

# A Visit from the Goon Squad



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JENNIFER EGAN

Jennifer Egan was born in Chicago to Donald and Kay Egan. When her parents' divorced, she moved with her mother to San Francisco, where she spent her youth. She studied English literature at the University of Pennsylvania. After graduation, Egan spent two years at St. John's College in Cambridge, England. During this time, she traveled throughout Europe, which provided inspiration for some of her first novels. She moved to New York City after returning from Europe, and worked a series of odd jobs before her stories began being published. She published her first novel, *Invisible Circus*, in 1995. She published two other novels and a collection of short stories before *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2011. Egan continues to write in New York City, where she lives with her husband and two sons.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a novel set primarily in post-9/11 New York City, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* explores the way in which American culture has changed since the World Trade Center fell on September 11th, 2001. Many of the stories reference the absence of the twin towers, and several stories nod to the fear of future acts of terrorism, depicting the heightened state of surveillance Americans have experienced since the towers fell. The novel also examines the impact of digital media and the advent of the Internet, especially how these advances in technology have influenced the way in which Americans interact with one another, the environment, music, and other art forms. In relation to advances in technology, Egan takes a special interest in the music industry, moving from the punk rock scene in 1970s San Francisco to the highly produced pop music of today.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Jennifer Egan cites two primary sources of inspiration for *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Her main influence was the work of Marcel Proust, especially his multi-volume novel, *In Search of Lost Time*. Proust's fiction is often structured around the idea of music, and the passage of time remains a common theme of his work. The same is true of Egan's novel. Second to Proust, Egan was inspired by the HBO television series, *The Sopranos*. The episodic nature of the television show, the complexity of the characters, and the way in which different characters move in and out of focus, became a major inspiration for her work. As a novel in stories, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is in conversation

with several modernist works, including Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and Ernest Hemmingway's *The Nick Adam's Stories*. The novel in stories has become a popular form in recent years. Elizabeth Strout's novel in stories, *Olive Kitteridge*, won the National Book Award in 2009.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Visit From the Goon Squad
- **When Written:** Between 2006 and 2010
- **Where Written:** New York City, NY
- **When Published:** June 8, 2010
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Literature
- **Genre:** Literary Fiction, Contemporary Novel
- **Setting:** Most of the stories take place in and around New York City, although some stories are set in California, Italy, and Kenya
- **Point of View:** A blend of first, second, third, and other non-traditional points of view

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Writing Process.** Egan always writes the first drafts of her work longhand on a legal pad. Often, she will write the second draft the same way. She saves a version of each and every draft she writes.

**Strange Connections.** As an undergrad at the University of Pennsylvania, Jennifer Egan dated Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple Inc. Egan met Jobs at a dinner party in Silicon Valley, and a bicoastal relationship ensued. One time, during their relationship, Jobs showed up at Egan's door with a brand new Macintosh computer and installed it for her.



## PLOT SUMMARY

*A Visit from the Goon Squad* is unconventional in the way its narrative unfolds. Each chapter stands as a self-contained story, but as a whole, the individual episodes create connections that form a cohesive narrative. The stories, as they appear in the novel, do not follow a traditional chronology. Instead, they leap through time, showing slices of different time periods occurring between the late 1970s and the 2020s. The novel is also split into two parts—A and B—which echoes the two sides of an album. Several characters appear in more than one story, and through the ways in which they appear at different points in time, their narratives become clear.

In the novel's first story, "Found Objects," Sasha meets with her

therapist, Coz, with whom she is working to overcome an addiction to stealing. She recounts a date she went on with a man named Alex, during which she steals a wallet in the restaurant's bathroom. After a brief confrontation with the woman Sasha stole from, Sasha returns the wallet and admits she has a problem. Afterward, Sasha and Alex return to her apartment and have sex. Alex then takes a bath and Sasha goes through Alex's wallet. She finds a piece of paper that says, "I believe in you." She steals the paper and puts the wallet back before he returns.

The next story is called "The Gold Cure." This introduces Bennie Salazar, a divorced record executive in his mid-forties, who struggles with anxiety and sexual impotency. He sprinkles gold flakes into his coffee to combat his sexual dysfunction. Benny and his son Christopher meet Sasha, who is now Bennie's secretary, at the home of one of the bands signed to his record label. The band is not selling albums, but as they play some new music for Bennie, he begins to feel sexually aroused by the music. His arousal, however, suddenly escapes him as a flood of shameful memories strikes him. He runs out of the house. Afterward, Bennie drops Christopher off at his mother's house, and drives Sasha home. As Bennie drops Sasha off at her building, he tries to tell her about his attraction to her. She stops him, saying, "We need each other." She then goes home.

In the next story, "Ask Me If I Care," the narrative leaps back to the year 1979. Rhea, an insecure punk rocker with green hair, tells this story. Rhea feels undesirable and not "punk" enough because of her freckles. Rhea's friend Jocelyn begins sleeping with Lou, a powerful record executive and much older man. She convinces Lou to come see Bennie Salazar and Scotty Hausman's band, The Flaming Dildos. At the concert, Jocelyn gives Lou oral sex as the band plays. Lou has his arm around Rhea, and Rhea feels like she is a part of the sexual act in a way that disturbs her. After the concert, the group goes to Lou's house. Rhea and Lou share a conversation on the balcony in which Rhea scolds him for sleeping with Jocelyn, who is under age. Lou gets a kick out of her belligerence, and tells her never to change. Two weeks later, Jocelyn runs away with Lou. Lou promises to bring Jocelyn home when he returns to San Francisco.

In the next story, "Safari," Lou, two of his children, and his new girlfriend, Mindy, go on an African safari. They are joined by a cast of other characters, including Chronos, the guitarist of a popular band, and Albert, the tour guide. During the story, Mindy feels tension with Lou's children, Charlie and Rolph, who miss their mother. Out on the safari, a lion attacks Chronos, but Albert saves him by shooting and killing the lion. Later, Mindy sleeps with Albert. When Lou realizes that something is going on between Mindy and Albert, he tells Rolph that all women are "cunts." Rolph condemns his father's reaction, but Lou, a fiercely competitive man, feels a newfound desire to conquer Mindy. Later that night, Rolph and Charlie dance together in the hotel

restaurant—a moment of connection they have not experienced yet on the trip. In this moment, the narrative leaps forward, revealing the future. Mindy will marry Lou, and they will have two children together. After they divorce, she will work as a travel agent as she raises their children, and later will go on to continue her Ph.D. Charlie will go on to join a cult in Mexico. Rolph will become estranged from his father and commit suicide at the age of twenty-eight.

The narrative jumps forward a quarter century for the next story, "You (Plural)." Jocelyn narrates, and she and Rhea return to Lou's house after his health has failed. In the years since the story "Ask Me if I Care" Jocelyn has been in and out of rehab for drug addiction. Rhea has gotten married and had children. They find Lou bedridden and alone. After they catch up for a while, Jocelyn and Rhea push Lou's bed outside and stand by the poolside. Jocelyn thinks of Lou's son, Rolph, who was her age, and remembers loving him. Jocelyn asks Lou about Rolph, forgetting that he committed suicide years earlier. Lou begins to weep. Rhea responds empathetically, thinking Jocelyn has said this to spite Lou. Jocelyn is struck with anger, and feels like pushing Lou's bed into the **water**. Jocelyn tells Lou he deserves to die. Lou then asks Rhea and Jocelyn to stand on either side of him and hold his hands. They take his hands and stand together, staring into the pool, just like old times.

Scotty Hausman is the narrator of the next chapter, titled "X's and O's," which happens nine years before "The Gold Cure." Scotty is living a reclusive life in New York City, working as a janitor and spending his free time fishing in the East River. He decides to visit his old friend, Bennie. When he goes, he brings with him a dead bass he caught while fishing. Scotty is stunned by the glamour of Bennie's office, and notes how his life has gone in a different direction than Bennie's. As Scotty talks to Bennie, Scotty realizes that they are no longer friends. Bennie asks Scotty about his ex-wife, Alice, who appears in the story "Ask Me if I Care." Bennie had a crush on Alice, but Alice chose Scotty. Scotty realizes this is a point of insecurity for Bennie. As Scotty leaves, Bennie gives him a business card, and tells him to get in touch if he ever has any new music to show him. Scotty leaves the dead fish. The next day, Scotty gives the card to a young couple, one of whom is a musician.

In the first story of part B, titled "A to B," the focus is on Bennie's wife Stephanie before they get divorced. The family moves to a wealthy community outside of New York City, called Crandale. They attempt to fit in, but Bennie is racially profiled because he is Hispanic, and Stephanie feels like an outsider because of her tattoos. Stephanie begins playing tennis with a woman named Kathy. One day, Stephanie goes to the city to meet with the guitarist Bosco, for whom she does PR work. Her brother, Jules, who has just been released from prison, volunteers to go with her. Jules mentions that Stephanie and Bennie seem jumpy, which makes Stephanie worry that Bennie is cheating on her again. When they arrive at Bosco's apartment, Bosco tells

Stephanie that he wants to go on a suicide tour. The former guitarist for the Conduits, Bosco has become fat, alcoholic, and is dying of cancer. He wants to go out with a bang and die on stage. Stephanie thinks the idea is ludicrous, but Jules wants to write a book about the suicide tour. Later that night, Bennie comes home and while he showers, Stephanie finds a gold colored bobby pin on the floor. She realizes it belongs to Kathy, whom Bennie is having an affair with. Stephanie wanders downstairs, and goes out to the garden. She is surprised when Noreen, her reclusive neighbor, whispers to her from behind the fence. They share a brief interaction before Stephanie goes back inside.

The next story in the novel, "Selling the General," features Dolly Peale. Dolly, formerly known as "La Doll," was a famous PR expert, but she ruined her name after a light display at one of her parties malfunctioned and burned the famous attendees. She begins doing work trying to save the image a military dictator called The General. She hires Kitty Jackson, an actress with a flagging reputation, and they travel to meet the general so Kitty can appear in a photograph with the dictator. Dolly also brings her daughter, Lulu, in hopes of repairing their relationship. When they meet The General, Dolly takes a photograph of Kitty's interaction with him, but things take a turn for the worse when Kitty begins asking the General about the genocide. The General's guards carry Kitty away into captivity. Dolly and Lulu leave immediately. Months later, the General's country has transitioned to democracy. Kitty is released and begins working on a new movie. Dolly and Lulu move out of the city, and Dolly opens a successful sandwich shop.

The following story, titled "Forty-Minute Lunch: Kitty Jackson Opens Up About Love, Fame, and Nixon!" appears in the novel as a magazine article written by Jules Jones, Stephanie's brother. The article was written prior to his release from prison, and the style of the article, including rants and footnotes, shows Jules coming unhinged. As he talks with Kitty, he begins to conflate Kitty Jackson with his ex-girlfriend, who left him for a memoirist. Sensing his time with Kitty is almost up, Jules convinces her to go on a walk with him in Central Park. Once in the park, Jules pushes her down and tries to rape her. Kitty sprays him with pepper spray and stabs him in the leg with a Swiss Army knife. Later, Jules is convicted of attempted rape, and sent to prison. Kitty sends him a letter apologizing for whatever role she had in his mental breakdown. Her letter creates a media sensation, and Kitty is pegged as the Marilyn Monroe of her generation.

The next story, "Out of Body," is told through the voice of Rob, and includes Sasha. This story is set before Sasha begins working for Bennie Salazar, while she is still in college at NYU. Rob has recently attempted suicide and his friends, including Sasha, are worried about him. Rob and Sasha met after she asked him to pose as her fake boyfriend. Sasha believes that her

father has detectives watching her, and she wants to appear as if she is dating a nice boy. Rob resents the fact that Sasha seems interested in their mutual friend Drew. Sasha, Drew, and Rob go to a Conduits concert. As the band plays, Rob begins to fantasize about Drew, imagining that seeing Drew naked would give him a sense of relief. After the concert, Sasha goes to a party with Bennie Salazar, whom she has just met. Rob and Drew end up going to the East River together. Rob tells Drew that Sasha was a hooker in Naples. He immediately regrets betraying her. Drew decides to swim in the river. Rob follows Drew into the icy water, but gets caught in a current and drowns.

Next comes the story titled "Good-bye, My Love," told from the perspective of Sasha's uncle Ted Hollander. Sasha is in Naples, and her stepfather has flown Ted to Naples to look for her, but Ted, who is an art scholar, takes the opportunity to escape his wife and kids and view famous pieces of art. As he walks the city and views different pieces of art, he remembers Sasha as a child, describing her as lovely and bewitching. When he accidentally runs into Sasha on the street, he doesn't know what to say. They schedule dinner, and meet later that evening. As they eat, Sasha asks Ted about his family and his work. Ted is unhappy, and struggles to connect to his wife and family. Ted lies, telling Sasha he is not there for her. Later they go to a club where Sasha convinces Ted to dance with her. Sasha disappears on the dance floor, and Ted realizes she has stolen his wallet. The next day, Ted finds where Sasha lives, and waits outside her door until she gives him his wallet and lets him in. They watch the **sun** set, and Ted realizes how alone she is in this foreign country. The narrative then flashes forward, revealing that Sasha will have a family in the future. Ted will visit her, and they will reminisce about their time in Naples.

The story "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" is told in the form of a PowerPoint presentation created by Sasha's daughter, Alison. It is some time in the 2020s, and Sasha has married Drew and started a family. Alison uses the slides to tell the story of the family's current situation. Alison's autistic brother Lincoln is interested in **pauses** in great rock and roll songs. He struggles to connect with his father, who is a doctor and rarely home. One night, Drew returns home from work in a bad mood. Drew becomes angry with Lincoln, and yells at him. Sasha comes to Lincoln's defense, but Lincoln runs to his room. Alison and her father go for a walk in the desert. Drew admits that he has trouble connecting with his son. Alison suggests Drew help him make graphs of the rock and roll pauses as a way to find connection. As they return to the house, Alison experiences tremendous anxiety, feeling as if she has traveled into the future, and their home may be gone. She is relieved to find it still there, and goes to bed. The chapter ends with slides of graphs created by Lincoln and Drew.

The final chapter, "Pure Language," brings the novel full circle by returning to Alex, who appeared as Sasha's date in the novel's

first story. The year is sometime in the 2020s, and Alex has taken a job with Bennie as a social networking marketer, promoting a performance by Scotty Hausman, who has had a comeback as a musician who plays music for toddlers. Alex is reluctant to tell his wife, Rebecca, about his new job due to the stigma around the kind of marketing he's doing. Alex works with Lulu, Dolly's daughter who appeared in "Selling the General." On the day of the concert, the venue is packed, and Alex feels proud. Before the concert Scotty has a panic attack, and refuses to play. Eventually, Lulu convinces Scotty to get on stage. On stage, Scotty plays his songs for children, but then switches to more personal material. Everyone is wowed, and the concert later becomes historic. As Alex and Bennie walk home after the show, they pass the building where Sasha used to live. They ring the doorbell, but nobody answers. Just as they leave, a woman approaches. For a moment they hope it is Sasha, but it is another woman.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Sasha Blake** – One of the novel's main characters, Sasha appears in several of the novel's stories as both a major and minor character. Sasha struggles with her identity, and lives a wild life as she attempts to find her authentic self. She fears the future, and as the novel progresses, despairs that she is aging and has not accomplished the things she wanted. Throughout the novel, Sasha deals with an addiction to stealing, which ultimately leads to the loss of her job as Bennie Salazar's assistant. Eventually, Sasha gives up her ruinous lifestyle and finds a kind of redemption. She marries her college friend Drew and settles down. They have two children, Alison and Lincoln, and Sasha transforms her addiction to stealing into a passion for art made of found objects.

**Bennie Salazar** – Another main character in the novel, Bennie is a record executive. His mentor, Lou Kline, introduces him to the music industry as a teenager, and he becomes very successful. His success, however, leaves him disconnected from the people he loves, including his son Christopher. When it comes to music, Bennie is a purist and hates producing music he doesn't believe in. Ultimately, his devotion to music that he considers pure ruins his credibility in the music industry, as he refuses to stand behind the overproduced and soulless pop groups that companies want him to produce. Though Bennie is intelligent and charismatic, he struggles internally with his Hispanic identity and often feels like an outsider. Like Sasha, he also worries about aging, and suffers from sexual impotence that stems from the shame around his failures. By the end of the novel, however, Benny reclaims his status in the music industry and finds self-acceptance.

**Lou Kline** – Lou Kline is a powerful and charismatic music

producer who lives a decadent lifestyle that includes eating at fancy restaurants, doing cocaine, and seducing young women. Early in the novel, he has a relationship with a seventeen-year-old girl named Jocelyn. He has six children with a number of different wives. One of those children, named Rolph, commits suicide after a long period of estrangement from Lou. Lou refuses to confront the fact that he is aging, and lives his fast lifestyle accordingly. Eventually, however, Lou suffers a stroke as the result of his unhealthy lifestyle, and is left physically impaired and alone.

**Scotty Hausman** – Guitarist of the Flaming Dildos, Scotty is an eccentric musician. Bennie's good friend as a teenager, Scotty and Bennie stop hanging out after Scotty begins dating Alice, whom Bennie has a crush on. Though Bennie goes on to find success in the music industry, Scotty gets divorced and recedes into a life of seclusion, resentment, and delusional theories about his situation. He ends up working as a janitor and fishing in the East River in his free time. Scotty resents Bennie's success, and even visits his office once, leaving a dead fish behind when he exits. Scotty continues to love music and write songs on the lap steel guitar, and after rekindling his friendship with Bennie, goes on to play a redemptive, history-making concert in New York City.

**Dolly Peale (La Doll)** – Also known as La Doll, Dolly is a famous PR consultant and celebrity in New York City. Dolly's reputation is ruined after she organizes an event where a malfunction burns many of the party's famous attendees, leaving them with awful scars. Dolly cannot find PR work after this, and worries about providing for her daughter Lulu, whom she struggles to connect with. Eventually, Dolly takes a high paying job trying to redeem the image of a genocidal dictator named the General. After this project, she moves out of the city and opens a gourmet shop. Though nobody recognizes her as a formerly famous person, Dolly is happier after the change.

**Bosco** – Bosco, the former guitarist of the Conduits, has fallen from fame and become fat, alcoholic, and sick with cancer. In an attempt to regain his fame, Bosco decides to go on a suicide tour, during which he plans to create a documentary, and eventually die on stage. This plan does not come to fruition. Instead, Bosco ends up recovering and running a dairy farm.

**Rhea** – A punk rocker in her youth, Rhea dyes her hair green to assume a punk identity, but feels self-conscious about her freckles. Rhea is in love with Bennie, but feels left out because Bennie likes Alice. Lou considers her, along with Jocelyn, as one of "his girls," and later in life she visits him as he is dying. Though she doesn't have a sexual relationship with Lou, she feels both left out and disgusted by Lou's relationship with Jocelyn. Rhea ends up settling into a more traditional life as an adult. She gets married and has three children.

**Jocelyn** – A childhood friend of Rhea, Bennie and Scotty, Jocelyn begins a sexual relationship with Lou Kline at the age of seventeen. Jocelyn spends much of her adult life in and out of

rehab, but eventually finds recovery. By the end of the book, she is living with her mother and pursuing a college degree. Like many other characters, Jocelyn struggles with aging and the feeling that she has wasted her time and not created the life she wants.

**Alex** – Early in the novel, Alex is new to New York City, and enamored by the novel environment. He goes on a date with Sasha, during which she steals a woman’s wallet. Alex has strong morals, and stands up to the hotel workers, whom he feels are not doing a sufficient job helping the woman find her wallet. Alex returns later in the novel as a divorced and remarried father of a toddler. He is disillusioned and disconnected from his new wife, Rebecca. He takes a job with Bennie doing social media marketing to promote a concert played by Scotty. He works alongside Lulu, and feels insecure about his work, but ultimately goes on to promote a show that goes down in history.

**Lulu** – Dolly’s daughter, Lulu is a sociable young girl who often seems ashamed of and unable to relate to her mother. She travels with Dolly to an unnamed location to do PR work for the General. As an adult, Lulu works with Alex as a social media marketer, and prefers to communicate through text messaging. Lulu is intelligent and sensitive; traits she uses to help Alex promote a history-making concert.

**Stephanie** – Christopher’s mother and Bennie’s wife and business associate, Stephanie moves from New York City to the wealthy community of Crandale with her family. A tattooed woman and recovering drug addict, Stephanie feels out of place in Crandale and struggles to connect with the residents. She feels ridiculous because of the energy she puts into trying to connect the women she doesn’t identify with. Stephanie loves Bennie, but after Bennie’s past infidelities, she worries constantly that he is cheating on her. Her fears eventually become reality, and she and Bennie divorce.

**Kitty Jackson** – A famous actress who is assaulted by Jules Jones after an interview, during which he notes the power of her fame over those around her. A compassionate person, Kitty forgives Jules’ crime, and goes on to advocate for him in court. Later Dolly uses Kitty’s stardom in an attempt to save the General’s image. Kitty is idealistic and strong willed, which leads to her being kidnapped by The General.

**Rob** – A suicidal college student, Rob pretends to be Sasha’s boyfriend so that Sasha’s father will finally think Sasha is dating a “nice” boy. Rob has depression, is possibly gay, and feels disconnected from himself and others. He knows Sasha’s secrets, and after revealing them to a mutual friend, Drew, he drowns in the East River.

**Alison Blake** – The daughter of Sasha and Drew, Alison is a stubborn young woman who keeps a journal compiled of PowerPoint slides. She has tremendous love for her brother, Lincoln, and her father, but struggles to identify with her

mother. She keeps notes of all of her mother’s annoying habits, and believes it is her job to torture Sasha. She worries that things in her life are falling apart.

**Ted Hollander** – Sasha’s uncle, Ted Hollander is a frustrated art scholar who goes to Naples to try to locate Sasha. He is pleased that Sasha’s father funds the trip, and spends time viewing art, as opposed to finding Sasha. The trip is a chance for him to get away from his family, whom he feels don’t understand him.

**Charlene (Charlie)** – Also known as Charlie, Charlene is Lou’s daughter. On a trip to Africa with her father, she misses her mother and tries to connect to her younger brother, Rolph. She is defiant in her youth, and as an adult, joins a cult in Mexico run by a charismatic leader who promotes a diet of raw eggs. After almost dying of Salmonella, Charlie returns to the U.S., struggles with a cocaine addiction, and becomes estranged from her father.

**Mindy** – A Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at Berkley, Mindy is Lou’s girlfriend who travels to Africa with Lou and his children. An intelligent and motivated woman, Mindy has an inclination to analyze the interactions she sees through a structural lens. She sleeps with Albert, the safari tour guide, but later marries Lou and has two children before they divorce. After the divorce she works as a travel agent before returning to her studies at UCLA.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Jules Jones** – Stephanie’s brother, Jules is a frantic and neurotic journalist incarcerated for assaulting Kitty Jones after an interview. He spends time in prison, and moves in with Stephanie and Bennie after his release. He goes on to write a biography of Bosco titled “Conduit: A Rock and Roll Suicide.”

**Drew** – A friend of Sasha and Rob, Drew is a motivated young man from Wisconsin. He states he wants to become President of the United States, but ends up marrying Sasha and becoming a surgeon. He has a good heart, but has trouble connecting with his children.

**Lincoln Blake** – The autistic child of Sasha and Drew, Lincoln is obsessed with **pauses** in great rock and roll songs. He is intelligent, but socially awkward. He fails to relate to his father, but eventually finds connection through a project they do that involves graphing pauses in rock and roll music.

**Rolph** – Lou’s son, Rolph is a sensitive and naïve child who struggles to connect to his father. Rolfe commits suicide at the age of twenty-eight after years of estrangement from Lou.

**The General** – A genocidal dictator who hires Dolly to cover up his inhumane actions and reframe his image to avoid assassination.

**Arc** – The General’s human relations captain.

**Alice** – A friend of Bennie and Scotty, Alice is desired by both

friends. Rhea attempts to befriend her, but Alice does not trust her. Alice marries Scotty, but ends up divorcing him.

**Lizzie** — Sasha's friend in college, Lizzie dates a man named, Bix. Bix is black, and Lizzie has to hide this fact from her bigoted mother.

**Bix** — Lizzie's boyfriend, Bix is a black graduate student who has an interest in technology.

**Rebecca** — Alex's second wife and stepmother to Alex's daughter.

**Cora** — Lou's travel agent.

**Christopher** — Bennie's son.

**Albert** — A tour guide in Africa, Albert drives the safari vehicle for Lou and his family during their safari.

**Dean** — A blond actor who often states the obvious, Dean joins Lou and his family on their safari.

**Louise** — A young girl who travels through Africa with Lou and his family. Louise goes on to reconnect with Dean years after the safari, and eventually marries him.

**Chronos** — Bassist of the band the Mad Hatters, Chronos joins Lou and his family on the safari. He is attacked by a lion, and saved by Albert.

**Fiona** — One of two older women on the safari with Lou and his family. Fiona and her friend Mildred are supposedly birdwatchers.

**Mildred** — The other woman on the safari with Lou and his family, Mildred and her friend Fiona are supposedly birdwatchers.

**Coz** — Sasha's therapist, Coz attempts to help Sasha admit her problem with stealing and overcome it.

**Collette** — Bennie's executive producer.

**Dr. Beet** — Benny and his son Christopher's therapist.

**Chandra** — A member of the pop duo Stop/Go, Chandra is a musician and older sister of Louisa.

**Louisa** — A member of the pop duo Stop/Go, Louisa is a musician and younger sister of Chandra.

**Olivia** — Chandra's daughter.

**Marty** — a shy violin player, Marty plays with the Flaming Dildos.

**Ramsey** — Lou's old army buddy, Ramsey is the owner of the Safari company that Lou and his family travel with in Africa.

**Dave** — Scotty's fishing buddy.

**Clay** — Kathy's husband, Clay is a wealthy member of the Crandale community.

**Kathy** — Clay's wife, Kathy is a tennis player who befriends Stephanie and becomes her tennis partner. Kathy has an affair with Bennie.

**Cara-Ann** — Alex's daughter.

**Noreen** — An introverted woman and outcast in the Crandale community.

**Beth** — Sasha's mother.

**Hammer** — Beth's second husband, and Sasha's stepfather.

**Susan** — Ted Hollander's wife.

**Alfred** — Ted Hollander's son.

**Andy Grady** — Sasha's estranged father.

**Wade** — Drummer of the band the Pinheads, Wade is a touring musician who travels through Asia and Europe with Sasha before abandoning her in Hong Kong.

**Ava** — Alex's daughter.

**Lupa** — Bennie's second wife.

**Zeus** — An old friend of Alex, Zeus helps Alex promote Scotty's show.

**Joel** — The drummer for the Flaming Dildos. A smart kid, with an overprotective father.

**Sammy** — Scotty's fishing buddy.



## 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.



### TIME AND MEMORY

*A Visit from the Goon Squad* serves as an in depth exploration of the passage of time, the effects of aging on individual lives, and the longing for the past through memory. The novel's title even speaks directly to the theme of time. Bosco, the former guitarist of The Conduits, who has become fat, alcoholic, and suicidal, states, "Time's a goon, right?" Traditionally, a goon was an individual who inflicts fear and violence on others to achieve a desired end. Utilizing the word "goon" illuminates Egan's understanding of time as an unforgiving force that shapes the novel's characters in various, and often unpleasant, ways.

The novel's exploration of time and memory occurs in the overarching structure of the novel, and also within the individual stories. Structurally, the stories move back and forth through time. This movement offers clear depictions of the way in which people, places, and cultures change over time. Likewise, within the individual stories, there are often sudden jumps into the future, which offer immediate and powerful juxtapositions between the present, past, and future. For example, in the story "Safari," Charlie and Rolph, who are

siblings, are depicted dancing in a moment of true connection. During this moment, however, the story jumps suddenly forward, and the reader finds out that at the age of 28 Rolph will commit suicide. The leap forward puts this moment of connection in conversation with the tragedy these characters will experience later in life. This kind of narrative gesture is common throughout the novel.

The merciless effect of time on the lives of the novel's characters often leaves them searching memory for better times. The novel's characters are haunted by their mistakes, but also by their past successes. They often turn to memory, longing for a past in which their lives were exciting, their careers were fruitful, and their health was stable. Though not all of the novel's characters are completely ravaged by the passing of time, all of them must grapple with their powerlessness over it, their inability to stop or slow the passage of their lives, and the changes that come with it. Memory often serves as a respite for these characters, but ultimately, their lives are propelled forward and they have no choice but to go for the ride.



## IDENTITY, AUTHENTICITY, AND MEANING

The issue of identity is a prominent theme in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, as Egan explores the extent to which identity is inherent and the ways in which it is assumed. The novel's characters struggle to find meaning and authenticity in their lives, and they use different methods to discover, create, and escape their identities. The novel's two primary characters, Sasha and Bennie, are two examples of characters that face challenges with identity. Sasha, who feels empty of a true identity, steals items that reflect the identities of the items' owners in an attempt to establish her own identity. Bennie, who is ashamed of his racial and class identities, experiences shame after moving to a wealthy white community called Crandale.

Through Sasha, Bennie, and other characters, Egan works to highlight the instability of identity, and the ways in which created or assumed identities lead to a feeling of inauthenticity. Identity, assumed through certain cultural markers, is fluid. For example, in the story "Selling the General" the reader learns about *The Party*, which refers to a notorious and exclusive event thrown by Dolly. Dolly attempts to create an artistic display of lights by placing colored oil in plastic pans beneath the bulbs. Tragically, the pans melt, and oil ends up burning the party's guests. The incident ruins Dolly's career, changing her identity from a beloved scenester to a social outcast. Later, however, the party becomes an infamous event, and it is revealed that individuals who were not in attendance purposely mutilate their **bodies** in an attempt to claim they were there. These individuals, through self-mutilation, attempt to claim an identity of importance by lying about their involvement at the party.

This ironic situation depicts clearly the changing meaning of identity markers.

The novel ultimately shows the challenges and dangers of attempting to create identities that are not authentic. Sasha and Bennie both create significant wreckage in their lives in their attempts to create, maintain, or reject certain identities. The more they deny their true identities, the deeper their feeling of inauthenticity grows. In the end, both of these characters arrive in a place of authenticity, but this is only reached once they quit trying to forge their identities, and accept themselves, good and bad, for who they are.



## CONNECTION, DISCONNECTION, AND TECHNOLOGY

The theme of Connection and Disconnection is finely balanced in Egan's novel. Structurally, the novel highlights the way in which the characters' lives are woven together. Characters from one story emerge in later stories as background characters, and background characters in some stories take center stage at other points in the novel. For example, the story "Ask Me if I Care" is narrated by Rhea and includes Jocelyn as a side character. Later in the novel, in the story "You (Plural)", the roles switch, and we receive Jocelyn's narration with Rhea as the sidekick. The ways in which these characters' lives are connected, and the ways in which these connections become traumatic for these characters, comes through the juxtaposition of these two stories. Though the novel's stories depict the ways in which the characters' lives are interconnected, the novel's characters often struggle with a feeling of disconnection from self, family, and community. One striking example is the story "Out of Body," which is told by a depressed college student, Rob, who has recently attempted suicide. The second-person narrative technique depicts the sense of disconnection Rob feels from himself. Instead of referring to himself with "I" he refers to himself as "you." Interestingly, by using the pronoun "you" he also attempts to put the reader in his place, which can be read as a reach towards connection.

The idea of connectedness is also explored through the role of technology in the lives of the characters. The novel examines the ways in which technology is potentially leading to a greater sense of both connection and disconnection in our culture. In "Pure Language," Alex takes a job with Bennie doing Social Network Marketing, but he is concerned about sharing his new job with his wife because of the stigma attached to this form of marketing. Tension also develops in the story around Alex's daughter, who is a toddler and desires to play with Alex's phone. In this way, technology serves as an issue that leads to disconnection between Alex and his wife. At the end of the story, however, Alex uses his phone to locate his wife and daughter in the crowd, and texts her, leading to a moment of connection.

Though the novel depicts many characters that feel isolated, the narrative ends with a gesture toward hope. In the final moments of the novel, characters come together to watch Scotty Hausman perform live in New York City. The moment is one of deep connection for the characters present at the concert. Whether through the use of technology or the communal act of experiencing live music, the novel maintains its hope for a future where humans find community and connection.



### FAME, ART, AND POPULAR CULTURE

*A Visit from the Goon Squad* offers a strong critique of popular culture. Egan accomplishes this criticism primarily through her exploration of the music industry, but film, photography, and journalism are also investigated in her novel. Egan draws attention to the way in which trends come and go, and the effects of these cultural shifts. What is popular in one moment—for example, punk rock—is replaced by another trend soon after—such as overproduced pop music or music for preverbal infants. These shifts in culture often leave individuals who were once successful and famous in the dust. This is true in the experience of several of the novel’s characters. Bosco, for example—the guitarist from the hugely successful band, The Conduits—finds himself fat, alcoholic, and forgotten. Having fallen from fame, he desires so much to be remembered he decides to promote his new album with a “suicide tour” in which he plans to die at some point while on stage.

Egan often writes with intense irony about the ways we respond culturally to popular trends and famous individuals. She recognizes the power that fame holds in our culture. In the story “Selling the General,” Dolly uses actress Kitty Jackson’s fame in an attempt to redeem the image of a brutal dictator. In another story, Jules expounds on the way in which people respond to Kitty, showing the immense power she possesses as an actress. The absurdity of these depictions of fame points the reader to the true power popular culture and fame hold in modern society. “Selling the General,” in particular, depicts the way in which fame can be used to manipulate individuals toward unethical ends.

The novel does, however, have a respect for art aside from the fame and popularity of artists. While fame and popular culture are critiqued in the novel, several characters are depicted in a positive light because of their true love and appreciation for art and music. Though Benny and Scotty both have difficult moments in their careers, they do have comebacks that leave them more authentically connected to their art forms. Sasha also ends up establishing a good life, putting the fast rock-and-roll lifestyle she lived as a younger woman behind her. She begins making art out of found objects, which is a new and healthier outlet that replaces her obsession with stealing. While the novel critiques popular culture and fame, showing

the negative power of fame and the sad outcomes of individuals who chase it, Egan maintains a respectful appreciation of art and artistry, and those characters that put aside the pursuit of money and fame often end up much better for it.



### RUIN AND REDEMPTION

The theme of ruin and redemption is present throughout Egan’s novel. This theme fits nicely alongside the novel’s other themes, as the characters find themselves crushed by time, by their self-centered and isolating ways of living, and by shifts in American culture. Throughout the novel, each of the major characters finds him- or herself at a low point. Sasha’s story shows her slipping deeper into ruin as the result of her stealing, her isolation from family and friends, and her lack of self-love; Jocelyn becomes addicted to drugs and spends most of her adult life in and out of rehab; and Benny loses his record label and is seen as a failure by those still in the industry. The idea of ruin and redemption is also reflected alongside the characters in the spaces that they inhabit. New York City is an environment that reflects this theme in a particularly poignant way. These characters inhabit a post-9/11 NYC, where the towers have fallen, the rivers are polluted, and in later stories, the city exists in a heightened surveillance state. The same is true in other locations as well. In the story “Goodbye, My Love,” Ted visits the ruins of Pompeii and notes the way in which the city of Naples is degrading. In “Safari,” the killing of the lion reflects humans inflicting ruin on the environment. These images of ruin, as reflected through the consciousness of the characters, mirror the ruin they have experienced in their own lives.

Despite the ruin many of these characters experience in their lives, the novel counterbalances the destruction with redemption. Two of the novel’s main characters, Sasha and Benny, find their way out of the depths of their devastation and rebuild their lives. Benny, after losing his position at Sow’s Ear records, turns back to his pure love of music, reconnects with his old friend Scotty, and goes on to promote a concert that goes down in history. Sasha finds herself by the end of the novel, and settles down with her family, turning her addiction to stealing in a more healthy direction through her found-object art. The picture painted of these characters is not one of perfection—both Benny and Sasha still face challenges in their lives and relationships—but ultimately, they find themselves living lives they can inhabit with some level of peace. For both of these characters, their redemption comes through confronting those things which they ran from as younger individuals and accepting themselves for who they are. In Egan’s novel, redemption is an experience that happens within the individual, and only through self-acceptance and authenticity are these characters able to rebuild their lives.





## SYMBOLS

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



## THE SUN

The sun is a constant symbol throughout the novel, and serves to point the reader toward the passage of time, and also the theme of ruin and redemption. The presence of the sun is linked to both the destructive force of time on the lives of the characters, and also moments where time has landed them in situations that are stable and joyous. For example, in the story, “Ask Me If I Care,” Scotty stares at the sun with such intensity that it damages his eyes. This harmful act is associated with the death of his mother, which points toward the idea of time and ruin. More often than not, however, the sun symbolizes both ruin and redemption at once. While visiting Lou, Jocelyn fondly remembers watching the sunrise with Lou’s son, Rolph, comparing it to a baby, and imagining they could hold it in their arms. In this moment, the sun stands as an image of hope, but this hope is also backdropped by the knowledge that Rolph has gone on to commit suicide. The same is true of the sunrise in the story, “Out of Body.” The sunrise marks the day of Rob’s drowning, but also suggests hope for Sasha as she transitions toward a better life. Though the sun, as a symbol, has several shades of meaning through out the novel, it undoubtedly alludes to the passage of time, and serves to illuminate the experience of loss and hope the characters endure, often in the same instant.



## WATER

As a literary symbol, water is often connected with the idea of rebirth, renewal, and redemption, but in *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, this symbol is inverted, instead pointing to destruction, decay, and death. One of the primary images of water in the novel is the East River in New York City. The river is polluted and its banks are lined with trash. For those living in the New York City of the 2020’s, water is something to be feared. In the story “Pure Language,” the reader learns a water wall has been built to combat rising water levels. The most strongly symbolic moment of water in the novel occurs in the story “Out of Body.” At the end of a long night, Drew and Rob decide to swim in the East River. Symbolically, the water represents the polluted lives through which they are navigating, and the fact that Rob drowns during their swim solidifies the connection between water and destruction or death. A similar association appears in the story “You (Plural),” as Jocelyn, in a moment of anger toward Lou, imagines drowning him into the pool. Water, rain, and steam also appear heavily in the story “Selling the General,” which focuses on the unethical PR moves of a genocidal dictator.

Interestingly, the absence of water is sometimes associated with redemption. Knowing water’s connection with death (particularly in her personal experience), it should come as no surprise that Sasha ends up moving to the desert. The desert, a place defined by its lack of water, becomes the place where she finds stability and some semblance of happiness.



## THE BODY AND APPEARANCE

Attention to the body is constant in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Bodies often serve as the location of identity for individuals, and comparing one’s body to another’s allows these characters to establish their meaning in the world. In the novel, the body can be manipulated to establish identity and distinguish oneself. This is most clearly depicted in the story, “Ask Me If I Care.” Rhea dies her hair to establish a punk identity, and her attention to Jocelyn’s blond hair serves as a reference point against which she can gauge her authenticity. It also becomes an important element in the story “A to B,” as Bennie and Stephanie attempt to establish themselves and find acceptance in Crandale, but are judged by their appearances. The body is also a symbol that points the reader toward the theme of time. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* focuses on the ways in which the human body ages and fails. In the novel’s first story, “Found Objects,” Sasha focuses on Alex’s body and notes that he is fit because he is young. Later, in the story “You (Plural),” Lou’s power has diminished with the failing of his body. The body is the site of meaning in the novel, and the way in which characters focus on their own bodies and the bodies of others works to reveal their true natures.



## PAUSES

Pauses serve a symbolic function in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, pointing readers toward the passage of time, and imitating the ups and downs of the characters’ lives. Structurally, the interwoven narratives in the novel are often put on pause and returned to after time has passed. In this way, the novel imitates an album. These pauses, however, are not static. The pauses are packed with meaning. Within them, story continues to unfold, and characters continue to develop.

Pauses often point toward the idea of life and death. In the story “Great Rock and Roll Pauses,” Sasha suggests that pauses in rock music make you think the song will end, and one is relieved that they keep going. So many of the novel’s characters have this experience in their lives. They believe they are ruined, that they will never regain their lives, but often times they are just experiencing pauses in their relationships, health, or careers. Moments of pause within the stories are often moments of reflection and connection for these characters, an opportunity to reflect on the way in which things have changed. Like an album, these characters pause between the songs of

their lived experience. For some, the album continues, and for others it comes to an end.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor Books edition of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* published in 2011.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ [Coz] was trying to get Sasha to use that word, which was harder to avoid in the case of a wallet than with a lot of the things she'd lifted over the past year, when her condition (as Coz referred to it) had begun to accelerate: five sets of keys, fourteen pairs of sunglasses, a child's striped scarf...Sasha no longer took anything from stores—their cold, inert goods didn't tempt her. Only from people.

**Related Characters:** Sasha Blake (speaker), Coz

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 4

#### Explanation and Analysis



Sasha's decision to pursue therapy with Coz is an attempt to overcome her addiction to stealing, which has resulted in the loss of her job with Bennie Salazar. In a deeper sense, however, her stealing signifies an attempt to find connection and establish an authentic identity. Stealing allows Sasha to feel connected to others through possessing objects that are close to them, but also provides the opportunity to explore the issue of identity. The objects she chooses to steal—keys, sunglasses, and especially the child's striped scarf—have metaphorical significance as they are related to the victim's identity. For example, keys open doors that reveal people's private lives, and the scarf is connected to the idea of childhood and innocence.

In therapy, Coz attempts to get Sasha to use the word "steal" or "stealing" because it speaks to the nature of her addiction in a more authentic way than a euphemistic word like "lifting." By confronting the authentic reality of her ruinous actions, Coz believes Sasha will be able to take responsibility and connect to her identity in a more authentic way. Try as he might, however, Sasha does not find the authenticity she desires until the end of the novel.

☞ She could tell that [Alex] was in excellent shape, not from going to the gym but from being young enough that his body was still imprinted with whatever sports he'd played in high school and college. Sasha, who was thirty-five, had passed that point. Still, not even Coz knew her real age. The closest anyone had come to guessing it was thirty-one, and most put her in her twenties. She worked out daily and avoided the sun. Her online profiles all listed her as twenty-eight.

**Related Characters:** Sasha Blake (speaker), Coz

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 6

#### Explanation and Analysis

Scenes of Sasha's date with Alex are interwoven with her therapy session with Coz, and they work together to establish Sasha's character and explore her insecurity about aging and her struggle with authenticity. In the novel, the body is a symbol that depicts the often-ruinous impact of time. Likewise, the sun symbolically speaks to the passage of time. Both symbols then work to illuminate Sasha's character in this quote.

Sasha's attention to Alex's body speaks both to her insecurity about her own age and her understanding that the body reflects the impact of time. Alex has not been subjected to the ruinous effects of time yet, the way Sasha has. Sasha struggles to come to terms with the fact that she is aging—she avoids the sun (which can make people get wrinkles earlier, but in the novel also generally represents passing time) and keeps a gym routine in an attempt to combat aging. Her online profiles and lies to Coz further depict her insecurity and her inability to be authentic even with those closest to her. Likewise, the fact that her online profiles give her the capacity to deceive others also speaks to the way in which technology can serve as force of disconnection in the lives of the novel's characters.

☞ "I'm sorry," Sasha said quickly. "It's a problem I have."

The woman opened the wallet. Her physical relief at having it back coursed through Sasha in a warm rush, as if their bodies had fused.

"Everything's there, I swear," she said. "I didn't even open it. It's this problem I have, but I'm getting help. I just—please don't tell. I'm hanging on by a thread."

The woman glanced up, her soft brown eyes moving over Sasha's face. What did she see? Sasha wished that she could turn and peer in the mirror again, as if something about herself might at last be revealed—some lost thing. But she didn't turn. She held still and let the woman look. It struck her that the woman was close to her own age—her real age. She probably had children at home.

**Related Characters:** Sasha Blake (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 11

### Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the woman who owns the wallet Sasha stole earlier in the story confronts Sasha. As the therapy session sections of this chapter show, Sasha struggles to admit her addiction to stealing, but in this moment, she is forced to confront her addiction, an undesirable component of her true identity.


Here Sasha not only sees this undesirable part of herself with clarity, but another person also sees her with depth, which creates a feeling of connection within Sasha. Sasha, however, still wonders who she truly is, and thus is immediately curious about what else the woman sees in her—she wants to find something true, something perhaps “lost,” in the reflection of the woman’s eyes in the mirror (an image with several layers of disconnection). The moment ends with Sasha returning to her insecurity around her age and the misguided life she has lived. Her thought that the woman is her age and has children at home shows the distinction between where Sasha thinks she should be in her life, and where she actually stands.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ Bennie's assistant, Sasha, brought him coffee: cream and two sugars. He shimmied a tiny red enameled box from his pocket, popped the tricky latch, pinched a few gold flakes between his trembling fingers, and released them into his cup. He'd begun this regimen two months ago, after reading in a book on Aztec medicine that gold and coffee together were believed to ensure sexual potency. Bennie's goal was more basic than potency: sex drive, his own having mysteriously expired.

**Related Characters:** Bennie Salazar (speaker), Sasha Blake

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 21-22


### Explanation and Analysis

This chapter (and scene) takes place chronologically before the last story, prior to Sasha's loss of her job as Bennie's secretary as the result of her stealing. Like Sasha, Bennie struggles with the fact that he is aging. Again, the body serves to symbolically point toward the ruinous effects of time, as Bennie's sexual dysfunction is manifested in his physical body. His sexual impotence also speaks metaphorically to the impotency he is experiencing in his life and career. This impotency is incredibly damaging to Bennie's ego—his identity is rooted in his power as a record executive. His faith in the rather ridiculous Aztec healing method of consuming raw gold speaks to his desire to redeem his power by whatever means necessary, even the literal consumption of wealth and extravagance.

☞ Then the sisters began to sing. Oh, the raw, almost threadbare sound of their voices mixed with the clash of instruments—these sensations met with a faculty deeper in Bennie than judgment or even pleasure; they communed directly with his body...And here was his first erection in months...He seized the cowbell and stick and began whacking at it with zealous blows. He felt the music in his mouth, his ears, his ribs—or was that his own pulse? He was on fire!

**Related Characters:** Bennie Salazar (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 30

### Explanation and Analysis

In this scene Bennie has gone to visit a sister duo called "Stop/Go," which he long ago signed to his record label. In the past, Bennie has maintained his identity as a powerful record executive by signing successful bands, but "Stop/Go" has failed to produce a record since he signed them, causing doubt in his identity and ruin in his career. Bennie, however, remains a purist when it comes to music, and as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that he cares more about the quality of the music than the amount of records sold.



In this scene, Bennie connects authentically with the music, which creates a sense of connection to himself (his body) and those around him. This connection is shown through his collaboration in the music making, and also through his erection. Because his sexual impotency is connected to his impotency in his life and career, this moment of connection with the art of music making is momentarily redemptive for Bennie.

☝ "It's incredible," Sasha said, "how there's just nothing there."

Astounded, Bennie turned to her...Sasha was looking downtown, and he followed her eyes to the empty space where the Twin Towers had been.

"There should be something, you know?" she said, not looking at Bennie. "Like an echo. Or an outline."

**Related Characters:** Bennie Salazar, Sasha Blake (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 36

### Explanation and Analysis

As Bennie drives Sasha home through New York City after their visit to the house of the "Stop/Go" sisters, they pass the place where the Twin Towers stood before the terrorist attack of September 11th, 2001. In the novel, several sites in New York City, including the East River and the Twin Towers, serve as reflections of the ruin in the lives of the novel's characters. Both Bennie and Sasha have sustained significant ruin their lives—Sasha through her stealing and Bennie through his egotism and self-centeredness—and their attention to the ruin of Ground Zero reflects this shared experience.


Sasha's comments about the towers speak to her struggle in accepting her own past, and the losses she has experienced

in her life. Her desire for an echo or an outline also suggests a desire to find some remnant of her past in the present, as well as her inability to accept her losses (which are explored further as the novel progresses).

## Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ I can't tell if [Alice's] actually real, or if she's stopped caring if she's real or not. Or is not caring what makes a person real.

**Related Characters:** Rhea (speaker), Alice

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 58

### Explanation and Analysis

This story takes place in the late 1970s at the height of the punk rock scene in San Francisco. Rhea, an aspiring punk rocker, struggles throughout this chapter to establish her identity in an authentic way. She believes that identity can be created through external markers, so in attempt to be a true punk, she dons the appearance of a punk rocker.

Rhea also judges Alice throughout the chapter because Alice has blond hair and does not possess the external markers of a punk rocker. By the end of the chapter, however, after struggling with her own identity, Rhea begins to realize that her own attempts at establishing an authentic persona through her outward appearance have left her feeling empty. Alice, on the other hand, possesses as realness (or authenticity) that Rhea herself lacks. In this moment, she realizes that authenticity is rooted in not worrying about what others think, but acting in a way that is true to your own feelings.

## Chapter 4 Quotes



☝ "Women are cunts," his father says. "That's why."

...

"They are not—" He can't make himself repeat the word. "They are," Lou says tightly. "Pretty soon you'll know it for sure." Rolph turns away from his father. There is nowhere to go, so he jumps into the sea and begins slowly paddling back toward shore. The sun is low, the water choppy and full of shadows. Rolph imagines sharks just under his feet, but he doesn't turn or look back.

**Related Characters:** Lou Kline (speaker), Rolph

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 78-79

### Explanation and Analysis

The connection and disconnection between Rolph and his father Lou is highlighted in this chapter. Rolph, a naïve young boy, admires his father, despite his father's ruinous self-centeredness and misogynistic views. Until this point, Rolph accepts his father's views as truth. But when Rolph reveals that Mindy has cheated on Lou, Lou reacts by calling her a "cunt," which reveals the depth of his hatred toward women—a fundamental component of his identity.

In this moment, then, Rolph intuitively grasps the destructiveness of Lou's views, and rejects them. This rejection marks the commencement of his journey toward the development of his own identity independent of his father's. The fact that the sun is setting symbolically marks the end of their connection as father and son, and the menacing nature of the water speaks to the ruin Lou has created with his views, and the more adult world Rolph is entering in disconnecting from his father.

☞ [Charlie] takes hold of his hands. As they move together, Rolph feels his self-consciousness miraculously fade, as if he is growing up right there on the dance floor, becoming a boy who dances with girls like his sister. Charlie feels it, too. In fact, this particular memory is one she'll return to again and again, for the rest of her life, long after Rolph has shot himself in the head in their father's house at twenty-eight: her brother as a boy, hair slicked flat, eyes sparkling, shyly learning to dance.

**Related Characters:** Rolph, Charlene (Charlie) (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 82

### Explanation and Analysis

Throughout this story Charlie and Rolph have struggled to bond, but in this final moment of the story they find connection on the dance floor. For most of the story Rolph has identified with his father, but after a falling-out over Lou's vicious misogyny, Rolph disconnects from his father and begins establishing his own authentic identity independent of Lou. Rolph feels this process toward his own authentic identity physically, which is depicted in the fading



of his self-consciousness as he dances with Charlie.

The crucial flash-forward in this moment, however, counters the sense of redemption present in this scene. Rolph feels as though he is coming into his own identity, but his father's ruinous views and behavior will have a lasting effect on him, and ultimately play a part in his decision to end his own life. The past undoubtedly impacts these characters, shaping who they become in the future—another example of the often-ruinous force of time on their lives. Memory, however, serves as a respite for the pain of the present (in the flash-forward) for Charlie. In light of the tragedies in her life, Charlie finds solace in the memory of this moment of pure connection.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ Every night, my mother ticks off another day I've been clean. It's more than a year, my longest yet. "Jocelyn, You've got so much life in front of you," she says. And when I believe her, for a minute, there's a lifting over my eyes. Like walking out of a dark room.

**Related Characters:** Jocelyn (speaker), Lou Kline, Rhea

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 91

### Explanation and Analysis



Jocelyn and Rhea return to Lou's house twenty years after the chapter "Ask Me If I Care," which first introduced this cast of characters. Lou, who was last seen as a powerful record executive, has been ruined by a stroke; Rhea, who struggled with her punk persona, has gotten married and had children; and Jocelyn, who was popular but lost, has been in and out of rehab and finally gotten clean. The large leap in time since the last time these characters appeared illuminates the unpredictable and often ruinous effects of time on their lives.

Jocelyn has had a particularly difficult time in the preceding years, and feels as though she is beyond redemption, having missed her chance at a good life. Her lack of hope is depicted in her struggle to believe her mother's encouraging words, but at moments she is able to believe her, and feels relief at the thought of redemption.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☝ I looked down at the city. Its extravagance felt wasteful, like gushing oil or some other precious thing Bennie was hoarding for himself, using it up so no one else could get any. I thought: If I had a view like this to look down on every day, I would have the energy and inspiration to conquer the world. The trouble is, when you most need such a view, no one gives it to you.

**Related Characters:** Scotty Hausman (speaker), Bennie Salazar

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 103

### Explanation and Analysis



Scotty has decided to come to Bennie's office on 5th avenue in New York City to figure out what happened between their falling-out as teenagers and where they have both ended up as adults. In the years since their disconnection, Bennie has become a powerful record executive, and his success is depicted in Scotty's description of his office and the view. Scotty, however, has lived a ruinous and resentful existence, working as a janitor and spending his free time fishing and lamenting the loss of his wife.

A fundamental component of Scotty's identity his belief that he has been cheated by the universe. He finds meaning in the view of the city, believing that Bennie's success stems from the view, as opposed to the possibility that Bennie's view is the result of hard work or luck. At the same time, though, Scotty makes a rather poignant point about how both success and failure tend to snowball—once someone has some success, it's often easier to achieve more, whereas once someone is behind it's even harder to catch up. This is most obviously shown in the trajectories of Bennie and Scotty's lives.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ Stephanie and Bennie had lived in Crandale a year before they were invited to a party. It wasn't a place that warmed easily to strangers...It wore on Stephanie more than she'd expected, dropping off Chris for kindergarten, waving or smiling at some blond mother releasing blond progeny from her SUV or Hummer, and getting back a pinched, quizzical smile whose translation seemed to be: Who are you again? How could they not know, after months of daily mutual sightings? They were snobs or idiots or both, Stephanie told herself, yet she was inexplicably crushed by their coldness.

**Related Characters:** Stephanie (speaker), Bennie Salazar

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 111

### Explanation and Analysis

After achieving incredible success in the music business, Bennie and Stephanie move to Crandale, a wealthy and exclusive community outside of New York City. Bennie hopes that moving to the community will allow him to assume the identity of a typically successful American man, but both Bennie and Stephanie feel disconnected and inauthentic in the new community.

The difference between the Crandale community and the community the couple left in New York City creates an identity crisis in Stephanie. She both judges the women of Crandale and desperately wants their acceptance. This conflicting desire to both separate herself from and be accepted by the other woman echoes her struggle with authenticity within her own identity.

☝ The topic was the presence of Al Qaeda in the New York area. Operatives were present, Bill confided, especially in the outer boroughs, possibly in communication with one another (Stephanie noticed Clay's pale eyebrows suddenly lift, and his head gave a single odd jerk, as if he had water in one ear), but the question was: how strong a link did they have to the mother ship—here Bill laughed—because any kook with a grudge could call himself Al Qaeda, but if he lacked money, training, backup (Clay gave another quick head shake, then flicked his eyes at Bennie, to his right), it made no sense to allocate resources...

**Related Characters:** Stephanie (speaker), Bennie Salazar

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 116

### Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Stephanie and Bennie are at a party with members of the Crandale Community. Over time, they have begun to make some connections in Crandale and are invited to parties, but as this scene suggests, they are still considered outsiders. At this particular party, the conversation has shifted to the fear of terrorism in post-9/11 America. This tragic event not only had ruinous physical effects on New York City, but also tragic implications on the

nation's psyche. Suspicion, especially regarding those who do not appear white, is a reality in this world and explored through the second half of the book.

Though Bennie is Hispanic, he is racially profiled by the white Crandale members and pegged as being of Middle Eastern descent. Bill derives meaning from Bennie's dark complexion, but his racist misreading of external markers has caused him to misinterpret Bennie's true identity. This moment speaks to a disconnection between the characters present, but in a larger sense, a disconnection between Americans in a nation waging a supposed "war on terror." Bill's comment that "any kook with a grudge could call himself Al Qaeda" is such a gross generalization, that anyone who looks non-white can become a suspect.

☞ "I want interviews, features, you name it," Bosco went on. "Fill up my life with that shit. Let's document every fucking humiliation. This is reality, right? You don't look good anymore twenty years later, especially when you've had half your guts removed. Time's a goon, right? Isn't that the expression?"

**Related Characters:** Bosco (speaker), Stephanie

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 127

### Explanation and Analysis

Stephanie, who is a PR woman, goes to visit Bosco (the former guitarist of the Conduits) to talk about promoting his new album. At one time, Bosco was a very famous rock star, but he has aged, become alcoholic, and is dying of cancer. He has now decided that he wants to die on stage during his tour.

Bosco's comment about time being a "goon" both gives the novel its title and speaks to the devastating effects of time and aging on these characters' lives and bodies. The novel shows the way in which popular culture ignores the truth of aging, and remains obsessed with youth and vitality, but Bosco wants to counteract this. He is willing to go to great lengths to regain his fame (dying on stage), but also desires to show himself authentically, and provide an authentic view of aging and ruin.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ Entering Lulu's bedroom, Dolly felt like Dorothy waking up in Oz: everything was in color. A pink shade encircled the overhead lamp. Pink gauzy fabric hung from the ceiling. Pink winged princesses were stenciled onto the walls: Dolly had learned how to make the stencils in a jailhouse art class and had spent days decorating the room while Lulu was at school. Long strings of pink beads hung from the ceiling. When she was home, Lulu emerged from her room only to eat.

**Related Characters:** Dolly Peale (La Doll) (speaker), Lulu

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 145-146

### Explanation and Analysis

Throughout this Chapter, Dolly and Lulu's relationship is explored during their trip to a foreign country to do PR work for The General. Their relationship is strained as the result of Dolly's fall from fame after a party in which a light display malfunctioned and burned the guests. This event led to the loss of Dolly's job and her incarceration. Since this time, Dolly's relationship with Lulu has existed in a state of ruin. She is trying to regain stability in their lives through her work with The General, and in this scene she enters Lulu's room to tell her about the trip they are going to take.

Lulu is the only thing in Dolly's life that holds any meaning, and she desires connection with her daughter more than anything else. Her impression of the bedroom with its bright colors shows the way in which Lulu is the bright spot in Dolly's life, but the stenciled princesses are a reminder of the past, suggesting that though Dolly has been released from prison, the memory of this time period and the ruin it has caused will remain. The fact that Lulu only emerges from the room to eat further shows the deterioration of their relationship and the depth of their disconnection from one another.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☞ For months she'd done business with Lars, arriving sometimes without having managed to take anything, just needing money. "I thought he was my boyfriend," she said. "But I think I wasn't thinking anymore." She was better now, hadn't stolen anything in two years. "That wasn't me, in Naples," she told you, looking out at the crowded bar. "I don't know who it was. I feel sorry for her."

**Related Characters:** Sasha Blake, Rob (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 194

### Explanation and Analysis


Before returning to New York City, beginning college, and meeting Rob, Sasha lived a transient lifestyle in Europe and Asia. Upon meeting Rob, they feign a relationship to make Sasha's father happy, and the two become close. Sasha shares some of her destructive past experiences with Rob, which leads to a deep connection between them. In this quote, the pain Sasha has experienced because of her addiction to stealing and lack of understanding of her identity becomes clear.

Sasha misinterprets the meaning of her relationship with Lars. In reality, she was engaging in sex work, but because she believed Lars was her boyfriend, she was able to rationalize to herself the act of sleeping with him for money. In this case, the misinterpretation of certain situations has led Sasha to justify her actions, but not without devastating consequences. Her struggle in establishing an authentic identity is then depicted in her comments about pitying her past self. This suggests her identity has changed since that time, and the fact she hasn't stolen in two years suggests she is on the road to redemption. This hope, however, is counteracted by the stories earlier in the book that show Sasha later in life and still engaging in her addiction.

●● As you fail, knowing you're not supposed to panic—panicking will drain your strength—your mind pulls away as it does so easily...You slip through Sasha's open window, floating over the sill lined with artifacts from her travels: a white seashell, a small gold pagoda, a pair of red dice. Her harp in one corner with its small wood stool. She's asleep in her narrow bed, her burned red hair dark against the sheets. You kneel beside her, breathing the familiar smell of Sasha's sleep, whispering into her ear some mix of I'm sorry and I believe in you and I'll always be near you, protecting you, and I will never leave you, I'll be curled around your heart for the rest of your life, until the water pressing my shoulders and chest crushes me awake and I hear Sasha screaming into my face: Fight! Fight! Fight!

**Related Characters:** Rob (speaker), Sasha Blake

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 207

### Explanation and Analysis

In a drug-inspired decision to go for a swim in the icy East River, Rob has followed Drew into the water. Unlike Drew, however, Rob is not a strong swimmer and gets caught in the current. In the novel, water often represents the idea of ruin, and in this scene these characters confront the ruin of their lives as Rob meets his final destruction through death.

Throughout the entire story Rob has struggled with a connection to himself, as embodied in the second-person narrative point-of-view. In this moment his mind slips away from his body, but he seeks connection by returning in his mind to Sasha, the one person with whom he has felt connected. Though he gives up fighting by the end of this scene, he continues to hold onto the idea that Sasha will find redemption, and it turns out that his death plays a role in inspiring Sasha to change her life. The switch into first person at the end of the quote suggests Rob's reconnection with and acceptance of his identity (as, at the very least, a person who loves Sasha purely) in his final moments of life.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

●● Ted braced himself for his moody, unpredictable son.  
 "Hiya, Alf!"  
 "Dad, don't use that voice."  
 "What voice?"  
 "That fake 'Dad' voice."  
 "What do you want from me, Alfred? Can we have a conversation?"  
 "We lost."  
 "So you're what, five and eight?"  
 "Four and nine."  
 "Well. There's time."  
 "There's no time," said Alfred. "Time is running out." "

**Related Characters:** Ted Hollander (speaker), Alfred

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 211

### Explanation and Analysis

Ted, a husband, father, and art scholar, is in Naples. He is supposed to be looking for his niece, Sasha, but has been ignoring his duty and going to art museums instead. In this story, Ted's primary struggles are connecting with his family and finding balance between his identity as a father and his




identity as an art scholar. His phone call with his son then depicts both his inauthenticity and his disconnection from his family.

Ted's son recognizes the lack of authenticity in his father's voice, and immediately calls him out for being fake. Ted's children seek connection with him through sports, but Ted is seemingly not interested in sports, suggesting a deeper lack of understanding in his character and a strong lack of connection in the family. The comment about there still being time shows, on one level, that Ted does not empathize with his son's disappointment at having lost the game. In a larger sense, however, it speaks to Ted's belief that he still has time to redeem his family and find Sasha. His son's final comment is then an ominous one, reflecting Ted's lack of understanding that he does not have as much time as he thinks to redeem his marriage and find Sasha.

☞ On another day more than twenty years after this one, after Sasha had gone to college and settled in New York; after she'd reconnected on Facebook with her college boyfriend and married late (when Beth had nearly given up hope) and had two children, one of whom was slightly autistic...Ted, long divorced—a grandfather—would visit Sasha at home in the California desert...And for an instant he would remember Naples: sitting with Sasha in her tiny room; the jolt of surprise and delight he'd felt when the sun finally dropped into the center of her window and was captured inside her circle of wire. Now he turned to her, grinning. Her hair and face were aflame with orange light. "See," Sasha muttered, eyeing the sun. "It's mine."

**Related Characters:** Sasha Blake (speaker), Ted Hollander

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 233

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is a flash-forward that occurs while Ted is with Sasha in Naples. He has finally found connection with her, and they share a moment of authenticity in her room as the sun sets. The sun as a symbol generally represents the theme of time, and the flash-forward reveals that the sunset signifies an end to this period of Sasha's life, and the beginning of her journey toward something better. The novel's flash-forwards generally reveal whether the

characters find redemption or end up in a state of ruin.

Sasha is one of the few characters in the novel that finds redemption. She reconnects with Drew through Facebook, which depicts the way in which technology plays a role in the way people connect in the future. She eventually finds stability, and has a family. Ted, however, loses his marriage as the result of his inability to manage the two components of his identity that are at odds in the story.

The end of the quote then jumps back to Naples, as Sasha claims that the sun is "mine." This is a reminder of her fear of time and aging—later in life she avoids the sun altogether—but also her addiction to stealing. It's as if she desires to possess and control the sun itself, to steal the idea of time and thus escape its effects.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ Mom makes sculptures in the desert out of trash and our old toys. Eventually her sculptures fall apart, which is "part of the process."

**Related Characters:** Alison Blake (speaker), Sasha Blake

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 242

### Explanation and Analysis

Alison describes her mother's (Sasha's) sculptures in this moment. Sasha makes art out of found objects, which is also the title of the novel's first chapter, "Found Objects." Sasha has channeled her addiction to stealing into an art form, which has allowed her to find a new sense of meaning, pointing to the potentially redemptive quality of art. The fact that Sasha builds the sculptures knowing that they will fall apart also suggests an acceptance of time and the unavoidability of decay and ruin. In light of this new understanding, it is clear that Sasha has better come to terms with time's effects as well as with her own identity, and has finally discovered a way to live her life more authentically.

☞ Conduit: A Rock-and-Roll Suicide, by Jules Jones. Mom bought the book, but she never mentions it. It's about a fat rock star who wants to die onstage, but ends up recovering and owning a dairy farm. There's a picture of Mom on page 128...Mom's mouth is smiling, but her eyes are sad. She looks like someone I want to know, or maybe even be.

**Related Characters:** Alison Blake (speaker), Bosco, Jules Jones, Sasha Blake

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 258

### Explanation and Analysis



The book Alison mentions here provides a glimpse into her mother's past. The book calls back to the chapter "A to B", which highlights Bosco's decision to go on his "suicide tour" and Jules' desire to document it. In "A to B" these characters seem completely ruined—Jules by his mental illness and Bosco by his alcoholism and cancer—but the presence of the book here suggests that both of these characters have found some kind of redemption.


Sasha's lack of interest in the book suggests that she wants to put the troubles of her past behind her. Alison, however, wonders who her mother was in the past. The picture of Sasha smiling with sad eyes speaks to the conflict she lived with for so many years, and her struggle to find herself authentically. This is no longer the woman Sasha is as Alison's mother, and Alison wants to connect with her mother in a deeper way by understanding who her mother was in the past (while also perhaps just wishing her mother were as "cool" as she once was). Though Alison generally identifies more strongly with her father, she senses a connection with her mother as she looks at this image.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☛☛ At last he found Rebecca, smiling, holding Cara-Ann in her arms. She was dancing. They were too far away for Alex to reach them, and the distance felt irrevocable, a chasm that would keep him from ever again touching the delicate silk of Rebecca's eyelids, or feeling, through his daughter's ribs, the scramble of her heartbeat. Without the zoom, he couldn't even see them. In desperation, he T'd Rebecca, pls wAt 4me, my bUtiful wyf, then kept his zoom trained on her face until he saw her register the vibration, pause in her dancing, and reach for it.

**Related Characters:** Alex (speaker), Cara-Ann, Rebecca

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 337

### Explanation and Analysis

Through this chapter, Alex has been struggling to find connection with his wife Rebecca. Much of the tension in their relationship revolves around the use of technology. Alex has taken a job doing social media marketing for Bennie, and has been unable to admit to Rebecca that he is engaging in this work. Rebecca condemns this kind of work, and Alex feels a conflict within his own identity around the ethics of the job. Over the course of the chapter, however, he begins to see the benefits of technology as a connective force, though he remains unable to share this with Rebecca.

At Scotty's concert, which Alex has promoted, Alex feels his disconnection from his wife strongly. He seeks her out using his handset (similar to an iPhone). His distance from Rebecca and his daughter spatially speaks to the disconnection they have experienced through the chapter. In this moment, however, technology serves as a connective force, allowing Alex to bridge the gap between them and reach out to his wife. The fact that he texts her is an act of authenticity—he transcends his fear of Rebecca's judgment and expresses himself honestly through his newfound appreciation of technology.



## 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: FOUND OBJECTS

A young woman named Sasha stands in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel, when she notices a bag on the floor. The owner of the bag is going to the bathroom in one of the stalls. Sasha mocks the woman's blind trust. She thinks that in New York City, a person will steal the hair off of your head if you give them a chance. She reasons that not taking the wallet would be dull, so she decides to live dangerously, and steals it.

The narrative shifts, and it becomes clear that Sasha is recounting this episode to her therapist, Coz. Her therapist tries to get her to say the word *steal*. Since her "condition" started five years ago, Sasha has been unable to accept responsibility for her stealing. Sasha has stolen keys, sunglasses, a child's striped scarf, binoculars, and pens, among other things. She no longer steals from stores because she finds the items cold and inert. She only steals from people.

Coz calls the feeling Sasha gets when she steals "the personal challenge," and considers it a way to assert her individuality. He attempts to switch this challenge around in her mind, so the challenge becomes the resistance of the urge. Meanwhile, Sasha has her own questions about Coz. She wonders if he is gay or straight, if he has written famous books, or if he is a con man posing as a therapist. She has decided to resist her urge to look into this.

During their therapy sessions, Sasha rests on a blue leather couch, and Coz sits behind her. This relieves him of the burden of eye contact, which he finds tiring. Sasha stares out the window, and continues the story of stealing the wallet.

In the story, Sasha is on a boring date with a man named Alex. Alex stares at the television in the bar while Sasha tells him stories about her old boss, Bennie Salazar. Sasha goes to the bathroom and returns with the stolen wallet. After stealing it, she feels a strong sense of possibility in the evening. She sits back at the table and gives Alex what she calls her "yes/no smile." Alex asks if she is happy. She tells him she is always happy, but sometimes she forgets.

*In this scene, Sasha's struggle with her identity is explored in her reasoning around stealing the bag. She frets that her life is dull, and feels compelled to steal the purse. Of course, her comment about New York City being a place where people cannot be trusted also ironically describes herself as a resident of the city.*



*The fact that Sasha is in therapy shows that the ruin her addiction to stealing has caused has led her to at least a hesitant desire for redemption. She steals from people because the objects have meaning for the individuals—she attempts to find connection to others through the objects she steals.*



*While Sasha is confused with her own identity, she also seems to deflect this into questions about Coz's true identity—but she does not look into him because she would prefer to keep it a mystery. Knowing him personally would mean more intimacy, which is something Sasha struggles with, both fearing and desiring human connection.*



*Connection for these characters is difficult. The lack of eye contact marks a lack of connection.*



*Sasha talks about her old boss, hanging onto the past, which was (presumably) a better time in her life. Her smile and comment about happiness speak to the identity issues that Sasha faces—she struggles to authentically connect even to her own feelings.*



Sasha asks Alex if he wants to go somewhere else, and he agrees. As he stands, she examines his **body**. She can tell he is in very good shape, not because he works out, but because he is young. Sasha feels like she has passed that point in her life. Not even her therapist knows her true age. Most people, when asked, place her in her 20s, and the closest anyone has come is 31. She works out daily and avoids the **sun**. Her online profiles say she is 28.

The narrative switches back to the therapist's office. Coz asks Sasha if she ever considers how stealing makes her victims feel. Sasha understands the question has a correct answer, and that Coz is trying to help her get well. She knows where the story is supposed to end—she should stop stealing and return to the things that once guided her life: music and friends. She thinks of a set of goals she had written when she first moved to New York, which included finding a band to manage, understanding the news, studying Japanese, and practicing the harp.

Sasha tells Coz she doesn't think about the people she steals from. She knows that Coz does not think it is because of a lack of empathy. Sasha once told him about an incident when she stole a screwdriver from a plumber who was fixing her tub. As the plumber is on the floor, she sees the screwdriver and feels compelled to hold it. She easily slips it from his tool belt, thinking her hands were made for stealing. The screwdriver feels special to Sasha while the plumber is there, but after he leaves, it feels like any other screwdriver. Afterward, she feels bad about her actions, which is why she is bankrupting herself to pay for therapy.

Often, Coz tries to connect the figure of the plumber to Sasha's father, who disappeared from her life at the age of six. She rejects this idea, stating that she doesn't even remember her father. Sasha thinks that she does this for both Coz's protection and her own, as she feels acknowledging the pain of this situation would interfere with the redemption story they are attempting to write through their therapy.

The story shifts back to the night of the wallet theft. As Sasha and Alex leave the hotel, a woman approaches and tells them that someone stole her wallet and she has to catch a plane in the morning. Alex steps up to help the woman. Sasha begins to worry once Alex tells the concierge to call security. She remembers she has a Xanax in her purse, but she can't open it for fear the woman will see her wallet. She watches Alex get angry at the injustice of the situation. Sasha notes that he is new to New York, and seemingly still has a thing or two to prove about how people should treat one another.

*The body as a symbol in the novel usually connects to the passage of time and the effects of aging on the characters. The sun is also a symbol that reflects the passage of time, and so by avoiding it, Sasha attempts to cling to her youth. The dishonesty also reflects a lack of authenticity and an aspect of constant performance in her identity.*



*Coz's question is an attempt to get her to connect with herself emotionally, and think about her relation to other people. She understands this is an attempt to end the stealing, as it is "ruining" her story, which she assumes is supposed to end happily.*



*Sasha seems to steal objects that are connected to the victim's identity in an attempt to establish her own identity. As soon as the plumber leaves, however, the tool so intimately associated with him diminishes in meaning for Sasha. The moment that Sasha admits she feels bad is one of authenticity, though it doesn't stop her from striving for connection through stealing.*



*Sasha's disconnection from her father is crucial to her character, but she is unwilling to admit it at this point in the novel. She feels that facing this loss will inhibit her recovery, and limit her chances for redemption. Her unwillingness to face this, however, interferes with the authenticity of her story and seems to prevent the possibility of any real "redemption" at all.*



*At this point in the novel, Alex is still idealistic and principled, but Sasha thinks this will go away after living in New York for a while, which shows her disillusionment. Sasha's desire for the Xanax is an attempt to disconnect from her feelings of shame for her actions, which is an ongoing struggle for her.*



When the security guards arrive, Sasha tells Alex she will go search the bathroom. Once inside, she takes a Xanax in her mouth and chews it, because they work faster this way. As she looks for a place to put the wallet, the woman comes into the bathroom. Their eyes meet in the mirror. Sasha hands the woman the wallet and tells her she has a problem with stealing. Sasha then feels a warm rush, as if her **body** and the woman's had fused together.

The woman stares at Sasha, and Sasha wonders what the woman sees in her face. Sasha wants to stare into the mirror again—she wonders if something about herself might be revealed—but she doesn't turn. Sasha realizes that the woman is close to her age, and thinks she probably has children at home. The woman agrees not to say anything. Sasha thanks her, and feels a rush of relief as the Xanax kicks in.

Sasha and Alex leave the hotel and walk through the Tribeca neighborhood in Lower Manhattan. Sasha hates the neighborhood since the World Trade Center was destroyed on September 11th. The buildings had always given her hope. She feels tired of Alex, having moved past the desire to find connection through shared experience, to a feeling that they know one another too well.

Sasha and Alex talk about the wallet incident. Sasha lies, telling him she found the wallet in the bathroom behind a planter. Alex finds it strange, stating that the woman seemed like she did it on purpose to get attention. One thing he has learned in New York City is that it is hard to tell who people really are. Everyone seems to have multiple personalities, he says. Sasha tells him he will get used to it.

They arrive at Sasha's apartment, where she has lived for six years. She keeps the things she has stolen on display around the apartment. Her bathtub, which is in the kitchen, impresses Alex. Sasha tells Alex she never uses it since she showers at the gym. Alex loves the apartment, and tells Sasha it feels like old New York. Sasha tries to see the apartment as Alex does. She believes the charm of New York will fade for Alex, the way it has for her. She also thinks that Alex will forget her.

*The moment where Sasha's eyes meet the woman's in the mirror is a step toward connection, though it is by its very nature (as only the reflection of Sasha, not Sasha herself) still indirect. This first step, however leads to Sasha honestly admitting she has a problem, which is a step toward authenticity. Afterward, Sasha feels relieved, and senses a connection to the woman, which can be seen as a redemptive moment.*



*Sasha senses the woman sees something in her that she can't see in herself, which illuminates her struggle with identity. Realizing that the woman is her age and likely has children at home points toward Sasha's insecurity around aging and family.*



*The novel pays specific attention to the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, and focuses on the changes these events had on the characters and the nation. The shift in Sasha's feeling from wanting connection to then feeling too connected suggests that Sasha does not know herself or what she wants.*



*By describing the strangeness of the woman's actions, Alex unknowingly comments on Sasha. Sasha steals for a specific reason, and though it is not for attention, it is for a feeling of connection. Alex notes that, in his mind, New Yorkers struggle with authenticity.*



*Keeping her stolen objects around makes Sasha feel close to other individuals. Alex's reaction to the apartment as "old New York" speaks to a desire and appreciation for the past. He is still enthralled by NYC, but Sasha no longer sees the charm in the place. She understands the way things change, and knows that Alex will change too, leaving her as a blank spot in his memory.*



In the living room, Alex asks Sasha about the stolen objects laid out on tables around the apartment. Sasha then remembers stealing a child's scarf—she remembers it falling from the child, and the excuses she told herself to keep it. When she brought the scarf home, she washed it by hand, and folded it neatly. It is one of her favorite objects. Sasha is drawn to Alex as he looks at the objects, which she sees as years of her life compressed. She feels as if Alex were looking at the raw and warped core of her life. She kisses him, and pulls him to the floor.

After they finish having sex, Sasha is left with a terrible sadness. Alex asks Sasha if he can take a bath in the tub. He leaves the room, and Sasha collapses onto a chair. As Alex draws his bath, Sasha sees his jeans on the floor. He comes back into the room, and stares again at the stolen objects. He asks if he can use a packet of bath salts (which Sasha stole from her friend, Lizzie, before they stopped speaking). Sasha never uses the objects she steals, feeling it would imply greed or self-interest. When she agrees to let Alex use the salts, she feels she has taken a symbolic step, but is unable to tell whether it is in a good or bad direction.

Alex puts the salts in the bath, and Sasha is reminded of Lizzie's bathroom, where she would shower after they went running in Central Park. Alex goes to the bathroom, and after closing the door Sasha takes his wallet from the pocket of his jeans. Sasha sifts through the contents, until a little scrap of paper falls out. The paper is very old and torn at the edges. It says I BELIEVE IN YOU. Sasha feels ashamed for having gone through Alex's wallet. Before Alex comes out, she puts his wallet back, but keeps the piece of paper.

The narrative then cuts to the therapist's office. Coz asks Sasha if she put the paper back. Sasha says she didn't have a chance, but Coz is skeptical. She wishes she could tell him that stealing the paper was a turning point, that she reconnected with her friend Lizzie, and that she has changed. She asks Coz not to ask her how she feels, and he agrees. They sit there in silence, and Sasha is aware of the minutes of Coz's time slipping away.

## CHAPTER 2: THE GOLD CURE

Bennie Salazar, owner of Sow's Ear Records, experiences shameful memories as he meets with executives of his record label. They talk about a band he signed called Stop/Go, a sister duo who are managed by their father. When he signed the band they seemed like an excellent bet, but they are aging now, and haven't put out an album.

*The scarf is an important object to Sasha because it is related to childhood. She longs for the past, and also feels insecure about being an older woman without children. Alex's attention to her objects makes Sasha feel connected to him, as if the objects allow him to know her in a more intimate way, though Alex doesn't necessarily understand this. This feeling of connection inspires Sasha to reach for more intimacy.*



*Despite the intimate moment, Sasha is left feeling sad. She felt that Alex momentarily knew her through the stolen objects, but he does not understand the significance of the moment. The bath salts are another example of the way in which Sasha's stealing has ruined relationships, leaving her disconnected. By not using the stolen objects, Sasha signals that she is not stealing out of greed—she steals to feel connection, which is the opposite of self-interest.*



*The act of going through Alex's wallet shows Sasha quickly slipping back into her addiction. The paper she steals is meaningful to Alex, and therefore something she associates with his identity. The shame she feels suggests the ruinous nature of her addiction, but she keeps the paper anyways—perhaps both for its connection to Alex and for the message it bears.*



*Sasha has the chance to tell Coz about the successes and changes in her life, but she chooses not to. She worries about who she will become at the end of the story she is "writing" with Coz, and doesn't want to end it. In this moment, she is still afraid to connect to her authentic feelings. The story ends on the idea of time slipping away, which connects back to Sasha's worries about the future and longing for the past.*



*Bennie's shame is rooted in his past, and these memories have a ruinous effect on the present moment. Signing Stop/Go is one of many causes of his shame. The connection between their age and lack of future success reflects the obsession with youth found in American popular culture.*



The word “sisters” brings back a memory to Bennie from twenty years prior. After a night of partying, Bennie hid behind a fence as the **sun** rose, listening to cloistered nuns sing. The sound of their voices is magical to Bennie. Later he set up a meeting with the mother superior, where he pitched an idea to make a record of their singing. Before leaving, Bennie approached the mother superior to say goodbye and kissed her on the lips. The mother superior is appalled and injured by his action.

Shaken by the memory, Bennie does not want to listen to the Stop/Go mix with his colleagues. Instead, he decides to visit the sisters at their home after picking up his son Christopher from school. Before leaving, his assistant, Sasha, brings him a coffee, and he sprinkles gold flakes into it. He read in a book on Aztec medicine that the gold flakes help with sexual potency. His sex drive has expired, and he is not sure if his recent divorce from his wife, Stephanie, or the battle over his son, Christopher, has caused it. He sips the coffee and looks at Sasha’s breasts, seeking the feeling of arousal in his **body**. He feels nothing.

On his way to pick up his son Christopher, Bennie listens to classic punk rock music and laments the current state of the music industry. Five years ago, he sold his record label to a crude-oil extraction company, and feels resentful that he has to produce terrible music to make them happy. As he drives, his mind drifts to an award ceremony where he accidentally called an accomplished jazz pianist “incompetent” instead of “incomparable.”

Bennie picks up his nine-year-old son, Christopher, and notices that his own mood changes as soon as he gets into the car. On the back of a parking ticket, he writes, Bennie “Incompetent” and “Kissing Mother Superior.” His therapist, Dr. Beet, suggested writing down his insecurities instead of burdening his son with them. They decide to get coffee together, but Bennie tells Christopher he can’t tell his mother about this. Bennie feels connection to his son through defying his ex-wife. As they drink their coffee, Bennie sprinkles some gold flakes into the cup. Christopher asks what it is, and Bennie tells him it is medicine. Christopher asks if he can have some, and Bennie gives him one flake. Christopher becomes increasingly talkative, and Bennie wonders if it is because of the flakes. Bennie notes that Christopher is more talkative than he has been in the year since the divorce.

*This memory from Bennie’s youth is expressed first with a sense of nostalgia. The sunrise, as a symbol, speaks to the hope Bennie felt as a young man and the magical role of music in his life. Bennie, however, is impulsive, and his action of kissing the mother superior is not only harmful to her, but interferes with his opportunity to record their singing. This kind of poor and impulsive decision-making is a theme through Bennie’s life.*



*Bennie’s sexual dysfunction is literally and figuratively related to his failures. In his life in general, he feels impotent, and the more he focuses on his malfunctioning body the more despair he feels. Impotency is also a sign of aging, which is another insecurity Bennie lives with. The gold shows Bennie’s desperation to regain his sexual potency—he is willing to try this very expensive and absolutely absurd method to redeem himself. Here we also start to see how Egan’s characters appear tangentially in each other’s stories, as Sasha plays a minor role here.*



*When it comes to music, Bennie is a purist. He loves music that is authentic and raw. The sale of his business to the oil company both depicts his personal downfall in the industry and the capitalistic nature of the music business, which is more about money than art. Again, memory leaves Bennie ashamed, and the word “incompetent” can be read as a projection of the way Bennie feels about himself.*



*The shift in Christopher’s mood signifies the relationship they share. Bennie struggles to connect with Christopher, which has been made worse by Bennie’s tendency to burden Christopher with his shameful memories. Bennie’s feeling of connection to his son when he defies his ex-wife points to a spiteful element of his identity, but also a willingness to go to sometimes harmful lengths with his son for connection. Bennie is so desperate for redemption through the gold flakes that he even credits them for Christopher’s talkativeness.*



Sasha waits for Bennie at the house of the Stop/Go sisters. As Sasha says hello to Christopher, Bennie again looks at her breasts and feels nothing. He then looks up at her face and realizes, though they have worked together a long time, he doesn't really know her.

The sisters, Chandra and Louisa, look fantastic, and have a bunch of new material to show Bennie. Chandra's daughter, Olivia, is also there, and Bennie notes Christopher's reaction to her, like a charmed snake rising from a basket. In the recording studio, Louisa sits at the keyboard. Olivia takes up some bongo drums, and hands Christopher a tambourine. Bennie feels a sense of hope being in the presence of music. Sasha brings him a coffee, and he sprinkles some gold flakes into the cup. As they begin to play, Bennie feels great. He starts to record the music. Simultaneously, he smells Sasha's perfume, and becomes aroused. He seizes a cowbell and begins hitting it, feeling as if he were on fire.

As they play, however, Bennie remembers a time he was inadvertently copied on an email between two colleagues in which he was referred to as a "hairball." He loses his focus, and his erection, as he scribbles "hairball" onto his parking ticket. Bennie then remembers a time in Christopher's childhood when Christopher had lice. Bennie couldn't believe it because Christopher went to a fancy private school. After this, Bennie began to spray OFF! bug spray into his armpits. Suddenly, he remembers a woman he was admiring who went into the bathroom at a party after he'd had diarrhea, and he'd felt intensely ashamed. These memories are so overwhelming that Bennie runs from the studio, apologizing on his way out.

Bennie drives home with Sasha and Christopher. He feels the magic of the afternoon continue to fade away, and fights the desire to look at Sasha's breasts. When he finally looks, he feels nothing, and despairs the loss of the erection he'd had as the Stop/Go sisters played. Bennie asks Sasha what she thought, and Sasha says Stop/Go is awful. Bennie says they sounded different two years ago, but Sasha reminds him he signed them five years ago. She knows because the last time she saw them she'd come from a meeting at Windows on the World, which was in the World Trade Center. Bennie waits out a respectful **pause**, and then changes the subject back to the band. Bennie tries to rationalize the band's change, saying two years or five years shouldn't matter, but Sasha reminds him in the music business, five years is five hundred years.

*Bennie uses Sasha as gage for his sexual potency, revealing a self-centered and sexist component of his character. The fact that he doesn't really know her after years of working together furthers this idea. His self-centeredness has created a lack of connection to others.*



*Again Bennie focuses on the sisters' image, as opposed to their character, speaking to a lack of human connection. Bennie's obsession with his own impotency leads to a sexualized impression of his son's interaction with Olivia, a snake being a blatant phallic symbol. Music serves a redemptive and even life-affirming role for Bennie, and in the act of creating music he feels his vigor return.*



*The feeling of connectedness is ruined, however, when Bennie slips back into his shameful memories. All of these memories are connected to the body, either his or his son's. The body is an ongoing obsession and insecurity for Bennie. As mentioned before, his insecurities around the external state of the body are reflective of his internal conflicts and struggle with identity.*



*Bennie continues to gage his sexual potency through Sasha, showing his self-centeredness. The conversation about Stop/Go reflects the nature of the music industry, and the way in which changing trends in popular culture leave artists behind. Sasha's attention to the World Trade Center is a reflection of her own preoccupation with the past. Again the terrorist attack on 9/11 becomes a reflection of ruin in the novel, and speaks to the destruction these characters experience in their own lives. The pause following this conversation is also meaningful, containing pain, memory, and a kind of politeness all at once.*





When they reach the home where Christopher lives with his mother, Bennie is unable to pull up the driveway. Christopher tells Bennie to take some of his medicine. For a moment, Bennie can't find his box of gold flakes, but Sasha produces it and tells him he dropped it as he ran out of the Stop/Go sisters' house. Bennie, Christopher, and Sasha share some of the flakes. Bennie hugs Christopher and feels tempted to tell his son not to tell his mother about the gold flakes, but he catches himself as he imagines Dr. Beet telling him to avoid "betrayal bonding." He feels a deep pain watching Christopher walk to the house where they used to live together.

As they drive back to the city, Sasha notices the place where the Twin Towers used to stand. She notes that it is incredible that there is just nothing there any longer. She says there should be something—an echo, or an outline. Bennie remembers looking at his mentor, Lou Kline, and thinking, "You're finished." Nostalgia, Bennie thinks, is the end. He then notes that Lou died four months ago after being paralyzed by a stroke.

At a stoplight, Bennie remembers the list he has been writing on the parking ticket. He pulls it out, and Sasha asks what it is. Bennie hands it to her, and she reads it aloud. She thinks they are song titles, and says they're not bad. Bennie asks her to read them one more time, and feels relieved and cleansed. When they reach Sasha's apartment, Bennie tells her that he is crazy about her. Sasha says there is no way anything will happen. "We need each other," she says. She kisses Bennie's cheek, and Bennie notes that it is a chaste kiss, one between a brother and sister, or a mother and son. She leaves, and as she walks up the steps she waves and mouths something. Bennie can't hear, so he frantically tries to get the window down. He misses it a second time, before realizing she is just telling him she will see him tomorrow.

### CHAPTER 3: ASK ME IF I CARE

This story is told through the voice of a young woman named Rhea. Late at night, Rhea, Scotty, Bennie, and Jocelyn go to Alice's house. Alice tells the group about a private school where she went up until 6th grade. Her sisters still go there, and are required to wear uniforms. Scotty asks to see Alice's sisters, so they go upstairs. Scotty and Bennie follow Alice. They both have a crush on Alice, though Bennie is entirely in love with her. Rhea has a crush on Scotty, but Alice loves Scotty. As they climb the stairs, Jocelyn tells Rhea that Alice's sisters will be blond because rich children are always blond. In the room, as they look at Alice's sleeping sisters, Rhea worries they will scare the children with their punk rock attire, which includes dog collars, safety pins, and shredded t-shirts.

*When Sasha produces the gold flakes, the reader understands that she intended to steal them, though the act of returning them is a redemptive move toward combating her addiction. The sharing of the gold flakes constitutes a moment of connection, though we're also meant to understand the dysfunctional nature of the act. Bennie's decision not to engage in betrayal bonding is a moment of surrender, a minor redemptive moment for Bennie.*



*Sasha's desire for an echo or an outline of the Twin Towers speaks to her struggle coming to terms with the past. Unlike Sasha, Bennie refuses to feel nostalgic. He believes that living in the past is a ruinous endeavor, and attributes Lou's downfall to this activity. Nostalgic or not, Bennie's shameful memories are causing serious damage in his life.*



*Sasha's perspective on Bennie's list offers him the opportunity to see his past in a new light. The words have no meaning for Sasha, which relieves Bennie of the shame he has associated with them. This ironically creates a sense of connection between them. Bennie tries to push the connection deeper, but Sasha resists. She fears deep connection, as she understands the dangers associated with loss, reflected in her comment that they need each other.*



*This story involves the coming of age for these young characters. Alice's innocent and sleeping younger sisters offer a contrast to the group of punk rockers, who are moving away from childhood. Rhea's attention to the group's triangulation of attraction and Jocelyn's comment about Alice's class shows the connections and disconnections within the group. Rhea's fear around scaring the children suggests she is sympathetic to the young girls, and still tethered to that period of her life. Though she dons the appearance of an edgy punk rocker, she is stuck between the world of the young sisters and her life's next stage.*



The year is 1979, and Rhea is glad that the 1980s are almost here. She is sick of the burned out hippies that hang around San Francisco, where this story takes place. She enjoys punk rock music, and spends her time hanging out with Scotty and Bennie, who are in a punk rock band called the Flaming Dildos. At school, Rhea, Scotty, Bennie, and Jocelyn, hang out on a strip of pavement called “the pit” with the other punk rockers. Scotty plays a lap steel guitar he built by himself, and everyone listens to him. Scotty’s mother died three years prior from an overdose of sleeping pills, and he has gotten quieter since then.

Bennie is new to the school, and wears his hair in a Mohawk. Bennie is able to get along with the “cholos” (young Mexican Americans who dress in a particular style), who hang out down the path from the pit. Rhea wonders why the cholos talk to him, and Jocelyn tells her that Bennie is a cholo, too. Rhea explains the triangulations of love within the group: Rhea likes Bennie, but Bennie likes Alice, who likes Scotty. Scotty likes Jocelyn, and Jocelyn loves Scottie, but she isn’t in love with him. Jocelyn is seeing an older man named Lou, who picked her up hitchhiking.

Rhea notes that nobody in the group wants to date her. She blames this on her freckles, which she plans to remove when she can pay for it herself. Until then, she has her dog collar and dyes her hair green to draw attention away from the freckles. She feels ugly in comparison to Jocelyn, whom she thinks is beautiful. They have done everything together since fourth grade. Jocelyn has seen Rhea’s dad drunk, puking in the buses, and Rhea has seen Jocelyn’s dad hugging a male prostitute before her parents divorced. Despite these intimacies, Rhea missed the day Jocelyn met Lou while hitchhiking. Lou, a powerful record executive, snorted lines of cocaine off of Jocelyn’s bare butt, and they had sex twice. Rhea made Jocelyn tell each detail of the story so she could like she and Jocelyn were equals again.

On Saturday, Jocelyn and Rhea go to Scotty’s garage for band practice. Alice is there with a recorder that her dad bought her, and with a real microphone. Joel, the band’s drummer, shows up next. His dad waits for him outside for the entire practice. Joel is a high achieving student who applied to Harvard, and his dad is overprotective. Rhea notes that the neighborhood is right by the ocean, and all of the houses are brightly colored, but when the garage door closes, they all suddenly feel enraged.

*These characters are strongly rooted in the popular culture of the late 1970s and seek to distinguish themselves from the last generation. They carve out their identities through their musical tastes, clothing, and territory (the pit). Scotty’s identity is exposed through his self-made guitar and magnetism. His character has also been shaped by the loss of his mother through a ruinous addiction to drugs.*



*Bennie expresses his punk identity through his Mohawk, though he is able to switch roles and interact with people from other groups (the cholos) as well, and it’s implied that Bennie himself is Latino. Rhea, who imagines identity as a fixed component of an individual, struggles to understand how he navigates between the two groups. Again, Rhea mentions the connections and disconnections within the group, but this time she reveals her own attraction to Bennie. She laments the fact that Bennie is not attracted to her, which serves as a source of anxiety for her character.*



*Rhea focuses on external markers, crediting them as the source of an individual’s identity, as shown in her attempt to draw attention away from her freckles with her punk attire. She believes she can change internally by changing her appearance. Though Rhea feels Jocelyn is better looking than she is, she rests in the connection they have through their shared experiences. Jocelyn’s relationship with Lou is mature in a way that leaves Rhea feeling insecure, so knowing the details of the relationship allows Rhea to feel Jocelyn is not leaving her behind.*



*The microphone bought by Alice’s dad signifies her privilege, and the overprotectiveness of Joel’s dad is something the other character’s lives lack, despite their general sense of connection through the band. Likewise, the counterpoint between the rage-filled garage and the affluent neighborhood offers an ironic commentary on these teenagers’ perceptions of their lives and identities.*



Toward the end of the practice, a kid named Marty shows up to try out for the band. Rhea notes that he is overweight, has pimples, wears an AC/DC t-shirt, and plays violin. They record a song called “what the fuck” about a failed relationship. While everyone sings, Rhea watches Bennie, admiring his Mohawk, but he turns his attention to Alice.

Bennie and Scotty later drive around from club to club with the recording of their music, trying to get the Flaming Dildos a gig. They want to play a show at a club called the Mab, where all of the best punk bands play. Bennie deals with the club managers while Scotty waits in the car. The band members feel that they have to be careful with Scotty. As a young boy, when his mother went away, Scotty would stare at the **sun**. There are permanent smudges in his vision now, but he likes them because they remind him of his mom.

The band goes to the Mab every Saturday after band practice. They drink from Rhea’s dad’s liquor before going, and Rhea notes that Jocelyn needs to drink more than her to get drunk. They eavesdrop in the Mab’s bathroom, getting all of the gossip around the punk scene. They also enjoy slam dancing to the bands, which makes them feel like real punk rockers. But Rhea wonders what makes a person really punk. She notices that no punk rockers have freckles.

On another Saturday night, the band goes to the Mab, but Jocelyn goes out with Lou. After the concert, they return to Alice’s house, where Alice’s mom serves them yogurt. Rhea remembers one night Alice’s mom brought hot cocoa to them on a gold tray, and Jocelyn said she just wanted to flaunt her wealth. This evening, with Jocelyn gone, Rhea asks Alice if she still has the school uniforms she mentioned earlier. She brings Rhea upstairs to her room, which is full of stuffed animals. Rhea notes that Alice seems nicer when Jocelyn is not around.

Alice takes the uniforms from her closet and asks if Rhea is making a joke. Rhea says no, and promises not to laugh with Jocelyn later about the uniforms. Alice says she doesn’t care either way. Rhea notices that Alice’s pants are ripped and her eyes have dark makeup, but because of her blond hair, she could never be a real punk. Rhea asks why Alice’s parents let them come over, and Alice says they aren’t her parents, but her mother and stepfather.

*Rhea judges Marty based on his external markers, though this act can be read as a projection of her own insecurity. The insecurity is furthered by her focus on Bennie’s attention to Alice.*



*The sun is connected to the theme of time and the ruinous effects of time on these characters’ lives. Even before her death, Scotty’s mom was absent, and staring at the sun was his way of passing the time, hoping she would return. The act is destructive to his vision, but the ruined vision has also become a way to connect with her memory.*



*Rhea’s attention to Jocelyn’s drinking foreshadows Jocelyn’s future struggles with drugs and alcohol. The Mab is the center of the local punk community, and a place Rhea and Jocelyn seek connection. Access to the scene’s gossip and slam dancing lets them feel connected and authentic in their assumed punk identities. Despite these activities, Rhea continues to feel insecure.*



*Rhea feels slighted by Jocelyn because she goes out with Lou, so Rhea turns to Alice instead. Jocelyn constantly draws comparisons between herself and Alice, which interferes with Rhea’s ability to connect, but with Jocelyn gone, she is able to feel affection for Alice. The stuffed animals and dresses are symbols of childhood, and in this moment, both Rhea and Alice are less concerned with projecting a mature and tough identity.*



*Alice is more secure in her identity than Rhea, which is reflected in her lack of concern about Rhea and Jocelyn laughing at her. Rhea, however, remains stuck on the external markers, noting that Alice isn’t really punk because of her blond hair. Alice’s home life becomes more complicated when she corrects Rhea about her stepfather. The comment suggests her home is more conflicted than Jocelyn and Rhea perceive.*



Later, Bennie tells Jocelyn and Rhea that the Flaming Dildos got a gig at the Mab. They shriek and hug him, and Rhea notices his heartbeat. She remembers each and every time they have hugged. They ask who else knows, and he tells them Alice, which bothers them.

After the news, Jocelyn uses Rhea's phone (at her house) to call Lou. Lou scolds Jocelyn, telling her not to call him, but to just let him call *her*. Rhea grabs the phone and asks Lou why he is being rude, but he tells Rhea to give the phone back to Jocelyn. Jocelyn tells Rhea she has to leave the room. Rhea joins her brothers, who are working on a science project, on the balcony. She looks straight into the **sun**, the way Scotty did. Jocelyn comes out a short while later, overjoyed. She tells Rhea that Lou is coming to the show and might give the Flaming Dildos a record contract.

The night of the concert, Rhea and Jocelyn meet Lou for dinner at a fancy restaurant. Rhea notes that he looks as old as her dad. The girls sit under Lou's arms, and Rhea notes that they are "Lou's Girls." After they order, Lou slides a tiny brown bottle of cocaine under the table, and the girls go into the bathroom. Jocelyn has a small spoon, and takes four hits. She gives Rhea one. When they return, Rhea feels as if she has eyes all over her head. Lou tells them about a trip he took to Africa, and about a train there that didn't stop, but only slowed down for people to jump off. Rhea says she wants to go to Africa, and Lou tells her maybe they will go sometime. Rhea feels as if she is beginning her adult life this evening.

They walk together to the Mab, Rhea and Jocelyn beneath Lou's arm. In the hustle and bustle of Broadway, Rhea feels that once her freckles are gone, her whole life will be like this. The girls go into the bathroom and put their dog collars and safety pins on, and when they return the band is setting up. Bennie shakes Lou's hand, and tells him it's an honor to meet him.

The band starts playing, and people respond by throwing cans and bottles at the stage. The band keeps on playing, and Alice tries to tackle the people throwing garbage. The crowd erupts, and everyone begins slam dancing. Rhea notices Scotty close his eyes, and notes that his magnetism is starting to work. One of the garbage-throwing spectators jumps on stage, but Scotty kicks the man in the chest. Scotty smiles in a way Rhea has never seen before, and she realizes that Scotty, out of all of the friends, is the truly angry one.

*The hug is a moment of connection for Rhea, and the fact that she remembers every hug with Bennie reveals her love for him. She feels resentful, however, after she finds out Alice knew about the show before her.*



*Lou's actions toward the girls depict an imbalance of power in the relationship. Lou is a much older man who exerts control over Jocelyn. By making Rhea leave the room, Jocelyn furthers the disconnection Rhea feels developing between them. The contrast between the adult situation in the room and the kids working on their science project depicts Rhea's situation—she is caught between a childhood and adult identity, trying to find her way.*



*Lou's power as a famous record executive is displayed in this scene through the glamorous restaurant and cocaine, and in his action of claiming the young girls as "his." Jocelyn is already growing accustomed to this life, as shown through her drug use, and the fact that she takes more than Rhea. The conversation around the train serves as a metaphor for the life Jocelyn is entering—she is getting on a train that will not slow down. This moment is important in Rhea's coming of age, as she is entering a world that is much more adult than she has yet experienced.*



*In the bathroom, the girls assume their external punk signifiers, again speaking to the idea that identity is fluid and assumed. Bennie's connection with Lou marks his beginning in the record business, which will make him very successful, but ultimately ruin him.*



*Alice's attempt to protect the band is surprising, again revealing a deeper layer to her that Rhea and Jocelyn overlook. Likewise, Scotty's identity is further illuminated. While playing music, he shifts from an introverted individual to a magnetic and aggressive one. Rhea recognizes his anger, which becomes a defining characteristic for him as the novel progresses.*



Rhea turns to Jocelyn, and is surprised to find her kneeling in front of Lou, giving him oral sex. Lou's hand rests on the back of her head, and his other arm is around Rhea. Rhea wonders how Jocelyn is able to breathe, and it begins to seem like Jocelyn is some kind of animal or machine. Rhea tries to focus on the band, but Lou grasps her shoulder. He turns his head toward her and lets out a groan. Rhea begins to cry.

After the concert, everyone goes to Lou's house. The apartment is more extravagant than Jocelyn told Rhea, and she feels betrayed by this. Inside, everyone is shook up from the show. Lou brings Bennie up to his recording studio, and Rhea tags along. She notices how Bennie continues to look out the door at Alice. Rhea feels like she wants to cry again. She worries that what happened in the club counts as having sex with Lou. She leaves the studio and goes into Lou's bedroom, lying down on his bed. Jocelyn joins her, and Rhea says that Jocelyn should have told her. Jocelyn asks what she means, but Rhea doesn't know. Jocelyn grabs a framed picture from the nightstand and shows it to Rhea. Lou is in the picture with his six children. Lou looks happy in the picture, and Rhea notes that he looks like a normal dad.

Lou comes into the bedroom, and Rhea leaves. She waits, at the top of the stairs, looking down into the living room. Scotty is playing a gold guitar and Alice is behind him with her arms around his neck. Bennie is still in the recording studio, playing music over the house's sound system. As Rhea listens, she thinks that Bennie will never know how much she understands him. In that moment, she notices Marty looking at her, and she understands that she is the ugly one in the group, so she "gets" Marty. Frustrated, she goes through a set of glass doors onto Lou's balcony.

After a short while, Lou joins Rhea on the balcony. Rhea asks him if he remembers being their age, and Lou responds that he is their age. She tells him he has six kids, and he agrees, but tells her he will never get old. She says he is already old, and Lou tells her that she is scary. Rhea agrees, saying that her freckles are scary. He tells her it's not the freckles. She is a scary person, and he likes it. He says she is going to keep him honest. Lou tells Rhea that people will try to change her, but she shouldn't let them. He says she is beautiful, and one day a man will fall in love with her freckles and kiss them one by one. Rhea starts to cry. Lou gets close and Rhea focuses on Lou's **body**, stating that it looks like someone has walked on his skin and left footprints. The world is full of shitheads, Lou says, but Rhea shouldn't listen to them. She knows Lou is a shithead, but she listens anyways.

*In this moment, Rhea is initiated into the adult world in a way she is not ready for. She feels further disconnected from Jocelyn, as shown through her perception of her as an animal or machine. The groan Rhea receives implicates her in the sexual act, and she finds this so disturbing she begins to cry.*



*Rhea's feeling of disconnection is furthered by the fact that Jocelyn has not told her everything about Lou. She continues to examine the implications of her experience in the club with Lou, and worries she has been ruined by it. In the bedroom, she seeks connection with Jocelyn, but it is a futile attempt because she doesn't know exactly what she is looking for. This confusion is an indication of her naïveté about the adult world Jocelyn is now a part of. The picture of Lou reinforces his age, and the fact that he looks like a "normal dad" shows the complexity of his identity—he is a father, a powerful record executive, and a lecherous man who abuses his power by seducing young women.*



*Rhea is positioned away from the group, which shows her lack of connection to them. Her musing about Bennie and how he will never know she understands him furthers this idea. Her thoughts about Marty—that Rhea is ugly and so gets Marty, the ugly boy—show her continued insecurity and confusion. In Rhea's mind, the external determines everything, including the outcomes of one's life.*



*Lou lives his life as if time and ageing are not a factor. He lives the decadent lifestyle of a famous man, unaware that it will have devastating consequences later in life. This fact is furthered by Rhea's attention to his body—time has already left "footprints" on him, though Lou denies it. Rhea scares Lou because she is not subjugated by his power. Rhea sees through Lou's image, while Jocelyn doesn't. Lou also sees through Rhea, though, recognizing her insecurity. As an adult, Lou at least has a broader perspective than Rhea, and understands that freckles are not the defining factor of her identity.*



Two weeks later, Jocelyn runs away. Rhea tells her parents that she is with Lou. Scotty and Alice have begun dating, and Bennie no longer hangs out with Scotty. Rhea notes that it is like Bennie and Scotty no longer know each other. Rhea wonders if she had pulled away from Lou that night at the Mab, if Benny would have settled for her the way Scotty settled for Alice. Jocelyn's parents contact Lou, and he tells them he will bring her home in two weeks, next time he comes to San Francisco.

*By running away, Jocelyn exerts her independence (but also her recklessness), while Rhea remains rooted in a less mature position, as shown by her connection with Jocelyn's parents. Lou's response to them, however, shows that he still maintains the power, and Jocelyn may not be as mature as she thinks she is.*



While Rhea is waiting for Jocelyn to come home, Alice invites her over to her house. She has never seen Alice's house in the daytime, and it seems smaller. Alice is calm and happy now that Scotty loves her. Rhea wonders if Alice is actually real, or if she's stopped caring whether she is real or not, or if not caring is what actually makes a person real. They go to the backyard where Alice's sisters are playing tetherball. Alice's sisters turn to them, laughing, wearing their green uniforms.

*Rhea's perception of Alice has shifted, and Alice's true identity becomes clearer now that Jocelyn is not influencing Rhea with her critiques of Alice. Rhea tries repeatedly to find authenticity through external markers, but she begins to realize that authenticity cannot be found through other people's perceptions and opinions. Alice's sisters offer a final iteration of youth in the story, and their carefree laughter in counterpoint to the seriousness of Rhea's pondering shows that she has, over the course of the story, taken a major leap toward adulthood.*



## CHAPTER 4: SAFARI

Lou Kline, his girlfriend Mindy, and his two children, Rolph and Charlie, are on an African safari. Several other characters join them, including Chronos, the bassist of one of the bands on Lou's label, and Dean, an actor who has a habit of stating the obvious. One evening, as they sit around a bonfire, Rolph asks Charlie if she remembers a vacation they took with their mother to Hawaii. Charlie is focused on her father's legs, which are intertwined with Mindy's. She knows they will retire to their tent and make love. She will hear their movement, but Rolph is too young to notice. Charlie reminds Lou that he was married to their mother on that trip. Lou says he is aware of that.

*This first scene appears to be one of connection as the group sits around the bonfire, but Rolph and Charlie's preoccupation with the memory of the vacation they took with their mother undercuts this. Charlie, unlike Rolph, is old enough to understand the intimate details of her father and Mindy's relationship, and uses the mention of her mother in an attempt to disrupt their connection. Lou senses her motive, and brushes it off.*



Two elderly birdwatchers, Fiona and Mildred, trade a sad smile, hearing this familial dispute. Lou has been flirtatious with them, asking them to take him bird watching. They suspect Lou's charm has created challenges in his relationships. In fact, Lou has had two failed marriages, and has two other children in L.A. who are two young to come on the safari.

*At their age, Fiona and Mildred seem to have insight into the nature of the family's struggle. They see through Lou's charm, and understand that his egotism has led to destruction in his relationships.*



A group of Samburu warriors arrives, and Charlie recognizes a young warrior who has scars on his chest. The warriors begin to sing in guttural voices. Charlie moves closer to them. She notes that she is becoming a different sort of girl, acting out in surprising ways. She earlier gave away a pair of earrings (which her father had given her) to a woman whose breasts were leaking milk. When the tour guide, Albert, found Charlie in the village, he told her that her father was not happy, but she didn't care.

The young warrior smiles at Charlie. He has lived away from his village since he was ten, but he understands that in Charlie's culture, she is a child. The narrative then flashes forward, revealing that the young man will die in tribal warfare, but one of his grandchildren named will go to college at Colombia, study robotic technology, and marry an American named Lulu. His technology will be used for crowd security in New York City.

While Charlie watches the warriors perform, Lou takes Rolph for a walk. He tells Rolph that his sister is acting crazy, and that all women are crazy. Rolph says his mother is not crazy, and Lou agrees, saying she was not crazy enough. Lou asks if Rolph likes Mindy. Rolph says he does, though he doesn't know if she is crazy, or the right kind of crazy. Lou puts his arm around Rolph. Lou is not introspective enough to understand that his son is the only person who can soothe him. He doesn't realize that he enjoys the fact that Rolph is different from him, in that Rolph is quiet, reflective, and aware of the pain of others.

Rolph closes his eyes and thinks he will remember this night for the rest of his life, and the narrator reveals that he will. They return to camp and Rolph goes into his tent. He expects Charlie to be asleep, but when she speaks he can tell she has been crying. She asks him where he went.

*At this point Charlie seems to be defining herself through her defiance of her father. This is depicted in the act of giving away the earrings he bought her. The detail about the woman's breasts leaking milk associates her with the idea of a mother, suggesting Charlie's longing for connection with her own absent mother.*



*The young warrior's perspective challenges Charlie's perceived independence. She believes she is an adult, but the warrior sees her as a child. The narrative leap forward to the young warrior's death further separates Charlie's experience from his own, speaking to the idea of cultural disconnection. In this flash forward, the reader also receives a glimpse of the future in America where technology abounds. This America (and the character of Lulu) will be featured later in the novel.*



*Lou and Rolph's walk is a moment of meaningful connection, though it is tainted by Lou's misogynistic musings. Rolph is too young to understand the ruinous implications of his father's statement, and its connection to the end of his parents' marriage. Unconsciously, Lou knows that his egotism and prejudice is appalling, which is why he admires Rolph. Rolph is the polar opposite of Lou.*



*Rolph understands that this moment of connection is important, though the meaning of the exchange will change as he ages, eventually holding a devastating force in his life. When he returns, we see a more authentic side of Charlie. Her hard surface has fallen, and she is shown in a vulnerable state.*



The following day, they pack their things and begin traveling toward the hills. Cora, Lou's travel agent, is rude to Mindy. Mindy, an anthropology Ph.D. student at Berkley, ascribes a structural cause to the behaviors and emotions she notices. She believes Cora hates her because she is younger and dating a powerful man. Charlie, meanwhile, is experiencing *structural resentment*, in which the adolescent daughter of a twice-divorced man will not accept his new girlfriend. Finally, Mindy calls Rolph's affection for his father *structural affection*, in which a child embraces his father's new girlfriend because he can't separate his loves from his father's, and the new girlfriend will feel maternal toward the child.

Mindy begins thinking about her own relationship with Lou, and realizes it will be temporary due to *structural incompatibility*, meaning Lou, who is much older and more powerful than she is, will not accept her ambitions. She turns her attention to Albert, the safari guide, and thinks of the term *structural desire*, which suggests that a younger mate of a powerful male will be drawn to the closest male who disdains her mate's power.

Chronos, the bassist for a band signed to Lou's label, sits beside Albert in the front seat. Chronos argues with the bassist of his band (who is also on the safari) about who has seen the most animals, something Mindy calls *structural fixation*. Albert swerves the truck off the road through the tall grass, and parks beside a pride of lions—two females, one male, and three cubs. Lou, Charlie, Rolph, Chronos, and Dean stand up, their upper bodies emerging through the sunroof. Mindy, effectively alone with Albert in the vehicle, realizes she is attracted to him. Very softly, Albert tells Mindy she is driving him crazy. Mindy says her hands are tied, and when Albert asks if it will be forever, she tells him it's an "interlude."

As they talk, Chronos gets out of the car and approaches the lions, taking photos. When one of the female lions suddenly pounces on him, Albert shoots and kills it. Lou jumps from the car, pushing Mindy back inside. She realizes he wants her to stay with the kids. Mindy is frightened, along with the children, but she hides her fear. Mildred, one of the elderly birdwatchers on the trip, rests her hand on Mindy's shoulder and tells her Chronos will be fine.

*Mindy misses the complexity of emotion and the conflicts present in the group by analyzing them only through a theoretical lens, ultimately leading to a disconnection from and misunderstanding of others. A great deal of irony rests in the fact that anthropologists are meant to understand cultures, while the complex culture of her own group eludes her.*



*Viewing her relationship with Lou through a structural lens allows her to rationalize her lack of attachment to Lou and her attraction to Albert, shirking responsibility for her feelings. This is fundamental to Mindy's character—though she identifies strongly with her ambition and intelligence, she analyzes her way out of culpability for her feelings and actions.*



*Mindy's structural analysis of each interaction also serves as a way for her to feel superior to others on the trip, but once she is left alone with Albert, she finds connection with him. The connection pulls her from her intellectual musings, and she experiences a true desire for Albert, which surprises her. She suspects that her relationship with Lou will be temporary, but the story later reveals that it will last longer than she suspects, showing her lack of insight into the future and even her own nature.*



*Chronos' foolish decision causes the lioness to die, which speaks to the ruin human kind causes in the natural world. This idea is explored to a greater extent later in the novel. Mindy, in an attempt to take on a motherly role, hides her true feelings, but Mildred sees through her, and comforts her.*





That evening, the group goes to a bar at a mountain hotel. Albert is held up as a hero, though he knows his boss will reprimand him, even though Chronos only received a minor wound and two stitches. The narrative then flashes forward, revealing that members of the trip will reconnect in the future. Dean, the movie star who likes to state the obvious, will reconnect with a girl named Louise, who was twelve at the time of the trip, and they will get married. Most, however, will meet and realize that their shared experience does not provide the foundation for an ongoing relationship.

Rolph and Charlie meet a group of other tourist children and sneak out back to look for animals through a fence. There are no animals, but the children ask about the events of earlier that day. When Charlie tells Louise they were inches away from the lion, Rolph corrects her, saying they were feet away. Charlie then corrects him, saying feet are made of inches. Rolph is sick of the conversations about the lion, and worries that the cubs will be without a mother now. Charlie tells him maybe the father will take care of them. All the while, Mildred and Fiona are listening in on the conversation, but they are not noticed. The narrator notes that older females are easily missed. Mildred suggests that the pride (group of lions) will likely take care of the cubs.

Rolph goes back to the bar and finds Lou and Mindy talking to Ramsey, the owner of the safari outfit, and an old army friend of Lou's. Lou notes that Rolph looks tired, and Mindy offers to take him upstairs. When they exit the bar, they stand for a moment on the porch. Rolph hears the other children but is relieved to be away from them. Albert is out on the porch, and he says hello to them. Mindy says hello, and takes Rolph upstairs.

Rolph perceives Mindy's interaction with Albert as rude, and he asks Albert to join them upstairs. At the top of the stairs, Rolph asks Albert if his room is upstairs. Albert says he stays in room 3. Rolph offers to show Albert his room. Mindy is acting strange, and Rolph senses some tension in the room. He feels angry at Mindy, and remembers that his father said women are crazy. On the way up, Rolph wanted Mindy to tuck him in, but now he feels apprehensive about it. He says he can tuck himself in.

*The lion attack creates a stronger sense of community and connection within the group, though the flash-forward in the narrative challenges this feeling of camaraderie. Dean and Louise reconnect and find commonality, but the majority of the group does not find their single shared experience enough to merit ongoing connection. This moment offers a commentary on the way time changes people and perspectives change, and how nostalgia as a function of memory skews reality.*



*Already the children are recreating the details of the lion attack from different perspectives and finding discrepancies in their memories. Rolph's concern about the lioness's cubs hints at his own pain around ruin of his parents' marriage. Again, the older women offer their perspective to comfort Rolph, acting maternally. The comment about age speaks to the way our culture values youth and looks down upon aging. This idea is explored in depth with regard to the music industry later in the book.*



*In this moment, Mindy does not conceptualize the interaction through a structural lens, which suggests a change in her after the lion attack. Her desire to act maternal to Rolph is more authentic in this moment. Rolph feels disconnected from the other children, but feels happy to have his own space, a moment where disconnection is presented in a positive light.*



*With his child's perspective, Rolph does not understand that the tension in the room is sexual. He remembers his father's statement that women are crazy, which leads to a disconnection from Mindy. This moment depicts the way in which Lou's ruinous attitude and comments about women are already negatively affecting Rolph.*



Five days later, the group takes a train to Mombasa. The train does not stop, but slows down just enough for people to jump off. Charlie and Mindy share a laugh over Dean's obvious statements. Lou moves in and asks what is so funny, and Charlie says, "Life." Charlie hugs Lou, and notes that she used to hug him when she was younger.

*Here the train mentioned in the story "Ask Me if I Care" returns. The train, as a metaphor for time, suggests that time stops for nobody. Mindy's openness to being maternal has caused a shift in Charlie's lack of trust, and they find connection in this scene. Charlie has taken on a more authentic perception of herself; though she continues to view herself as mature (as shown through her comment about life), she allows herself to remain Lou's child (as shown through the hug).*



The next afternoon, they settle in a hotel near Mombasa. They go to the beach, and Lou notices a Medusa tattoo on Chronos's chest, which he finds less startling than his potbelly. Lou notices that Chronos's **body** looks like the body a father, but notes that his own body is healthy and lean. He feels proud walking on the beach with Mindy, who is more beautiful than expected in a sparkling blue bikini.

*The tattoo of Medusa (a female monster in ancient Greek myth) echoes Lou's perception of women as threatening or crazy, though he pays more attention to Chronos's body. The body reflects the effects of time and aging, something Lou fears, and he uses Chronos's body to comfort himself. He uses Mindy in a similar way, as a reflection of his potency and vitality.*



Charlie and Rolph relax under a palm tree. Charlie says she never wants to go home, but Rolph misses their mother. He watches Mindy and Lou swim in the **water**. Rolph confronts the fact that his father doesn't love his mother anymore, but attributes this to her not being crazy enough. Rolph and Charlie decide that Lou doesn't love Mindy either, though she loves him. Rolph believes everyone loves Lou.

*Though Charlie experiences a change of identity in the trip, becoming more comfortable with Mindy and her father, Rolph continues to suffer as the result of his father's behavior. Water as a symbol reflects the idea of ruin, and the fact that Mindy and Lou are depicted there speaks to the nature of their relationship. Though Rolph understands that his father does not love his mother, he is too immature to fault his father for ruining the relationship. He still believes everyone loves his father.*



After swimming with Mindy, Lou goes to get spears (for spearfishing) and snorkeling gear. He fights the urge to follow Mindy to bed, noting that she has been especially seductive and overly sexual in the past few days. He suspects their relationship will end after the trip. Lou brings Rolph down to the **water**, and they begin snorkeling together. Lou notices that Rolph is thin and timid, traits Lou believes he gets from his mother. Lou spears seven fish, but Rolph doesn't kill any. He tells his father he just likes watching them.

*Lou's decision to forgo sex with Mindy and spend time with his son is a redemptive move toward connection, though his way of connecting with his son (through violence) shows his lack of understanding of Rolph's true self.*



They rest on a spit of rocks, and Rolph asks Lou what he thinks of Mindy, if she is the right kind of crazy. Rolph says she was rude to Albert. Lou asks about this, and as Rolph tells the story about Mindy and Albert's interaction, Lou senses something happened between them. Rolph asks why Mindy was rude to Albert, and Lou says women are "cunts." Rolph feels a deep anger at his father for saying this. Rolph turns and begins swimming back through the **water** as the **sun** sets. He imagines sharks under him, but he doesn't look back at his father. He knows that it is excruciating for his father to watch him struggle to stay afloat, but also knows Lou will save him if he sinks.

*In his naïveté Rolph clings to his father's original comment about women, but when Lou calls Mindy a "cunt," Rolph senses the truly destructive nature of this misogynistic comment. He rejects it, showing an authenticity to his true self in this moment. Both the sun and water appear in this scene as symbols pointing to the ruinous nature of Lou's relationship with Rolph and the damage this will cause in the future. The setting sun depicts the end of their connection as father and son. The shift is also shown in Rolph's decision to swim back. Instead of trying to please his father, Rolph decides to hurt him by struggling back alone.*



That night at dinner, Rolph and Charlie drink wine. Rolph doesn't like the taste, but likes the way it makes him feel. Lou has spent the past hour in bed with Mindy, having sex, and feels victorious. He is a man who can't lose, and tells himself he doesn't care about Albert. He makes Mildred and Fiona promise to take him bird watching the next morning.

*Lou's thought that he "can't lose" speaks to a fundamental element of his personality—his sexual conquest of Mindy feels redemptive, but is actually objectifying and misogynistic. He doesn't care about Mindy, but only about his own sense of victory.*



Rolph and Charlie go outside together. Rolph tells Charlie that this night reminds him of the vacation to Hawaii with their mother, though he doesn't truly believe it. Charlie says that their father is going to marry Mindy. Rolph says that his father doesn't love Mindy, but Charlie tells him it doesn't matter. Charlie doesn't think Mindy is so bad, but Rolph no longer likes her.

*Charlie's comment about love and marriage shows a level of maturity that Rolph lacks. Charlie understands that her father will marry Mindy just to save face, while Rolph still believes marriage requires love.*



The narrative jumps forward, revealing that Charlie will join a cult in Mexico led by a man who promotes a diet of raw eggs. She will get salmonella poisoning and return to the U.S. After that, she will become addicted to cocaine, and date a series of domineering men. All the while, she will try to repair the failed relationship between Rolph and Lou. The flash-forward continues, revealing that Lou will marry Mindy because, in his mind, that means he is the winner. After returning to the U.S. from Africa Mindy will feel dissatisfied, and drawn back to the life Lou offers her. They will have two children before divorcing. Mindy will work as a travel agent before returning to her Ph.D.

*This leap forward puts the present narrative in an entirely new perspective. Lou's ruinous relationship to and disconnection from his children will have devastating effects, as shown through the details of Charlie's life. Driven by his ego, Lou will marry Mindy and ruin that relationship the way he ruined his relationship with Rolph and Charlie's mother. Later chapters reveal that Lou will end up devastated and alone, while Mindy finds a happier ending, and returns to her passion for anthropology.*



Back in the present, Charlie and Rolph go back into the bar, and Charlie pulls Rolph onto the dance floor. Rolph feels self-conscious. Lou dances with Mindy, who is thinking about Albert, as she will periodically after she marries Lou. Charlie notices Mildred and Fiona watching them. Charlie holds Rolph's hands and they begin to dance. She will return to this memory through out her life, even after Rolph commits suicide at their father's house at the age of 28. She will remember him dancing even after she goes to law school, and has her own child, who she wants to name Rolph, but can't because it would be too painful for Lou and her mother. As they dance, Rolph stops her. He tells her that he doesn't think the old women were ever watching birds.

*Again, a moment that appears like connection actually reflects Rolph's alienation. Rolph's suicide shows the true outcome of his relationship with his father and the devastation of his parent's marriage, and makes us rethink the entire story in light of this new information. Charlie, however, experiences redemption later in life. Rolph comes to the intriguing realization that the elderly birdwatchers are actually observing their family, adding a disturbing twist to the story's end. Mildred and Fiona's age seems to give them perspective the other characters lack, but Rolph, having realized his father's true nature, now shares some of their understanding.*



## CHAPTER 5: YOU (PLURAL)

Jocelyn and Rhea, adults now, return to Lou's house. Twenty years have passed since the last time they visited, and the house seems too quiet. Lou is in a hospital bed with tubes up his nose. He has had two strokes. Bennie has contacted all of the old friends through the internet and asked them to visit Lou before he passes away. Jocelyn and Rhea are unsure of what to do as they stand by his bed. Jocelyn remembers Lou from a time in her life when death was not a thing she focused on, though there were instances of death, including Scotty's mom and her own father, who died of AIDS.

*In this chapter we see familiar characters but from a new perspective and after a long period of time, as Egan continues to explore the nature of time through narrative shifts. Lou, who appears as an egotistical and ambitious man in the last chapter, has been ruined by his luxurious lifestyle in the record industry. The reconnection between the old friends occurs through the internet, introducing an important relationship between technology and connection in the novel.*



Jocelyn can only say "hello," and Rhea notes that everything is the same. They both laugh at this. Lou tells them they still look gorgeous, though Jocelyn thinks he is lying. They are both 43 now. Rhea is married with three children, and Jocelyn is back at her mother's house. She is not using drugs anymore, and is trying to finish her B.A. at UCLA. She notes that some mornings the **sun** looks wrong outside her window. She feels like everything has gone past her, and left her behind.

*In the story "Ask me If I Care," Jocelyn is the one connected to Lou, but her inability to speak to him now suggests a drastic change in their relationship. Rhea, who worried so much about her future, ends up married with children, and feels authentic in her life. Jocelyn, on the other hand, is seeking redemption after a ruinous drug addiction. The sun again reflects the passing of time and its often tragic effects.*



Rhea shows Lou a photo of her children, and Lou says her sixteen-year-old daughter is cute. Jocelyn feels angered by this, since she herself was that age when she met Lou. She thinks of Lou's children, remembering that Rolph was his favorite. Rolph was born on the same day as Jocelyn. Jocelyn remembers standing naked with Rolph, staring into a mirror, trying to figure out if being born on the same day had left a clue on their **bodies**.

*Lou's comment about Rhea's daughter triggers the trauma of her past. Her deep connection with Rolph is explored in this section, and their intimacy is depicted in their shared moment naked before the mirror. The body here is a depiction of the past, before both Rolph and Jocelyn were devastated by the effects of time.*



A nurse comes in and adjusts Lou's tubes, and Jocelyn has to look away from Lou's colostomy bag. She begins to cry, thinking that Lou has cost her so much time. Rhea hugs her, and Jocelyn remembers Lou telling her that Rhea is doomed because of her freckled skin. Jocelyn sobs that Rhea has three children and she has nothing. She says it's all for no reason, but Rhea tells her she hasn't found the reason yet.

*Rhea, who fears the future, can't bear to look at the colostomy bag because it represents the ruin of the body due to aging. Jocelyn's memory of Lou's comment shows a despicable side of Lou that undercuts an sincerity to his comment to Rhea on the balcony in the story "Ask Me if I Care." Jocelyn compares herself to Rhea, and struggles to find meaning in her life.*



Lou tells Rhea and Jocelyn he hasn't been outside in weeks, so they push his bed outside to the pool. Jocelyn imagines the young Lou would be outside, and would be offended by his older self. Outside, Jocelyn sees one of the nurses, and thinks for a moment it may be Rolph. She remembers being young and hiding behind the pool with Rolph while Lou called for her. They kissed, and later had sex, and Jocelyn imagined that Rolph was her first sexual interaction.

*Earlier in the novel, Lou denies the fact that he is aging, which is why Jocelyn notes that his younger self would be offended by his current state. Jocelyn has blocked out the trauma of Rolph's suicide. Her connection with Rolph was authentic, and she finds redemption from her damaging relationship with Lou by pretending that her sexual relationship with Rolph was her first.*



Jocelyn asks about Rolph, forgetting that he committed suicide years ago. Rhea shakes her head. Jocelyn remembers the way Lou treated her while they were together, having sex with her in the open while other people, including Rolph, could see. Lou begins crying and says Rolph didn't make it. Rhea asks why Jocelyn is doing this, not realizing that Jocelyn has experienced a mental blank spot. The **sun** hurts Jocelyn's eyes, so she closes them. Jocelyn imagines pushing Lou into the **water** and drowning him. She opens her eyes and tells Lou she should kill him—he deserves to die. Lou tells her it is too late.

*In Jocelyn's memory, the abusive side of their relationship becomes clear. Lou makes a spectacle of their sex life as a way to demonstrate his power and sexual potency. The pain of the sun in Jocelyn's eyes is a reminder of Scotty (who stared into the sun for too long) and suggests the pain caused by the passage of time and the losses she has experienced. Lou already feels dead because his identity as a powerful record executive is gone. The person he was in the past is, in fact, dead.*



Jocelyn remembers standing on the roof with Rolph, watching a party by the pool. They waited all night for the **sun** to rise. When it rose, Rolph said it was like a baby. Jocelyn cried, and imagined the sun fragile in their arms. Jocelyn then thinks about how her mother marks each day she is drug free on a calendar. Her mother tells her she has so much life ahead of her, and Jocelyn tries to believe her.

*The shared moment as the sun rises depicts a time in life when Jocelyn and Rolph still had hope. This is depicted in the image of the sun as a baby. Now, however, Jocelyn's days are not marked by the sunrise, but by marks on the calendar, and she struggles to believe her mother's encouraging words.*



Lou composes himself and asks the girls to stand on either side of him. He puts his arms around them and says it's nice to be with Jocelyn and Rhea again. They look at the **water** and listen to the birds. He asks for another minute with them, and thanks them.

*Lou is depicted without power in this moment—instead of claiming the girls as his, as he did earlier in the novel, he asks permission. The kind act of standing with him, however undeserved, is a redemptive moment for Jocelyn—a moment of compassion.*



## CHAPTER 6: X'S AND O'S

Scotty Hausman sits in the park, watching women jog past him. Some of them remind him of his ex-wife. Scotty reads an issue of SPIN magazine, and sees an article about Bennie Salazar. The two have fallen out of touch. After this a week passes, during which Scotty tries not to think about Bennie, but he suddenly can't get his childhood friend off his mind. He writes a letter and then goes to Bennie's office building on Park Avenue and fifty-Second Street. Scotty stands outside and looks up at it, wondering what floor the office is on. He drops the letter into the mailbox.

Five days later, a letter arrives in Scotty's dented mailbox. It is from Bennie, and it says he still thinks of the days when they played in a band together. He asks if Scotty still plays the slide guitar. Scotty is working as a janitor and enjoys fishing in the East River. He notes that there is only a little bit of difference between being a janitor and working in a tall building on Park Avenue—maybe no difference at all.

The next day, Scotty goes fishing in the polluted East River. He catches an enormous striped bass, and brings it home under his arm. At home he puts on khaki pants and a jacket that he obsessively dry-cleans, and goes to visit Bennie. Scotty notes that the woman who works at the dry cleaners gets frustrated with him because he keeps bringing the jacket in even though it is still clean. At Bennie's office, Scotty gets through security easily, and credits it to Bennie's good luck rubbing off on him. He notes that his luck is not generally so bad, more neutral than anything else, but occasionally it edges toward bad. He wonders if his visiting might actually be lucky for Bennie, or if he might take all of Bennie's luck away from him. If this is the case, Scotty wonders if he might keep Bennie's good luck forever.

The décor in Bennie's office impresses Scotty. He puts his fish on the reception desk, and asks the receptionist (Sasha) to see Bennie. She calls Bennie, who tells her that he is in a meeting, but Scotty says he will wait. He sits in a very comfortable leather chair and feels like he could stay there forever, abandoning his East Sixth Street apartment. Scotty notes that he doesn't leave his apartment much—he doesn't need to in the "information age." Each night he orders copious amounts of Hunan string beans and drinks Jägermeister while watching television.

*The disconnection between Scotty and Bennie, who were once good friends, becomes immediately apparent. Bennie's image on the magazine establishes his fame, while Scotty's life is in ruin after his divorce. The idea of disconnection is furthered by the image of the building. Scotty spends his time on park benches while Bennie sits at the top of a tower.*



*Though Bennie has become a famous man, he still holds onto his fond memories. Scotty feels deeply insecure about his current situation, but reasons his way around the anxiety. He tries to argue that identity and authenticity have little to do with a person's social standing. In this way, he attempts to level the disconnection between them.*



*The East River stands as a symbol for ruin in the novel, but the fact that Scotty pulls a fish from it suggests his continued attempt to find redemption and hope in life. The suit also depicts this, as he keeps it obsessively clean in expectation that he will have a good reason to wear it. Scotty finds meaning in his ability to move through security. This kind of idea is a fundamental component of his character—he derives meaning from places where others may not see any. His hope for redemption is further depicted in his wondering about keeping Bennie's luck.*



*Bennie's office depicts the power associated with fame. The connection with Sasha helps establish that this story takes place before "The Gold Cure," when Bennie is still at the top of his game. Scotty's thought about living in Bennie's waiting room depicts the sad state of his current situation. He is poor and isolated, though he finds some connection through technology.*



Scotty ponders his theory about experience. He believes that since humans are information-processing machines, translating X's and O's into experience, he could technically take the information gathered on television and apply his artistry to shape that information into experience. Scotty once tested this theory by going to a gala fundraiser for heart disease. He stood outside of the building, and realized that the stone wall standing between him and those inside was made of atoms and molecules. Suddenly, he felt pain. He told himself that there was no such thing as "inside and outside," that it all comes down to X's and O's that can be acquired in different ways, but he still felt like he was excluded, and this idea was painful.

A little while later, Scotty returns to Sasha's desk and puts the fish, which is wrapped in newspaper, on it. He tells her that if Bennie doesn't hurry up the fish will begin to stink. Eventually, Bennie comes out. Scotty observes Bennie's **body**, noticing that he looks fit and wears expensive clothes that seem to glow. Bennie puts his arm about Scotty's shoulder and leads him to his office.

Scotty finds Bennie's office awesome. The entire city seems laid out beyond his office window. He notes that the city looks like an easy thing to have from this perspective, even for a person like himself. Scotty puts the fish on Bennie's desk. Bennie thanks him, but says the fish will go to waste in his office. Scotty tells him to take it home and eat it. Bennie tells Scotty to talk to him, suspecting Scotty has a demo tape he wants him to hear. Scotty realizes that he and Bennie are no longer friends, and never will be. Scotty senses that Bennie wants to get rid of him. He knew this would happen, and that was the very reason he came to see him.

Scotty is offended that Bennie thinks he came for a handout. Scotty says he wants to know what happened between A and B—meaning how did they go from being in a band as kids and chasing the same girl, to where they are now. Scotty brings up Alice, the girl they both chased as teenagers, and feels it was the correct move. Scotty ended up marrying her, which he views as a victory over Bennie, even though she divorced him. Bennie tells Scotty he worked hard for what he has. A strange **pause** ensues, during which Scotty grapples with the past and the loss of his friend. He imagines tearing Bennie's head off.

*Scotty believes that technology, such as television, allows him to live a life of broad experience, though his dissatisfaction with life and experience with the gala seems to negate his theory. He tries to prove that nothing stands between him and the people inside, that authenticity and personal meaning are not defined by external factors (such as stone walls), though he still feels the disconnection and associated pain these external factors cause. It becomes clear that his theory is an attempt to quell the insecurity around his current position in life.*



*The attention paid to Bennie's body suggests time has been easier on him than Scotty, and his clothes further define his difference from his former friend.*



*Scotty attributes Bennie's success to his location, whereas Bennie surely sees his location as the result of his success. Scotty's offering of the fish is misunderstood, furthering the sense of disconnection between the two men. Bennie, as a famous cultural figure, is all business, as shown through his question about the demo tape. For Scotty this illuminates the truth about the distance between them.*



*Both Scotty and Bennie have different perspectives about what happened "between A and B." Scotty has defined his identity around the fact that he "won" Alice, though this is undercut by the fact she divorced him. All of the steps toward success are embedded in the conversational pause as Scotty grapples with the truth. Bennie's hard work and success puts Scotty's failures in perspective, which enrages him and further distances him from his old friend.*



Scotty goes to the window and closes his eyes. He can sense Bennie's fear. Bennie asks Scotty if he is still playing music, and if he is married. Scotty tells him he divorced from Alice, but Bennie says he meant remarried. Bennie apologizes, and then tells Scotty that he is married with a three-month-old son. Scotty realizes that his theory of X's and O's does not apply in this situation, and he doesn't have what Bennie has. He allows himself to think about Alice for a moment, and sees her standing in the **sun**, not angry or afraid, which is how he made her feel.

Scotty looks out the window and thinks that if he had this view he would have the energy and inspiration to conquer the world, but the people who need this view don't have it. He wishes Bennie health and happiness, and smiles widely, revealing his broken teeth. Bennie looks shocked, and this makes Scotty feel strong, as if everything in the room belonged to him. Before he leaves, Bennie gives him a business card. He tells Scotty not to be a stranger, and to send him some of his music. Outside, Scotty realizes that he left his fish inside Bennie's office, and laughs out loud. He hopes Bennie opens the newspaper and sees the fish, because it is shiny and beautiful.

The next day, Scotty goes fishing with two of his friends, Sammy and Dave. As the **sun** rises, he feels renewed, and feels the urge to jump into the river and swim. Scotty's friends watch women jog along the river, and joke that one of the woman might be Scotty's next wife, but Scotty doesn't look. Later, he spots a couple he often sees who are addicted to heroin. He notices they look haggard and sexy, the way young people can before they get older and just look haggard. Scotty stops them and asks if they are musicians. The woman says her boyfriend is an awesome musician. Scotty says he believes them. He gives them Bennie's card, telling them Bennie is his friend and they should call. They thank him and leave.

Scotty walks home, noting the beauty of the spring in New York City. He looks forward to getting home and bringing his jacket to the dry cleaner. He hopes the young woman there will challenge him. He looks forward to telling her he has been somewhere while wearing it. He wants her to make it new again.

*Bennie sharing about his marriage and child pushes Scotty to realize that the theories he uses to rationalize his own failures are bogus. He understands this as he imagines Alice, and in this moment he confronts the fact that he ruined the relationship by making her feel angry and afraid. This is a tragic moment, where it's suggested that Scotty's growing mental instability drove his wife away and started to ruin his life.*



*Scotty's musings on the view seem nonsensical, but are actually rather insightful in suggesting how success often reinforces itself, as does failure. Scotty's broken teeth embody the brokenness and ruin in his life, and Bennie finds this shocking. Scotty then feels powerful again, having knocked Bennie off kilter, and He slips back into his belief that he is no different than Bennie. Leaving the fish is a minor step forward for Scotty, as it represents hope of his own redemption, and he believes Bennie will see the beauty of his hope in it.*



*The sunrise, like the fish, signifies Scotty's hope, and the fact that he does not look at the women suggests he is moving beyond his resentment toward Alice and is taking responsibility for the role he played in their breakup. Giving the couple Bennie's card is a redemptive act for Scotty, suggesting he accepts that Bennie is no longer a part of his life and can do nothing for him.*



*The spring, like the sunrise in the last section, signifies Scotty's hope. The jacket operates the same way. Though the meeting with Bennie didn't go well, he feels he has done something important.*





## CHAPTER 7: A TO B

Bennie and Stephanie have moved with their son Christopher to a wealthy community called Crandale. At this point, Bennie and Stephanie are still married, and Bennie has just made a lot of money selling his record label. Stephanie finds the people of Crandale unwelcoming, and this wears on her. She thinks they are snobs, and their coldness bothers her, but she is confused by why she is bothered.

Bennie's family joins the Crandale Country Club. In the locker room, a woman named Kathy says hello to Stephanie. Stephanie recognizes her because Kathy's son goes to Christopher's school. Stephanie notes that her **body** has been unchanged by childbearing. After leaving the locker room, Stephanie meets Bennie and Christopher by the snack stand, and hears people playing tennis, which causes a rush of nostalgia for her. Stephanie was a good player as a teenager. Later that evening, still at the country club, Bennie and Stephanie sip gin and tonics, and Bennie says, "so this is what it's like." Stephanie jokes to herself that there is no better way to mark one's success than going to a place one doesn't belong. Stephanie mentions buying a tennis racket.

Three weeks later, Stephanie and Bennie are invited to a party after a neighbor discovers that Bennie signed his favorite band, the Conduits. After tennis practice, Stephanie comes home and finds Bennie and the neighbor talking about the band. She feels good because she'd hit well at tennis practice. She also feels proud of how different she is than the other Crandale women, with her dark hair and tattoos—though she notes that she did buy a little white tennis dress to wear while playing.

At the neighbor's cocktail party, Stephanie talks with Kathy, who introduces Stephanie and Bennie to her husband, Clay. Clay wears seersucker shorts and a pink oxford shirt, which Stephanie thinks would look ironic on a different sort of person. She senses Bennie looking at Kathy, which makes her uncomfortable. Kathy suggests they play tennis sometime, and Stephanie agrees. She feels that this is a victory, but also feels ridiculous for feeling that way.

Stephanie and Kathy soon become successful tennis partners, playing against other Crandale women. Kathy's status in the Crandale community makes Stephanie feel at ease, in spite of her dark hair and tattoos. Yet despite their relationship, Stephanie does not like Kathy, who is a Republican and would be dumbstruck if she found out that Stephanie's older brother, Jules had assaulted actress Kitty Jackson during an interview. Stephanie feels proud of herself when her tennis skills approach the level of Kathy's.

*This story takes place before "The Gold Cure" and after "X's and O's." Bennie has made a great deal of money in the record business, and moving to the exclusive community is his way of signifying his success. Stephanie wants to be accepted, but doesn't want to identify with the Crandale people, which leads to inner conflict.*



*Stephanie feels self-conscious in the locker room and envious of Kathy because she perceives Kathy's body as younger looking than hers. This desire to regain her youthful self is reflected in nostalgia about playing tennis as a younger woman. She understands that for Bennie, moving to Crandale is an attempt to assert an identity as a conventionally successful man, and she criticizes him for it. She doesn't realize that her desire to buy a tennis racket is similar to Bennie's desire to move to Crandale in the first place.*



*Stephanie continues to desire acceptance, but also wants to distinguish herself from the other woman, showing a conflict in her identity. Her appearance—the tattoos and dark hair along with the white tennis dress—is a visual depiction of this conflict.*



*Bennie and Stephanie find connection within the community, though Stephanie is not sure how she is supposed to feel about it. Clay's attire has a different meaning inside of Crandale than it would outside, speaking to the fluid nature of identity and the way it can shift depending on the situation.*



*Stephanie desires to be accepted and connected within the community, which she achieves through Kathy. She does not want to identify with Kathy, however, because internally she perceives herself as fundamentally different than the Crandale women. Her competitiveness toward Kathy, however, undercuts her feeling of dislike, suggesting she may admire or relate to Kathy more than she wants to admit.*



As time passes, Bennie begins to sense that people in the community do not trust him. During the family's second summer at Crandale, they attend a cocktail party where the conversation swerves toward Al Qaeda's presence in New York City. One of the men in the conversation keeps glancing at Bennie, suggesting he may be a terrorist. They leave the party and Bennie asks Stephanie what he is doing living in a place like Crandale. Stephanie tries to defend the Crandale residents, saying that Bennie is paranoid, but Bennie calls her out, suggesting that everyone was racially profiling him. Stephanie hugs him, and suggests they move, but Bennie looks around at his home, thinking of all the work he has put into it. He says the other people can move, but he will not. Bennie says he will die in the house, and they both double over in laughter.

Bennie begins giving Stephanie a hard time about playing tennis with Crandale women, whom he calls fascists. Stephanie is unwilling to break the friendship that gives her easy assimilation in the Crandale community, however. She does not want to be like her outcast neighbor Noreen, who has awkward mannerism and shaky hands. None of the Crandale women talk to her.

Stephanie begins scheduling her tennis games later in the day so Bennie won't see her in her tennis outfit. This is easy to do since Stephanie has begun working freelance for a PR woman named La Doll. Stephanie writes this deception off as protecting Bennie, instead of lying. She notes that Bennie has told his share of lies over the years.

The following spring, Stephanie's brother, Jules, is released from prison, where he'd spent five years for the attempted rape of Kitty Jackson. In prison, he'd gone on medication for bipolar disorder, and made peace with a failed engagement. A writer, he'd also written a piece about the effect of 9/11 on the inmates, which won a PEN Prison Writing award. Stephanie has noticed, however, that Jules seems to be struggling.

One morning, Bennie asks if Stephanie is driving to the city for work. She has begun leaving her tennis outfit at the gym so she can go play without Bennie knowing. If Bennie asked, like he did this morning, she would tell him she was going to a meeting, which was partially true since the meetings were later in the day. Stephanie lies and tells Bennie she is going to see her client Bosco—the guitarist for the Conduits—at ten. Bennie is suspicious, knowing Bosco is an alcoholic and never awake that early. Bennie asks her to call him after the meeting, and Stephanie knows she will have to cancel her tennis game.

*Bennie is judged in the community based on the color of his skin. Ethnically, Bennie is Hispanic, but the people mistake him as being of Middle Eastern descent. On one level, this shows the inability to know a person's true identity based on their external markers. Beyond this, the neighbors' assumptions are downright racist, and leave Bennie and Stephanie feeling disconnected. Bennie's pride drives his desire to stay, and is so strong that he suggests he will die in the house. Both Bennie and Stephanie realize the absurdity of his statement, which inspires their laughter.*



*Stephanie's association with the Crandale women leads to disconnection between her and Bennie. Noreen also becomes the embodiment of what Stephanie fears the most; she doesn't want to be rejected.*



*Stephanie's lying shows the growing distance between herself and Bennie. It becomes clear at this point that moving to Crandale was in part an attempt to redeem their relationship.*



*Jules' case was a high profile one that has become a topic in popular culture. In prison, he redeems himself, at least in part, by addressing his mental illness and cultivating his art. His redemption, however, seems precarious now that he has been released.*



*Bennie and Stephanie's relationship has become further disconnected by Stephanie's dishonesty. Bennie is aware that she is keeping something from him, and challenges her. By asking Stephanie to call him after the meeting, he demonstrates his lack of trust. Their relationship is beginning to fall apart.*



Stephanie cancels her game and, returning to the kitchen, finds Jules at the window. He asks what is up with the neighbor, Noreen. Stephanie says she is nuts. Noreen is doing something near their shared fence, but Stephanie can't figure out what. Jules asks if he can catch a ride to the city. On the way out, Jules notes that he thinks Noreen is watching them. Jules fears she might be dangerous, and Stephanie jokes that it takes one to know one.

On the ride to the city, Jules mentions that he plans to join Stephanie in her meeting with Bosco. She wonders if this is some kind of punishment for lying to Bennie. As they drive on the expressway, Jules asks if she is having an affair. Stephanie says he is out of his mind, but then wonders why he is asking such a question. Jules tells her she and Bennie seem jumpy, different than he remembered them. Stephanie feels afraid that Bennie is cheating on her, despite his promise that he would stop.

Jules admits it may just be Crandale that is making Stephanie and Bennie seem different. The place is packed with Republicans, and Jules can't believe Stephanie and Bennie spend time with them. He feels everything is different since he returned from prison. The twin towers have fallen, security is high, and everyone sounds stoned when they are talking because they are emailing at the same time. Stephanie asks what Jules' plan is, and he says he has no idea. When he had first come to New York, he had found a job at Harper's magazine, and an apartment on Eighty-first that he shared with two editors and a man who won a Pulitzer prize. Stephanie doesn't understand what happened to him. Jules says he is like America, and that their hands are dirty.

Before going upstairs, Stephanie explains that Bosco is different than he was when the Conduits were still playing. She looks at the **sun** reflecting off of the cobblestone street, and remembers shooting the Conduits first album cover years ago. Stephanie and Jules go upstairs and meet Bosco, who is old, fat, alcoholic, and dying of cancer. They discuss Bosco's new album, which is titled "A to B." His last albums have tanked, and people have become indifferent toward him. He believes this new album will be a comeback. The word catches Jules' attention.

*Though she has resisted it, Stephanie's condemnation of Noreen establishes her as in alignment with the other Crandale women. She also perceives Jules as crazy, though it becomes clear that he is more perceptive than she gives him credit for.*



*Stephanie's thought that she is being punished depicts the guilt she feels about lying to Bennie. Jules notices that Bennie and Stephanie's relationship is strained, and Stephanie's painful memories of Bennie's infidelity are triggered. This moment foreshadows the ruin already beginning to take place in Bennie and Stephanie's marriage.*



*Jules, as an outsider in the Crandale community, sees the ways in which the community has changed Bennie and Stephanie's identities. Likewise, his time away in prison allows him to see the way in which America as a whole has changed after 9/11, and the way in which technology is affecting the way people connect. Jules compares himself to America, which he believes is in a state of ruin, and his comment about dirty hands suggests that the American people are at least partly responsible.*



*Time has had a devastating impact on Bosco, which is echoed in the reflection of the sun. Bosco's album title also speaks to the idea of time, as well as referring to the title of the book's earlier chapter. The novel as a whole, it might be said, explores the passage from "A to B" for these characters. The fact that Bosco has been forgotten illuminates the nature of popular culture, and that fame is impermanent.*



Bosco tells Stephanie that he wants interviews and features in magazines. He wants to record every humiliation, depicting the realities of getting old. "Time's a goon, right?" he says, and Jules steps up and repeats the line. Stephanie does not believe any of these plans are going to work, but Bosco says she is too old to understand. Bosco goes on to tell Stephanie that he wants to do a national suicide tour, during which he will die on stage. Jules believes Bosco's plan is genius, and Bosco gives him full rights to the story of his decline and suicide tour.

*Bosco's comment about time being a "goon" seemingly gives the novel its title, as well as again referring to the devastating effects of aging on these characters' lives and bodies. Popular culture ignores the truth of aging, and remains obsessed with youth and vitality, but Bosco wants to counteract this. The suicide tour idea reflects the length Bosco is willing to go to regain his fame, but also his desire to show himself authentically. Jules, a character who is also looking for redemption, feels connected with Bosco through their shared desires.*



Stephanie leaves feeling defeated, but Jules is thrilled by the new opportunity. He buys a planner and a new pen to write his appointments in. Jules asks her what is the matter, and Stephanie remembers Jules as a teenager, when he protected her. She begins to cry, realizing that this feeling has been buried under years of dealing with Jules' struggles. Stephanie feels like everything is ending. She misses the wild drug and sex filled days before she and Bennie were married, when they were young, lucky, and strong. She feels disturbed by Bosco's obsession with dying. Jules agrees that everything is ending, but he believes it is not ending yet.

*Jules is revitalized by the prospect of redemption through writing Bosco's story, and buying the supplies depicts his attempted reclamation of his old identity as a writer. Stephanie's memories of Jules show just how ruinous his mental illness has been, and her tears depict the pain of their present disconnection. Stephanie holds on to the memory of a time when she was young and her relationship with Bennie was still vital and exciting, but she must now acknowledge that the past is gone.*



After a second meeting, Stephanie goes to her boss's office. Dolly (La Doll) tells Stephanie that she can feel her negativity, and she should cancel her meetings next time she feels this way, so her attitude doesn't bother the clients. Stephanie has known Dolly forever, and calls her a "bitch." Dolly laughs at this.

*Dolly's condemnation of Stephanie's negativity again shows Egan commenting on the nature of the entertainment business. Stephanie's authentic feelings would bother famous clients, so she must pretend or else avoid clients altogether.*



Stephanie and Jules drive back to Crandale, where they pick Christopher up from soccer practice. He hugs her, and she feels grateful for the affection. She has a burning desire to talk to Bennie about her day. She speaks to Sasha, Bennie's assistant, whom she used to mistrust, but has now grown fond of. Bennie is not at the office, but he calls a short while later to tell her he is stuck in traffic. Stephanie imagines laughing with Bennie about Bosco, and feeling happy again. She decides not to lie to Bennie about her tennis games anymore.

*The exchange with Bosco that left Stephanie feeling like things are ending also increases her desire for connection with her family, as shown through her gratitude for Christopher and her desire to connect with Bennie. Her fantasy of laughing with Bennie reflects this desire for connection, and her decision not to lie is an attempt to redeem both herself and the relationship.*



When Bennie arrives home, he goes straight into the shower. Stephanie decides to get into the shower with him, remembering that they had bought the double shower with handmade fixtures. Bennie had been adamant about buying it. She takes her clothes off, but before getting into the **water**, she looks through the contents of Bennie's pockets, which he has left on the bedside table. This is an old habit she developed when Bennie was cheating. As Stephanie steps back, she feels a gold bobby pin stuck to the bottom of her foot. She knows that it does not belong to her, and suddenly realizes that Bennie is cheating on her with Kathy.

Stephanie leaves the house and goes into the yard. She can't understand why this instance of infidelity is more painful than the others, but it is. Bennie calls from the kitchen as she staggers into a flowerbed. Stephanie kneels in the dirt by the fence. Christopher begins calling for her next, and Stephanie covers her ears. Then another voice comes from the far side of the fence. Stephanie sees Noreen through a crack in the fence boards. Noreen says she likes to sit in this spot, and Stephanie says she knows. Stephanie closes her eyes and wants to disappear. Inside the house, everyone is calling for her, including Jules. She stands and says goodnight to Noreen. As she begins moving out of the flowerbed, she hears Noreen quietly wish her a good night.

*The fact that this scene revolves around the shower (water) symbolically reflects the ruin about to occur in their relationship. Stephanie believes taking a shower with Bennie will be an opportunity to reconnect, but her rifling through Bennie's pockets also suggests a lack of trust (as well as recalling Sasha's actions in the first chapter). Just as Stephanie has been dishonest, Bennie too has been dishonest. At this point the marriage is ruined beyond repair.*



*Stephanie's physical distance from her family in this scene depicts her disconnection from them. Likewise, her close proximity to Noreen connects the two women, both of them now outcasts. Earlier, Stephanie looked down on Noreen, associating herself with the other popular Crandale women, but the falseness of this identity becomes clear in this moment of painful clarity. Stephanie, like Noreen, is truly an outsider. At the same time, Noreen finally but briefly appears as a real and complex human, one with sufferings and desires of her own.*



## CHAPTER 8: SELLING THE GENERAL

Dolly Peale, a PR woman, has taken a client named "The General," who is a genocidal dictator—she has been hired to save his image. Her first effort in this regard involved taking pictures of him in a fuzzy blue hat with flaps that cover his ugly ears. The image appears in the *New York Times*, but this spurs rumors that The General has cancer, which creates further unrest among his people. The General's advisors had forgotten to cut up the hat's chinstraps, which appear to be tied in a bow under his chin in the image. Dolly panics and begins looking for contact information for The General's human relations captain, named Arc. The General's personnel are under the impression that Dolly, also known as La Doll, is a top PR consultant in New York.

Before she took the job, Dolly was copyediting textbooks until 2 am, sleeping until 5 am, and then doing English lessons online with students in Tokyo. She was attempting to keep her daughter, Lulu, in a private school. When Arc called to ask if she could recover The General's image, she took the job for need of money. The high pay provided by The General allows her to look past the fact that he is a genocidal dictator.

*This opening scene is packed with satirical absurdity that points to the truly ridiculous, but also immensely powerful, nature of popular culture. The General's hat, with its silly earflaps and bow, has the power to send vast numbers of people into unrest. The distinction between Dolly's names—Dolly and La Doll—becomes an important element of her identity through the story. Her identity as La Doll has been ruined, which leads her to make the decision to take on the unethical job of saving the dictator's image—she feels she has no choice.*



*The depiction of Dolly's present life depicts the fall from fame she's experienced, to the point that her need for money drives her to make the unethical choice to work for The General. This choice points, in a larger sense, to the ethics of "fame" in popular culture and public relations work. We also might recall the name "Lulu" from Chapter 4, "Safari," where it's mentioned that the grandson of a young African warrior will grow up to marry Lulu.*



Around 6 am, Arc calls and tells Dolly that they are not happy about the *Times* article. She tries to reason with Arc, telling him that he needs to cut the hat's ties off, but Arc continues to say that The General is not happy. Arc reveals that he has heard rumors that Dolly is not a top PR consultant. Dolly says she has enemies, like the General. She tells them to retake the picture without the ties in a bow, and to show some of The General's hair in front. As she speaks, Lulu comes into the room, and Dolly feels an inner collapse at the fact that Lulu has lost sleep. She hugs Lulu. Several weeks later, the new image is released, and the headline suggests that the extent of The General's war crimes may be exaggerated.

Dolly met her ruin on New Years Eve, two years ago. Before this New Years Eve party she was known as La Doll, and threw exclusive and high profile parties. In an attempt to create the atmosphere for the New Years Eve party, Dolly hung translucent trays below the spotlights, and filled them with oil and **water**, believing the light shining through the water would create an impressive effect. By midnight, however, the trays began sagging, and then quickly they collapsed, spilling hot oil and water onto the famous guests. Later, people accused Dolly of doing it on purpose, and now everyone hates her. She served six months in jail, lost all of her money paying for settlements, and ruined her identity as La Doll. During this time, she comes to understand that her true error was holding onto an era that had already passed, which is a great mistake for a publicist.

After the positive review of The General, Arc calls and tells Dolly that she is being paid monthly, so she needs to do more work. That night Dolly dreams of The General meeting a pretty blond woman. After waking, she decides The General should be linked to a movie star, which would recover his image. Kitty Jackson, who had become a martyr after she was assaulted by Jules Jones, and later forgave him, comes to mind. Kitty has fallen from grace since then after a period of bad behavior, including dumping a bag of horse manure on a fellow actor's head and setting several thousand lemurs free on a Disney set. Kitty agrees to take the job. Arc does not like the plan, but Dolly tells him all The General has to do is stand with Kitty and smile. Arc agrees hesitantly, and tells Dolly she has to travel to The General along with Kitty.

*Dolly got the PR job based on her reputation as La Doll, which is an identity with negative meaning attached to it (though the reason why is explored later). The fact that making minor changes to an image has a significant impact on portrayals of genocide depicts the absurdity of the situation, but also the sometimes sinister power of the media with regard to popular culture and opinion.*



*The New Year's Eve party marks Dolly's transition from her identity as the famous La Doll to her current state of infamy. The presence of water in this moment again reflects this ruinous shift. The rumors spread further to destroy her reputation, and disconnected her from those who admired her. The realization that her error was holding onto the past speaks to the nature of American pop culture, which thrives off of novelty and fast-moving trends. The party was La Doll's attempt to stay relevant, but this striving led to ruin as opposed to success.*



*Dolly recognizes the power of celebrity in American culture, and realizes that presenting The General with Kitty Jackson with have an immediately redemptive impact for his image. Kitty Jackson, who was assaulted by Jules, has been held up as a martyr, and the meaning of her image would have a powerful influence if associated with The General. Kitty, like Dolly, has had a fall from fame, however, and it appears Kitty agrees to take the job for reasons similar to Dolly's.*



Dolly enters Lulu's bedroom and is struck by the colors. Her eyes linger on images of winged princesses she has stenciled on the wall using a method she'd learned in prison. Lulu only comes out of her bedroom when it is time to eat, spending the rest of the day separated from Dolly. Since Dolly was released from prison, Lulu has begun calling her by her first name, instead of calling her "mom." She also makes Dolly drop her off around the corner at school, so the kids won't see her mother. At school, nine-year-old Lulu is a central figure in the group of girls she hangs out with. Dolly admires Lulu's authority in the group.

Dolly tells Lulu that she has to take a business trip. She figures Lulu will want to stay with one of her friends, but Lulu asks if she can go along. Lulu asks where they are going, but Dolly can't tell her. She worries about Lulu being in the presence of The General. Lulu doesn't ask again where they are going. Instead she asks Dolly if she can dye her (Dolly's) hair blond again.

Dolly and Lulu meet Kitty at the airport, and Dolly is immediately struck with regret. Kitty looks disheveled, and seems no longer young to Dolly. She wonders if people will even recognize Kitty anymore. While Lulu uses the bathroom, Dolly explains the mission to Kitty. Kitty asks why Dolly brought Lulu. Dolly explains that Lulu knows nothing about The General and won't meet him. She asks Kitty not to say anything about him. When Lulu returns, they board their flight.

When they arrive, they go through twenty checkpoints before reaching The General's compound. Dolly looks for signs of trauma on Lulu, but is surprised to find Lulu staring down the men with guns at the checkpoints. The compound, a massive white mansion, is surrounded by lush green gardens and the sparkle of **water**. When they step out of the car, Dolly feels the **sun** on her neck. Her hair has recently been cut and dyed blond again. Kitty takes off her sweatshirt, and Dolly notices burns on her arms. Dolly remembers her party, and realizes that Kitty was not in attendance. Kitty then reveals that she made the scars herself in order to appear as if she were at the party. Many people have mutilated themselves to claim attendance, Kitty says, and when Dolly says *she* knows who was there, Kitty says it doesn't matter, because Dolly is no longer anyone important. She then takes Dolly's hand and tells her, "to hell with *them*."

*The princesses on Lulu's walls serve as a reminder of Dolly's ruin and time in jail. This event had devastating effects on Dolly and Lulu's relationship, and their disconnection is reflected in Lulu's refusal to call Dolly "mom" or let Dolly walk her to school. Dolly recognizes herself in Lulu's authority in her group. She is popular, the way Dolly was popular as La Doll, which serves as a reminder of Dolly's fall from fame, but also her admiration of the influence that comes with popularity.*



*Dolly wants so badly to connect with Lulu that she is willing to put her at risk with The General in order to gain meaningful time together. Lulu's comment about Dolly's hair suggests a transformation in Dolly's identity—Lulu wants Dolly to regain her old identity because she identifies the blond hair with the years before Dolly's ruin.*



*Dolly's attention to Kitty's age again references the importance of youth in the entertainment industry, and it's implied that her fame has dwindled in part because of her aging. Dolly's request that Kitty not mention The General to Lulu suggests that she understands the unethical and dangerous nature of the job, and feels ashamed in front of her daughter.*



*The vegetation and water around the compound seems to contradict the death and destruction that more generally surrounds The General. The same contrast is present in the work Dolly is doing by trying to save his image. Dolly has attempted to regain her identity as La Doll by cutting and dyeing her hair, hoping this job will put her back into a position of respect and fame. The infamous party has become an important cultural event, and though it has ruined Dolly, it has taken on meaning beyond her. The scars are a symbol of status, and the fact that Kitty has mutilated herself to achieve this status, along with her claim that "it doesn't matter" whether or not she was really there, speaks to the acceptance of inauthenticity in the entertainment business.*



Arc greets them and tells Kitty he and The General have watched all of her movies. Dolly is worried about what Kitty might say, but she acts like a starlet, and even suddenly looks younger to Dolly. They learn The General is not there, and they must travel to him. Kitty agrees to go wherever The General wants them to go, and says, “right, kiddo?” to Lulu. It takes Lulu a moment to realize that Kitty is talking to her, and when she does, she agrees.

That night, they settle into a suite, and Arc offers to take them out for a tour. Kitty decides to stay and drink, but Lulu and Dolly go. Before leaving, Dolly tells Kitty not to overdo the alcohol, and to remember whom they are dealing with, but Kitty tells her she wants to forget. She wants to be innocent like Lulu.

Arc takes Dolly and Lulu to an outdoor market in the city. Lulu picks out a star fruit. Arc takes one and nods to the vendor, who looks frightened, nodding eagerly to Dolly and Lulu. Lulu bites into the fruit and laughs. Lulu tells Dolly she has to try some, calling her “mom” in the exchange, and Dolly bites into the fruit. Dolly feels wonderful realizing that Lulu called her “mom.” Afterward, they go to a teashop. The waiter is noticeably anxious around Arc. Arc says that The General moves among the people, but he has to be careful because of his enemies. Someone had made a threat against his home earlier that day, which is why The General left. Dolly is concerned because they are staying in the house.

That night, Dolly can’t sleep for fear of an assassination attempt. She wonders how her life has arrived in this place. She finds herself returning to the party, imaging the plastic pans buckling and dumping burning oil on the guests. She feels at ease because Lulu is sleeping next to her. Dolly had Lulu in her middle age after getting pregnant by a movie star client. Lulu believes her father is dead. Dolly thought about having an abortion, but continued putting it off until it was too late. As she rests there, she feels grateful for The General for providing a single bed where she would get to sleep beside her daughter. She whispers into Lulu’s ear that she will always protect her, and nothing bad will ever happen to them. Lulu sleeps on.

The next morning they drive out to meet The General. Kitty has done her hair and makeup, and Dolly finds her too beautiful to look at. As they drive, children hold out fruit for sale and cardboard signs, but the speeding vehicle pushes them back. Dolly wants to say something to the driver, but she doesn’t know what. She feels relieved after they leave the city limits. Kitty begins to smoke, and Dolly wants to scold her for subjecting Lulu to it.

*Being recognized as a star transforms Kitty in Dolly’s eyes, even seeming to reduce her age (as Egan again connects the physicality of the body to perception in popular culture). Kitty acts maternally toward Lulu, and Lulu’s response suggests she does not receive this kind of treatment from Dolly.*



*Kitty is aware of the unethical nature of the job, and decides to drink in an attempt to smother her guilt. In wishing to be innocent, Kitty desires not only to be young, but also to be ignorant of the implications of her actions.*



*Dolly witnesses the ruinous effects of The General’s reign firsthand in the vendor and waiter’s fear. The star fruit Dolly and Lulu share points back to the idea of stardom, and the connection between this shared moment and stardom points back to Dolly’s belief that if she can redeem her status she can regain her daughter’s affection. This idea, however, is contrasted with the fact that Dolly is putting Lulu in grave danger by bringing her on the trip and staying in the house that is under threat.*



*Dolly, like other characters, has experienced the damaging effects of time and aging, and tries, through memory, to figure out how she ended up where she is. Her connection with Lulu comforts her, though the fact that Lulu is on the trip at all speaks to the ruinous role Dolly often has in Lulu’s life. This is furthered by the lie she has told Lulu about her father. The trip feels redemptive to Dolly, and her promise to protect Lulu is sincere, though upcoming events will challenge her confidence.*



*Kitty’s identity shifts again in Dolly’s eyes, arousing questions about Kitty’s authenticity. The kids serve as a reminder of the unethical nature of Dolly’s work, and the fact that she wants to say something to the driver for going so fast and Kitty for speaking shows a conflict within her own sense of identity.*





Kitty asks Lulu what she wants to do with her life. Lulu, who is only nine, doesn't know. Lulu asks what Kitty dreamed about when she was nine years old, and Kitty tells her she wanted to be a jockey or a movie star. She has realized one of her dreams, and she still loves the acting, but the people, she says, are monsters. They seem nice at first, but it is all a lie. Lulu asks if Kitty ever tried lying, and Kitty says she has, but she couldn't forget she was lying and when she told the truth she was punished.

Dolly, Lulu, Kitty, and Arc arrive in a jungle, and camouflaged men come from the trees. They walk together to a compound hidden in the side of a hill, and Dolly gets her hidden camera ready. When they meet The General, Dolly is surprised by his short stature and sullied military uniform. He looks tired and grumpy. There is a **pause** in which no one, including The General, seems to know what to do.

When The General notices Kitty, Dolly watches the power of recognition move across his face. Kitty moves easily toward The General and hugs him, then takes his hands and leans back smiling and laughing a bit, and The General smiles back, showing his teeth. Dolly surreptitiously snaps photographs at each stage of the encounter, and is especially pleased about the photograph showing The General with a smile on his face.

Dolly is overjoyed by Kitty's acting, and feels relieved that the job is done. She feels proud that she had arranged the event, and that Lulu had seen it. Kitty scans the crowd, and then asks The General if this place is where he buries the bodies, or whether he burns them first. Arc tells Kitty that The General cannot understand her, but he wants to know what is going on. Lulu begs Dolly to make Kitty stop. Dolly tells Kitty to knock it off, but Kitty continues. She asks The General if he eats them, or if he lets the vultures do it. Dolly grabs Kitty's arm and tells her she is going to get them killed, but Kitty sarcastically asks if she wasn't supposed to bring up the genocide. The General recognizes the word genocide, and the soldiers detain Kitty. As they carry her off, she continues to question The General until Dolly hears a blow, and then a scream, and Kitty is gone.

*Lulu and Kitty's conversation speaks directly to the often-inauthentic nature of the entertainment industry. Kitty has engaged in the same behavior, but was unable to look past the fact that she herself was acting inauthentically. This fact provides a truer sense of who she really is.*



*Dolly's surprise at The General's stature and appearance suggests how fame distorts the way famous individuals are imagined and perceived. The pause reflects the lack of connection between those present. They cannot mention the ruin The General has caused in the lives of those who live in his country, but this suffering is present in the silence between them.*



*Kitty's celebrity allows her to influence The General and approach him in a way that surprises Dolly, showing the power of fame and American popular culture. Dolly understands that in order to redeem The General's image she needs to depict him in a benevolent light, which the smile achieves. The smile however, provides an image of The General that is not authentic to his identity, which echoes the dishonest nature of the entertainment industry.*



*Dolly is especially pleased that Lulu saw her success, as she believes this accomplishment will further redeem their relationship. Kitty, however, ruins this moment by bringing up the genocide—but for Kitty, this moment is redemptive in a different way, as she addresses the way she feels about The General and his actions in a brave and authentic way. Though Kitty faces death, she continues to confront The General, which is a moment of true authenticity.*



The soldiers whisk Dolly and Lulu back to the cars. Lulu rests her head on Dolly's lap and cries as they drive from the jungle. They are driven to the airport, and are flown back to New York. They arrive early in the morning, and neither of them speaks the entire way home. When they reach the apartment, Dolly is surprised to find nothing has been destroyed. Lulu goes straight to her room, and Dolly tries to figure out what to do about Kitty.

A short while later, Lulu emerges from her room in her school uniform. Dolly is surprised that she wants to go to school, but Lulu asks what else she would do. They don't talk on the way to school, and Dolly fears that this silence will never end, and if Kitty dies she feels she will lose her daughter too. At the school, Lulu walks away without saying goodbye.

Dolly develops the photos she took of Kitty with The General. After she receives the photos, she rushes home and sends the photos to *The Enquirer* and *The Star*. The photos circulate quickly, and by nightfall reporters from major papers start calling. She learns that Arc has denied the rumors about Kitty and The General. Later that night, after fourteen attempts, Dolly reaches Arc by phone. He says they can no longer speak because The General is angry. Arc promises Dolly that Kitty is alive and unharmed, but he will not speak to Dolly again.

Almost a year later, The General comes to New York to speak about his country's transition to democracy. Dolly and Lulu have moved out of the city, but they drive back one night to meet with Arc. Arc tells Dolly that a few days after they left, photographers had located the compound. He notes that assassins couldn't even find it, but the photographers came in hordes. After ten days, The General agreed he had to face his inquisitors. He met them with Kitty on his arm, wearing the blue hat Dolly had advised him to wear earlier in the story.

During dinner, Arc asks if Dolly has seen Kitty's new movie, in which Kitty plays a jockey and rides on horseback. Dolly had gone with Lulu to see the movie in the town where they now live, in Upstate New York. Before they moved, Dolly had received calls from other mass murderers looking for a fresh start, but she didn't take the work. Lulu had been upset about the move to Upstate New York at first, but she quickly adjusts, and Dolly is relieved because nobody knows her or her failures. She has opened a gourmet shop with the final payment from The General. Occasionally, Dolly will order a shipment of star fruit, and share it with Lulu.

*Dolly's plan to redeem her relationship with Lulu has failed, and their lack of conversation on the ride home embodies the strong sense of disconnection between them. Dolly expects physical destruction when they arrive at home, but this expectation is just a projection of the ruin she knows she has caused in her and Lulu's relationship.*



*Dolly expects Lulu to be disturbed by the experience with The General, and is surprised by Lulu's composure, again suggesting she doesn't know Lulu as well as she thinks she does. The silence continues to represent the disconnection between mother and daughter.*



*Dolly attempts to save Kitty's life by breaking the images of The General to the media. The photographs gain her (Dolly) immediate attention, as shown through the calls from the reporters, but they do not accomplish what she hopes they will with The General. The break in contact with The General speaks to the larger sense of disconnection Dolly experiences in her life.*



*The fact that the paparazzi found the compound before the assassins could is a satirical gesture toward the pervasiveness and power of fame and popular culture. It is suggested that Kitty had a role in the country's transition to democracy, which depicts the power of celebrity in a positive light—Kitty used her fame for good in this instance.*



*Earlier in the story Kitty mentioned that, as a child, she dreamed of being a jockey and a movie star, and the fact that she now has the opportunity to do both in the new movie suggests she has redeemed her career and at least partly realized her dreams. Likewise, Dolly's move to Upstate New York is redemptive, both in terms of her identity and relationship with Lulu. In Upstate New York she doesn't have a reputation, so she can live her life in a more authentic way. The final instance of the star fruit suggests that Lulu and Dolly are finding connection now that the ordeal with The General is over.*



## CHAPTER 9: FORTY-MINUTE LUNCH: KITTY JACKSON OPENS UP ABOUT LOVE, FAME, AND

## NIXON!

This story is written in the form of an article that might appear in a magazine. Jules Jones is the writer, and the article profile's Kitty Jackson. He recounts a lunch he shared with her, during which he interviews her. The chapter includes footnotes, which expand on specific moments of the article.

Kitty is on the phone when he arrives at the restaurant. Jules notes that movie stars always look small the first time you see them, which is true for Kitty. Her hair is highlighted blond, and Jules knows about highlighting because his ex-fiancé used to talk about it. He notes that though Kitty has an unexceptional face, she seems extraordinarily pretty.

Kitty is on the phone for five minutes, which cuts into the forty minutes she has agreed to for the interview. She apologizes to Jules after she hangs up, which puts her in the category of nice celebrities. These kinds of celebrities act like they are just like you, Jules notes, so you will write flattering things about them. He prefers mean celebrities, however, because they provide good material for his reporting.

Jules notes the way in which people respond to Kitty, which is completely different than the way they respond to non-celebrities. He observes that the waiter's recognition of Kitty's fame seems to spread through the restaurant through a system of quantum physics—a concept called entangled particles. Even people across the restaurant who can't see her seem to suddenly react.

Footnote 1: Jules explains that entangled particles have not been fully explained. How can one particle know what is happening to another? First, he decides that the particles are not communicating because they would have to do it faster than the speed of light, which is impossible. Then he discredits Einstein's theory that the particles are responding to local factors, because all of the particles seem to be responding at the same time. He decides it is a quantum mechanical mystery. The presence of Kitty seems to entangle patrons by making them simultaneously aware that they are not Kitty Jackson. This shared awareness, Jules speculates, creates a simultaneous reaction.

*Profile stories, which seek to illuminate celebrities' lives, are a component of popular culture that furthers American obsession with celebrity and fame—while also arguably adding another layer of façade to any kind of true “identity” such stories might reveal.*



*Jules's surprise at Kitty's size and beauty speaks to the way in which fame distorts the way famous individuals are imagined and perceived. His mention of his ex-fiancé in Kitty's profile suggests that the article is not only about Kitty, but also about Jules.*



*Kitty's phone call underlines the fundamental disconnection between her and Jules. Jules believes that celebrities are fundamentally different than non-famous individuals, as suggested by his comment about “nice celebrities.”*



*Jules sees Kitty as possessing immense power, which she does to a certain extent, at least in affecting how people perceive and act around her.*



*Jules's elaboration of this theory illuminates his character further, and it's suggested that he is somewhat mentally unstable. His theory revolves around the idea of connection and disconnection, and he perceives celebrities as fundamentally different from non-celebrities. The awareness of disconnection between these two entities is supposedly the force that creates the reaction Jules is witnessing.*



Jules asks if she likes the attention, and Kitty says she doesn't feel like she deserves it. He compliments her movies, and she says she was proud of her older work. As she begins to talk about her new movie, Jules cuts her off. He is not interested in her new movie. The waiter brings their food, and Jules analyzes the waiter's and Kitty's behavior. Jules compares Kitty and the waiter's responses to a sandwich. The middle of the sandwich is the truth of their emotion, and the bread is their attempt to cover it up and keep it contained.

Jules notes that sixteen minutes have passed. He suggests that Kitty has been having an affair with her co-star, and purposefully talks with his mouth full in a calculated effort to disgust Kitty, an attempt to puncture her shield of kindness. She denies the affair, stating that she and Tom Cruise have a wonderful relationship, that she admires Nicole Kidman (his wife), and babysat their children. Jules smiles, intending to fluster Kitty. He reminds the reader that he only has forty minutes, and he needs to "break her open" quickly. He watches her eat her salad. She dips her finger into the salad dressing, and sucks it off.

Footnote 2: This footnote reveals that Jules is writing this article from Rikers Island Correctional Facility. For months he has been analyzing the moment where Kitty sucked her finger. He enumerates the list of thoughts that went through his head in that moment. He wonders first if she is coming onto him, but decides that is out of the question. He then asks why it would be out of the question. He answers this question by remembering his ex-fiancé's comment about him gaining weight, having skin problems, and having no worldly clout. He goes back and forth, finally realizing that he does not even register as a man to Kitty, and so she is not self-conscious in his presence.

Jules asks what Kitty plans to do with her career next, and Kitty is relieved to receive a normal question. Jules believes the best he can do in this situation is to hide the impossibility of them sharing any kind of connection. Jules notes that he keeps inserting himself into the story because it is the only way to make an article about a nice nineteen-year-old interesting. He finds Kitty boring, and what is most interesting about her is the reaction she receives from others. In order to understand his own reaction to her, Jules states that it is important the reader understands that his ex-fiancé dumped him two weeks ago for a memoirist who wrote about his adolescent penchant for masturbating into the family fish tank.

*Jules' readers are interested in the identity of the famous individual—that is, who they are authentically beyond their movies. Jules' sandwich analogy speaks to a level of inauthenticity he perceives in both Kitty and the waiter, and perhaps a fundamental disconnection between all humans.*



*Jules is obsessed with time, something reflected in the very title of his piece: "Forty-Minute Lunch." The moment where Kitty sucks her finger is an important turning point in the interview, as Jules continues to search for a kind of authentic core or experience that he can write about.*



*This footnote puts the interview in perspective, as we see that Jules is looking back from a point in the future and analyzing the events from memory. His argument with himself shows instability in his identity, and an inability to derive proper meaning from interactions with others. His final comment about not even registering as a man to Kitty again speaks to his theory about a fundamental human disconnection between celebrities and non-celebrities.*



*Jules backs away from the questions meant to "break her open," abandoning the idea of connecting with Kitty. He does, however, believe he is more interesting than Kitty, which speaks to his perception of himself and his identity. The pain he has experienced around the ruin of his relationship becomes clear as he inserts the information about his ex's new boyfriend. He compares himself to the man, and establishes that he is superior to the new boyfriend.*



Kitty responds to Jules' question by saying that she imagines her future self looking back at her present self, and wonders if her present self is beginning a great life. Kitty wants happiness. She wants to find true love, and have children. Jules feels anger, fear, and lust. He looks at her shoulder and briefly imagines pulling apart her little bones and sucking the meat off of them one by one.

Footnote 3: In this footnote, Jules recounts the day he met his ex-fiancé. She was out walking her dog, which Jules calls a mangy, wet-looking terrier that appears unlovable. But she loved the dog, and Jules admired that. As he watched her pick up the dog's poop, he imagined their life together. He asked her if he could help. She smiled and asked him if he was insane.

Jules asks Kitty how it feels to be a sex goddess, but she says it is something other people feel. A look of weariness comes over her face, and Jules also feels weary. Jules says all of this is such a farce, and notes that Kitty is regarding him with pity. He worries that he has permitted her to turn the interview around on him, forcing him into the spotlight. He sneezes, which he feels saves the moment from turning on him.

Jules asks Kitty if she would be willing to go on a walk with him. She asks about her publicist, who is supposed to come relieve her of the interview in forty minutes. Jules suggests that he call her publicist and have him meet them. He wants to get a few extra minutes with Kitty to try to salvage the interview, and he wants to see the way Kitty moves while she is walking. As she walks out, Jules notes that she walks in a way that suggests she knows she is famous and irresistible. She keeps her head down because her power over others is embarrassing.

By the time Jules and Kitty have reached Central Park, forty-one minutes have passed. Jules watches Kitty's legs as they walk, so closely that he can see the fine hairs above her knees. He feels like getting on the ground and crawling beside her. Her skin is smooth, Jules believes, because she is young and still unaware that she will reach middle age and die.

*Because of Jules' current state and recent failure in his relationship, Kitty's comment about love pushes him into a rage. His violent imaginings are shocking, but perhaps show a more authentic version of his true thoughts and emotions.*



*Jules seemingly identifies with the unlovable dog, which is why he becomes attached to his ex-fiancé—he believes she can love him no matter what. Her question about Jules' insanity is some rather ironic foreshadowing.*



*Jules does not believe Kitty is telling the truth, and the pity he thinks she has for him further disconnects them. He worries she has turned the spotlight on him, but in fact, he has been inserting himself the entire time. The article is in fact a profile of Jules' identity, not Kitty's.*



*Jules' internal misogyny is expressed in his desire to naturally objectify Kitty and gawk at her body. He also reads her posture as an indication of her power, and her fundamental disconnection from "normal" people, though Kitty's comments earlier in the interview suggest she is more humble and human than Jules believes.*



*Jules takes more time from Kitty than she desired to give, which is a minor demonstration of his manipulative nature. Jules has experienced ruin, and he believes Kitty has not, which endows her with a purity that he violently desires for himself.*



They sit on a grassy slope, and begin talking again about her new movie. Jules suggests they stop talking about the movie and talk about horses. Kitty's response suggests that Jules has broken through her celebrity surface and touched something deeper: Kitty pulls a picture of a horse from her purse, saying the horse's name is Nixon. Kitty feels sad because she never gets to see the horse. In this moment, Jules pushes Kitty back on the grass and tells her to pretend she is riding Nixon. He covers her mouth when she tries to scream. He remembers a failed sexual encounter with his ex-fiancé as he pins Kitty down with his **body**. Jules feels rage, desiring to cut Kitty open or tear her apart and plunge his arms into whatever pure liquids exist within her body. He wants to rape her and then kill her, but not the other way around because he wants to feel the life inside of her. Kitty sprays Jules with mace and stabs his thigh with a Swiss Army knife. She runs away, but Jules notes that he got an extra twenty minutes with her.

Later, Kitty writes Jules a letter in jail, apologizing for whatever part she played in his emotional breakdown and for stabbing him. Several other articles appear after his incarceration about the vulnerability of celebrities, the need to vet freelance writers, and the lack of adequate daytime security in Central Park. Kitty is held up as the Marilyn Monroe of her generation, a martyr for her response to Jules.

Footnote 4: In response to the article about the need for security in Central Park, Jules writes a letter to the editor. He suggests erecting checkpoints at each entrance of the park that will call up the records of success or failure of each visitor, and assign each person a rank depending on their statistics. Then the lower ranked people could receive a tracking device and be watched in the park. His only request is they rank infamy equally with fame, so that way he could receive the same protection as Kitty. This is in response to the assassination of character he has received after the rape.

## CHAPTER 10: OUT OF BODY

This story is told in the second person by a character named Rob. While hanging out at a friend's house, Rob listens to his friend Drew talk about being president one day. He looks at Drew through layers of hash smoke in the **sun**. Drew's arm is around Sasha. Rob admires Drew's **body**, which is healthy because of his love of swimming. Rob tells Drew not to try and say he didn't inhale, and everyone laughs. Rob feels like a funny guy, but then worries that people laughed because they are afraid he will jump out of the window and kill himself.

*Jules sees Kitty in a moment of authenticity as she speaks about her horse. In his mind, the disconnection caused by her celebrity slips away, and he feels the barrier between them fall. He reads this as an opportunity to push the connection toward a sexual end. His emotions turn to rage as he thinks about his ex and the destruction he believes she has caused in his life, though it is clear at this point that Jules's instability is the real problem. He believes entering into Kitty's "pure liquids" (in a kind of twisted baptism) will be redemptive for him, and allow him to regain the life he feels he has lost. Jules' final comment about the extra twenty minutes suggests a deep disconnection from reality, as his interview time seems just as important as his attempted rape and murder of Kitty.*



*Kitty's actions after the attack suggest a humanity and authentic concern for others that Jules completely disregarded through the interview. Her attempt to forgive Jules is consumed by popular culture, however, and the meaning is misconstrued as an attempt for Kitty to further her image.*



*Jules' letter suggests that he still perceives himself as a victim, though he was clearly in the wrong, and his comment about protecting celebrities along with non-celebrities implies that he still holds to the idea of a fundamental disconnection between these two groups. His comments also illuminate the absurdity of the surveillance state in America, which becomes an idea explored in the final chapters of the novel.*



*The second-person point of view in this story is a stylistic depiction of Rob's disconnection from himself and others. He is also self-conscious, as shown through his concern about his friends' laughter. Drew, on the other hand, is confident, and looks toward the future with high aspirations. The joke about not inhaling marijuana is a reference to a famous comment from President Bill Clinton.*



Rob feels paranoid. He worries that Drew is mocking him, but Drew is sincere. Last fall, Drew stood in Washington Square passing out leaflets to get students to register to vote. Rob helped Drew hand out pamphlets, but didn't register to vote himself. Nobody, not even Sasha, knows that he never voted for Bill Clinton. He keeps it a secret.

*Rob's paranoia and self-consciousness is reflected in his concern that Drew is mocking him. The fact that he doesn't vote perhaps suggests that he doesn't feel his voice is important, or else a fundamental apathy about the world.*



Drew gives Sasha a kiss. Rob knows Drew feels horny because he feels it too. He used to get into fights in high school when he felt this way because it relieved the tension. Nobody will fight him now, though, because he slit his wrists with a box cutter three months ago, and people are too worried about him. People have been treating him differently, smiling whenever they see him.

*Rob clearly struggles with his sexuality, and in the past he expressed this through aggression. Rob's suicide attempt has had ruinous effects in his relationships and in his life, creating a layer of disconnection between himself and even his closest friends—a kind of disconnection perhaps not so different from that which Jules perceived between celebrities and non-celebrities.*



Drew kisses Sasha again, and Rob feels angry. They are at their friends Lizzie and Bix's house, and it feels too small. The house is full of plants and the smell of plants, and the walls are covered in Bix's collection of Last Judgment posters that show humans getting separated into good and bad. Rob goes out onto the fire escape, and Sasha joins him, asking what he is doing. It makes her nervous to see Rob out there, but Rob says the worst he would get if he jumped is a broken arm or leg.

*Rob feels disconnected from both Sasha and Drew, and seeing them kissing causes him to feel the pain of this disconnection (it's also suggested that he has complicated romantic feelings for both friends). Sasha's immediate concern about Rob going on the fire escape shows her genuine concern for him, but also confirms Rob's theory that his friends are always cautious around him now.*



Drew joins Rob on the fire escape and they listen to Lizzie talk to her mom on the phone inside the apartment. Her parents are visiting from Texas and don't approve that she is dating Bix, who is a black man. Afterward, Lizzie leans out the window, and Rob asks how her bigoted parents are. Lizzie says that he can't talk that way in her apartment, and she tells Rob, "fuck you," and Rob returns the insult. He feels good about the reaction he gets from Lizzie, noting that it has been a while. Sasha and Lizzie begin talking about Rob, and he notes to Drew that he loves how they talk about him like he isn't there, like he is dead.

*Lizzie's parent's bigoted ideas about race cause more disconnection between Lizzie, Bix, and her parents. Rob is not afraid to speak the truth about them, and he feels good getting an authentic reaction from Lizzie, since people have been acting inauthentically toward him since his suicide attempt.*



Rob remembers Drew telling him about his childhood in Wisconsin, where he built a log cabin, hunted, and swam in a lake by his house, even in the winter. When Rob first met Drew, Drew thought Rob must have swum a lot because he grew up in Florida. Rob says he did, even though he doesn't like **water**, which is something only Sasha knows about him. Rob goes to the window and looks inside at Bix, who is on his computer, reading messages sent from other graduate students. Bix believes computer messaging is going to be huge in the future.

*Rob admires Drew's upbringing and finds meaning in the authenticity of his experiences. Rob's dislike of water, which in the novel symbolically points toward ruin, speaks to his desire for life and redemption—but it also foreshadows his eventual death. Bix finds connection through the use of technology, and correctly predicts that technology will be a primary method of communication in the future.*



Bix tells Rob to come inside because Lizzie is stressed out. Inside, Rob apologizes to her, and then says sorry that her mom a bigot, and that Bix and she are dating a girl from Texas. Rob apologizes that his recent suicide attempt makes her nervous. As he says it, he feels like he is a few feet away from himself, and he notices that the others' faces have grown sad. He wonders which part of himself is the real one, the part of him saying these things to Lizzie, or the part of him watching from a distance.

Rob, Drew, and Sasha walk to Washington Square Park. Rob remembers that while he was recovering from his suicide attempt in Florida, Sasha and Drew went to Washington and watched the sun rise over the Mall the day Bill Clinton was elected. They told him they felt something in the air, but Rob doesn't feel it. At Washington Square, Drew leaves and Rob feels glad. He is coming down from the hash, which is still new to him. At Freshman orientation, Sasha had picked Rob out because he didn't do drugs. She needed a fake boyfriend because she was afraid that her stepfather had hired a detective to look out for her. Rob agreed to be her fake boyfriend.

Rob and Sasha began spending time together after the orientation, and Sasha became increasingly worried about the detective. Rob kissed her in public to throw the detective off. Sasha told Rob that they needed to tell each other something that would make it impossible for them to really go out. Sasha told Rob that she started shoplifting at thirteen, and became addicted to it. Later, in Naples, she stole things and sold them to a man. She then began having sex with the older man and still taking money from him, telling herself that he was her boyfriend. She told Rob that that person (her past self) wasn't really her, and she feels sorry for whoever that was. Rob tells Sasha about a football teammate whom he'd had sex with, though he does not believe himself to be gay. He wasn't sure who it was who had sex with the other young man.

Rob and Sasha spend some time in the library, where Sasha writes a paper for one of the six classes she is taking to try and graduate in three years. She is an older student, and feels behind. She is majoring in music and business. After she finishes, they walk to Sasha's apartment. The mood of Sasha's roommates seems to shift when Rob arrives. They go to Sasha's room, which is empty besides a rented harp she is learning to play. Rob lies on the bed, and Sasha takes a shower, returning quickly, Rob suspects, because she doesn't want to leave him alone. He remembers spending the night in Sasha's room, and holding her while she cried. Rob knows everything about Sasha, the particularities of her **body**, and everyone believed they were dating. The biggest regret of Rob's life is not sleeping with Sasha. It was especially hard on Rob when Sasha started dating Drew.

*Rob acts authentically in this moment by speaking his mind. He is aware of the fact that his suicide attempt has created a distance between himself and those around him, and his disconnection from even himself is reflected in his feeling of being separated from his body.*



*In the novel, sunrises often depict connection and hope between characters, which is the feeling the characters felt in this memory. Rob, however, feels left out of this experience, and also lacks connection and hope. The history between Rob and Sasha depicts both the lack of authentic connection between them, and the way Rob has changed since they first met. By agreeing to be her "fake boyfriend," Rob agreed to partake in an inauthentic form of relationship.*



*As time moved forward, Rob and Sasha's feelings for each other change from almost comically false to become a more authentic friendship. The fact that they are not in a romantic relationship allows Sasha to be more honest and authentic with Rob than she is with most people, and so she reveals a dark secret of her past—that she essentially worked as a prostitute in Naples. Rob shares honestly about his sexuality with Sasha as well, feeling the same disconnect from his past self as she does.*



*Sasha's lifestyle before school had ruinous consequences, and home in the U.S. now, she is seeking redemption. Rob is now also seeking redemption after his suicide attempt, though the reactions from those around him are a reminder of the damage it has caused. His memory of holding Sasha is one of connection, and his intimacy with her body confirms this. Their connection is authentic, despite the fact that they are only friends, though Sasha's relationship with Drew causes Rob to feel distant and resentful. Rob's regret is rooted in memory, and because time only moves forward, he despairs his lack of action in the past.*





After ten o'clock, Rob and Sasha meet Drew on Third Avenue and Saint Marks. Drew kisses her, and Rob wonders why Drew has been able to help Sasha start her life over again, when he was unable to do the same. Rob wonders again what Sasha felt like watching the **sun** rise in Washington D.C., and whether other people felt it too. They arrive at the Pyramid Club, where they are going to see the Conduits play a concert. Rob offers Drew and Sasha ecstasy pills. Drew wants to do the ecstasy with Sasha, but she has quit doing drugs. Rob takes one of the pills and puts the rest back in his pocket.

As the Conduits play their concert, Rob stands in the back and watches Drew and Sasha close to the stage. He wishes Drew were his brother, wishing they could have built a log cabin together and slept inside. He wishes he could have killed an elk with Drew, and danced naked around a fire. He feels if he could see Drew naked, even once, it would ease the deep pressure he feels inside of himself. As Bosco (the guitarist) crowd surfs overhead, Drew spots Rob and pushes his way back to him. Rob shoves one of the pills into Drew's hand.

After the concert, Rob and Drew wait for Sasha outside. They are high on ecstasy, and Sasha says she gets it. Drew tells her not to be mad, and she tells him she is not mad, but bored. She was invited to a party with the Conduit's producer, Bennie Salazar, but she doesn't want to take Rob and Drew because they are high. Rob says Drew wants to come with him anyways, and Drew agrees.

Later, Rob and Drew sit in another part of the city, and Rob says he feels bad about leaving Sasha. Drew tells him not to worry, but Rob remembers Sasha coming to visit him at the hospital after his suicide attempt. She had climbed into bed with him and held him. She had found him after the suicide attempt, and the doctor had told her if she'd been ten minutes later, he would have died. Sasha told him that in Naples, there were kids who were hopeless, but there were others who she thought still might have a chance. She believed that she and Rob were survivors. She made him promise he would never attempt suicide again, and he did, truly believing he would not break his promise.

Later, they meet Bix, and Rob gives him the final ecstasy pill. Bix has been walking around for hours because the janitor kicked him out of the lab, and he can't go home because Lizzie's parents are in town. Rob feels like going home, but Bix tells him he can't because he is "central to the action." Drew agrees, slinging his arm around Rob's shoulders, and telling him that he is their aching, pounding heart. They go to an after-hours club, and Rob dances with a girl who wants to go home with him, but eventually she gets bored at his lack of response and leaves.

*Rob reads meaning into Sasha and Drew's relationship, believing that Drew possesses a power to help Sasha that Rob fundamentally lacks. The Conduits are Bennie Salazar's band, and interestingly, a conduit is a channel that typically carries water, which is a symbol in the novel often connected to ruin. The fact that Sasha has quit doing drugs suggests she is more experienced than Rob and Drew, and trying hard to find redemption after a difficult period in her life.*



*Rob's separation from Drew and Sasha in the club speaks to his lack of connection in a larger sense. Behind Rob's desire to be more like Drew is also a desire for intimacy with him, as Rob continues to struggle with his sexuality. He gives the pills to Drew in an attempt to create an opportunity for the intimacy he desires.*



*Sasha, already jaded by her past experiences with drugs, is merely bored by her friends' experimentation. She chooses to go with Bennie, who will later become her friend and introduction to the music industry, as the novel depicts in earlier chapters. This Conduits' concert is the two characters' first moment of connection.*



*Rob's guilt and Drew's subsequent response confirms that, though they are not romantically involved, Rob shares a deep connection with Sasha. Her love for him is reflected in her presence in the hospital. Her comment about being survivors reflects her belief in and hope for redemption, and Rob's promise suggests that her presence and words have given him hope that he will be able to find it.*



*Bix's experience of disconnection is rooted in his racial identity. Bix's comment about Rob being the center of the action offers a different view of Rob than the perspectives of others (including Rob himself), and when Drew wraps his arm around Rob they seem to share an authentic moment of connection.*



After the club, Rob, Drew, and Bix eat breakfast, and then go to the East River. The **sun** is rising, and Drew says he wishes he could swim in the **water**. He says they should remember this moment, even when they don't know each other anymore. Rob imagines himself looking back from the future, and feels a swell of movement pushing him toward the future. Bix says they will know each other forever, since the days of losing touch are almost gone. Bix says he imagines it like Judgment Day, when everyone will rise out of his or her **bodies** and meet someplace else where you never lose anyone or get lost. Rob asks if Bix will finally get to meet Lizzie's parents in that special place, and Bix laughs, saying maybe that part will never change, but he hopes it does. With that, he says he'd better get home, and leaves.

Rob and Drew walk together along the river, smoking a joint. Rob tells Drew he wishes they could live in a cabin together in Wisconsin. Drew says he would miss Sasha, and Rob tells him he doesn't really know her, that Drew doesn't know who he would really be missing. Drew asks what he means, and Rob tells him that Sasha was a hooker in Naples. Drew gets insulted, but Rob says to ask her about the man in Naples. They start walking again, and Rob feels terrible about what he has said. Eventually Drew turns and tells Rob he is an asshole.

Drew tells Rob to leave him alone, and goes down to the river's edge to a beach made entirely out of garbage. Rob follows him, and Drew begins to undress. Rob looks at Drew's **body**, which is as strong and tight as he had imagined, though he finds it thinner than he expected. He feels a faint appreciation for the beauty and inelegance of a man undressing. At the **water's** edge, Drew looks back and tells Rob he has always wanted to do this. Drew dives into the water.

Rob moves to the edge of the **water** and undresses. He feels if he can master his fear it will mean something important. Rob jumps in and hits his knee hard on something below the surface. He swims quickly to get away from the garbage, which he imagines reaching up and slashing his genitals and feet. Rob yells to Drew, asking how they will get out, and Drew tells him they will get out the way they got in. Rob is struck by the beauty of the city around him, but realizes suddenly that the shore is far away and he can't find Drew. In the distance, he hears Drew calling out to him, but when he tries to call back his voice seems small.

*The sunrise over the river echoes the sunrise Drew and Sasha shared in D.C., and Rob's thought of looking back on this moment from the future suggests a kind of hope that he will survive. The presence of water, however, foregrounds the impending ruin of these relationships. Bix, who is involved in the development of the internet, believes that connection will become easier in the digital age. The disconnection from the body he mentions speaks to the idea that identities will exist in an extra-physical realm, which in a sense is true on the internet. He understands, however, that certain elements of American culture, such as racism, will not be overcome through a technological revolution.*



*Rob seeks a moment of connection with Drew, but Drew turns his attention to Sasha. This angers Rob, and he reveals his deep knowledge of Sasha's past, using this as a kind of weapon against Drew.*



*The garbage on the beach speaks symbolically to the ruin these characters must navigate in their lives. Rob has put Drew on a pedestal, believing Drew's experience is superior to his (which is why he got Sasha), but in this moment he also sees that Drew is thinner than he expected, suggesting how ideas of others' identities are often distorted.*



*Rob is seeking to find authenticity, and he believes he will find meaning in his life by facing his fear of the water. The water takes on an ominous nature as he swims out, and the image of slashing his genitals is perhaps connected to his struggle with his sexuality. The moment of beauty after swimming through the garbage rings of redemption, though it is tragically short-lived.*



Rob flails, knowing he is not supposed to panic. His mind pulls away, and he imagines slipping from Sasha's window, past the stolen objects on her sill. He sees her asleep in her bed, and imagines saying sorry to her, telling her that he believes in her, that he will always protect her, that he will never leave her, and that he will be curled around her heart for the rest of her life. The narrative voice switches from the second person to the first person (Rob refers to himself as "me" instead of "you" in this moment). The current pulls him under, and he hears Sasha screaming into his face: Fight! Fight! Fight!

*Rob disassociates from his body, speaking to the disconnection from himself he has struggled with throughout the story. In this state, he returns to Sasha, the one person with whom he has felt true connection. His comments echo those Sasha said to him in the hospital, and though he gives up fighting, he continues to hold onto the idea that she at least will find redemption. The switch into first person suggests Rob's reconnection and acceptance of his identity in his final moments of life.*



## CHAPTER 11: GOOD-BYE, MY LOVE

Ted Hollander is in Naples looking for his niece, Sasha. Sasha's stepfather, Hammer, has paid for Ted to go looking for her, but Ted has been ignoring his duty to find Sasha. He instead goes to Pompeii and looks at the paintings and mummified bodies left after the volcanic eruption in the year 79 AD. In the early evening, he returns to his hotel, and calls Sasha's mother to report he hasn't found her. He apologizes, and says he will look for her tomorrow, though he already has plans to visit an art museum.

*The scenery of destruction at Pompeii is related to the ruin Ted feels in his personal life. His dishonesty about searching for Sasha speaks to a lack of authenticity and an apathetic disconnection from those he loves. Ted is presented as another character who derives great meaning and pleasure from some kind of art—in his case, visual art.*



Back at his hotel, Ted gets a drink and calls his wife, Susan. She asks if everything is all right, but her merry tone disheartens him. During his time in Pompeii, Ted has been imagining a slightly different version of his wife—one who is more thoughtful and knowing. At Pompeii he imagined her listening with him to the screams and sliding ash. He feels guilty about his waning affection and love for Susan. At first Susan was baffled and distraught by Ted's lack of attraction to her, but eventually she had taken on a relentless cheeriness that Ted despises. It makes him feel hopeless.

*Ted and his wife Susan don't share an authentic relationship, which is reflected in her merry tone and the way she pretends everything is fine. The image of Ted and Susan at Pompeii furthers the idea that their relationship is in "ruin." Ted holds no hope for redemption, but continues to move through the relationship without acknowledging the destruction.*



Susan puts Ted's son on the phone. Ted says hello in a cheery tone, and his son tells him not to use the "fake dad voice." His son tells him they lost their soccer game. Ted talks to his other two children, and they also tell him about their sports scores. His sons play different sports in an attempt to gain attention from their father. The conversations leave Ted feeling drunk and anxious to get out of the hotel. He notes that he doesn't usually drink because the two hours he has in the evening away from his family are spent thinking and writing about art. He is a tenured art history professor. He locks his children out of his office at night to work, but despite the escape, he usually does not think or write.

*Ted's son recognizes the lack of authenticity in Ted's character. His children seek connection with their father through sports, but Ted rejects these "offerings." Ted is unable to reconcile his conflicting identities—that of an art scholar and that of a father—and this leaves him unable to be fulfilled as either.*



At dusk, Ted goes to the Piazza Vittoria. The Plaza is teeming with families and kids playing soccer. There are also threatening youths wandering around, and despite Ted's size, he is frightened of them. He thinks of them living in despair in the same place that their ancestors lived lavish lives, doing drugs on the steps of churches where their ancestors are buried. Ted worries Sasha is among them. She disappeared two years ago at the age of seventeen, the way her father also disappeared. Sasha has struggled with drug addiction, shoplifting, and suicide attempts. Ted remembers her as a lovely and bewitching young girl, but later recalls her turning his young boys away for fear of polluting them. Ted then wanted nothing to do with Sasha, believing she was lost for good.

The next morning, Ted takes a taxi to the Museo Nazionale. He views a relief sculpture called Orpheus and Eurydice. He recalls the story of Orpheus and Eurydice: their love and marriage, Eurydice's death by snakebite while fleeing from the advances of another man, Orpheus descending to the underworld and promising Pluto not to look back at her as they exit, and his inability not to look. As Ted views the sculpture, he is moved by the quiet of the interaction depicted, the absence of drama and their gentle touch. He lingers on their unspeakable knowledge that everything is lost. He visits the piece several more times before leaving the museum.

Ted leaves, and as he walks, the decaying churches strike him and the soiled coats of arms carved into the doorways. He notes that these universal and defining symbols are made meaningless by time. He imagines his wife behind him, equally entranced by the city. As he walks, he notices a woman selling cigarettes from her window. A girl buys a pack, and as Ted approaches, he realizes it is Sasha. He follows her for a short while, noticing that she is limping. Eventually, Sasha turns and confronts him.

Ted tries to make small talk; avoiding the reason he is here. He asks Sasha about her limp, which she says is the result of an ankle injury she got falling down a flight of stairs in Tangiers. Ted is surprised by Sasha's maturity, and perceives the changes she has undergone as instantaneous and startling. She also looks fragile to him. Sasha asks Ted if he still lives in Upstate New York, and recalls the names of his children. He is surprised she remembers, but Sasha tells him she remembers everything. Sasha says she is going to visit friends, but it was nice to see him. Ted asks if he can take her to dinner, and she agrees to go that evening.

*Ted focuses on the way in which time has had destructive effects on Italian culture and people. Ted provides more insight into the development of Sasha's identity through his memory of her, which creates meaning across the novel's different stories and references to Sasha's life. There has always been something in her that Ted believed was destructive, and his lack of hope for her redemption is clear in his idea that she is lost for good.*



*The story of Orpheus and Eurydice connects to the idea of ruin (death) and redemption (re-birth). In the myth, however, Eurydice is not redeemed—Orpheus breaks his promise, and Eurydice dies a second death, being wrenched back to Hades. Ted finds meaning in his own experience through the myth. In a large sense, this speaks to the way in which art provides meaning in individual lives. In a more specific sense, Ted believes he is in Naples to redeem Sasha, but like the myth, the mission is ultimately hopeless.*



*The image of the churches and the coats of arms decaying speaks to the destructive power of time and the way in which it strips away the meaning attached to objects of cultural significance. Ted's mention of Susan shows his desire for connection with her. Simultaneously, he has the opportunity to connect with Sasha, though he is hesitant because of his belief that she is irredeemable.*



*Like in other moments of emotional tension, Ted here strays away from the truth and sticks to small talk. The seeming suddenness of Sasha's changes emphasizes the idea of time and the way in which its impact on the novel's characters is unforgiving and unstoppable. Ted is surprised by Sasha's memory, but for Sasha memory is a significant element of her character, as her current situation and identity is rooted in the pain of her past.*



Ted returns to his hotel and makes his daily call to Sasha's mother, Beth. He knows she will be happy that Sasha seems to be doing well. Ted does not feel the same way. He doesn't know why he felt peaceful knowing he should be looking for Sasha, but failing to do so. Lying on his bed, he remembers the summer he lived with Sasha's father, Andy, and Beth on Lake Michigan. Sasha was five at the time. When her parents fought, Ted would take Sasha to the beach. She had long red hair at the time, he remembers. When the sand was too hot from the **sun**, Ted would carry Sasha in his arms, set her on a towel and put sunscreen on her. He would wonder what would become of her after growing up amid so much violence.

When Sasha was little, Ted took her to the beach one day. Ted told Sasha he was working as a contractor to pay his way through graduate school. Sasha asked about floor sanders, and revealed that she knew a man who sanded the floors in their house. Ted grew suspicious after Sasha told him the man gave her a fish. Ted asked if it was a goldfish, but Sasha said it was a bathtub fish. Ted asked if it squeaked, and Sasha said yes, but she didn't like the sound. Ted notes that these stories were used to distract her from her parents fighting, and this made her seem older than she really was.

Sasha would ask if Ted would take her swimming, and he always agreed. She would lay her head against his chest and hold onto him. He would sense her mounting dread as they approached the **water**. Ted tried to make it easy for her, but Sasha would always gasp and tighten her grip as they entered the water. Once in the water, Sasha would be fine, but Ted always felt as if he were subjecting her to some pain. He always felt the desire to rescue her, and take her away. He worried about the summer ending and returning to school, but when it was time to leave Sasha barely looked at him, and he left feeling angry.

Sasha arrives at Ted's hotel that evening, and he feels surprised and reluctant. He was hoping she wouldn't show up. Sasha takes him to an affluent neighborhood called Vomero. After getting out of the taxi, Ted looks toward Mount Vesuvius and pictures the imagined version of Susan next to him. Sasha tells Ted she lives in this neighborhood, and Ted says he could have met her here instead of at her hotel, but Sasha says most foreigners get robbed in Naples. Ted says that Sasha is a foreigner, and she agrees, but says she knows her way around.

*In the past, Ted believed he could protect Sasha, but he has abandoned that belief, which reveals the way in which time has changed him as a person. The sun is here associated with the damaging effects of time, so carrying Sasha across the hot sand symbolically speaks to Ted's idea that he could protect her from the damage she will experience in her life. Even as he attempts to protect her, however, he senses that her experience as a girl living amid violence will have ruinous effects on her life.*



*In this moment we see a more authentic version of Ted, before he became consumed by his identity as an art historian and disconnected from his family. Ted's protective feelings for Sasha show his love for and connection with her, which has since faded. Through Ted's memory, we also see a version of Sasha that explains her challenges in the narrative present. We understand that her traumatic past has led to her current life.*



*Water often points to the idea of ruin in the novel. The image of Ted and Sasha in the water together speaks to the pain they will both experience in their lives, but the image also involves connection. Yet despite their connection, Ted perceived a meaningfulness in their relationship that wasn't apparent to Sasha, and this was painful for him. The story suggests this is the moment where Ted's understanding of relationships and connection began to change.*



*Ted didn't want Sasha to show up because her presence gives him the responsibility to try to save her, and he doesn't believe he can. Sasha is associated with Susan in this moment—the Susan Ted imagines, with whom he is able to connect. Sasha's perception of Ted as a foreigner and herself as a local person shows that she has shaped her present identity around her experience in Naples.*



At the restaurant, Ted and Sasha sit in a window seat. Sasha keeps looking at the young people beyond the window riding and sitting on Vespa Scooters. When Ted asks if she knows any of them, Sasha says they are students, speaking in a way that suggests that students are nothing, and that most of them still live at home. She changes the subject to Ted's life, asking if he is still a professor. Jarred again by her memory, Ted feels the pressure he often feels when he talks about his work. He has gone into monstrous debt to get his art history degree. He tells her he is writing about the impact of Greek sculpture on French Impressionists, but Sasha seems to find it uninteresting. She asks about Susan and whether he loves her. He says of course he does.

They eat dinner, and after a second glass of wine, Sasha begins to open up. She had run away from home with a man named Wade, who is the drummer in a touring band. They went first to Tokyo, and Ted feels a twinge of envy when she says this. After that they went to Hong Kong. Wade left Sasha in Hong Kong, and she traveled with some friends through China. Ted asks if the friends from China were the same friends she had in Naples. Sasha tells him she meets friends wherever she goes.

After leaving the restaurant, Ted and Sasha go to a nightclub. Sasha tells him her friends own the place. She asks Ted to buy her a drink with a little umbrella. As he goes to the bar, he thinks that Sasha has seen more of the world in two years than he has in twenty. He feels like escaping her. He returns to her and gives her the drink, and as she takes a sip he notices a scar on her wrist. She says it is from before, and won't show Ted, so he grabs her hand, and takes a certain angry pleasure in hurting her. There are more scars, and Sasha says a lot were by accident. Ted says she has had a hard time, though she won't admit it. There is a **pause**, and then Sasha tells Ted she used to think she saw her father in China and Morocco. She used to think that he was following her to make sure she was ok, and then when she realized he wasn't she got really scared.

Finally, Sasha asks Ted what he is doing in Naples. He lies, telling her he is there to look at art. Sasha's face slackens, and she says she thought he came to look for her. She suggests they dance, and grabs Ted's hand, pulling him to the dance floor. He begins dancing, but quickly realizes Sasha is just standing there. When he stops, she hugs him, and he realizes then that she has grown up, that the little girl he once loved is gone, just like the young man he was when he used to love her. Sasha lets go, tells Ted to wait where he is, and disappears. When she doesn't return, Ted goes to the bar to buy another drink. When he reaches for his wallet, he discovers Sasha has stolen it.

*Sasha's criticism of the young people suggests insecurity in her character, as we know from the last chapter that she does return to school. She finds meaning in her current lifestyle based on the fact that she is out on her own and not with her parents. Sasha's lack of interest toward Ted's new book increases his self-consciousness. Instead, Sasha changes the subject to Susan, which directs Ted to another role he struggles with—that of a husband and family man. He is yet again unable to speak honestly about his relationship with Susan.*



*Sasha's comments about "friends" connect to her ideas of identity—Sasha does not know who she really is, so her identity is fluid, shifting depending on the situation. She is able to connect with people wherever she goes, but this lack of true identity also creates destructive relationships.*



*Ted again regrets not living as fully as Sasha. The scars are another indication of the ruin Sasha has experienced in her life, and also connect her to Rob from the last chapter, who attempted suicide—their connection becomes clearer in this moment, as again Egan reveals a stray fact that causes us to rethink earlier events in a different light. Sasha found relief in the idea that her father may be following her, but the realization that he wasn't indicated a true disconnection from him, and the fact of being truly alone scared her.*



*Sasha secretly hoped Ted was there to find her, which speaks to her desire for connection, and feels let down by the belief he isn't in fact there for her. The apparent moment of connection (which is in fact simply an opportunity for Sasha to steal the wallet) forces Ted to realize that time really has passed, and they have both changed.*



The next morning Ted wakes in his hotel. The night before he had gone to the police and reported his wallet stolen, but he didn't give them Sasha's name. Ted goes out searching for Sasha, knowing he has to find her that day. He takes a taxi to the Museo Nazionale and sets off in the direction he'd gone when he found Sasha yesterday. He finds his way to the place where they parted ways, where Sasha said her friends lived, and goes inside. He meets an old woman, and tells her he is looking for Sasha, an American with red hair. As he says it in Italian, he realizes the description is not true anymore, since Sasha's hair is no longer the red color it was when she was little.

The woman says she doesn't know, but when Ted gives her a twenty-dollar bill, she leads Ted up the stairs. On the second floor, he sees a decrepit piano, and even in its state of decay, recognizes it as a sign of nobility. The woman notices Ted admiring the piano, and with pride throws open the doors to a big dim-lit room with moldy walls. The woman switches on the light, and Ted sees murals painted on the wall of women clutching fruit and clumps of dark leaves. She brings him to the third floor, where two boys share a cigarette. He smells dope and stale olive oil and realizes that the place is a rooming house. On the fifth floor, where the servants once lived, the woman leads him to a door.

Inside, Ted sees Sasha, half asleep on the bed. She says hello, but as soon as the old woman rounds the corner, she slams the door in Ted's face, telling him to go away. Ted waits behind the door. When he asks Sasha if this is where she lives, she tells him she is moving someplace better. Ted asks if she will move when she's picked enough pockets, and Sasha says it was a friend of hers who did it. She tells him to leave again, but he can't. He waits, and a long while later, Sasha asks if he is still there. The door opens and his wallet drops out. Sasha tells him to go to hell. Ted remains, sitting for what feels like hours, imagining that he is an element of the palace himself, bearing the ebb and flow of generations and feeling the place relax into the earth.

Eventually Sasha comes out. Ted asks where she is going, and she walks to the shower without saying a word. When she returns, she opens the bedroom door, and explains that she cleans the place to pay her rent. Ted asks if it makes her happy. She slams the door on him again. As he waits for Sasha, he thinks about Susan, not the imagined version of her from earlier, but his real wife. He remembers riding the Staten Island Ferry with her, and Susan telling him that they need to make sure their life is always like it was in that moment. He knew she'd said it because she'd felt, in that moment, the passage of time. He remembers feeling it too. He'd taken Susan's hand and said it will always be that way. Recently, he'd asked Susan about that day, but she said she didn't remember it. Ted knew she did remember, but he had let go of the woman she was that day.

*Ted understands Sasha's life is already in a state of ruin, so he doesn't increase the destruction by giving her name to the police. His attempt to find her suggests he has not given up on her, and now believes she can be redeemed. The fact that he describes Sasha by the way she looked when she was young, however, suggests that Ted is still trying to hang onto an idea of Sasha when she was younger, even though he knows she is a very different person now.*



*The relationship between time and decay is reflected in the rooming house. It was once a place of nobility, but has shifted into a state of ruin where young transients engage in drug use. The fact that Sasha lives on the floor where the servants once lived is also meaningful. Earlier in the story, she pretends she is living comfortably in a wealthy area of Naples, but it now becomes clear that she was not letting Ted see the truth of her situation at all.*



*Sasha attempts to present different identities at different moments. She is polite to the old woman, but as soon as she is gone, her attitude changes. Likewise, her comment about moving someplace better suggests she feels insecure about her situation, as it does not reflect the inauthentic image she presented to Ted. The fact that Ted stays, however—even after getting his wallet back and being told to leave—suggests a shift in his character. He had decided not to give up on Sasha. His focus on the passage of time suggests an acceptance of the ways in which things have changed.*



*Ted's question about whether Sasha is happy is an attempt to access her in an authentic way—but Sasha, of course, rejects the questions. The imagining of Susan as her true self speaks to a shift in Ted's character—both a desire to reconnect with his wife and the hope of redeeming their relationship. Both Ted and Susan have become different people since the time of this memory, though Susan chooses not to hold onto the past through memory. She would rather avoid the issue altogether.*



Later that afternoon, Sasha opens the door and lets Ted inside. The room is small, and the **sun** is just beginning to set. The windowsill is full of objects that Ted assumes are souvenirs from Sasha's travels. A crude circle made out of a bent coat hanger hangs in the middle of the window. Ted realizes how alone she is in this place. Sasha, as if sensing his thoughts, says she knows a lot of good people, but the friendships never last. Ted sits beside her and puts his arm around her and says life is harder if one does it alone.

The story then jumps forward twenty years, and Ted, long divorced, visits Sasha at her home. She is married with two children. Sitting there, he remembers her room in Naples, and the jolt of surprise he experienced when the **sun** dropped into the center of the window and was captured in the wire coat hanger. The story flashes back to Sasha and Ted sitting in her room. The sun illuminates her hair and face with orange light. "See," Sasha says, staring at the sun. "It's mine."

## CHAPTER 12: GREAT ROCK AND ROLL PAUSES

This chapter is delivered in the form of a PowerPoint presentation created by Sasha's 12-year-old daughter, Alison. It describes the events of May 14th and 15th of some year in the 2020s. There are four sections, titled "After Lincoln's Game," "in Alison's room," "one night later," and "the desert." Alison's family consists of herself, her brother Lincoln, who is 13, her father Drew, and her mother Sasha.

The first section begins immediately after Lincoln plays a Little League game. Lincoln and Alison walk to the car together where their mother is waiting. Alison walks with her arm around Lincoln's shoulder. When kids say "good game" to Lincoln, Alison answers for him. Sasha yells at Alison, which she notes is an annoying habit. She rolls her eyes at her mother. The air is cool, but Alison feels the heat from the earth like heat coming from a person's **body**. She can't tell if she can feel it through her shoes, but she crouches and touches it. It is warm.

*The setting sun suggests that this stage of Sasha's life is ending. Ted assumes that the objects are from Sasha's travels, but they are actually stolen objects (as we saw even in the first story), attempts to connect with others and establish her identity through them. Ted unconsciously understands that the objects reflect Sasha's loneliness and disconnection, however.*



*Ted does not find redemption for his marriage, but he does at least reconnect with Sasha. The sun is again linked to the theme of time, as Sasha's "capture" of the sun is a reminder that she has her whole life ahead of her. At the same time, her claim that "it's mine" relates to her hoarding of stolen objects and desire to control her fate—she wants time itself to be something she can steal.*



*This story is set in the near future, and the presence of the PowerPoint depicts the advancement of technology and the way in which younger generations engage with it. Sasha and Drew also reappear in this story, emphasizing the connections across the novel.*



*Lincoln and Sasha's connection is depicted in their closeness to one another, but the fact that Sasha answers for Lincoln suggests that he is distanced from his peers. The heat from the earth in connection to the body (which is often the symbolic site of aging and decay in the novel) speaks to the human effect on the environment at this point in the near future.*





Alison is annoyed by her mother's habit of repeating what other people say before they part ways. A friend of hers says, "Adios, Sasha." Sasha responds, "Adios, Christine." In the car ride home, Alison asks her why she has to do that. Sasha gets offended, and asks Alison to ease up on the scrutiny, but Alison says it's not possible. They arrive home and Alison's father, Drew, is still at work. This piece of information appears alone on its own slide. The family lives in the desert, and when Sasha was little, there were lawns, but now you need energy credits for a lawn or a turbine. Alison, Sasha, and Lincoln sit at the picnic table looking up at the stars. Alison mentions her mother's sculptures, which she makes out of trash and old toys. Eventually, the sculptures will fall apart, which Sasha claims is part of the process.

The next slide describes Lincoln. He looks like his father, Drew, but is skinnier. He is obsessed with **pauses** in great rock and roll songs. Alison states that Lincoln knows more than grownups about a certain things. One of those things is that a full rest is four beats long, and a half rest is two beats. Lincoln makes astute comments about certain songs, noting the length of pauses and their effects. Their father, if he were with them at the picnic table, would say he was proud of Lincoln for analyzing the songs so closely, and then ask Lincoln if he spent time with other kids today. Sasha, who is there, enjoys the songs Lincoln talks about.

Lincoln loops the **pause** in each song so it sounds like it lasts for minutes. When Alison's friends are around, she ignores this, but when she is alone with Lincoln, she enjoys the pauses. The slide depicts the pauses with an empty square. Sasha responds again to Lincoln's project. She knows the song "Bernadette" sounds "smoky" because it was recorded on an 8-track, and she doesn't think the pause on Jimi Hendrix's "Foxy Lady" is a true pause, because Hendrix is snickering. She notes that it is a beautiful night, and wishes their father were there with them instead of working.

*As in most of the other stories, the family here experiences various levels of disconnection from each other. The fact that Drew's absence is alone on the slide suggests Drew's isolation from the family, and how important her father's presence is to Alison. The mention of the energy credits and lack of lawns marks a change in the environment as a result of human overconsumption. Sasha has found redemption from her addiction to stealing through her found object art. The sculptures fall apart over time, which is a comment on time and ruin, and Sasha's acceptance of this fact of life.*



*The description of Lincoln's body nods to the younger Drew as he appears in "Out of Body," and Lincoln is later suggested to be on the autism spectrum. Lincoln's obsession with pauses takes on meaning for Alison as the story progresses. Alison has the feeling that her family's situation is unstable and ending, but just as a pause gives way to a new beginning, so too do people, relationships, and time continue to move forward.*



*As a pre-teen, Alison's identity shifts when her friends are around, but with Lincoln she can be authentic and excited about his music projects. Sasha's love of music and experience in the industry allows her to connect with Lincoln in a way that Drew can't. Sasha comment about Drew suggests she feels disconnected from him in their relationship's present state.*



Drew isn't there because earlier that day he operated on the heart of a girl whose parents are undocumented immigrants. Everyone says he is a good man because he runs a clinic. He is the boss, but in his free time he tries to check in with Alison. He struggles to connect with Lincoln. Alison believes that Lincoln wants to tell his father he loves him, but he must find a roundabout way to do it. His logic reflects his developmental disability. Instead of saying, "I love you," he reasons that because his dad is from Wisconsin, and Lincoln loves music, and his father loves him, and Steve Miller is from Wisconsin, and the Steve Miller Band was popular fifty years ago, and one of their biggest hits was "Fly Like An Eagle," then if he talks about the song with his father it will be the same as saying, "I love you." The following slide shows just their father's response, telling Lincoln that what he says about the **pause** in "Fly Like an Eagle" is good to know.

The next slide brings the reader to Section 2, which describes Alison in her room. Another one of Sasha's annoying habits is giving Alison a hard time for not keeping a typical journal on paper. Mention of the word "paper" insults Alison, and she notes that she doesn't even know anyone who uses the word anymore. Alison gives her mom a bunch of slogans from school about not wasting paper, and Sasha replies by laughing and asking Alison to have mercy.

Sasha looks at a toy horse in Alison's room. She got the horse in Pakistan after reconnecting with Drew on Facebook and moving there with him. Sasha never looked back after that. Alison still plays with the horse sometimes, even though she is twelve. Sasha tells Alison she loves seeing the horse. Alison changes the subject, asking her mother about a book called "Conduit: A Rock-and-Roll Suicide," by Jules Jones. The book is about Bosco, who wanted to die on stage, but who ended up recovering and owning a dairy farm. There is a picture of Sasha on page 28 outside the Pyramid club in the early 1990s.

Alison notes that her mother is pretty and smiling with red hair, though her eyes look sad. She looks like someone Alison wants to know, or a person that Alison might become someday. Sasha doesn't want to talk about the picture because it feels like it comes from another life and seems to reflect all of her past struggles. Alison asks what struggles her mother is talking about, but Sasha tells her it is nothing she needs to think about. Sasha sits on the edge of her bed, and Alison asks her mother to tell her everything bad she has done, including the embarrassing and dangerous things. Sasha looks away, and tells her she can't. Alison suddenly realizes that her job is to make people uncomfortable, and she will do this all of her life. Her mother is her first victim.

*Drew's presence in the community is different than the way he is perceived by his family. Though he connects well with others socially, he struggles to find real closeness in his own family. Lincoln, who is autistic, struggles to connect with others and must find a roundabout way to express his love for Drew. His strange logic fails to register for Drew, however, and Drew's comment that it is "good to know" suggests he totally misses the point. The pause in this moment is packed with meaning, holding the emotion that Lincoln tries, but ultimately fails, to express.*



*Sasha's comments about Alison's PowerPoint journal speaks to a generational disconnection between them as time has shifted their experiences of the world. Alison's environmental consciousness is reflected in her feeling toward paper. She recognizes the ruin already unleashed upon the world through human consumption.*



*The horse serves as an object of memory for Sasha that links her to her love for Drew. Their mode of reconnecting through Facebook shows how technology has shifted the way people find connection. In this moment, it also becomes clear that both Jules and Bosco found a kind of redemption, despite their ruined states earlier in the novel.*



*Alison's comment about her mother's smile alongside her sad eyes speaks to the struggles Sasha experienced in finding her authentic identity. Sasha has come so far to find redemption that the past feels like it belongs to another person. Memory is painful for her, so she prefers to avoid it, which is why she refuses to talk to Alison about it. In this moment, we see Alison recognizing a component of her own identity that connects her to her mother. As a young woman, Sasha was a delinquent, and we see a thread of this in Alison.*



When Alison is almost asleep, Lincoln comes into her room with a pair of headphones. He clamps them over her ears. The music stops, and Alison waits through a long **pause** for it to start again. After a minute, she asks if that is the end of the song. Lincoln laughs, and she laughs too, thinking Lincoln has a sweet giggle. She asks how long a pause can go, and Lincoln tells her one minute and fourteen seconds. Just then, Sasha appears in the doorway and asks what is going on. She is holding a handful of papers, which she makes into collages while she waits for Drew to come home. Alison does not understand why Sasha loves junk so much. Sasha tells Alison that the collages are not junk, but tiny pieces of their lives. Sasha tells them it is time for bed.

The next slide describes how it can be when Drew comes home. The shapes on the slide depict a seesaw. On one side, Drew is depicted kissing Sasha, telling stories, laughing, and popping wine bottles. On the other side, Drew is sitting in his car before coming inside, coming in silent and angry, and pouring gin. The side with the boxes describing negative attributes is darker in color, and outweighs the other side. The front door wakes Alison, and she peeks through the crack to where her parents are. They hug, but don't say anything.

The next slide begins Section 3, titled, "One Night Later." Drew barbecues chicken on the deck, and they eat together at the picnic table. Alison thinks his dinners are better than Sasha's, even when they cook the same thing. Drew asks Alison and Lincoln about school, and Sasha keeps his arm around him and kisses his cheek, which Alison finds annoying. Alison wants to ask about the girl who had heart surgery, but she doesn't. She doesn't understand why Drew loves Sasha. It is difficult to make him laugh, but when he does it comes out like a bark or a roar, which she notes may be surprise at his own laughing. Sasha has told Alison that he used to laugh more, but everyone laughs more when they are younger.

Alison knows the story of Rob's drowning. After Rob drowned, Drew decided to become a doctor. When he told her this, Alison asked why he didn't become a lifeguard, and Drew jokingly asks if he still can. She knows that before this, he wanted to be president, but also notes everyone does at the age of 18. He tells everyone these things because keeping secrets can kill you, he says, which is one of his favorite sayings. Sasha keeps a picture of Rob in her wallet. Alison thinks he is cute, but her father is more handsome. Alison has asked her mother about Rob, whether she loved him, what he was like, and why her father didn't save him. Sasha says she loved him as a friend, that he was sweet and confused, and that her father tried to save him.

*Lincoln and Alison share a moment of connection through the sharing of Lincoln's music projects. Alison anticipates when the song will start again, as she feels that things in her life are ending, and hopes that they will become good once more. Sasha's collages, like her found object art, speaks to the idea of redemption—that people can pick up the broken pieces of their lives and glue them back together. Alison, who lacks her mother's perspective, struggles to understand this idea.*



*Drew's identity is explored in the layout of this slide. He has two aspects to his person (in Alison's eyes)—one that is loving and light, and another that is angry and dark. The angry and dark side is the aspect of his identity that Alison perceives as stronger than the loving and light side.*



*Alison's affection and connection to Drew is depicted in her comment about his cooking being superior to Sasha's. Sasha's arm around Drew suggests connection, though Alison reads the kiss as overcompensation—she knows there is tension in the relationship, so the affection feels inauthentic. Alison's desire to know whether Drew saved the girl shows her desire to believe that Drew will redeem the family and relieve the tensions between them—but Alison doesn't ask, suggesting that she doesn't believe he can.*



*Alison, though she is naïve in some ways, is aware of her parents' experiences with ruin and loss. Drew's decision to become a doctor speaks to a desire for redemption in light of the guilt he feels about Rob's death. Though Alison knows about Rob, her comments about Rob and Sasha's responses do not illuminate who Rob truly was, of course. The truth of that time in Sasha and Drew's life is much more complicated than Sasha reveals to Alison, again showing how memory obscures meaning.*



Drew asks Lincoln a lot of questions about his sports game and school. Lincoln responds in one-word answers, and tells him he'd rather play music. Drew's questions are on one side of a seesaw image, and outweigh Lincoln's responses in the slide. Sasha can sense that Drew isn't happy. He's finished two gin and tonics and is smiling, but his face is tired. He agrees to let Lincoln play some music. Lincoln plays some music, and analyzes the **pauses**. Drew whispers to Sasha, asking if they should encourage Lincoln's obsession, and whether it will help him connect with other kids. Sasha says they should because it helps him connect with the world. She says they shouldn't try to divert him into another activity because this is what he cares about. Drew doesn't understand.

Drew tries to ask Lincoln why the **pauses** matter so much to him, but Lincoln continues analyzing different songs. Eventually, Drew yells at Lincoln to stop. Lincoln starts to cry, and Alison begins to cry, too. Drew tries to hug Lincoln, but he hunches into a ball. Sasha is so furious her face is pale. She tells Drew the songs make you think the song will end, but then the song isn't over so you're relieved. But then the song ends, because every song ends, and that time it is for real. There is a pause as they stand on the deck. Drew picks Lincoln up, and as he struggles, Alison notes that Lincoln looks like a younger version of Drew. It looks as if Drew is hugging his younger self. Lincoln escapes his father and runs inside. Sasha follows, leaving Alison alone with Drew.

The final section, Number 4, is titled, "The Desert." Drew asks Alison to go for a walk with him. Drew tells her to be careful of snakes, but Alison says it's too cold for them, that they are sleeping. Alison hears the silence in the desert like the **pauses** in Lincoln's songs. She says the whole desert is a pause. Drew admits that he needs to do better with Lincoln. Alison suggests he could help Lincoln graph his pauses, but when Drew agrees to do this, Alison is doubtful.

They stop at an old golf course with a collapsing clubhouse. Drew stands in a shallow hole and asks Alison if she remembers playing there. She notes that her father doesn't have any friends, but he says his family members are the only friends he needs. They continue on, and during a long stretch of empty space, Alison asks if her mom is mad. Drew says yes, but she will forgive him. Alison then asks if she forgave him when Rob drowned. Drew asks Alison what made her think of Rob. Alison says sometimes she just thinks about him, and Drew says he does too.

*Drew does not accept Lincoln's authentic identity, and continues to push him towards sports and social interactions. The image depicts the imbalance in the relationship and the power Drew holds. The two aspects of his face—smiling and tired—speak to the two conflicting parts of his personality mentioned earlier. Sasha and Drew's disagreement depicts a divide in their personalities and parenting styles. Because of her own experience establishing her identity and connecting to others, Sasha understands how art (in Lincoln's case, the pauses in music) can do this.*



*The pauses matter so much to Lincoln and Alison because they offer hope that the music will continue, which in a larger sense, speaks to their hope that their family will stay intact. Drew does not understand this, again showing his disconnection from his kids and their circumstances. Sasha's comment, then, operates as a subtle threat that their relationship could end. The image of Drew hugging his younger self (who is struggling) seems to depict the trauma Drew is dealing with from his past.*



*Drew's request is an attempt to connect with his daughter after ruining the night. The pause of the desert reflects the tone of the night, one of emptiness but also the possibility of wholeness. Drew recognizes the damage he has caused, and desires to make it right, though Alison does not believe he will take action to do so.*



*The collapsing clubhouse speaks not only to the ruin within the family that evening, but also to the ruin humans have caused on the earth. A golf course in the desert requires a tremendous amount of resources to maintain, which has contributed to environmental destruction. Clearly Rob's memory is something that haunts both Drew and Sasha and remains a source of pain and tension between them.*



They arrive at a field of solar panels that stretches on for miles. They look evil to Alison, but she knows they are mending the earth. They were built years ago after protests, but their shade has made a lot of desert creatures homeless. Alison notes that the creatures can now live where the lawns and golf courses used to be. Alison returns to discussing Rob, and asks Drew if Rob's death was his fault. Drew says no, but tells her that the little girl he operated on the day before died. Suddenly, the solar panels begin to tilt all at the same time. Alison grabs onto her father and asks what is going on. Drew tells her they are collecting the moonlight.

They stand a long time, and Alison thinks she never wants to go back home, that she wants to stay there with her father forever. Alison asks if he has ever heard of a band called the Frames that have a **pause** of more than a minute in one of their songs. Drew says Sasha used to listen to them. He grows frustrated that Alison is paying attention to pauses like Lincoln, but when Alison asks him to admit that it is a long pause, he laughs and agrees. They begin walking, and Alison wishes she could curl up and close her eyes. They walk for what feels like several years, and Alison feels as if they won't make it, that she will never see her mother or brother again.

When the house comes into view, the windows are dark. Drew points out a snake on one of Sasha's sculptures. He lifts Alison onto his shoulder, and she thinks he is the strongest man in the world. The house looks abandoned to Alison. She asks if her mother and brother are inside, but her father doesn't answer. She feels suddenly afraid that the solar panels were a time machine, and she is now a grown woman returning after many years. Alison imagines her parents are gone, and realizes that living there together was so sweet, even though they fought.

Drew sets Alison down on the porch, and she runs inside. There is a light, and the familiar things inside feel to her like the softest, oldest blanket. She begins to cry. In bed, she listens to her father talk to Lincoln. Drew asks Lincoln if he hears anything. Lincoln says he doesn't, but Drew brings him to the window. He asks if the silence sounds familiar to him. A completely black slide appears next in the PowerPoint, and in the following slide, Lincoln tells his father that he understands. The final slides of the story depict a set of graphs that Drew and Lincoln made, illustrating different effects of pauses in rock and roll music.

*The solar panels provide hope for the earth, but their relationship to the earth is complicated, as they also make other creatures homeless. This idea speaks to the complex relationship between ruin and redemption, and the way in which they co-exist. The fact that Drew couldn't save the girl startles Alison—she wants to believe that her father has the power to save lives and redeem the family, but the failure with the young girl's surgery shows his limits.*



*Alison's desire to stay in the desert is related to the idea of pauses. If she can stay here (in this pause) she can hold onto the hope that her family will resolve their conflicts, but by returning she must face the fact that things might fall apart. It becomes clear that Drew feels left out of the family's musical interests, but Alison gives him the opportunity to connect through asking him to admit the pause is long. The attention to the passage of time in this moment shows Alison's concern with the future and the feeling that things are falling apart.*



*Alison feels afraid of the unknown inherent in the future, but her fear is then eased by the perspective she gets imagining what it would be like to look back from the future. This imagined perspective, and her new desire to treasure the memory of the present, is an echo of the way time often works in the novel itself, looking backward and forward in time and judging certain events in relation to the past or present.*



*The walk with her father and the moment of imagining the future gives Alison a new and more mature perspective on her family's situation. Despite the fact there is tension, she feels a newfound appreciation for her home and family, and for the present moment. Drew's interaction with Lincoln is then an attempt at connecting with his son through Lincoln's interest in pauses. The dark slide depicts the experience they share, and the final slides suggest that Drew and Lincoln have redeemed their relationship in some small but crucial way.*



## CHAPTER 13: PURE LANGUAGE

This story is set in the near future. Alex meets with Bennie to talk about a job promoting a concert. Their children play on the floor between them, and their wives, Rebecca and Lupa, are in the kitchen. Alex had heard about Bennie from Sasha a long time ago, though he doesn't remember Sasha's name. He remembers something about a wallet, but can't remember the details.

Alex feels some tension around taking the job, which revolves around social media marketing. The job he wanted was running a mixing board. Bennie's daughter, Ava, takes a plastic pot away from Alex's daughter, Cara-Ann. Alex gets up to go intervene, but notices Bennie doesn't move. He sits back down. Rebecca calls in, asking if everything is okay. Alex tells her everything is good.

Bennie understands that Alex wants to work with sound, but the problem with the industry is it is no longer concerned with sound. The music industry is all about "reach," which is a bitter pill Bennie has swallowed. Bennie was fired from his own label, Sow's Ear, after bringing cow dung to his board of directors, and stating that they are asking him to produce shit music. After that, Bennie had begun producing music with analog sound, but it never sold. He is seen as irrelevant in the industry now.

When Alex's daughter bites Bennie's daughter's shoulder, the women rush into the room. Alex reveals that he met Bennie through Bennie's much younger wife, Lupa. Lupa suggests Bennie play Scotty's record for Alex. He plays the record, and tells Alex Scotty's album is selling well with "the pointers," a term used to describe toddlers who are now able to download music just by pointing at their kiddie handsets, which resemble smartphones. In the near future in which this story is set, bands have had no choice but to market to preverbal children. Alex's daughter has never touched one of the handsets, and Alex and Rebecca have agreed not to let her until she is five.

*This story leaps forward in time, showing two characters presented in earlier stories. Both Bennie and Alex have changed in the years that have passed, but some things haven't changed completely, such as Bennie's involvement in the music industry. The fact that Alex doesn't remember Sasha speaks to time's corrosive nature on memory, and the way in which moments that feel meaningful at the time often lose their meaning.*



*This story too takes place in the near-future, and shows the impact of technology on the lives of Americans. Alex, like Bennie, is a purist when it comes to music, and he wants to interact with it directly by running the mixing board. The difference in Bennie and Alex's response to the daughters shows a distinction between their characters. Bennie is older and has another son (Christopher), but Alex is a new father.*



*In the near-future America featured in this story, the music industry is not concerned with the artistic credibility of the music, but on what music will sell—and through this Egan comments on the present nature of the music industry as well. The language around the industry has also shifted, showing how meaning associated with language has changed over time. Bennie, a true lover of art, sacrificed his career to fight against the degradation of the industry.*



*The information about Bennie's wife shows the ups and down Bennie has experienced in his life. Earlier, the novel depicts the ruin of his relationship with Stephanie, but looking forward now, he is remarried with a new family. His reconnection with Scotty also points to the idea of connection and redemption. The change in the music industry and in technology is shown in the marketing strategies to "the pointers." The industry is not interested in art, but in what will sell.*



Bennie closes his eyes as he listens to Scotty's album. He believes his sound is pure. Alex closes his own eyes and takes in the sound, which sounds like choppers, church bells, and a distant drill. He hears Cara-Ann cry as Rebecca pulls her sweater on to get her ready to go. Alex feels dread at the thought of leaving the meeting empty handed. He opens his eyes and finds Bennie staring at him. Bennie asks him if he hears what Bennie hears.

That night, Alex gets out of bed and goes into the living room. Outside the window, the Empire State Building stands tall. It had been a selling point when Rebecca's parents bought the apartment. They'd planned to sell it, but developers are now erecting a building that will block the view, lowering the value of the apartment. Alex lights a joint. He thinks about that afternoon, when he'd tried—and failed—to tell Rebecca what he'd agreed to do for Bennie. His job is to find people, who are pejoratively called "parrots," to spread the word about an upcoming concert to be played by Scotty.

Taking out his handset, Alex begins choosing people he might try to recruit for the job by three criteria: how much they need money, how connected and respected they are, and how they might use that respectability to recruit others to attend the concert. He finds that people who score high in two criteria, score low in the third. He realizes that Bennie had recruited *him*, though he is not sure exactly why it worked, since Alex considers himself a purist, like Bennie. He decides it doesn't matter, and chooses to find fifty people like him.

Alex meets with Lulu, who is Bennie's assistant. They are working together on the social media marketing campaign for Scotty's concert. Lulu is perusing a marketing degree, and Alex is surprised that she has to take physics instead of epidemiology. She explains that the "viral model" of marketing has gone out of style. Information now travels faster than the speed of light, so they study particle physics in marketing school. Lulu is what is called a "handset employee," who has no office and uses no paper, but is omnipresent through the use of her handset.

*At this point in his life, Bennie is able to act authentically and promote music he believes in. Alex, however, is distracted by his role as a father, and cares more about providing for his family than the quality of the music.*



*The changes of the city reflect the way in which time impacts the lives of the city's resident. In the novel's first story, Alex was new to New York, and optimistic, and the disappointment of the new building reflects the changes he has experienced in his outlook. Alex struggles with authenticity on two levels: he agrees to take the job that does not reflect his values, and he is unable to be honest with Rebecca about it. Likewise, his job is to exploit people, depicting a larger lack of authenticity and honesty in the music industry.*



*Alex's thought process shows the way in which technological innovation in marketing has disconnected people from their humanity and the humanity of others. Instead of thinking who might be right for the job, Alex considers others not as people, but by impersonal criteria. His realization that he was recruited in the way he wants to recruit others then suggests to his disconnection from himself.*



*Lulu appears earlier in the novel as Dolly's daughter in "Selling the General," and seeing her now, as a confident and intelligent young woman back in New York, depicts the impact her earlier experiences have had on her career choice. The shift in the marketing models shows the advancement in technology and the ways that individuals connect and work in the Egan's imagined future.*



Alex learns that Lulu has known Bennie since she was a child because her mother, Dolly, was a friend with Bennie's ex-wife, Stephanie. Their food arrives, and Bennie is careful not to wake Cara-Ann, who sleeps by his side. Lulu uses terms typically associated with sports to talk about their plan, and when Alex asks her about them, she says they are now marketing terms. They talk about the ways in which they will use manipulation to get their marketing team together. They talk about the ethics of the work, and whether it is okay to bribe people with money into promoting the show. Lulu challenges Alex's perception of what is ethical, and Alex feels like pushing back against Lulu's confidence, which seems to him the outcome of a happy childhood. He believes it is rooted in her youth.

Cara-Ann wakes up, and asks who Lulu is. Lulu asks if she can just "T" Alex, meaning can she send him a text message. She texts his phone, and he reads the strange texting idiom Lulu uses. She likes texting because it is straightforward—no philosophies, no metaphors, and no judgment. Cara-Ann points at the handset, and Alex tells her not to look. Before he can put the phone away, though, Lulu sends Cara-Ann a text picture of a lion, with a note that says she has a nice dad. Cara-Ann reaches out and begins touching the phone. Lulu texts Alex, saying that she never met her own dad. After receiving the text, Alex says he is sorry, but feels suddenly if he is talking too loud. He texts "sad", but Lulu texts, "Ancnt hstry", back to him.

Three weeks later, as Alex and Rebecca walk to the river, Cara-Ann points to Alex's pocket, asking for his phone. She's started calling it "lollipop." Rebecca asks Alex if he has a lollipop, and Alex says of course he doesn't. Alex has just met Rebecca outside of the library where she was studying, planning to finally tell her about his job with Bennie. They are hurrying to get to the river before sunset, which has been pushed back due to global warming. By the time they reach the river, the **sun** is hovering above the **water** wall, which has been constructed to combat rising water levels.

Rebecca sets Cara-Ann down, and Alex takes Rebecca's hand. He notes that lately he has not found her as attractive as he did in the past. She has begun looking like a fragile, harried academic. She is teaching and working on a book about the phenomenon of "word casings," a term she created for words that no longer have meaning outside of quotation marks, such as, "friend" and "real." Other words, like "identity" and "Cloud," have changed meaning because of their use on the web. Alex feels depressed when he thinks about his role in the relationship. He is an aging music freak who is struggling to make his way, and feels he is sapping the life from his wife.

*Lulu's language around marketing is unfamiliar to Alex, showing both how meaning changes over time older individuals are left behind as time and society moves forward. Likewise, the ethics of marketing has changed, and in this new technological world manipulation and a lack of authenticity are the norm. Lulu's confidence echoes her confidence in "Selling the General," though Alex misinterprets her upbringing, as Lulu had a difficult upbringing with a mother who spent time in prison. This speaks to the way outward markers like confidence do not necessarily reflect a person's identity or history.*



*The advancement of technology and the way people connect in the future is again depicted in this scene. Lulu likes sending text messages because she feels the meaning is straightforward and not weighed down by the complexity of oral communication. Alex's prejudice against technology is shown through his refusal to let Cara-Ann look at the phone, though the text exchange has a sudden impact on him, which is reflected in his self-consciousness about the volume of his voice. By engaging in the text exchange about her father, Alex gives in to the appeal of technology, and is able to connect with Lulu in an authentic way.*



*Cara-Ann's word for the phone, "lollipop," points to the instability and subjectivity of meaning—Alex knows what she is talking about, but Rebecca doesn't. Alex continues to struggle to be honest with Rebecca about the job. The presence of the sun and the rising water levels speak to the ruinous impact of human consumption on the earth.*



*Though holding hands seems like a gesture of connection, Alex's thoughts suggest a disconnection between Alex and Rebecca. Rebecca's research points to a major theme running through this story—the shift of meaning in language through time. Advancements in technology (and, arguably, the disconnection from meaning that accompanies them) have had a major impact on the meaning and sincerity of certain words. Alex's self-consciousness about the relationship illuminates why he has taken the job with Bennie. Though it conflicts with his identity and values, he feels as if he is a ruinous force in Rebecca's life and wants to find redemption through making something of himself in the job.*





As the **sun** sets, a hush encloses the crowd at the wall. Cara-Ann runs off, and Rebecca peruses in attempt to catch her. Alex, left alone for a moment, checks his phone, finding some texts from Lulu reporting people who have agreed to join their marketing campaign. When Cara-Ann returns, she cries “Lollipop!” Alex slips the phone in his pocket, and Cara-Ann tugs at his jeans. Rebecca realizes that the phone is what Cara-Ann is referring to when she says lollipop. She asks if Alex let her use it, and he says he did once. They argue, and Rebecca says she doesn’t understand why he changed the rules. Alex becomes paranoid, wondering what else she knows. He decides it is time to tell Rebecca about the job, but he feels paralyzed. He feels the desire to text her, instead of telling her outright.

*Despite the technological world in which these characters live, there is still a reverence for the beauty of nature, and a respect for the power of passing time. The argument about the phone speaks to an ongoing tension and disconnection between Alex and Rebecca around the issue of technology, arguably reflecting Egan’s own conflicted views on the subject. Because he has been able to connect with Lulu through texting, Alex feels he might connect with Rebecca the same way—technology has brought about a certain level of connection, but also a greater sense of distance.*



As they begin walking again, Alex remembers the night he met Rebecca. He had chased down a man in a wolf mask who stole her purse, and though he failed to get it back, he coaxed her into getting burritos and beers. Later, they had sex on the rooftop of her building. As he reminisces, he remembers Sasha’s name, and recalls the events of the night he spent with her, though he can’t remember if they had sex. Just then, Alex gets a text from Lulu, asking if he has heard that Bennie moved Scotty’s concert outdoors. This means that Alex will have to do more outreach so people will know where to go. He will receive no additional pay. They text back and forth about Scotty’s demands, and Alex realize that the text conversations move along smoothly. When they arrive home, Alex texts Lulu about the building going up beside his. She asks if he can stop it. He says has tried, but failed. He asks if he can move, and she texts back, “nyc”. He thinks she means ‘nice’, but she really means, ‘New York City’.

*The memory of the night he met Rebecca echoes the novel’s first story, “Found Objects,” and speaks to a time in Alex’s life when he was more authentic and true to his values (though also naive and idealistic). He remembers Sasha’s name because of the relationship between the two events, but does not recall the moment of intimate connection they shared, again showing to the fallibility of memory. When Alex is texting Lulu, he seems to realize that texting is a valid and effective way of connecting with others, though the miscommunication pointed out by the narrator suggests another misunderstanding, and this way of connecting is not without its faults.*



The day of the concert is unseasonably warm. The trees, which bloomed in January, are full of leaves. Alex had debated how to tell Rebecca about the concert, but she had brought it up, saying it might be a chance for Alex to reconnect with Bennie. He writhes at the fact that he still hasn’t told her about the job.

*The presence of blooming New York City trees in January shows the extent of ruin caused by climate change in the story. The fact that Alex has still not told Rebecca about his job also speaks to the severity of their disconnection and inability to be authentic with one another.*



On the way to the concert, they run into Alex’s friend Zeus and his girlfriend. Zeus and his girlfriend say that they have heard Scotty is really good, and Alex wonders if they have been recruited for the marketing project. Rebecca says that, strangely, she has heard the same thing from eight different people. Zeus’s girlfriend says it’s not strange, that people are getting paid to talk about it, but Rebecca notes that they were people she knew. After the exchange, Alex notes that he feels invisible.

*The fact that Alex doesn’t know who is working for him and who isn’t emphasizes the lack of human connection in his work. Likewise, Rebecca’s response that she knew the people who told her about the show speaks to a similar kind of disconnection.*



On the way to the outdoor venue, Alex and Rebecca have nine or ten similar exchanges with different people. Alex struggles to believe that his work has been so successful. He feels like a genius, but begins to worry that Scotty might not be as good as everyone is saying. Rebecca, noticing that Alex seems nervous, asks if he is okay. He says he is fine. Rebecca notes that he is squeezing her hand, but she enjoys it.

When they reach the venue, there are helicopters overhead. Alex has gotten used to these forms of security, but today it seems strange to him. Around him, he notices a sea of babies and children. He notes that if there are children there must be a future. The new buildings shine on the horizon, more like sculptures than buildings, because they are empty. In front of the venue, there is a heavy police presence, and there are security cameras attached to lampposts and trees. Rebecca tells Alex that she loves him, and Alex tells her not to say it like something bad is about to happen. Rebecca says she is nervous, but Alex tells her it is just the helicopters.

Alex leaves Rebecca and Cara-Ann in the crowd after receiving a text message from Lulu that Bennie needs help. Alex goes to Scotty's trailer, and finds Bennie and an old roadie inside. There is no sign of Scotty. Again, Alex feels invisible. Bennie tells the roadie that he can do it, but the man seems frantically unsure of himself. Bennie tells Alex to stand by the door. As Alex watches Bennie talk to the man, he suddenly realizes that the man is Scotty Hausman. Scotty says he is too old to play, that he can't go out there. Alex understands that Scotty Hausman does not exist. Scotty is a "word casing" in human form, a shell whose essence has vanished. Bennie continues to encourage Scotty, telling him that "time is a goon," and he shouldn't let that goon push him around. Scotty feels the goon has won.

Bennie takes a long breath and reminds Scotty about the time he came to his office twenty-some-odd years ago and brought him a fish. After Bennie lost his job and Stephanie divorced him, he searched out Scotty. He asks Scotty what he told him, and Scotty says Bennie told him it was time to become a star. Scotty had dared him to do it. There is a long **pause**, and then Scotty jumps to his feet and lunges for the door, trying to escape. Scotty grapples with Alex, eventually swinging at Alex. He hits the door, and then knees Alex in the groin. He throws the door open and begins to leave, but is stopped by Lulu.

*Despite his feeling of invisibility, Alex feels proud of his work, though he questions the authenticity of the message he has been spreading. Rebecca sees Alex's tight grip her hand as a source of connection, while Alex is anything but connected to her in this moment.*



*Security has become heightened in post-9/11 NYC, hinting at a constant threat of destruction and a more complete surveillance state. Alex's recent leap into new uses of technology has caused him to begin contemplating its ruinous consequences, but he tries to find hope in future generations. His engagement in the music industry also raises questions about the meaning of art. By comparing the empty buildings to sculptures, Alex speaks to the emptiness of most art in his society.*



*Alex's misinterpretation of Scotty (believing he is a roadie) again shows the disconnection between image and identity, as does Alex's impression of Scotty as an individual whose "essence" is gone—for this impression is counteracted later in the story. Bennie and Scotty both acknowledge the ruinous force of time, again bringing up the titular "goon." Scotty understands that popular culture worships youth and thus believes he is beyond redemption. Bennie, however, has known both ruin and redemption in his life, and believes Scotty should resist while he can.*



*Through the loss of his family and ruin of his career, Bennie has become a more authentic individual, which allowed him to reconnect with Scotty in a deeper way than he was able twenty years prior. He believes Scotty is worthy of redemption, and has worked hard to reach this point with him. The pause embodies everything they have been through to arrive at this place. Scotty, however, is unable to overcome his fear and attempts to escape.*



Lulu stands before Scotty, the sun reflecting in her hair. Scotty hesitates, and Alex realizes that Scotty has lost the fight. Lulu offers to walk him to the stage, and he asks to take her arm. In that moment, Alex sees a sexy and rakish version of Scotty shine through. After they walk toward the stage, Bennie says Lulu will run the world some day. On stage, Scotty begins to play children songs, and the sound of his music drowns out the helicopters. Alex expects the crowd to reject Scotty, but the children cheer, and their parents become intrigued by the song's double meanings.

As Alex watches, he is stunned by the response. He wonders if a crowd at a particular moment in history creates the meaning of the event, like Monterey Pop or Woodstock. Maybe, he thinks, the response is just because two generations of war and surveillance have caused people to peg Scotty as the embodiment of their own unease. The crowd is bowled over when Scotty stands up, releasing something strong, charismatic, and fierce. Later, people will say this is when the concert really started. He begins playing songs nobody has ever heard, ballads of paranoia and disconnection that come from the heart of a man who had never had an online profile, a handle, or a handset. The music is pure. Later, the show will go down in history, and later everyone will claim they were there, even if they weren't. Scotty will become a mythic figure.

As Alex watches with Bennie, he wishes he were with Rebecca and Cara-Ann. He locates Rebecca with his handset, but he can't see her. Eventually, he uses a zoom feature on his phone to find her. They are too far away for him to reach her, but he texts her, calling her his beautiful wife, and asking her to wait for him. He watches until the vibration of the phone registers in her pocket.

After the concert, Bennie is elated, and says that this kind of event only happens once in a person's life. Alex notes that after the concert, Rebecca kept asking him to see about a job with Bennie. Well after midnight now, Bennie and Alex walk together to the Lower East Side. Alex feels depressed, but hides it from Bennie. Alex asks Bennie if he ever had an employee named Sasha. Bennie says he did, and that Sasha used to live close by. Alex asks what she was like, and Bennie says she was great, but she stole from him so he had to fire her. Alex feels a connection form in his mind, but he can't see it clearly.

*Lulu's youth is highlighted in this moment and becomes a source of power for her. Through his connection with Lulu, Scotty is able to face his fear, and Alex sees Lulu's youthful power bring out a different side of Scotty's identity. In the presence of Scotty's art, the sound of the helicopters fades, which speaks to the timeless redemptive power of art. Scotty's music has the power to connect with both parents and children because it provides meaning for both groups.*



*The intense sense of connection among the crowd while Scotty plays leads Alex to contemplate the nature of these kinds of shared experiences and question how meaning is created. Again, Scotty's outward appearance is misleading, which leads to surprise when he stands and begins playing his music, revealing his true identity. Scotty's age and lack of presence on social media also speaks to the power of pure art over pop culture fads. The fact that the show goes down in history and people will lie about being present proves this idea is true, while also subtly reflecting Dolly's past party disaster earlier in the book. In light of everything that Scotty has been through in the novel, this moment is immensely redemptive.*



*Alex here uses his cellphone to find Rebecca, showing the potential connective power of technology. Throughout the story he has hidden his texting from Rebecca, but in this moment he acts authentically, and communicates with her without fear.*



*The concert was not only redemptive for Scotty, but also for Bennie. In light of all of the ruin in his life and career, he has finally accomplished something that will go down in history. Alex, however, does not share in Bennie's elation because he still has not been able to be honest with Rebecca about his job. Alex almost grasps a more complete memory of Sasha, but it remains just out of reach for now.*



They turn a corner, and Bennie says that Sasha's apartment was right there. Alex feels a flash of recognition and a shiver of déjà vu, as if he is returning to a place that no longer exists. Bennie remembers Sasha lived in apartment F4, and they ring the buzzer. Alex gains more clarity around his memory of the night he went to Sasha's apartment, remembering the bathtub in the kitchen. Alex imagines himself walking into the apartment and finding his younger self there, still full of schemes and high standards. Nobody answers, and Bennie says he hopes that Sasha has a good life, because she deserves it.

Bennie and Alex begin walking again and Alex says he doesn't know what has happened to him. Bennie says Alex grew up, just like everyone else. Alex thinks in the text idiom Lulu uses: th blu nyt, th stRs u cant c, th hum tht nevr gOs awy, which translates to: the blue night, the stars you can't see, the hum that never goes away. Just then, they see a woman approaching. For a moment they hope it is Sasha, but it is another girl, young and new to the city, fiddling with her keys.

*The sight of the building triggers Alex's memory, and for a moment he is transported back to a time in his life when he was younger, when he was more ambitious and stood by his values. Through this memory, he confronts the person he has become. Bennie has also lost connection with Sasha, but his comment suggests a change in his character. In earlier stories he objectifies Sasha and uses her as a gage for his sexual potency, but his hope that she has a good life suggests he recognizes her humanity. Sasha is arguably the protagonist of the novel, and the fact that the book ends with two characters thinking about their connections to her while she is absent is ironically fitting, considering Egan's main themes.*



*Alex confronts that he has changed, but can't understand what happened. Bennie, who is older and more experienced, understands time and age have changed him. Alex's poetic thoughts offer an inverse of the novel's symbols of the sun and pauses. The night is absent of sunlight and the stars are not visible, which reflect Alex's lack of attention to time, but the hum reflects the idea that time is always passing, whether one pays attention to it or not. Their hope that the girl is Sasha speaks to their desire to reconnect with the past, but the fact that it is a young woman who is new to the city suggests the past is unattainable—that time is always moving forward, and past moments of connection or authenticity must remain forever behind them.*





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