

I Am the Messenger



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARKUS ZUSAK

Markus Zusak was born in Sydney in 1975 to German and Austrian immigrant parents. He studied English and History at the University of New South Wales and worked as a high school teacher before gaining international success for his novels. He began writing as a teenager, and his first novel, *The Underdog*, was published in 1999. He wrote two sequels to his first novel before garnering greater mainstream success for his Young Adult novel *I Am the Messenger* in 2002. In 2006, he published his most successful book, *The Book Thief*, which received international acclaim and was later adapted into the film by the same name. Zusak currently lives and writes in Sydney, Australia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the early 1990s, Australia experienced its greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression, resulting in 11.4% unemployment and a general discontentment and loss of financial confidence among Australians. The 1990s also saw a major change in Australia's population demographics, with nearly 1 in 4 Australians coming from overseas. These dynamics of change and deprivation are reflected in the plot of *I Am the Messenger*, with many of the people Ed Kennedy helps living in poverty or dealing with related economic and social stresses. Indeed, Ed himself is from a poor neighborhood where many people struggle to find jobs and drug use, violence, and family instability are common.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Markus Zusak's most successful work is *The Book Thief*, another Young Adult novel, though that book is set in Germany during World War II. Zusak has said that one of his favorite novels, and an important influence on his writing style, is *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller. Additionally, one of the missions in *I Am the Messenger* is connected to the book *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, which concerns a young woman struggling with mental illness.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *I Am the Messenger* (originally published in Australia as *The Messenger*)
- **When Written:** 1999-2002
- **Where Written:** Sydney, Australia
- **When Published:** 2002
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary

- **Genre:** Young Adult Fiction
- **Setting:** Suburban Australia
- **Climax:** Ed realizes a stranger has been dictating his entire life for the past year.
- **Antagonist:** The Man with the Cards, Ordinairness
- **Point of View:** First-person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

The Parking Spot. Zusak first had the idea to write *I Am the Messenger* when he noticed a 15-minute parking spot outside a bank. He wondered what would happen if someone was parked in that spot during a bank robbery, thus leading him to write the first scene in the novel, in which this happens to the characters.

Good Dog. The main character's smelly mutt is based on an actual Rottweiler/German Shepherd mutt Zusak knew. However, Zusak has said that the real-life dog only "stank about a quarter as much" as its fictional counterpart.



PLOT SUMMARY

Ed Kennedy, a 19-year-old cab driver convinced of his own mediocrity, is caught in a bank robbery. For reasons he does not understand, he grabs the bank robber's gun and prevents the robber's escape. The media briefly hails Ed as a hero, but the excitement quickly dies down and Ed returns to his ordinary life of driving a cab, hanging out with his coffee-drinking mutt, and playing **cards** with his friends, Marv, Ritchie, and Audrey. But one night, Ed receives a mysterious envelope in the mail which contains an Ace of Diamonds with three addresses written on it.

Uncertain of the sender of the card, Ed decides to go to the first address listed on it. At that address, he witnesses a drunk man sexually assaulting his wife. Ed realizes the card wants him to help the wife and her daughter, but he feels unequipped to face the large, abusive man. So, he decides to move on to the next address. At the second house, Ed meets Milla, a lonely elderly woman with Alzheimer's disease who believes Ed is her late husband. Ed helps her by spending time with her. Then, he progresses to the third address and sees a teenage girl running barefoot in preparation for track meets. He learns her name is Sophie and that she lacks confidence and always loses her races. Ed gives her an empty shoe box and although Sophie still doesn't win her races, she now has confidence in her abilities. Finally, Ed returns to the first address, but he still does not know how he will stop the abusive man. One day, a gun appears in Ed's mailbox, so Ed uses it to threaten the man until he

promises to never hurt his wife again.

Having helped all the people on the card, Ed returns home to find two masked men waiting for him. The men, who are named Keith and Daryl, beat Ed up and take the gun, before giving Ed a letter and the Ace of Clubs. Afterward, Ed confesses his attraction to Audrey, but she only wants to be his friend. The Ace of Clubs contains a clue which, along with a strange passenger in Ed's cab, leads Ed to three names written on a stone in the local river. The first name belongs to a selfless priest whom Ed helps boost attendance at his church by throwing a big party. The second name is a single mom who dedicates her life to her children. Ed helps her by buying her an ice cream cone, because he believes she deserves to be taken care of as well. The final name leads Ed to a teenage delinquent named Gavin, who frequently brawls with his older brother, Daniel. Ed beats up Gavin himself because he believes an outside enemy will unite the brothers. After Gavin and Daniel work together to beat up Ed as revenge, Ed knows he has completed the Ace of Clubs.

Ed receives the next card at the local amateur football game. This card, the Ace of Spades, has the names of three authors written on it. Before Ed can look up the names, he tries to kiss Audrey, but she rejects him once again. Ed returns to the card and discovers that each author has a book that corresponds with a street name in his town. On the first street, Ed helps a poor but loving family enjoy a moment of beauty after buying them new Christmas lights to hang up on their house. At the next street name, Ed sees his own mother on a date with a man. Ed confronts his mother, because his dad died only the year before and his mom generally treats Ed with hostility, and his mother reveals that she hates Ed because he is an underachiever like his father. After reconciling with his mother, Ed goes to the third street, which contains an old theater operated by an elderly man named Bernie. Ed decides he can help Bernie by seeing a movie at the theater with Audrey. However, while Ed and Audrey are watching the movie, the screen suddenly plays video of Ed helping the people on the cards. Ed finds the Ace of Hearts left behind in the theater.

The Ace of Hearts has three movie titles written on it, which lead to Ed's three friends. First, Ed motivates his lazy friend Ritchie to begin looking for a job so that he may find a purpose in life. Then, Ed helps his irritable friend Marv reunite with the girl he has always loved and the child they share. Lastly, Ed slow dances with Audrey, who fears emotional intimacy, to encourage her to allow herself to love him back.

Though Ed excitedly believes he has finished the entire mission of the cards, he receives a Joker with his own address written on it. In disbelief, he goes through the normal routine of his life, until one day a man gets into his cab and instructs Ed to drive to each address listed on the cards so far. Ed realizes the man is the bank robber from the beginning of the story, and then the man directs Ed to go home. Ed enters his house and finds a

stranger sitting on his couch. The young man explains that he sent Ed the cards in order to prove that if someone as average as Ed can commit extraordinary acts of kindness for others, then truly anyone can. The man hands Ed a folder detailing every action Ed has taken since the beginning of his plan and then leaves. Ed agonizes over the implications of the man's influence on his life, until Audrey comes over and she and Ed kiss. Ed realizes the kiss is not written in the folder. Then he realizes the man was not using him to help others, but instead was using Ed as a message to inspire everyone to reach beyond their own expectations of themselves to bring good into the world.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ed Kennedy – Ed Kennedy is the protagonist of the novel. He is a 19-year-old cab driver in a suburban Australian town. He lives alone in a rundown house with his dog and has strained relationships with both his family and his friends. His main hobbies are playing **cards**, reading, and walking around town. At the beginning of the novel, Ed views himself as a mediocre failure because he has not achieved anything extraordinary in his life. He has a generally pessimistic view toward both his own potential and the world around him and believes circumstance has doomed him to always been ordinary. He is also hopelessly in love with his friend Audrey, and generally feels as unsuccessful in his romantic life as he does in his career prospects. However, after Ed receives playing cards from a mysterious source, he gradually develops into a person driven to reach his full potential by helping others. Ed's transformation shows how one can find meaning in life through the higher purpose of helping others, rather than traditional markers of success related to careers and romance. Ed's relationship to his town also changes, as helping others causes him to see the beauty and caring already present in his community. At the end of the novel, the man who sends Ed the cards reveals that Ed's actions throughout the novel prove that even the most ordinary of people can commit extraordinary acts in order to help others. In the final chapter of the novel, Ed realizes he must move on with his life without the man and his cards. Ultimately, he comes to believe that although circumstance has shaped his life, it's up to him to choose how to react to these circumstances.

The Man with the Cards – The man with the cards is the stranger who sends Ed a series of **playing cards** with names of those in need. His goal, the reader learns at the end of the novel, is to use Ed's example to prove that anyone, no matter how ordinary, may reach their full potential in order to help others. Not only does the man send the cards, he also tells Ed that he organized the failed bank robbery at the beginning of the novel, instructed the Edgar Street man to abuse his wife,

and killed Ed's father, showing the depth of his power over the events of Ed's life. He writes all of these events down in a **folder** which he gives to Ed at the end of the novel. The man is unnamed, leaving his identity open to interpretation. One could interpret him as God, given the seemingly omnipotent and omniscient influence he exerts over Ed's life. One could also view the man as the author of the novel himself, because the man dictates Ed's life in order to prove a point, just as an author writes characters to do the same. Either way, the man represents the powerful outside forces that influence an individual's life by challenging them beyond their perceived potential. At the end of the novel, the man tells Ed that Ed must now live his life on his own and then walks away from Ed's house while writing in a notebook, symbolizing the withdrawal of this outside influence on Ed's life. The man's departure shows how circumstance controls an individual's life up until a point, but after that an individual must make their own decisions.

Marv – Marv is Ed's friend from childhood. At the beginning of the novel, Ed characterizes Marv as argumentative and stingy. All Marv appears to care about are his savings account, his old rundown car, and the local amateur football game. However, when the **Ace of Hearts** directs Ed to help Marv, Ed learns that Marv actually saves money to give to his child, whom he has never met. When they were teenagers, Marv got his girlfriend, Suzanne, pregnant and her family moved away. Ed helps Marv reunite with Suzanne and their daughter, Melinda. Afterward, Marv is incredibly grateful and becomes much more generous with Ed and their other friends.

Audrey – Audrey is Ed's friend and his love interest. She is an underaged cab driver like Ed. She does not allow herself to love anyone because her family was abusive to her as a child. As a result, she only has sex with men she does not care about, like her boyfriend, Simon, and will not sleep with those she does care about, like Ed. She becomes uncomfortable when Ed begins to change as a result of his mission to help others. Her reactions show how finding a purpose in life, like Ed does in the novel, can require the sacrifice of one's casual relationships with others. As directed by **the Ace of Hearts**, Ed helps Audrey by helping her allow herself to feel her love for him for just three minutes. At the end of the novel, Audrey comes to Ed's home and asks to move in with him, showing that she has learned to allow herself to be vulnerable enough to openly care about and depend upon another person.

Dave "Ritchie" Sanchez – Ritchie is Ed's friend. Ed nicknamed him "Ritchie" because he has a tattoo of Jimi Hendrix that's so poorly drawn, it looks like Richard Pryor. At the beginning of the novel, Ed characterizes Ritchie as lazy and easygoing. Ritchie has no job and spends his days at the pub and the gambling hall. However, Ed eventually realizes that Ritchie is deeply troubled by his lack of direction and desperately wishes to discover his purpose in life. With Ed's support, Ritchie begins

to search for a job, showing the importance of searching for purpose in life so as not to waste one's potential.

Daryl – Daryl is a hitman whom the man with the cards sends to challenge Ed at different points in Ed's mission. However, Daryl does not know the identity of the man with the **cards** and just does what the man pays him to do. He is the partner of Keith. Ed first meets Daryl and Keith when they assault him inside his home at the beginning of the novel. Both Daryl and Keith are argumentative with each other and with Ed. Daryl's role in the mission shows the far-reaching power of the man with the cards.

Keith – Along with Daryl, Keith is a hitman whom the man with the cards sends to challenge Ed at different points in Ed's mission. Keith does not know who the man with the **cards** is; he just does what the man tells him to do. Ed first meets Daryl and Keith when they assault him inside his home at the beginning of the novel. Both Daryl and Keith are argumentative with each other and with Ed. Keith's role in the mission shows how powerful the man with the cards is.

The Young Man in Black – The young man in black is another person the man with the cards sends to guide Ed in his mission. This unnamed character dresses in all black and has yellow-colored eyes. The character is generally hostile and impatient whenever he encounters Ed. He helps Ed find the "stones of home" on the **Ace of Clubs** and helps Ed run into Ma while he works on the Ace of Spades. He shows that Ed is not the only character whose life is controlled by the man with the cards, though Ed never finds out exactly how this character fits into the plans of the man with the cards.

Beverly "Ma" Kennedy – Ma is Ed's mother. She swears constantly, especially in her frequent tirades against Ed. Over the course of the story, she reveals that she is so hostile toward Ed because she is disappointed in him for being the only one of her children never to leave their hopeless hometown. Ed realizes Ma also hates herself for never leaving, and by the end of the novel Ma and Ed have a deeper understanding of each other. She represents the view that an individual is completely controlled by their circumstances and that if they want to improve themselves, they must first totally change their environment. Ed, however, disagrees with this view and comes to a more nuanced perspective over the course of the novel.

Gregor Kennedy – Gregor is Ed's father, who passes away six months before the beginning of the events of the novel. He is a furniture salesman who dies of liver failure alone in his own moving van. Ed describes his father as kind and gentle but also lazy and alcoholic. While he is alive, Beverly, his wife, yells at him constantly for being drunk and for not providing a better life for their family. Gregor serves as an example of an individual who died without a purpose in life and without living up to his full potential, an example which Ed wants to avoid. At the end of the novel, the man with the cards reveals that he

orchestrated Gregor's death as part of his plan to control Ed's life.

The Edgar Street Man – The Edgar Street man lives at the first address on the first **card** Ed receives. This man often comes home drunk late at night and rapes his wife, while their daughter, Angelina, cries on the front porch. Ed takes him as an example of the uncaring nature of the world. He is large in stature and violent in temperament. Ed wants to stop him from hurting his family but feels weak compared to him. Ed eventually threatens the man with a gun until the man promises to never hurt his wife again. Afterward, the man leaves town, never to return.

The Edgar Street Woman – The Edgar Street woman is the wife of the Edgar Street man and the mother of Angelina. She lives at the first address on the first **card** Ed receives. Ed witnesses her being raped by her husband on several different nights. She lives in constant fear and sadness but continues to survive and take care of her daughter. After Ed threatens and scares away her husband, the woman and her daughter live peacefully in their home.

Angelina – Angelina is the young daughter of the Edgar Street man and woman. She sits on the front porch of her home and cries while her father repeatedly rapes her mother. Ed speaks to her when he tries and fails to enter the house. She expects him to save them but does not react when he initially fails. After Ed threatens and scares away her father, Angelina and her mother live peacefully in their home.

Milla Johnson – Milla Johnson is the elderly woman who lives at the second address written on the **Ace of Diamonds**. She suffers from memory loss and confuses Ed with her late husband, Jimmy, who died in World War II. Ed immediately recognizes that she is very kind and very lonely. Ed helps her by pretending to be her husband and reading to her. Ed feels blessed to be able to spend time with her because she is so kind, showing how when he helps others, his own life improves as well.

Sophie – Sophie is the teenage girl who lives at the third address on the **Ace of Diamonds**. She lives in the wealthy part of town and runs barefoot every morning to prepare for her track meets. Ed views her as beautiful and pure. Sophie is shy, especially when speaking to boys. At the beginning of the novel, she always loses her races and feels disappointed in herself. Ed gives her confidence by gifting her an empty shoe box to symbolize how she should run her races barefoot and have more confidence in herself. She still loses her race but feels better about her own abilities. Sophie sees Ed as a saint, even though he does not agree with this characterization. She represents an individual who finds meaning not from outside success but from within themselves.

Father Thomas O'Reilly – Father O'Reilly is the first name written on the "stones of home." He is a priest who lives in the

poorest part of town so he can minister to those who need him most. Unlike Ed's perception of what a priest should be, O'Reilly swears and does not try to evangelize to Ed. O'Reilly has an estranged relationship with his brother, Tony. He is also disheartened by the lack of attendance at his church, so Ed helps him by organizing a large community event at the church one Sunday. O'Reilly is incredibly touched to see the attendance at his church and even shares a moment with his brother on that day. He calls Ed a saint and continues to offer Ed moral support on his mission. O'Reilly is an example of a person who spends his whole life caring for others, and yet still needs others to help him as well.

Angie Carusso – Angie Carusso is the second name written on the "stones of home." She works as a pharmacist and is a single mother to three young kids. Ed observes her dedicating her days to her children and buying them ice cream every time she receives a paycheck. He helps her by buying her an ice cream because she always takes care of her children and not herself. She admits to him that although she loves her children, she is exhausted by the task of raising them alone. Later, Angie buys Ed an ice cream cone for Christmas and assures him that she is doing okay. She represents an individual who makes great sacrifices in order to care for others, and she also shows how those who give away so much of themselves deserve help from others in return.

Gavin Rose – Gavin Rose is the third name written on the "stones of home." He is a teenage delinquent who frequently physically fights with his older brother, Daniel. Ed helps Gavin by beating him up, so that Daniel and Gavin may unite as brothers in order to face an outside enemy. Ed succeeds, as Daniel and Gavin team up to assault Ed as revenge. Gavin represents how adversity can help individuals unite in care for each other.

Daniel Rose – Daniel Rose is Gavin's older brother. Ed sees Daniel beat Gavin up on their front lawn one night. When Ed assaults Gavin, Daniel comes to his younger brother's rescue and later helps him exact revenge, just as Ed intended. With Gain, Daniel demonstrates how shared adversity can be a source of unity.

Lua Tatupu – Lua Tatupu is the first person Ed helps for the **Ace of Spades**. Lua's family is Polynesian and lives in the poor part of town. Physically, he is very large and strong. Lua is very affectionate and loving to his wife, Marie, and their five children, including Jessie. These traits contrast with the brutality of characters such as the Edgar Street man and show both Ed and the reader that extraordinarily loving individuals exist everywhere, regardless of circumstance. Lua is incredibly moved when Ed gifts his family new Christmas lights because no one else in the neighborhood has ever helped the family, showing how one small act of kindness can deeply impact an individual.

Marie Tatupu – Marie Tatupu is the wife of Lua and the mother of Jessie and his four siblings. She is immediately welcoming and generous toward Ed even though he is a stranger to her. When she and Lua kiss in front of the Christmas lights, Ed finds the love between them to be beautiful, showing how helping others allows one to see the beauty within their own community.

Bernie Price – Bernie Price is the third person Ed helps for the **Ace of Spades**. He is an elderly man who owns an old theater that shows classic movies. He rarely has customers and frequently sleeps while working. He bought the theater because he used to love going to the movies on dates. Ed helps him by allowing Bernie to relive a part of his youth by seeing Ed and Audrey watch a movie together. It is in Bernie's theater that Ed sees the film of his own actions, which helps him realize the extent to which the man with the cards is involved in his life.

The Bank Robber – The bank robber holds up the bank with Ed and his friends in it at the beginning of the novel. He has red hair and, according to Ed, is extremely ugly. Ed commits a seemingly heroic act by stopping the bank robber from escaping, and the robber is sentenced to six months in jail. He threatens Ed by saying that he is a “dead man.” At the end of the novel, the robber gets into Ed's cab as a customer and instructs him to drive past all the addresses Ed visited in his mission. This reveals that every event in the novel, including the failed bank robbery, was orchestrated by the man with the cards. The bank robber says being arrested and going to jail was worth it because the mission has completely changed Ed's life for the better.

Tony O'Reilly – Tony O'Reilly is the brother of Father Thomas O'Reilly. Tony lives in the wealthy part of town and has two sons. He is estranged from his brother for reasons he does not explain but that are linked to their disagreements about wealth and greed. However, at Ed's invitation, Tony attends the big community event at Father O'Reilly's church and the men share a brief moment at the end of the day, offering hope for their relationship in the future.

Suzanne Boyd – Suzanne Boyd is Marv's ex-girlfriend and the mother of his child, Melinda. She used to sneak out of her house in the poor part of town to be with Marv, but when she became pregnant, her strict father demanded that their family move away and that she never see Marv again. Suzanne hates herself for obeying her father and leaving Marv, but later she makes the courageous choice to defy her father and unite Marv with Melinda. This shows that while one may not be able to control or undo their past mistakes, they can nonetheless decide to make the moral choice in the present.

Henry Boyd – Henry Boyd is Suzanne's father and Melinda's grandfather. He is strict and has an explosive temper. When Marv attempts to meet Melinda, Henry assaults him. Both Ed and Marv demonstrate their courage by standing up to Henry.

Ed can recognize that despite Henry's faults, he is also suffering, which reveals the empathy Ed has developed throughout the novel. Suzanne eventually runs away from Henry, taking Melinda with her.

Tommy Kennedy – Tommy is Ed's younger brother. Since they were children, Tommy has seemingly been better than Ed at every activity they undertake. Tommy lives in the city and is studying to become a lawyer. He has an attractive girlfriend named Ingrid. Tommy serves as an example of someone who has achieved traditional success in both his romantic life and his career, success which at the beginning of the novel Ed feels inadequate for not having.

Sophie's Dad – Sophie's father attends her track meets and watches from the sidelines as she runs. He does not yell and scream at her as she runs like other parents do. He tells her before the race that she can win if she wants to strongly enough. Sophie's father represents the view that one can succeed by force of will alone, regardless of circumstance.

Alice Misha – Alice is a sex worker whom Ed picks up in his cab one night. She is kind to him and tells him to not worry so much. Later, Ed imagines having sex with Alice, showing his longing for intimacy and connection. – Misha is the teller in the bank where Ed stops a robbery. Ed runs into her later in the novel at the bakery where she now works; she had to quit her old job because her boss was sexually harassing her.

Leigh – Leigh is Ed's older sister. She moved out on her own, unlike Katherine, but now is married and has children as well. She also lives in the city. Like Katherine, her success in having a family and moving to the city contrasts with Ed's lonely single life in their hometown.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Doorman – The Doorman is Ed's dog. He is a smelly, 17-year-old mutt who used to belong to Gregor Kennedy. Ed personifies the Doorman and often imagines dialogues between himself and the dog, revealing Ed's lack of close human relationships. The Doorman enjoys drinking coffee and going on walks with Ed.

Katherine – Katherine is Ed's eldest sister. She got pregnant as a teenager, a common occurrence in their community, and got married and moved to the city. Her success in having a family and moving to the city contrasts with Ed's lonely single life in their hometown.

Jessie Tatupu – Jessie is Lua and Marie's youngest child. He is the one who tells Ed about the Tatupu's family tradition of hanging up Christmas lights.

Ma's Date – Ma's date is an older man whom Ed's mother eats dinner with at the restaurant on Clown Street. He is well dressed and acts like a gentleman.

Melinda Boyd – Melinda Boyd is Suzanne and Marv's three-

year-old daughter. Marv meets her at the end of the novel.

Ingrid – Ingrid is Tommy’s girlfriend. She is very attractive.

Simon – Simon is Audrey’s boyfriend. She has sex with him but does not love him. Simon senses this and is even jealous of Ed because, though Audrey won’t sleep with Ed, it’s clear that she loves him.

Joe, Graeme, and Joshua – Joe, Graeme, and Joshua are the thugs who hang out on Father O’Reilly’s street and hassle passersby like Ed. Father O’Reilly shows his compassion by befriending these men.

Merv – Merv is the team captain of Ed’s amateur soccer team.

Jay – Jay is the young boy who Ed asks to watch the Doorman. The young woman gives Jay the **Ace of Spades** to give to Ed.

Reggie – Reggie is the referee of the amateur soccer game. He is perpetually drunk.

The Young Woman – The unnamed young woman gives Jay the **Ace of Spades** for Ed and then disappears into the crowd at the amateur soccer game.

The Librarian – The librarian is a young man who works at the library where Ed goes to research the **Ace of Spades**. His attitude toward Ed is generally belittling and facetious.

Ed up to live a mediocre life. No matter how much Ed wishes he could change his life, he cannot seem to succeed. Ed describes his town as a “suburban outpost” where he grew up in an impoverished neighborhood. Part of his explanation for his unsuccessful life is that very few people who grow up in his neighborhood actually succeed. This shows how, at the beginning of the novel, Ed believes that the circumstances of one’s birth dictate their adult life. Ed also attributes his current unfulfilling job to his inherent laziness in school and his alcoholic father’s waste of the family money. Ed sees these factors as beyond his control, allowing him to wallow in misfortune rather than taking action. When Ed encounters a problem, such as the bank robbery he gets caught up in at the beginning of the novel, he laments the series of circumstances that led him into this mess. This reveals Ed’s perspective that his life is miserable because he can’t control the unfortunate events that happen to him.

Ed’s fate appears to turn around when **playing cards** with instructions begin arriving in the mail. Now, Ed’s life is still dictated by forces beyond his control, but he begins to view this as a positive change in his life. The motif of the playing cards symbolizes the role of fate in Ed’s life, because in both Ed’s life and in card games, one does not get to choose the cards, or circumstances, they are dealt. The playing cards direct Ed to help strangers he would otherwise never meet, such as a senile old woman, Milla, who believes Ed is her dead husband. While Ed helps the strangers (comforting Milla by reading to her, for example) he feels his perspective on himself beginning to improve. He begins to see himself as privileged by the opportunity to meet people like Milla, showing how the imposition of the cards upon his life actually creates a positive change for his character. After Ed successfully helps several strangers, his mother tells him that both she and Ed are doomed because they never left their dead-end town, but Ed argues that they would be the same people no matter where they lived. He says he wants to try to improve himself within the circumstance he lives in now. This shows how Ed’s perspective on fate is beginning to shift. He accepts that he still has no control over the town he grew up in or the missions given to him, but he also understands that he can affect how these events change him as a person.

When Ed meets the man who has been sending him the playing cards, he realizes the man has been controlling his life far beyond just sending him the names of people in need. The man’s influence on Ed’s life includes orchestrating the failed bank robbery Ed encountered at the beginning of the novel and killing Ed’s father before the novel began. One could interpret this man as either God or as the author himself, given the incredible control he has over Ed’s life. These revelations confirm Ed’s perspective that one does not have control over their own life, but at the same time, Ed has to start making his own decisions once the man leaves. Ed has depended on



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.



CIRCUMSTANCE VS. CHOICE

At the beginning of *I Am the Messenger*, Markus Zusak’s 2002 novel, main character Ed Kennedy wallows in discontent with his life. He is frustrated with his dead-end career as a taxi driver in a hopeless suburban town and his lack of a love life, but cannot seem to improve his life due to his innate ineptitude. However, fate appears to offer Ed an opportunity when he stumbles upon a bank robbery that he manages to foil. Afterward, he begins to receive instructions in the mail that send him on missions to help others. Just as he is beginning to feel like he has the choice to improve himself by helping others, Ed discovers that the instructions, and in fact his entire life for the past year, were controlled by one man. Once the man withdraws his control from Ed’s life, Ed realizes it is his choice now how he lives his life. Ed’s progress throughout the novel toward taking charge of his life shows that while one cannot control the circumstances that dictate their life, one *can* choose how to react to those circumstances. At the beginning of the novel, circumstance seems to have set

outside forces to dictate his life for so long, he does not know how to exercise his own free will. After Ed finally gets together with his longtime crush, Audrey, he realizes their union is not described in the **file** the man wrote about Ed's life. Audrey helps Ed realize that while the file dictated his life so far, every decision Ed makes from that point on belongs to him alone. This shift suggests that while a person like Ed cannot choose the circumstances of their lives, they can nonetheless decide how to move forward from those circumstances.

The novel ultimately suggests that like Ed, no one can determine the hand they are dealt by life. Forces beyond one's control, like the man who mails the playing cards, will always affect one's life. However, like Ed chooses to let the missions change his perspective and like he chooses to proceed with his life after the man withdraws, one still has the free will to decide what to do with life's circumstances.



HEROISM, SAINTHOOD, AND ORDINARINESS

Ed Kennedy, a 19-year-old cab driver with no ambition or close personal relationships, feels like the heroism and sainthood others have attained are impossible for a person as ordinary as himself. However, after Ed embarks on a mission of doing good deeds for strangers, those he helps begin to view him as a hero or a saint. When the man who gave Ed his mission arrives at the end of the novel, he reveals to Ed that the mission was meant to show how even a person as ordinary as Ed can become capable of heroic and saintly acts.

At the beginning of the novel, Ed Kennedy views heroes and saints as people completely different from him. Ed introduces himself by comparing his life as a deadbeat underage taxi driver to those of historical figures who made great achievements by the time they were his age, most notably the saintly and heroic figure Joan of Arc. Ed says that the reason he has not lived up to these figures is because he is "unfit" and "weak." This reasoning shows that Ed sees himself as inferior to heroes like Joan of Arc because of his inherent ineptitude. After Ed foils a bank robbery by preventing the thief's escape, he fantasizes about his town's local papers publishing a story about his actions with the headline, "Taxi Driver Turns to Hero," but he thinks the papers are more likely to call him a "deadbeat." Not only does Ed have a low opinion of his ability to become a hero, but he also believes that others see him this way too. Ed's belief in his own ordinariness is so strong that even when he commits a traditionally heroic act like stopping a crime, he still views himself as less than incredible. Later, when Ed receives a **playing card** in the mail with addresses written on it, it leads him to a house where a man is brutalizing his family, and Ed deduces that whoever sent the card wants Ed to stop the abuse. Ed desperately wants to save the family, but he feels weak and helpless compared to the abuser's large stature. Ed sees himself as unable to become the hero this family needs

due to fact he is not extraordinarily strong, as he believes a hero should be.

As Ed completes more missions, those he helps compare him to a saint or a hero, but he resists this characterization because he still views himself as ordinary. After Ed motivates a teenage track runner to take pride in her performance, she asks him if he is a saint. Ed responds by telling her he is "just another stupid human." Though the teenage girl believes Ed has committed a saintly act, Ed does not believe that helping her changes his inherent averageness. Later, Ed helps a priest bolster his church attendance and the priest says Ed is the kind of saint who, despite not being involved in church, does God's work. This time, instead of denying the compliment, Ed quietly accepts it. This shows that Ed is beginning to see himself as capable of committing saintly acts despite his previous ordinariness. Ed eventually manages to save the family of the abusive husband by using a gun to threaten the man into leaving town forever. It's notable that Ed only threatens the man with the gun, instead of actually committing murder like he originally suspected the card was instructing him to, because he believes he is too cowardly to kill him. This suggests that while Ed still lacks the extraordinary courage or strength of a traditional hero, he is nonetheless able to commit the heroic act of protecting the family from abuse.

At the end of his mission of helping people, Ed meets the mysterious person who has been sending him instructions in the mail, and the person reveals that Ed is both ordinary *and* capable of heroic actions. The man says he picked Ed for the mission specifically because Ed is the "epitome of ordinariness." As the man argues, if someone as ordinary as Ed can commit heroic acts, like saving the family from their abusive father, then truly anybody can do the same. Ed's helpful actions, despite his ordinariness, show that heroism and saintliness are not traits one is born with, but instead are acts that one chooses to commit. Ed's ability to undertake heroic acts like confronting the abusive father also suggests that Ed's view of himself as inept is entirely self-constructed. While Ed might not be as mythically brave as a historical figure like Joan of Arc, he can express heroism through simple actions, such as facing his fears and caring for others.

Ed's development from a man committed to the idea of his own ordinariness to a person who commits heroic and saintly acts shows how anyone is capable of being of great service to others. Ed's ability to help others shows that one does not need to be blessed with incredible strength or divine fortune to stand up for others. One simply needs to be an ordinary person who chooses to care.



PURPOSE, SUCCESS, AND MEANING

Ed Kennedy begins *I Am the Messenger* as a directionless cab driver who laments the meaninglessness of his life due to his lack of

professional and romantic success. However, when instructions to help others start appearing in Ed's life, he learns that purpose, rather than success, gives one's life meaning. Specifically, Ed learns that the purpose of caring for others is what will bring meaning into his life.

At the beginning of the novel, Ed views his life as a failure because he has not achieved success in either his professional or romantic life. Ed describes his lack of success at the age of 19 by saying: "No real career. No respect in the community. Nothing." Ed believes he is a failure because he has not earned esteem through professional success. Ed further explains his failure in life by detailing his inability to please women sexually and his inability to start a relationship with his crush, Audrey. He says his sexual ineptitude means he fails as a man, according to society. This shows how Ed views himself as worthless because he does not live up to society's expectations. Ed's views of his own failures are compounded by the relative success of his siblings. Ed's brother, Tommy, is attending university in a big city to become a lawyer, meaning he has the career prospects Ed will never have. His sisters have also moved to the city and had children, showing they have the success in their personal relationships that Ed doesn't. These comparisons contribute to the sense of defeat Ed feels at the beginning of the novel.

But when **playing cards** with instructions begin to appear in Ed's life, he finds meaning in the pursuit of helping others. Whereas Ed previously did nothing with his time except go to work, hang out with his dog, and play cards, after receiving the instructions he dedicates all his time to acts of service. The tasks add an order and structure to Ed's life that he didn't have before, thus giving him a sense of purpose as he wakes up each day. Ed discovers that the act of helping others, like reading to the aging Milla or inspiring the young Sophie, brings him joy. Ed's development shows that one can find purpose in the act of caring for others. Notably, Ed still has not gained the professional or sexual success he lamented not having at the beginning of the novel. Instead, he has found meaning for his life in the greater purpose of helping others.

The final card Ed receives directs him not to strangers, but to his friends. By helping his friends with the central insecurities and losses of their lives, Ed not only reaffirms his own purpose to help others but also learns how his own friends create purpose and meaning outside of the societal expectations Ed held onto in the beginning of the novel. The final card leads Ed to learn more about his friend Ritchie, who appears to only care about his unemployed life of drinking and gambling. Once Ed speaks with Ritchie about his own previously purposeless life of driving a taxi, Ritchie reveals how deeply he is troubled over his own lack of ambition and direction. After their conversation, Ritchie begins to look for a job and starts to feel better about himself for at least trying. This shows how one can give their life meaning by simply searching for their purpose, even if the

purpose itself isn't yet clear. Additionally, Ed discovers that his friend Marv, who only seems to care about his rundown car and his hoard of money, is actually saving funds for his estranged daughter. With this discovery, Ed realizes his friend actually finds purpose attempting to care for his child in the only way he knows how. This turn of events again shows how one can find purpose in taking responsibility for and trying to show love to others. Ed further affirms his own purpose of helping others by reuniting Marv with his child. Finally, Ed helps his friend Audrey by encouraging her to allow herself to love him for just three minutes. This is significant because Audrey has always feared love, even though a part of her wishes to fall in love with Ed. Ed also gives up on his pursuit of being sexually successful in order to enjoy a moment of genuine emotional intimacy with Audrey. This shows that both Audrey and Ed both find meaning in the act of loving and caring for each other.

Before receiving the cards, Ed believed his life was pointless because he did not meet society's ideas of success. However, when the cards instruct Ed to solve the problems of strangers, he finds a greater meaning for his existence through his new commitment to helping others. He also discovers further purpose in helping his friends and learning about how they create meaning in their own lives. All of this shows that true meaning in life comes not through superficial societal definitions of success but rather through a higher purpose of helping and loving others.



HOPE, CARING, AND BEAUTY

Ed believes his community to be generally hopeless, because in his opinion, everyone in his neighborhood is self-centered. However, after Ed receives his mission to help others through a series of **playing cards** with unknown origins, he begins to notice the beauty of how other people express caring for others. He also inspires hope himself by showing others his care for them. Ed begins to see the beauty in his community and his life through the care he shows toward others and through the love he sees others demonstrate as well.

Before completing his mission of helping others, Ed views his town as ugly because he believes his community members do not care for each other. Ed describes his neighborhood by saying there are "plenty of teenage pregnancies there, a plethora of shithead fathers who are unemployed, and mothers like mine who smoke, drink." These details construct an image of a community where the people who are supposed to care for each other, mainly family members, often fail to due to issues like poverty. When Ed follows the instructions on the playing card to his first mission, he discovers a local man who repeatedly sexually assaults his wife. Ed wonders why the world does not hear the assault and stop the man, but then he realizes that the world can hear but "it doesn't care." This incident reinforces Ed's belief that people in general do not

care about the suffering of others.

However, Ed soon begins to notice the beauty in the world by witnessing the kindness and strength of others. The first card leads Ed to helping a local teenage track runner named Sophie, who is not the fastest runner at her competitions but shows a great level of determination. Ed comes to appreciate the strength of her spirit and recognize her internal beauty. This shows how the mission to help others allows Ed to see the beauty inside individuals within his community. Similarly, Ed helps another family by decorating their home with brand-new Christmas lights. Ed watches the lights illuminate the yard and feels an incredible sense of “power and glory.” The act of kindness Ed committed for the family allows him to experience a moment of beauty. While Ed looks at the lights with the family, he sees the husband lovingly kiss his wife. This moment contrasts with the brutality of the other husband whom Ed witnessed assaulting his wife. When Ed sees this example of tenderness, he realizes that some people are truly beautiful on the inside. Thus, by helping out this family and others, Ed is able to recognize that beauty and love exist in the world despite the ugliness he has seen. The husband of the family Ed tells Ed that no one else in the neighborhood ever did anything to help them. Ed’s mission not only shows him that there are caring, beautiful people in the world, but also allows him to show others that kindness exists in the community.

Ed’s perspective at the beginning of the novel is pessimistic because he can only see the ugliness and selfishness present in his society. However, by helping others he begins to see the beauty and hope present within individuals. What’s more, Ed is able to spread this beauty by being an example of a caring individual for others. Ed’s transformation in perspective shows that if one wants to see the beauty of their community, they should begin by caring for others.

mission change him as a person. Notably, the first four cards Ed receives are all aces, and in many different card games, such as Blackjack, aces can either be high or low depending on the circumstance of the game. In a similar way, Ed finds that his missions can also widely vary: some are easy and positive like reading to a lonely old woman, while some are dangerous and hard such as stopping a large alcoholic man from abusing his family. Overall, the playing cards show that one cannot choose their circumstances, but one can choose what they do within those circumstances.



THE FILE

At the end of the novel, the man who has been sending Ed on his missions gives Ed a file detailing every step of Ed’s own life for the past year, right down to the very questions Ed is currently asking the man. The file represents the outside forces that dictate Ed’s life. Given the file’s almost mythical ability to determine exactly what Ed was going to do, one could interpret the file as a divine plan Ed has no control over. One could also view the file, with its careful record of Ed’s life, as the novel itself, which again would negate Ed’s agency in his own life; it would make him a character controlled entirely by the decisions of the author. However, the file’s record of events ends directly after the man says goodbye to Ed forever. This symbolizes a withdrawal of control by whatever greater force has been dictating Ed’s life. After Ed finally gets together with his longtime love interest, Audrey, he desperately searches the file for a record of their relationship. When he can’t find it, Audrey says that it’s because this moment in their lives belongs to them alone. This conclusion suggests that circumstances might dictate one’s life up until a point, as the file has dictated Ed’s life thus far, but how one moves on from those initial circumstances is their choice alone.



SYMBOLS

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



PLAYING CARDS

Throughout the novel, playing cards symbolize the tension between external circumstance on the one hand and individual choice on the other hand. The main character, Ed Kennedy, mysteriously receives playing cards in the mail that send him to a series of locations where people need his help. Ed’s main hobby is also playing card games with his friends. The prevalence of cards contributes to the novel’s theme of circumstance, because one cannot control what cards they are dealt in a game, just like Ed cannot control the mission he is given. However, once one is dealt cards, they have a choice of how to play the cards, just as Ed has a choice to let his



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *I Am the Messenger* published in 2002.

2 of Diamonds Quotes



☛ No real career.

No respect in the community.

Nothing.

I’d realized there were people everywhere achieving greatness while I was taking directions from balding businessmen called Derek and being wary of Friday-night drunks who might throw up in my car or do a runner on me.

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Ed compares himself to historical figures who had already achieved great success at his age as he introduces himself to the reader. Ed's exaggerated statement that he has "nothing" shows his pessimistic and self-deprecating attitude at the beginning of the novel. Ed's comment about "no real career" demonstrates how he believes he is a failure because he has been unsuccessful in his career. This quote also makes it clear that Ed has a desire to achieve "greatness," but he feels categorically different from all the people who have already had accomplishments at his age. He sees his concerns as a taxi driver, (such as worrying about whether one of his customers is going to throw up in his car) as ordinary and menial, as opposed to the extraordinary lives he imagines other people living. This quote defines meaning in life as achieving traditional success in life and sets up a dichotomy of extraordinary vs. ordinary people. This overwhelming sense of ordinariness and his desire to break free from it will motivate Ed throughout the novel.

Ed receives a mysterious card with addresses written on it and asks his friends if any of them sent it, before Audrey speculates on the reason behind the card. Audrey's explanation of the cards shows the novel's perspective on fate and freewill, where one cannot control their circumstances but *can* control their reaction to these circumstances, just as Audrey speculates Ed will not be able to control what he finds at each address but will nonetheless choose his reaction. Audrey further details the concept of fate as represented by the playing cards. She uses the metaphor of the "luck of the draw" to explain that one cannot choose the events life gives them, just as one cannot choose the cards they are dealt in a card game. Audrey suggests here that one should accept the reality they cannot control and try to make the best of it, an idea that Ed will slowly come to believe over the course of the novel.

4 of Diamonds Quotes

☛☛ *You're a dead man.* I hear his voice again, and I see the words on my face when I get back in the cab and look in the rearview mirror.

It makes me think of my life, my nonexistent accomplishments and my overall abilities in incompetence.

A dead man, I think. He's not far wrong.

3 of Diamonds Quotes

☛☛ "Something is going to happen at each of the addresses on that card, Ed, and you'll have to react to it."

I think about it and decide.

I speak.

"Well, that's not real good, is it?"


"Why not?"

"Why *not*? What if there are people kicking the crap out of each other and I have to go in and stop it? It's not exactly uncommon here, is it?"

"That's just luck of the draw, I guess."

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy, Audrey (speaker)



Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker), The Bank Robber

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

After Ed foils a bank robber's crime and testifies against the robber in court, the robber threatens Ed that he's as good as dead. Ed then compares his "nonexistent accomplishments" and "incompetence" to death itself, showing how he believes that because he has not achieved success in his career and has no special skills, his life does not have meaning. This characterizes Ed's perspective at the beginning of the novel; he often expresses the belief that if an individual has not achieved society's traditional markers of success, their life has no purpose. However, the robber's statement that Ed is "a dead man" could also be interpreted as representing the beginning of a complete transformation in Ed's life brought on by the seemingly random event of foiling a bank robbery. The phrase suggests that the previous version of Ed, who accomplished nothing

in life, is over and now, after the bank robbery, Ed will begin a new life of purpose.



5 of Diamonds Quotes

☝☝ He has sex with her and the bed cries out in pain. It creaks and wails and only I can hear it. Christ, it's deafening. *Why can't the world hear?* I ask myself. Within a few moments I ask it many times. *Because it doesn't care*, I finally answer, and I know I'm right. It's like I've been chosen. *But chosen for what?* I ask.

The answer's quite simple:

To care.

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker), The Edgar Street Woman, The Edgar Street Man

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 41-42

Explanation and Analysis

A playing card mysteriously arrives in the mail and directs Ed to an address where a man sexually assaults his wife. Ed's opinion that the world does not care reflects his perspective that people are generally selfish and do not notice the suffering of others. This quote represents a pivotal moment for Ed as he realizes the purpose of his mission, and perhaps his whole existence, which is to care for others. Placing himself, as someone who cares, in opposition to the world, which doesn't care, portrays Ed's mission in a larger context because not only does it suggest that a larger force has chosen Ed to act, but it also suggests that his actions will diverge from and possibly alter his society's standards. The idea of being "chosen" also brings into question Ed's freewill and the integrity of his mission, because if one is *told* to feel empathy for another, is that empathy genuine? Ed will seek to answer that question as he continues on with his mission.

Jack of Diamonds Quotes

☝☝ "Are you some kind of saint or something?"

Inside, I laugh. *Me? A saint?* I list what I am. *Taxi driver. Local deadbeat. Cornerstone of mediocrity. Sexual midget. Pathetic cardplayer.*

I say my final words to her.

"No, I'm not a saint, Sophie. I'm just another stupid human."

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy, Sophie (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Teenage track runner Sophie asks Ed if he is a saint after he encourages her to be more confident and run barefoot. Sophie calling Ed a "saint" is specifically significant because he previously compared himself unfavorably to the saintly figure of Joan of Arc. At this point in the story, Ed has only completed two missions, so his denial of being a saint shows that he has not yet changed his opinion of himself as an ordinary person; he thinks that he can't do great things because he isn't inherently great. Ed's description of himself as "just another stupid human," however, suggests that one does not need to be exceptional in order to commit saintly acts. All of this contributes the main theme of novel, which points out that if a "stupid human" like Ed can commit great acts of service for others, then anyone can.



6 of Clubs Quotes

☝☝ I want to take that world, and for the first time ever, I feel like I can do it. I've survived everything I've had to so far. I'm still standing here. Okay, it's a crummy front porch I stand on, cracked to shithouse, and who am I to say that the world isn't the same? But God knows that world takes enough of us...

How many people get this chance?

And of those few, how many actually take it?

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

Ed receives the second playing card with instructions on it, but he struggles to decipher what exactly the instructions want him to do. Still, he resolves not to give up and wishes to continue on with his mission of helping people. Ed shows his characteristic pessimism by noting the poor circumstances he lives in and comparing the rest of the world to this negativity. However, he also counters this negativity by reaffirming his desire to take on the world, showing how his perspective has shifted from believing he is overwhelmingly oppressed by his circumstances to believing that he can overcome these circumstances with his own determination. Ed's questioning of how many

people take advantage of opportunities when they encounter them emphasizes the idea that one should not waste their potential in life and instead use courage and motivation to make their lives meaningful whenever possible.

8 of Clubs Quotes

☝ “You know, they say that there are countless saints who have nothing to do with church and almost no knowledge of God. But they say God walks with those people without them ever knowing it.” His eyes are inside me now, followed by the words. “You’re one of those people, Ed. It’s an honor to know you.”

Related Characters: Father Thomas O’Reilly (speaker), Ed Kennedy

Related Themes:   



Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

As Ed helps Father O’Reilly bring congregants to his church, O’Reilly thanks Ed for his help. O’Reilly’s comment about God walking with saints “without them ever knowing it” contributes to the idea that an unknown force is acting upon Ed’s life, directing him toward helping others. This suggests that no one, even those who do not believe in a higher power, has full control over their circumstances. O’Reilly’s use of the verb “walks” rather than “leads” or “commands” when referring to the influence of this higher power suggests, however, that while outside forces may influence a person in saintly acts, the person still chooses to act on their own. O’Reilly’s comments on sainthood show that religious instruction is not what makes one saintly, but rather, what makes one a saint is the care they have for others. This suggests that Ed, or anyone as ordinary as Ed, could potentially become a saint by choosing to help others.

☝ The father speaks with a sincerity that’s hypnotizing. Not about God, but about the people of this town getting together. Doing things together. Helping each other. And just getting together in general. He invites them to do that in his church every Sunday.

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker), Father Thomas O’Reilly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

Father O’Reilly gives a speech at the large community church service Ed helps organize, and Ed reflects on his words here. The points O’Reilly makes in his speech contribute directly to the novel’s theme of the importance of helping others. His mention of the “people of this town” specifically contrasts with Ed’s views of his own community at the beginning of novel. Ed believed his community was generally hopeless, because the people were selfish and did not take care of each other due to outside factors such as addiction and poverty. However, O’Reilly’s words offer hope that members of a community can care for each other simply by making an effort to come together. As Ed describes him in this quote, O’Reilly shows how one kind individual can inspire others to show similar kindness. The “sincerity” of O’Reilly’s words also emphasizes his humanity and shows how inspiring acts of kindness are not reserved for mythical heroes or saints but are committed by ordinary humans.

Queen of Clubs Quotes

☝ I hope for a moment that they both understand what they’re doing and what they’re proving.

I want to tell them, but I realize that all I do is deliver the message. I don’t decipher it or make sense of it for them. They need to do that themselves.

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker), Daniel Rose , Gavin Rose

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

In order to teach the Rose brothers to take care of each other, Ed beats Gavin Rose up and then calls his older brother, Daniel, to come save him. Ed’s words here reveal that in order to help others, one should not try to control their lives. Instead, one should empower the other people to improve their lives on their own. Ed’s realization also shows that while outside forces may influence an individual’s life, what the individual does with the situation is their choice. Furthermore, the idea that Ed is there to “deliver the message” suggests that by helping others, one can have an

impact far beyond their own life. This also comments upon Ed as a character in the context of the novel, because presumably Ed's efforts to help others are not only supposed to inspire characters in the novel to become more caring—they are also meant to inspire the reader.

Ace of Spades Quotes

☛ My only worry is that every time I've wanted something to go a certain way in all this, it's gone the other, designed perfectly to challenge me with the unknown.

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 184



Explanation and Analysis

After finishing the missions on the Ace of Clubs, Ed eagerly awaits the arrival of the next card, though he is still anxious about what may come next. Ed's words here suggest that in order to improve oneself, one needs to be challenged by outside forces. This contrasts with the comfortable mediocrity Ed lived in at the beginning of the novel, where he never tried anything beyond what he saw as his limited potential as an ordinary person. Ed's acknowledgement of the necessity of challenge suggests he is beginning to find his purpose in life. The idea of Ed's mission being "designed perfectly" also suggests that just as someone is carefully sending Ed instructions within the novel, the author is also plotting Ed's life in order to show the reader how an ordinary person can rise to challenge of being an extraordinary help to others.

4 of Spades Quotes

☛ Four globes to brighten up the Tatupu house this year. It's not a big thing, but I guess it's true—big things are often just small things that are noticed.

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker), Marie Tatupu, Lua Tatupu

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

The Ace of Spades leads Ed to the house of a poor yet happy

family and he realizes the way to help them is to buy them new Christmas lights for their home. Ed's comparison of "big things" to "small things that are noticed" shows that one does not have to do extraordinary, heroic acts in order to help others. Instead, any ordinary person simply needs to observe what another person needs and then perform a realistic act of human compassion. This contrasts with Ed's view at the beginning of the novel, which stated that the only people who live impactful lives are the heroes who make dramatic accomplishments. The positioning of this quote in the middle of the book shows how helping people thus far has taught Ed to notice that even the smallest of actions can create beautiful change in another person's life.

6 of Spades Quotes

☛ Lua and Marie are holding hands.

They look like they're so happy, just inside this moment, watching the kids and the lights on their old fibro house.

Lua kisses her.

Just softly on the lips.

And she kisses back.

Sometimes people are beautiful.

Not in looks.

Not in what they say.

Just in what they are.

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker), Marie Tatupu, Lua Tatupu

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

Ed decorates Lua and Marie Tatupu's family home with Christmas lights and Ed and the family stand to observe the beautiful lights. Lua's actions, described here as "soft," directly contrast with the violent and cruel abuse of the Edgar Street man toward his wife and child. This shows both Ed and the reader that while there are violent people in the world like the Edgar Street man, there are also beautifully loving people like Lua. Ed's recognition that "sometimes people are beautiful" shows how Ed's mission of helping others, which included string up the lights for the family, allows him to see how other people are also capable of extraordinary acts of love and caring. This suggests that when one tries to help others, they themselves will see more caring and beauty in the world as well.

7 of Spades Quotes

☞ “You know, Ed, we’ve been living here close to a year now, and nobody—absolutely nobody—has ever lifted a finger to help or make us feel welcome.” He drinks. “We expect no more these days. People have enough trouble getting by on their own...But then you come along, out of nowhere.”

Related Characters: Lua Tatupu (speaker), Ed Kennedy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

Lua approaches Ed after Ed decorates the Tatupu family home with Christmas lights. Lua’s words that they “expect no more these days” of their community echoes Ed’s perspective on other people at the beginning of the novel, when he expected people to be selfish due to outside factors such as poverty. Lua’s praise of Ed shows how one can overcome this selfishness. However, Lua’s last comment about meeting Ed shows that Ed, by committing an act of kindness for them, has changed Lua’s perspective; now Lua sees that it might be possible to count on his community after all. This shows how performing acts of kindness for a person can have a broad impact on that person’s worldview. What’s more, Lua’s interpretation that Ed came “out of nowhere” to help them suggests that anyone, from any background, can offer kindness to others.



8 of Spades Quotes

☞ Maybe I truly am shedding the old Ed Kennedy for this new person who’s full of purpose rather than incompetence. Maybe one morning I’ll wake up and step outside of myself and look back at the old me lying dead among the sheets.

It’s a good thing. I know.

But how can a good thing suddenly feel so sad?

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 232

Explanation and Analysis

Ed contemplates how much he has changed since receiving the first card and beginning to dedicate his life to helping others. Ed’s acknowledgement that becoming a good person is a positive change shows how helping others has empowered him to improve himself. However, the sadness

he feels in this quote shows how personal growth can require sacrifice, specifically the sacrifice of one’s previous self-image. The image of Ed viewing his dead former self echoes the bank robber’s language that Ed should look in the mirror and seeing a “dead man;” both moments make it clear that personal growth is a kind of death, since it involves giving up previous versions of oneself. Notably, Ed says he is now full of “purpose” rather than “success,” even though he craved success at the beginning of the novel. This shows how finding a purpose in helping others is more transformative for an individual than achieving traditional success might be.

Ace of Hearts Quotes

☞ *But will it end with this? I ask myself. Will it let go of me?* Already, I know that all of this will stay with me forever. It’ll haunt me, but I also fear it will make me feel grateful. I say *fear* because at times I really don’t want this to be a fond memory until it’s over. I also fear that nothing really ends at the end.

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 267



Explanation and Analysis

After receiving what he believes will be the last card in his mission to help others, Ed contemplates what this upcoming ending means for his life. Ed’s knowledge that the mission will “stay with [him] forever” shows how helping others helps one find purpose which they will hold onto for their entire lives. Meanwhile, Ed’s “fear” of looking back on his accomplishments before he is finished with the entire mission shows that he knows he can’t use past success as an excuse for inaction, which represents a shift in Ed’s character because he used to seek out excuses for his shortcomings. Finally, Ed’s comment that “nothing really ends at the end” shows how the practice of helping others is a pursuit one must continuously undertake rather than something that has a clear conclusion. These words also comment on the nature of the novel itself, suggesting the characters’ lives extend beyond the end of the plot and that their purposes, specifically Ed’s message to help others, can have an impact beyond the narrative itself—presumably by inspiring readers.

3 of Hearts Quotes

☞ “It’s the person, Ma, not the place. If you left here, you’d have been the same anywhere else.” It’s true enough, but I can’t stop now. “If I ever leave this place”—I swallow—“I’ll make sure I’m better *here* first.”

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker), Beverly “Ma” Kennedy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 283



Explanation and Analysis

After a dramatic confrontation where Ed’s Ma admits that she is angry at both him and herself for never moving out of their dead-end town, Ed explains that one’s personality, rather than their circumstances, determines their life. Ed’s speech here represents a major shift in his relationship to his circumstances. Whereas before Ed viewed himself as doomed to be ordinary due to the fact that he was born in a hopeless suburban town, now Ed admits that he has control over who he becomes as a person. Ed’s perspective has also shifted from his previous belief that people are inherently successes or failures to this new belief in gradual self-improvement, as shown by his commitment to get “better” even without changing where he lives.

5 of Hearts Quotes

☞ Usually, we walk around constantly believing ourselves. “I’m okay,” we say. “I’m all right.” But sometimes the truth arrives on you, and you can’t get it off. That’s when you realize that sometimes it isn’t even an answer—it’s a question. Even now, I wonder how much of my life is convinced.

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker), Dave “Ritchie” Sanchez

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

Ed contemplates the nature of contentment in his life and those of others after talking to his friend Ritchie about their mutual lack of motivation and purpose. Ed’s words expose how easily one can fall into a comfortable state of mediocrity unless they challenge themselves to achieve beyond their perceived potential. Ed’s phrasing of “the truth

arrives on you” characterizes reality as an outside force which influences a person, rather than something a person can actively control. This suggests that although Ed now believes that he can change his own life, it’s also true that part of being happy is accepting difficult realities without denial. Overall, this quote advocates for refusing to accept ordinary contentment and instead doing the difficult work of finding one’s true purpose.

☞ “There’s only one thing I want.”

“What’s that, Ritchie?”

His answer is simple.

“To want.”

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy, Dave “Ritchie” Sanchez (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 304-5

Explanation and Analysis

Ed receives a card which directs him to help his friend Ritchie by talking to Ritchie about his lack of direction in life. Ritchie’s desire “to want” reveals that Ritchie feels he lacks a purpose in his life. This mirrors Ed’s own directionless life at the beginning of the novel, where he does nothing except drive a taxi and play cards. Ritchie’s statement that he simply wants to want, rather than wanting traditional markers of success like wealth or romance, suggests that true meaning comes from one’s own emotions and sense of personal fulfillment. Notably, though, it’s not enough for Ritchie to just acknowledge this want; he needs to share it with someone else—namely Ed—in order to get the support he needs and take action toward his goals.

Joker: The Folder Quotes

☞ “And why?” He pauses, but he doesn’t move back. “I did it because *you* are the epitome of ordinariness, Ed.” He looks at me seriously. “And if a guy like you can stand up and do what you did for all those people, well, maybe everyone can.”

Related Characters: The Man with the Cards (speaker), Ed Kennedy

Page Number: 353

Explanation and Analysis

After planning out Ed's life for over a year, a strange man reveals why he sent Ed on a mission to help others. This quote places Ed's mission in a context beyond his own life by arguing that Ed's actions impact the world by proving that anyone can help others. The man's words also explain the author's motivations for characterizing Ed as average: to prove to the reader that anyone, no matter how ordinary they believe themselves to be, can help others just as Ed does within the novel. Thus, in a postmodern twist, this quote suggests that the man with the cards may represent the author himself. The man's description of Ed as the "epitome of ordinariness" also suggests that Ed's averageness is a strength not a weakness (as Ed believed at the beginning of the novel), because this ordinariness gave Ed the opportunity to stand up for other people.

lives. This suggests that while one may not be able to control the circumstances that fate forces on them, how they move on from those circumstances is nonetheless their decision. The file could also represent the novel itself and its plot, suggesting that while the author gets to control the character's lives up until the end and the reader gets to observe those lives, what happens after the plot ends belongs to the characters themselves.

●● And that's when I realize.

In a sweet, cruel, beautiful moment of clarity, I smile, watch a crack in the cement, and speak to Audrey and the sleeping Doorman. I tell them what I'm telling you:

I'm not the messenger at all.

I'm the message.

Joker: The Message Quotes


●● "I'm looking for *this*," I tell her. I wave my hand at both of us. "I'm looking for you and me, together."

And Audrey only crouches down. She kneels with me and places her hand on mine to make me drop the papers.

"I don't think it's in there." She said softly. "I think, Ed...I think this belongs to us."

Related Characters: Audrey, Ed Kennedy (speaker)

Related Themes: 



Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 357

Explanation and Analysis

After the man with the cards hands Ed a file detailing his entire life for a year and then leaves, Ed gets together with Audrey, his longtime crush, and searches for a record of their union in the file. The file represents control over Ed's life, which is why he cannot believe that anything that has happened to him would not already be recorded there. However, Audrey's comment that their relationship belongs to them alone indicates that while Ed's life has been dictated up until this point, now they have control over their

Related Characters: Ed Kennedy (speaker), The Doorman , Audrey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 357

Explanation and Analysis

After the man with the cards reveals he sent Ed a series of missions to prove that an ordinary person can perform extraordinary acts of kindness for others, Ed realizes the mission was not just to get him to help a few people, but instead to inspire people everywhere to help others. This revelation is significant to Ed's character because at the beginning of the novel, Ed felt like his life had no purpose because he had not achieved any kind of traditional success. Now Ed realizes his life has a purpose, even though he still doesn't fit the mold of a traditional hero. Ed's transformation shows how one can find a greater meaning in life by considering how their choices influence and inspire others. What's more, Ed's realization that he is "the message" suggests an awareness of his relationship to the reader, because it suggests that he knows his purpose in the novel is to show the reader how, if someone as ordinary as Ed can commit great acts of kindness, they too can help others.



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.

ACE OF DIAMONDS: THE HOLDUP

Ed and everyone else in the bank can tell that the robber is hopelessly bad at committing robbery. What's worse, according to Ed, is the fact that his friend Marv's car is running out of time in a 15-minute parking spot. Lying facedown on the floor while the robber wields a gun, Ed and Marv discuss the parking ticket Marv is going to receive. Ed says the car is not even worth paying a ticket on, which infuriates Marv because he loves his rundown car. Ed and Marv argue over the car until the bank robber asks who is talking.

Angry and undeterred by the bank robber's threats, Marv continues to argue with Ed about the car and eventually shouts at the robber to hurry up. Ed can tell that Marv is about to completely lose his temper. He looks over at his other friends, Ritchie, who is hiding under the bank's children's play table, and Audrey, who lying with her foot on Ed's leg.

Ed feels sorry for the bank teller, whose nametag reads Misha, as the robber points the gun at her. As Marv and Ed continue to bicker, the bank robber asks, even angrier, who is still talking. Marv, as a joke, responds that Ed Kennedy is talking. Ed takes this opportunity to introduce himself to the reader as an average 19-year-old underaged cabdriver with no career prospects in his suburban town. He also wants the reader to know he is horrible at both sex and taxes.

The bank robber threatens to shoot Ed, who chastises Marv for calling attention to him. The bank robber yells at Ed to shut up, but Ed continues ranting against Marv for joking around at a time like this. The robber becomes fed up and storms over to where Ed, Marv, and Audrey are lying on the ground. The robber presses his gun into Ed's face. Ed determines the robber must be angry at the world for making him so ugly.

The bank robber asks which one of the hostages is Ed, and Ed points at Marv. Marv, unafraid of the incompetent robber, realizes he recognizes the man. Ed, Audrey, and Ritchie all tell Marv to stop talking. The bank robber becomes more agitated at all the voices and asks Marv if he has a death wish. Marv argues that he only wishes for the robber to pay his parking ticket.

Ed's misplaced concerns show how little value he places on his own life; he cares more about a parking ticket than being involved in an armed robbery. Ed's complaints about both the parking spot and the hopeless bank robber introduce his pessimistic attitude, where he believes that unfortunate situations constantly arise for reasons that are beyond his control.



Marv's irritation in this dangerous scenario shows that he is reckless and immature, perhaps because he seems to have no other responsibilities on his mind other than his car. This shows how one can act carelessly toward their life if they do not feel that it has a greater purpose.



Ed's immediate mention of his lack of career prospects shows how he believes a person is identified by their career success, or lack of it. His specific mention of his suburban town also shows how he believes his circumstances have determined his fate. His comment about being horrible at sex also highlights how common it is to evaluate success in terms of sexual prowess as well as career success.



Ed's choice to notice that the bank robber is ugly, instead of worrying about his life or the gun, shows that he is a person who looks for the ugliness in life. This pessimistic point of view colors many of Ed's observations at this early stage of the novel.



Marv's first priority is his car. Because that priority creates no deeper meaning for Marv, he is reckless and careless with both his life and the lives of others, as shown by his continued agitation of the armed gunman. This incident further emphasizes the potentially dire consequences of a purposeless life.



Suddenly, the robber sees the police arrive and his getaway car speed off. The robber responds by demanding Marv hand over his own car keys, and Marv complies. As the robber flees, he drops the gun at the bank entrance. The robber tries and fails many times to start Marv's old car. For reasons he himself does not know, Ed picks up the robber's gun and runs out to the car. He points the gun at the robber, who attempts to run away. Next thing Ed knows, he has fired the gun.

Ed hears sirens. The robber, uninjured but now caught, collapses. Ed feels sorry for the robber and the series of misfortunes which led him to being arrested, including holding up a bank filled with people as stupid as Ed and his friends and trying to start Marv's horrible car. As the cops lead the robber away, Ed continues to antagonize Marv about his car, while Ed still holds the warm gun in his hand.

The cops take Ed and his friends to the police station for questioning. As they leave, a police officer tells Marv to get a new car, if he has the money. Marv responds that he has the money, but he just has other priorities. Later, Ed asks Marv what exactly those priorities are. Marv counters that Ed may be considered a hero by most people, but Marv is still mad about Ed shooting through his window.

As Ed and Marv leave the police station, they are swarmed by reporters wanting to interview Ed. Ed wonders if they will print headlines calling him a hero, but he knows the papers are more likely to call him a "deadbeat." Ed, Marv, Audrey, and Ritchie walk back to the car, which now has a ticket on it. Marv tries to start the car but fails. In a few days, the first message will arrive, changing Ed's life.

2 OF DIAMONDS: SEX SHOULD BE LIKE MATH: AN INTRODUCTION TO MY LIFE

Ed wants to tell the reader about his life. He plays **cards** with his friends a few times a week. His friends are Marv, who never shuts up, Ritchie, who is quiet and has an awful tattoo, and Audrey, who is beautiful and also a cabdriver like Ed. Before Ed describes himself, he explains that at the age of 19, Bob Dylan and Salvador Dalí had begun their groundbreaking careers and Joan of Arc was already leading a revolution. Ed at 19 is just an underaged cabdriver.

Ed became a cab driver because Audrey was one, and Ed is in love with Audrey. She does not love him back, however, and he constantly questions his life and his lack of accomplishments. Whenever he tries to talk about his insecurities with his friends or his Ma, they all dismiss him.

Ed's uncertainty about his motivations suggests that he is not fully in control of his own actions. This uncertainty about motivations brings the heroism of Ed's actions into question, because he may not be truly heroic if he is not acting intentionally or if some unknown outside force is controlling his decisions.



Ed pity for the robber's misfortune suggests that Ed believes an individual's life is determined by luck. He does not hold the robber accountable for his decision to rob the bank or for committing the crime ineptly, showing that Ed does not believe at this point that a person is responsible for their choices.



The fact that many people view Ed as a hero for his unintentional, dangerous act of firing a gun at a robber shows how superficial common definitions of heroism can be. Marv, as Ed's friend, is able to see through this heroism, showing that Ed is not inherently heroic just because others consider him to be hero.



Ed's fantasies about being called a hero show he is attracted to the superficial societal perception of heroism, which defines heroes by single bold acts like stopping a bank robbery, but still sees himself as separate from this definition because of his ordinariness.



Ed's comparisons of himself to famous figures express a view of success that depends upon an individual's fame and career prospects relative to their age. By this definition, only a few historical figures could be considered successful. Because Ed believes this very narrow definition is the only marker of a successful life, he views himself as a failure.



Ed's loved ones' dismissal of his concerns suggests that not everyone shares his incredibly high bar for success, and that there are other options for defining personal meaning.



Ed rents a cheap shack for a house. He works for a sketchy taxi company that didn't question him when he lied about his age. His describes his suburban town as average, with good and bad neighborhoods. He grew up in one of the bad neighborhoods. Ed stayed in his childhood home until his younger brother, Tommy, left for college. Ed was too lazy to get accepted into college, so now he drives a cab.

Ed's one roommate is a 17-year-old named the Doorman who spends all day warming his fur in front of the door. The Doorman is an incredibly smelly mutt who used to belong to Ed's father, before his father died six months ago. The dog's happiness at simple things like sunbathing makes Ed happy. Ed knows he'll be sad when the dog finally dies.

Ed's other possessions include a TV and a family photo. The photo shows Ed's Ma, his father, his two sisters, and his younger brother. Only half the people in the photo are smiling. Ed describes his father as a kind and reserved man who was also a lonely and lazy alcoholic. He was a furniture delivery man who died from liver failure. Ed's brother, Tommy, is in college in the city. His two sisters, Leigh and Katherine, have also moved to the city, leaving Ed the only sibling still in town.

Ed has dark hair and an average build. He likes to walk the Doorman around town or to his father's grave. He imagines Audrey walking beside him. Unlike Dylan or Dalí, he has accomplished nothing and enjoys spending his time playing **cards** and driving his taxi from the city to the town.

Ed restates that he is hopelessly in love with Audrey. Audrey, on the other hand, is busy having sex with many people who are not Ed. She tells Ed she won't have sex with him because she likes him too much. Ed is too shy to make a move on her anyway, because he knows from past relationships that he is horrible at sex. He wishes sex were like math, where he could openly admit being horrible at it, but instead society expects men to be good at sex.

Audrey comes over to Ed's home whenever she feels sad. They drink and watch movies together until she falls asleep. Ed knows she comes from an abusive family, which is why she refuses to let herself love anyone. Ed longs to be with her anyway.

Ed's description of his bad community suggests that he believes the circumstances one grows up in influence their future success. He also speaks of laziness as if it is an inherent trait beyond his control. This suggests that he believes individuals are set up by fate to be either successful or unsuccessful.



Ed's dependency upon his dog suggests a lack of human connection in his life, suggesting that when one is as pessimistic and preoccupied as Ed, they struggle to connect with others. Meanwhile, the happiness the dog brings Ed suggests that if one looks for the positive elements in life, they will feel more optimistic.



The fact that Ed is lonely and lazy like his father, who lived a short and unsuccessful life, further emphasizes the idea that Ed is doomed to be unsuccessful due to some inherent quality. However, Ed's siblings rose above their circumstances, exposing a flaw in Ed's argument that his life is predetermined by his family or his town.



Ed indulges in fantasy as he imagines dating Audrey, suggesting that it is not a lack of motivation or imagination holding Ed back, but instead a lack of action.



Ed's lamentation at not being good at sex, when society supposedly expects men to be good at sex, shows how he views himself as a failure because he does not live up to society's expectations. Meanwhile, Audrey's comments about how she likes Ed too much to have sex with him shows how she views sex and intimacy as completely separate.



Ed views Audrey's current problems with personal relationships as controlled by her past family circumstances. He also views their connection as somehow lacking because they do not have sex, which he views as a symbol of a successful relationship.



3 OF DIAMONDS: THE ACE OF DIAMONDS

Ed looks over the articles about the bank robbery, which disappointingly exaggerate his heroism. His Ma comes over and tells him she's proud of him for once in his life. One evening some time later, Ed comes home and finds an envelope in his mailbox. He doesn't think to open it until later that night, but when he picks up the envelope again, he feels a strange power surrounding it. Shivering, Ed opens the envelope and discovers a **playing card**, the Ace of Diamonds, inside.

Three addresses and times are written on the **card**. Ed looks out the window but sees no one outside. He stands holding the card and ponders if his friends, or fate, sent him the card. The phone rings and Ed excitedly picks it up, believing the caller will answer his questions. Instead, his Ma is calling. She swears at Ed for forgetting he promised to help her pick up a coffee table that day. Ma continues ranting at him, but Ed ignores her as he stares at the card in wonder. He no longer feels like the worthless cabdriver, because the card was given to him specifically.

Ed returns his focus to the conversation and promises to help his Ma tomorrow. Before she hangs up, he asks her if she sent him the **card**. His mom responds by yelling at him further for forgetting about the coffee table. Ed remains calm, as he always does in the face of his mom's anger, even though she is never this angry with any of her other children. Ma tells Ed to "piss off" before she hangs up.

After getting off the phone, Ed chastises himself for forgetting about the coffee table. Then he forces himself instead to focus on the **card**. He knows the sender must know him, because they clearly know he plays cards. However, he thinks Marv's too stupid and Ritchie isn't the type to scheme like this. He also doesn't think Audrey is a likely suspect. He wonders if someone saw him playing cards with his friends out on his front porch.

Ed can't sleep and, in the morning, he looks up the addresses on the **card**. One is a rundown house, the other is old but well-kept, and the other address is in the wealthy part of town. That night, at a card game, Ed tells his friends about the mail and asks if any of them are responsible. Marv answers that he's too dumb, and Ritchie says that he himself is too lazy.

Ed's Ma's pride in him shows that she also holds the view of success as defined by singular extraordinary acts of heroism. The strange power Ed feels concerning the card represents his view that an individual's life is controlled by outside forces; he seems to expect the mysterious card to change his ordinary life, even though he has no idea what it means.



Ma's characteristic foul-mouthed tirade against Ed suggests she is also frustrated by Ed's ineptitude and his inability to meet traditional definitions of success. This reveals that Ed's perception of his own failure is not exclusive to him. Additionally, Ed's fixation on the card shows that at this point, he believes a person becomes extraordinary by having unique events happen to them, as opposed to making extraordinary choices.



Ed's constant calm when dealing with his mother suggests a carelessness toward his personal relationships, indicating that he sees these relationships as inherently strained beyond his control.



The unknown origin of the card, and the feeling that someone has been observing him playing cards, heightens the mystery surrounding the card, as well as emphasizing Ed's view that outside forces can influence a person's life in order to transform them into an extraordinary person.



The wide variety of the houses not only further emphasizes the economic disparities which influence people's lives in Ed's town, but also heightens the mystery of the card's purpose, suggesting that fate is about to change Ed's life in dramatic fashion.



Audrey claims she did not send the **card**, but she has a theory about why the card was sent to Ed in the first place. She believes whoever sent the card read about Ed stopping the bank robbery in the paper and decided the town needs a person like Ed. From this, she determines that Ed will witness something at each address and then have to do something about what he sees. Ed responds that her theory sounds like a horrible deal for him, because it sounds like he might have to do something like break up a fight. Audrey says, “that’s just luck of the draw, I guess.”

Audrey’s theory suggests that Ed receiving the card was not a random chance of fate, but instead an event he caused through his choice to commit a heroic act. This complicates Ed’s own theories about fate and his own ordinariness. But at the same time, Audrey’s comment about the “luck of the draw” suggests that the card represents fate after all. This tension between fate and choice will come to characterize Ed’s understanding of his mission throughout the rest of the novel.



Marv gloats over winning the **card** game. Ed details how Marv lives at home and works for his dad, though Marv never spends the money from his job. Ed says he’s only friends with Marv because they grew up together. Unfortunately, his inner monologue about Marv doesn’t solve the mystery of the card. Ed decides that the only thing to do is go to the first address.

Ed remaining friends with Marv because they were childhood friends further emphasizes how Ed believes one’s past determines their future. However, Ed’s redirection of his attention to the card also shows a shift in his character where he realizes that, instead of just complaining, he must act in order to shape his own life.



Late the next night, Ed is sitting on his front porch when Audrey arrives. They have a drink and Ed desperately wishes they could sleep with each other. But Ed still does not make a move on Audrey. Instead, he holds the **card** in his hand and contemplates how this could be the time where, like Dylan or Dalí or Joan of Arc at his age, Ed accomplishes something with his life. Then Ed realizes he is just kidding himself.

Ed’s comparison of his current situation to the lives of historical figures suggests that some part of him believes a person is ordinary until they rise to the occasion of extraordinary circumstances. However, his denial of his own situation immediately after this thought shows his prevailing belief in certain people’s inherent ordinariness.



4 OF DIAMONDS: THE JUDGE AND THE MIRROR

Ed receives a subpoena to testify about the bank robbery. When he arrives at court, he sees the robber looking even uglier and more hopeless than before. The robber glares at him until Ed looks away. Ed takes the stand and testifies against the robber. As Ed leaves the stand, the robber whispers that Ed is now a “dead man.”

Ed’s summons to court and the robber’s threats show that there are serious consequences to the kind of rash, dramatic heroism Ed practiced by stopping the bank robber. Calling Ed a “dead man” also represents how the singular event of the bank robbery changed Ed’s life; in a sense, his old self really is dead.



A policewoman at the courthouse tells Ed not to worry about the robber’s threats. She suspects that a man as pitiful as the robber will be so scared of jail, he won’t risk committing another crime. But as Ed drives his cab away and sees himself in the rearview mirror, he thinks that, considering his life thus far, he basically is a dead man already.

Ed’s assessment of himself as essentially dead shows his perspective that if one is not succeeding in their career or in gaining the respect of others, they are not truly living life. As before, Ed characterizes his life as essentially meaningless because he is not successful by society’s standards.



5 OF DIAMONDS: WATCHING, WAITING, RAPING

The bank robber is only sentenced to six months in jail. Ed tries to ignore the robber's death threat and focus on the first address listed on the **card**. He attempts to go to the house on Monday, and then Tuesday, but doesn't work up the courage until Wednesday around midnight. He waits on the dim, rundown street and remembers that Marv used to have a girlfriend who lived here, before she and her family suddenly moved away.

Ed finds the house he is looking for and hides among the trees on the other side of the street. It is nearly the time listed on the **card**. A large, clearly drunk man approaches the house. He enters and starts shouting for his wife. Through the bedroom window, Ed sees the man grab his wife and rape her. Ed wonders why the world doesn't notice this crime, but then he realizes that the world doesn't care. Ed realizes he has been chosen to care. A young girl comes out onto the porch of the house and cries.

The rape finally stops, and the young girl goes back inside. The woman comes out and sits on the porch. Ed can see the pain all over her whole body. He contemplates going to comfort her, but a voice inside his head stops him. Ed realizes the **card** wants him to stop the Edgar Street man from abusing his wife. Ed watches the woman cry and wonders how people survive a life like this.

6 OF DIAMONDS: PIECES

The next day, Ed contemplates what he has seen as he drives. He prays the missions get easier than having to stop a gigantic rapist from brutalizing his wife. Audrey asks Ed about the address on the **card**, but he says he can't tell her what happened.

Ed continues to return to the house and watches as the Edgar Street man continues to rape his wife night after night. One afternoon, while Ed is grocery shopping, he sees the wife pushing her daughter in a shopping cart. Ed watches them, until the wife stumbles in one of the aisles. She appears to fall to pieces for a moment before standing back up. Ed asks her if she's okay and she says yes. Ed knows he must act soon.

Ed's failed attempts to visit the house, even though he doesn't even know what is there, shows how when one builds up the idea of heroism, they may struggle to summon the courage to meet their expectations.



Ed's belief that the world doesn't care about the wife's suffering suggests he sees people as generally selfish. However, Ed's revelation that he has been chosen to care complicates this previous belief, as it suggests there is an outside force sending help for people like the woman. The empathy of the situation remains complicated, because if Ed has been told to care, then his empathy might not be genuine.



Ed's intuition that he must solve the woman's situation rather than just comforting her suggests that he realizes one cannot simply feel sorry for a situation but instead must take action to stop it. This shows that witnessing an injustice will drive even someone as lazy as Ed to want to help and shows how he does possess the potential for genuine heroism.



Ed's exclusion of Audrey shows that he believes in a brand of heroism where the hero must nobly act alone, so as to shield others from the problems the hero must solve.



Ed knows he must act soon because he sees the woman's suffering, showing how feeling empathy for someone in need will compel one to act. The woman's recovery after falling apart also suggests that just because one appears like they can survive their suffering, that doesn't mean another person shouldn't try to help them.



7 OF DIAMONDS: HARRISON AVENUE

Because Ed is cowardly and weak (and he knows it), he decides to abandon the mission of the man and his wife for a while. He feels ashamed of this, but he wants to succeed at the other addresses on the **card** before he undertakes such a difficult mission. Ed decides to go to the second address on the card at the designated time. He sits in the kitchen drinking coffee with his dog and assures himself that the next address must be better than the last.

Ed and his friends play an overly complicated **card** game of their own invention at Audrey's house. As they bicker among themselves, Ed observes Audrey and affirms his hopeless love of her. He wonders what would happen if he confessed his feelings to her. She seems frustrated with his wasted potential, but, Ed reasons, she has slept with plenty of other losers. Yet Ed knows he doesn't just want to sleep with her.

Marv asks Ed what happened after he received the **playing card** in the mail. Ed says he threw the card away, but he thinks back to how earlier that night, he went to the second address on the card. Through the window, Ed watched the house's one resident, an elderly woman, eat dinner all alone. Ed could tell just from watching the woman interact with her kitchen appliances that she is kind, but incredibly lonely. Even hours later, Ed still feels transformed by observing her kindness.

Ed is so distracted by his worries about the old woman and whether or not she is okay that he forgets to play his turn in the **card** game. He makes a deal with himself: if he draws the Ace of Diamonds, he will go help the old woman. He draws that exact card from the deck and smiles to himself. Audrey winks at him, as if she understands what has just happened.

The next day, Ed has put on his nicest clothes and picked up a cake from the bakery. The cashier at the bakery turns out to be Misha, the bank teller from the robbery. She calls Ed a hero, but he feels more like a fool. She tells him she quit the bank job because her boss was sexually harassing her. Ed feels bad for Misha, since she had to quit just because someone else was acting inappropriately.

Ed's inability to face the man at the first address conflicts with his previous assumptions about heroism. It seems here that heroism is not a trait one inherently finds within themselves, but instead a practice that one builds upon as they face greater and greater challenges.



Ed sees success in life as intrinsically linked to success in romantic relationships, so Audrey's supposed rejection of him contributes to his overall frustration with his life. Still, he recognizes here that there's more to meaningful relationships than just sex, indicating some growth in his definitions of interpersonal success.



The transformation Ed feels shows how observing the caring attitude of another person has influenced him to become more caring himself. The old woman also proves that one does not need to be surrounded by personal relationships in order to be kind, and also that being a caring person is not an act that one does for the approval of others; it seems to have its own inherent worth.



Ed's dependency on drawing the right card shows how one can use fate as an excuse to either do or not do a difficult task. One could interpret Ed's success in drawing the ace as either an outside force influencing his life or him ascribing meaning to random chance in order to avoid making his own decisions.



Ed's supposed act of heroism at the bank failed to solve the teller's real problem of sexual harassment, showing how these dramatic, one-off acts of heroism often fail to change enduring societal problems such as sexism. Misha having to quit because of the actions of another also shows that Ed is not the only person whose life is strongly influenced by outside forces.



Ed approaches the old woman's house and knocks on the door. The woman greets him excitedly by calling him Jimmy and saying she always knew he would come. She smiles and hugs him before inviting him inside for dinner. Ed sits down at the dining room table and he and the woman joke around and reminisce about "old times." From the dining room table, Ed can see people rushing past outside. He also sees the woman's ID card, which reveals that her name is Milla.

Ed's morality is complicated in this scene, because he is lying to a clearly confused elderly woman by pretending to be somebody he is not, but this lie brings the woman great joy. This suggests that in certain situations, a seemingly immoral act like lying is justified because the act is an expression of caring for another person.



Milla and Ed sit down for dinner and Milla tells him all about her day. After dinner, Milla asks Ed (whom she keeps addressing as Jimmy) where he has been all this time. The sadness in her eyes as she speaks deeply troubles Ed, before he tells Milla that he has been looking for her. Hearing this makes Milla happy again. Eventually, she says that she should say goodnight. Before Ed leaves, she asks him if she will see him again. Ed answers yes, absolutely. On his walk home after seeing Milla, Ed realizes the **card**'s message is that he should heal Milla's loneliness.

Ed's revelation about being called to spend time with a lonely woman shows a shift in his perspective where he realizes that helping others does not require dramatic, dangerous acts of heroism like stopping a bank robbery, but instead involves being present and empathetic for another person in need. Ed must pretend to be Jimmy in order to do this, showing in a rather literal way that helping others is not about who one is, but who one can become.



8 OF DIAMONDS: BEING JIMMY

One day, while Ed is visiting his Ma, he realizes she has replaced the coffee table she got him with one Tommy, Ed's brother, bought her. When Ed expresses offense at this, Ma insults his personal taste and his abilities until he leaves. Ed thinks about how he prefers being Jimmy over being himself.

Ed's preference of being Jimmy shows how adopting the identity of another can give someone the freedom from their personal issues needed in order to improve oneself and help others.



Later that evening, when Ed goes to visit Milla, she asks him to read to her. He reads [Wuthering Heights](#) to her until she falls asleep. In the book, Ed finds a love note dated back to 1941, addressed to Milla from Jimmy. At the next visit, Milla shows Ed a photo album and points out how handsome he used to be. Suddenly, she asks him if she treated him right. Ed assures her that she was the best wife anyone could have. Milla cries and laughs.

Milla's questions and tears show that caring for someone, like she clearly cares for Jimmy, can come with the burden of loss and doubt. However, her laughter and Ed's ability to reassure her show that caring for another person also leads to beauty and joy, which seems to make the act of caring worth the burdens it may cause.



A few days later, Ed is playing **cards** with his friends at his house when the phone rings. The caller asks Ed, "How's it going, Jimmy?" before hanging up. Stunned by the call, Ed returns to his card game. Audrey looks at him with concern, and Ed wants to tell her what's wrong, but he knows her opinion won't change what he has to do. He knows he has fulfilled his mission for Milla by giving her companionship, but now he must move on to the next address.

The caller addressing Ed as Jimmy, and Ed's interpretation of this as a sign he must move on, shows how while assuming a different identity helped Ed care for Milla, he cannot use this as a crutch to keep from improving himself. Though he's not yet sure how he'll do it, Ed knows that he needs to keep becoming stronger and more courageous if he wants to be of real service to others.



Later, Ed takes the Doorman to the cemetery to visit Ed's father's grave and look at the other tombstones. There, Ed runs into the cemetery security guard and asks him if he knows a grave with the name Johnson on it. Eventually, Ed finds the grave of James Johnson, who died in 1942 serving his country. Ed realizes Milla has been waiting all this time for Jimmy to finally return to her.

The cemetery and the graves show a continued preoccupation with the past for both Ed and Milla, contributing to the idea that one's past inescapably influences the present. However, Ed's ability to bring Jimmy back to Milla also shows how empathy can bring closure to past hurts.



9 OF DIAMONDS: THE BAREFOOT GIRL

Ed decides to move on to the third address on the **card** at the designated time of 5:30 am. He waits outside a nice house until a figure wearing athletic clothes, but no shoes, emerges. Ed hides as he watches the figure run down the street. He waits for the figure to return, and as he is about to leave, he runs into her. He realizes she is a teenage girl and is overcome by her incredible beauty. They make eye contact, but she looks down as she continues running. Ed leaves, still unsure of what this girl could possibly need.

The good condition of the house and the lack of apparent need suggest that even if a person needs help, that need might not be immediately obvious. Furthermore, Ed's continued wondering at how to help the girl demonstrates that in order to care for another person, one must first try to better understand the person they wish to help.



Ed continues to watch the girl run in the morning. One day, he decides to run behind her, even though he struggles to keep up. He follows her to the track field, where he watches her do lap after lap. She sees Ed beside the field, but again looks down at the ground. Ed realizes she will never approach him on her own, so he must be the one to talk to her.

The girl's constant downward look and her shyness around Ed suggest that sometimes the help a person needs doesn't involve an obvious external factor (such as abuse or loss) but instead has to do with that person's inner emotional life.



The next time the girl stops on the field, Ed approaches her and introduces himself. The girl reveals that she recognizes Ed from the articles about the bank robbery. She asks Ed why he is following her but takes his word for it when he says he is not a predator. In her soft, perfect voice, she confesses she struggles with conversations and asks if they can spend these mornings together without speaking.

Though, as the girl points out, Ed's following of the girl may seem predatory, he is doing this to help her, showing that caring for people can involve actions which others may view with skepticism. Ed and this girl are also connected by their shared lack of social skills, which suggests that perhaps he can help her by empathizing with her.



Ed continues to stop by the athletic field and watch the girl run every single morning. One day, he decides to observe her as she leaves school. He notes that the girl is fine with her female classmates but horribly shy around boys. Ed hopes she will grow out of her awkwardness, but he knows his job is to help her now.

Ed's perspective has shifted from wishing life would improve to admitting that he must work to make life improve. This shows that, while he does not choose the mission he is given, he is nonetheless learning that he can choose how to proceed with that mission.



Ed attends the girl's athletic meet on the weekend, where he hears the girl's family call her Sophie. As she prepares for her race, Sophie sees Ed and smiles, but looks away immediately after. She wears well-worn spiked shoes, perhaps a good luck charm. Her father tells her that, if she wants it badly enough, she can win the race. Ed now knows what he will do to help Sophie.

Sophie's father's speech represents the view that one can succeed if they choose to try hard enough. This contrasts with Ed's view that one's success is determined by factors beyond their control. Sophie's use of the shoes for good luck shows she sides with Ed's perspective and depends upon fate rather than choice.



Though he suspects all missions won't be so easy, Ed allows himself to appreciate watching Sophie run the race beside another girl, who is just a little bit faster than her. Sophie looks devastated when she loses the race, but her father still applauds her. Sophie's father's quiet support reminds Ed of his own reserved father. As Sophie returns to her family and takes off her old shoes, Ed knows she needs something better.

Sophie's devastation at her loss disproves her father's theory that one can succeed through will alone. Ed's further identification with Sophie through the similarities between their fathers suggests that by helping her, he is also helping himself. This shows that caring for others improves one's own life as well.



10 OF DIAMONDS: THE SHOE BOX

Ed and Audrey are drinking on his front porch when she asks him if he still has the **Ace of Diamonds**. Ed says he is still working on the mission of the card. Ed's not sure if he can handle more missions. In the meantime, he continues to read to Milla and to watch Sophie lose at her races. Ed knows Sophie needs to somehow recreate the spirit she possesses on her morning runs, so Ed hands Sophie's father an empty shoebox to give to her.

The empty shoebox represents Sophie in her most natural state, barefoot. This shows that Ed believes that Sophie already possesses the qualities needed to succeed; she just needs to look within herself and rely on those qualities. This represents the view that the factors behind a person's success are not external but internal—a lesson that Ed hasn't yet applied to his own life.



At the next athletic meet, Sophie is barefoot. However, on the first lap of the race, she trips and falls. She gets back up and sprints as fast and as free as she does in the mornings. She passes all the other runners, until she is tied with the girl who always beats her. As they near the finish line, Sophie is in pain, but has never looked more alive. Sophie comes in second, but Ed sees on her face the same beauty and spirit that is present during her morning runs.

Sophie has failed to achieve society's idea of success, which is winning the race, but she has discovered a greater form success, as shown by the triumph of her inner spirit. This suggests that success should not be defined by the expectations of others, but instead is achieved by creating meaning within oneself.



JACK OF DIAMONDS: ANOTHER STUPID HUMAN

Ed is about to leave the field when Sophie, bloody and scratched from the race, approaches him. She thanks him. He tells her she is beautiful and, this time, Sophie does not look away. She asks Ed if he is a saint. Ed thinks about all the labels he has as a mediocre, sexually inept cabdriver. He tells Sophie that he is "just another stupid human," and walks away.

Ed's comment that he's just human in response to claims of sainthood suggests that one does not have to be special in order to perform saintly acts for another. Instead, like Ed observed Sophie and figured out how to help her, anyone can pay attention to the needs of others and perform great acts of kindness for them.



QUEEN OF DIAMONDS: EDGAR STREET REVISITED

Ed feels uplifted by helping Milla and Sophie, but downtrodden by the thought of the first address. He stays up late every night watching reruns of *The Dukes of Hazzard* and drives his cab the next day with a headache. Ed is playing **cards** with his friends when an impulse suddenly comes over him, compelling him to return to the first mission.

Ed's hesitation over the first mission followed by his eventual resolution that he has to complete it shows that even if helping someone may require sacrifice, one has a moral obligation to do so.



Though nearly paralyzed with fear and hating himself for his own inaction, Ed approaches the front door of the house. He can hear the Edgar Street man assaulting his wife inside. The front door to the house opens and the daughter steps out. She introduces herself as Angelina and asks Ed if he is there to save the family. Ed says he is. Suddenly hopeful, the girl embraces him and points him to her parents' bedroom. However, Ed is frozen, knowing there is nothing he can do to stop what is going on inside. He expects the girl to scream at him for failing to help, but she just says goodbye and goes back inside the house.

Ed's hatred of himself for his inaction suggests that if one witnesses someone in need of help and does not help, one becomes complicit in the injustice. Angelina sees Ed as a hero come to save her. This suggests that because she is a child, she holds the view that help comes from strangers who solve problems with one bold act of bravery. However, Ed proves this view incorrect with his own recognition of the severity of the situation, and Angelina resigns herself to her reality.



Ed lies awake at night, feeling like he is going to go insane after having had to face Angelina directly. Still, he senses that fate wanted him to meet her in order to give him courage. However, he failed. Suddenly, the phone rings. Ed runs to pick it up and the voice on the other end tells him to check his mailbox, before hanging up. Ed immediately reaches into his mailbox and touches something inside that is cold, heavy, and has a trigger.

Though Ed sees it as fate that he met Angelina, he's the one who chose to be on the front porch where he sees Angelina every night. This shows how one can use fate as a justification for their own choices, especially when one must choose to do something difficult, as Ed must do here.



KING OF DIAMONDS: MURDER AT THE CATHEDRAL

Feeling incredibly unlucky, Ed holds a gun with one bullet in it. He wishes he had never stopped the robbery. As he realizes the impossibility of someone as weak and inept as him killing someone with a single bullet, Ed grows angry. He wonders why he was chosen for this task and what will happen if he refuses. To calm down, Ed plays some music. The song "Five Hundred Miles" comes on and Ed feels even crazier. He laments that now his life has a purpose, and that purpose is to kill someone.

The fact that Ed receives the gun and immediately assumes he must use it to kill the man shows his belief in a brand of heroism defined by individual dramatic, violent acts. Ed continues to view fate as a series of misfortunes that turn people like him into victims. At this point, the idea that his life might have a purpose is a burden rather than an inspiration.



The next day, Ed drives his taxi completely exhausted. He thinks about the gun under his mattress and the **card** in his dresser drawer. As Ed returns his taxi to the company lot, he sees Audrey kissing one of their coworkers. He passes them as he goes inside the company office to see his boss, Jerry. He tells the boss he needs to take his taxi home to help his brother move. The boss initially refuses but then agrees when Ed reminds him that he's a good employee. Marv calls Ed later to ask him why he is not at the card game. Ed tells him it's because he has to kill someone, but Marv doesn't take him seriously.

This scene reminds the reader that while Ed is grappling with larger issues of fate and heroism, he is still dealing with the ordinary concerns of his life, such as his crush on Audrey, his job, and his friendships. This suggests that individuals who must perform extraordinary acts of heroism are still normal people with ordinary lives rather than inherently special people.



Ed leaves his house with his taxi, the gun, and a flask full of vodka mixed with sleeping pills. He drives to the main street of his town and waits until he sees the abusive man leaving the pub. He then offers the man a free ride. Once the man gets in, Ed offers him the vodka. Filled with a blind determination, Ed drives out of town, while the man passes out in the passenger seat. Ed parks his taxi on a dirt road up a mountain called the Cathedral. Ed parks and hits the man with his gun until he wakes up. He orders the man out of the car and walks him down the deserted road.

Ed commits morally questionable acts by drugging and beating the man, which again emphasizes that helping others may involve acts that some might perceive as morally wrong. Ed exploits the man's flaws, specifically his abuse of alcohol and his self-serving nature, in order to trap him, showing how one's own selfishness and lack of concern for others can often lead to their own downfall.



The abusive man stumbles and falls. Ed threatens to shoot him. The man starts weeping, but Ed maintains his resolve to kill him. Ed marches him to the edge of the mountain and aims the gun at the back of his head. Suddenly, Ed begins to shake at the thought of killing someone. He asks the reader to imagine what they would do if they were in his place. Ed spends so much time wondering how he will ever live with himself after killing another person that eventually, the man falls asleep.

As the sun rises, Ed wakes up the abusive man. Ed explains that he has been chosen to do what he's doing, and he has been watching the man abuse his family. He tells the man that he is now going to die for that abuse. The man begins to beg for his life, saying he will never hurt his family again. Ed forces him to admit that he feels as scared right now as his wife does every night. Ed fires the gun.

ACE OF CLUBS: AFTERMATH

Ed stumbles into his house. He relives the feeling of the gun in his hands and the sound of the abusive man falling to the ground. He remembers how the man gasped, shocked he was still alive. Ed had shot up at the sky. Ed left that man out on the mountain before driving back. Now, Ed sits on his front porch with his dog and watches the passersby, knowing no one else had to do what he did last night. He wonders again why he was chosen for this mission.

The phone rings. With dread, Ed answers it, but it turns out the caller is Marv. Marv berates Ed again for missing the **card** game. Ed tells him to stop because he had to attempt murder last night. Once again, Marv does not take him seriously. Marv asks him if he is going to participate in the annual football game. Ed zones out until Marv hangs up. Ed stores his gun in his nightstand and falls asleep.

Ed dreams about the abusive man, wondering what he is doing now. He wakes up and returns his cab to work before taking the Doorman for a walk. He feels paranoid, eventually realizing he is waiting for the next **card** to arrive. He walks to Marv's place and sees Marv hanging out with other friends. He thinks about how none of these people will ever leave this town and he accepts this. He tells Marv he will play in the soccer game. Then he returns the Doorman to the house and goes to work. All the while, Ed feels numb, like he isn't himself anymore.

Ed begins the scene committed to the idea of a dramatic, decisive, but violent, act of heroism. However, Ed's hesitation suggests that this brand of heroism, with its violence and its guilt, is not actually the best choice, and so he must consider other ways of being helpful.



Ed forces the man to have empathy for his wife by making him feel the same fear she does. This shows that empathy is a powerful tool for solving injustice. Thus, Ed represents an almost divine force of justice, acting upon the abuser's life and forcing him to change his ways.



Ed's decision not to kill the man shows his rejection of the violent brand of heroism for a more peaceful, redemptive option. Ed's observation of the passersby as wholly different from him not only shows Ed's desire to be exceptional, but also suggests that, in order to solve serious problems like abuse, even ordinary people like Ed must take extraordinary action.



Once again, the narrative reminds the reader that although one must occasionally undertake extraordinary actions, like Ed did with the abusive man, even people who seem heroic still have ordinary concerns like friendships and sports.



Ed's calm acceptance that Marv and his friends will never leave their town shows a shift in his perspective. Whereas before he believed an individual was defined by the quality of their community, performing extraordinary acts within his own community has shown Ed that one can choose to commit meaningful acts no matter where they are. Ed's disassociation from himself also shows how committing caring acts transforms one's identity.



The next day, Ed sits in the park with the Doorman. He runs into Sophie, who tells him that she misses him. Ed says he misses her too. But Ed knows he misses the honesty and purity she represents. He asks her if she is still running barefoot. She says yes. Finally, Sophie begins to leave. Before she does, however, she asks Ed if he's okay. Ed says he's waiting for the next **card** and he's not ready for it, but he'll receive the card anyway. Sophie leaves and Ed decides to head back home.

Ed's recognition of how Sophie's honest spirit inspires him shows how by choosing to perform caring acts, one can learn to see the beauty present in their community. Ed's acceptance that he will receive the next card whether he is ready or not also reminds the reader that one cannot choose what fate gives them, but instead must accept and work with whatever they receive.



2 OF CLUBS: THE VISIT

A few days pass without a **card** arriving. Ed visits the abusive man's house, but he's nowhere to be found. Ed feels guilty, wondering if the man is okay and if he made the right decision by not killing him. One night, Ed returns from playing **cards** and his house smells like pie baking in the oven. He sees a man in the kitchen, wearing a mask and eating a pie. The last thing Ed remembers is realizing there's another man standing behind him.

Ed's concern for the abusive man, despite his significant flaws, shows how caring for others has changed Ed into a generally more empathetic person. On the flip side, the presence of the mysterious and seemingly violent men in Ed's house hints that a life dedicated to helping others will involve higher stakes and greater sacrifice than one might expect.



Ed wakes up to the Doorman licking his bloody face. He is lying on his kitchen floor, and his head hurts too much to move. He drifts into unconsciousness before someone begins dragging him across the floor. His vision begins to focus on the two men in front of him. The men complain about the Doorman's smell, as Ed begs them not to hurt his dog. The men assure him they won't hurt his pitiful excuse for a guard dog, as they continue to eat pies they stole from Ed's fridge.

The men's violence shows the high sacrifice one may have to make in order to undertake a mission of helping others. However, the absurdity of the men eating pies while beating Ed up and their refusal to hurt the dog show that the outside force behind Ed's mission is not entirely malevolent.



Ed asks the men who sent them. The men say they don't know; they just do what they are paid to do. When Ed complains that he doesn't get paid, one of the men slaps him and tells him to stop complaining, because they all must make sacrifices for the "greater good of mankind." Ed whines about not getting a pie and the man slaps him again and tells him to grow up. The men chat causally between themselves about their masks, addressing each other as Daryl and Keith. Ed joins in and can feel a camaraderie growing between the three of them.

Since the men are in a similar situation to Ed, where they receive instructions without knowing who sent them, this scene suggests that the mission to help others involves more than just one individual acting alone. The camaraderie Ed feels with these men, who previously seemed threatening, shows how working together for the idea of a "greater good" can unite previously separated individuals.



Daryl and Keith decide the time has come for them to leave, so they take find Ed's gun and hand Ed an envelope. Before they go, Daryl says that he has been instructed to tell Ed that he's been doing a good job so far. Daryl says, though he knows he is not allowed to, that he and Keith know Ed did not kill the abusive man. Then he punches Ed in the stomach and leaves. Ed falls on the floor and passes out from pain.

Daryl saying that Ed is doing a good job emphasizes that Ed is making the moral choice by making sacrifices for the sake of helping others. Daryl's knowledge that Ed did not kill anyone suggests all Ed's actions are being watched, which adds to the tension surrounding the question of whether Ed's mission is part of fate or part of someone else's plan.



3 OF CLUBS: THE ENVELOPE

Alone with only the dog to help him, Ed struggles to stand up. He picks up the envelope from the floor. Hesitant at the knowledge that the next mission could be uplifting or horrifying, he slowly opens the envelope. Inside, he finds the **Ace of Clubs** and a letter. The letter tells Ed that he did well with the last assignment, and that the letter writer knows Daryl and Keith told Ed about knowing the abusive man is not dead. The writer compliments Ed on handling that situation well. The writer reports that the abusive man has fled town.

The letter writer asks Ed if he is ready for the next **card**, but then says it doesn't matter. Ed completed the last card even though he wasn't ready for that one either. The writer concludes the letter by telling Ed that his life depends on his choice to "keep delivering." Trembling, Ed picks up the card. Instead of addresses, written on the card are the words: "Say a prayer at the stones of home." Ed has no idea what this clue means. He falls asleep and is still bleeding when he wakes up. Ed attempts to ignore the card, but he cannot enjoy his usual hobbies of reading or watching TV. He can only sit there and bleed.

4 OF CLUBS: JUST ED

Audrey asks Ed if he has received a new **card** and wonders why he looks so beat-up. He has come over to her house for help, but the coworker she was kissing before is in her house. The coworker asks who's at the door and Audrey responds, "Just Ed." Ed begins walking away. Audrey calls after him, asking him if he will be home later. He hurries away but falls and trips, all the while referring to himself as "Just Ed." Audrey pursues him and promises him she will see him later. Ed thinks about how she looked so beautiful standing in her doorway (after obviously spending the night with the coworker) and he himself just looks like a mess.

Ed places the **Ace of Clubs** next to the Ace of Diamonds in his drawer. He imagines having all of the aces, and how this would be an excellent hand in any card game. But he knows this is not a game. Later, Audrey arrives at his house to talk about the cards. She asks Ed what he had to do at the addresses on the Ace of Diamonds. Ed tells her the truth about the old woman he read to, the beautiful girl he inspired, and the abusive man he had to kill. Audrey asks him if he actually killed someone and he snaps at her. Ed then feels regret for being angry at her and for inviting her into the painful, beautiful life he has been living since he received the first card.

The letter's ability to predict what happened between Ed and the men suggests an omniscient force dictating Ed's life, which further emphasizes the idea that an individual does not have control over their own fate. The letter writer's approval of Ed not killing anyone suggests the writer also subscribes to the nonviolent form of heroism Ed practiced with the man.



The letter writer saying that it doesn't matter if Ed is ready for the next mission suggests that an individual does not need to feel ready to help others; they simply must see an injustice and then choose to rise to the occasion. Ed's life depending upon the mission could be interpreted as a death threat, raising the stakes of Ed's choices. These words also suggest that one's purpose in life depends (perhaps literally) upon their ability to care for others.



Ed's obsession with the phrase "Just Ed," spoken by his crush to her lover, shows how he believes he is denied sexual success due to his ordinariness. This moment indicates that when one becomes obsessed with the idea of success as defined by sexual relationships, they create greater frustration for themselves and also separate themselves from loved ones, as Ed separates himself here from Audrey even though she clearly cares about him.



Ed's thought about the aces shows how even when fate deals someone what they expect to be a positive situation, there is no guarantee that things will turn out as expected. This also shows how serious Ed now considers his life to be, which suggests that caring for others can lead one to thinking more purposefully about their own life.



Ed tells Audrey that he did not kill the abusive man, just scared him enough to convince him to leave town. Audrey asks if the man deserved what happened to him and Ed becomes outraged that he has to worry about such issues while all his other friends are just living their normal lives. Audrey reminds him that he was chosen, and that some of the missions on the **card**, like Sophie and Milla, were uplifting. And even if the mission with the abusive man was difficult, she argues, the difficulty was worth saving the man's family. Ed admits that he agrees he just wishes he were more competent, so that the missions would be easier.

Ed keeps rambling until he accidentally confesses that he also wishes Audrey were dating him and not their coworker. Audrey looks away, and they sit in silence until Audrey tells Ed he is her best friend. Ed feels like dying. They sit in silence and Ed is exhausted. He knows he has to rise above his own feelings, because the mission of the **cards** has just begun.

5 OF CLUBS: CABS, THE HOOKER, AND ALICE

Later that night, Ed is driving his taxi in the city and enjoying the quiet. He picks up a rough-looking woman he assumes is a sex worker. She addresses him as "honey" and "sweetie" as he drives her to a hotel. As she gets out of the taxi, she tells Ed that he looks nice. She says that, unlike her clients, Ed can call her by her real name, Alice. She tells him not to worry so much, before walking away.

Ed waits for Alice to turn around and say something else, until a car behind him honks and he has to drive away. As he drives, he imagines himself having sex with Alice. He is so distracted he almost runs a red light, but he enjoys the welcome distraction from his worries about Audrey and the **cards**.

6 OF CLUBS: THE STONES

Ed returns home to only his dog to keep him company. He feels ready to quit complaining and proceed with his mission. He stands on his front porch and feels as if he can conquer the entire world. He wonders how many people have something like his life happen to them. And of those who do, how many try to make the most of it? Ed puts the Doorman on a leash, and they go for a walk to find the "stones of home" listed on the **Ace of Clubs**. Unfortunately, Ed still has no idea where to look.

Ed's outrage shows that the concepts of fate and moral obligation are far more complicated than the traditional narrative of whether or not one deserves what happens to them. Audrey's comments and Ed's agreement also demonstrates how close friendships like theirs can influence one to have a more moral, more positive perspective on one's own life.



Ed's commitment to rising above his feelings shows how having a purpose greater than oneself, such as Ed's mission to help others, can uplift one in circumstances that might otherwise be devastating.



Though Ed's passenger is an individual often discriminated against by society, she shows him genuine compassion. This shows that one does not need to hold a high status in society in order to show compassion to the others. In fact, this scene suggests, maybe those who experience adversity are the best equipped to empathize with others.



Ed's fantasies show that he still desires the success he associates with sex, which indicates that his ideas about success haven't yet completely transformed, even though he's starting to understand other ways of defining success.



Ed realizes that complaining and negativity cannot change the forces beyond his control. Ed's change of attitude shows that while one may not be able to control the circumstances they are given, like Ed cannot change the cards given to him, one can improve themselves by changing their perspective on their situation.



The week goes by and Ed lives his normal routine of playing **cards**, driving his cab, and practicing for the soccer game with Marv. Marv still lives with his parents and saves most of his money in the bank. Marv chats with Ed about the upcoming soccer game but Ed is still thinking about the “stones of home.” Marv tells Ed not to think so much, like Marv used to obsess over his girlfriend who suddenly left him. Ed feels like he should ask more questions about Marv’s life, but he does not feel like they will ever be that close as friends. Instead, he just asks Marv what he would do if there were some place he needed to be that he couldn’t get to. Marv says he’d be frustrated.

Ed looks at maps and reads local history books but still cannot figure out where he needs to go. He goes back to the first house from the first **card** and sees that the wife and daughter are now happy without their abusive father. He continues to read to Milla. He watches Sophie run her races. Then at work one night, the answer suddenly comes to him.

While driving, Ed keeps looking for Alice, but never sees her. Around four in the morning, he picks up his final customer of the night, a young man dressed all in black. When Ed asks him where he wants to go, the young man says, “Drive, Ed.” Ed knows this customer is going to the stones of home. While Ed drives, the young man stares at him angrily. Ed asks him if he knows Daryl and Keith and the young man threatens him in response. They drive down to the river.

Ed pulls over near the river and reads the fare out to the young man. The young man refuses to pay, even when Ed insists. Suddenly, the young man jumps out and runs towards the river. Ed chases after him. Ed remembers a similar situation where he was chasing after his younger brother, who was always faster than him. They used to race each other to the river and Ed always lost, even the one time he truly tried to win. Ed once again finds himself chasing a faster, smarter, stronger person.

Ed collapses from exhaustion. He hears the young man laugh before he disappears. He stands alone in the darkness and listens to the river. He realizes that in his pursuit, he left his taxi unlocked with the keys inside. Though he knows he should return to his car, he stays by the river as the sun begins to rise. He thinks about how he and his brother used to fish upstream while standing on smooth rocks.

Marv’s discussion of trying not to think about his ex-girlfriend suggests that everyone, even an individual who previously appeared to be as flawed and shallow as Marv, has experienced their own pain which they may need others to help them with. However, Ed’s inability to talk to Marv about this loss shows how one may find it difficult to express caring even toward their friends.



Ed’s visitation of his past missions show that the act of caring is not a single event which one completes and then leaves behind, but rather an ongoing practice which both changes the life of the individual who is helped and uplifts the spirits of the one who does the helping.



Because it will soon be revealed that this young man is part of Ed’s mission, his dark clothing and intense anger represent the sacrifice and resentment that can sometimes go along with helping other people.



Ed’s recollection of his childhood with his brother hints that his mission will begin to have deeper significance for Ed personally. Ed’s thoughts about his brother also show that skewed ideas of success, such as the one Ed holds, may originate from childhood failures and frustrations.



The unlocked taxi represents the ordinary worries of Ed’s life. Ed’s decision to stay by the river instead of returning to his taxi suggests that the greater purpose of helping others is more important than one’s ordinary concerns—and that Ed is finally beginning to accept this, even if he doesn’t explicitly acknowledge it yet.



Ed struggles his way upstream to the stones. The sun is rising, and his cab doors are still unlocked. Ed pictures his brother and himself climbing over the stones. He realizes this is the “home” the **card** was referring to. At the rocks, he finds three names written. Lacking pen and paper, Ed records the names in his mind. He repeats them over and over again as he walks to his cab. When he arrives, he finds his keys safely hidden in the sun visor.

The mention of “home” hints at the fact that Ed may have to resolve his issues with his family in order to progress with his mission. This development suggests that in order to help others, one must also learn how to help themselves. The keys hidden in the sun visor implies a benevolent outside force helping Ed along on his mission.



7 OF CLUBS: THE PRIEST

Ed looks up the first name on the rocks, Thomas O'Reilly, and finds two T. O'Reillys in the phonebook. One lives in the richer part of Ed's town, the other in the poorer neighborhood. Though Ed knows he probably has the help the one living in the poorer neighborhood, he goes to the other T. O'Reilly's home first just to make sure.

Two people with the same name living in very different places implies that they are very different people. This shows that individuals living very different lives could both be in need of help, even if Ed understands that the reality of poverty makes one of the men the more likely candidate.



When Ed knocks on the front door of T. O'Reilly's house, a tall, friendly man greets him and invites him inside. Ed asks him if his name is Thomas O'Reilly, but the man says his name is Tony. He adds that his brother's name is Thomas. Before Ed can leave, Tony asks what he wants with Thomas. Ed says he doesn't know. Tony instructs Ed to tell Thomas that greed hasn't destroyed Tony yet. He gives Ed one last warning that Thomas is a priest.

Tony's comment about greed suggests deep philosophical differences between the two brothers. This suggests that even family members may struggle to understand and care for each other. Tony warning Ed about Thomas being a priest suggests that morality is about to play an even bigger role in Ed's ongoing mission.



Later that night, Ed is talking to his own brother, Tommy, on the phone. He is asking Tommy if he is the one sending the **cards**, because Tommy is the only one who would have known about them fishing off the stones as children. Tommy says Ed seems to always attract weird situations. Finally, Ed briefly asks Tommy how he is doing and receives an equally brief answer. They hang up.

The similarity between the names Tommy and Thomas suggests that Ed and his brother also have a strained relationship like Tony and Thomas. This parallel hints that by helping others heal their estranged relationships, Ed might be able to improve his own relationships as well.



Before attending a **card** game, Ed goes to the neighborhood where Thomas O'Reilly lives. The street is full of rundown houses, and Father O'Reilly's house is no exception. Before Ed can approach the house, three large strangers begin hassling him for money, cigarettes, and his jacket. Scared, Ed quickly walks the other way and leaves the neighborhood.

The rundown nature of O'Reilly's house and the seemingly dangerous nature of his neighbors suggests that O'Reilly may be in great need of Ed's help. This shows that the factors that make it difficult to help someone are sometimes the same factors that show why someone needs help.



Later, while playing **cards** at Ritchie's place, Ed asks Ritchie where his parents are, since he still lives with them. Ritchie says he doesn't know. Ed has a streak of good luck and wins several card games. Marv keeps rambling on about the soccer game. Audrey continues to treat Ed carefully and awkwardly, as she has ever since he confessed his desire for her. Ed offers her a small smile to let her know their friendship is still okay.

After the **card** game, Audrey comes over to Ed's house. Ed realizes how dirty his house is and feels even more sorry for himself for being unable to date Audrey and unable to complete his mission. But then he imagines himself conquering the mission with Father O'Reilly, despite the thugs that lurk outside the priest's front door. Ed tells Audrey about the stonies of home and that there are three new people waiting for him. She says whoever is doing all this must know him very well. Ed says that no one knows him very well. Even he doesn't believe that he truly knows himself.

Ed returns to Father O'Reilly's house and the priest happily invites him in. The priest is a bald man in his mid-40s. Ed is about to explain why he's come when O'Reilly's neighbors begin screaming at each other. The Father opens the window and asks them what's wrong. The neighbor couple details their marital fight to the Father, who tells them to be kinder to each other. Ed asks how he can stand living next to all that fighting, but the priest says this is why he lives here.

Ed and the Father discuss their respective careers. The Father curses and tells Ed very few people come to his church these days. To Ed's relief, the priest does not lecture him on religion. Instead, he asks Ed why he came here. Ed tells him that he has a purpose for being here; he just doesn't know what that purpose is yet. The priest says that purpose reveals itself in time and Ed should "have faith."

Father O'Reilly walks Ed down the street. On the way, he tells the three thugs from yesterday, all of whom he knows by name, not to both Ed anymore. They all agree. Before the Father leaves, Ed tells him what Tony said about not being destroyed by greed. The Father admits he hasn't spoken to his brother in a while. For the first time, Ed views the Father as simply human, rather than a priest.

Ed's streak of good luck contrasts with his bad luck at Father Thomas's house, showing how Ed still believes that luck determines one's life. Audrey's concern for her friendship with Ed shows that one does not need to have a sexual relationship with someone in order to still care for and value them.



Ed's continued focus on his personal failures, despite his other successes, shows that a pessimistic, self-deprecating attitude like Ed's is difficult to overcome. However, his ability to look forward to the future shows how succeeding at helping others can change one's perspective on their own abilities.



Father O'Reilly subverts expectations by living in an impoverished, chaotic neighborhood not because of his own issues, but because he wants to help other people with their own issues. This shows that to help others, one must first seek out and interact with those most in need, even at personal cost to oneself.



Ed and the Father's discussion of purpose shows that one's purpose in life may not always be clearly defined, but one must still trust that if they are striving to care for others, they are on the right path to a meaningful life. This is the "faith" Father O'Reilly refers to.



The Father's friendship with the thugs from earlier suggests that one should care for an individual even if they might at first appear mean or scary. The Father's estrangement from his brother also shows how even the saintliest of individuals still have ordinary problems like family conflict.



Later, Ed is at Marv's house. Marv realizes with disgust that Ed has brought along the Doorman. Marv hates the Doorman and the Doorman always barks at Marv. The friends play **cards**, and Ed draws the Ace of Clubs in their third game. Ed thinks about Father O'Reilly and asks his friends if they will go to church with him on Sunday. Ritchie, easygoing as always, agrees and then Marv and Audrey agree too.

That night, Ed's mother calls. She reminds him to call his sister, Kath, because it is her birthday, and then immediately hangs up. Ed realizes he does not have his sister's phone number, so reluctantly he calls his mother back. Ed spares the reader the details of the tirade that inevitably follows.

On Sunday, Ed, Marv, Ritchie, and Audrey are all in church. Ed sees that the church is old and depressing and only filled with about a dozen people. Father O'Reilly comes out and looks dejectedly around the mostly empty sanctuary. He spots Ed and gives a special welcome to all the cabdrivers present. After the ceremony, the friends sit on the church lawn and Marv, hungover, complains about the sermon. Father O'Reilly comes up and thanks them all for coming. He says he hopes to see them next week, but Marv says he won't be coming. Ed now knows he must fill the Father's church with people.

8 OF CLUBS: JUVENILES

Ed drives his taxi around while thinking about ways to get people to come to church. An idea comes to him when one of his customers asks him to drop him off at a pub. Ed realizes that free beer is only thing guaranteed to bring in a crowd. When Ed tells Father O'Reilly about his idea to throw a big event with free beer and food at the church on Sunday, the Father says they could do that, but the church has no money. Ed offers his own savings.

Ed's friends decide to spray paint the news about the Sunday event around town. Marv also delights in other immature schemes, such as stealing barbecues from their friends. They gather a bouncy castle, a karaoke machine, kegs of beer, and hot dogs. All over town, they spray paint advertisements to come to the church on Sunday for free beer and the chance to meet a priest. Ed feels a newfound closeness with Marv as Marv helps him paint. They laugh and run around, and Ed feels confident and content for the first time in a long time.

Ed noticing the Ace of Clubs and connecting it to his mission shows that he still believes fate drives his mission. This suggests again that an individual can interpret random happenings to reinforce the choices they believe they should make anyway.



The lack of closeness in Ed's family mirrors the distance in Father O'Reilly's family. This parallel shows that often, those one is supposed to be closest to are often the same individuals one struggles to express caring for.



Father O'Reilly's disappointment over low church attendance suggests that this clearly friendly and caring person wishes to minister to and help more people. This scene indicates that one's purpose in life can be to help another person care for others, as Ed realizes he must help Father O'Reilly influence more people. The Father's sadness also shows that those who help others also need help themselves.



Ed's idea of free beer shows that helping others often involves unconventional, offbeat thinking. Ed offering to invest his own savings in order to help Father O'Reilly, without a second thought, shows how the continuous act of helping people transforms an individual into a more selfless person.



Marv's immaturity actually becomes a strength in helping the priest, showing that anyone can use their personal traits to help others. The closeness Ed feels with Marv also shows how working together for a greater good can bring individuals together.



Everyone in town, including the police, notices the graffiti. The police come to talk to Father O'Reilly about the vandalism, but he placates them with the promise of free beer. Ed knows that all kinds of people, from the alcoholics to the atheists to the Satanists, will be at the church on Sunday. On Saturday, the Father visits Ed at his house. The Father tells Ed that some people who are not involved with the church or God still do saintly acts. He says Ed is one of these people. Ed doesn't deny this compliment, like he did when Sophie called him a saint.

Also on Saturday, Ed travels around town. He invites Sophie and her family to church. He asks Milla if he can take her to church with him tomorrow. Finally, he stops at Tony O'Reilly's house. He asks Tony if he has seen the graffiti. In response, Tony invites Ed into his home. Hesitantly, Tony explains that he and his brother are estranged. Ed says Tony does not need to talk about it if he doesn't want to, and Tony seems relieved. One of Tony's children comes in, whining about a fight with his brother before asking for some soda. Tony casually mentions to Ed that they might be at church tomorrow.

Ed and his friends arrive at the church early Sunday morning. The Father is there, looking anxious. Soon, people begin to arrive with the kegs of beer, the bouncy castle, and the barbecues. Then many more guests arrive. Ed asks to borrow Marv's car so he can pick up Milla, even though Marv teases him for always making fun of his car. When Ed returns to the church with Milla, he is shocked to see the place filled with people. Even his Ma is there. Ed stands in the back and waits for the Father to come out.

The Father greets the crowd, and everyone cheers for him. The Father begins to play a harmonica and is joined by a band. They play a song that he dedicates to God, and then he gives a short speech about the importance of the people of the town working together and helping each other. He invites the thugs from his neighborhood to read from the Bible.

During the final song of the church service, Ed spots Tony and his children. Father O'Reilly also sees Tony. He begins the final prayer by thanking God for all the people gathered there, for free beer, and for the fact that his brother is there. Lastly, he thanks a certain special person. Ed silently prays for Audrey, Marv, Ma, Ritchie, and his late father. He also prays for help in his missions.

The Father's immense gratitude shows that one should help the individuals who spend all their time helping others, because this reversal has a greater impact upon those individuals' lives. Additionally, the fact that Ed accepts the compliment of sainthood this time, when he denied a similar compliment earlier in the novel, shows how the act of helping others can help people like Ed improve their low opinions of themselves.



Here, Ed shows that it's not necessary to know all the details about another person's problems in order to feel empathy for that person. What's more, Tony's comment that he might come to the church the next day shows that healing between estranged individuals does not necessarily involve bold, dramatic actions, but can be as simple as being present for each other.



The successful attendance at the church shows that when one puts in great effort to help others, as Ed did for Father O'Reilly, they will receive incredible rewards. Meanwhile, Ed's acceptance of Marv's teasing over the car, when at the beginning of the novel they fought over this, shows how undertaking the mission to help others has allowed Ed to mature.



The Father's speech sums up the philosophy of Ed's mission: individuals should take care of each other. This suggests that when an individual helps another, like Ed helping the Father reach more people, the act sends a positive message to the community.



Father O'Reilly's gratefulness at seeing his brother further emphasizes the idea that caring people like Father O'Reilly still need healing within their own lives. Ed's prayers highlight the idea that a higher power may be supporting individuals in their missions to help others, even though Ed still isn't sure who or what is behind the cards.



After the service, the crowd gathers for food, drink, and karaoke. Ed dances with Audrey, Milla, and Sophie. After the party, Ed and his friends clean up. Before he leaves for the day, Ed sees Father O'Reilly and his brother Tony sitting together and smoking. Ed knows this moment will not completely heal the rift in their relationship, but that it is nonetheless meaningful in itself.

Ed's thoughts on seeing Father O'Reilly and his brother together further emphasize the idea that helping others does not mean dramatically solving all their problems, but rather means encouraging people toward beginning to solve their own problems.



9 OF CLUBS: THE COPS SHOW UP

Sunday night, Father O'Reilly comes over to Ed's house. Speechless, the Father places his hands on Ed's shoulders and gazes into his eyes. Ed witnesses a sense of peace and holiness come across the Father's face. Ed realizes that the Father is unused to thanking people, because he is usually the one helping others. Ed tells the Father not to worry and they enjoy a moment of silent happiness between them.

Ed telling the Father not to worry shows that one should commit acts of caring not for expectation of being thanked, but because caring is the moral thing to do. Caring is especially valuable when done for a person who always cares for others, such as Father O'Reilly.



The police come to Ed's house with cleaning supplies for the graffiti around town. Ed finds himself, late at night, wiping paint off the road. He asks God, "Why me?" but receives no response. Ed laughs and appreciates his life.

Notably, Ed does not ask "Why me?" in a negative tone, as he usually does when he laments fate. By learning to appreciate his own life, Ed has come to view the forces of fate—whatever they might be—as positive rather than negative.



10 OF CLUBS: THE EASY ONE AND ICE CREAM

Ed moves on to the next name on the stones, Angie Carusso. He looks her up in the phonebook and discovers she is a pharmacist with three kids, whom she walks to school every single day. Ed observes that as soon as she gets paid, she always takes her kids to the park and buys them ice cream. Ed knows exactly what he has to do for Angie, and he knows this task will be easy. He watches Angie and her children leave the playground and feels sad that Angie seems to move too slowly for her young age.

Angie's life, which she spends caring for her children to the point of exhaustion, hints at the downsides of being completely dedicated to others. Ed's decision to act shows that others have a moral obligation to take care of individuals like Angie, who rarely take care of themselves. Ed's task for Angie also shows that while helping others can be difficult, it is also sometimes easy.



Ed works during the day and spends his nights walking around town. He visits the house of the abusive man and watches the wife and daughter eating dinner by themselves. He passes by Milla's house and checks on Father O'Reilly. His church is not as full as it was on the Sunday of the party but has far more people in it than before Ed intervened. He also searches for the third name on the stones, Gavin Rose. Unfortunately, he discovers, teenage Gavin is a horrible person.

Ed visiting the houses of those he has helped suggests that acts of caring for others have lasting effects upon their lives. Therefore, Ed also has a lasting influence on their lives, which makes him somewhat like the significant historical figures he used to envy, even though he started out as such an ordinary person.



Ed watches Gavin harass shop owners, steal from shops, and pushing around weaker children. Gavin lives with his hard-drinking mother and equally criminal brother in the poor part of town. The brothers fight constantly. One night, Ed sees the older brother, Daniel, severely beat Gavin on the front lawn of their house. Afterward, Gavin walks down the street, grumbling about killing his brother. Ed sees an opportunity.

Gavin's flaws show that one has a moral obligation to help others even if those in need of help may not immediately seem worthy. In fact, those with flaws may be in the most need of help, as implied by the fact that the card has directed Ed to this specific dysfunctional family.



Ed approaches where Gavin is sitting on the side of the street. Gavin tells him to go away or else he will beat him up, but Ed refuses to leave. He sits down a little bit away from Gavin and asks him what happened. Gavin answers that his brother is a jerk. He repeats again that he wants to kill Daniel. Ed leaves, thinking about how these boys need to experience the real world for once in their lives.

Ed's opinion that Gavin needs to experience the real world shows that Ed defines reality as something beyond the mundane squabbling of families. Ed's reflections here suggest that, in order to mature into a more moral individual, one must be exposed to forces beyond their immediate family and home.



JACK OF CLUBS: THE COLOR OF HER LIPS

On payday, Ed watches Angie take her kids to the ice cream shop and then the park. After they leave the shop, Ed goes inside and buys an ice cream cone. He walks up to Angie and her kids and explains that he has seen Angie buy ice cream for her kids but none for herself. He says that he believes Angie deserves ice cream too, and hands her his cone. Angie hesitantly takes the ice cream and then begins to eat it. Her children leave to go play, and Ed sits with her on the bench as she savors her ice cream.

Ed giving Angie the ice cream demonstrates that caring for others does not have to involve flashy, dramatic sacrifices. Instead, caring can be as simple as a small act which lets someone know that they matter. Angie's savoring of the ice cream further suggests that small acts of caring can have a large impact on those who need a little kindness in their lives.



Angie watches her children on the playground. She explains to Ed how she loves and appreciates her children, but her life is difficult as a single mother of three kids. She begins to cry because, as Ed realizes, she is always giving herself to others and no one ever gives to her. She thanks Ed and asks him his name. One of Angie's children approaches and promises to give her mother a part of her ice cream next time. Ed still feels sorry for Angie, but he also feels content.

Ed's act of caring is not just giving Angie the ice cream, but also allowing Angie to express the sadness she feels she cannot express to anyone else. This shows the great impact empathy can have even between strangers. Additionally, the promise of Angie's child shows how kind acts can inspire further kindness among others.



QUEEN OF CLUBS: BLOOD AND ROSES

Ed knows his next task is helping Gavin and his brother. He doesn't believe that Gavin and Daniel have ever truly had to deal with an outside force attacking their family. So, Ed waits until Gavin and Daniel have another fight and Gavin runs out of the house. He stops at the same place down the street as last time.

Ed expresses the view that in order for an individual to mature, one needs to confront the outside forces that dictate one's life and learn to cope with and grow from these circumstances.



Ed grabs Gavin by the shirt collar and pulls him into the bushes. Ed punches him over and over again. He can tell Gavin is scared but he continues. Ed does not like hitting Gavin, but he cannot seem to stop himself. Finally, Ed pulls himself away and walks away from Gavin's crumpled, injured body.

Ed beating Gavin suggests that sometimes, violence is justified in the pursuit of helping others. However, when one does use violence, one must also use self-control, as shown by Ed's decision to walk away from Gavin.



Ed walks to the nearest phonebooth. Unfortunately, a teenage girl is already using the phone. Ed begins knocking on the door of the booth, until the girl asks him angrily what he wants. He pesters her until she gets off the phone, then he calls Gavin's house. When Daniel answers, Ed tells him that his brother is lying hurt down the street and Daniel should go get him. Then he hangs up and goes to watch Daniel rescue his brother. Ed thinks that for the first time, they are actually acting like family. He realizes his job is not to fix them, but just to set them on the path to fix themselves.

Ed's knowledge that he has not fixed the boys, but rather just set them on the path toward fixing themselves shows that an individual can only help another person so much. As is the case with Ed himself, the majority of the work of improving one's life must be undertaken by the individual in question.



KING OF CLUBS: THE FACE OF CLUBS

Ed feels proud, knowing he has completed all the tasks on the stones of home. He takes the Doorman for a walk down to the river and checks on the stone with the names written on it. He sees a check mark next to Father O'Reilly and Angie's names, but no mark next to Gavin's. He knows this means his mission with Gavin is not complete.

This scene shows that Ed can't necessarily complete his mission on his own; he's still relying on outside input to guide him along the way, even though he doesn't quite know where that input comes from.



Two nights before the annual soccer game, Ed is still worried about his incomplete business with Gavin. When he cannot sleep, he goes to the pharmacy to pick up some sleeping pills. On his way home, he realizes a group of boys is following him. Suddenly, he hears Daniel ask Gavin if this is the guy. Then the boys grab Ed and all start punching him. Daniel tells Ed that this is payback for him hurting Gavin. He lets Gavin make the last punch before the boys run off.

By working together to beat up Ed, Daniel and Gavin show that Ed has succeeded in his goal of uniting the two brothers and teaching them to care for each other. Though this incident is obviously painful for Ed, it demonstrates how personal sacrifice can be a way of encouraging growth in others.



Ed eventually stands up and limps home. He knows he has finally completed the **Ace of Clubs** and his task with Gavin. He looks at himself in his bathroom mirror and sees his black eyes, swollen jaw, and bloody face. He tries to smile despite his injuries and congratulate himself on a good job.

Ed's injuries represent both the physical and emotional sacrifices he makes for his mission. This shows that helping others can require personal sacrifice, but Ed's smile suggests this sacrifice is worth making.



ACE OF SPADES: THE GAME

Ed sweats and bleeds onto his bed, but he still feels happy. He laughs as he takes a shower and returns to the bedroom. He looks at the two **cards** and remembers the stories associated with the instructions the cards gave him. He wishes the best for all the people he met in those stories. He wonders what the next card will bring. Ed wants the next tasks to be clear and direct, but he knows that every time he wishes for simplicity, his life only becomes more complicated.

Ed is sleeping on his couch when he hears knocking at the door and assumes it's Keith and Daryl. Marv walks in. He asks Ed how he got injured. Ed says he was randomly attacked by a gang. Marv asks if Ed can still play in the soccer game that afternoon. Ed says yes, because for some reason he wants even more physical struggle. Marv offers to buy him breakfast.

Ed and Marv go to breakfast at a cheap café. The waitress hassles the boys while they attempt to order from café's limited selection. She handles their typical sarcastic attitudes and snaps back at them. Their food is inordinately expensive and delivered late. When their food finally does arrive, Ed is disappointed with his meal and Marv offers him part of his food. Ed asks Marv why he is being so nice to him today. Marv admits that he is trying to ensure that Ed shows up to the soccer game later that day.

Ed stops at home and picks up the Doorman. Together, they head down to the community athletics fields. Ed remembers all the time he spent with Sophie here. He holds onto the image of Sophie running for a while, before turning toward the ugliness of the soccer game. The two teams are made up of mostly amateur, rough-looking, barefoot middle-aged men. One of the men, whom they call Merv, grumbles at Ritchie for being late. Ritchie asks Ed why he is all beat up, but does not care enough to press the issue, which is why Ed appreciates his friendship.

Ed realizes he has been assigned to guard the largest player on the opposing team. However, Ed is not worried. Merv gathers the team together and gives them a pep talk about destroying the other team. Before the game, Ed goes to check on his dog. He finds a young boy named Jay petting the Doorman and asks the boy if he minds watching the dog during the game.

Ed's thoughts reveal that while helping others may be morally good, doing so is also often complicated. Ed's acceptance of complexity shows his development as a character, because at the beginning of the novel he separated the world into binaries such as success and failure. His reflections here show how helping others leads to a maturing of one's own character.



Marv's limited concern over Ed's injuries and his significant concern over the football game reveals his misplaced priorities. Unlike Ed, it seems that Marv has not yet learned to value caring deeply for others.



Hostility from the waitress further emphasizes Ed's viewpoint that people are generally selfish and preoccupied with their own issues. This suggests that one must make an intentional effort, such as what Ed is doing with the cards, in order to break from this norm. Marv continues to show his misplaced priorities, which the novel suggests come from the fact that he does not have any significant responsibilities in his life.



The rough, ugly atmosphere of the soccer game emphasizes the general hopelessness of Ed's town, given that such a brutal event is so popular among men in his town. Meanwhile, Ritchie's tactful decision not to ask more about Ed's injuries shows that empathy can come in many forms; sometimes, not helping is the most helpful course of action.



The violent tone of Merv's pep talk to the team portrays a view of success and heroism which depends upon dominating and hurting others. One can assume that this attitude is common in Ed's society, showing how his mission to help others goes against the dominant values of his community.



The game's referee, Reggie, is already drunk before the game begins. Ed shakes hands with his opponent, the massive man he has nicknamed Mimi, and the opponent threatens to tear him apart. The game begins and Ed keeps making runs for the goal, only to be pummeled to the ground by Mimi. The crowd cheers every time Ed is beaten down. Merv, the team captain, congratulates Ed on being the only player to go for the ball, despite the physical cost to himself.

At halftime, Ed sits with the Doorman and Jay. As the second half begins, Ed's team manages to get the upper hand. Marv goads Ed to attack Mimi. In response, Ed encourages Mimi to run at him. On the next play, Mimi collides with Ed. Against all odds, Mimi falls to the ground injured but Ed is still standing. Everyone cheers for Ed, but Ed feels sorry for hurting the other player. The players debate how to move the injured Mimi off the field and relentlessly mock his weight. Ed leaves the field and realizes the Doorman has disappeared.

Ed's nicknaming of his opponent with a female name suggests a misogynistic attitude, which shows how being in a hypermasculine, violent environment can cause even a caring person like Ed to become less kind. Merv further emphasizes an idea of heroism which involves physical sacrifice through aggressive acts.



Mimi's injury represents the consequences of valuing the violent, masculine expectations of society over the wellbeing of others. Ed shows opposition to this destructive societal norm by being concerned for Mimi and walking away from the game. This moment shows that while Ed is to some extent still stuck in the norms of his community (he did encourage Mimi to hit him, after all), he's also becoming a more compassionate person.



2 OF SPADES: TWENTY DOLLARS FOR THE DOG AND THE CARD

Ed runs around the field looking for the Doorman and Jay. He comes across Audrey and she helps him look for the dog. After they check the surrounding area, they return to the field. Ed sees the Doorman and Jay standing beneath the tree they were originally under. Jay is now holding a drink and a snack. A young woman stands with them, but she hands Jay something and runs off.

Ed realizes Jay is holding a **playing card**. He runs after the young woman, but she is gone. Ed wants to keep searching for her, because he is sure she knows who is sending the cards, but he knows he must get the card from Jay. Unfortunately, Jay refuses to give Ed the card, because the young woman said that the card is for the owner of the dog and the little boy believes he now owns the Doorman. Ed offers him twenty dollars for both the card and the dog, and the boy accepts. Ed sees that the card is the Ace of Spades.

Ed's panic to find the Doorman, the one being he has spent the most time with so far in the novel, implies that a mission like Ed's, where one is compelled to help others, can affect the relationships one holds most dear.



The disappearance of the woman heightens the mystery of the cards, which further emphasizes the idea that a higher power somehow compels individuals to help other people. Jay's immaturity and desire for money highlights the idea that even for a would-be hero like Ed, ordinary obstacles can challenge one's ability to help others.



3 OF SPADES: DIG

Marv forces Ed to come to the team's victory party because the players have voted Ed the best player for defeating Mimi. On the way to the party, Ed stops by Audrey's house, but she is out, most likely with her boyfriend. Ed arrives at the party and realizes he does not truly know any of the people there. He waits on the front porch until Marv comes and sits with him. Marv congratulates Ed again on injuring Mimi, but Ed still feels pity for the other player. Ed chooses to think about the **card** in his pocket and the future it promises. Marv asks Ed what he's smiling about. Ed says he has to leave and for the first time, Marv lets him go without any hassle.

Ed walks home and takes out the **card** to examine it. He had expected the card's suit to be hearts, because spades are the more dangerous-looking suit. This card has three new names written on it: "Graham Greene, Morris West, Sylvia Plath." The names sound familiar to Ed, but he cannot find them listed in the local phonebook. Ed sits on his living room couch and contemplates the card. He drifts off to sleep.

Dreaming, Ed finds himself still at the soccer game, chasing after the mysterious young woman and arguing with Jay for the **card**. In the next dream, Ed is in a classroom. There are books in front of him, but he cannot read the words. A teacher walks in and instructs Ed to read the words on the blackboard behind her, but Ed cannot. Suddenly, Ed looks up and sees the teacher hanging from a rope attached to the ceiling, dead. Ed feels like he cannot breathe. The dead woman asks Ed if he can read the words now. Ed sees that the blackboard says, "Barren Woman."

Ed wakes up on his living room couch. He realizes the words in his dream, "Barren Woman," are the title of a poem his high school English teacher liked. He remembers the poem was written by Sylvia Plath, the third name on the **card**. He deduces that the names on the card are famous authors and resolves to go to the library once it opens to further unravel the mystery.

Before Ed can go to the library, Audrey stops by to hang out. Ed tells her about the new **card**. All the while, he watches her lips and wishes he could kiss her and touch her. Ed feels like he deserves Audrey's love, because he has been suffering so much while helping others. But he knows Audrey will not return his affection, and he will receive no reward for his mission. He vows to stop looking for a reward because he hopes he has evolved past that need.

Ed's lack of connection at the team party shows how traditional communities, such as a sports team, can fail to provide support if the members are not genuinely caring people (as shown by the team's continued degradation of Mimi). In contrast, Ed's focus on the mission of the card shows how helping others can help one remain happy and compassionate in the face of other's hostility and selfishness.



Ed's expectations about the suit of the card either express how random chance can affect one's fate (like the suit of a drawn card can affect a game) or how one can project their own opinions onto random happenings; Ed wants to believe that fate is somehow involved in what's happening, even though he has little evidence either way.



Ed's inability to read the words represents the helplessness he often feels during his missions. This shows that even if one feels helpless or inadequate, they still must try to help others—and, given Ed's many successes so far, the novel seems to argue that feeling inadequate is no real barrier to success.



The poem "Barren Woman" is about emptiness in life and failing to achieve one's full potential. This allusion contributes to the theme of finding meaning in life after failing to succeed by traditional measures, as Ed is currently doing at this point in the plot.



Ed's thoughts on his desire for a reward show how if one helps others with the expectation of reward, they will be disappointed. This advocates for a selfless approach to acts of kindness, though Ed's feelings show that shifting to this perspective is a difficult task.



Though Ed knows it's foolish, he kisses Audrey. He feels her for second, but she pulls away. Ed tastes blood and realizes Audrey's lips are bleeding. He feels awful, knowing he cannot even succeed in kissing her correctly. He apologizes to Audrey and they stand facing each other in uncomfortable silence. Ed knows Audrey will never love him back, but he also knows no one loves Audrey as much as he does. Ed apologizes again and Audrey accepts his apology. He remembers that Audrey doesn't want to touch anybody she could ever truly love.

Ed's painful and awkward encounter with Audrey suggests that if one approaches physical intimacy with the idea of deserving a reward or seeking a marker of success, rather than acting out of genuine connection with the other person, they will ultimately leave the interaction unsatisfied. Ed understands Audrey's issues with love but refuses to consider her feelings before he acts, which demonstrates that he's still somewhat immature at this point in the story.



Ed goes to the library, expecting he will look up the authors in catalog drawers with index cards. He approaches the librarian and asks him if he has any cards. The librarian responds by asking Ed what kind of cards, and then says Ed must not have been to the library in many years. Ed feels embarrassed, like the librarian views him as an uneducated fool. The librarian shows Ed how to look up the names on the computer.

The librarian's belittling of Ed contributes to the novel's general sense that people are hostile unless they make an effort to be caring. Ed's lack of knowledge about the library also shows how a purposeless life can lead to becoming out of touch with the world at large.



Ed looks up each author and finds their books in the library. Excited, he picks up as many books as he can carry and convinces the librarian to let him check them all out. He stumbled back home under the weight of all those words. At home, he reads through the books, but cannot detect any clues as to where the **card** wants him to go next.

Ed's inability to discover the secret to his missions shows that the skills one values (like Ed values reading) might not always lead to success. Instead, one may have to depend on more unexpected means to aid them in their mission to help others.



Ed falls asleep reading but when he wakes up, he discovers a note slipped under the front door. This causes Ed to shiver, because he remembers this means that the person sending the **cards** is following him at all times. The note tells Ed he is on the right path, but the answer is simpler than he is expecting. Ed takes the Doorman for a walk so that he can think about what this simple solution might be. As he looks at the street signs, Ed realizes that the titles of the authors' books must correspond with street names in town.

The message on the note suggests that it's normal to over-think the act of helping others, to the point where one lets it hinder the good they can do for others. This note and Ed's discovery of the street signs suggests that part of doing good is observing the outside world instead of getting caught up in constant contemplation.



Ed crosschecks the book titles with his town directory and finds three streets that match books by the three authors. But he still doesn't know which house numbers he is supposed to go to. Since this is the **Ace of Spades**, Ed reasons, he must dig for the answer. Ed picks up the books whose titles match the street names and reads through the first one until he finds a note addressed to him on the 114th page. He decides this is the house number he is looking for. Feeling elated at how simple and painless this process is, he finds the other two house numbers in their respective books.

Ed's opinion that this process was easy, when really it involved several fairly complicated steps, shows how shifting one's perspective and looking for the positive aspects of a situation can lead one to feel that even challenging tasks are manageable. One may also feel more assured of their actions, as Ed does here.



4 OF SPADES: THE BENEFITS OF LYING

One evening, Ed is playing **cards** with his friends over at his house. He is thinking about how, earlier that day, he visited the address 114 Glory Road, which he discovered in the book. At the house, he witnessed a family of Polynesian descent led by a father even larger than the abusive man from the first card. However, the man on Glory Road is incredibly kind and affectionate to both his wife and his kids. The houses on the street are all old and cheap. So far, Ed has no idea what this family needs from him.

Marv smugly wins the **card** game. He starts talking about the upcoming Christmas game and wonders whose turn it is to host it. Ed and his friends all know it's Marv's turn, but he won't host because he is too cheap. Ed reminds Marv that he has more than enough money saved, but Marv says what he spends his money on is his business alone. Ed volunteers to host the Christmas game, if Marv gives the Doorman a kiss for Christmas. Marv reluctantly agrees.

Ed continues to return to Glory Road. Although he can tell the family lives paycheck to paycheck, he still cannot tell what exactly they need. One night, Ed is hiding in the bushes when the father of the family comes out and confronts him. The father asks Ed why he is always watching the family. Ed lies and says he used to live in the house and since his dad recently died, he enjoys seeing the man spend time with his kids. This makes the father warm up to Ed and invite him inside for dinner.

The father introduces himself as Lua Tatupu. He takes Ed inside and introduces him to his wife, Marie, and their five children. They all eat dinner together, while Lua jokes around with the kids. Ed can tell that although the parents are happy, they are very tired. After dinner, Ed gives the children piggyback rides. The youngest child, Jessie, tells Ed that Lua is going to hang up the Christmas lights soon. Maria invites Ed back for dinner anytime.

That weekend, Ed passes by Lua's house and sees the Christmas lights hung up. The lights are old and faded, with many missing. Only half of them light up. Ed knows there's a small job he can do for this family that will make a big difference. He buys a new set of lights and leaves them on the front porch of the house.

The kindness of the father on Glory Road shows both Ed and the reader that while there may be horribly abusive members of society, there are also incredibly loving individuals present. This also suggests that external factors such as poverty do not necessarily impact how one cares for other people.



Marv's avoidance of spending shows how even when one achieves a traditional marker of success, such as saving a lot of money, they may not utilize that success in the way others expect them to. Marv's attitude also suggests that amassing a large amount of money may lead one to selfishly guarding that fortune, though the reader will later learn that Marv has other motivations.



Ed's lie shows that the use of seemingly morally wrong acts such as lying can be justified for the purpose of helping others. Of course, Ed's dad really did die recently, which suggests that there is truth in this lie and that Ed really does enjoy watching the man with his kids.



The generosity of the family toward a stranger, despite their apparent poverty and the parents' tiredness, shows how individuals can overcome outside factors in order to be kind to others. The harmony of this family contrasts with the disharmony of Ed's own family, which again shows that people don't have to let adversity have a negative impact on their family relationships.



Ed's plan shows how small acts of kindness can have a bigger impact on individuals, because such acts communicate the crucial message that another person cares for those individuals. The acts themselves, this scene suggests, do not mean as much as the messages behind the acts.



5 OF SPADES: THE POWER AND THE GLORY

The night after Ed leaves the lights at the front door, a van pulls up in front of his house. Lua, Marie, and their children step out of the van and reveal that they looked Ed up in the phonebook. They insist Ed come with them back to their house. Once they arrive, Marie ushers all the kids inside. Then Lua gets out, leaving Ed alone. Ed worries he has offended Lua by buying the lights. Finally, Ed gets out and stands on the edge of the lawn with Lua. Marie and the kids come out and join them.

Lua calls out to Jessie, who is still in the house. Suddenly, all the new lights hung up on the house, flash on. Everyone's faces are lit up with red, blue, yellow, and green. The children clap and cheer for Christmas. Jessie comes outside. He seems the happiest of all the family. Lua reveals that Jessie insisted Ed come to watch them turn the new lights on for the first time. Ed feels a sense of power and glory.

The gathering of the family and their desire to include Ed suggest that Ed's intent to help them was enough to make an impact on their lives, even though the specific action he took was a relatively small one.



Ed's recognition of the power and beauty of this moment emphasizes the theme that helping others leads the helper to recognize the positive aspects of the world around them. It also seems that sharing these positive aspects with others increases their beauty, since Ed takes care to note how joyful each member of the family is.



6 OF SPADES: A MOMENT OF BEAUTY

The children dance in the Christmas lights and Ed watches Lua and Marie holding hands. He realizes how happy they are. Lua kisses Marie gently and she kisses him back. Ed thinks about how beautiful some people are, not because of how they look, but because of how they live.

The beauty Ed sees in Lua and Marie's affection for each other shows how caring for others will lead one to recognize and appreciate how other people also express caring for one another.



7 OF SPADES: A MOMENT OF TRUTH

Marie thanks Ed for the lights, and Ed replies that the family deserved to have new lights. Lua tells Ed that the family has lived in that house for almost a year, but no one in the neighborhood has done anything to help them. Lua does not resent the neighbors, because he knows they have their own troubles. He just wonders why Ed chose to help their family. Ed says he doesn't understand the reasons why himself.

Lua's words reveal how outside factors, such as poverty and race (given that the Tatupu family are the only characters identified as not white in the novel) can stop individuals from caring for others. However, if an individual like Ed intentionally tries to help another person, they can overcome those differences to forge a powerful bond.



Marie gives Ed a Christmas card made by all the children. The family settles down to watch TV together and Ed takes the opportunity to slip out. Before he goes, Lua give Ed a special stone for good luck. Then he asks Ed if he really did used to live in their house. Ed confesses that he didn't, and Lua accepts this fact.

Lua and Ed's acceptance of the lie shows how both characters believe that an otherwise immoral act such as lying is justified as long as one commits such an act in order to help others. This further emphasizes that helping others sometimes requires unconventional tactics.



8 OF SPADES: CLOWN STREET. CHIPS. THE DOORMAN. AND ME.

Ed drives his taxi on the hottest day of the year. His air conditioning is broken, and his customers complain. Ed remembers he has Lua's lucky stone in his pocket and feels happy despite the annoyances. When Ed returns his taxi to the company lot, he runs into Audrey. She wants to talk to him, but he notices her boyfriend waiting for her and leaves. He walks the Doorman to the next address on the **card** and thinks about how Audrey's boyfriend probably doesn't appreciate her beauty like he does.

Ed buys an order of French fries on the way to the address. When he arrives at the address, he realizes that it's a small Italian restaurant. Ed sits on a bench across the street and watches the restaurant, but nothing seems to happen there that night. He returns to the restaurant every night after that, but still sees nothing he needs to fix.

One night when Ed returns from the restaurant, Audrey is waiting for him on his front porch. When he asks her why she's there, she says that she's missed him. She says he "used to just be" but now he is somebody. She feels a distance between them now, because he has begun to improve himself. Ed realizes Audrey felt more comfortable with him when he was more ordinary and less confident, because back then he would never have expressed his feelings for her.

Ed feels the lucky stone in his pocket. He considers how Audrey says he's changed. He agrees that the old version of himself is gone, and now he lives a new life with purpose. He knows this transformation should make him happy, because he always wanted to change himself, but instead he feels sad.

Ed tells Audrey that they should get drunk and she agrees. He asks her what else she was doing before coming over. She says she was having sex with her boyfriend, but after he left, she just felt empty. Ed reasons with himself that he could be happy just providing Audrey with emotional support. They continue to drink. Later, Audrey asks Ed if he hates her. Ed says that he does. They laugh, but then Audrey says she doesn't blame him.

Ed's opinion that the boyfriend doesn't appreciate Audrey's beauty implies that he believes he has earned the right to be with Audrey through his appreciation of her. This shows that Ed still believes one should be able to achieve romantic success by working hard. But of course, the fact that Audrey still rejects him shows the flaw in this view of romance.



Ed's failure to determine what his purpose is at this address suggests that helping others involves deeper investigation and, perhaps, personal introspection as well. Issues in need of help, this scene suggests, can be more subtle than the dramatic, obvious problems one might suspect.



The distance Audrey now feels from Ed shows how improving oneself and complicating one's life by caring for others may cause changes in one's relationships. However, it seems that such changes can ultimately lead to deeper, more meaningful connections, since Ed and Audrey have never had such a candid conversation before.



The language here refers back to the bank robber's comment that Ed is a "dead man." Ed isn't literally dead, but in a sense, a part of him died when he became a better person. This idea indicates that finding one's purpose can be a valuable source of personal transformation, but that transformation can nonetheless be painful.



The emptiness Audrey feels shows how, contrary to Ed's beliefs, sexual success does not necessarily add meaning to one's life. Their conversation reveals how both characters use each other (Audrey uses Ed for emotional support and Ed uses Audrey for the promise of sexual success), suggesting that the obstacle in their relationship is a lack of understanding and genuine appreciation of each other.



Ed falls asleep on the couch and wakes up to someone at his front door. He opens the door to find the young man who led him to the stones of home standing in front of him. He looks annoyed. He tells Ed to return to the restaurant tomorrow at 8 pm, and to hurry up, because he has other business to take care of. Ed asks him again whom he works for. The young man tells Ed that he “might not be the only one getting **aces** in the mail.” Then the man disappears.

After the young man leaves, Audrey follows Ed to bed and begs him to tell her about what he has been doing. He tells her about Milla and Sophie, but then realizes she has already fallen asleep. He continues to tell her about the rest of the people he has helped anyway. Ed feels happy as he falls asleep.

9 OF SPADES: THE WOMAN

Audrey wakes up in Ed’s bed the next morning and he serves her breakfast. Before she says goodbye, she tells Ed that he knows her better than anyone and she feels the most comfortable around him. After she leaves, Ed feels like he is in physical pain. For the rest of the day, Ed thinks about how the young man from last night suggested Ed was not the only one receiving missions. He wonders if that man, Daryl, and Keith are also receiving instructions from an outside source.

That night, Ed leaves his dog at home and walks to the restaurant on Clown Street. He feels anxious, worrying that this will be one of his difficult missions. He asks for a table at the restaurant and sits in the back corner. After ordering dinner, he surveys the other customers. He notices an older man sitting alone at the next table. Then the man’s date arrives, and Ed realizes the date is Ed’s own mother, looking more dressed up and feminine than Ed has ever seen.

Ed’s mother’s date is dressed nicely and acts like a gentleman. Ed cannot help but think about his dead father. Ed states that while his father was an alcoholic, he was still nice and gentlemanly. Ma used to yell at her husband when he came home drunk and nag him during the day. Ed remembers how his father used to take him and his siblings to the park, and on those days, Ed saw his father as a hero. Ed continues to watch his mother on her date and feels increasingly angrier because, he realizes, she is happy with someone and he himself is alone.

The young man’s comments suggest that the mission of the cards extends beyond Ed’s life. This shows how the mission of helping others holds a greater purpose than just one individual’s life. This also suggests that perhaps everyone has a moral obligation to play a role in the higher purpose of helping others; Ed might not be such an anomaly after all.



Ed believes that helping others is beautiful and inspiring, so he believes sharing these stories will comfort and uplift Audrey. This shows how helping others can create even greater good beyond just the person who is initially helped.



Ed’s revelation that others could be receiving similar messages shows his expanding empathy as a character as a result of helping others. In a sense, this experience may even provide Ed with the community he lacked, though that community seems to be taking an unexpected shape.



Ed’s own mother being the person he needs to help suggests that the broader purpose of helping others can lead one to support those with whom they have the closest relationships. Of course, this revelation also suggests that perhaps this really will be one of the hard missions, since Ed has long-standing conflicts with his mother.



Ed’s memories of his parents’ relationship show a lack of empathy for his mother, as he does not see why a woman would be angry that the father of her children is frequently drunk. In order to help his mother, Ed will likely need to develop a more empathic understanding of her situation. What’s more, Ed still views success in life as defined by one’s romantic relationships, as shown here when he feels that his mother is more successful than he is because she’s on a date.



10 OF SPADES: FRONT-PORCH CYCLONE

Ed pays for his meal, but Ma is too focused on her date to notice her own son. So, Ed walks to her house and waits on her front porch. Eventually, he falls asleep. He wakes up to Ma asking what he is doing there. He asks her if she had a nice time on her date. She responds that she is a grown woman with needs, before she steps over Ed to go inside her home.

Ed thinks about how he is the only one of the siblings Ma won't invite into her house. Before she can shut him out again, he asks her why she hates him. She answers that she hates him because he reminds her of his father, before shutting the door on him. Ed believes that nothing else that's happened to him, not even being beat up, hurts as much as what she just said. Ed falls to the floor in devastation. He shouts to his Ma inside that he won't leave without talking to her.

Finally, Ma opens her door. Ed tells her that she treats him the worst of all her children, despite the fact that he is the only one who is in town if she ever needs him. Ma says that is exactly why she is angry with him, because he has never left their town. She tells him that his father always promised her he would move the family someplace better, but now both she and Ed are still here. She says that, like his father once did, Ed has a lot of potential to succeed, but he will always waste it. She tells him that she just wants him to accomplish something and the reason she is so angry is because she loves him so much.

Ed looks his mother in the eyes and realizes she doesn't just hate his father. She also hates herself for never leaving. However, Ed knows that it is not the place which makes a person a failure. It is the person themselves. He also realizes, as she begins to cry, that she was seeing the other man while his father was still alive.

JACK OF SPADES: A PHONE CALL

Late that night, Ed calls his Ma to make sure she is okay. She says she is all right, except for the fact that he woke her up. He wants to tell her he loves her, but instead he decides it is better to just hang up.

Ed's mocking of Ma, when she has seemingly done nothing wrong by being an adult single woman going on a date, and Ma's blanket dismissal of Ed suggest that both characters need to have greater empathy in order to help each other.



The hurtfulness of Ma comparing Ed to his father emphasizes how one can be oppressed by forces beyond their control, such as heredity. But while Ed can't help that he's his father's son, his insistence [on talking to his mother despite her anger indicates that he does still have power over how he responds to this unfortunate situation.



Ma's words reveal how she believes an individual's life is dictated by their environment; she thinks that the only way Ed can improve himself is by leaving their town. She also emphasizes the idea that the most disappointing kind of life is one where an individual has not achieved their full potential. Meanwhile, her anger—which she says comes from love—suggests that caring for another person can involve negative emotions.



Ed's recognition of his mother's self-loathing shows how by confronting one's issues with another person, one can have greater empathy for that other person. Ed's newfound belief that he is in charge of whether or not he fails also suggests that helping others has empowered him to take responsibility for his own life.



Ed's phone call shows how caring for others and repairing relationships happens in small increments of progress, rather than dramatic reversals.



QUEEN OF SPADES: THE BELL STREET THEATER

The next morning, Ed contemplates what Ma said to him. He knows his mission with her is complete, because she needed to tell him what she told him last night. She made him realize he cannot be a loser cabdriver his whole life. Then Ed decides to visit Father O'Reilly at church. The Father is happy to see him and asks if God has been with him these last few weeks. Ed says no, but the Father assures him that everything happens for a reason.

Ed goes to the third address on the **card**, an old movie theater. The theater appears completely empty, until he finds an old man sleeping in the back room and wakes him up. The man excitedly says Ed is his first customer in weeks. Ed is alone in the theater as the man plays a classic film. However, the movie stops halfway through because the old man has fallen asleep again. The man, embarrassed, offers Ed a free movie.

Ed introduces himself to the old man, but the man says he already knows Ed's name, because he was told Ed was coming. Ed asks him who told him he was coming, and after a little bit of questioning, he determines Keith and Daryl visited the theater before him. The man tells Ed that when he is finished with the mission, he will receive another delivery. Ed says that he needs to help the man. The man says Ed should just come in for a free movie.

The old man asks Ed if he has a girl and Ed says yes. Then the man tells Ed to invite the girl to movie. He explains that he used to love taking dates to this movie theater when he was a kid, which is why he bought the theater in his retirement. He lets Ed select any movie he wants, and Ed selects *Cool Hand Luke*. The man introduces himself as Bernie Price.

Ed invites Audrey to the movie tomorrow, and then he goes to visit Milla. He invites her to his house on Christmas and she agrees because she has been so lonely without him. The next day, both Ed and Audrey dress up in nice clothes and walk to the theater together. Ed reveals that he has picked her favorite movie for them to watch. She holds his arm as they walk.

Ed introduces Audrey to Bernie, and they settle down in the theater for the movie. Ed hopes Bernie feels happy seeing them watching the movie, thinking they are actually dating. Ed knows this is what he can do for Bernie. However, Ed also hopes to find a little happiness himself in this mission.

Ma's influence on Ed shows how personal relationships can motivate an individual to search for their purpose in life, even when those relationships also cause pain. Father O'Reilly represents the view that a benevolent outside force dictates individuals' lives, an idea that Ed does not yet believe himself.



The emptiness of the theater suggests a lack of traditional success as a business. However, the man's excitement shows he finds meaning beyond these ideas of success. This suggests that an individual can find joy and purpose in life beyond traditional markers of success such as accumulating money.



The visit from Keith and Daryl suggests this mission will have greater significance for Ed, further emphasizing the idea that outside forces dictate the direction of an individual's life. What's more, Ed's realization that all the man needs is for him to watch the movie shows that helping others can take unexpected forms.



Unlike Ed's purposeless life, Bernie clearly has a purpose in life in sharing his love of movies with others. This shows how one can find meaning in a pursuit outside of traditional ideas of success and also indicates that following one's purpose can create happiness for others.



The closeness between Ed and Audrey in this scene shows how intimacy between two people is created through simple moments of understanding, like Ed knowing Audrey's favorite movie.



Ed's way of helping Bernie shows how empathy can help all individuals involved. Ed has also begun to recognize that helping others improves his own life as well.



Ed asks Audrey if they can invite Bernie to watch the movie with them and Audrey agrees. Bernie initially refuses to interrupt them, but then joins them after a few minutes and sits next to Audrey. Audrey holds both Ed and Bernie's hands. Ed thinks that sometimes, he is content to just be Audrey's friend, because she knows exactly what a person needs.

Bernie falls asleep but the movie reel needs to be changed. Audrey wakes him and he leaves, but Ed realizes someone is already in the projection room. Ed runs toward the room and Audrey follows, but they only find Bernie standing outside the room. He shakes with surprise because someone jumped out of the room at him. They go inside the projection room and find a reel with Ed's name on it there. Ed wonders why someone keeps doing this to him. Bernie responds that "they do it because they can." He also tells Ed they told him they planned this out a year in advance. Ed and Audrey return to the theater to see what is on the mystery film reel.

KING OF SPADES: THE LAST REEL

Ed and Audrey watch the movie screen as it shows an image of young men walking down the street toward another person. Ed realizes that the young men are Gavin and Daniel, and they are walking toward him. He watches as the movie replays the boys beating him up. Then the movie shows Ed leaving the library, then shows him with the Christmas lights, and then shows him arguing with his mom. Finally, the movie shows Ed walking into the movie theater. Then words flash across the screen, telling Ed he needs to move on.

Audrey helps Ed back to his seat because he can't walk. Bernie begins playing *Cool Hand Luke* again, but Ed can only think about the words "They do it because they can." He knows this is the final challenge he must overcome for the **Ace of Spades**. He feels as if someone is moving around him, but he can't see anyone in the dark theater. On his seat now is the Ace of Hearts. Ed sits down, holding the card but not looking at it. A heartbeat seems to radiate from the card in his hand.

ACE OF HEARTS: THE MUSIC OF HEARTS

Ed and Audrey walk home late at night. The only other person outside is a young man on a bench, but when Ed looks back at him, he has disappeared. Audrey says something to Ed, but he cannot hear her over the sound of heartbeats in his head. He knows the young man he just saw was the one who left the **card** in the theater.

Ed's thoughts about Audrey show how he has matured as a character, as he realizes that caring for and understanding others is more important than sexual relationships. This shows how one should find meaning in kindness rather than superficial markers of achievement.



Bernie's words are especially chilling because they imply an individual like Ed has no control over their lives; it seems here like what happens to him has nothing to do with his choices, but instead is determined by an outside force. This incident tests Ed's growing belief that it's his reactions to circumstance that really matter, since it's becoming increasingly clear that the circumstances themselves may be totally beyond his control.



Ed's life portrayed as a movie not only reveals that he has been watched, but also suggests that his life is being organized into a narrative arc. This is one of the moments that most clearly suggests that the person controlling Ed occupies a role similar to the author's. At the same time, the words telling Ed to move on suggest that one cannot dwell on past good deeds, but instead must continue to help people.



Ed's inability to move suggests that it's still hard for him to accept that the person with the cards is controlling his life to this extent; it's as if he struggles to take any action because he knows that his decisions only have so much power. The suit of hearts, which represent love and emotion, implies that this final set of missions will be especially personal for Ed.



Ed's paranoia and his certainty that the stranger is involved with the cards shows how when one believes their life is determined by outside forces, one will ascribe seemingly unrelated happenings to those outside forces.



Ed wakes up the next morning and looks at the **card** on the floor. He assures himself that this is the last card, before falling back asleep. Ed dreams of driving away alone, like the hero at the end of the movie. Ed wakes up and picks the card up off the floor. He sees three movie titles listed on the card. He wants to start on solving the mystery, but he focuses on work until Christmas. He carries the card with him and wonders if the mission will ever end. He fears he will always be haunted by memories of the cards, but he is even more afraid he will be thankful for the mission even after it is over.

Ed decides to give out Christmas cards, so he takes the aces from old decks of **playing cards** and writes notes to each family he has met since receiving the first card. He prays he will run into Sophie, because she is unsuccessful like he is (in her running, anyway) and also because she is beautiful. She comes out of her house as he is putting the card in her mailbox and reads the card, where he wrote that she's beautiful. She asks him what she can give him in return for all he has given her, but he says, "I've given you nothing."

Ed delivers his last Christmas **card** to Father O'Reilly. He tells the Father he has been busy with his mission. He feels upset over the fact that the final card is the Ace of Hearts because, according to Ed, hearts are dangerous. The Father assures Ed he will be okay, but Ed knows he will never be just okay anymore. After delivering the cards, Ed returns to driving his taxi. Still, all he can hear is the sound of heartbeats.

2 OF HEARTS: THE KISS, THE GRAVE, THE FIRE

Ed buys food and alcohol for his Christmas party with his friends. Audrey arrives at his house, but she has to leave early to see her boyfriend. Ritchie arrives on his bike. Marv is late, and Ritchie speculates he won't come because of their deal that he has to kiss the Doorman. Ed says Marv will always come for free food. Finally, Marv arrives, and Ritchie demands he kiss the dog. Marv protests but the friends hassle him until he kisses the Doorman.

The friends play **cards** and enjoy each other's company. Audrey's boyfriend comes over and hangs out with them for a while. Ed can tell Audrey doesn't love the boyfriend. After Audrey and the boyfriend leaves, Ed, Marv, and Ritchie attend a community bonfire on Main Street. There, Ed spots Angie Carusso and her children. Angie walks up to Ed and hands Ed an ice cream cone. She tells Ed she is doing just okay, but that's good enough for now.

Here Ed envisions himself as a hero, representing a shift in his self-deprecation from before. This change shows how helping others can lead people to become more confident in themselves. What's more, it's clear that Ed still believes in the idea of traditional heroism, where an individual commits extraordinary acts all by themselves, but at the same time, he starts to intuit that it's actually connecting with all the people he's helped that's going to make a lasting difference in his life.



Ed saying "I've given you nothing" references giving Sophie the empty shoe box, but it also suggests that one can help another person not by giving them anything new, but instead by helping them realize the strengths they already possess.



Ed's associations of hearts with danger shows how caring for others exposes individuals to vulnerability. Ed's desire to never be "just okay" again shows how finding a purpose, as Ed has in helping others, means that one will experience intense joys and intense sadness instead of simply being fine. These deep emotions, Ed implies, are preferable to stagnation and neutrality.



Ritchie cares deeply about the silly prank of Marv kissing a dog, suggesting that if one does not have a meaningful purpose in life, they will put greater importance on trivial events.



Angie's words complicate Ed's previous feelings about being "just okay." Ed seems to want a richer emotional life than being "just okay," but Angie indicates that sometimes feeling okay—rather than filled with some kind of dramatic emotion—is sometimes a necessary part of life. This moment suggests that learning to embrace that kind of balance will be one aspect of Ed's ongoing growth process.



Ed overhears a father gently chastising his son and this makes Ed miss his own father. He leaves the bonfire to go to the cemetery alone. He finds his father's grave and remembers how he cried at his funeral. Ed wishes he could have said something nice about his father at the funeral, because though his father never achieved any success, he was still kind to everyone. Ed walks away, knowing he does not want a wordless funeral like his father's.

Ed's thoughts about his father's funeral suggests that one should not only strive to be decent to those they encounter but should also actively strive to have a positive impact beyond their own lives. The motivation Ed finds in his father's death shows how examples of wasted potential can motivate one to find purpose in their own life.



Ed returns home to find Ritchie and Marv asleep outside. He wakes Ritchie up and tells him it is time to go home, but Ritchie confesses he doesn't want to go home. For a moment, Ed recognizes a deep sadness in Ritchie's eyes, but the emotion quickly disappears. Ed tells Ritchie he can sleep there tonight and then goes out to bring Marv inside.

Ritchie's sadness shows how even seemingly happy people can be suffering internally. Ed's sensitive attention to this reality demonstrates how his missions have made him more attuned to the needs of others, even when those needs are subtle.



Ed settles Ritchie on the couch and Marv in Ed's own bed. He collects his **cards** from his nightstand. He sits at his kitchen table and remembers fondly the cards he has already completed. He still worries over the next card, however, and he cannot sleep.

Ed's worry over the next card reflects the vulnerability one feels when confronted with the possibility of failure, but Ed's happy memories of the previous missions indicate that he now sees that it's worth it to overcome such vulnerability.



3 OF HEARTS: THE CASUAL SUIT

The next morning, Ed goes over to his Ma's house for Christmas. His sisters arrive with their kids and husbands. His brother, Tommy, brings his beautiful new girlfriend, Ingrid. Ma seems the least happy to see Ed out of all the children. After lunch, Ed begins to leave to go pick up Milla. His Ma mocks him for leaving so soon, but Ed walks away from her indifferently.

Ma's preference for the other siblings shows how she still measures success in life by traditional standards of career and romantic success. But Ed's indifference toward her, contrasting with his previous anger, shows that helping others has helped him let go of traditional views of success.



Tommy stops Ed on the front step to make sure he is okay. Ed says he is fine. Ed and Tommy chat casually about their lives and laugh, for the first time feeling comfortable with each other. Ed knows he won't speak to Tommy again for a while, because that is not the dynamic of their relationship. For now, Ed is content to spend just this small amount of time with his brother.

Tommy and Ed's interaction mirrors the interaction between Father O'Reilly and his brother, which shows that the struggle for family members to connect is a universal problem. This also shows how caring is a continuous act of slow progress rather than something that changes all at once.



Tommy returns to the house and Ed tries to leave. His Ma stops him again. She wishes him a Merry Christmas. Ed tells her that it's not the place that determines a person's life but the person themselves. He says that before he leaves this town, he needs to improve himself exactly where he is. Ma is shocked, but she just says, "Okay." Ed leaves.

Ed's development, from believing his fate was determined by his hometown to realizing he has the power to improve himself, shows how caring for others leads one to recognize the agency they have over their own lives.



Ed walks over to Milla's home. When he arrives, she hands him a present. He apologizes that he didn't get her a gift, but she says that his return is enough of a gift. He walks her to his house, and she is so tired from the walk she immediately falls asleep in his living room. When she wakes up, she and Ed have dinner. Milla is very appreciative and insists that Ed open his present. He discovers she has given him a suit. He puts it on, and it fits perfectly.

The suit represents Ed coming into adulthood, as he dons more mature clothes. This moment symbolizes the way that helping people like Milla has caused significant positive changes for Ed himself.



Ed calls a cab to take Milla back to her house. The cab driver turns out to be Audrey's boyfriend, Simon. Ed rides along with them and takes Milla inside her house. She thanks him but Ed realizes he was the one who was blessed by the chance to spend the day with her. Ed takes Simon's cab back to his house. Simon asks Ed if he is in love with Audrey. Ed says this doesn't matter because Simon just wants assurance Audrey loves him. Ed tells him Audrey won't let herself love anyone, because of her painful past, but Simon says Audrey loves Ed. However, as Ed points out, Audrey chooses to be with Simon.

Ironically, while Ed has been jealous of Simon for dating Audrey, Simon has been jealous of Ed for being the one Audrey truly loves. This suggests that sexual success is not what makes a person happy, as Ed previously thought. This moment indicates that love and mutual understanding are what give a relationship meaning, rather than sex.



4 OF HEARTS: TO FEEL THE FEAR

Two days after Christmas, Ed visits Bernie at the theater. He asks Bernie about the movie titles on the **Ace of Hearts**. Bernie talks about one of the titles, *Roman Holiday*, which stars Audrey Hepburn. Ed focuses on the name, Audrey. Bernie looks up the other titles in his movie catalog. The movie *Cat Ballou* stars Lee Marvin, whose name reminds Ed of Marv. The movie *The Suitcase* was directed by Pablo Sanchez, who has the same last name as Ritchie. Ed fears this card will be the most challenging mission, because he sees now that it involves his friends.

Ed's apprehension at realizing the next card involves helping his friends shows that, while one might expect helping those they already care for to be easier than helping strangers, helping loved ones may be the more difficult task because of the vulnerability and tension that come with close personal relationships.



Ed hurries through the streets, filled with fear. He wants to run to Audrey and help her as soon as possible, but he decides to go by the order of the names on the **card**, which would be Ritchie, Marv, and then Audrey. He has no idea what Ritchie could need, so he goes to Ritchie's house and sits down across the street. Late at night, Ritchie enters the kitchen alone and sits at the table, doing nothing.

Ritchie's behavior here suggests an aimless, lonely life. This is a possibility that Ed has never really considered before, even though he and Ritchie spend lots of time together. This combined with Ed's uncertainty about how to help Ritchie shows that even close friends struggle to know how to care for each other.



As Ed is about to stand up, he realizes two men are looming over him, eating pies. They are hard to recognize without their face masks, but he suspects they are Daryl and Keith. Ed fears they are going to beat him up again, but Daryl hands him a pie and promises they won't hurt him. Daryl and Keith sit with him and bicker about whether or not Ed will spill sauce on his shirt. Then Keith apologizes to Ed for their fighting, which Ed interprets as a sign that they have been instructed to treat him nicely.

The fact that Daryl and Keith do not beat Ed up suggests that Ed has matured enough that he does not need to be forced to do what is morally good. This suggests that when one makes a practice of helping others, as Ed has done, they become more skilled and intuitive in how to best care for people.



Ed, Daryl, and Keith joke around with each other until the light goes off in Ritchie's kitchen. Ed laments that he has missed his chance, but Daryl has no idea what that means. Neither, according to Daryl, does Ed. Keith tells Ed that Ritchie is Ed's best friend, so he already knows what to do. As they walk away, Ed realizes he knows exactly what he should do. The knowledge tears Ed apart inside. He envisions his three friends, Ritchie, Marv, and Audrey, and knows the **Ace of Hearts** will cut into all of them like a knife.

Ed's realization about his friendship with Ritchie shows that in order to care for another person, one must first seek a deeper understanding of that person. It seems, however, that such understanding and the growth it brings can also be quite painful for everyone involved.



5 OF HEARTS: RITCHIE'S SIN

Ed goes over all he knows about Ritchie. Ritchie is twenty years old with no job, no achievements, and no goals. The next night Ed goes to Ritchie's house, he finds his friend sitting again in the kitchen. Ed moves closer and realizes Ritchie is listening to the radio. He remembers how on Christmas Eve, Ritchie said he didn't want to go home. He envisions Ritchie's hands, sitting on the table with nothing for them to do.

Ritchie's listening to the radio suggests a desire to reach beyond his enclosed life. This, along with Ed's observations about Ritchie's idle hands and Ritchie's hesitation to return home, shows how living a lazy, unoccupied life can be a subtle source of deep pain.



The next two nights, Ed and his friends play **cards**. Ed studies Ritchie, knowing Ritchie's entire life consists of going to the pub, going to the gambling shop, and then going to the card games. Meanwhile, Audrey tells them a story about a friend who worked with a recruitment agency that gifted her an alarm clock. When the friend left the agency, she forgot the clock and everyone in the office thought it was a bomb. When the police arrived and discovered the clock, the friend was fired.

Audrey's story compares time to a bomb, which further emphasizes the idea that to waste one's potential in life is a tragedy. She implies that time is continuously running out, which mirrors Ed's fears about getting stuck being an ordinary person forever.



Ed continues to stare at Ritchie. He wants to better understand his friend. So, when the friends are saying goodnight and Ritchie suggests they play the next game at his house, Ed asks him to show him that radio station he is always listening too. Ritchie looks paralyzed, like he does when he sits alone in the kitchen at night. Ed imagines Ritchie walking all alone through his mind. Ed pictures himself joining Ritchie, only to realize they are heading nowhere. But still, Ed knows Ritchie is waiting for something.

Ritchie's paralysis shows how one can become stuck in a purposeless life, even if they wish to change themselves; often, this scene suggests, making progress requires relying on help from others. Ed's fantasy about joining Ritchie suggests both that Ed is still purposeless in some ways and that loved ones can help each other on their journeys to finding meaning.



After everyone leaves, Ed sits in his kitchen and drinks coffee with the Doorman. Ritchie knocks on the door and Ed invites him in. Ritchie confronts him about stalking him. Ritchie tells Ed to stop, but Ed refuses. Ed shows Ritchie his **cards** and explains that each gives him a mission to complete. He tells Ritchie that his name is on one of the cards. Ritchie tries to deny that he is one of Ed's missions, but Ed tells Ritchie that he is a "disgrace." Ritchie looks wounded, and Ed knows this is because Ritchie thinks the same of himself. They sit in silence. Eventually, Ritchie returns to his easygoing attitude and tells Ed that he is a good friend.

Ritchie's denial of being one of Ed's missions shows how one can deny that they need help or need to change their lives, because the reality of their discontent and suffering is too uncomfortable for them to acknowledge. The harshness of Ed's words to Ritchie that helping another person can involve driving that person to acknowledge the painful truths they might otherwise deny. However, Ritchie's reversion to his old nature shows the difficulty of this task.



The next night, when Ed arrives at Ritchie's house to watch him in the kitchen, Ritchie calls out to Ed. He suggests that he and Ed go to river. Ed and Ritchie walk to the river and Ritchie explains that he used to believe he suffered from a physical disorder because he is so lazy. He says he doesn't even have a job, when even people as unmotivated as Ed have jobs. Ed says being a cab driver is not a job but an excuse.

Ed's description of cab driving shows how simply having a job is not necessarily enough to give one a purpose in life. Instead, one must make an effort to find meaning in their life beyond just earning a paycheck.



An hour passes with Ed and Ritchie drinking silently by the river. Eventually, Ritchie mentions that there's nothing he wants to accomplish. Ed realizes that every person goes about their lives telling themselves they're all right until they are confronted with the truth of their problems, like Ritchie just was. Ed also wonders how often he convinces himself he is okay when he truly is not. Ritchie finally tells Ed that the only thing he really wants is "to want."

Ritchie represents a universal desire (which Ed shares) to find one's purpose in life and find a reason for living. His simple yet agonizing desire "to want" shows how difficult the process of finding a purpose can be. Ed's revelations also show how helping others can lead one to realizing painful—yet necessary—truths about themselves.



6 OF HEARTS: GOD BLESS THE MAN WITH THE BEARD, THE MISSING TEETH, AND THE POVERTY

The next day, Ritchie begins looking for a job. Ed contemplates his own job as a cab driver and wonders what more he wants to do with his life. He tries to reason that he is living the life he wants, but he knows he is not satisfied with his job or his house. He feels as if he decided this was his identity without truly realizing it. And now he does not know where to go from here.

Ritchie's job search shows that even if one does not know what they want in life, they should continue to search for their purpose nonetheless. Similarly, Ed's revelation shows how easily one can accept averageness and discontent without even meaning to do so.



With Ritchie on the right path, Ed considers the next mission, Marv. He does not know what Marv could possibly need, with all his money and his beloved car. Days pass, and New Year's Eve arrives. Ed goes over to Ritchie's house for a party. When Ed returns home, he feels sad, because his father is no longer around to celebrate holidays. Ed continues to wrestle with what to do for Marv. He considers Marv's attachment to his old car, and how he would rather kiss a dog than spend money on a party of his own. He wonders why Marv has saved over \$40,000 in the bank, and then realizes this question is the key to the **card**.

Ed's wondering over Marv further emphasizes that in order for an individual to help another person, they must seek a greater understanding of what motivates that person. Meanwhile, Ed's need to help Marv shows that even if one has achieved traditional success, like Marv has by acquiring a large amount of money, that person might still require help to achieve greater meaning in their lives.



Ed considers how he will discover what exactly Marv needs. He considers arguing with Marv, but he knows this may cause Marv to storm off. He could get Marv drunk, but they both may become incoherent that way. Lastly, he could ask Marv transparently what he wants, but he knows honesty will likely cause Marv to refuse him. Ed is still thinking when a homeless man approaches him at the grocery store. The man asks Ed for spare change, and Ed realizes the best strategy is to ask Marv for money. He gives the homeless man five dollars and hurries home.

Ed's careful contemplation here again highlights how hard it can be to help the very people to whom one is closest. Additionally, the idea Ed gets from the homeless man shows that inspiration to help others can come from unlikely sources.



7 OF HEARTS: THE SECRET MARV

Ed continues to return to read to Milla because he thinks she is his favorite mission. However, he also thinks Sophie, Father O'Reilly, and Lua's family might be his favorite. He feels bad for reminiscing over these positive memories when he has two difficult missions left to complete with his closest friends. He is scared of letting Marv and Audrey down but takes courage in his past successes.

At the next **card** game, Ed asks Ritchie how the job search is going. Ritchie says he hasn't found anything yet but will keep looking. Marv mocks Ritchie for looking for a job but apologizes when Ritchie appears hurt. After the game, Marv offers Audrey a ride home, but she says she would rather walk than ride in his horrible car. As Marv struggles to start his car, Ed asks Marv for money. Marv freezes, and Ed realizes this is the end of their casual friendship.

Marv hesitantly asks Ed how much money he needs. Ed responds by yelling at Marv for being so cheap. They stand in silence until Marv gets out of his car and apologizes to Ed. Marv says that he doesn't have the money because all his savings are organized in a fund one cannot withdraw from for a few years. Ed asks Marv why he did this, and Marv begins to cry. Marv asks Ed to take a drive with him.

Marv drives Ed to the poor part of town. He points out the home of Suzanne Boyd, his ex-girlfriend who suddenly moved. Marv reveals that the reason she and her family moved three years ago was because he and Suzanne have a child together. They sit in silence, as Ed realizes Marv's stinginess comes from his desire to save money for his child, and his argumentative nature comes from his guilt over Suzanne moving away.

Marv admits that he doesn't even know if he has a daughter or a son. He has Suzanne's new address only because he begged one of her friends to give it to him. Marv reminisces about how, as teenagers, Suzanne used to sneak away from her strict father a few nights a week to sleep with Marv in a field. Marv remembers how happy he was on those beautiful nights. Then, Suzanne's family left town, because she was pregnant and the family was ashamed. Marv has been carrying this story alone for three years.

Ed's contemplation shows how while one can use past good deeds as motivation to continue, one cannot use the fulfillment they find in these successes as an excuse to stop helping others. Ed's train of thought also indicates that one cannot let the fear of letting others down stop them from trying to helping others.



Ritchie's continued effort to find a job shows how helping someone confront a difficult truth can have a lasting impact on that person's life. Ed's revelation about the changed nature of his friendship with Marv further emphasizes the idea that helping others and gaining a deeper understanding of their needs sometimes requires the sacrifice of a comfortable but shallow connection to other people.



Marv's tears and his initial inability to explain why he has been saving money shows that his character is much more complex than Ed originally assumed. This shows how one can misunderstand those they care about unless they make an intentional effort to learn more.



Ed learns that Marv finds purpose in life by trying to make up for his past mistakes and care for his child. This shows that the ways people create meaning in life do not always follow traditional values of success and are not always immediately apparent, even to one's own friends.



Marv's suffering and his act of finally telling Ed about his pain shows how caring for another person often involves assuring that person they are not alone in their pain. The value Marv placed on his relationship with Suzanne and his pain over losing her shows how meaning often comes from close interpersonal connections, even though those relationships can lead to pain too.



Marv has not gone to Suzanne's new address because her father threatened to kill him if he ever saw him again. He has made several attempts to drive to her house, but he's overcome with fear each time. Still, he longs for Suzanne every day. Ed can only imagine what it's like to love someone that much. All Marv can do to cope with his guilt is save up money, because he feels this is the only gift he can give to his estranged child. Ed promises to accompany Marv to Suzanne's new house, so he can finally meet his child.

Marv makes a sacrifice with no hope of reward, which contrasts with Ed's previous expectation of a reward for helping others. Ed recognizes this as a love he has never experienced. Marv's surprising example indicates that perhaps Ed can learn from Marv about what caring for others really means.



8 OF HEARTS: EACH TO EACH

Marv calls Ed later and says they will go to Suzanne's house tomorrow. Ed offers to drive them there in his cab. The next night, they drive to the next town over. The Boyds live in a house just as poor and rundown as the one they lived in before. Marv sits in the car for 40 minutes before he summons the courage to get out. After 14 failed attempts, he wills himself up to the front door and knocks. The door opens, but Ed can't see who is there. Marv goes inside the home.

The fact that the Boyds live in the same conditions as they did in the other town further emphasizes that the person, not the place, determines some aspects of an individual's life. Meanwhile, Marv's refusal to give up on seeing the Boyds this time shows how one needs both perseverance and support, as represented by Ed, in order to pursue one's purpose.



A few moments later, Marv comes flying out the door. Henry Boyd, Suzanne's father, is beating Marv as he scrambles across the lawn. Ed gets out of the cab, even though Henry is strong and furious. As Ed runs toward the house, Henry kicks Marv as he lies on the ground. Marv attempts to explain to him that he has money he wants to give to the child, but Henry won't listen. He tells Marv to never come back.

Ed shows courage in facing the violent and angry Henry, which contrasts with his hesitation to face danger at the beginning of the novel. This shows how facing challenges in order to help others can lead to personal growth; Ed is becoming more and more like the brave heroes he once revered.



Ed approaches and attempts to pick Marv up off the ground. He looks up and sees Suzanne standing in the doorway with the child. Henry shouts at Suzanne to go back inside and Suzanne disappears. Henry says Marv disgraced their family. Ed argues that Suzanne is also responsible. Ed approaches Henry and states that Marv acted honorably by facing Henry even though he knew there would be a fight. Henry begins to look intensely sad and begs them to leave. Ed returns to his cab and realizes Marv is still in the yard. Suzanne is out on the porch and the two of them are staring at each other.

Ed's praise of Marv indicates that a morally honorable person makes sacrifices in order to care for others, as Marv wants to do in order to be reunited with his loved ones. Ed's recognition of Henry's sadness shows how Ed can feel empathy even for an aggressive, unjust person, which highlights how Ed has become more compassionate through his missions.



9 OF HEARTS: THE SWINGS

Ed drives the bleeding Marv home and Marv thanks Ed for his help. Weeks pass and their friendship contains the same petty arguments, despite the significant life event they experienced together. Ed is grateful their friendship hasn't changed. One morning, Ed arrives at work and the secretary tells him someone called and requested Ed's cab specifically. She gives Ed Suzanne's address. Ed decides to go straight to Suzanne without calling Marv.

Despite Ed's previous fears that his friendship with Marv was permanently changed, their return to normalcy shows that one can both care deeply for another person and still enjoy lighthearted moments with them. Suzanne's call to the cab company suggests the courage of Marv and Ed has inspired her to defy her father.



Ed arrives at Suzanne's house and she gets into the cab along with her daughter. Ed asks the child what her name is, and the child says Melinda. Ed recognizes that both Suzanne and Melinda are beautiful. Suzanne tells Ed that she hates her father and hates herself for obeying him. Suzanne asks Ed if he hates her for what she did to Marv. Ed says he doesn't, because Suzanne was young, and her father was controlling. Ed says what's most important is Suzanne coming to see Marv today. She tells Ed that no one has ever confronted her father like Ed did.

Ed acknowledgement of the powerful influence of Suzanne's circumstances on her life along with his emphasis on her current choices shows how he now has a nuanced view on fate and choice. This view accepts that while one cannot change their past circumstances, they can choose how they proceed from those circumstances and begin to make up for the regrets of their past.



Ed drops Suzanne and Melinda off at a playground and then picks Marv up at work. Ed waits on the hood of his cab while Marv cautiously approaches Suzanne and Melinda at the park. Marv shyly shakes his daughter's hand and then pushes her on the swing set. Suzanne comments to Ed that Marv gets along well with Melinda. Melinda gets off the swing and holds Marv's hand. Ed can see that Marv is crying.

Marv's connection with his daughter shows how the act of caring, as Marv clearly cares for his daughter, can heal past pain. The union of the family also demonstrates how bravery (as Ed, Marv, and Suzanne have all shown) can overcome unkind forces such as Suzanne's father.



10 OF HEARTS: AUDREY, PART ONE: THREE NIGHTS TO WAIT

Ed can't sleep that night because he is still thinking about how Marv looked holding hands with his daughter and how afterward, Marv hugged him. Ed knows that now Audrey is his one remaining mission. He believes this is the most important message for him.

Ed's memory of Marv's affection for his daughter shows how helping others allows one to recognize the beautiful love of others.



Ed goes to Audrey's house and watches it from the outside. For three nights, he watches Simon come over and listens to him and Audrey having sex. Ed still knows that Audrey loves him, not Simon, and he determines that Audrey needs to allow herself to feel that love for once in her life. He decides that tomorrow he will complete this mission.

Ed knows that love, not sex, is the secret to his mission, which shows how he has matured as a character. This change shows that caring for others will lead one to value love and compassion over traditional forms of success such as sexual conquests.



JACK OF HEARTS: MARV'S AFTERTHOUGHT

Before Ed leaves for Audrey's house the next night, Marv arrives at Ed's place. He asks Ed if he still needs the money he asked for. Ed assures him he doesn't need any money. He explains to Marv the missions he has received through the **cards** and how Marv belonged to the Ace of Hearts. Ed says he has to go, and Marv deduces that he is on his way to Audrey.

Marv's offer of money shows how caring for his family has made him a radically more generous person. Additionally, Ed once again shows that a seemingly immoral act of deception can be justified if the act is used to help others.



QUEEN OF HEARTS: AUDREY, PART TWO: THREE MINUTES TO TAKE

Ed waits outside Audrey's house with a cassette player beside him. He knows he must suffer through another night of listening to Simon and Audrey have sex before he can complete this mission. At dawn, he hears Simon leave the house, and then Ed knows it is time to act. He knocks on the door and Audrey answers, asking him what he's doing there. Ed says he is here for her. Audrey steps outside in her pajamas and Ed leads her down to the nearby garden.

Ed begins to play a specially selected song on the cassette player. He looks into Audrey's eyes and holds her hands. Wordlessly, he pulls her close and she rests her head on his shoulder. They slow dance to "the music of hearts" and Ed hopes she can feel the love he has for her. They dance for three minutes and Ed waits for her to admit that she loves him back. All she can say is "Ed Kennedy, huh?" and that it's only him. Ed pulls away, knowing that three minutes of love were enough.

Ed's suffering through listening to Simon and Audrey being together suggests that part of the mission involves him overcoming his jealousy of Simon. This further suggests that one must give up superficial ideas of success in order to have a caring, meaningful relationship with another person.



Ed's view that love is enough shows he has given up on the view that one deserves a reward for showing kindness to others. Instead, he recognizes that love and caring are valuable in themselves.



KING OF HEARTS: THE END

Ed collects his things and begins to leave Audrey. He says he will see her at the next **card** game, but she promises him he will see her sooner than that. Ed walks home, thinking about how he has completed twelve tasks across four cards. He has never felt so victorious and free in his life. He sits in his kitchen and drinks coffee with his dog, but suddenly his positive attitude disappears. He hears someone open a latch and then run away.

Slowly, Ed walks to his mailbox. He opens the box and finds an envelope with his name on it. He can see that the envelope contains one more **card** with one more address on it. He collapses on the lawn. Thoughts elude him as he opens the envelope and sees the address written on the card, the Joker. It is the address to his own home, meaning the last mission is for him.

The freedom and happiness Ed feels at having completed his mission shows a desire to control his own life. This suggests that succeeding in helping others leads one to feel more confident and secure in their own agency as well.



The appearance of another card in Ed's life suggests that one cannot escape outside influences on their life, even when they've worked hard to gain autonomy. The fact that this last card carries Ed's own address, however, suggests that Ed's life has always been intimately tied to those of the people he's helped, whether he's known it or not.



JOKER: THE LAUGHTER

Ed's street is quiet, but he hears **the Joker** in his hand laughing at him. He is scared to go back inside his house in case someone is waiting for him in there. However, he searches the entire house and finds no one there but his dog. Feeling numb, Ed goes to work, unable to chat casually with his customers like he usually does. Two days pass in this limbo, until Ed almost crashes his taxi when he fails to notice the car in front of him has suddenly stopped. Ed slams on the breaks just in time and hears the Joker laughing from the passenger seat.

Ed's perception that the Joker is laughing at him after he almost crashes his car suggests he believes the card is influencing his luck. This shows how in times of distress, as Ed feels in this chapter, one will revert to the assumption that fate controls their life. Ed has come so far in terms of feeling that he can take charge within his circumstances, but he still feels burdened by the things he can't change.



JOKER: THE WEEKS

Ed feels overextended as weeks pass and he is still waiting for someone to arrive at his house. One day, a person walks in, but it's only Audrey. She asks Ed why he has been so distant from their friends lately. Ed says he has been waiting. He shows Audrey the **cards** and explains that each card is complete, except for the Joker. He begs Audrey to admit that she sent him the cards because she wanted him to help others and improve himself, but she tells him the truth that she didn't send the cards.

Audrey's honest denial of her involvement suggests that one cannot know if the forces acting on one's life are good or evil, an uncertainty that makes Ed feel desperate in this scene.



JOKER: THE END IS NOT THE END

Late at night, someone knocks on Ed's door. Ed takes a deep breath and opens the door. A bald man in a suit with a mustache stands in front of him. He asks Ed if he may come in and, when Ed consents, he sits down at the kitchen table. He opens his briefcase and takes out a letter. He insists Ed open it, but Ed instead asks who sent him. The man, of course, does not know. Finally, Ed opens the letter, which tells him to go down to the cemetery.

The bald man is yet another stranger involved in this scheme, further suggesting the power of the outside forces to influence an individual's life. The appearance of this man and the other messengers throughout also comment on the form of the novel itself, as the author dictates the actions of a cast of characters to emphasize themes, just as whoever is sending the cards instructs different people to serve some larger purpose.



At the mention of the cemetery, Ed wonders if his father planned the whole scheme of the **cards** before he died. He knows his father used to walk the streets of the town after leaving the pub, so his father would know the addresses listed on the cards. Ed runs to the cemetery.

Ed's suspicion that his father is behind the cards shows how one of the main outside forces that dictates an individual's fate is their own parents; after all, no one gets to choose the family they're born into.



Ed finds Daryl and Keith standing next to his father's grave. Keith says Ed is so similar to his father that he was likely to die just as underachieving as he did. Daryl reveals that he and Keith were hired in order to challenge Ed, so he didn't actually end up like his father. However, Keith reveals, Ed's father is not the person who hired them.

Daryl's words about Ed's father suggest that while one's parents have a powerful influence on one's life, the negative aspects of this influence can be overcome by allowing the challenges of life to create personal growth, as Ed has done with the cards.



Ed asks Daryl and Keith how they knew he would be at the cemetery at this exact time. They say their employer always tells them where to go and the employer is never wrong. Neither of them knows who the employer is, however. Daryl reveals that they came here tonight to remind Ed not to die in the same state his father did. Daryl and Keith tell him he has to wait a little while longer and then they walk away. Ed thanks them, but he knows they don't hear him, and he will never see them again.

Daryl and Keith's revelation about the employer suggests a divinely powerful, omniscient power acting upon the character's lives. Daryl's reminder that Ed should try not to become like his father also emphasizes how negative examples can be used to motivate an individual into doing more than they think they are capable of.



Ed waits a few more days and then one day at dawn, a young man gets into Ed's cab. When Ed asks him where he wants to go, the young man says Ed's own address. Ed freezes, but the young man orders him to drive. As Ed approaches his house, the young man removes the cap that has been concealing his face. Ed realizes the man is the failed bank robber from the start of the book.

The robber instructs Ed to drive past each address he went to for the mission. Lastly, they drive past Ritchie's house, the playground where Marv met his daughter, and Audrey's place. Ed wishes he could stay forever in the happy memories with his friends, but he and the man return to Ed's house. The robber pulls a mirror from his pocket. He holds the mirror up to Ed's face and asks him if he remembers how, at the trial, he said that every time Ed looked in the mirror, he should see a dead man.

Ed envisions Angelina, Milla, and Sophie. He remembers Father O'Reilly's laughter, Angie's ice cream, and the brotherly love of Gavin and Daniel. He sees the Christmas lights, his mother's disappointment and love, and Bernie's old cinema. He sees all this in the mirror, as well as Ritchie by the river, Marv in the park, and Audrey in the three minutes they danced together. The man asks Ed if he still sees a dead man in the mirror. Ed says no, and the man says then this entire scheme was worth it. The man says goodbye forever and tells Ed to go inside.

JOKER: THE FOLDER

Ed enters his house and finds another man sitting on his couch with the Doorman. Ed cannot manage to ask the man if he is who he thinks he is, but the man simply nods. The man explains that he came to town a year ago and saw Ed with his dead father, his **card** games, and his dog. He watched Ed like Ed watched all the addresses on the cards. He reveals that he killed Ed's father, as well as organized the failed bank robbery and sent Daryl and Keith to beat Ed up. He says he did all this because Ed was completely ordinary, and he wanted to prove that if someone so average can commit extraordinary acts in order to help people, then truly anyone can.

The reappearance of the bank robber shows Ed's life has been controlled since the beginning of the novel. This revelation further emphasizes the meta-commentary of the narrative, as it suggests that every event in Ed's life has been designed to convey a larger message, just as the author has written the book to emphasize certain points.



The robber's instruction to pass every house relevant to the mission suggests that Ed must reflect upon his accomplishments in order to continue improving, an idea that is made literal when the robber brings out the mirror. This moment makes it clear that avoiding being a "dead man" means constantly evolving and leaving old versions of oneself behind. As the robber suggests, self-reflection is a key part of this process.



Before helping others, Ed looked in the mirror and saw a dead man, suggesting that one's life is meaningless if they do not strive beyond their perceived potential in order to help others, as the cards drove Ed to do. The robber's conviction that the scheme was worth it expresses the view that seemingly immoral actions, such as spying on Ed, are justified in order to improve the lives of others.



One could interpret this man as God, given his divinely omniscient knowledge of Ed's life. This interpretation suggests that one's life is completely controlled by a higher power. One could also interpret the man to be the author himself. This man claims that he has dictated Ed's life in order to show that anyone can go above and beyond themselves to help others, just as the author has written out the details of Ed's life in order to convey the same point.



Ed stands still, questioning his reality. Eventually, the man stands up, leaving a **folder** on the couch behind him. He reveals that everything he planned for Ed, and everything Ed did, is written in the folder, including the conversation they are having right now. Ed asks if he himself is real. The man tells him to look in the folder. Ed does, and written inside are the words, "Of course you're real." The man begins to leave, and Ed begs him to tell him what he is supposed to do now. The man says Ed must now live his own life.

The man remains for a few more minutes while Ed grapples with the weight of what he has just learned. Finally, the man leaves, without ever telling Ed his name. Ed watches the man walk up the street and take out a notebook to write in. Ed thinks that maybe he should be the one to write about it, because he was the one who did all the work. He stops himself from thinking too much about this. Ed goes through the **folder** and verifies that everything inside is true. He waits around as days pass, before realizing he is waiting for life after the events in the folder.

JOKER: THE MESSAGE

One day, Audrey knocks on Ed's door. She comes in and asks Ed if she can stay, forever. Ed and Audrey kiss and hold each other. They sink to the floor together and the Doorman comes and sits next to them. Ed tells Audrey the entire story of the man and the **cards**. When he finishes, he realizes there's something else he needs to know. He runs to the **folder** and frantically searches through it. Audrey asks what he's looking for and he says he is looking for them getting together. Audrey says that this moment is meant for them alone.

Ed, Audrey, and the Doorman sit on the front porch. Ed contemplates the man's words about how if someone as average as Ed can commit extraordinary acts of kindness for others, then this means that any person can do the same. He realizes that he was not a messenger, delivering information and meaning to others. He is the message himself.

The folder represents the novel itself because it dictates Ed's every action, just like an author describes a character's life. This suggests the message of Ed's life—that one should commit extraordinary acts of caring for others—is the moral the reader should take away from the novel. The man's instruction that Ed now has to live his life emphasizes again that while one cannot control their circumstances, they do choose how they proceed from these circumstances.



The namelessness of the man leaves the reader to interpret whether he is God, the author, or simply another character within the context of the story. This shows how one has a choice of how to perceive the forces that guide people's lives. This idea is further emphasized by Ed's thought that he should write down his story, because while he cannot change the events themselves, he can change the lens through which they are viewed.



Audrey's words indicate that now that the man has withdrawn his control, Ed must make his own decisions and continue to live his life on his own terms. This further emphasizes the idea that circumstance dictates an individual's life to a point, but beyond that point, one must make their own decisions. The end of the folder also represents the end of the novel and its control over the characters.



Ed's revelation that he is the message shows how when one chooses to help others, their life becomes an inspiration to others to act with kindness as well. This also further emphasizes the idea that Ed's purpose is to show to the reader the value pushing oneself to help others, even when one doesn't feel heroic or extraordinary at all.





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