are uncivilized shows that she has strict expectations about what families should look like and how people should behave. The Finneys' bustling household and quirky habits are inappropriate rather than interesting in Phoebe's eyes. Sal, by contrast, doesn't make any observations about the Finneys like she did about the Winterbottoms. This is perhaps because they remind Sal of her own wild family—and in her eyes, acting "civilized" isn't necessarily better or more conducive to happiness.



Last weekend, when there was a sports day at school, Mary Lou and Phoebe's parents were both there (Dad was not). Phoebe's parents watched the events, while Mr. and Mrs. Finney participated. Phoebe told Sal she thought Mary Lou was probably embarrassed, but secretly, Sal thought the way the Finneys acted was nice. She wonders if Phoebe secretly *wanted* her parents to act more like the Finneys.

Sal seems to value closeness and involvement in families, perhaps because she wishes that her own parents were more present. It's possible that Phoebe feels the same way, and that she's speaking ill of the Finneys not because she actually disapproves, but because she's jealous.



Now, Phoebe and Sal are sitting with Mary Lou in her bedroom. Phoebe is talking about the lunatic while Mary Lou's brothers run in and out of the room, and Ben is on Mary Lou's bed. He's staring at Sal, and out of the blue, he asks if she can sit on her **hair**. Sal says she can, so Ben draws a cartoon of a lizard with long hair that turns into a chair. He captions it "Salamander sitting on her hair." Phoebe and Mary Lou, unimpressed, leave the room. But as Sal turns to give Ben the drawing back, Ben leans forward and kisses her collarbone. He grabs the drawing and runs away. Sal is confused—was Ben trying to kiss her lips? Or was it an accident?

Ben's interest and fumbled kiss are confusing for Sal; she seems unused to the romantic attention. In addition, although Sal's other classmates have shown interest in her long hair, Ben is the only one who's reacted to it by asking a seemingly nonsensical question and drawing very literal cartoon. Rather than treating Sal like an oddity, the way their peers do, Ben clearly admires her and is trying to understand her in his own unique, imaginative way.



As Phoebe and Sal walk home from Mary Lou's, Phoebe says it was very loud at the Finneys'. Sal says she didn't mind, and then she remembers Dad once telling Momma that they'd fill their home up with children. But they hadn't; Sal was their only child, and then Momma left.

Sal believes that the Finneys' bustling household is the same family dynamic that her parents wanted. The detail that Sal is her parents' only child calls back to her memory of Momma being pregnant and further implies that the baby either didn't survive or was put up for adoption. Then, the fact that Sal mentions Momma leaving just after this subtly hints that Momma's pregnancy was somehow related to her leaving Sal and Dad. Sal's reflection makes her time at the Finneys' bittersweet, as she knows that she'll likely never have siblings of her own.



At Phoebe's house, the girls find Mrs. Winterbottom crying on the couch. Mrs. Winterbottom insists she's fine, so Phoebe tells her about the "potential lunatic." This seems to upset Mrs. Winterbottom, and she suggests they don't tell Mr. Winterbottom about the lunatic. Later, Phoebe tells Sal that this is odd: her mother never keeps secrets from her father. The girls walk onto the porch and find an unmarked envelope on it. There's a message inside that reads, "Don't judge a man until you've walked two moons in his moccasins." Phoebe shows Mrs. Winterbottom, who seems anxious. Mr. Winterbottom gets home just then, and he isn't at all concerned.

Although Mrs. Winterbottom seems just as upset about the lunatic as Phoebe is, the fact that she keeps this a secret from Mr. Winterbottom could suggest that she knows more about the lunatic than Phoebe does and is upset for a different reason. Her secrecy implies that she's reluctant to be open with Mr. Winterbottom, perhaps because of his tendency to dismiss anything abnormal (like the note that Sal and Phoebe find) as irrelevant to their traditional, respectable family. The note contains Walk Two Moons's titular saying: it essentially advises the reader not to judge a person unless they fully understand that person's experiences. This, of course, ties into the way Sal and Phoebe have judged characters like Margaret and the lunatic thus far in the novel. In this way, the note's mysterious appearance seems almost fated to happen, hinting that the lesson it contains will be an important one for the girls to learn.



CHAPTER 10

Back in the car with Gram and Gramps, Gramps suddenly pulls off the freeway to rest in Madison, Wisconsin. Gram says she feels sorry for Mrs. Winterbottom. She says that being a mother "is like trying to hold a wolf by the ears." It's hard to have lots of kids, but it's also hard to have only one or two. Gramps finally finds a parking space. He doesn't have change for the parking meter, so he writes a note about being a World War II veteran with German shrapnel in his leg and leaves it on the dash. Sal ascertains that Gramps doesn't actually have shrapnel in his leg. Dad has called her "gullible" before.

Gram feels empathy for Mrs. Winterbottom because she understands how difficult it can be a parent, and she makes sense of this by comparing it to nature. Her comment that it's hard to have only one or two kids calls back to Sal's observation that her own parents wanted lots of children but only had one—here, Gram unknowingly confirms that this was probably hard on them.



Gram keeps saying, "Huzza, huzza!" as she, Gramps, and Sal walk around Madison. They get sandwiches, ice cream, and blueberry muffins. Sal hears the voice telling her "rush, hurry, rush," but Gram asks Sal if she wants to send postcards. Sal doesn't. Momma sent her postcards from all along this route. The final postcard came from Coeur D'Alene, Idaho, and arrived two days after Sal and Dad learned that Momma wasn't coming back.

Sal and her grandparents are figuratively walking in Momma's footsteps as they travel across the country, but Sal doesn't want to repeat Momma's trip beat for beat. She again implies that something traumatic happened during Momma's trip, which makes the postcards painful for Sal to think about.



Finally, Gramps says it's time to get back on the road. But not long after they get back in the car, Gramps pulls off in the Wisconsin Dells to take a nap. Gram and Sal explore an old fort and then watch some Native Americans dance with drums. Sal explains that Momma didn't like the term "Native Americans." It sounded stiff to her, and she always said she was proud to be an Indian. Sal agrees with Momma. She lies back and listens to the drums.

Given Momma's stories about Sal's Pickford grandparents, it follows that Momma would dislike "Native Americans" because it sounds too formal. Instead, Momma wanted to be lighthearted and free-spirited, like the Hiddles. In this way, both Momma and Sal frame "stiffness" as something they must work to move away from—instead, both mother and daughter want to connect with nature in a raw, uninhibited way.



When Sal opens her eyes, Gram is gone. Sal panics, thinking Gram and Gramps left her. She pushes through the crowd and finds signs for three different parking areas. Finally, as Sal pushes through the crowd, she realizes that Gram is dancing in the very center of the Native Americans.

Although Sal is afraid that Gram and Gramps have left her, this doesn't seem likely to happen—after all, she and her grandparents are very close. Instead, her fear is likely rooted in her lingering trauma over Momma leaving.



CHAPTER 11

Gram, Gramps, and Sal leave Wisconsin the next morning and enter Minnesota. Gramps is thrilled to have some scenery. Sal stays quiet; she doesn't want to say anything about how she was terrified that her grandparents were going to leave her yesterday. Since Momma left, she's been afraid of people leaving. At Gram's prodding, Sal picks up Phoebe's story again.

Here, the novel confirms that what made Sal so afraid yesterday was her trauma over Momma's departure. It's caused her to fear that no adults in her life are going to stick around, which makes it clear that Sal is still struggling to cope with her mother's absence.



The next Saturday, as Sal and Phoebe are leaving for Mary Lou's house, Phoebe finds another message on the porch. This one reads, "Everyone has his own agenda." There's nobody on the street. Mary Lou thinks the messages are exciting, but Phoebe is frightened. She's afraid someone is watching their house.

Phoebe is mirroring Mrs. Winterbottom in her fear of these messages. There are less frightening explanations for where the messages came from, but Phoebe is eager to jump to conclusions that confirm her fears.



The girls try to figure out what the message means. They wonder if it's for Mr. Winterbottom, since he goes to a lot of work meetings and meetings have agendas, but Phoebe doesn't buy it. Sal knows what the previous message means. She explains that she used to picture two moons sitting in moccasins, but Dad says it actually means you shouldn't judge people until you've been in their situation.

Here, Sal explains one of the novel's central ideas: that it's important to think about how other people see things. This has huge implications for what's going on right now—Phoebe, at least, is totally unwilling to consider other people's perspectives.



Phoebe looks suspicious, but Sal assures her that Dad isn't leaving the messages. When Ben comes in, Mary Lou asks him what the phrases mean. He draws two moons in a pair of moccasins. Mary Lou suggests that perhaps Mr. Winterbottom is judging people at work, but Phoebe snaps that her father doesn't judge people.

Sal and Ben seem to have a natural connection, which becomes clear when Ben draws exactly what Sal used to imagine when she hears this phrase. Phoebe is, again, unwilling to consider other people's perspectives, which is why she snaps at Mary Lou rather than acknowledging her idea as a real possibility.



Later, Phoebe, Sal, and Mary Lou walk to the drugstore. Tommy and Dougie invite themselves along, as does Ben. Tommy and Dougie run around making noise and chasing each other, and Phoebe asks how Mary Lou can stand it. Mary Lou says she's used to it. Ben walks right behind Sal, and at one point, Tommy knocks Sal over. Ben catches her but then won't let her go. Sal feels like there's something crawling on her spine—but it's not unpleasant. Finally, Ben lets go.

Sal starts to get scared at the drugstore. It feels like someone is watching her—and Sal notices the lunatic at the cash register, staring at her and Phoebe. Later, as Phoebe and Sal walk home, someone runs up behind them. Phoebe is convinced it's the lunatic, but it's just Ben. He offers to walk the girls home to protect them from lunatics and then suggests that they shouldn't call the young man a lunatic. Ben refuses to elaborate. Then, he asks Sal if people touch each other at her house, since she flinches every time someone touches her. Sal insists she doesn't flinch, but she has to make herself not flinch when Ben touches her arm.

Then, Ben asks where Momma is. Sal says she's in Lewiston, Idaho, and she doesn't feel like saying why. Ben reaches out to touch Sal's arm again, and she flinches. Sal thinks about it, and she realizes that Dad doesn't hug her much anymore. Her family used to hug all the time. As she walks, she remembers snuggling in bed with Momma. Momma had suggested they build a raft and float away. Sal used to think about floating away with Momma—but when Momma went to Lewiston, she didn't take Sal.

Ben touches Phoebe's arm, making her jump. He laughs, but this bothers Sal too. Phoebe's family seems so stiff—is Sal becoming like them? She's watched Phoebe and Prudence shrink away from Mrs. Winterbottom's attempts to touch them, and she wonders if she withdrew from Momma, too. Maybe that's why Momma left.

At Phoebe's driveway, Ben excuses himself. But just then, Margaret pulls up in her yellow Volkswagen and starts pulling bags out of the car. Phoebe tells Ben that she's Mrs. Cadaver, and Ben offers to help with the groceries. Phoebe hisses to Ben to not go inside, but he ignores her. Sal declines Mrs. Cadaver's invitation to come in and follows Phoebe to her front door.

To Phoebe, the Finneys' way of life is chaotic and totally beyond her understanding. But to Mary Lou, this is normal—another instance where two people look at the same thing with very different perspectives. Meanwhile, Ben's crush on Sal becomes more apparent here, and it seems like Sal might reciprocate his feelings.



Sal is starting to get pulled into Phoebe's paranoid outlook on the world. So, things that normally wouldn't scare her—like a young man at the cash register—are starting to look sinister. In this way, Phoebe seems to be influencing Sal to make negative assumptions about people she doesn't know. Ben's suggestion that Phoebe shouldn't call the young man a lunatic (a term that implies that he's crazy) suggests that Ben has some sort of negative association with this word and finds it offensive—perhaps because he or someone he knows has been called a lunatic before. Finally, Sal's habit of flinching when people touch her implies that she's pulling away from people emotionally. She's afraid of getting too close, perhaps because Momma (the person she was closest to) left her.



Sal recognizes she and her parents used to be more openly affectionate—it seems likely that Momma's departure is what changed things between Sal and Dad. While Sal frames her memory of snuggling in bed with Momma as positive, the fact that Momma wanted to float away (with Sal but without Dad) suggests that she was somewhat unhappy.



Sal wants to be a true Hiddle: fun-loving, open, and comfortable with physical contact. She compares how she acts these days to how Phoebe and the Winterbottoms act, which suggests that Sal's new experiences and relationships are helping her become more self-aware. Sal also wonders if she pulled away from Momma, and if that's what caused Momma to leave—she seems to be trying to blame herself.



Ben doesn't seem to judge people nearly as harshly as Phoebe does. While Phoebe sees a "creepy," dangerous woman, Ben simply sees someone in need of assistance. Sal strikes a middle ground: she doesn't want to get close to Margaret, but she also doesn't seem to believe that Margaret is evil.



The girls look back and see Ben picking up a shiny new axe. Mrs. Winterbottom greets the girls at the door and asks who Ben is and where Mary Lou is, but Phoebe brushes her off. Phoebe gives her mother the latest message, which seems to worry Mrs. Winterbottom. Phoebe doesn't mention the lunatic at the drugstore, and later, the girls watch Ben leave Mrs. Cadaver's house in one piece.

When Sal gets home later, she finds Dad messing with his car's engine. She asks if a person is getting too stiff if they flinch when someone tries to touch them. Dad turns around slowly. His eyes are puffy, like he's been crying. Sal doesn't flinch when he hugs her.

Just as Mrs. Winterbottom is starting to keep secrets from her husband, Phoebe is starting to keep secrets from her mother. In some ways, Phoebe is pushing Mrs. Winterbottom away, especially when she doesn't answer Mrs. Winterbottom's questions or reveal that they saw the lunatic at the drugstore.



Witnessing Phoebe's cold treatment of Mrs. Winterbottom seems to have spurred Sal to reach out to Dad. Sal and Dad are both recovering from the trauma of Momma leaving them—they are, in this sense, the only two people who can fully understand how the other feels. Connecting with each other, as they do here, could help them heal their relationship and their shared grief.



CHAPTER 12

For the most part, Gram and Gramps sit quietly and listen to Sal's story about Phoebe. But when Sal tells them about the message "Everyone has his own agenda," Gramps says that's so true: everyone is concerned with their own worries and expects everyone else to worry about the same things.

Later, when Sal talks about Ben asking after Momma, Gram and Gramps give each other a look. Gramps says that once, his father ran away for six months—and when Gramps's best friend asked about it, Gramps punched his friend. Then, when Sal mentions flinching at Ben's touch, Gram turns around and kisses Sal's hand. Gram also regularly remarks that Phoebe is just like her old friend Gloria.

Not long before they hit the South Dakota border, Gramps heads north toward the Pipestone National Monument in Minnesota. Gramps insists this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but Sal just wants to keep going. Pipestone is in a dark forest that smells like Bybanks. It feels a lot like Bybanks, too. At the monument, Sal asks one man if he's a Native American. The man explains that he's a person—an American Indian person. Sal says she is, too.

Gramps, at least, is able to listen to Sal's story and apply some of its lessons to his own life. He suggests here that a lot of people are so wrapped up in their own realities that they fail to consider that other people might see things differently. This is the mindset that Phoebe (and, to an extent, Sal) falls into.



Both Gram and Gramps are going out of their way to show Sal that they're listening and empathizing with what she went through. Gramps has also experienced a parent leaving, so he has some idea of what it's like to cope with that grief and trauma. By telling Sal about his behavior, he shows Sal that she's not alone in lashing out.



At Pipestone, Sal gets to connect to nature the same way she did in Bybanks, as well as to her Native American heritage. Pipestone doesn't feel so different from home, and other people here have similar ancestry to Sal. This man, at least, also feels the way Sal and Momma do about appropriate terminology, which shows Sal that she's not alone in her opinion.



Sal, Gram, and Gramps watch “American Indian persons” making pipes out of stone. Outside of a museum, there’s a man smoking a peace pipe. He gladly passes the pipe to Gramps, who takes a puff and passes it to Gram. Gram passes it to Sal. Sal kisses the stem, since that’s what it looked like Gram and Gramps did. The smoke makes her feel foggy. As she lets it out of her mouth, her brain says, “There goes your mother.” Gramps buys two pipes in the gift shop, one for him and one for Sal.

Gramps gets them a room at Injun Joe’s Peace Palace Motel for the night. By now, Sal is used to Gram and Gramps’s bedtime routine. Every night, after they climb into bed, Gramps says, “Well, this ain’t our marriage bed, but it will do.” This is because Gramps’s most precious belonging is his marriage bed, back home in Bybanks. All of Gramps’s brothers were born in that bed, as well as all of his children.

The story of the marriage bed starts when Gramps is 17. He met Gram that summer. Gram was young and wild, and Gramps followed her for a full three weeks. He finally asked Gram’s father to marry her—and Gram’s father said he could, if he could get Gram to stand still. When Gramps asked Gram to marry him, she asked if he had a dog. She wanted to know where the dog slept and how the dog greeted Gramps when he got home at the end of the day. Gramps admitted to singing his dog a song sometimes while he held her. At this, Gram said she’d marry Gramps: if he’d treat a dog that well, he’d treat her even better.

Three months later, Gram and Gramps got married. During those three months, Gramps, his father, and his brothers built a house in a meadow. It didn’t have furniture by the time the wedding rolled around, but that didn’t bother Gramps. After the wedding, during the supper, Gramps noticed that his father and brothers were absent. He figured they were planning to kidnap Gramps to drink whiskey—but instead, when Gramps later carried Gram into their new home, he discovered the marriage bed. His father and brothers had moved it during the supper. Sal wonders if she’ll ever have a marriage bed like her grandparents.

Peace pipes are sacred objects for many tribes—so Sal using one here is a way for her to spiritually connect to her Native American heritage. Her thought about Momma perhaps implies that on some level, Sal knows Momma isn’t coming back, and she’s trying to make peace with that fact by symbolically releasing her. The way this moment unfolds also suggests that connecting to her Native American heritage and to nature will help her connect more with Momma as well as heal from the trauma of Momma’s departure.



Again, though Sal’s focus is on her own story and Phoebe’s story, she’s hearing her grandparents’ story along this road trip as well. Learning Gram and Gramps’s story and noticing their eccentricities allows Sal to get to know her grandparents better, effectively humanizing them in her eyes.



Gram and Gramps’s story establishes that Gram and Gramps have been kind, honest people their entire lives, not just in as grandparents to Sal. And just as Sal is currently learning about her grandparents as she tells them about Phoebe, in this story, Gram learns about who Gramps is by hearing how he treats his dog. In this way, both of them rely on storytelling to discover new perspectives.



Gram and Gramps’s marriage bed shows Sal what’s possible in a romantic relationship and gives her something to aspire to. She has alluded to trouble in her parents’ marriage, so it’s possible that Gram and Gramps’s relationship is a more stable example for her. The fact that Sal seems to hope to one day have a marriage bed like her grandparents shows that she’s starting to think about growing up and becoming independent from her parents.



CHAPTER 13

Next, Sal tells Gram and Gramps about Mr. Birkway, her English teacher. Mr. Birkway is energetic and loves English. His eyes are deep and can make you feel like he wants nothing more than to listen to you. On the first day of school, Mr. Birkway asks students for their summer journals. The kids are nervous and whispering—they don't want Mr. Birkway to read them. Sal doesn't have one, but Mr. Birkway says it's not a problem. The students whisper among themselves, wondering if they wrote about one another. Later, these journals will cause a whole lot of trouble.

It's significant that what Sal notices and admires about Mr. Birkway is his attentive listening, as this is a skill that Sal is developing as she hears other people's stories (like Gram and Gramps's in the previous chapter). However, Mr. Birkway's students seem anxious about his intention to read their private thoughts, and this passage foreshadows that the journals are going to cause conflict.



CHAPTER 14

Sal is at Phoebe's the following Saturday. Mrs. Winterbottom is running errands, while Mr. Winterbottom is golfing. Mrs. Winterbottom instructed the girls to call the police or Mrs. Cadaver if they hear any noises. Phoebe is very jumpy. She remarks that Mrs. Cadaver works odd hours—but Sal points out that as a nurse, Mrs. Cadaver works various shifts. From Phoebe's bedroom window, the girls watch Mrs. Cadaver cut branches off trees and then start poking a rhododendron bush. Just then, a car pulls up—and Mr. Birkway gets out of it. He hugs Mrs. Cadaver and then helps her dig up the rhododendron and move it to the backyard.

Because Phoebe and her mother expect bad things to happen, they fixate on harmless noises and assume the worst in people. Even though Sal dislikes Margaret, she's better able to "walk two moons" in Margaret's shoes that Phoebe is—that is, she can at least see the situation from Margaret's perspective and understand her habits this way. Mr. Birkway's arrival, on the other hand, is a real mystery—he and Mrs. Cadaver are obviously close, but it's unclear how they know each other.



Phoebe is convinced that Mrs. Cadaver buried something under the rhododendron, like Mr. Cadaver. Maybe Mr. Birkway helped. She suggests that Dad shouldn't go over to Mrs. Cadaver's house anymore. Sal isn't convinced Mrs. Cadaver is a murderer, but she doesn't want Dad hanging out with her. This is especially true since there are lots of creepy things, like masks and swords, in her house.

Sal doesn't buy Phoebe's fears outright, but again, they provide a convenient excuse to hate Mrs. Cadaver. And as Sal goes along with Phoebe's way of looking at the world, things that might not have bothered before—like the masks in Mrs. Cadaver's house—suddenly start to look sinister.



Dad acts different at Margaret's house. At home, he reads old letters, stares at the photo album, and looks lonely. But he smiles at Margaret's house and sometimes touches her hand. Sal doesn't like it. While she doesn't want Dad to be sad, she likes that Dad is thinking about Momma when he's sad.

Sal reveals here why she resents Margaret so much: she takes Dad's attention away from Momma. She isn't willing to accept that Dad is trying to move on and heal after Momma's departure, a process she's trying to sabotage.



Later that afternoon, Mrs. Winterbottom comes home looking terrible, like she's been crying. Phoebe pulls Sal upstairs to do homework and insists her mother likes to put groceries away by herself. She also doesn't think there's anything wrong with her mother. Sal wonders about this. How can she see that Mrs. Winterbottom is sad and worried, but Phoebe can't? Is Phoebe afraid to see it? Did Sal not notice some things about Momma?

To Sal, it's obvious that Mrs. Winterbottom is experiencing extreme emotional distress. So, it's shocking for her to realize that Phoebe either can't or won't see the same thing. As Sal connects this back to Momma, she starts to realize that perhaps being so close to someone blinds you to seeing how they're actually feeling. This would also line up with Sal's other indications that Momma wasn't happy—perhaps Sal just didn't see it.



When Sal and Phoebe come back downstairs, Mrs. Winterbottom is asking Prudence if she thinks she (Mrs. Winterbottom) “lead[s] a tiny life.” Prudence isn’t interested; she asks for nail polish remover and for her mother to hem her skirt. Sal asks Phoebe why Prudence doesn’t hem her own skirt, but Phoebe accuses Sal of being critical. Mrs. Winterbottom hems Prudence’s skirt right away.

By “a tiny life,” Mrs. Winterbottom likely means a life that’s limited, unfulfilling, and unimpressive. By asking this question, the reader can infer that she thinks she leads a tiny life, and that she’s probably hoping someone will tell her that she doesn’t. When both Prudence and Phoebe brush their mother off, they essentially show her that she does lead a tiny life—her world is limited to being a wife and mother, and she’s unappreciated and taken for granted within this role.



As Sal walks home later, she wonders why Mrs. Winterbottom does so much for her family if she doesn’t like it. At home, Dad hands Sal a package from Margaret. There’s a sweater inside, but Sal doesn’t want it. She tells Dad she doesn’t want to hear anything he has to say about Margaret—and she realizes she sounds like Phoebe.

As an outsider, Sal is able to think more critically about Mrs. Winterbottom’s dissatisfaction and the Winterbottoms’ family dynamic more generally. But at the same time, it’s much harder for Sal to interrogate her own behavior or see things from Dad and Margaret’s perspective. She’s starting to look critically at her own behavior, though, as she realizes that she’s acting like Phoebe.



CHAPTER 15

It’s extremely hot in South Dakota. Gram and Gramps start unbuttoning their clothes, and finally, Gramps stops at the Missouri River. Gram and Gramps undress and sit down in the river. Sal looks up and down the river before she follows them in. She lets her long black **hair** flow out behind her and remembers Dad asking her to never cut it. That was about a week before Momma left, and Momma had insisted that Dad resented that she cut her hair. Sal saved Momma’s hair; it’s under the floorboards in her Bybanks bedroom, along with Momma’s postcards.

Given what else Sal has alluded to about the weeks leading up to Momma’s departure, it seems as though Momma wasn’t happy in her role as a wife and mother. Cutting off her hair was, perhaps, a way to try to free herself from her identity and, by extension, these roles that seemed to trap her. When Sal collected Momma’s hair, she was trying to cling to her own perception of her mother rather than accepting who Momma herself wanted to be.



Sal is trying not to think about the postcards when, suddenly, a teenage boy appears on the bank. He has a big bowie knife in his belt, and Gramps tells Sal and Gram to get behind him. If Phoebe were here, she’d think the boy was a lunatic. Gramps greets the boy, who insists the riverbank here is private property. Sal is terrified, especially when the boy starts to go through Gramps’s pants pockets and finds his wallet. Sal picks up a stone from the riverbed and skips it across the water as a snake slides into the river.

Although Phoebe does make rash judgments about people, this boy does behave menacingly—he has a knife, and he seemingly wants Gramps’s money (or perhaps just his ID). Sal also implies that Phoebe uses the term “lunatic” to more generally refer to young men who mean to do her harm—it’s a catch-all phrase for her rather than the dictionary definition of the word (a mentally ill person).



The veins in Gramps’s neck are standing out. He tells the boy to watch what Sal can do. Sal picks up another rock and tosses it at a nearby tree—the rock sticks in the knothole. The boy stops going through Gramps’s pockets and stares at Sal. Suddenly, Gram cries out and flails. She pulls a snake out of the water and asks if it’s a poisonous water moccasin. It bit her leg.

Sal’s ability to throw the rock into the knothole is meant to intimidate the boy. The boy and Gramps’s attempts to intimidate each other, though, abruptly end when the snake bites Gram. Dad was right: Gram and Gramps attract trouble wherever they go.



Gramps carries Gram out of the water, tells her to put the snake down, and takes the boy's knife from his belt. He cuts a slit between the two punctures in Gram's leg, and the boy starts to suck the venom out. Gramps and the boy settle Gram in the backseat of the car. The boy continues to suck at the snakebite while he directs Gramps to the hospital. Later, in the waiting room of the hospital, Sal offers the boy a \$50 bill from Gramps, but he refuses to take it. The boy compliments Sal's **hair**, tells her not to cut it, and says the river wasn't actually private property.

A bit later, Sal goes in to see Gram. Gramps is on the bed with her, stroking her arm. A nurse comes in and makes him get off. He explains that Gram has had medicine that makes her a bit delirious. When the nurse leaves, Gramps gets back on the bed and says it's not their marriage bed, but it will do.

CHAPTER 16

The next morning, the doctors release Gram from the hospital. Gramps wants her to stay another day, but Gram is too "cantankerous." Sal figures that fear is making them all cantankerous. She slept in the waiting room, and the boy stayed in the waiting room with her. At 6:00 a.m., the boy woke Sal up to tell her that Gram was better. Then, he offered Sal a piece of paper with his address on it, in case she wanted to write. He added his name—Tom Fleet—and left.

As Gramps checks Gram out of the hospital, Sal suggests they call Dad, but Gramps refuses—he doesn't want to worry him. But Sal is ready to talk to Dad. As she and her grandparents leave the hospital, Sal hears a familiar bird warble coming from some nearby poplars. Suddenly, Sal thinks of the "**singing tree**" in Bybanks. Sal explains that there's an aspen beside the barn in Bybanks. As a kid, she often heard a beautiful birdsong coming from the top of the tree. She could never see the bird, so it seemed like the tree itself was singing. Just after Dad learned that Momma wasn't coming home, he left for Lewiston, and Gram and Gramps came to stay with Sal. Sal spent the day waiting for the tree to sing, and she, Gram, and Gramps even slept under it. It never sang.

Back in the present, Gram hears the birdsong and exclaims that it's the **singing tree**. She says this is a good sign. Gramps gets back on the road, headed for the Badlands. The whispers Sal hears stop telling her to hurry—in fact, they tell her to slow down. She can't figure out why, though it seems like a warning. But Sal doesn't have much time to think, since she resumes her story about Phoebe.

Gramps and the boy immediately become allies as they get Gram medical treatment. This sudden change suggests that they both misjudged each other—the boy assumed that Sal and her grandparents deserved to be taken advantage of, while they assumed he was going to hurt or steal from them. In reality, the boy was just trying to scare them—now, he shows himself to be helpful, humble, and kind.



This ordeal has clearly shaken Gramps—after all, the venomous snakebite could have severely injured or killed Gram. Now, much like Sal clings to her memories of Momma, Gramps is literally clinging onto Gram by refusing to leave her side.



Sal is already learning to look at her own behavior through different lenses, depending on what other people have to say. Gramps might be calling Gram "cantankerous," but Sal recognizes that Gram isn't the only one who's frustrated with this turn of events. Sal is, after all, still hearing the wind telling her to rush—Gram's snakebite is scary, but it's also slowing them down on their trip.



Once again, something Sal encounters in her present immediately jolts her into the past. The singing tree emerges as a symbol of Momma. Sal and Momma had a shared love of and connection to nature—it was a source of wonder (and perhaps even magic) for them. That the tree didn't sing after it became clear Momma wasn't coming home suggests that Momma's absence completely altered Sal's world, depleting it of the joy it once had. In this way, Sal depended on her mother for happiness and didn't know how to create it for herself.



Hearing the singing tree suggests that Sal is starting to recover and figure out how to be happy and appreciate nature again. And while this might be a good thing, it also seems disorienting for Sal. Hearing the whispers telling her to slow down suggests that some part of her doesn't want to find closure and move on from Momma.



CHAPTER 17

Sal is walking home after school with Phoebe. Phoebe is unusually sullen for no apparent reason. She tells Sal that Dad has to stop seeing Mrs. Cadaver—Mrs. Cadaver might chop him up, and then, Sal would have to go live with Momma. Sal is surprised, since she hasn't mentioned Momma at all. She lies that she'd go live with Momma in that event, though she knows such a thing would be impossible.

When Sal and Phoebe walk into Phoebe's house, Mrs. Winterbottom is sitting in front of a pan of burned brownies. She blows her nose, asks Phoebe how school was, and kisses Phoebe's cheek. Phoebe brushes off Mrs. Winterbottom's kiss and insists she doesn't want a brownie, since they're burnt and she's fat. Mrs. Winterbottom assures Phoebe that she isn't overweight, but Phoebe snaps. She shouts that she's fat and doesn't need her mother to wait for her after school. Then, she flounces upstairs.

Mrs. Winterbottom offers Sal a brownie, so Sal sits down. She starts to remember the day before Momma left. Sal didn't know Momma was going to leave the next day, and she continually refused to walk up to the fields with Momma. Finally, Sal snapped at Momma. Now, she wishes that wasn't one of Momma's last memories of her.

Just then, Prudence flies through the front door, wailing that she botched her cheerleading tryout. As Mrs. Winterbottom suggests she come to the second round of tryouts tomorrow to watch, Sal can tell that Mrs. Winterbottom is trying to put aside her own sadness. Sal realizes that Prudence "ha[d] her own agenda," just like Sal did the day Momma invited her to walk to the fields.

Prudence screeches that Mrs. Winterbottom can't come watch as Phoebe comes back into the kitchen with another white envelope. The message in this one reads, "In the course of a lifetime, what does it matter?" Prudence insists she has better things to worry about, and Phoebe teases Prudence that cheerleading tryouts don't matter in the grand scheme of things.

Here, Sal starts giving clues that Momma might not just be convalescing in Lewiston. This builds tension, as now it's even less what Momma is doing in Lewiston, or why Sal can't live with her. But Sal isn't ready to share this with Phoebe (or with the reader), so the novel puts this mystery aside for a while longer.



Phoebe is starting to push Mrs. Winterbottom away forcefully; she doesn't appreciate Mrs. Winterbottom's attempts to support and comfort her. Again, Mrs. Winterbottom seems to be in an emotional state—comforting Phoebe may also be an attempt to comfort herself.



Again, watching Phoebe and Mrs. Winterbottom's troubled dynamic gives Sal insight about the way she treated Momma. Given the similarities between Sal and Phoebe's respective relationships with their mothers, Sal's regret about snapping at Momma could foreshadow that Phoebe will come to similarly regret snapping at Mrs. Winterbottom.



Sal's realization about Prudence having "her own agenda" shows that she's internalizing the lessons in the mysterious notes. Just like Phoebe, Prudence doesn't seem to register that her mother is struggling emotionally. Sal can see that Prudence is too caught up in what's going on in her own life to pay attention to what's happening to the people around her—especially Mrs. Winterbottom, whom Prudence takes for granted in many ways.



This message encourages the reader to consider whether something that seems like a big deal is actually that important, when considered alongside the fact that life is long. Phoebe is trying to annoy Prudence by noting that cheerleading tryouts don't matter, but she nevertheless seems to grasp this note's basic message.



Meanwhile, Sal notices something odd happen to Mrs. Winterbottom: she puts a hand to her mouth and stares out the window. Later, as Sal walks home, she thinks about the message. She figures that cheerleading tryouts probably don't matter, but yelling at your mother might. She's sure that yelling at your mother will *definitely* matter, though, if your mother leaves.

Sal doesn't mention that either Phoebe or Prudence notice this change coming over their mother. Sal, as an outsider who sees her own mother reflected back to her in Mrs. Winterbottom, notices. This is because she's seen what happens when a mother become unhappy, and it hasn't turned out well for Sal's family.



CHAPTER 18

Sal doesn't mention Dad much as she tells Phoebe's story to Gram and Gramps. Dad is one of four sons, but his three brothers have died. Dad is good, kind, and honest. He likes plain things, and he loved the farm in Bybanks. Sal can tell he doesn't like working in an office in Euclid, since there's nothing "real" to touch. Momma was right: Dad is good, since he's always coming up with small things to cheer other people up. Sal believes this bothered Momma because she wanted to keep up with him, but that was impossible for her. He'd do things like dig up flowering bushes he found and plant them in Gram's garden, or bring small things back for Momma and Sal when he went to buy farm supplies. He always chooses the perfect gift.

It's clear that Sal admires her father as she describes him in this passage, which adds nuance to Sal's strained relationship with him throughout the book. Her resentment of Dad seems to be rooted in how he's coping with Momma's absence, not in a dislike of who he is. However, Sal does suggest that Dad's "goodness" is something that caused conflict in his and Momma's marriage, as Momma didn't feel like she was good enough for him. This passage also characterizes Dad as someone who treats the natural world with reverence—wanting to touch "real" things shows that Dad thinks of nature as healing and invigorating.



Sal has never seen Dad angry, and not long before she left, Momma nastily accused Dad of not being human. This bothered Sal—it seemed to her like Momma *wanted* Dad to be mean. Then, two days before Momma left, she said she felt "rotten" in comparison to Dad. She took offense when Dad said she wasn't rotten, and then she said she needed to leave and clear her head and heart of bad things. She insisted she had to go, since she wasn't good or brave. And she told Dad to call her by her real name, Chanhassen, instead of Sugar.

Sal picks up on the possibility that Momma wasn't happy and was struggling with self-esteem issues as she got closer to leaving. Dad's kindness toward Momma seems to have just made her feel worse about herself. Previously, Sal also revealed that Momma cut her hair around this time as well, which may have helped her reorient her identity. While her long hair was associated with who she was (Sugar), her new, short haircut was associated with who she wanted to be (Chanhassen).



Sal figured Momma would ultimately decide to stay—or, if she was going to leave, tell Sal first. But instead, Momma left Sal a letter explaining that she'd be home "before the tulips bloomed." This, of course, didn't happen. Dad continued to work after Momma left, and he continued to stash gifts for Momma in the bedroom. Then, after it became clear Momma wasn't coming back and Dad made the trip to Lewiston, he started chipping away at the plaster wall. This eventually revealed the hidden **fireplace**. In the new grout between the bricks, he wrote Momma's name: Chanhassen.

Because Sal was so close to Momma and so set in her perception of who her mother was, she never expected Momma to actually leave. After Momma did leave, and Sal and Dad found out that she wasn't coming back, Dad's process of chipping away at the plaster wall and discovering the fireplace was a cathartic process. It's as though, through this symbolic act, he came to terms with who Momma truly was rather than who Sal and Dad wanted her to be—just as he uncovered what was truly hidden beneath the wall. Writing Momma's preferred name in the fireplace grout was a way to honor her and show her that he respected who she wanted to be—even though Sal makes it seem like Momma will never return to see her name etched into the grout.



Three weeks later, Dad put the farm up for sale. Sal was aware that Dad and Mrs. Cadaver were writing each other letters. He went to visit her once and announced that he had a new job in Euclid when he got home. Sal was too busy throwing temper tantrums to care about Mrs. Cadaver. She was convinced they couldn't leave, since Momma might come back. Finally, Dad agreed to rent the farm instead of selling it—but he insisted they had to go to Euclid, since Momma was haunting the farm. Eventually, Sal ran out of steam and agreed to go to Euclid.

Again, the fact that Dad and Margaret were corresponding before Dad and Sal moved to Euclid creates a sense of mystery about how they met and what the nature of their relationship is. Meanwhile, in Sal's mind, Momma's emotional and spiritual connection to the farm is so great that she can't believe Momma won't return to this place. And though Dad seems to accept that Momma won't return, he nevertheless echoes the idea that Momma is spiritually connected to the farm when he insists that Momma is haunting the property.



So, as Sal tells Phoebe's story to Gram and Gramps, she leaves out everything about Dad. They already know that Dad felt he had to leave the farm, and that Sal wanted nothing to do with Margaret. On the day Sal and Dad left the farm, Sal wished that Dad was meaner. Then, she'd be able to blame him for Momma leaving, since Sal didn't want to blame Momma.

In Sal's mind, Momma can do no wrong. So even if Sal might resent Momma for leaving on some level, she's trying to come up with any reason to shift the blame onto someone else. The answer, she decides, is to try to blame Dad, which is part of the reason why she's so closed off from him. But because Dad is so kind, this is difficult for Sal—and by wishing Dad was meaner, she echoes Momma's own resentment of Dad's goodness.



CHAPTER 19

Gram asks where they are in Phoebe's story; she needs Sal to refresh her memory after the snakebite. The last thing she remembers is that Phoebe wanted Sal to tell Dad that Mrs. Cadaver and Mr. Birkway cut up Mr. Cadaver. Sal picks her story up: Phoebe is very concerned about Margaret. One Sunday, Sal finds Dad looking through photo albums. She asks Dad if he knows much about Margaret, but she won't let him explain anything. Instead, she tells him that Margaret is spooky, and that they shouldn't visit her anymore. Dad just says that Momma isn't coming back. Suddenly, Sal sees how foolish Phoebe's beliefs are, and she refuses to let Dad tell her how he met Margaret.

Finding Dad looking through old photo albums suggests that he's still grieving Momma, even if Sal seems to believe that he's moving on and becoming close (perhaps even romantically involved) with Margaret. As Sal grapples with all of this, she seems to realize that she's overreacting—just because she doesn't like Margaret doesn't mean that Margaret is “spooky” or dangerous. But by refusing to let Dad tell her the story of how he and Margaret met, Sal is shielding herself from truths that might be uncomfortable for her.



As Sal does homework later, she finds herself doodling an evil woman in the margins. She draws a noose and a tree to hang her doodle. The next day, Sal studies Mr. Birkway closely. He's a lively murderer. Sal hopes he's in love with Margaret so they can get married, go far away, and let Dad and Sal go back to Bybanks. Surprisingly, though, Mr. Birkway reminds Sal of Momma, before Momma became sad.

The evil woman Sal doodles is presumably Margaret, and the noose in the drawing speaks to Sal's level of disdain for Margaret's involvement in Dad's life. She seems to wish that Margaret would die, or at least fall in love with someone else and leave Dad alone. In addition, describing Mr. Birkway as “a lively murderer” suggests that Sal wants to believe Phoebe's insistence that Mr. Birkway and Margaret are criminals and in cahoots, even if she knows this story is far-fetched.



Mr. Birkway introduces Greek mythology in class. Meanwhile, Sal remembers how much Momma loved books and “Indian stories.” She especially loved stories featuring reincarnation of some sort. Mr. Birkway pulls Sal out of her reverie by assigning Phoebe an oral report on Pandora, due next Monday. Class ends, and Mr. Birkway asks Sal to stay after. Phoebe insists on staying too—Sal shouldn’t be alone with him, since he helped Mrs. Cadaver murder Mr. Cadaver. But the meeting is fine; Mr. Birkway assigns Sal a “mini journal,” where she has to write about something that interests her.

Sal is preoccupied as she walks home with Phoebe, Mary Lou, and Ben. She’s barely paying attention as she and Phoebe part ways with the others—and the lunatic appears in front of them. Phoebe is terrified already, but then the lunatic asks her name and puts his hand in his pocket. With a screech, Phoebe pulls Sal along with her and races for home. Sal is starting to believe that the boy is a lunatic too.

The door is locked when Phoebe gets to her house. Mrs. Winterbottom opens the door for the girls and says she thought she saw someone frightening. Phoebe says she saw the lunatic and they should tell Mr. Winterbottom. Sal realizes that Mrs. Winterbottom is more afraid than even Phoebe is. To Sal’s knowledge, nobody calls the police that evening.

CHAPTER 20

Sal tries to write her mini journal for Mr. Birkway that night. She lists all the things she likes first. They’re all things from Bybanks, like the chickens, the fields, or the swimming hole. Sal ends up writing about Momma, “because everything [is] connected to her.” She finally writes about the “**blackberry** kiss.”

Many Greek myths (and probably many of Momma’s “Indian stories”) were developed to help people explain things that were difficult to understand. At this time, many things in Sal’s life seem inexplicable to her, such as why Dad insisted on coming to Euclid and why Momma left, so these stories might give her some new perspective. Phoebe’s desire to protect Sal is humorous, but it also reflects how caught up she is in her wild assumptions about people.



This young man doesn’t seem particularly frightening, just as he didn’t seem threatening when he showed up at the Winterbottoms’ door. It’s a mystery as to why he’s interested in Phoebe, but Phoebe refuses to let him explain who he is or how he’s connected to the Winterbottoms—from her perspective, everyone is out to get her.



Though Mrs. Winterbottom seems even more afraid of the lunatic than Phoebe does, the fact that she doesn’t call the police is important. This, along with the fact that she kept the lunatic a secret from Mr. Winterbottom, subtly hints that Mrs. Winterbottom is scared for a different reason than Phoebe is, and that she somehow knows the lunatic doesn’t pose a real threat to them.



Here, Sal admits outright that everything precious in her life is somehow connected to Momma—even though her mother is absent, she’s still the center of Sal’s world. In particular, the family farm in Bybanks seems intrinsically connected to Momma because of how much she loved nature.



Sal writes that one morning, she woke up very early and watched Momma walk up to the barn. Momma was pregnant then, and she was singing as she walked. She put a few **blackberries** in her mouth, and then, Momma threw her arms around the maple tree and kissed it. Later in the day, Sal approached the maple tree. She probably was making it up, but she thought she could see a small blackberry-colored stain where Momma kissed the tree. Then, Sal kissed the tree herself. In her journal, she confesses that she's kissed lots of trees since then. Every tree has a particular taste, but they all taste a bit like blackberries. She doesn't know why.

The next day, Sal gives her mini journal to Mr. Birkway. During class, Mr. Birkway introduces a poem by e. e. cummings called "the little horse is newY." According to Mr. Birkway, Mr. Cummings just liked to capitalize the last letter of the title. Phoebe snickers that Mr. Cummings must not have taken an English class, but to Sal, the Y looks like a foal on its new spindly legs. In the poem, the "newY born horse" lives in a "smoothbeautifully folded" world, which Sal likes. It sounds safe.

Phoebe leaves early for a dentist appointment, so Ben walks home with Sal. As they walk, Ben asks if Sal would like him to read her palm. Sal offers him her hand, and Ben spends about five minutes tracing the lines on her palm. It makes Sal think about the e. e. cummings poem. Finally, Ben says that the bad news is he can't read palms—but the good news is that he was able to hold Sal's hand and she didn't flinch. Sal snatches her hand away and refuses to speak to him. He walks her all the way to Phoebe's house. On the porch, Sal turns away quickly, and Ben accidentally kisses her ear. He hurries away.

Phoebe's face is white and scared when she opens the door and invites Sal in. There's a pie and three notes on the table, one each for Prudence, Phoebe, and Mr. Winterbottom. Phoebe's note reads that she should keep the doors locked and call Mr. Winterbottom if she needs anything. Phoebe says she wasn't concerned at first, but then, Prudence opened her note. Prudence's note includes instructions for heating up dinner. Sal doesn't think much of this and helps Phoebe and Prudence make dinner. Then, Mr. Winterbottom gets home. His note says: "I had to go away. I can't explain. I'll call you in a few days." Sal feels a "sinking, sinking feeling."

Finally, Sal explains why she associates blackberries with Momma. The memory of Momma kissing the tree and leaving the blackberry stain—even if that stain only exists in Sal's imagination—seems central to Sal's perception of her mother, because it shows how carefree, loving, and connected to nature Momma was. Because of this, she associates Momma with blackberries and with trees, and her desire to feel emotionally close to her mother leads her to mimic Momma's gesture of kissing the tree. The aside that all trees taste a little like blackberries suggests that Sal senses Momma's presence all around her—it colors all of Sal's experiences, just like the blackberry-colored stain lingered on the tree that Momma kissed.



In English conventions, as in other parts of her life, Phoebe has a very particular idea of how things should be—so to her, e. e. cummings just made a mistake. But because Sal doesn't approach the poem with those preconceptions, she's able to focus on how the poem makes her feel and how the words look on the page. There's more than one way to look at this poem, just as Sal is learning that there's more than one way to look at a person or situation.



The e. e. cummings poem helps Sal think about other events in her life in a new way. And significantly, given that Sal thought the world cummings described in the poems sounded "safe," she implies that she feels safe with Ben—their romance is developing, even as Ben tricks her in a way that Sal doesn't appreciate. Nevertheless, Ben seems to sense Sal's lingering trauma and to want to help her heal and accept kindness and affection.



But Mr. Winterbottom's note forces Sal to remember Momma's departure—Momma also left without saying goodbye, though she left Sal a note that promised she'd be back. Mrs. Winterbottom's differs in that, unlike Momma, she offers no promise that she's coming back. From this, it's hard for Sal and the Winterbottoms to gauge Mrs. Winterbottom's intentions in leaving.



Prudence and Phoebe pepper Mr. Winterbottom with questions. Phoebe wants to call the police, since the lunatic might have kidnapped Mrs. Winterbottom. Mr. Winterbottom says he has no idea where Mrs. Winterbottom went, but they should eat dinner anyway. Later, as Sal leaves, Phoebe makes Sal swear to not tell anyone about her mother.

For Phoebe, the only plausible explanation for her mother's disappearance is that someone kidnapped her. Mr. Winterbottom, though, isn't willing to entertain such fantastical ideas. It's more important to him to support his daughters and make things seem normal, even if this is perhaps impossible. In this way, Mr. Winterbottom's tendency to brush things off and ignore anything out of the ordinary keeps him from having to confront the severity of this situation.



At home, Sal finds Dad looking at a picture of him and Momma sitting in front of the sugar maple in Bybanks. Sal tells him that Mrs. Winterbottom went away and that she says she's coming back, but Sal doesn't believe it. Then, she heads upstairs. Dad appears in her doorway and says that usually, people do come back. Sal knows he means this generally, but she takes his words to mean that a miracle could happen. Momma might come back, and they can all go back to the way things were in Bybanks.

By saying that people usually come back, Dad seems to imply that it was a fluke that Momma didn't return to him and Sal. It wasn't something they could've predicted, and as Dad sees it, the Winterbottoms should proceed as though Mrs. Winterbottom will indeed return. In this regard, Dad seems to have processed and accepted Momma's absence in a way that Sal hasn't yet, as his experience of Momma leaving doesn't color his perception of other people leaving. His reassurance gives Sal hope that Momma will come home, which seems misguided given that Sal has left several clues suggesting that it's impossible for Momma to return.



CHAPTER 21

Phoebe shows up at school the next day with a thin smile that looks like it's been pasted on. She maintains this all day, and she tells Sal to come spend the night tomorrow night. Mr. Birkway assigns the students an exercise: they must draw their souls in 15 seconds. The students stare at him for a few seconds, and then Sal puts her pencil to her paper.

Phoebe may have been pushing her mother away before Mrs. Winterbottom left, but her reaction to her mother's absence shows how much she relied on having Mrs. Winterbottom around. Even if Mrs. Winterbottom annoyed Phoebe, Phoebe still feels lost and afraid without her.



When the time is up, Mr. Birkway collects everyone's drawings and puts them on the bulletin board. Sal is shocked. Every person drew a central shape, such as a heart, square, or triangle. And inside each shape is a design, such as a cross or a window. Sal thinks the one with a teardrop inside must be Phoebe's. There are two drawings that are exactly the same: Sal and Ben's. They both drew maple leaves inside of circles.

The result of this exercise suggests that the people in Sal's class aren't that different from one another; they all drew much the same things, after all. But Sal and Ben drawing the exact same thing indicates that they're deeply connected in a way that's mysterious both to them or to outsiders. Furthermore, the fact that Sal draws a maple leaf indicates that she sees her soul as intrinsically connected to Momma (whose name means "maple sugar") and to the natural world.



CHAPTER 22

At Phoebe's house the next night, Sal barely sleeps. Phoebe jumps in and out of bed at every noise. She's sure the lunatic will return for her, and she spots Mrs. Cadaver in her garden at one point. Sal dozes off and wakes up to Phoebe crying, though Phoebe denies it. In the morning, Phoebe refuses to get up and tells Mr. Winterbottom she's very sick, possibly with cancer. Mr. Winterbottom says they have to live their lives and can't "malingering." He tosses her the dictionary before he runs away. Phoebe discovers that to malingering is to pretend to be sick to get out of work.

Prudence races around the house getting ready, while Phoebe slowly dresses in wrinkled clothes. Downstairs, she laments that there's no muesli, toast, or orange juice on the table. Then, she touches Mrs. Winterbottom's favorite cardigan and asks if her mother would really leave it behind. Mr. Winterbottom insists it's old, but Phoebe puts it on.

Sal is uneasy. This all reminds her of the first few weeks after Momma left. Sal and Dad fumbled around, and the animals were skittish. When Dad said Momma wasn't coming home, Sal refused to believe it. She presented her postcards to Dad, as well as Momma's favorite chicken. Sal knows that both she and Phoebe were asking the same thing by showing their mothers' favorite things to their fathers: "How can she not come back to me? She loves me."

When a classmate comments on Phoebe's wrinkled blouse at school, Phoebe says Mrs. Winterbottom is away. The classmate says she already does all her own ironing, and Phoebe whispers to Sal that she's having a heart attack. Sal remembers a time that her family's dog, Moody Blue, caught a baby rabbit and carried it around. When Sal convinced Moody Blue to hand over the rabbit, she could feel the rabbit's heart beating fast—until it stopped. Momma said the rabbit was dead. Now, Sal wonders what would happen if Phoebe's heart stopped. Mrs. Winterbottom wouldn't have any idea.

As Phoebe tries to orient herself after Mrs. Winterbottom disappears, she searches for anything that might explain what's happening to her and to her family. Her first instinct is to stop everything so that nothing will have changed when Mrs. Winterbottom returns. But Mr. Winterbottom proposes that they should confront their fears and remain strong by continuing on with life as usual. In this way, Phoebe and her father have entirely different ways of coping with loss, and the novel doesn't indicate that either of these reactions is better or more valid than the other.



With Mrs. Winterbottom gone, Phoebe has to acknowledge all the things that her mother did for her. She may not have appreciated these things much before, but now they seem extremely important.



The situation at the Winterbottoms' house is unsettling for many reasons, but for Sal, it's especially hard because she went through the same thing when Momma left. Phoebe, she realizes, fears that Mrs. Winterbottom has been kidnapped because in her mind, it's unthinkable that Mrs. Winterbottom would leave her beloved daughters—just as Sal initially refused to believe that Momma wasn't coming back.



Phoebe is afraid of what's happening with her mother, but she also doesn't want to have to admit to her classmates that her family is going through this crisis. Phoebe prides herself on being normal and having a seemingly perfect family that, so it would be difficult to acknowledge that that's not actually the case. Sal, though, has been in Phoebe's position, so she's focused on how Mrs. Winterbottoms' disappearance is affecting Phoebe (much like Momma's absence has affected Sal). She's clearly worried about the prospect of suffering (or even dying) without one's mother around to intervene.



Later in the morning, Christy and Megan ask if Mrs. Winterbottom is on a business trip. Phoebe says her mother is in London and then gives Sal a puzzled look. Sal understands: it's easier to lie sometimes. She did the same thing when Momma left. She tells Phoebe not to worry, and Phoebe snaps back that she's not worried. Sal also remembers snapping at people when they tried to empathize with her or soothe her. In reality, she felt terrible. Kids continue to pepper Phoebe with questions throughout the day. Walking home after school, Ben tells Phoebe to talk. But instead, Sal says, "everyone has his own agenda."

Phoebe asks Sal to stay with her after school, and to ask Dad if she can stay for dinner. Mrs. Winterbottom isn't home, so Phoebe announces that she's going to look for clues that will prove the lunatic dragged her mother away. Sal wants to tell Phoebe this is silly, but she knows Phoebe won't want to hear it. When Momma left, Sal imagined that all sorts of things had happened to her. Dad assured Sal that Momma didn't have cancer. She wonders if maybe Dad was trying to protect either her or Momma.

Phoebe searches the house for bloodstains and hair. She collects hairs and marks suspicious spots with tape. Prudence gets home a bit later, thrilled that she made the cheerleading squad. Phoebe reminds Prudence that Mrs. Winterbottom was kidnapped, but Prudence insists that isn't true and asks about dinner. When Prudence opens the freezer and tells Phoebe to look, Sal is terrified—maybe there are body parts in there. But instead, there are frozen casseroles with cooking instructions taped to the top. Prudence shows Mr. Winterbottom the freezer when he gets home, but he just says, "Hm."

Over dinner, Mr. Winterbottom says he hasn't heard from Mrs. Winterbottom. He refuses to call the police and then listens to Phoebe tell him about her evidence. Then, he pulls Phoebe to the freezer, makes her look at the casseroles, and asks if the kidnapping lunatic really would've allowed Mrs. Winterbottom to prepare casseroles before taking her. Phoebe accuses her father of not caring. When Sal leaves later, Mr. Winterbottom is busy calling all of Mrs. Winterbottom's friends, which pleases Phoebe.

Again, Sal recognizes what's going on with Phoebe here because she's experienced the same thing herself. In this way, Sal can empathize with Phoebe in a way that many of their classmates probably can't. Sal also suggests that what's going to come next isn't a mystery: Phoebe is going to continue to feel terrible but will insist that she feels fine. When Sal responds to Ben with one of the messages from the notes, she's suggesting that Phoebe is far too caught up in her own misery to care about talking to Ben.



Because Sal has been through all of this and knows that Phoebe won't want to hear that she's grasping at straws, Sal is able to be a more empathetic friend. But at the same time, seeing Phoebe go through this allows Sal to think more critically about what happened when Momma left. Wondering if Dad was trying to protect her or Momma by telling the truth is a much more generous view of Dad than Sal has given him thus far.



One of the things that makes Mrs. Winterbottom's disappearance especially difficult for Phoebe is that Prudence and Mr. Winterbottom don't seem to care all that much. Prudence, for one, is too caught up in her own life to take Phoebe's concern seriously. And although Mr. Winterbottom doesn't react strongly to the frozen meals, they hint that his wife was planning her departure for some time. Sal is still dealing with the trauma of Momma's departure, so she feels every twinge of fear that Phoebe does.



Mr. Winterbottom seems to be doing exactly what Dad did with Sal: telling her that all of the far-fetched ideas she's considering are probably wrong. Sal is able to see that Mr. Winterbottom is trying to be kind by telling Phoebe the truth, but to Phoebe, this is insulting. It makes her feel as though Mr. Winterbottom doesn't care about Phoebe or Mrs. Winterbottom.



As Sal steps onto Phoebe's porch, Margaret calls to her—Dad is over, and they're having dessert. Dad tells her to join them, but Sal says she needs to go finish her homework. Dad decides to walk home with Sal, and they discuss Phoebe and Mrs. Winterbottom. Dad insists that it's far-fetched that a lunatic might've carried Mrs. Winterbottom off, but Sal asks how Dad knows that someone didn't blackmail Momma into going to Idaho. Sighing, Dad insists that Momma wanted to go, and he says they couldn't have stopped her. For that matter, Momma intended to return. Seeing how miserable Dad looks, Sal apologizes. They sit on the porch together, "pitiful and lost."

Sal isn't ready to forgive Margaret Cadaver yet, or Dad for that matter. But in this moment, Sal starts to see that Dad is hurting just as much as she is because of Momma's absence—he's just as "pitiful and lost" as she is. And Dad seems to suggest that while wild ideas (like the notion that the lunatic kidnapped Mrs. Winterbottom) might help a person cope with loss in the short term, it's better to accept the truth in the long term. In this case, the truth is that Momma wanted to go, and she also wanted to return. This also implies that Momma didn't choose whatever situation is preventing her from returning.



CHAPTER 23

Gramps is worried about Gram, but he's not worried about her snake bite—rather, Gram's breathing is raspy now. He promises to stop in the Badlands. The air is still whispering to Sal to slow down, but she suggests that they don't stop. Sal knows Momma must've traveled this road and wonders what she thought of every passing sign. Momma didn't like to drive, so when she announced that she was going to Lewiston, Dad and Sal were shocked. Momma had a cousin in Lewiston whom she hadn't seen in 15 years. And that, Momma said, was a good thing—the cousin would be able to tell Momma who she really is, who she was before she became a wife and a mother. Her cousin, Momma believed, would be able to tell her who Chanhassen is.

It's possible that the whispers telling Sal to slow down are linked to Gram's declining health. On some level, perhaps Sal knows that by rushing through the trip and not stopping to rest, they could exacerbate whatever is wrong with Gram or miss some of her symptoms. Meanwhile, by wondering what Momma thought of the passing landscape, Sal is able to "walk two moons" in Momma's shoes (just like the mysterious letter suggested) and see this route through Momma's eyes. This may allow Sal to develop more empathy for her mother and come to a better understanding of Momma's departure. Finally, in Sal's flashback, she confirms that Momma did feel stifled by her role as a wife and mother. Sal and Dad's surprise when Momma floated the idea of the trip to Lewiston suggests that she challenged their assumptions of who she was.



The Badlands are a shock for Sal. The rest of South Dakota is flat, but the Badlands consist of jagged peaks, hills, and valleys. Gram is so raspy and out of breath that she can't get out "Huzza, huzza." Gramps puts a blanket down for her to sit on. Sal remembers the two postcards Momma sent her from the Badlands. One said that Sal is Momma's left arm, and that Momma misses her left arm. Sal tells her grandparents one of Momma's stories about the sky. The sky used to be low enough to bump your head on—and people got so fed up, they pushed the sky up with long poles.

This passage again shows how devoted Gramps is to Gram. Her worsening health continues to build tension, as it makes the future uncertain and could throw a wrench in Sal's goal of reaching Lewiston by Momma's birthday. Sal can't look at the Badlands without also seeing Momma, and because of this, she also remembers Momma's stories that seem particularly relevant to the Badlands.



As Sal tells her story, a pregnant woman stands nearby. Gramps invites the woman to sit on their blanket. Since Sal is afraid of pregnant women, she excuses herself. She remembers how when Momma told Sal about her pregnancy, Sal was upset. But before long, Sal got excited about the baby. She helped decorate the nursery and fold clothes. She, Momma, and Dad couldn't decide on a name for the baby, but this didn't worry Momma.

As Sal describes her growing excitement for Momma's baby, she implies that she hasn't always been afraid of pregnant women—she was perhaps afraid of how the baby might change her life, but she wasn't scared of Momma. Seeing the pregnant woman now, Sal can't help but remember Momma being pregnant and relive this moment.



Three weeks before Momma was due, Sal was climbing trees in the woods. Dad was in town, and Momma was scrubbing floors. Then, Sal's branch snapped, and she fell. She woke up later to discover her leg twisted under her. Sal passed out again and woke up when it was dark. Momma was calling for her. Eventually, Momma found Sal, carried her home, and called Gram and Gramps to take Sal to the hospital.

Sal might love the natural world, but it's not always a force kind and generous force. She learns here that it can hurt her, and the situation puts Momma in danger as well—lifting like this can be dangerous if a woman has a high-risk pregnancy. But because Momma's loved Sal so much, she didn't hesitate to carry her inside and get her the care she needed. Nevertheless, this detail foreshadows that something may have gone wrong with the baby after this, which would explain Sal's previous hints that she's any only child despite Momma having been pregnant with a second baby.



That night, Momma went into labor. She insisted something was wrong. Sal sat outside the bedroom as Momma screamed and went quiet. The doctor came out of the bedroom with the baby, which was blue with marks on its neck. The umbilical cord had strangled it. The baby was a girl.

This confirms what Sal has hinted at throughout the book: the baby Momma was carrying didn't survive. This traumatic memory explains why Sal fears pregnant women. She'll never be able to forget that having children doesn't always bring happiness, the way it does for the Finneys—it can also bring tragedy.



The doctor allowed Sal to touch the baby but not to hold her. Dad was shaken, but he kept checking on Sal and Momma. He told Sal it wasn't her fault; the baby didn't die because Momma carried Sal earlier. Sal didn't believe him. She snuggled in with Momma, who asked to hold the baby. She wouldn't accept that the baby was dead.

It is impossible to tell whether Momma carrying Sal is what caused the baby to die—the stress of lifting Sal could have caused complications, or the baby's death may have been entirely unrelated. Either way, though, the stillbirth isn't Sal's fault—she didn't break her arm on purpose, nor could she have known that Momma would carry her. But the reader has already seen that Sal she deals with grief by blaming herself, so she assumes that she must have caused her sister's death. This mirrors Phoebe's practice of telling wild stories—there's a remote chance that Phoebe is right that Mrs. Winterbottom was kidnapped, but it's highly unlikely and impossible to verify. Nevertheless, it makes Phoebe feel better and more in control, just as Sal tries to understand the stillbirth by blaming herself.



Sal fell asleep and woke up to Momma calling for Dad. Dad turned the light on and found the bed soaked in blood. An ambulance came for Momma, and Gram tried to scrub the blood off of Sal's cast. When Dad came home, he insisted they name the baby anyway. Sal suggested Tulip. Over the next few days, Momma had two operations to stop the bleeding. Ultimately, she had a hysterectomy—she'd never have another baby.

Momma and Dad dreamed of having many more children. So, in addition to the trauma of losing Tulip, Momma also lost the ability to pursue the dream of having more biological children when she had the hysterectomy. This fundamentally changed the course of her life, and the description of Dad and Sal seeing the blood-soaked bed and witnessing Momma being taken away in an ambulance suggests that this was traumatic for the whole family.



Back in the present, Sal looks at Gram, Gramps, and the pregnant woman. She imagines that the woman is Momma, and that everything will turn out okay. Then, Sal tries to imagine what Momma did when the bus stopped here. Was Momma thinking about Sal as she sat here?

Imagining that the pregnant woman is Momma is a thought experiment for Sal to consider how things might have been if Tulip hadn't died. Sal can't change anything about the past, but reflecting on what happened to Momma and trying to put herself in Momma's shoes may help her get some closure.



Then, Sal picks up a flat stone and hurls it across the gorge. She remembers a Blackfoot story Momma told her about Napi, who created people. He decided to toss a stone in water to see if humans would live forever or die; if the stone sank, they'd die. The stone did sink. Sal had asked Momma why Napi used a stone instead of a leaf, but Momma couldn't give a satisfactory answer. Sal throws another rock across the gorge. It sinks, and Sal thinks she shouldn't expect anything else.

This Blackfoot myth ties into Sal's lingering trauma surrounding Tulip's death. It introduces the idea that although death is natural and expected, it's still traumatic and difficult to accept, especially when someone dies at a young age. Furthermore, the fact that Blackfoot used a stone rather than a leaf in this myth could perhaps be seen as unfair—stones always sink, after all, so it's as though Blackfoot knowingly doomed humans to mortality. This subtly hints that death is necessary and meaningful in a way that humans can't necessarily understand or control, hence why Momma didn't have an explanation for Sal.



CHAPTER 24

Gramps swears at a driver who cuts him off as they leave the Badlands. Usually, when Gramps cusses, Gram threatens to go back to the egg man, whom she once ran off with for three days when Gramps wouldn't stop cussing. Gram once confided in Sal that she actually doesn't mind *some* cussing—and the egg man snored terribly. She explained that she didn't even remember why she left Gramps. Sometimes, Gram said, you can love someone but still need to go away so you know for sure.

Sal isn't quite able to put it together yet, but what Gram has to say about the egg man and leaving a relationship could also apply to Momma leaving Sal and Dad. Just like Gram, Momma seems to have loved Sal and Dad deeply—but just as Gram needed time away from Gramps to be sure that she loved him, Momma may have felt the need to go away so she could be sure that she really belonged on the farm in Bybanks.



Gramps stops that night at a motel near Wall, South Dakota. The only room left has only a king-size waterbed, and Gramps jokes that the three of them will have to “float on this raft” tonight. Gram flops down and giggles. Sal flops down next to her, and Gramps sits on the other side. The bed sloshes, and Gram keeps giggling. That night, Sal dreams of floating on a raft with Momma. They're staring at the sky, which keeps moving closer. Then, with a popping noise, Sal and Momma are in the sky—and Momma remarks that they can't be dead. In the morning, Sal gets back in the car with her grandparents, and they ask her to continue Phoebe's story.

This passage is another example of Sal's present intertwining with her past, as Gramps's joke reminds Sal of lying with Momma and talking about floating away on a river. But in Sal's dream, floating on the raft is associated with death. The meaning of this dream isn't totally clear, but it seems to suggest that in Sal's mind, fully reuniting with Momma is only possible in death. This again confirms that it's impossible for Momma to return to Sal and Dad, though it's still unclear exactly why that is. Momma's insistence that they aren't really dead again suggests that death is difficult to accept and understand. This dream adds further mystery to Momma's departure and what happened to her on the journey to Lewiston.



A new message appears the day after Phoebe shows Mr. Winterbottom her suspicious evidence. This one reads, “You can’t keep the birds of sadness from flying over your head, but you can keep them from nesting in your hair.” Phoebe brings the message to school and insists it was the lunatic—the messages are clues to help Phoebe find Mrs. Winterbottom.

Phoebe is so caught up in proving her mother was kidnapped that she’s totally unwilling to consider this message’s meaning. It seems to suggest that Mr. Winterbottom has the right idea—by continuing on as usual, he’s trying to keep the “birds of sadness” from “nesting.” More generally, the note suggests that although a person can’t choose what happens to them, they can choose how they respond to events.



Kids keep asking Phoebe about Mrs. Winterbottom’s trip to London. Sal thinks that Phoebe looks like a whole family of “birds of sadness” are in her hair. Ben gives his report on Prometheus in English class that day, and after school, Mary Lou invites Phoebe and Sal to dinner. Dad agrees that Sal can go and suggests he’ll eat with Margaret.

Sal’s observation that Phoebe has “birds of sadness” in her hair suggests that Phoebe is actively choosing to be miserable and deny reality. Although Mrs. Winterbottom’s disappearance is upsetting, it’s implied that Phoebe has the power to choose to approach her mother’s disappearance in healthier way. This idea is contrasted with the allusion to Prometheus, a Greek god whom Zeus punished by sentencing him to eternal torture. Paired together, these details perhaps suggest that although suffering can seem never-ending, people can still choose how they respond to it.



CHAPTER 25

When Sal, Phoebe, and Mary Lou get to the Finneys’ house, it’s in utter chaos. The boys are running everywhere, while Mr. Finney is cooking with four-year-old Tommy’s help. Phoebe whispers that she’s not “optimistic” about this meal. Mrs. Finney comes home at about 6:00 p.m., and the boys argue about who gets to tell her things first. She ignores them and kisses Mr. Finney. Finally, everyone sits down. Phoebe points out to Sal that the plates don’t match. Then, when she sees that they’re having fried chicken, she says she has a sensitive stomach and can’t eat it. She puts two pieces of chicken from Ben’s plate back on the serving dish, insisting there’s cholesterol in the chicken.

What shines through in Sal’s description of the Finney household is how in love with each other Mr. and Mrs. Finney are. It seems like they, rather than their children, are the center of each other’s worlds in the midst of chaos. This is probably unfamiliar for Phoebe—from what Sal has seen, Mr. Winterbottom usually rebuffs Mrs. Winterbottom’s affectionate advances. The entire dinner is upsetting for Phoebe, as being served a meal that’s so different from what her mother would serve makes Mrs. Winterbottom’s absence all the more apparent.



Phoebe tells Mrs. Finney she can’t eat the chicken, and she insists Mr. Finney shouldn’t either—men have to be careful of cholesterol. As the beans get to Phoebe, Phoebe asks if there’s butter on the them. There is, so Phoebe says she can’t eat the beans—butter has cholesterol in it. Mrs. Finney warns Mr. Finney about the cholesterol, and Sal can tell that she’s not the only one frustrated with Phoebe. Phoebe goes on to refuse the potatoes too, and everyone else stares at their plates.

Phoebe seems to have no idea she’s being rude or that she’s annoying Sal and Mr. And Mrs. Finney. Her refusal to consider that the Finneys’ eating habits are simply different from—not necessarily inferior to—her family’s eating habits reflects Phoebe’s general unwillingness to consider other people’s points of view.



Finally, Mrs. Finney asks Phoebe what she eats. Phoebe says Mrs. Winterbottom makes low-calorie, cholesterol-free vegetarian meals, and that she's a great cook. Sal wants to blurt out that Phoebe is acting like this because Mrs. Winterbottom disappeared, but she stays quiet. Phoebe asks for "unadulterated" vegetables or one of her mother's casseroles. Mrs. Finney finally finds Phoebe muesli with milk. Phoebe usually eats it with yogurt, but the Finneys don't have any. As Sal eats, she remembers that eating at Gram and Gramps's house in Bybanks felt a lot like eating at the Finneys'. Maybe Momma wanted a house like this, full of kids and "confusion."

Phoebe is trying to feel close to Mrs. Winterbottom by insisting on eating something that her mother would make. But Sal is the only person who can truly empathize with Phoebe, because she's the only one who understands why Phoebe is acting this way. To the Finneys, Phoebe probably just seems entitled and picky. But unlike Phoebe, Sal gains some new perspective from this meal. Although she was upset about having a younger sibling when she first learned that Momma was pregnant, now she seems to understand the appeal of Momma and Dad's desire for a big family.



As Sal and Phoebe walk home, Sal asks if everyone seemed quiet after dinner. Phoebe sighs that they were quiet because of "all that cholesterol sitting heavily on their stomachs." Impulsively, Sal invites Phoebe to spend the weekend with her. Phoebe starts to say something about Mrs. Winterbottom but instead says she'll ask her dad. The girls find Mr. Winterbottom in the kitchen, washing dishes in a frilly apron. Phoebe critiques his technique. He looks sad, but Phoebe doesn't notice. Mr. Winterbottom says that he'll have Mrs. Winterbottom call Phoebe at Sal's if Mrs. Winterbottom calls over the weekend. That night, Phoebe calls Sal's house to say that she thinks she caught her father crying—but he never cries.

Finding Mr. Winterbottom in what's presumably his wife's apron, washing dishes, shows Sal, at least, how upset Mr. Winterbottom actually is that his wife is gone. But Phoebe is too caught up in her own emotions to notice. Even when confronted with proof that her father was crying, Phoebe isn't willing to acknowledge that Mr. Winterbottom isn't as stoic as he seems—perhaps because this would mean that her father isn't who Phoebe thought he was, just as her mother isn't who Phoebe thought she was.



CHAPTER 26

On Saturday morning, Phoebe arrives at Sal's house with a suitcase. Sal takes Phoebe up to her room, and Phoebe observes that there's only one bed. She says that hosts should make their guests comfortable, so Sal should sleep on the couch. Sal knows why Phoebe is acting like this, even if it makes her angry. Phoebe continues to insult things like Sal's mattress, and she insists that Sal should "make some sacrifices" for her guest. That's what Mrs. Winterbottom always says.

In order to connect with and remember Mrs. Winterbottom, Phoebe is doing everything in her power to channel her mother. In this case, that means trying to force Sal to "make some sacrifices" for the sake of being polite. However, while Mrs. Winterbottom taught Phoebe how to be a good host, she seemingly neglected to teach her how to be a good guest.



Sal snaps and says that Mrs. Winterbottom made a huge sacrifice when she "took off," but Phoebe maintains that her mother was kidnapped. Phoebe unloads her clothes into Sal's closet and then says she's getting a migraine. Her aunt's doctor got migraines, and it turned out the doctor had brain cancer. Phoebe says things like this all day. Sal starts to wonder if this is how Dad felt when Sal threw the temper tantrums—Sal hates Phoebe, even though she knows Phoebe is just upset.

Sal understands what Phoebe is going through, but that doesn't make her behavior any easier or more pleasant to be around her. Again, witnessing Phoebe's struggles helps Sal become more introspective and think critically about her own behavior. And as Sal wonders if Dad felt similarly annoyed by her, Sal also starts to think more generously about her father, realizing that he has been supporting her just as she's been supporting Phoebe.



Sal and Phoebe go to Mary Lou's after dinner. Sal sits down with Ben while Phoebe goes to look for Mary Lou, and Ben observes that Phoebe is driving Sal crazy. Sal agrees, and Ben says that Phoebe is probably lonely. Sal's heart starts to pound, and she wants to reach out and touch Ben's face. Instead, she goes inside, and from the window, she watches Mrs. Finney climb onto the garage roof. Mr. Finney joins her a few minutes later. They lie there, kissing, and Sal remembers how her parents acted with each other before the baby came. Ben comes into the kitchen, and Sal is gripped again with the desire to touch his face. Then, Phoebe marches into the kitchen and says that Mary Lou is on a date with their classmate Alex.

Sal sleeps in a sleeping bag on the floor that night. She pretends to fall asleep right away. Dad pokes his head into the room a bit later to check on Phoebe—he heard her crying. Sal feels bad. She knows she should comfort Phoebe, but she also remembers just wanting to cry alone. That night, Sal dreams she's looking through binoculars. She's watching Momma climb a very tall ladder that just keeps going into the sky.

Ben, like Sal, seems empathetic and emotionally intuitive. No one else seems to recognize that Phoebe is just lonely and grasping for any attention she can get. This makes Ben seem even more attractive to Sal—he is, in this sense, a kindred spirit. Then, as Sal watches the Finneys kiss on their roof, she remembers how in love her parents used to be. The Finneys, in a way, show Sal how things could have been, had Tulip not died and had Momma not gone to Lewiston.



Sal is finding that it's hard work to empathize with Phoebe and really comfort her. But at the same time, Sal also recognizes that Phoebe might not want to be comforted. Just as Sal didn't want to hear Dad tell her the truth when Momma left, Phoebe might not want to accept any kindness or advice from Sal. Sal's dream in this passage is similar to the other dream she had of herself and Momma floating together, first on the raft and then in the sky. The image of Sal looking up at Momma as she climbs higher and higher could suggest that Sal now feels more distant from her mother than she did when Momma first left—or it could simply reflect Sal's feeling of smallness and helplessness in reaction to Momma leaving her behind.



CHAPTER 27

When Sal helps Phoebe haul her suitcase home the next day, she says she knows Phoebe has been upset—but sometimes, she feels like “dumping [her] cholesterol-free body out the window.” Phoebe doesn't respond and instead pesters Mr. Winterbottom with questions about Mrs. Winterbottom. He explains that Mrs. Winterbottom called Mrs. Cadaver to say she's okay. He doesn't know why she called Mrs. Cadaver, and Mrs. Cadaver is gone until Monday so they can't ask. Phoebe insists that Mrs. Cadaver probably killed her mother, and she and her father argue. Finally, he agrees that if he hasn't heard from Mrs. Winterbottom by Wednesday, he'll call the police. Later, Phoebe tells Sal she's going to go to the police station by herself.

Sal wants to support Phoebe, but by telling Phoebe how obnoxious she's being, Sal seems to imply that Phoebe should be aware that she's not the only one struggling right now. The revelation that Mrs. Winterbottom called Mrs. Cadaver is shocking for Phoebe. But while Phoebe jumps to the conclusion that Mrs. Cadaver is at fault, this mostly just shows that Mrs. Winterbottom was more connected to her neighbors than Phoebe ever realized. Her mother's life, Phoebe is realizing, is a mystery to her.



On Monday, Phoebe gives her report on Pandora. She says that in his report on Prometheus, Ben got some things wrong: Zeus sent Pandora to humankind as a reward, since humans seemed lonely. There was a dinner with matching plates, and Zeus made Pandora feel like a “welcome guest.” Mary Lou and Ben exchange an eyebrow raise. Phoebe says Pandora was given many gifts, such as curiosity and a beautiful box she was forbidden to open. Ben asks questions throughout Phoebe’s presentation, all of which annoy her.

Phoebe says that finally, Pandora opened the box. The box contained the evils of the world, including cholesterol, lunatics, and murder. This is why there’s evil in the world. But at the bottom of the box was one good thing: hope. Sal thinks about Pandora’s box that night. She wonders why anyone would put hope in a box with terrible things, though she acknowledges it’s a good thing. Sal figures there was another box that contained good things, like love, sunshine, and trees. Worry would probably be at the bottom of that box. Even when things are fine, Sal always worries things will change for the worse.

Sal thinks that things seemed fine with her, Momma, and Dad until the baby died—and did the baby actually die, since it never got to breathe? Sal doesn’t think Phoebe’s family was fine, even before Mrs. Winterbottom disappeared. She knows that Phoebe believes the lunatic kidnapped Mrs. Winterbottom because she can’t imagine that her mother left of her own volition. Sal wants to tell Phoebe that perhaps Mrs. Winterbottom was just unhappy, and that it had nothing to do with Phoebe.

As Sal gets to this point in the story, Gram and Gramps exchange a look. And it occurs to Sal that maybe Momma’s departure didn’t have anything to do with her—people don’t own their mothers. Sal starts to wonder if maybe she and Phoebe can just hope that things will improve.

Phoebe adds in details to the Greek myth of Pandora’s box (like Zeus making Pandora feel like a “welcome guest”) as a way of expressing her own anger and insecurities. She insults Sal and the Finneys by insinuating that they’re poor hosts, and she treats Ben like an annoyance. In this way, she’s pushing away all the people who are trying to help her cope with her mother’s disappearance.



The story of Pandora’s box, and Sal’s made-up story about another box of good things and worry, suggest that there’s hidden complexity to every situation in life. Even in a world filled with evil, it’s possible to hope—and even if everything seems perfect, it’s still possible for something to go wrong.



Things seemed fine to Sal before the baby died, but Sal has also left several clues that suggest Momma and Dad had a troubled marriage even before the stillbirth. It’s still difficult for Sal to view her own family objectively, since her perception of them is colored by her emotions and memories. It’s also hard for her to accept that Momma’s departure had nothing to do with her, or that the stories she’s told herself since then have been coping mechanisms rather than the truth. Yet it’s easy for her to notice the same things about Mrs. Winterbottom and Phoebe, perhaps because she’s looking at their family from an outsider’s perspective.



Sal’s newfound ability to recognize her own story reflected in Phoebe’s hearkens back to the beginning of the novel, when she said that Momma’s story is hidden behind Mrs. Winterbottoms’ (like the fireplace hidden behind the wall). Phoebe’s story is helping Sal come to terms with the fact that Momma left, and that she isn’t to blame for Tulip’s death or for Momma leaving. Perhaps Momma, like Mrs. Winterbottom, was just unhappy and needed alone time. It’s also a mark of Sal’s growing maturity that she recognizes that mothers, including her own, are their own people—they don’t exist solely to serve their spouses and children. Finally, Sal’s thought about hoping for the best ties in with the story of Pandora’s box and with the idea that people can choose not to let “birds of sadness” nest in their hair. Just as it’s always possible for disaster to strike, it’s also possible that things will improve—and people can choose whether to fixate on tragedy (as Phoebe does) or hold onto hope.



CHAPTER 28

When Sal sees the first sign for the Black Hills, the whispers change: now they tell Sal to rush again. She only has two days to make it to Lewiston. She tells Gramps they need to hurry, and as he tells her there's no deadline, Gram gives him a look. Gramps says they'll make the Black Hills a quick stop. Sal considers hitchhiking with someone else who drives faster, but she feels dizzy thinking about the curves down into Lewiston. She's heard a lot about them. Gramps jokes that he should let Sal drive. Sal does know how to drive—Gramps taught her. They'd drive on the farm, and Sal looked forward to getting her license, but she became afraid of driving once Momma left.

The Black Hills aren't black; they're covered in pine trees and look eerie. This is a sight Momma had always wanted to see. She used to talk about how the hills are sacred to the Sioux tribe, but the white settlers took the land. Sal almost expects a Sioux to stop the car. When Sal finally sees Mt. Rushmore, she thinks the presidents are great—but the Sioux must be sad about the “white faces” in their hill. The carvers should've added some Native Americans, too. Gram and Gramps seem just as disappointed, so Gramps speeds ahead. They're in Wyoming by late afternoon, and Gram says she wants to stop and see Old Faithful at Yellowstone. She assures Sal that they'll make it to Idaho by the 20th.

CHAPTER 29

Phoebe goes to the police on the day that Mr. Birkway reads a poem in class that upsets both her and Sal. The poem is “The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls” by Longfellow. As Mr. Birkway reads it, Sal can hear the tide rising and following. It's about a traveler hurrying along by the sea, when suddenly the sea calls to the person and, presumably, pulls the person into the sea. One student says the poem seems peaceful, but Sal says it's terrifying. Phoebe says it's about a murder. Ben suggests that maybe the traveler died “like normal people die,” not by drowning. But Sal insists that dying isn't normal at all; it's terrible. Ben wonders if dying is possibly normal *and* terrible.

When the bell rings, Phoebe grabs Sal and her evidence. They run to the police station. In retrospect, Sal doesn't know why she went with Phoebe—maybe she was starting to believe in the lunatic, or maybe she just admired Phoebe for taking action. Sal wishes she'd done something when Momma left.

Sal hasn't told her grandparents that she needs to be in Lewiston by Momma's birthday. But even still, Gram seems to have caught on to what Sal is thinking and understands that it's important to her. This passage also raises more questions about what happened to Momma on her way to Lewiston and what she's doing now. It's unclear why Sal knows so much about the curving road that leads to Lewiston, or who told her about it. The fear of driving she developed after Momma left also seems significant, as it could imply that something happened to Momma on the road.



Because Momma cherished nature and her Native American heritage, Sal still can't see the Black Hills without thinking about her mother. And because Sal knows from Momma that the Black Hills are sacred to the Sioux tribe, this colors Sal's perception. Mr. Rushmore makes her sad rather than proud, because the carvings are a reminder that the U.S. government (as represented by the presidents' “white faces”) forced Native American people off their land.



Sal and Phoebe are so upset by this poem because it seems to suggest that at any time, anyone can be snatched away, never to be seen again. Having both lost their mothers, it may hurt to have to confront the possibility that sometimes, people just disappear—or die. Ben's suggestion that maybe dying can be both normal and terrible ties in with the Blackfoot myth that Sal remembers in the car with her grandparents, as the story teaches that death is both inevitable and difficult to comprehend.



Although Sal may not realize it, going with Phoebe to the police station is a way for Sal to show Phoebe that she doesn't have to be alone in her grief, and that Phoebe isn't the only one who cares about her mother. The aside that Sal wishes she'd done more after Momma left implies that she still blames herself to some extent.



In the police station, Phoebe tells the man at the desk that she needs to speak to someone about a potential murder and/or kidnapping. When another woman asks if the girls are here because of something they read in a book, Sal jumps to Phoebe's defense. Phoebe says this is about Mrs. Winterbottom, and the woman leads the girls to speak to Sergeant Bickle. Phoebe tells Sergeant Bickle everything about her mother disappearing, Mrs. Cadaver and her missing husband, and the messages. Phoebe pulls out the messages, and Sergeant Bickle reads them all aloud. His mouth twitches as he asks how these are related to Mrs. Winterbottom's disappearance. Phoebe says she wants Sergeant Bickle to find that out.

Phoebe then offers Sergeant Bickle her envelope with the strands of hair, which she'd like him to analyze. Sal can tell that Sergeant Bickle and the woman aren't taking them seriously. Sergeant Bickle excuses himself and is gone for an hour. As the woman asks Phoebe about her family, Sal tries to get a look at the pictures on Sergeant Bickle's desk. Finally, Sergeant Bickle comes back with Mr. Winterbottom. Phoebe looks relieved, but Mr. Winterbottom seems embarrassed.

Mr. Winterbottom drives to his house and tells Phoebe and Sal to wait while he speaks to Mrs. Cadaver. When he returns, he relays that Mrs. Winterbottom asked after Phoebe and Prudence, and that Mrs. Cadaver told her they were fine. Phoebe says she's not fine, and anyway, her father should tell the police that Mrs. Cadaver hired the lunatic. Mr. Winterbottom tells Phoebe she's getting carried away, but Phoebe insists Mrs. Winterbottom loves her and wouldn't leave without explaining herself. Mr. Winterbottom starts to cry.

CHAPTER 30

Gramps exclaims that Phoebe's family was very sad, while Gram says that Sal seems to have really liked Phoebe. Sal does like Phoebe. Phoebe is magnetic, and underneath her odd behavior, Sal believes she was frightened. And Phoebe sometimes acted how Sal felt.

Back in the story, Sal is pretty sure that Phoebe didn't actually plan on breaking into Mrs. Cadaver's house. But one evening, Phoebe sees Mrs. Cadaver leave for work, waits until Mr. Winterbottom falls asleep, and then calls Sal and tells her to come over. Sal goes and finds Phoebe in front of Mrs. Cadaver's house. She leads Sal up the walk, knocks, and then opens the door. It's unlocked. Phoebe goes inside and then into the room on the right. Someone calls to Sal—but it's just Mrs. Partridge. Mrs. Partridge asks if Phoebe is here too, and she tells Sal she can turn on a light.

Sal understands how important it is to Phoebe that the police take her seriously, even if she doesn't necessarily believe that Mrs. Winterbottom was kidnapped and murdered. But to Sergeant Bickle and the woman at the desk, both girls seem far too caught up in conspiracy theories to take seriously, and they refuse to see the story from Phoebe's perspective.



Again, neither the woman nor Sergeant Bickle are taking Phoebe's concerns seriously—instead, they brush Phoebe off and imply that she's immature by calling her father to come pick her up. Mr. Winterbottom, meanwhile, is more embarrassed than concerned about helping the search for Mrs. Winterbottom—the way others perceive him and his family is still his main focus.



It's becoming clearer that Mr. Winterbottom is doing his best to keep himself together for his daughters' sake. But when confronted with Phoebe's naked fear and anger, it's impossible for him to keep up his calm façade. He doesn't understand exactly where Phoebe is getting all her wild theories, but he does recognize that she's coming up with them as a way to cope with the trauma of her mother's disappearance.



The implication here is that Sal likes Phoebe because although Phoebe might take things further than Sal ever would, Sal also sees herself in her friend.



Sal recognizes that Phoebe wants to feel like she's doing something to hunt for Mrs. Winterbottom, especially after her disappointing visit to the police. But Phoebe is thwarted, since Mrs. Partridge is home and interrupts her snooping. Again, although Phoebe has grand plans to find her mother, the adults in her life don't always understand what she's trying to do.



Sal finally finds a light. Mrs. Partridge shows the girls her book, *Murder at Midnight*, which is in braille. Sal notices once again how creepy the room is, with dark rugs, a bear skin, and “grim” African masks. Phoebe examines a spot on the floor, and Mrs. Partridge asks if she dropped something. Then, as Phoebe inspects a sword, Mrs. Partridge warns her to not cut herself. Sal finds it unsettling that Mrs. Partridge knows what Phoebe is doing, even though she can’t see her. Sal tells Mrs. Partridge they need to leave; they just stopped by to check on her. Then, Mrs. Partridge says she recently met Phoebe’s brother. Phoebe snaps that she doesn’t have a brother.

The objects in Margaret’s house are unfamiliar to Sal, and so she begins to feel like Phoebe might have a point that Margaret is dangerous. But just because these items seem foreign to Sal doesn’t necessarily mean they’re creepy or evil. African masks, for instance, are often ceremonial—just like the peace pipe Gramps bought Sal in Pipestone. In this way, Sal is judging her surroundings in a negative way just because she doesn’t understand the significance of the objects. Then, Mrs. Partridge’s insistence that she met Phoebe’s brother is interesting, given that Phoebe only has a sister. This is especially mysterious since Mrs. Partridge has been characterized as an unusually perceptive person, so it’s possible that she knows something Phoebe doesn’t. But Phoebe isn’t interested in hearing what Mrs. Partridge has to say, so this remains a mystery.



Once they’re back on the street, Phoebe starts to put together the list of things in the house that the police should investigate. Sal says that even though Phoebe doesn’t believe Mrs. Winterbottom would leave without an explanation, that might be what happened. Phoebe disagrees, but Sal says that it might have been too painful for Mrs. Winterbottom to explain why she left. She also says that Mrs. Winterbottom might not come back, but Phoebe tells Sal to “shut up.”

Although Sal felt unsettled in Mrs. Cadaver’s house, she still logically knows that Mrs. Cadaver probably has nothing to do with Mrs. Winterbottom’s disappearance. As Sal discovered with Momma, sometimes people leave for their own private reasons. Still, though, Phoebe is unwilling to hear other people’s points of view on the matter.



Sal heads home and remembers the day Phoebe showed her items that remind her of Mrs. Winterbottom. Sal knows exactly what Phoebe is doing, because she did the exact same thing. Dad was right—Momma haunted the house in Bybanks. When Sal got to Euclid, she unpacked the gifts from Momma first thing. Sometimes, Sal studies these items and remembers exactly what happened when Momma gave them to her. These are all she has left of Momma.

Again, Sal understands why Phoebe is acting the way she is because Sal herself reacted the same way after Momma left. It’s normal, Sal suggests, to try to hang onto mementos like this, because when a person disappears, mementos and memories are all that are left. This also shows that Sal can connect with Momma through avenues other than the farm in Bybanks; she can connect with Momma in Euclid, too.



Before Momma left, she once said that if a person visualizes something happening—like winning a race—they can make it happen. Sal didn’t quite get it (what if everyone visualizes themselves winning?), but she visualized Momma calling after Momma left. She visualized Momma getting on a bus back to Bybanks and coming inside. Neither of things happened.

It’s still a mystery why Momma never called or returned to Bybanks, but Sal still learns through this failed visualization exercise that Momma wasn’t always right. Although Sal idolized her mother, Momma was a complex, flawed person who made mistakes and held beliefs that didn’t always help. Nevertheless, the fact that Sal thinks about Momma’s advice now suggests that some problems can be solved through positivity and perseverance—perhaps even the problem of Mrs. Winterbottom’s disappearance.



Now, Sal also thinks about Ben—she wants to ask him where his mother is. Sal lies in bed thinking about the poem about the traveler. Is death actually normal *and* terrible? She lies awake the entire night, thinking about Mr. Winterbottom crying. He’s normally so stiff that this is the only clue Sal has that he cares about his wife. At daybreak, Sal calls Phoebe and says they have to find Mrs. Winterbottom.

As Sal watches Phoebe process Mrs. Winterbottom’s absence, she also becomes more curious about other people. She’s moving beyond thinking only about herself and her own perception of the world, and now it’s becoming clear to her that other people are struggling just as much as she is.



CHAPTER 31

The next day, Phoebe comes to school with another message: “We never know the worth of water until the well is dry.” Phoebe says it’s a clue—Mrs. Winterbottom might be in a well. During a passing period, Sal walks right into Ben. He rubs a spot off of her cheek, and Sal leans forward to kiss him—just as he turns away. She ends up kissing his locker. Kissing seems way too complicated, though Sal is kind of relieved she wasn’t successful in kissing Ben.

Phoebe humorously blows past the intended meaning of this phrase and settles on a more literal meaning that supports her worldview. This phrase actually suggests that people don’t know how valuable something is until that thing is gone. In this case, Phoebe didn’t know how much she loved and relied on her mother until her mother disappeared.



Mr. Birkway comes to class with everyone’s journals—which he’s going to share with the class. He explains that he’s going to change names and obscure the covers, so nobody will know whose journal he’s reading. The class looks nervous. Several people ask to use the restroom or go to the nurse, but Mr. Birkway picks up a journal. He hides the cover and reads that “Betty” will go to hell because she always says “God.” Mary Lou is purple and starts to shout at Christy, but Mr. Birkway says he likes this passage because lots of people aren’t aware when they’re offending other people.

Mr. Birkway’s comment about Christy’s journal entry reveals the purpose of this exercise: he wants to teach his students that everyone sees the world differently. These journals, he believes, will be totally anonymous, so he’ll be able to use them as teaching tools to show his students that everyone has different points of view (a lesson that’s similar to the mysterious “walk two moons” message that was left on Phoebe’s porch). However, Mary Lou’s reaction shows that the students will be able to tell whose journals are whose despite Mr. Birkway’s attempts to keep them anonymous—and reading their private thoughts aloud is already causing fights.



Mr. Birkway pulls out another journal and reads that “Linda” is the writer’s best friend, but Linda shares everything—even things that aren’t interesting, like what her father wears to bed. Mr. Birkway explains he likes this passage because it illustrates that best friends can still annoy each other, but one girl gives another a “wicked eyebrow-message.” From the next journal, Mr. Birkway reads that “Jeremiah” is clean but also a jerk. Mary Lou looks ready to fall over, and Alex looks betrayed. The bell rings. At first, everyone is relieved—but then, kids confront one another about what they wrote. Sal is happy to be going back to the police station with Phoebe.

Mr. Birkway doesn’t see—or doesn’t care—that reading his students’ journals aloud is creating conflict and making his students feel violated and embarrassed. Rather than teaching the students valuable lessons, hearing their classmates’ perspectives is hurtful because all of these entries contain negative judgments of other people. In this way, Mr. Birkway’s lesson is having the opposite effect that he intended—rather than encouraging his students to see things from one another’s perspectives, it’s merely exposing the fact that the students make assumptions and judgments about one another.



The officers let Phoebe and Sal in to see Sergeant Bickle right away. Phoebe puts the newest message, her evidence from Mrs. Cadaver's house, and a list of more things to investigate on his desk. Sergeant Bickle says the girls don't understand, but Phoebe calls him an "idiot" and storms out. Sal waits while Sergeant Bickle follows Phoebe, and she takes the opportunity to look at the photos on his desk. In one photo, Sergeant Bickle stands with a woman, presumably his wife, and a young man who must be their son. Their son is the lunatic.

It's possible that Sergeant Bickle has information the girls don't have—or he could simply be taking Mr. Winterbottom at his word that everything is fine, and that they don't need law enforcement to help them find Mrs. Winterbottom. But to Phoebe, this again feels like a betrayal because Sergeant Bickle is refusing to take her seriously and see the situation from her point of view. Meanwhile, Sal's discovery that Sergeant Bickle's son is the lunatic reveals that they've misjudged this young man—clearly, the lunatic isn't who Sal and Phoebe thought he was, and she's connected to them in a way they didn't expect.



CHAPTER 32

Gramps drives quickly through Wyoming. The trees and the rivers whisper to Sal to hurry up. They arrive in Yellowstone late and get a room at an inn. Gram is thrilled to see Old Faithful in the morning. She assures Sal that once they see Old Faithful blow, they'll continue on. Sal spends the night praying to an elm tree that they won't get in an accident, that they make it to Lewiston on time, and that they can bring Momma home. Later, Sal discovers she prayed for the wrong things.

Noting that she prayed for the wrong things here indicates that later, Sal will be able to look back on this moment with a totally different perspective, perhaps because of new information she'll learn. The tone of this line also implies that whatever is going to happen isn't good, building a sense of foreboding and dread.



Gram is too excited to sleep, so she rambles. She asks Gramps if he remembers the letter from the egg man that he found under the mattress. Though she said at the time that she didn't know how it got there, she'd like to confess that she put it there. Then, she says that it's the only love letter she's ever gotten. She teases Gramps about Gloria and then asks Sal to continue her story about Phoebe and the lunatic.

It's not yet clear why Gram chooses this moment to confess the truth about the egg man's letter. But this detail nevertheless reveals that Gram and Gramps's relationship wasn't perfect—Gram longed for love letters, which she never got from her husband.



Sal races out of Sergeant Bickle's office after seeing the picture of the lunatic. She runs all the way to Phoebe's house and notices Mrs. Partridge on her porch, all dressed up. Mrs. Partridge explains that she's going somewhere, and Jimmy is coming to get her. A car pulls up—and Mr. Birkway gets out. He calls Mrs. Partridge "Mom," and he and Mrs. Partridge explain their relation. Mrs. Partridge used to be a Birkway, and Mrs. Cadaver used to be a Birkway too. Mrs. Cadaver is Mr. Birkway's twin sister. Sal spends the rest of the evening trying to track down Phoebe, with no luck.

It's unclear what Sal intends to do with the information about the lunatic, but realizing he's Sergeant Bickle's son gives Sal and Phoebe one more mystery to pursue. The revelation that Mr. Birkway and Mrs. Cadaver are twins shocks Sal, as it humanizes Mrs. Cadaver and dashes Sal's hope that Mrs. Cadaver could fall in love with Mr. Birkway and leave Dad alone. Because Sal dislikes Mrs. Cadaver so much, she's never asked—or expressed any curiosity—about Mrs. Cadaver's life.



At school in the morning, Sal says she has news. Phoebe, though, doesn't want to talk about it. Sal doesn't understand what's going on, and the day is terrible. Mr. Birkway makes everything worse by reading people's journals again. Sal studies Mr. Birkway and is very disappointed—if he's Mrs. Cadaver's twin, he's not going to marry her. The first journal he reads from is about a girl named Jane, who's smart, cute, and smells good. Sal's arms prickle—Ben might have written this, and he definitely didn't write it about Sal. He didn't know Sal when he wrote it. Sal notices that all her female classmates are smiling. Ben is staring at his desk.

From the next journal, Mr. Birkway reads that "Jane" knows nothing about kissing—she believed it when the writer told her kisses taste like chicken. Mary Lou leaps up and yells at another girl. From the same journal, Mr. Birkway reads that the writer hates writing, journals, and "idiot symbols." The writer wonders if maybe the woods in the snowy woods poem are just woods, not a symbol for death or sex. Beth Ann stands up and announces that she does hate all those things—especially the journals.

The room goes quiet. Mr. Birkway briefly looks ready to strangle Beth Ann, but then he says he knows how she feels. He appreciates her honesty, and he used to feel the same way about symbols. Mr. Birkway pulls out a picture and asks Ben what the picture is of. Ben says it's a vase. When Mr. Birkway shows the picture to Beth Ann, she sees two people. Mr. Birkway says they're *both* right and shows everyone that you can see both a vase and people. This picture, he says, is like a symbol—there's nothing wrong with seeing a vase or people, and it's even better if you can see both.

Then, Mr. Birkway pulls out another journal. Sal feels ready to die—it's her journal, and Mr. Birkway reads the story of Momma's **blackberry** kiss and how Sal has kissed trees. The only thing that stops Sal from dying is that Mr. Birkway picks up another journal. But as he starts to read that the writer is concerned about a Mrs. Corpse, who may have murdered her husband, he seems to regret ever reading the journals out loud. Students go wild when the bell rings, wondering who Mrs. Corpse murdered and teasing Sal about kissing trees.

Sal is getting more comfortable with the fact that she has a crush on Ben. It's exciting, at first, to think that he wrote about her—but when she realizes that's impossible, she has to confront that Ben has had crushes on other girls before her. In this way, Sal has to recognize that Ben's life doesn't revolve around her, and that he's growing and changing just like she is.



Beth Ann—the writer of these entries—is likely referring to Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." For her, trying to parse the symbolism of the woods is just an obnoxious exercise, and she doesn't understand why she has to do it. Identifying symbols, though, can be a lesson in critical thinking and seeing something from multiple perspectives, which is the same lesson Mr. Birkway is trying to teach by reading students' journals aloud.



Mr. Birkway proposes here that there's no one right way to see a symbol or image—or, for that matter, a person or situation. Moreover, with new information or another person's perspective, it's possible to come to a different understanding of what something means or why it's important. Sal has already alluded to this idea several times, most recently when she noted that she prayed for the wrong things but wouldn't realize that until later.



The story of Momma's blackberry kiss might be meaningful and tender to Sal, but to her classmates, it's something to mock her about. Mr. Birkway seems to finally realize how hurtful reading his students' journals aloud can be when he discovers that Phoebe has written accusations about Mrs. Cadaver, his sister. With this new information, he seems to change his perspective.



CHAPTER 33

Gram and Gramps still aren't sleepy, so Sal agrees to tell one more part of the story before she goes to bed. In her story, Sal goes to Phoebe's in the evening after Mr. Birkway reads the girls' journals aloud. Sal marches up to Phoebe's bedroom and says she has something to tell her about Mr. Birkway. But the doorbell rings, and Mr. Winterbottom tells Phoebe and Sal to come downstairs. Mr. Birkway is there, and Sal feels terrible—Phoebe doesn't know that Mrs. Cadaver is Mr. Birkway's sister. When Phoebe notices that Mr. Birkway has her journal, she says it's private. Mr. Birkway apologizes for reading it aloud.

Then, Mr. Birkway explains that Mrs. Cadaver is his sister, and that her husband is dead. Phoebe looks smug, but Mr. Birkway says he wasn't murdered. Mr. Cadaver and Mrs. Partridge were hit by a drunk driver, and Mrs. Partridge lost her sight in the accident. Mrs. Cadaver was on duty in the emergency room when her husband and mother came in on stretchers. Sal watches Phoebe. Mr. Winterbottom's hand is on her shoulder, and that seems like the only thing keeping Phoebe in her seat. Mr. Birkway says that Mr. Cadaver is not buried in her backyard, and he wants to assure Phoebe that he and Mrs. Cadaver haven't kidnapped or murdered Mrs. Winterbottom.

Once Mr. Birkway is gone, Sal and Phoebe sit on the front porch. Phoebe doesn't know what to do now; without Mrs. Cadaver to suspect, she doesn't know where to look for Mrs. Winterbottom. Sal shares that the lunatic is Sergeant Bickle's son, and the girls make a plan.

That night, Sal can't stop thinking about Mrs. Cadaver and imagining her looking down at the stretchers in the emergency room. Sal feels like she's walking in Mrs. Cadaver's moccasins, and she wonders how Mrs. Cadaver got rid of the "birds of sadness" after losing her husband and after Mrs. Partridge became blind. These are things that matter. Sal wonders if Mrs. Cadaver regrets anything, and if she knew "the worth of water before the well was dry." Back in the present, Sal asks Gram if she's sleepy yet. Gram isn't, but she tells Sal to go to sleep and tells Gramps to say this isn't their marriage bed. He complies.

This is an instance of dramatic irony: Sal and the reader know that Mr. Birkway is Mrs. Cadaver's sister, but Phoebe doesn't know this yet, and this causes tension. Sal can see that this is a train wreck waiting to happen, and she wants to protect Phoebe at all costs from the embarrassment of learning that she's suspicious of the wrong person. But when Mr. Birkway comes to the Winterbottoms' house, to apologize and presumably to tell Phoebe the truth, it shows that he has internalized his own lesson about seeing things from other people's perspectives.



While Sal already knew that Mr. Birkway and Mrs. Cadaver are siblings, the accident is news to both her and Phoebe. In this moment, Phoebe learns that she's severely misjudged Mrs. Cadaver as an evil murderer—instead, Mrs. Cadaver watched her husband die and her mother lose her sight. This truth is hard to hear and is no doubt embarrassing for Phoebe—and knowing this, Phoebe will have to come up with a new theory as to where her mother went.



Phoebe is lost without Mrs. Cadaver to suspect. But Sal by sharing the lunatic's connection to Sergeant Bickle, Sal gives Phoebe something else to focus on, ensuring that Phoebe still doesn't have to fully confront that her mother is gone.



Just like Phoebe, Sal can now start to empathize with Mrs. Cadaver, as she seems more human to Sal and less like an interloper trying to steal Dad away. As Sal thinks about Mrs. Cadaver, she touches on all the messages that she and Phoebe have found on the Winterbottoms' porch—all of which are helping Sal ask different questions and look at things in a new way. And Sal also finds that she and Mrs. Cadaver might have something in common. Sal has implied that she didn't know "the worth of water" (or Momma) before Momma left. Here, she wonders if Mrs. Cadaver appreciated her husband enough before he suddenly died, or if she now feels the same way Sal does.



CHAPTER 34

Sal believes this next day is the best and worst of Gram and Gramps's lives. Momma's birthday is tomorrow, and there's a lot of driving left to do. Gram didn't sleep all night, but she's excited to see Old Faithful. Gramps drives them there, and at first, Gram is disappointed—especially because there's a rope fence around a mound.

A park ranger tells Gram to stay on the right side of the rope. Old Faithful is due to erupt in 15 minutes, so Sal watches people gather. Gram gets more and more excited until a bit of water spits out of the hole. Then Old Faithful hisses and shoots water far up in the air. Gram is entranced and stands in the spray, shouting. Gramps is watching Gram. Gram is sniffing when they get back in the car; she insists she's just happy she got to see Old Faithful.

CHAPTER 35

It didn't look like it on the map, but all of Montana is mountains. The road snakes along cliffs, and Gramps regularly encounters camp trailers. Sal thinks the scenery is beautiful, but she's terrified. At every turn, she can almost see the car driving off the cliff. She watches buses sway and only barely stay on the road. Gram still isn't sleepy, so Sal continues her story about Phoebe. She wants to finish the story today.

Sal and Phoebe set their plan in motion the day after Mr. Birkway's visit. They plan to track down the lunatic and, hopefully, find Mrs. Winterbottom. Sal isn't convinced that Sergeant Bickle's son is a lunatic or at all connected to Phoebe's mother, but she's committed to doing something. The girls fidget all day at school. Their classmates are still upset about the journals. In English class, Mr. Birkway apologizes for reading people's private thoughts and sends everyone to the library. There, Sal notices Ben trailing her—seemingly to kiss her. Finally, the bell rings, and Phoebe and Sal race to Phoebe's house.

The tension rises as Sal notes that this day is going to be the best and worst of Gram and Gramps's life—something bad is going to happen. Old Faithful is a site that's sacred to many Native American tribes, so even though Sal isn't as excited as Gram, she can still connect with her heritage here.



Gram is still very capable of getting into trouble—she's presumably trying to get closer to the geyser when the ranger tells her to stay put. Old Faithful, Sal and Gram discover, is a breathtaking sight. Gramps, though, loves his wife so much that the real attraction is watching Gram enjoy the spectacle.



Sal's love of the natural world isn't enough to distract her from how frightening these roads are. Some of this also has to do with how tense Sal is getting as she and her grandparents near the end of her journey, as she wants to get to Lewiston in time for Momma's birthday. But her fixation on the car driving off the cliff, and on the busses swaying, points to a more general fear of riding in cars—though it's unclear why, exactly, Sal feels this way.



Again, Mr. Birkway may have seen the journals as a great way to teach perspective and empathy—but now he realizes that for many of his students, the exercise was just humiliating. Meanwhile, Sal can't quite escape her budding romance with Ben, which is a mark that she's becoming more mature and perhaps even moving away from her grief as she forms new relationships.



Sal and Phoebe find six Bickles in the phone book. Four numbers are dead ends, one is busy, and one doesn't pick up. Finally, the number that didn't pick up does—and it's Sergeant Bickle's wife. Phoebe says she'll call back later. While Dad is at Margaret's later that night, Sal calls Sergeant Bickle. She asks for Sergeant Bickle's son and says she met him at the library and has lost one of his books. Sal says she doesn't have his number at school because she lost it. Sergeant Bickle doesn't seem convinced, but he gives Sal his son, Mike's, address.

Sal has already said she doesn't really believe that the lunatic kidnapped Mrs. Winterbottom. But as she and Phoebe put this plan in action, they are, in a sense, experimenting with pretending to be more adult and in-control than they actually are. Furthermore, they're also doing this to "rescue" Mrs. Winterbottom, which is a way for them to feel like they have agency in a situation that otherwise feels helpless and confusing.



CHAPTER 36

The next day, Saturday, Phoebe and Sal find Ben waiting at the bus stop. He's also going to Chanting Falls, but to a hospital there, not to the university. The three of them sit in the back of the bus, with Sal in the middle. When they get off in Chanting Falls, Ben points the girls toward the university and heads in the other direction. Phoebe gripes that Ben's presence makes her nervous, and Sal agrees—but only because Ben makes her brain and skin feel funny.

Ben's presence makes Phoebe feel like someone is watching her, which seems to be rooted in her paranoid worldview. Sal, however, is nervous around Ben because she's attracted to him and feels mysteriously connected to him.



Sal and Phoebe discover that Mike's address is at a freshman dormitory. There are lots of college girls outside, and they make Sal and Phoebe look very young in comparison. There's a reception desk in the dorm lobby, but Phoebe won't ask for help. Finally, Sal asks the man at the desk for help. He tells the girls to go up to room 209, and Phoebe almost chokes. Sal leads Phoebe through the door, but Phoebe says she can't do it—what if Mike slits their throats? They slip out the exit at the end of the hallway and come out on a lawn. But on the far side of the lawn, Sal sees a young man and an older woman on a bench, holding hands. The woman kisses the man on the cheek—and Sal realizes it's Mrs. Winterbottom and the lunatic.

The girls may have been able to come up with this plan, but actually executing it is a different story. Now that their youth and inexperience are more obvious, they're not as emboldened—and they're clearly involved in something that they don't entirely understand. Discovering Mrs. Winterbottom kissing the lunatic (Mike) makes it clear that there's more to Mrs. Winterbottom than Phoebe realized; Mrs. Winterbottom does have a life outside of her role as a wife and mother.



CHAPTER 37

Sal can't watch. She races for the bus stop, leaving Phoebe behind. When Sal reaches the hospital, she realizes she missed the bus stop. She has a hunch, so she asks the receptionist to see Mrs. Finney. When Sal says she's not family, the receptionist says she can't see Mrs. Finney—Mrs. Finney is on the psychiatric ward, and that's family only. The receptionist sends Sal outside when Sal says she's actually looking for Ben. There, Sal finds Ben sitting with a woman in a pink robe. Ben introduces Sal to Ben's mother, but his mother doesn't look up. She just walks away across the lawn.

Finding Mrs. Winterbottom with the lunatic isn't at all what Sal expected. So, although Sal wants to support Phoebe, she discovers in this situation that she can't—dealing with disappearing mothers, especially when Sal's own Momma didn't come back, is too emotionally taxing. And now, Sal gets to unravel the mystery of Ben's mother, who has also been mysteriously absent throughout the novel. Finding Ben here shows Sal that she and Ben may have even more in common than she thought.



Ben and Sal follow Ben's mother. The woman reminds Sal of Momma right after Momma got home from the hospital. Momma would get up in the middle of things, or she'd forget what she was doing and start something else. She'd wander in odd patterns through the field. After a while, Sal says she has to go. At that moment, she and Ben both have the "same agenda." They lean forward at the same time, and Sal remembers Mr. Birkway's vase picture. Sal and Ben kiss, and it doesn't taste like chicken. Sal feels like the "newly born horse," and Ben asks if their kiss tasted like **blackberries** to her.

The similarities between Ben and Sal become even more pronounced as Sal discovers that Ben's mother reminds her of Momma. Given that Mrs. Finney is on the psychiatric ward, she clearly has a mental illness—and the similarities between her and Momma's behavior imply that Momma may have been similarly struggling with mental illness after the trauma of the stillbirth. Meanwhile, Sal's first kiss with Ben signifies her growing up and moving away from her past by strengthening her present relationship. Ben asking whether the kiss tasted like blackberries is a nod to Momma—he's heard the story of her blackberry kisses, and it's clearly affected him, just as it affected Sal.



CHAPTER 38

Gram interrupts Sal to say that this is what she's been waiting for—she loves stories with good kisses. Sal doesn't look at the map; she doesn't want to know if they're not going to make it in time. If she keeps talking and praying, they might have a chance. Gram asks what happened with Mrs. Winterbottom kissing the lunatic, and Sal resumes her story.

At this point in her story, Sal finds that storytelling can distract her from her fears in the present, while also helping her make sense of the past.



Sal heads back toward the university and finds Phoebe sitting at the bus stop. She doesn't say anything about Ben or his mother but explains that she was afraid. Phoebe insists it doesn't matter. Nothing matters. She says that nothing happened; Mrs. Winterbottom and Mike just sat and laughed. Mrs. Winterbottom has cut her **hair**, and at one point, she even spit in the grass. Phoebe says it was disgusting; after seeing that, she doesn't need her mother anymore. When they get home, and Prudence shouts that Mrs. Winterbottom called and is coming home, Phoebe is unenthusiastic.

Sal and Dad were a bit upset when Momma cut her hair, just like Phoebe is here. For both girls, their mothers' long hair represented the women's roles as wives and mothers. So, cutting it off is hard for their daughters accept, as it's a way for the women to assert that they're not just wives and mothers. They are their own people, and they can make choices about their bodies (and their lives more broadly) that their daughters might not understand.



Prudence tells Phoebe and Mr. Winterbottom that Mrs. Winterbottom didn't say much, but she did ask that Mr. Winterbottom not make any prejudgments. She's bringing someone with her, and this person is male. Phoebe looks at Sal, says "Cripes," and goes inside. Sal doesn't understand why Phoebe doesn't tell her father what she saw.

Momma's departure has strained Sal's relationship with Dad, just as Mrs. Winterbottom's disappearance has made Phoebe distant from her father. But despite this parallel, Sal isn't making an effort to understand and empathize with Phoebe's choice to stay silent.



Sal is ready to tell Dad the news, but Margaret is with Dad when Sal gets home. When Margaret finally leaves, Sal tells Dad everything. He says it's good that Mrs. Winterbottom is coming home and then stares out the window. Sal knows he's thinking about Momma. That night, Sal thinks about the Winterbottoms. To her, it seems like everything is going to fall apart tomorrow.

It's unclear whether Sal expects Dad to say anything about Momma when she shares that Mrs. Winterbottom is coming home. But for both Sal and Dad, the fact that Mrs. Winterbottom is coming home—whereas Momma didn't—forces them to confront their emotions surrounding the loss of Momma yet again.



CHAPTER 39

Phoebe calls Sal in the morning and begs her to come over. She says she needs a witness, and she hasn't told Mr. Winterbottom what she saw. Phoebe says that Mr. Winterbottom and Prudence have been cleaning the house since last night—and this morning, her father decided to mess some things up so Mrs. Winterbottom won't think the family can function without her. Sal doesn't want to go over, but she feels bad for running away yesterday, so she agrees.

Sal finds Mr. Winterbottom, Phoebe, and Prudence sitting around, doing nothing. Mr. Winterbottom is a nervous wreck; he jumps up and sits down, and he changes his shirt twice. Finally, a taxi pulls up. Mr. Winterbottom runs to the kitchen, and Phoebe follows. Sal follows Phoebe, and Prudence goes to answer the door. From the kitchen, they hear Mrs. Winterbottom introduce Prudence to Mike. Mr. Winterbottom goes red and tells Phoebe she shouldn't be around for this, but he allows the girls to follow him into the living room.

Phoebe almost faints for two reasons. Mrs. Winterbottom now has short **hair** and is stylish, with makeup and earrings. And second, Mike Bickle is standing in the living room. Sal briefly wonders if Mike did kidnap Mrs. Winterbottom, but she remembers how happy Mrs. Winterbottom looked yesterday. For that matter, Mrs. Winterbottom doesn't look afraid of Mike—she looks afraid of Mr. Winterbottom. Sal can tell Phoebe's heart is breaking as Mrs. Winterbottom hugs Phoebe. Then, Mr. Winterbottom asks his wife to explain. He doesn't hug her back when she puts her arms around him, and Sal wonders if Mrs. Winterbottom is really in love with Mike. He seems way too young.

Mrs. Winterbottom sits down and starts to cry. She says things that don't make sense about being respectable, about Mr. Winterbottom not forgiving her, and she says she has a secret that Mr. Winterbottom might not forgive her for. Finally, Mrs. Winterbottom says that Mike is her son. She had him before she met Mr. Winterbottom and had to give him up for adoption. Now, she knows Mr. Winterbottom won't think she's "respectable." Mr. Winterbottom swears as Mrs. Winterbottom explains that Mike found her. At first, she was frightened, but she and Mike have been talking. Mr. Winterbottom interrupts to ask if she's going to leave again. Mrs. Winterbottom flinches but says she'll only leave if Mr. Winterbottom wants her to—she's "unrespectable."

Because Phoebe doesn't know anything about Momma, she's unable to consider why Sal might not want to witness her reunion with Mrs. Winterbottom tomorrow. It's important to Mr. Winterbottom to show his wife that she's needed, wanted, and appreciated, so that she'll realize her family needs her to come home.



Mr. Winterbottom seems to assume that Mike is Mrs. Winterbottom's lover; this is why he gets angry when he hears Mrs. Winterbottom introduce Mike to Prudence. At this point, it's impossible to tell whether Mr. Winterbottom is correct in this assumption or not—the girls did see Mrs. Winterbottom kiss Mike, after all. Trying to forbid Phoebe from meeting Mike and her mother shows that Mr. Winterbottom fears that Phoebe won't be able to handle this situation maturely.



Phoebe has made both Mrs. Winterbottom and Mike into one-dimensional caricatures in her mind. Mrs. Winterbottom exists in Phoebe's mind as just her mother, and Mike exists as a lunatic who's somehow involved in her mother's disappearance. But seeing them right in front of her, looking comfortable together, forces Phoebe to toss out these perceptions and make some new ones. Again, Mrs. Winterbottom's short hair signifies that she's moved on from just identifying as a wife and mother. Now, she's taking charge of her own identity.



Mrs. Winterbottom fears that revealing Mike is her son is going to damage her reputation in her husband's eyes. Admitting that she had Mike and gave him up for adoption is likely an admission that she had a baby out of wedlock, possibly as a very young woman—things that she doesn't expect her upstanding, stoic husband to approve of. With this, Mrs. Winterbottom essentially reveals that she's been trying to embody the perfect housewife for so many years to try and make up for her perceived fall from grace years ago—but she can't continue this façade anymore.



Mr. Winterbottom says he's not worried about respectability; it concerns him more that Mrs. Winterbottom didn't feel like she could tell him anything about this. Mike gets up and says he knew this wouldn't work, but Mr. Winterbottom says he has nothing against Mike. He just doesn't know Mike, or his wife.

Perhaps surprisingly for Mrs. Winterbottom, Mr. Winterbottom suggests here that he prizes honesty over "respectability." He'd rather know the truth about his wife and who she is than have her hide the embarrassing parts of her past from him.



Sal wishes she weren't here, and she feels sad for Phoebe's family and for herself. Mr. Winterbottom says they all need to sit down and talk. Then, he shakes Mike's hand and says he's always thought a son would be nice. Sal suggests she leave, and Mrs. Winterbottom asks Phoebe if she's angry. Phoebe says she is and drags Sal to the door. The girls step outside just as Mrs. Partridge sets an envelope down on the stoop.

Sal realizes that the Winterbottoms are going to have to work hard to move on from the events of the last week and from Mrs. Winterbottom's revelations. But she's also sad that Phoebe's mother came back when Momma did not. While Sal could empathize with Phoebe during Mrs. Winterbottom's week away, it's much harder to do so now that Phoebe is getting exactly what Sal wanted. Meanwhile, the reveal that Mrs. Partridge is the one who's been leaving the notes again challenges Sal and Phoebe's presumptions—there's more to Mrs. Partridge than they thought.



CHAPTER 40

At this point in Sal's story, Gramps shouts, "I-dee-hoo!" as they cross the state line into Idaho. Sal finally believes she's going to make it to Lewiston by tomorrow, the 20th of August, Momma's birthday. Gramps suggests they drive another hour to Coeur D'Alene, which is only 100 miles from Lewiston. He asks Gram what she thinks, but she doesn't respond at first. When she does, her voice is rattly. Gramps shoots Sal a worried look as Gram lets out a long cough and says she's happy that Mrs. Winterbottom came home. She wishes Momma could come home as well. Gramps gives Sal a tissue and asks her to continue her story.

Gram's health is clearly declining, as evidenced by her rattly voice and slow response to questions. This starts to suggest that the "worst" day Sal previously alluded to is going to involve Gram's health. But even as Gram is in decline, she can still voice her support for Sal, Sal's story, and Mrs. Winterbottom. It's important that Gram's wish is that Momma could come home rather than that she will come home, as this word choice again implies that it's physically impossible for Momma to return.



On the porch, Sal asks Mrs. Partridge what she wants. Phoebe tears the envelope open and reads "Don't judge a man until you've walked two moons in his moccasins." Mrs. Partridge turns to go, but Phoebe says they already got this message. Mrs. Partridge asks if the girls have enjoyed the notes. She explains that Margaret reads them from the paper, and sometimes, Mrs. Partridge asks her to copy them down. She thought they'd be nice surprises for the girls, like fortune cookies.

Once again, Phoebe has to confront that her outlandish suspicions about other people are off base. Mrs. Partridge seems to have just wanted to do something nice for Phoebe's family; the notes aren't sinister at all. And at least in Sal's case, the notes have helped her think about things in new ways.



Phoebe approaches Mrs. Partridge and asks when she met Phoebe's brother. Mrs. Partridge says he came several weeks ago to the wrong house and let her feel his face—that's how she figured Mike was Phoebe's brother. Then, Mrs. Partridge totters away, and Phoebe spits in the street and asks Sal to join her. It's disgusting, but to Sal, it seems perfect.

For both Sal and Phoebe, spitting in the street represents their newfound freedom. Now that Phoebe knows the truth about her mother—particularly the fact that Mrs. Winterbottom isn't as "respectable" as Phoebe thought—it only seems right that Phoebe should start loosening up, too.



Phoebe heads back into her house, and Sal, feeling suddenly courageous, goes to Margaret's. They talk for a long time, and Sal finally finds out how she met Dad. She cries during their conversation, but afterwards she understands why Dad likes being around Margaret.

Once Phoebe seems settled, Sal realizes it's time to find the same kind of closure. Spending time with Margaret and learning the truth about her helps Sal develop empathy for Margaret and for Dad. But it's unclear what, exactly, Sal learns from Margaret—this is yet another mystery that the novel has yet to reveal.



When Sal gets home, Ben is sitting on her steps. He explains that there's a present for her in the backyard. It's a chicken. Sal kisses Ben again, and he says he named the chicken **Blackberry**—but if Sal wants, she can change the name.

Bringing Sal a chicken named Blackberry is a way for Ben to show Sal how much he loves and respects her. Whereas the other students in their class mocked Sal for the story of the blackberry kiss, Ben appreciated it and now wants to honor Momma as well as Sal's love of animals and nature.



Back in the present, Gram asks if this is the end of Phoebe's story. Sal says it is. That's not entirely true, as Phoebe had to get used to a brother and Mrs. Winterbottom's new persona, but all that's still happening. Gram closes her eyes for the last hour of the drive. Gramps and Sal listen to her breathing, and Sal observes that Gram looks a bit gray.

Here, Sal suggests that stories never truly end—the people in stories will continue to grow and change, even after the telling is over. By noting that Phoebe's story isn't really over, Sal encourages readers to consider what Phoebe is going through now. The fact that Gram's breathing is noticeably labored and that her complexion is gray further hints that her health is in decline, and that Sal and her grandparents may have to deal with another emergency.



CHAPTER 41

In Coeur D'Alene, Gramps drives right to the hospital. According to the doctors, Gram had a stroke. Gramps insists on staying with her through all her tests, even though an intern says she's unconscious and won't know the difference. Sal waits in the waiting room until a man comes in with a beagle. When the receptionist tells the man that he'll have to leave the dog outside, Sal offers to sit outside with the dog.

Once again, Gramps shows Gram how much he loves her by insisting on staying by her side as she undergoes tests. When the intern remarks that Gram won't know the difference, it suggests that he doesn't put as much stock in a love like Gram and Gramps—he sees things from a purely medical perspective and perhaps ignores the emotional aspects of his work.



As Sal sits on the grass with the beagle, she wonders if Gram's stroke happened because of the snake bite. Does Gramps feel guilty for stopping at the river? Sal wonders again if Momma's baby wouldn't have died if Sal hadn't climbed the tree and broken her leg, and if Momma hadn't carried her. But Sal also thinks that people can't just sit in safety, like Phoebe and Mrs. Winterbottom tried to do. People have to go do things—and maybe this is why Gram and Gramps brought Sal along on this trip in the first place.

This is a big moment for Sal, as she starts to realize that it's worth it to take risks and try new things, even if that means getting hurt in the process. People can't just lock themselves away, because as Mrs. Winterbottom demonstrated, that eventually becomes unsustainable. This also raises the question of how, exactly, Sal has been sheltering herself, and how going on this trip will help her move away from that.



The beagle is just like Moody Blue. As Sal prays for Gram, she remembers when Moody Blue had a litter of puppies. For the first week, Moody Blue wouldn't let anyone near the puppies. But as the weeks went on, Moody Blue let people touch them. When the puppies were about six weeks old, Moody Blue started snapping at them. This bothered Sal, but Momma explained this was normal. The puppies needed to become independent so they could survive without Moody Blue. Now, Sal wonders if Momma's trip to Idaho was a lot like Moody Blue snapping at her puppies. Momma might have left for herself and for Sal.

Sal goes back into the hospital when the beagle's owner comes back for her. A nurse shows Sal in to see Gram after midnight. Gram is still gray, and according to a nurse, she can't hear. Gramps tells Sal that they're going to be in the hospital for a while, so he gives Sal some cash and the car keys, in case she needs something. He assures Sal that Gram doesn't want her sitting around the hospital. Gramps tells Sal to whisper anything into Gram's ear, and then go do what she needs to. Sal whispers in Gram's ear and then goes to the car. She studies the map and closes her eyes. She knows Gramps knows what she's going to do.

Sal studies the route from Coeur D'Alene to Lewiston, and then she starts the car. She drives around the parking lot and consults the map again, but she decides that "in the course of a lifetime, there [are] some things that matter." Sal drives onto the highway, going slowly and praying to the trees. There's no traffic. It takes her four hours to get to the top of Lewiston Hill, which looks down over Lewiston. There's a treacherous, winding road in front of her that leads to the town. Sal pulls into the lookout at the top and looks over the guardrail. She can't see the bus, but she knows it's there.

Thinking of Moody Blue's reaction to her puppies helps Sal rethink her belief that Momma was just being selfish by leaving. It's possible that Momma's departure was natural in its own way, as children (like puppies) eventually have to become independent from their parents. The separation may have even helped Sal grow stronger and learn to survive without her mother, just as Moody Blue snapping at her puppies forced them to survive on their own. This aligns with Sal's previous description of learning how to identify her own emotions after Momma left, whereas up until that point, he had been Momma's "mirror."



Gramps continues to suggest that the medical professionals don't know Gram as well as he does, and he's certain that she can hear. Whether this is true or not (it's impossible to know), Gramps also seems to imply that Sal whispering into Gram's ear before Sal takes off is going to give Sal the closure she needs, whether Gram can actually hear or not.



Gramps taught Sal to drive years ago, so when he gave her the keys, he presumably knew that she'd take the car the rest of the way to Lewiston. Sal's drive is a literal journey across Idaho as well as a symbolic coming-of-age journey. Having realized that separating from Momma helped her grow stronger, she can now face her fear of cars and get herself to Lewiston without help. The fact that that Sal knows there's a bus over the guardrail creates more tension, as this suggests that there was some sort of accident here, and that Sal knew about it ahead of time. So, when Sal paid close attention to the buses on the road in earlier passages, it was likely connected to this accident.



Sal drives slowly down the road. Her palms sweat, and the car goes too fast for Sal's comfort. She snakes down the road. There's another spot to admire the view about halfway down, and Sal pulls into it. When another car pulls into the overlook, the man in it asks Sal where the driver of her car is. Sal says they're around. The man continues that this is quite the road to be driving at night. He points down the hill a bit. Sal can see a rough path and something shiny. The man says a bus went off the road here just over a year ago. Only one person survived.

Finally, it's implied that Momma was killed in the bus accident that the man references here. This means that the description of Momma "resting peacefully" in Lewiston at the beginning of the novel was a euphemism for death rather than actual rest or healing. The fact that this revelation happens so far into the novel (and in an indirect way) suggests that up until now, Sal has been lying to herself—and, by extension, to the reader—so that she wouldn't have to face her grief over Momma. By telling herself that she could bring Momma home if she got to Lewiston in time, Sal was trying to avoid the painful truth that it's impossible for Momma to come back, though she did know this on some level. Furthermore, the fact that Momma died in a bus accident is probably why Sal was nervous to travel, and why she's been so preoccupied with buses on the mountain roads. Now, as Sal confronts the site of her mother's death, she must finally rely on her own perceptions (rather than what Dad and her grandparents have told her) and face the truth of what happened.



CHAPTER 42

Once the man leaves, Sal crawls under the railing and approaches the bus. Dawn is approaching, and Sal is happy for the light. She finds the bus lying on its side. The tires are punctured. Sal climbs onto it. The metal side of the bus has been peeled back, and Sal can see a mess of seats, foam, and mold inside. In her imagination, she always climbed in through a window and walked down the aisle, looking for anything of Momma's. But Sal can't get in—there's no room.

The bus isn't what Sal expects, and it shows her that she isn't going to get the kind of closure from Momma's death that she perhaps expected. Noting that there's no room for Sal to get into the bus and find something of Momma's symbolizes Sal's inability to reach Momma—it is indeed impossible for Sal to bring Momma home, as Sal and other characters have alluded to throughout the novel.



Sal picks her way back to the car and discovers the sheriff parked behind Gramps's car. The deputy scolds Sal for playing on the bus, but then the sheriff asks Sal where her car's driver is. Sal admits she's alone; Gramps is in Coeur D'Alene. She tells the sheriff she drove herself here and tells the deputy her age. Then, when the sheriff asks why, Sal tells him everything else about why she couldn't wait for someone else to drive her. When she's done, the sheriff talks on his radio for a bit and then tells Sal to get in.

At first, the sheriff and the deputy treat Sal like they would any other kid they found playing on a dangerous accident site. But as the sheriff realizes who Sal is, his perception of her changes, and he treats her with compassion and kindness by listening to her story.



Sal figures she's going to jail. This doesn't bother her, but she's upset that she won't be able to do what she came here to do or get back to Gram. Instead of taking her to jail, though, the sheriff takes Sal to the cemetery, right to Momma's grave. On the gravestone is Momma's name—Chanhassen "Sugar" Pickford Hiddle—and an engraving of a maple tree. Seeing that, Sal knows that Momma isn't coming back. As Sal sits, she hears a birdsong coming from a willow tree. Sal hugs the willow, kisses it, and tells it "happy birthday." When she gets back in the sheriff's car, she says that Momma isn't actually gone—she's singing in the trees. She tells the sheriff he can take her to jail.

The sheriff continues to show Sal empathy by driving her to Momma's grave. Seeing the grave firsthand allows Sal to finally accept that Momma is dead and isn't coming back. And hearing the birdsong coming from the willow—in a way that implies the willow tree is a singing tree, like the one in Bybanks—shows Sal that she can connect to Momma everywhere. Momma is a part of the natural world, so as long as Sal has access to nature, she has access to her mother's spirit.



CHAPTER 43

The sheriff doesn't take Sal to jail. Instead, he and the deputy drive Sal and Gramps's truck to Coeur D'Alene, though he does lecture her about driving without a license. Then, Sal asks the sheriff about the accident. He's not sure if he saw Momma or not, but he does remember meeting Dad. Sal asks if he saw Mrs. Cadaver, and the sheriff is shocked—everyone, he says, saw Mrs. Cadaver. As they were bringing stretcher after stretcher up the hill, Mrs. Cadaver's hand waved from the window. Sal explains that Mrs. Cadaver sat next to Momma on the bus.

Finally, Sal and the sheriff reveal how Dad came to know Margaret Cadaver: she was the only person who survived the bus accident that killed Momma. Sal already knows at this point (Margaret told her after Phoebe's mother came home), but now readers see that Sal's presumptions about Margaret kept her from getting to know the one person who could connect her to Momma.



Sal tells the sheriff that Mrs. Cadaver and Momma were strangers when they got on the bus, but they were friends by the end. Momma told Mrs. Cadaver everything about Sal, Dad, the farm in Bybanks, and the **singing tree**. Sal figures that Momma must've missed her and Dad, since she told Mrs. Cadaver so much about them.

For Sal, it's cathartic to share Mrs. Cadaver and Momma's story with the sheriff. By essentially admitting that she was wrong about Mrs. Cadaver, Sal also comes to a more mature, nuanced understanding of Momma's final days.



Then, Sal tells the sheriff that she learned all this on the day that Mrs. Winterbottom returned. Mrs. Cadaver told Sal about meeting Dad in the hospital. They talked for hours when he found out Mrs. Cadaver sat next to Momma. After that, they began writing to each other. When Sal asked if she was going to marry Dad, Mrs. Cadaver said it was early for that—Dad is just interested in her because she was with Momma at the end.

Sal could've gotten this information months ago, had she been ready to listen to Dad and Mrs. Cadaver explain how they met. But she wasn't ready then—it's only now, as she confronts that Momma is actually dead, that Sal is able to accept that Mrs. Cadaver doesn't present a threat.



Even with all this, though, Sal admits she didn't believe that Momma was actually dead. She figured there'd been a mistake. Sal isn't sure of what she hoped to find in Lewiston—maybe she expected Momma herself.

Sal told herself that Momma wasn't dead to protect herself from having to deal with her grief. But now that Sal has proven to herself that Momma is dead and isn't coming back, she can begin to truly grieve—and ultimately move on.



Sal sleeps for the last half of the drive to Coeur D'Alene. She wakes up in the sheriff's car outside the hospital, just as the sheriff is coming out of the hospital. The sheriff gives Sal an envelope. Inside is a note from Gramps explaining that Gram died early this morning. It lists his motel address. When Sal gets there, Gramps is on the phone, but he hangs up to hug Sal. The sheriff offers his condolences and says he'll lecture Gramps for letting Sal drive alone another time. Then, the sheriff offers to help with arrangements. Gramps has already arranged for Gram's body to fly back to Bybanks. He and Sal are going to finish up in Coeur D'Alene and drive home tomorrow.

Once the sheriff is gone, Sal notices her grandparents' open suitcase. She picks up Gram's baby powder and notices a crumpled letter on the desk. Gramps explains that it's a love letter; he wrote it last night. Then, Gramps says he misses his gooseberry. He lies down and starts to say "it," but he can't. Sal helps him say that this isn't his marriage bed, but it will do.

CHAPTER 44

Now, Sal and Dad are back living in Bybanks. Gramps lives with them, and Gram is buried where she and Gramps were married. These days, Sal wonders if there's something more hidden behind the **fireplace**. Just like the fireplace was behind the plaster wall, and Momma's story hid behind Phoebe's, Sal thinks there's a third story underneath those two. That one is about Gram and Gramps.

The day after Gram's funeral, Gloria came to visit Gramps. The two sat on the porch, and Gramps talked about Gram for hours. Gloria eventually said she had a headache—and she hasn't been back. Sal also wrote to Tom Fleet, telling him about Gram. He wrote back offering his condolences and asking to visit the aspen grove.

Previously, Sal alluded to the fact that this day would be both the worst and the best. It turns out to be the worst day for Gramps and Sal because they've lost a beloved wife and grandmother, but at the same time, this day allowed Sal to find closure about Momma's death. Importantly, Sal doesn't try to convince herself that Gram is still alive the way she did with Momma. Now that she's made this journey to accept Momma's death, it's easier for her to accept that Gram is dead—and perhaps, that death is both "normal and terrible," as Ben suggested earlier. It's sad that Gram is gone, but losing a grandparent is, perhaps, simply a part of life.



Gramps and Sal's openness with each other as they grieve for Momma contrasts with how shut off Sal was from Dad after Momma died. Sal realizes now that it can be cathartic to connect with others and grieve communally.



Now that Sal and Dad have both found closure after Momma's death, they can return home without feeling like she's "haunting" the farm. And Sal now realizes that any given story has more stories nested within it. By telling Phoebe's story to her grandparents on their road trip, she also gained more insight about Momma's final days and learned the story of her grandparents' romance along the way.



It seems like perhaps Gram was right about Gloria—she still seems interested in Gramps. But even if Gram was right, Gramps is still in love with and grieving Gram—he isn't ready to move on. Sal's friendship with Tom Fleet is yet another testament to the idea that there is often more to a person than meets the eye. Whereas Sal and her grandparents initially thought that Tom posed a threat to them, here he proves himself to be a caring and loyal friend.



Gramps is still giving Sal driving lessons. They drive around with Gramps's new beagle puppy, Huzza Huzza, and they play the "moccasin game." In it, they pretend to walk in someone's shoes. They made the game up on the way home from Lewiston, and it's helped Sal discover some new things. Now, Sal knows the trip with her grandparents was a gift from them. It was a chance for her to walk in Momma's moccasins and follow her last trip. Sal also knows now that Dad didn't take her to Lewiston when he learned of Momma's death for many reasons. He just didn't understand at the time that Sal would need to see Lewiston for herself. But he was right that they don't need to bring Momma back to Bybanks—Momma is in all the trees and fields.

One afternoon, after Sal tells Gramps about Prometheus and Pandora, Gramps explains that myths emerge so that people can explain things they don't understand—such as why there's evil in the world. Remembering Phoebe and the lunatic, Sal says that if she were in Phoebe's position, she'd have to believe in a lunatic to believe that her mother disappeared. Sal now knows that Phoebe's family helped her think about Momma. Phoebe's stories weren't true, but Sal knows she herself engaged in some of the same exercises in order to ignore that Momma was gone.

Sal doesn't think people can explain all the terrible things in the world they can't fix, so to cope, they fixate on the awful things in their own lives. Eventually, it becomes clear that things aren't as bad as they seem. Sal has decided that being brave means looking into Pandora's box, and then looking at the box with "the smoothbeautiful folds" in it.

Momma's postcards and her **hair** are still hidden in Sal's bedroom, under the floorboards. Sal reread the postcards when she and Dad came home, and she discovered that she, Gram, and Gramps saw every sight Momma did. These days, as Sal drives Gramps around, she tells him Momma's stories about reincarnation. He especially likes a Navajo story about Estenatlehi, who grows from a baby to an old woman and then turns into a baby again.

Naming his beagle puppy Huzza Huzza is a nod to Gram's habit of saying "huzza, huzza," just as the chicken Blackberry is a nod to Momma. It's possible to honor deceased loved ones, the novel shows, by keeping the things or phrases they loved alive. The moccasin game, meanwhile, takes the novel's title a step further. Now that Sal understands the importance of "walking two moons" in another person's moccasins (trying to see things from others' perspectives), she makes a point to do so—and this makes her a more empathetic person. In turn, Sal's empathy has helped her repair her relationship with Dad and understand why he behaved the way he did after Momma died.



Stories, Gramps and Sal propose, are a way to think about frightening things without having to actually confront them. People can tell themselves stories that make things seem more manageable or understandable—like the Native American and ancient Greek myths Sal learned throughout the novel, and like Phoebe and Sal's own stories about their mothers. But in the end, Sal realizes, it's essential to confront the truth. Sal had to accept that Momma was dead and stop telling herself stories in order to come to terms with her trauma.



Here, Sal proposes that bravery means accepting that the world contains both terrible and beautiful things, the way she previously imagined beautiful things buried beneath terrible things (and vice versa) in Pandora's box. It's impossible to make the world all good or all bad—they exist in balance with each other.



Sal and Gramps's mutual interest in reincarnation myths suggests that storytelling is a way to connect to loved ones who've died. Though Momma and Gram can't return as babies, the Estenatlehi story suggests that people never truly die—their memories are, in a sense, continuously reborn as their stories are passed on to future generations.



Sal still climbs the sugar maple, where she goes there to think. Yesterday, in the sugar maple tree, Sal discovered that she's jealous of three things. First, she's jealous of whomever Ben wrote about in his journal. Then, she's jealous that Momma wanted more children. It makes Sal feel like she wasn't enough—though Sal wonders if Momma wanted more children because she wanted more Sals. Finally, Sal is jealous that Mrs. Winterbottom came home when Momma didn't. Sal still misses Momma.

Ben and Phoebe write to Sal regularly—Ben even sent Sal a valentine in October. Ben, Phoebe, Mrs. Cadaver, and Mrs. Partridge are all coming to visit Sal and Dad next month. Mr. Birkway might come too. Sal and Dad are excited to see them—Sal can't wait to show Phoebe and Ben all the things she loves. She hopes she and Ben can kiss. But for now, everything is well.

It's a mark of Sal's growing maturity that she's able to identify these jealous feelings. Notably, all of Sal's jealousies stem from not being someone's one and only—Ben's only crush or Momma's only child. Sal's ability to recognize this signals that she's now better able to think critically about herself and others.



Now, Sal is oriented toward the future rather than feeling stuck in the past. Having come to terms with Momma's death, Sal now sees the importance of accepting life for what it is and appreciating the people she has rather than staying mired in grief and judgment of others. She still misses Momma, but she's also looking forward to spending time with her friends and continuing her relationship with Ben. Including Mrs. Cadaver in this list of friends shows how completely Sal has changed her thinking, as she now recognizes that people are complex—they aren't all good or all bad, as Sal and Phoebe initially assumed. By ending on this note, the novel drives home the importance of its titular saying: "Don't judge a man until you've walked two moons in his moccasins." By putting herself in other people's shoes, Sal has a deeper and more nuanced understanding of herself and those around her, which has allowed her to form mature relationships that she deeply values.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Brock, Zoë. "Walk Two Moons." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Jul 2021. Web. 23 Jul 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Brock, Zoë. "Walk Two Moons." LitCharts LLC, July 23, 2021. Retrieved July 23, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/walk-two-moons>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Walk Two Moons* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Creech, Sharon. *Walk Two Moons*. HarperCollins. 2019.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Creech, Sharon. *Walk Two Moons*. New York: HarperCollins. 2019.