The Heart is a Lonely Hunter

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CARSON MCCULLERS

Born in Georgia in 1917, Carson McCullers demonstrated artistic promise from an early age—even as her tomboyish style, introspective nature, and battles with several bouts of rheumatic fever alienated her from many of her peers. McCullers, a dedicated piano student, practiced music several hours each day. At the encouragement of her watchmaker father, she began writing stories as well. At 17, McCullers moved to New York City to continue her piano studies at Juilliard—but after falling on hard times in the city, she spent her time working odd jobs and taking writing classes. McCullers began dividing her time between New York and Columbus, Ohio after another bout of rheumatic fever. Her 1937 marriage to Reeves McCullers took her to Charlotte, North Carolina, where the couple lived for several years until their divorce in 1941. McCullers then returned to New York, where she moved in trendy literary circles, became a member of the artists' salon February House, and made connections that would allow her to move to Paris after the end of World War II. McCullers had relationships with a number of women and often dressed in men's clothing—and yet in 1945 she remarried Reeves McCullers, who himself had homosexual relationships throughout their marriage. Reeves McCullers committed suicide in Paris in 1953, after which McCullers retreated to upstate New York. In spite of a series of strokes that left her largely paralyzed by the age of 31, McCullers remained prolific throughout her career. Her novels *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *The Member of the Wedding*, and *Reflections in a Golden Eye* explore themes of alienation, radical politics, and the struggle to live a decent, empathetic life. Her work has been widely adapted for stage and screen, and her novels and short stories alike remain oft-cited examples of Southern Gothic literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter is set in the late 1930s. At that time, the South was still in the throes of the Great Depression. Widely recognized as the greatest economic crisis in the history of industrialization, the Depression was a destabilizing event which impacted and displaced countless families and communities. The Southern mill town at the heart of the novel is suffering—a lack of available work leads to increased social tensions between the members of the community, while simmering resentments among the working class ignite racial tensions and inspire a political schism in which revolutionary voices are challenged or quashed by apathy and hopelessness. The atmosphere of the bigoted, segregated Jim Crow South is also a major focal point of the novel. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* was widely hailed at the time of its publication as one of the first novels by a white writer to try to fully, empathetically inhabit and detail the lives of black individuals rather than portray them as ciphers or stereotypes. Indeed, the novel—while not always politically correct according to today's standards—does endeavor to demonstrate and condemn the limited social and professional options, pervasive racism, and cruel injustices to which black communities all across the Deep South were subjected at the height of the Jim Crow era. Many characters in the novel also express feeling heightened anxieties about World War II over the course of the year during which the book unfolds. Though the United States has not yet entered the war during the events of the book, Mick Kelly's neighbor and crush, Harry Minowitz, is one of the few Jewish people in town, and together he and Mick daydream about absconding to Europe and going undercover to "fight the fascists."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter is part of the Southern Gothic tradition—a movement of Southern writing which explores the morally dark grotesqueries of life in the American South. Authors like William Faulkner (*Absalom, Absalom!*), Flannery O'Connor (*A Good Man Is Hard to Find*), Eudora Welty (*Delta Wedding*), and McCullers's friend and contemporary Tennessee Williams (*A Streetcar Named Desire*) were practitioners of the genre. Shaped by these writers' collective desire to investigate and interrogate the South's legacies of violence and cruelty hiding just beneath a thin veneer of mannered gentility, Southern Gothic works often feature instances of emotional violence or physical grotesquerie. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*'s central themes of loneliness and isolation, the failures of communication, and racism and injustice are reflected in another giant of Southern literature, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was published two decades after McCullers's debut novel. Additionally, as a work of Modernism, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* portrays quintessentially Modernist themes of alienation and disillusionment. Similar works from this era include J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*; Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*; and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Heart is a Lonely Hunter
- **When Written:** 1930s
- **Where Written:** New York City and Columbus, Georgia

- **When Published:** 1940
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** An unnamed mill town in the Deep South, possibly in Georgia.
- **Climax:** Shortly after learning of the death of his longtime friend Spiros Antonapoulos, John Singer commits suicide.
- **Antagonist:** Loneliness and isolation; racism; capitalism
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Uncanny Resemblance. Over the year, many critics and scholars have drawn an autobiographical connection between Carson McCullers and Mick Kelly, one of the novel's protagonists. The name "Mick" could arguably be read as a derivation of the author's married last name. Like Mick, McCullers was a tomboy growing up, was also a devoted and talented pianist obsessed with music, and was also the daughter of a watchmaker who struggled to provide for his family. While the specific details of Mick's girlhood very well may be the stuff of fiction, it's clear McCullers drew upon her own childhood in creating one of the novel's most iconic and memorable characters.

Up For Interpretation. The character of John Singer—a deaf and mute man who serves as the novel's centripetal point, drawing a group of lonely and disconnected people together—has been the subject of many different theories and interpretations over the years. Some scholars suggest Singer's friendship with Antonapoulos—another deaf and mute man—is homosexual in nature, and that the men's shared afflictions are symbolic of their need to remain closeted in the hostile, socially conservative environment of the Deep South. Others have suggested that Singer is an allegory for God, a benevolent but inscrutable presence who must listen to the prayers, worries, hopes, and rants of others without ever being able to make himself heard or understood in return. Whether interpreted literally or allegorically, Singer remains one of 20th-century literature's most striking, intriguing, and baffling characters, and his thoughts and actions have fascinated readers for nearly 80 years.

PLOT SUMMARY

In Part One of the novel, Carson McCullers introduces five characters—all of whom live in an unnamed mill town in the Deep South, and each of whom is profoundly lonely in his or her own way. The year is 1938. John Singer, a deaf and mute man, has recently been separated from his companion of 10 years, Spiros Antonapoulos—who is also deaf and mute—after the irritable, quarrelsome Antonapoulos is placed in an insane asylum by his cousin Charlie Parker. Singer mourns being left alone in a town where no one truly understands him. He moves into a boarding house run by the Kelly family and begins frequenting the all-night establishment the New York Café. Biff Brannon, the proprietor of the café, is trapped in an unsatisfying marriage to a woman named Alice. Brannon has a soft spot for strangers, "freaks," and misfits, and draws Alice's ire when he lets a belligerent, drunken wanderer, Jake Blount, stay and drink at the café on credit for 12 days. Brannon is perturbed by Blount's radical political views and violence when intoxicated, but together he and Singer conspire to feed, clothe, and shelter the clearly ailing stranger. Mick Kelly, a 13-year-old tomboy whose parents run the town boarding house, feels lonely and bored all the time. A middle child in a family of six children, Mick harbors dreams of being a famous composer and pianist and is constantly writing **music** in her head. Mick is fascinated with John Singer, and often visits him in his room upstairs. Meanwhile, Jake Blount eventually secures a job at an outdoor attraction, the Sunny Dixie Show, working as a carousel operator. Blount is a devoted socialist who longs to travel the South and expose the evils of capitalism to the workers he meets. Blount can hardly stay sober long enough, however, to get through the day—let alone to begin a revolution.

Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland, a black doctor who idolizes the writings of Baruch Spinoza and Karl Marx, is a lonely man who dreams of galvanizing his people toward revolution. When Copeland's daughter, Portia, who works in the kitchen of the Kelly boarding house, pays him a visit, Copeland's great struggle becomes clear. He wants to inspire his community to refuse jobs in which they must serve white people, to push back against the racism and injustice in their town, and to take pride in their identity and their struggle. Copeland sees Portia as complacent. Though she claims to genuinely love her job; her employers' children; and life with her husband, Highboy, and her brother Willie, Copeland still wants better for Portia. Over the course of their conversation, it becomes clear that Portia is the sole link between Copeland and the rest of his estranged family, and yet he constantly tests her patience by inciting ideological quarrels with her. At the end of the night, after a brief reconciliation with Willie and Highboy after they come to collect Portia, Copeland is left alone with his books. He reflects privately on his recent meeting with the first decent white man he's ever known, a deaf man who lit his cigarette for him in the rain one night.

As the weeks go by, Singer finds himself hosting Mick, Brannon, Blount, and Copeland in his room at the boarding house as they visit him individually. Singer is amused by their thoughts and words, moved by their struggles, and yet never fully able to connect with any of them since he cannot express himself in return. He visits Antonapoulos at the asylum, but finds his friend closed-off and changed.

In Part Two, as the seasons go by, each of the main characters' lives, hopes, dreams, and traumas become intertwined. In the early fall, Mick hosts a prom party for her new high school classmates, reconnecting with her next-door neighbor Harry Minowitz, a Jewish boy whose passionate hatred of fascism intrigues Mick. Throughout the party Mick enjoys feeling fancy and grown-up—but at the end of the night, she puts on her old shorts and goes for a late-night walk through the neighborhood to listen for the sounds of other people's radios. Biff's wife, Alice, dies suddenly, leaving Biff in a stunned kind of grief with only his sister-in-law Lucile Wilson and his niece Baby Wilson to comfort him. Copeland's son Willie is charged with assault after a brawl at a dance hall and sent to the state penitentiary. The shocking, emotional incident prompts Copeland to attend a family reunion held by his late wife's father, whom his children call Grandpapa, and to reconnect with his estranged sons Karl Marx (who is ashamed of his name and goes by "Buddy") and Hamilton. Blount wishes he could spread the message of socialism throughout the town, and gets an idea about how to do so when he meets a traveling evangelist, Simms, who scrawls Bible verses and religious messages on the walls of local buildings and businesses. Later, Mick's younger brother Bubber gets their cash-strapped family into even deeper financial trouble after he accidentally shoots Baby Wilson with his friend Spareribs's rifle. Lucile demands repayment from the family for Baby's hospital bills, and though Bubber tries to run away to Atlanta, his family catches him and brings him home. After the incident, Bubber becomes sullen and withdrawn and insists upon going by his given name, George.

On Christmas Day, Copeland hosts a party at his home and announces a young man named Lancy Davis as the winner of an essay contest on the subject of "How [to] Better the Position of the Negro Race in Society." At the party, Copeland gives a rousing speech to his many guests, trying to inspire them to embody the generous, community-oriented values of Marxism and to rebel against the laborious jobs which keep them in servitude to their white oppressors. The speech is met with raucous cheers, but Copeland is still uncertain of whether he's truly gotten through to his people. Meanwhile, Singer visits Antonapoulos at the asylum and finds that his friend has been moved to the infirmary after a bout of nephritis. Singer brings Antonapoulos gifts and food, but Antonapoulos is as disinterested and cold as ever. Brannon continues mourning his wife, so distracted by his grief that he barely notices the café steadily losing money. He longs to give his love to someone and to parent a child, and soon develops a kind of obsession with Mick Kelly and, to a lesser extent, the ailing Baby. As Mick and Harry grow closer, her fascination with Singer deepens, too, and she struggles to transcribe the constant symphonies playing in her head onto paper.

One cold February morning, in the midst of a pneumonia outbreak which worsens Copeland's dormant tuberculosis, Portia brings Copeland terrible news: a young man named Buster Johnson has just been released from the penitentiary and has brought with him the horrible story of his treatment there. Buster and Willie were tortured for months by white guards at the prison—as a result, Buster has lost one leg, and Willie has lost both of his feet. Copeland, incensed, goes to the courthouse to demand to speak with the local judge, but a group of white policemen beat him and lock him up for the night.

As the cold breaks and the warm March temperatures descend, Mick and Harry go on a picnic to distract themselves from their grief and anxiety over rumors of Willie Copeland's torture and news of the Nazis' increasing control over Europe. While at a creek in a quiet forest, the two have sex. Harry asks Mick to marry him, but she tells him she plans to never marry. Harry then runs away from home, instructing Mick to respond to a letter he'll send her in two months' time letting him know she's "all right." Mick realizes that she is an adult now, whether she wants to be or not. Jake Blount hears that Willie has returned from prison and goes over to Copeland's house to visit with the boy and ask him to tell his story throughout town in hopes of galvanizing people against the racist, capitalist status quo. During a discussion with Copeland, however, the drunken and agitated Blount is unable to agree with the doctor's belief that it is racism, not capitalism, that is the greater evil. The two men insult each other, the sickly Copeland has a fit, and Jake runs away in fear.

Over the summer, Mick's sister Hazel tells her about a job opening at Woolworth's department store. Mick's parents initially discourage her from taking the job and urge her to stay in school, but after Mick hears how much the job pays, she decides to go in for an interview, knowing the money will help her family. On the morning of the interview, Mick rushes to Singer's room and asks him if taking the job is the right thing to do. Singer, bewildered, nods in response. Mick goes to Woolworth's, where she is hired on the spot. Weeks later, Singer, perturbed by his recent strange inability to understand what people are saying to him—including Mick on the morning she frantically asked him about the job at Woolworth's—decides to go visit Antonapoulos once again. When he arrives at the asylum, however, after a 12-hour train ride, he is informed that Antonapoulos is dead. Singer wanders through the town where the asylum is located and meets a trio of deaf and mute men, but he is in such pain over Antonapoulos's death that he's unable to connect with them. Singer takes the train back to the mill town, where he retrieves a gun from the jewelry store where he works, takes it up to his room at the boarding house, and commits suicide.

Part Three of the novel takes place over the course of a single day some weeks after Singer's death: August 21st, 1939. McCullers shows where each of the four main characters—all devastated by the loss of Singer—have wound up. Copeland is

being moved against his will out to Grandpapa's farm so that he can recuperate from his illness. Blount narrowly escapes a violent race riot at Sunny Dixie—in which Lancy Davis is murdered, and which the papers report was inspired by "labor agitation." Knowing he will soon be a wanted man for his involvement in the riot, Blount skips town, unsure of where he's going but determined to remain in the South. Mick finds herself constantly physically and mentally exhausted due to the dull but emotionally demanding nature of her work at Woolworth's. As she eats a sundae and drinks a beer at the New York Café, she regrets taking the job, and wonders if she'll ever be able to get back into the "inside room" of solitude in her own mind and compose her music again—or whether all her years of dreaming have been for nothing. At the end of a long, empty night at the café, Brannon stands alone at the cash register and wonders what possessed Singer to kill himself. He stews in his loneliness and longs for someone to be able to give his love to. For a moment, Brannon believes he can comprehend the nature of human loneliness, struggle, and valor—but the moment of clarity is gone as quickly as it came, and Biff is left alone to wait for dawn.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John Singer – John Singer is the novel's protagonist and central, centripetal force—all of the other characters, desperate for connection and a relief from their isolation, swirl around him. John Singer is deaf and mute, and as such, is unable to communicate easily or traditionally with the people around him, though he reads lips with skill. While at the beginning of the novel he has lived for 10 years with another deaf and mute man, Spiros Antonapoulos, Antonapoulos soon falls ill and is sent away to a mental asylum far from town—leaving Singer alone for the first time in over a decade. Singer's loneliness and despair are constant, though he finds distraction and amusement in the fascination that four people develop with him. As Mick Kelly, Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland, Jake Blount, and Biff Bannon privately and individually befriend Singer, they each come to see him as a reflection of themselves: a perfect listener who will reflect their own thoughts back to them, writing supportive and kind answers to their deepest, darkest fears and questions on the small pad of paper he always keeps with him. Singer finds himself alternately amused and burdened by the problems and concerns of his four visitors, even as his own loneliness and sense of complete isolation drives him to visit the increasingly ill Antonapoulos several times throughout the year. Singer's devotion to Antonapoulos remains tender and total, and yet as he watches his friend slowly slip away, Singer's own capacity for the enthusiasm and emotional labor required to maintain his connections with Mick, Copeland, Blount, and Biff dulls. While the other four main characters in the novel feel lonely and hampered in terms of self-expression, Singer is perhaps the only truly lonely, isolated person in the story. His differences from those around him are profound and permanent, and, indeed, after Antonapoulos dies and Singer's connection to the one person who could ever truly understand his unique struggle is severed, Singer takes his own life. Kind, gentle, patient, and honest, Singer's allure is infectious. He becomes a kind of mirror not just to his four companions but to the rest of the townspeople as well, all of whom are guilty of having "described the mute as [they] wished him to be." Singer's ability to reflect others' own selves back to them is inextricable from his own tragic inability to find someone who will do the same for him.

Mick Kelly – Mick Kelly is the youngest protagonist of the novel at just 13 years old. The middle child in a large family, Mick is often lonely and bored. Obsessed with **music** and the symphonies of Beethoven and Mozart but too poor to afford music lessons or a piano, Mick takes to wandering through the town's richer neighborhoods at night in hopes of hearing the sounds of a symphony on someone's radio. Mick, dreamy and idealistic, spends much of her time in an "inside room" in her mind where she composes music and imagines traveling the world as a famous conductor. When John Singer rents a room in Mick's family's large boarding house, Mick becomes obsessed with him—transfixed by his tranquility and validated for the first time in her life by his listening skills, Mick develops a crush on Singer that is more emotional than romantic. Mick is a feisty, contrarian tomboy, and she's misunderstood by almost everyone she meets—but with Singer, she feels seen and understood at last. Over the course of the year in which the novel takes place, Mick grows up considerably. She goes from being a tomboy who cares nothing for clothes, boys, or social affairs to a young woman who wants to gain the admiration of her high school classmates. Amidst her struggles with her annoying, cruel siblings—and her family's ever-increasing money troubles—Mick forms a friendship with the Jewish boy next door, Harry Minowitz, and from him learns about the evils of fascism and the necessity of political passion. Toward the end of the novel, Mick loses her virginity to Harry. Afterward, he asks for her hand in marriage, but Mick declares that she'll never marry. Soon after her fateful afternoon with Harry, Mick is forced to make the biggest decision of her life: whether to stay in school or drop out and take a job at Woolworth's department store in order to help her parents escape their mountain of debt. Mick chooses to do the latter, and, within just a few weeks, she finds her reckless spirit, fanciful dreams for the future, and passionate artistry trampled and stifled by the exhaustion and existential boredom of work.

Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland – Doctor Copeland is a black doctor who resides in the unnamed mill town in which the novel is set. An upstanding and well-known member of his community who has delivered countless babies—many of whom have been

given his name by their parents—Copeland is beloved by his people but plagued by the feeling that he's undeserving of the kindness and generosity his patients and neighbors show to him. Copeland is disturbed by the racism and injustice he bears witness to each day. He wants his family, friends, and neighbors to demand more from life—to rise up against the oppression of white people (all of whom he hates, save for the kind and gentle John Singer), insist upon fair and equal treatment, and reclaim their dignity. As passionate as Copeland's beliefs and dreams are, he finds himself unable to shake his community from what he sees as complacency. Copeland has a dark past, and admits that his anger over racism, injustice, and inequality once made him a fearful, violent person who drove his wife Daisy and his children Portia, William, Karl Marx, and Hamilton away. Copeland's aspirations toward Marxism and his devotion to the works of thinkers like Karl Marx and Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza alienate him ideologically from the largely conservative, uneducated population of the small mill town. While Copeland serves as a community organizer, bringing people together at Christmastime to proclaim the values of anti-capitalism and racial solidarity, he is perpetually unable to affect change in his community. Copeland suffers physical and emotional challenges throughout the novel as he witnesses his son Willie be incarcerated and later tortured and maimed in prison. He is beaten himself when he tries to secure justice on Willie's behalf, and is later diagnosed with tuberculosis of the lungs. Eventually, the sickly Copeland is moved against his will to his late wife's father's farm to recuperate, his physical removal from his community at last reflecting the deeper ideological isolation he's felt for so long.

Bartholomew "Biff" Brannon – Biff Brannon is the kind, thoughtful, deeply existential owner of the New York Café—an all-day, all-night restaurant and bar on the main street of the unnamed mill town in which the novel takes place. Biff Brannon has a self-proclaimed fondness for "freaks" and misfits, and, early on in the book, shelters Jake Blount at the café and lets him drink on credit. Biff believes the best in people even as he himself struggles with dark, obsessive feelings and a punishing sense of guilt—emotions that intensify after the sudden, unexpected death of his wife, Alice. Biff and Alice have never had children, and though Biff longs to be a father, his desire to care for children sometimes veers into the desire simply to *possess* children. As John Singer, Jake Blount, and Mick Kelly all begin spending more time at the café, Blount finds himself drawn to Singer, and often visits the man in his room at the Kellys' boarding house. Biff is one of Singer's only visitors who ever asks Singer any questions about himself, his past, or his thoughts. Even as Biff bonds with Singer, he finds himself longing to get closer to Mick and to his niece Baby—but he detects something "wrong" in these feelings, and worries that his preoccupation with the young girls is inappropriate. Biff frequently wonders about the purpose of life, the limits of human connection, and the struggle between good and evil. He is a very contemplative person, and yet is never quite able to find the answers to the existential questions he poses himself. Toward the end of the novel, Biff has a short, fleeting moment of transcendence, and believes he has come to understand the purpose of "human struggle" and the nature of time itself—but the moment is gone just as quickly as it came, and Biff is left alone and wondering again.

Jake Blount – Jake Blount is an itinerant wanderer who, at the start of the novel, has just arrived in the unnamed mill town in which the book is set. A drunkard, a socialist, and a man deeply disturbed by the inequalities and injustices he perceives all around him, Jake Blount travels from town to town trying to get people to see the "truth"—but he is never able to articulate concisely what truth he wants to share, and is never able to galvanize or radicalize the people he meets. Jake Blount believes that capitalism is the great evil of America and the root of all racism and injustice. Like Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland, Blount wants to inspire people to rise up, take action, and change their fates—but like Copeland, his fatal flaw is that he fails to do so at every turn, often because of his own actions or circumstances. Even though Blount's intentions are good, he is a deeply self-absorbed person. As he befriends John Singer, he often spends his time ranting at the deaf man, drinking Singer's alcohol and eating Singer's food, and falling asleep in an intoxicated heap on Singer's floor. Singer empathizes with Blount's frustrations with society, but seems to know Blount will never be able to get sober long enough to organize anyone—or put aside his own beliefs to make room for those of others. Indeed, when Blount, incensed by rumors of the injustice and cruelty Willie has faced while imprisoned at the state penitentiary, goes to Copeland's house to visit Willie and the doctor, he finds himself embroiled in a late-night debate with the ailing Copeland. Both men long to change the world—but Blount is so preoccupied with the idea of capitalism, not racism, as America's greatest evil that he declines to support Copeland's vision of marching over a thousand black people all the way to Washington. Blount's inability to work with others—and his own internalized racism, in spite of his protestations to the contrary—condemn him to a life of wandering and solitude.

Spiros Antonapoulos – John Singer's longtime friend and companion Spiros Antonapoulos is an obese Greek man who, like Singer, is both deaf and mute. At the start of the novel, Antonapoulos and Singer have been living together in the same room—but sleeping in different beds—for upwards of 10 years, though the circumstances of their meeting are never revealed. While Singer is devoted to Antonapoulos, Antonapoulos is closed-off, reserved, and rarely emotes with facial expressions or uses sign language to communicate with Singer. Shortly after the story begins, Antonapoulos's mental health declines rapidly, and soon his cousin and employer, Charlie Parker, hurries him away to an asylum. Singer begins organizing his life around his

periodic visits to the asylum, taking 12-hour train rides and loading his bags with gifts and snacks for his friend. During these visits, Antonapoulos is either sullen, ill, or some combination of the two. He shows Singer little gratitude for his presence or gifts, and talks to his former companion very little. Scholars and critics have long speculated on the true nature of Singer and Antonapoulos's relationship, and some have even posited that the men's deafness and muteness are allegorical representations of the stifling, alienating, and isolating experience of being homosexual in the Deep South in the late 1930s. Whether or not the relationship between the two men is actually sexual or romantic, what is clear is that it is uneven and imbalanced. While Singer tries desperately to connect physically, emotionally, and linguistically with the only other person who could possibly understand him, Antonapoulos hides behind anger, antagonism, and misanthropy, eventually dying alone in the asylum due to complications from nephritis. When Singer learns of Antonapoulos's death, he takes his own life—illustrating his final, crushing despondency at having watched his friend slowly fade away and perish. Cold and occasionally cruel, both self-loathing and self-indulgent, Antonapoulos's hesitance to communicate or express his feelings makes him an enigma throughout the novel with motivations, feelings, wants, and needs that are never quite made clear.

Portia – Doctor Copeland's only daughter. Portia works as a servant in the Kellys' boarding house, cooking meals for the Kelly family and their boarders and keeping the house in order. Though her father believes she should search for a job that doesn't require her to work for white people, Portia is happy in her work and seems to genuinely love the Kelly children—especially Mick, though Portia frequently finds herself at odds with the willful, contrary young girl. Portia is kind, gentle, sweet, and emotional, and yet her desire to fill her life with love and happiness often means that she tries very hard to ignore the structural racism and inequality that defines her own existence as a black woman and the lives of those in her family and community. Portia is forced to reckon with the violence and cruelty her community faces when she learns that her brother Willie, imprisoned for assault, has been tortured by white guards at the state penitentiary.

William "Willie" Copeland – One of Doctor Copeland's sons. Willie lives with Portia and Highboy, and the three of them have a strange but sweet relationship in which they undertake equal responsibility for their shared home's expenses and upkeep. Willie, Portia, and Highboy live happily until one night when Willie and Highboy get into a fight at a dance hall. Willie is charged with assault with a deadly weapon and sent to the state penitentiary, where cruel white guards torture him and his fellow inmates. This abuse results in Willie returning home with both of his feet amputated. Traumatized by what he's been through, Willie experiences debilitating phantom pains and longs desperately to know where his feet are and what was done with them after they were severed from his body.

Highboy – Portia's husband. A quiet but kind man who lives happily with both Portia and Willie. Willie and Highboy get into trouble one night at a dance hall, and though Willie is charged and imprisoned, Highboy escapes the incident without suffering any physical harm or legal repercussions. Highboy tries his best to be supportive of Portia as she worries over her brother, proving himself a dedicated and compassionate partner.

Grandpapa – Portia, Willie, Buddy, and Hamilton's grandfather on their mother's side. Grandpapa is a kind, forgiving, and deeply religious man who lives on a farm outside town. He eventually invites Doctor Copeland to come live with him on his farm so that Copeland can recuperate from tuberculosis of the lungs—even in spite of Copeland's tumultuous history with his deceased wife (Grandpapa's daughter), Daisy.

Alice Brannon – Biff Brannon's wife. Alice is a bit of a nag, constantly trying to reel in her husband's affinity for "freaks" and lost causes. Alice works the day shift at the New York Café, but when she dies suddenly after having an enormous tumor removed from her abdomen, Biff is left to run the café alone. He misses Alice terribly and takes to wearing her perfume and using her shampoo. Though Alice and Biff's relationship is revealed, in flashbacks, to have been tumultuous and sometimes unhappy, Biff's longing for the early days of their marriage shows that Alice truly was a loving wife.

Mrs. Lucile Wilson – Biff Brannon's sister-in-law and Baby's mother. Lucile, fresh out of a marriage to a cruel, abusive man, dreams of getting her beautiful and talented daughter, Baby, into Hollywood pictures and making a fortune. She is fiercely protective of Baby, but often treats her daughter more like an asset or a means of making money than like an independent, autonomous person. Lucile is obsessed with Baby's appearance, and when Baby is injured and hospitalized, Lucile frets less over how the incident will affect her daughter's health than how it will affect her looks and her ability to perform.

Baby Wilson – Lucile's daughter Baby is just four years old, but Lucile's dreams of securing Hollywood stardom for her daughter have already influenced the prissy, haughty way that Baby acts. Always primped and dressed in fancy pink clothes, Baby Wilson draws the ire—and perhaps envy—of her neighborhood friends. When Bubber accidentally shoots Baby while playing with Spareribs's gun, Baby suffers a head wound and must have all her beautiful yellow curls shaved off at the hospital. After the accident, Baby becomes sullen and contrary, embarrassed by her shorn head and her fall from grace.

Harry Minowitz – Mick's next-door neighbor and schoolmate. A Jewish boy two years Mick's senior, the 15-year-old Harry is smart, sensitive, opinionated, and determined to find a way to fight fascism and Nazism. Harry admits to being perturbed by

intrusive, bloody thoughts and hyper-real nighttime dreams of murdering Hitler. Over the course of the novel, Harry and Mick—once barely acquaintances—slowly become closer and even develop romantic feelings for each other. Toward the end of summer, Harry and Mick go on a picnic in the woods and, out in the wilderness, have sex. Harry is immediately filled with shame and remorse over this incident and flees town that very night.

Charlie Parker – Spiros Antonapoulos's cousin. A Greek man who has adopted an American name, Charlie Parker runs a fruit and candy store on Main Street. He employs Antonapoulos for a while, but when the man's behavior becomes erratic, Charlie Parker puts him away in an asylum—much to the concern and chagrin of John Singer, Antonapoulos's closest friend.

George "Bubber" Kelly – Mick's younger brother and favorite sibling. Together, the two of them are often tasked with caring for their baby brother, Ralph. Bubber is sweet and silly, and Mick often finds herself overwhelmed by love for him. Bubber has a wild streak, however, and this unruliness often gets him in trouble—such as when he accidentally shoots Baby Wilson with his friend Spareribs's rifle. After the incident with Baby, Bubber insists on going by his given name, George, and becomes sullen and withdrawn. Mick tries to keep George's spirits up and help him get back to the person he once was, but he is unmoved by her efforts and slowly grows more and more disconnected from her.

Mr. Kelly – Mick's father. A kind but sad man who once worked as a carpenter and housepainter but now, due to an injury, works as a watchmaker and jewelry repair man. Mr. Kelly is often lonely in spite of his many children and full house of boarders, and particularly longs to connect with Mick. Constantly worried about money at the start of the novel, Mr. Kelly's troubles worsen after Bubber accidentally injures Baby Wilson, leading Lucile, Baby's mother, to demand regular payment from the Kelly family to account for Baby's medical bills.

Daisy – Doctor Copeland's deceased wife and the mother of Portia, Willie, Buddy, and Hamilton. Doctor Copeland often made Daisy the subject of his directionless rage against the injustices facing the black community, and Daisy eventually moved out of her husband's house, taking her children with her to live on her father's farm outside of town.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Karl Marx "Buddy" Copeland – One of Doctor Copeland's sons. Embarrassed by his given name and estranged from his father, Karl Marx lives on his Grandpapa's farm and goes by "Buddy"—yet when his father needs him, Buddy is there for him.

Hamilton Copeland – One of Doctor Copeland's sons.

Ralph Kelly – The baby of the Kelly family. Mick is often in charge of watching over and caring for Ralph, and frequently drags him around town in a little wagon.

Hazel Kelly – Mick's eldest sister. Hazel is naturally beautiful but dull and impassionate. She helps Mick secure a job at Woolworth's department store toward the end of the novel.

Etta Kelly – One of Mick's older sisters. A vain, self-absorbed, unkind young woman who dreams of being in Hollywood movies despite being plain-looking. Toward the end of the novel, she falls ill due to a problem with one of her ovaries.

Bill Kelly – Mick's eldest brother. A shy, self-conscious teenage boy.

Mrs. Kelly – Mick's mother. An often-frazzled woman who sometimes puts her boarders' comfort before that of her own children.

Marshall Nicolls – A pharmacist who is one of Doctor Copeland's good friends. Nicolls believes that the key to "amicable" relations between the black and white community in town hinges on black people laying low and keeping the peace.

John Roberts – A warm, gregarious postman who is one of Doctor Copeland's good friends.

Buster Johnson – A young man who is incarcerated alongside Willie at the state penitentiary. Like Willie, Buster is tortured by a cruel group of guards—and, like Willie, is "crippled for life" when one of his feet is amputated as a result of that torture.

Lancy Davis – A passionate, idealistic young man who wins Doctor Copeland's annual Christmastime essay contest for his revolutionary essay about building a nation entirely of black people within the American South. Lancy is later killed in a race riot at the Sunny Dixie.

Simms – A fanatical itinerant preacher who delivers sermons on street corners throughout town and chalks Bible verses on the walls of houses and businesses. Simms is constantly trying to convert Jake Blount, but Jake takes any opportunity he can to mess with and embarrass Simms.

Patterson – The manager of the Sunny Dixie Show.

Mrs. Minowitz – Harry Minowitz's mother.

Spareribs – One of Bubber's neighborhood friends. Spareribs is a wild and unruly child who inherits a gun from his recently-deceased father—a gun which Bubber accidentally fires at Baby Wilson.

Delores Brown – A girl at Mick's school who gives Mick piano lessons in exchange for lunch money.

Carl – A young deaf and mute man whom John Singer once tried to befriend—only to have Antonapoulos scare Carl away with his unfounded rage.

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.

LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

The central theme of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is contained within its title, which is itself taken from a William Sharp poem containing the lines "But my heart is a lonely hunter that hunts on / a lonely hill." As the story of John Singer—a deaf and mute man who finds himself an object of fascination for four misfit residents of an unnamed mill town in the American South—unfolds, McCullers investigates how the forces of loneliness and isolation affect people all along the spectrums of race, class, age, and ability. Ultimately, McCullers suggests that feelings of loneliness and isolation are universal and perhaps the sole forces which unite humanity.

Over the course of the novel, McCullers paints a portrait of what loneliness and isolation look like from several different angles: spiritual, psychological, ideological, racial, and existential. As Mick Kelly, Jake Blount, Biff Brannon, and Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland individually seek companionship and validation from John Singer, they never realize or even stop to consider the fact that they are not alone in their feelings of remoteness and seclusion. They are each obsessed with their own loneliness, unable to break or even see through it—yet unaware that it is the only thing uniting them with their seemingly distant, disparate fellow townspeople. Many of the characters in the novel are dealing with a deep, existential kind of loneliness—a loneliness born of feeling profoundly out of place and unable to connect even with those they should be closest to. John Singer is perhaps the most lonely and isolated character in the novel. Though he is its central character, he is also its greatest mystery. Unable to communicate with those around him very easily, he instead shoulders an unusual role amongst the townspeople: he becomes a kind of silent cipher to whom others vent their problems and frustrations.

Singer's visitors include Mick Kelly, a lonely tomboy; Jake Blount, a belligerent but intelligent drunk; Biff Brannon, a lonely and grieving barkeep; and Doctor Copeland, a black doctor frustrated by the ills and injustices facing his community. All of these characters are facing isolation both profound and quotidian. Mick Kelly has four siblings and lives in a bustling boarding house—yet she feels unable to really connect with anyone other than her younger brother, George, and even seems to enjoy her own isolation. She makes an attempt at giving a party for her school friends, but winds up spending the end of the evening as she spends most other nights: alone on a neighbor's lawn, listening to the distant sounds of **music** on the neighbor's radio. Jake Blount is wrestling with social isolation brought on by his frequent drunkenness—and resultant bad reputation—but he also feels a deeper kind of loneliness. Blount is a radical who believes capitalism is evil and doomed—and his intense, far-left beliefs make him an anomaly and indeed a kind of threat in his sleepy Southern mill town. Biff Brannon longs for children and a family, but after his wife Alice dies, he finds himself unsure of whether he'll ever be able to give the love he has in his heart to another person. His fascination with his niece, Baby, and his neighbor Mick veers toward the inappropriate—but McCullers suggests that Biff isn't sexually interested in the young girls, but rather simply so saddened by the thought he might never have children that he becomes obsessed with daughter figures. Doctor Copeland is respected and well-loved in his community—he is the only medical professional who treats the black community in the mill town, and as such holds a position of high honor. Even as he takes pride in his work, however, Doctor Copeland finds himself feeling isolated from his community and his family, most acutely his daughter, Portia. He feels he wants better for the black citizens of his town than they want for themselves, and is uncertain of how to instill revolutionary politics and the desire for justice in his people. Doctor Copeland is both ideologically and socially isolated, and, furthermore, has strained relationships with most of his children.

Loneliness is the only thing that bonds these very different characters together. Age, race, politics, and personality separate them from one another profoundly. However, McCullers suggests that their loneliness is a kind of gift: it binds these four individuals' fates, giving them the opportunity to find the connections for which they're so desperately searching. Whether they will be able to make good on that gift and use it, however, is a different story—and McCullers suggests that, in some cases, preserving one's loneliness can become more important than finding a cure for it. As these four individuals make repeated visits to Singer's rooms at the Kelly boarding house, they lament their troubles, but rarely ask about Singer's own life—and they are, until very late in the book, each unaware that the others undertake visits similar to their own. These four individuals are ships passing in the night, too obsessed with their own sadness and isolation to realize that there are other people, right there in their community, looking for friendship, help, and solidarity. McCullers uses dramatic irony to highlight the unnecessary suffering of her characters, suggesting that, perhaps, if they were to open themselves up to broader friendships, their loneliness might be diminished. At the same time, however, there exists an undercurrent of cynicism and even defeat within the book: McCullers' characters all end up just as lonely—if not even lonelier—than they were at its start. They have failed to recognize loneliness as a central part of the human experience, and in being unable to recognize that fact, they are unable to use it to bond with those around them.

Loneliness perpetuates itself, Carson McCullers suggests

through *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*—and because of this fact, it is the one experience which unites all of humanity regardless of race, class, or creed. People are doomed to "hunt" for connection and absolution alone, McCullers argues, ironically unable to see that the feeling which plagues them and makes them feel so isolated from those around them is actually the force bonding them, unknowingly, to others.

COMMUNICATION AND SELF-EXPRESSION

All of the characters in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* struggle with the desire not just for companionship, but for the feeling of being more deeply known. But even as all five of the novel's central characters yearn to be seen, heard, and understood, they often find themselves unable to communicate with one another in the most basic of ways. As Carson McCullers's characters battle their loneliness and isolation, she demonstrates how difficult true communication and authentic self-expression can be. Through their struggles, McCullers argues that it is inherently impossible to fully communicate or express the truth of oneself to another person.

McCullers uses five central characters—all of different ages, races, abilities, and walks of life—to illustrate the failures of communication and self-expression that lie at the very heart of the human experience. John Singer is the character who struggles most with the practical aspects of communication. Deaf since infancy and mute for much of his adult life (due to his struggles in school speaking with his mouth and his resultant fear that "there was something disgusting in his speech"), John Singer uses sign language to communicate with his close friend, Spiros Antonapoulos, who is also deaf and mute. When Antonapoulos is taken away to an asylum, however, Singer is once again the only deaf individual in town—there is no one around who understands sign language, and Singer resigns himself either to silence or to, on occasion, writing out simple sentences on pieces of paper. Singer's practical issues with communication and self-expression serve as a metaphor for the more existential or emotional issues the other characters have with their own attempts to make themselves seen, heard, and known. Singer's fundamental inability to communicate easily with his fellow townspeople renders him a tragic figure. Indeed, when Antonopoulos eventually dies and Singer realizes the breadth of the struggle still ahead of him just to have an ordinary conversation with another person, he takes his own life.

Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland is another character whose profound struggles with communication and self-expression render him tragic, isolated, and doomed to never truly be understood. Doctor Copeland is a black doctor who has affected, over the course of his life, a formal and precise way of speaking. Doctor Copeland uses clipped, direct sentences and formal grammar, and he never uses contractions or slang—a speech pattern which stands in stark contrast to both the vernacular used by the black characters in the book and the casual, sometimes coarse speech of its white characters. Over the course of the novel, as Doctor Copeland's dreams of uniting his people under Marxist values and revolutionary action become clearer, so too does his reason for speaking in the isolating way he does. Doctor Copeland knows how racist the society in which he lives really is, and his formal speech reflects his desire to prove his worth and capability as a leader. Doctor Copeland has internalized a kind of self-hatred—even as he claims that it's white men he hates—and disdains the slang words and unrefined speech his patients, friends, and even his own children use. Doctor Copeland wants to prove his intelligence and show that he can communicate with anyone—but his insistence on certain ways of speaking and expressing himself ultimately ends up alienating him from the very people he longs to grow closer to and build a community with, including his own children.

Doctor Copeland, the teenage tomboy Mick Kelly, the drunk communist Jake Blount, and the lonely barkeep Biff Brannon pay regular visits to Singer—visits during which they talk at him constantly, unloading their sorrows and venting their frustrations in spite of their knowledge that the interactions are unequal and unfair. Through these one-sided conversations, McCullers examines their deeper failures of self-expression and communication. Doctor Copeland wants to find a way to rally and unite the members of the black community; Mick wants to become a **musician** and express herself by writing great symphonies, but her family's poverty precludes her from owning an instrument or taking lessons; Blount has powerful revolutionary ideals, but his alcoholism prevents him from expressing them articulately; Biff is wrestling with his grief over the recent death of his wife and his longing for a family, but doesn't know how to reach out to other people and build the connections necessary to start again. All of the novel's central characters are united by loneliness, to be sure—but their failures to communicate their fears, needs, and hopes is yet another force which binds these unlikely souls together. None of them is, ultimately, ever able to express themselves the way they want—or, if they are granted a moment of connection or transcendence, that moment proves fleeting. McCullers highlights not just the internal loneliness of these characters but also their outward-facing failures to communicate that loneliness, in order to metaphorically suggest the impossibility of ever truly, fully knowing another person—and of making oneself known in that same way.

From Mick's thwarted music career (the failure of which mirrors McCullers's own failures as a musician) to Doctor Copeland's inability to educate or mobilize his community to Singer's own despair over the practical difficulties of communication, McCullers's novel is populated by individuals who find themselves unable to express their deepest fears,

desires, and dreams. McCullers's characters' collective failure to express themselves—linguistically, artistically, politically, and otherwise—seems to suggest that attempts to make oneself understood to others are doomed endeavors.

RACISM, INEQUALITY, AND INJUSTICE

Set in the Deep South in the late 1930s, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* wrestles with the major social, political, and economic divisions that defined not only the region, but the world more largely during those years. Early reviews of the book, such as one in the August 1940 issue of *The New Republic*, lauded McCullers for her ability to "embrace white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness"—and indeed, that blend of "apprehension and tenderness" is what defines McCullers's outlook on the many injustices that define the community at the center of the novel. As McCullers depicts the forces of racism, inequality, and injustice at play in the unnamed mill town at the center of the novel, she uses that town as an analogue for the ways in which these issues reverberate through society more largely, ultimately arguing that until human society acknowledges and attempts to amend the plight of its most vulnerable, downtrodden members, it is—and always will be—a failure.

Racism and its resultant cruelties and injustices is perhaps the most complex and devastating issue in American society. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* reflects that complexity—and though McCullers's book sometimes uses the language of racism, it does so in pursuit of exposing exactly how racist thought and speech keep society's most vulnerable members down and prevent them from healing, advancing, or receiving the justice they deserve. Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland, the black doctor who is one of the novel's main characters, is the character whose arc most directly intersects with the theme of racism, inequality, and injustice. A weary, hopeful, complicated man who sees and takes to heart the injustices, disadvantages, and cruelties inflicted upon his people, Doctor Copeland longs to inspire the black community in his town to stand together against the white people, institutions, and ideologies which oppress them. Doctor Copeland's politics, however, don't just revolve around revolution and aggression. Copeland believes in Marxism, and longs to impress upon his people the need to "den[y] [them]selves comfort that the needs of others may be lessened." Doctor Copeland believes in a society structured upon the words of Karl Marx: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." Copeland's politics embody his anxieties, frustrations, and anger about not just racial inequality, but socioeconomic inequality. For Copeland, all these many refractions of cruelty and injustice are bound up in one another. Economic injustice is used to reinforce (and justify) racial injustice—while the wealthy few at the top of society thrive, the oppressed groups at the bottom are unable to do anything to change their fates. Doctor Copeland's speeches to his guests at Christmastime and his entreaties to his patients, acquaintances, and children embody McCullers's larger thematic message: that until society cares for its most vulnerable, it will be a failure.

Doctor Copeland's story also involves systemic injustice and police brutality. When his son Willie is jailed for assault and sent to work on a chain gang, Willie angers a guard during a work assignment. As a result, the guards lock Willie and two other prisoners in a cold shed and string them up by their feet. The guards leave the men in the shed for days, and by the time they let Willie and the others out, Willie's feet have become gangrenous and must be amputated. After Willie is released from prison and returns home, he complains of phantom pains in his feet and expresses longing simply to know where his feet are, and what was done with them after they were cut from his body. Willie's horrifying ordeal further agitates and angers Doctor Copeland. The doctor dreams of organizing the black community through ideology, nonviolence, and passion—but when he sees the cruelty of police brutality in action, he understands that society is simply stacked against him, his family, his community, and his entire race. McCullers illustrates the failure of society to care for its most marginalized individuals, and even shows how it actively brutalizes and terrorizes them. Willie's missing feet are a metaphor for the profound losses and cruel thefts perpetrated against black people in America every day—and for the inability of society's most disadvantaged members to ever reclaim the things stolen from them, even as their memories of those things haunt them daily.

While many sentences and passages within *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* contain language or sentiment that is racially insensitive by contemporary standards, Carson McCullers's novel nonetheless holds a deeper message of longing for racial, social, and economic equality—and for the radical, revolutionary politics that McCullers believes would allow equality to take root in America. McCullers's first novel is suffused with an open desire for a more just society—one in which racism and capitalism are dissolved and replaced by social and economic justice for all.

THE INDIVIDUAL VS. SOCIETY

In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Carson McCullers investigates the forces of isolation and injustice—and then considers how those forces create animosity and distance between the individual and society. McCullers's characters come up against apathy or even outright cruelty, and they also fight against the defeatist impulse to become apathetic or cruel themselves. Ultimately, McCullers argues that American society is engineered to suppress individual thought and action as a means of perpetuating the capitalist status quo, denying black Americans

justice and dignity, and securing the dominion of the ultra-wealthy few over the oppressed masses.

Over the course of the novel, McCullers uses the trajectories of her major characters to illustrate how society suppresses individuality, forcing its individual members—struggle as they might against the status quo—to resign themselves to lives as cogs in a racist, capitalist machine. Jake Blount is an aggressive, belligerent drunk who comes to town looking for work at the start of the novel. Jake, an anti-capitalist, believes the South is suffering at the hands of the North and longs for a revolution which will bring about the end of capitalism in America. McCullers presents Jake as not just anti-establishment, but as fundamentally incapable of living in society. His drunken rants and brawls are frightening to behold—in the novel's first part, he bloodies his head and hands against a brick wall while intoxicated. Even once Jake secures a job at an amusement park, Sunny Dixie, he finds himself sparring verbally and even physically with his patrons. Even though McCullers presents Jake as unstable and unpredictable, she is obviously invested in his unorthodox ideas and sympathetically portrays his inability to get people to see his point of view. Jake is a traveler who has been all over the South and has witnessed the suffering of the American proletariat. He longs to share the truth about society with the people he meets—and in showing them how the deck is stacked against them, inspire them toward revolution. Ultimately, however, Jake is unable to fulfill his purpose: after a riot rips through Sunny Dixie at the end of the novel, he decides to leave town and resume his wandering. Though Jake aspires to revolution, he's doomed to wander from place to place, scrounging up work where he can get it and using alcohol to dull the pain of his fate as a pawn of capitalism.

Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland is another character who stands alone against the larger society of which he's a part. As a black man living in the Deep South, Doctor Copeland must wrestle daily with prejudice, cruelty, and violence aimed at him, his family, and his community. Doctor Copeland believes that there are ways in which black Americans can rise up and change the way others perceive them, and hopes that through adherence to Marxism and the pursuit of education, the black community in his town will be able to prosper. However, Doctor Copeland's hopes for an end to racism and injustice in his community are dashed again and again. After his son Willie is arrested, jailed, and brutalized by the police, Doctor Copeland goes to the courthouse to pursue justice. But when Copeland himself is attacked, beaten, and jailed by the police, his tuberculosis worsens and he finds himself, upon release from jail, bedridden and unable to work or visit with his patients. Doctor Copeland harbored hopes of being a beacon of change in his community—but by the end of the novel, his society has forsaken and forgotten him. Doctor Copeland's daughter, Portia, concerned for his health, moves him to her grandfather's farm. As Doctor Copeland rides away toward the country with his father-in-law, McCullers illustrates how Copeland has failed to change society: he is just another old man bound to his bed, incapable of standing tall and strong any longer against the relentless forces of racism and injustice.

Mick Kelly—seen by many critics and scholars as a character inspired by McCullers herself—is the third major character in the novel who pushes back against the role society dictates for her. Mick is a tomboy who rejects the traditional femininity that her older sisters Hazel and Etta embody. Mick is obsessed with **music**, finding solace in the work of Mozart (whom she calls "Motsart") and Beethoven rather than popular tunes on the radio. Mick is a loner at school, and while she throws a successful prom party to gather all her classmates, she finds herself feeling awkward and uncertain of herself throughout the festivities; she ultimately ends the night alone, back in her trademark shorts after having abandoned her party dress and stripped off her makeup, listening to a neighbor's radio alone from the dark of their lawn. Mick, like Jake Blount and Doctor Copeland, is only able to resist the pressure to conform to society to a certain point. At the end of the novel, Mick takes a job at a nearby department store, Woolworth's, in order to help provide for her family. Mick works at the costume jewelry counter, and for her job, she must dress in fancy clothing and adorn herself with makeup and jewelry. Most crushingly of all, she must drop out of school and abandon her music in order to devote all her time to work. Mick stood against society for as long as she could—but in the end, she, too, was forced to either become a part of society's machine or watch her family suffer in poverty. McCullers uses the plights of these major characters to illustrate the unfairness of society and the compulsory nature of capitalism. McCullers demonstrates the ways in which individuals are often powerless to change their societies—a sentiment born of the frustration and desperation of the Great Depression, and one that, in spite of the progress American society ostensibly made over the course of the 20th century, is still echoed by many today.

The revolutionary politics espoused by many of the characters within *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* are yet another facet of the book's central concern with social and spiritual loneliness. The individuals who populate the novel are lonely on an existential level—and they stand alone, out of choice or due to forces beyond their control, when it comes to their politics, their hopes, and their uneasiness about the very society in which they live.

THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is her first novel, published to widespread acclaim when she was only 23. The book is set in an unnamed mill town in the Deep South—while some contextual clues point to the novel's setting being the state of Georgia, McCullers never directly names the place where her

characters' lives unfold. As a result, the novel transfigures a single town into an analogue of the larger American South—an analogue which allows McCullers to explore the racism, poverty, and mannered isolation of the larger region through the stories of just a few individuals. As McCullers employs (and subverts) tropes and traditions of Southern Gothic literature in aid of that mission, she ultimately argues that the conservativism; racism; and social, political, and economic stagnancy of the American South threaten to destroy the region.

The American South is a place of great significance in McCullers's personal life and creative imagination. In the pages of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, however, she critically examines the economic disadvantages, social ills, and structural, political cruelties that pervade the place which formed her as both a writer and a human being. The town at the center of the novel is never named. It seems to have some proximity to Atlanta, Georgia—but while the big city is within reach, the citizens of McCullers's unnamed town toil at the cotton mill, the center of the town's economy, or wrangle part-time jobs to make ends meet. Many characters struggle with money—from the large Kelly family who own the boarding house to the tenants who live there (and often struggle to pay rent each month), to the itinerant Jake Blount, to Biff Brannon's sister-in-law Lucile Wilson, who dreams of making money by turning her four-year-old daughter, Baby, into a movie star. The effects of the Great Depression on the town at the heart of the novel are grave and deeply felt. The economic stagnancy of the South, tied up in the region's agrarian roots, is exacerbated by the Depression and threatened doubly by the looming entrance of the United States into World War II. McCullers paints a portrait of the ways in which economic tensions in a small town reverberate through the individuals who populate that town, creating animosity, distrust, and resentment among even friends and neighbors.

The sociopolitical atmosphere in town is just as fraught as the economic one. Racism and segregation have cleaved the town in two, and while characters like Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland and Jake Blount long for political revolution and an end to racial injustice, McCullers suffuses the social atmosphere of the town with an at best casual and at worst violent bedrock of racism, ableism, and prejudice. Many of McCullers's characters believe in equality and justice—but she also takes care to show how casual racism and prejudice define much of life in the Deep South. For example, Mick Kelly claims to hate Nazis but privately thinks of her neighbor Harry Minowitz as a "Jew boy." Jake Blount regularly defuses violent fights between white and black patrons at the amusement park, Sunny Dixie—fights in which white patrons hurl horrible epithets and slurs at their black neighbors. A Greek character, Spiros Antonapoulos, is referred to as "oily," while many characters describe John Singer, who is deaf and never speaks aloud, bluntly and emotionlessly as "the mute" or a "dummy." The many social ills facing this one small town in the Deep South are used by McCullers as a proxy for the social ills facing the South more broadly. Racism, prejudice, and callous disregard for a person's interior based on their exterior are rampant social problems—and over the course of the novel, as racial tensions in town escalate to dangerous heights, McCullers takes care to show that unless people are able to look at their neighbors with grace and open-mindedness, society will descend into chaos and violence. McCullers replicates the language of racism and prejudice in order to point out its cruelty and the ways in which this cruelty destabilizes and unmoors society. Indeed, throughout the 20th century, violence throughout the South got much worse before it got better. Even now, contemporary readers of McCullers's work can appreciate her prescient warnings in light of 21st-century escalations in police brutality and white nationalist violence, many instances of which still erupt in the South each year.

As Jake Blount prepares to leave town at the end of the novel, he thinks to himself: "He would not leave the South. That was one clear thing. There was hope in him." Though McCullers interrogates and deconstructs the issues plaguing the American South in the 1930s, this brief passage indicates a fundamental "hope" in the region's ability to repair itself and prosper. Jake Blount, frustrated as he is with the social, political, and economic disadvantages rife throughout the South, doesn't want to leave it—or, perhaps he does want to leave, but nonetheless finds his "hope" for a brighter future there trapping him within it time and time again. Jake's inner monologue in this moment perhaps mirrors McCullers's innermost thoughts about the South—the place she grew up in, and the place to which she repeatedly returned through her writing about its politics, its people, and its twinned beauty and grotesquerie. Even as McCullers warns against the issues that threaten the South, she expresses a glimmer of optimism as to the region's ability to repair its social, political, and economic ills.

Carson McCullers has become widely known as one of the masters of the Southern Gothic literary tradition—a kind of writing that zooms in on the physical and emotional horrors of life in the American South. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* employs Southern Gothic tropes in order to deeply and subversively criticize the ways in which Southern history, manners, and politics hold Southerners captive to a set of beliefs, morals, and traditions that run counter to their own best interests—a fate which McCullers rightly believed would plague her homeland for decades still to come.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MUSIC

While *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is not a particularly symbolic novel, one important symbol of the characters' collective longing for self-expression, communication, and release from their respective isolation does emerge: music. Mick Kelly is the character most connected to the symbol of music, as she dreams of being a famous composer, conductor, and concert pianist renowned the world over for her symphonies. Music unlocks something profound in Mick—it drives her wild, releasing intense emotional and physical reactions to the beauty of the notes contained within the music of Mozart, Beethoven, and other orchestral compositions she hears on the radio. Mick doesn't have a radio of her own and is instead forced to listen quietly to the radios of her parents' boarders or to roam the streets of wealthier neighborhoods, searching for the sounds of another family's radio wafting down to the lawn. Mick's desire to compose music is intricately tied in with the enormous desire she has to express herself—a desire that is constantly thwarted by the bustling, chaotic environment of her parents' boarding house.

While no other character in the novel loves music so well as Mick does, John Singer—the deaf and mute man who becomes a kind of sage figure to whom the book's four major characters can vent—has a radio in spite of his inability to enjoy it. After John's death, Mick inherits his radio, though she doesn't get any joy out of listening to it any longer. Music, then, is also a symbol for the ways in which the desire to be seen, heard, known, and profoundly understood—a pressing want for Mick and Singer as well as Jake Blount, Biff Brannon, and Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland—dulls itself over time if one is unable to find that kind of connection and communion. Mick spends the entire book dreaming of music and longing for a way to make herself known to others, but by its end, she has resigned herself to the idea that both her concert-pianist dreams and her more ineffable, secret desire to be fully comprehended by another person may never be fulfilled.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Mariner edition of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* published in 2000.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

The next week was full of feverish activity. He talked and talked. And although his hands never paused to rest he could not tell all that he had to say. He wanted to talk to Antonapoulos of all the thoughts that had ever been in his mind and heart, but there was not time. His gray eyes glittered and his quick, intelligent face expressed great strain. Antonapoulos watched him drowsily, and his friend did not know just what he really understood.

Related Characters: Spiros Antonapoulos, John Singer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, John Singer—a deaf and mute man who has lived for 10 years with his companion Spiros Antonapoulos, who is also deaf and mute—learns that Antonapoulos, whose erratic and irritable behavior has recently worsened, will soon be sent away to live in an asylum. As Singer "feverish[ly]" prepares for the day that he will be ripped apart from his friend—the only person in town and, indeed, perhaps in the world whom Singer feels understands him—he tries to share his every passing thought with the closed-off, disconnected Antonapoulos. This passage thematically sets up the core concerns of the book: how debilitating loneliness can be, and how impossible it often is to every truly communicate the truth of oneself to another person. Even as Singer talks to his friend of 10 years, he has no idea whether Antonapoulos understands what he's saying. Singer has been forced very quickly to realize that his ability to communicate with another person and be seen, heard, and understood may soon be taken away forever. He is desperate to take advantage of his final days with Antonapoulos, but is steadily coming to comprehend that Antonapoulos, too, may now be beyond reach.

The relationship between Antonapoulos and Singer is one of the book's most ambiguous and indeed difficult to interpret. While the two men appear, from an outsider's perspective, to have a platonic friendship, scholars and critics have over the years suggested that Carson McCullers—herself a non-heterosexual woman who spent many years of her life married to a non-heterosexual man—may have used Singer and Antonapoulos's deafness and muteness to allegorize the experience of being homosexual in the Deep South in the 1930s. While this is only one interpretation of McCullers's intent in presenting the tortured and often one-sided relationship between the two deaf and mute men, it is clear that McCullers is invested

in portraying the claustrophobia and bleakness of spiritual loneliness, but also of simply being unable to ever feel understood on a practical level by one's neighbors and friends.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ In some men it is in them to give up everything personal at some time, before it ferments and poisons—throw it to some human being or some human idea. They have to.

Related Characters: Jake Blount, Bartholomew "Biff" Brannon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 32-33

Explanation and Analysis

As Biff Brannon, the proprietor of the 24-hour establishment the New York Café, watches Jake Blount rant endlessly at John Singer—who is deaf and mute—he considers the nature of men like Blount. Brannon has an affinity for misfits and loners, and has welcomed Blount into his café and allowed the man to drink on credit for several days. Though Blount is belligerent and occasionally violent when drunk, Singer allows Blount to talk to him for hours on end. Brannon is perplexed and a bit moved by this spectacle, and realizes that there is a "poison" within "some men"—loners and radicals in particular—which these individuals feel they must get out. This passage ties in with the novel's themes of loneliness and isolation as well as communication and self-expression by showing how some individuals long so desperately to be heard and understood that they offer up even the darkest, most unlikeable parts of themselves. Jake Blount, one of the novel's characters who most embodies the theme of the individual versus society, knows that he is odious and unpleasant—and yet he is determined to show those parts of himself off in hopes, perhaps, of finding someone who will endure or even appreciate them anyway.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ What would Portia say if she knew that always there had been one person after another? And every time it was like some part of her would bust in a hundred pieces. […]

Mick sat on the steps a long time. […] Her face felt like it was scattered in pieces and she could not keep it straight. The feeling was a whole lot worse than being hungry for dinner, yet it was like that. I want—I want—I want—was all that she could think about—but just what this real want was she did not know.

Related Characters: Portia, Mick Kelly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, which introduces the character of Mick Kelly—a feisty but dreamy 13-year-old tomboy—Mick wrestles with the difficult, ineffable feelings of love and yearning that make up the difficult years of adolescence. Mick's housekeeper Portia accuses her of having no room for love in her heart, but Mick has secretly harbored crushes and loves all throughout her childhood. It isn't that she wants nothing or no one—it's that she wants too much all at once. Mick longs to be a famous concert pianist and struggles with symphonies and tunes playing constantly in her head. Mick has huge dreams, and the violence and intensity with which she longs for them to come true often manifests as pain, confusion, or even anger. Mick is isolated within her indescribable wants, unable to communicate or express the depths of her feelings to anyone—and yet over the course of the novel, she will try again and again to make herself known to others.

❝ [Mick] wondered what kind of music [Singer] heard in his mind that his ears couldn't hear. Nobody knew. And what kind of things he would say if he could talk. Nobody knew that either.

Related Characters: John Singer, Mick Kelly

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

The novel's third chapter also begins to scratch the surface

of Mick's obsession with John Singer, who rents a room in the Kelly family's boarding house after the departure of his companion Spiros Antonapoulos. Mick is fascinated by Singer, and though he is almost entirely unknowable to her as a deaf and mute man, she's intrigued rather than scared off by his lonesomeness and strangeness. Mick senses a connection between her own indescribable longings and Singer's unknowability, a facet of his personality which stems from the difficulties he has communicating with hearing people. Over the course of the novel, Mick and Singer's stories will be the two to perhaps most acutely embody the novel's themes of communication and self-expression as they struggle individually with their desires to make themselves known to others—and the hesitations, roadblocks, and disappointments they experience, separately and together, in pursuit of that goal.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

"It was good to talk. The sound of his voice gave him pleasure. The tones seemed to echo and hang on the air so that each word sounded twice. He swallowed and moistened his mouth to speak again. He wanted suddenly to return to the mute's quiet room and tell him of the thoughts that were in his mind. It was a queer thing to want to talk with a deaf-mute. But he was lonesome.

Related Characters: John Singer, Jake Blount

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jake Blount wanders the streets of town alone, talking aloud to himself. He enjoys hearing the sound of his own voice, and describes his words in echoing tones. While music, the novel's central symbol, is most closely associated with Mick, this passage shows how language itself does, at times, embody the same symbolic weight and meaning that music does. In a novel so concerned with both the possibilities and limits of verbal communications, it makes sense that words themselves start to take on a kind of music—a mode of expression that is at once beautiful, complex, and potentially alienating. As Jake considers the music of his own voice, his thoughts turn to Singer—a deaf and mute man whose name, ironically, suggests he has the gift of sharing a musical, melodic voice. Though Singer does not speak, the novel's characters gravitate toward him time and time again. He is a mirror for their own thoughts and an echo screen for their own voices. As Singer never says a word, his very presence allows the other major characters in the novel to consider more deeply the weight and value of their own words, their own voices, and their own "music."

Part 1, Chapter 5 Quotes

"A person can't pick up they children and just squeeze them to which-a-way they wants them to be. Whether it hurt them or not. Whether it right or wrong. You done tried that hard as any man could try. And now I the only one of us that would come in this here house and sit with you like this."

Related Characters: Portia (speaker), Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland—an idealistic and impassioned black doctor—receives a visit from his daughter Portia, who works as a cook and housekeeper in the Kelly boarding house. Doctor Copeland is a serious thinker obsessed with the works of philosophers like Baruch Spinoza and Karl Marx. He is meticulous and fastidious in his speech, and has adopted a regimented, particular cadence which is very different from the vernacular used by his black friends and neighbors, and even the members of his own family. Doctor Copeland is determined to help his community rise above their white oppressors and reclaim their dignity, and has devoted his life to trying to make his people invest fully in the goal of bettering themselves and proving their worth. Here, Portia rails against her father's controlling—and, in the past, abusive—nature, clashing with him as she attempts to warn him for the umpteenth time that he cannot mold people's speech or behavior to his preferences or make people think the way he wants them to think. Copeland's struggle embodies many of the novel's major themes—as he attempts to make change and erase injustice in his community, he relies on language and communication to connect with others, but often finds himself isolated, alienated, and lonely, high in a tower of principles and ideas he is unable to share.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Singer was always the same to everyone. He sat in a straight chair by the window with his hands stuffed tight into his pockets, and nodded or smiled to show his guests that he understood.

Related Characters: Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland, Jake Blount, Bartholomew "Biff" Brannon, Mick Kelly, John Singer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

As Singer entertains repeat visits from the novel's four major characters—Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, Jake Blount, and Doctor Copeland—he affects the same behavior toward them all. The four characters visit Singer's room at the boarding house to vent their frustrations, lament their fears, and ask advice—but Singer, unable to communicate back with the swiftness and ease of his hearing neighbors, adopts an almost defensive stance throughout these visitations. He keeps his hands—once his go-to method of communication, now rendered useless in the absence of his one deaf friend, Spiros Antonapoulos—"stuffed tight" deep within his pockets, a gesture that signals his own ideological and emotional isolation. He offers his guests friendly smiles to make them feel understood—but knows that he himself will never be able to find reciprocal understanding in any of them. In many ways, these four visitors take advantage of Singer's silence, and while some of them do try to give him the opportunity to communicate his own feelings back in writing, Singer's ability to express himself in return is never their priority. In this way, McCullers's novel is a highly metaphorical and allegorical investigation of the failures of empathy, friendship, and communication that define most human lives.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ The music left only this bad hurt in her, and a blankness. She could not remember any of the symphony… […] Now that it was over there was only her heart like a rabbit and this terrible hurt.

The radio and the lights in the house were turned off. [...] Suddenly Mick began hitting her thigh with her fists. […] But she could not feel this hard enough. The rocks under the bush were sharp. She grabbed a handful of them and began scraping them up and down on the same spot until her hand was bloody. Then she fell back to the ground and lay looking up at the night. With the fiery hurt in her leg she felt better. She was limp on the wet grass, and after a while her breath came slow and easy again.

Related Characters: Mick Kelly

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mick has run away from her own prom party in order to be alone. Each night, Mick wanders the streets of rich neighborhoods, waiting on the lawns of houses through whose windows she can hear the sounds of classical music programs on rich folks' radios. After a night of trying—and, in many ways, failing—to socialize and make friends with her new high school classmates, Mick is feeling lonely and exhausted. As the sounds of Beethoven's Third Symphony wash over her, she feels refreshed and inspired—but as soon as the music is over, Mick is filled with a violent, angry self-hatred, and attacks herself as dark and silence wash over her. For Mick, the music she constantly hears in her head is a symbol of her larger issues communicating with or making herself understood by others. Mick spends much of her time in an "inside room" in her own mind. Regardless of whether Mick first retreated to the inside room as a balm against her difficulties expressing herself or whether her time in the inside room has itself exacerbated her loneliness, what is now clear is that Mick feels deeply isolated, intensely frustrated, and uncertain of whether she'll ever be able to find peace, understanding, and value in interpersonal relationships.

Part 2, Chapter 2 Quotes

"I go around," Blount said. He leaned earnestly across the table and kept his eyes on the mute's face. "I go all around and try to tell them. And they laugh. I can't make them understand anything. No matter what I say I can't seem to make them see the truth."

Singer nodded… […] His dinner had got cold because he couldn't look down to eat, but he was so polite that he let Blount go on talking.

Related Characters: Jake Blount (speaker), Bartholomew "Biff" Brannon, John Singer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Biff Brannon observes yet another interaction between Blount and Singer while the two men sit eating at the New York Café one evening. Biff observes Singer putting his own meal—nourishment and enjoyment—on hold in order to listen more closely to Blount's belligerent ranting. While Blount is a drunk and a radical, Singer seems to genuinely find value in his companion's words—he sees deeper than Blount's rough exterior, and senses the deep, profound sadness, frustration, and loneliness that Blount is trying to communicate. Blount's anti-capitalist politics and constant outrage over the social, political, and economic injustices ravaging the nation—particularly, in his view, the South—isolate him from the more conservative or politically neutral people around him. Like Copeland, Blount wants badly to affect and even change the way people think, feel, and communicate—but like Copeland, he is profoundly unable to get through to those around him, and is thus isolated from larger society and confined to the prison of his own thoughts.

Part 2, Chapter 5 Quotes

[Mick] went into the inside room. […] School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room. Mister Singer was in both rooms. Foreign countries and plans and music were in the inside room. […] The inside room was a very private place. She could be in the middle of a house full of people and still feel like she was locked up by herself.

Related Characters: John Singer, Mick Kelly

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mick describes the "inside room" in her head—a "private place" where she can tend to her dreams and experience precious solitude. Though loneliness is an enemy for many of the characters in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*—most of them adults—for Mick, who is still a child, loneliness is still important and special to her in many ways. Mick is the middle child in a family of six children, and, on top of that, has grown up in a boarding house, watching each day as her mother prioritizes the comfort of paying guests over that of her own family. It's easy to infer that Mick feels neglected, overwhelmed, and crowded out by the constant commotion around her, and thus she retreats into herself as a means of escape. Mick's "inside room" where she can be alone is still a sacred space, and she has not yet had to consider so deeply how loneliness and isolation can become the defining forces of a life. While the adult characters in the novel are burdened by their loneliness, Mick finds a kind of solace in hers.

Part 2, Chapter 6 Quotes

"And we are not alone in this slavery. There are millions of others throughout the world, of all colors and races and creeds. […] The people in this town living by the river who work in the mills. People who are almost as much in need as we are ourselves. This hatred is a great evil, and no good can ever come from it. We must remember the words of Karl Marx and see the truth according to his teachings. The injustice of need must bring us all together and not separate us." […]

Doctor Copeland loosened the collar of his shirt, for in his throat there was a choked feeling. The grievous love he felt within him was too much.

Related Characters: Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland delivers a rousing speech to a house full of guests at his annual

Christmas Day gathering. As he preaches to his people about the importance of following the communist doctrine of Karl Marx—"From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs"—Copeland's benevolent desire to better the lives of his community becomes apparent. He wants for his community to embody the generosity they've showed on this day by each bringing gifts "according to [their] ability," and has the wild hope that one day, black people will also be the recipients of this kind of goodwill and generosity from others of different "colors and races and creeds." Doctor Copeland's "grievous love" for his people is both painful and uplifting. He knows that the racism and injustice his patients, friends, family, and neighbors must face each day is debilitating and spirit-breaking—especially in the American South—but also genuinely believes that there is hope for the future. Copeland's desperate, almost tortured desire to spread his message—and his overwhelming fear that it will be unheard or misunderstood—is evident in this passage, perhaps more so than it is at any other point in the novel.

Part 2, Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ During the moonlit January nights Singer continued to walk about the streets of town each evening when he was not engaged. The rumors about him grew bolder. [...] The rich thought that he was rich and the poor considered him a poor man like themselves. And as there was no way to disprove these rumors they grew marvelous and very real. Each man described the mute as he wished him to be.

Related Characters: John Singer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

At roughly the midpoint of the novel, McCullers allows her readers to observe John Singer on one of his late-night walks through the unnamed mill town at the center of the story. Singer, on these walks, makes himself known throughout his community—and most everyone he meets develops a strange and intense affinity for him. Everyone in the community sees themselves reflected in Singer who is, in his silence, to them a cipher or a mirror for their own anxieties, hopes, and dreams. Because Singer is often silent, he does not dispel any of the "rumors" that spread about him, and so each person in town begins to see Singer as they "wish" him to be. In one sense, Singer is perhaps being taken advantage of—and in another sense, he is giving his friends and neighbors a great gift by allowing them to ameliorate their own feelings of loneliness and to see themselves reflected in another.

Part 2, Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ "They hollered there for three days and three nights and nobody come."

"I am deaf," said Doctor Copeland. "I cannot understand."

"They put our Willie and them boys in this here ice-cold room. There were a rope hanging down from the ceiling. They taken their shoes off and tied their bare feets to this rope [...] and their feets swolled up and they struggle on the floor and holler out. [...] Their feets swolled up and they hollered for three nights and three days. And nobody come."

Doctor Copeland pressed his head with his hands, but still the steady trembling would not stop. "I cannot hear what you say."

Related Characters: Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland, Portia (speaker), Buster Johnson, William "Willie" Copeland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Portia brings her father, Doctor Copeland, some terrible news. A young man named Buster Johnson has just returned from the state penitentiary and has brought with him an awful story. Buster was locked up alongside Willie—and tortured alongside him, as well, at the hands of several cruel white guards who strong the young men's feet up until their extremities became atrophied and gangrenous. Buster has had one leg amputated as a result—but Willie has had both feet cut off. As Portia describes, in detail, the suffering that Willie and the other prisoners endured, Doctor Copeland tells her that he is "deaf" and "cannot understand" what she's saying. What Copeland may actually be trying to do is to beg her to stop—but instead, the language he uses suggests that he is so traumatized by the reality of what he's hearing that he has become literally indisposed or "crippled," as Portia reports that Willie and Buster are now. This declaration ties in with the novel's themes of loneliness and isolation as well as communication and self-expression by suggesting that in some instances, there is no way to communicate feeling, horror, trauma, or pain—some things are so profoundly terrible that they can literally not be understood or accepted. Failures of communication and expression thus

perpetuate loneliness and isolation, creating a vicious cycle in which one is not able to seek comfort, understanding, or solace even in one's most difficult and traumatic moments.

The next morning the sun came out. The strange Southern winter was at its end. Doctor Copeland was released. A little group waited outside the jail for him. Mr. Singer was there. Portia and Highboy and Marshall Nicolls were present also. Their faces were confused and he could not see them clearly. The sun was very bright.

"Father, don't you know that ain't no way to help out Willie? Messing around at a white folks' courthouse? Best thing us can do is keep our mouth shut and wait."

Related Characters: Portia (speaker), William "Willie" Copeland, Marshall Nicolls , Highboy, John Singer, Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

After going to the courthouse to attempt to see the judge and demand justice for his son Willie, Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland is beaten by a group of white policemen and jailed for the night. When he emerges from lockup in the morning, he finds the faces of his friends, family, and neighbors waiting for him. As the cold of winter ends and the familiar Southern heat and glare return, McCullers paints a portrait of Copeland—disoriented and confused after a cold, feverish night in a cold cell—as betrayed by the very environment he calls home. The people, the politics, and even the weather are against him—and according to Portia's response upon seeing her father, she (and perhaps his friends and neighbors) feel he should know this by now. Doctor Copeland's enduring struggle against the injustices around him is valorous but doomed, and this passage illustrates the tragedy and the pain of being desperate for justice, change, and hope and yet unable to find any.

Part 2, Chapter 13 Quotes

"This the way it is," Willie said. "I feel like my feets is still hurting. I got this here terrible misery down in my toes. Yet the hurt in my feets is down where my feets should be if they were on my l-l-legs. And not where my feets is now. It a hard thing to understand. My feets hurt me so bad all the time and I don't know where they is. They never given them back to me. They s-somewhere more than a hundred m-miles from here."

Related Characters: William "Willie" Copeland (speaker), John Singer, Jake Blount

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Willie Copeland has just returned home from a stint at the state penitentiary, during which he and two other black men were tortured by a cruel group of white guards—torture that resulted in Willie being forced to undergo a double amputation. Here, he describes the debilitating phantom pains he still feels, each day, in his "feets." Willie's pain is evident from his stutter and his difficulty expressing what he's truly feeling—and yet he soldiers on, attempting to describe the ineffable, unnamable pain that now haunts his every day. The racism, cruelty, and injustice that has been thrust upon Willie is unspeakable, and yet McCullers insists on trying to have Willie find a way to articulate the physical and emotional pain he's feeling. Willie's amputation means he has no mobility—a metaphor for the absolute, crushing lack of social mobility the black community faced in the 1930s. McCullers uses Willie's devastation over the realization that the simple act of moving himself around is now difficult at best—and will be for the rest of his life—to illustrate the pain and suffering caused by the many social, political, and economic injustices which have been cruelly perpetrated against the black community for centuries.

"But if you was to ask me to point out the most uncivilized are on the face of this globe I would point here—" [...] Jake turned the globe again and pressed his blunt, grimy thumb on a carefully selected spot. "Here. These thirteen states. I know what I'm talking about. I read books and I go around. I been in every damn one of these thirteen states. [...] And here in these thirteen states the exploitation of human beings is so that—that it's a thing you got to take in with your own eyes."

Related Characters: Jake Blount (speaker), Doctor

Benedict Mady Copeland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 296-297

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jake Blount and Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland are deep in the throes of an all-night dialogue which has fired them both up. As they have discussed the racism, social inequality, and economic justice facing the American South, they have struggled to find common ground: while Copeland believes that racism is the greatest evil in America, Blount believes that title should belong to capitalism. Nevertheless, the two men agree on one thing—that the "thirteen states" which comprise the American South are some of the most cruel, lawless, unchangeable places in the world. Jake Blount's speech in this passage is tinged with betrayal and heartbreak, since the place that has raised him and made him is also the place that has most profoundly shattered and wrecked him. Blount's constant railing against the state of society has most likely grown tiresome even to him—but in this passage, McCullers makes clear that the source of the very real investment Jake has in spreading his message comes from a genuine desire to find a way to remake a place he loves; a place that has let him down.

Part 2, Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ There were three mutes inside and they were talking with their hands together. […] There was a certain brotherly resemblance between them.

Singer went inside. For a moment he had trouble taking his hand from his pocket. Then clumsily he formed a word of greeting. He was clapped on the shoulder. A cold drink was ordered. They surrounded him and the fingers of their hands shot out like pistons as they questioned him.

He told his own name and the name of the town where he lived. After that he could think of nothing else to tell about himself. He asked if they knew Spiros Antonapoulos. They did not know him. Singer stood with his hands dangling loose. […] He was so listless and cold that the three mutes in the bowler hats looked at him queerly. After a while they left him out of their conversation.

Related Characters: Spiros Antonapoulos, John Singer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 325

Explanation and Analysis

After making a 12-hour train trip to visit his onetime companion Spiros Antonapoulos at the asylum in which Antonapoulos has been living for a year, John Singer arrives at the establishment to learn that Antonapoulos is dead. Crushed, pained, and furious, Singer wanders aimlessly through the town surrounding the asylum until, to his great surprise, he comes upon a trio of deaf and mute men communicating using sign language. For a moment, there is a glimmer of hope within Singer. Though he's just lost the only person in the world who has ever, he feels, truly understood him, the fortuitous meeting with these three new men seems to portend that there's still the potential for Singer to find the kind of connection and community for which he's been longing. However, as Singer begins talking with the men, he finds himself dragged down by his sorrow, unable to rouse any enthusiasm or interest within himself. Singer feels lost, adrift, and alone, and his sorrow alienates him from even those most like him. McCullers uses this terrible turn of events to suggest that loneliness perpetuates itself, creating a spiral from which it is difficult to escape. Even if one manages to find the promise of connection and friendship, a life lived in loneliness is difficult to reimagine or escape.

Part 3, Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ The road ahead lay to the north and slightly to the west. But he would not go too far away. He would not leave the South. That was one clear thing.

Related Characters: Jake Blount

Related Themes:

Page Number: 350

Explanation and Analysis

When a race riot breaks out at the Sunny Dixie Show, Jake Blount's place of employment, two young black men are killed. Though Jake attempted to stop the fight from getting out of hand, simmering tensions between the black and white communities had been erupting at the Sunny Dixie for months—now, Jake is worried that the fight will be attributed to his "labor agitation," and decides to skip town. As he heads out of the mill town where he's been living for the last year, he laments that all the connections he's made and all the things he's experienced are done, severed, and over—yet again, he has become an itinerant wanderer with no friends and no place to call home. Still, as Jake sets out on

the open road, he remains determined to stay in the South. Though a part of him hates the place, he possesses just the tiniest glimmer of hope that somewhere, in some town, someone will listen to him and help him to rise up and better Southern society.

Part 3, Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ But now no music was in her mind. […] It was like she was shut out from the inside room. Sometimes a quick little tune would come and go—but she never went into the inside room with music like she used to do. It was like she was too tense. Or maybe because it was like the store took all her energy and time. […] When she used to come home from school she felt good and was ready to start working on the music. But now she was always tired.

Related Characters: Mick Kelly

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 353

Explanation and Analysis

After a long day at her new job at Woolworth's, Mick tries to cheer herself up by visiting the New York Café for a sundae and a beer. As Mick sits in her booth alone, she laments having taken the job—though she knew the money would help her family—and wonders whether she'll ever be able to get back to being the person she was just a few months ago. Mick is growing up, and she fears that her sense of being barred from the "inside room" in her mind is permanent—and McCullers bleakly suggests that, indeed, it is. This passage is perhaps one of the novel's most emblematic of the ways in which society turns individuals into helpless cogs in a perpetually turning capitalist machine. Mick was, just a few months ago, full of hope, dreams, and feelings so big that she often had to hurt herself to experience them as intensely as they demanded to be felt. Now, however, she has quickly become yet another exhausted, aimless worker whose dreams feel faraway and impossible.

Part 3, Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ And why? What was the reason for keeping the place open all through the night when every other cafe in the town was closed? He was often asked that question and could never speak the answer out in words.

Related Characters: Bartholomew "Biff" Brannon

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 356

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's final chapter, Biff Brannon—alone in his café in the middle of the night—contemplates death, loneliness, and community. As Biff asks himself why he keeps the café open all night when doing so actively harms profits, he thinks about how the answer is difficult to put in words—but given the events of the novel thus far and the kind, searching, open nature of Biff's relationship to his town, his neighbors, and his patrons, the answer is, to McCullers's audience, clear as day. Biff Brannon keeps his lonely little café open all night so that lonely people always have a place to go—a place where they can be seen, be heard, and find companionship even just for an evening. Biff Brannon has witnessed the effect Singer's presence had on the entire town—and knows now that what all people, but especially lonely people, truly need is someone to reflect themselves back to them, to listen to their rants, and to provide them with some easy company. Biff now longs to take that role on in honor of his dead friend.

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.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

In an unnamed mill town in the Deep South live two men—both of them are deaf and mute, and they are constant companions. One of the men is a large, stout Greek man named Spiros Antonapoulos. The other is a tall, reserved, well-dressed man named John Singer. Every day, Singer and Antonapoulos walk arm-in-arm to Main Street, where their jobs are. Antonapoulos works for his cousin, who owns a fruit and candy store, while Singer works across the street as a silverware engraver.

The opening passage of the novel introduces two characters who are very different, yet bound together by the unique struggles they've faced as disabled individuals living in the Deep South. Singer and Antonapoulos's close relationship, read literally, is the result of two men realizing they must stick together if they want to be understood and supported—but over the years, some scholars and critics have suggested that McCullers may have used deafness and muteness as an abstract allegory to describe the alienating experience of being homosexual in the South in the 1930s.

Though Singer talks expressively and frequently to Antonapoulos using sign language, Antonapoulos rarely uses his hands to speak at all—and when he does, he uses "vague, fumbling signs" and communicates only his most basic needs. The two of them share a small upstairs apartment in town. Antonapoulos sleeps in a large, plush bed while Singer sleeps in a plain narrow cot; the two of them share a bedroom. Antonapoulos does the cooking and Singer does the cleaning, and some nights, the two men play chess together, though Singer enjoys the game much more than Antonapoulos does. Antonapoulos sometimes steals candy from his cousin's store, which makes Singer uncomfortable.

This passage introduces the many differences between Singer and Antonapoulos. While Singer is animated, open, curious, and serious, Antonapoulos is cold, uncommunicative, and occasionally self-indulgent. This suggests that what binds the two men together is not true friendship, understanding, or love, but instead the simple fact of their shared disability. They are treated well by their neighbors but are, on a fundamental level, isolated from everyone else due to their deafness, and they have only each other for support.

After 10 years spent together living in the mill town in this way, Singer and Antonapoulos are in their early 30s. Though many of the mill workers in town are poor, desperate, and hungry, Singer and Antonapoulos are doing well for themselves. One day, Antonapoulos falls suddenly ill. His doctor orders him to stop drinking, and though Singer urges Antonapoulos to follow the doctor's orders, Antonapoulos becomes "sulky" and distant. Even after the illness passes, Antonapoulos is a changed man—he is irritable and restless and begins disrupting his and Singer's carefully-planned schedule by going out drinking each night. He often steals from bars and restaurants, and Singer pays for the things Antonapoulos takes.

Even as Antonapoulos's behavior becomes more erratic and unpredictable, McCullers never cites the source of the change in his personality. Singer, too, is flustered and confused by his friend's increasingly sullen and adversarial disposition—and this fact makes him feel isolated from the person he'd thought to be his constant, steadfast, predictable companion.

Antonapoulos's state worsens and he begins getting in trouble with the law. Singer tries to remain patient, but finds himself under a lot of stress as he spends his savings constantly bailing Antonapoulos out of jail. Antonapoulos's cousin, who has changed his name from his original Greek name to Charlie Parker, is unhelpful. Soon, all of Singer's savings are depleted, yet Antonapoulos continues acting out.

Even though Antonapoulos has family in town, no one really cares for the man the way Singer does. This demonstrates the depths of their isolation, and the difficulty on the horizon for Singer as his friend pulls further and further away.

One afternoon, Charlie Parker hands Singer a letter informing Singer that Parker is placing Antonapoulos in the state asylum 200 miles from town. Singer is distressed. He writes a note on the pad he keeps in his pocket for communicating with others, explaining that he wants Antonapoulos to stay. Parker insists, however, that Antonapoulos must go away. Singer knows there is nothing he can do, and, over the course of the week, prepares for Antonapoulos's departure. He talks to his companion with his hands nonstop, hoping to express "all the thoughts that [have] ever been in his mind and heart." On the day of Antonapoulos's departure, Singer brings him to the bus station to meet Parker. Antonapoulos hardly pays attention as Singer bids him goodbye.

Though Singer is desperate not to be separated from his friend, it is clear that Antonapoulos is a burden to his cousin. Misunderstood—and mistreated—due to his disability, Antonapoulos is sent away. It's already clear at this early point in the novel that society is not built for men like Singer and Antonapoulos, and even though Singer tries to help his friend up until the very last moment they have together, Antonapoulos seems to have completely walled himself off from help or friendship.

The next few weeks pass in a blur. Singer, painfully lonely, tries to comfort himself with memories of his life before Antonapoulos. He recalls his youth in Chicago, reflecting on his struggles to speak due to self-consciousness about his voice. Singer begins sleeping more and more, and soon finds his life full of vivid "half-dreams" about Antonapoulos.

This passage provides more insight into Singer's character, and underscores the reason why his relationship with Antonapoulos—another man who communicated as he himself did—was so important to him.

As winter turns to spring, Singer tries to change his routine. He begins taking long walks in the evenings and sleeping only a few hours each night. He starts eating his meals at the New York Café, a bar and restaurant two blocks from his home. On his first visit to the café, he hands the proprietor, Biff Brannon, a piece of paper describing the kinds of things he likes to eat for each meal and the prices he's able to pay. Brannon nods in agreement, and from then on, Singer eats at the café three times each day. As spring warms and turns to summer, Singer's agitation gives way to a kind of calm—but he continues his long, lonely walks through town each evening.

In this passage, Singer two makes dual, conflicting attempts: one is to try to ameliorate his loneliness and isolation by starting to hang around the New York Café. But strangely, the other is to preserve it by taking lots of long, solitary walks. Singer seems torn between the desire for companionship and the fear of being rejected or misunderstood.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2

At midnight on a dark, sultry early summer night, Bartholomew "Biff" Brannon works behind the cash register at the New York Café. The streets are quiet, but the café is full of customers. Biff nervously watches as a stout, dirty customer becomes increasingly drunk and loud. Biff goes upstairs to the room he and his wife Alice share above the café to retrieve a suitcase belonging to the drunk, whose name is Jake Blount. Alice wakes up and warns Biff that if he doesn't tell Blount—who naps in the café during the day and drinks on Biff's dime at night—to leave, she'll call the police. Biff insists that since his arrival in town, Blount has been a good customer.

This passage introduces Biff, the soulful and introspective proprietor of the New York Café. Biff takes a serious, genuine interest in observing and trying to understand his customers—even the unruly ones who are potentially bad for business.

Alice calls Blount "a bum and a freak," but Biff retorts that he likes freaks. Privately, he thinks about his frustration with the fact that after 15 years of marriage, he and Alice have been quarrelling more than usual. Biff tells Alice that she lacks compassion and curiosity—but she is nearly asleep again, and doesn't seem to hear him. As Biff brings Blount's suitcase downstairs, he admits to himself that he is perturbed by how much Blount's drunkenness has worsened over the 12 days he's been in town.

Even though Biff defends his choices to his wife and couches his interest in Blount as empathy and kindness, he also admits to a kind of sickened fascination with the man's downward spiral. It is clear that communication between Biff and his wife has broken down and deteriorated over the course of their marriage—they are on opposite sleeping schedules, they can't agree on anything, and they can't hold a conversation very long at all.

Back downstairs, Biff notes that Singer is drinking a cup of coffee alone while Blount, sitting alone in the corner, talks nonsense aloud to no one in particular—he is talking about "some queer kind of politics." Biff knows that he must say something to Blount at some point tonight—things can't keep going on as they are.

Biff is generous both ideologically and practically, but at the same time, Alice's words have made him look at Blount in a new light and reconsider what a liability the man might be.

Biff looks up from the counter to see Mick Kelly enter the café. Biff is shocked to see her there—Mick is barely a teenager. Biff greets the tomboyish Mick and asks if her parents know she's out so late. Mick assures Biff that a group of kids are out late playing. Mick asks to buy a pack of cigarettes, but as she gets out money to pay, she drops her change. Some of it rolls near Jake Blount's table. Blount picks up the coins and laments the high price of cigarettes, blaming the price on the "tyranny" of capitalism. Biff notices Mick staring at Singer. Jake Blount notices, too, and says drunkenly that he's been dreaming of Singer for several nights. Mick remarks that Singer has been living in her family's boarding house for the last three months, then leaves.

This passage introduces yet another major character, and deepens the information already known about the others. Mick is precocious and yet shy around Singer, while Blount doesn't temper his anti-capitalist rants around anyone—even a child. Singer is caught up in the middle as the others fight for his attention, while Biff, on the sidelines, simply observes.

Biff turns his attention to the drunk and stinking Blount. He urges Blount to go back to the kitchen and ask the boy working back there, Willie, to help him wash up and pick some clean clothes out of his suitcase. Blount rebuffs Biff's suggestion and keeps drinking. Biff tries to ask Blount about his past, but Blount stumbles out of the bar rather than answer Biff's questions.

Blount flees the second he's confronted with questions about his past—it's clear that he doesn't want to think about where he's been, and is doing everything in his power to forget it.

Biff surveys the café. It is after one in the morning, and only four or five patrons remain. He feels guilty for selling Mick cigarettes—he has a feeling of fatherly "tenderness" toward her which nonetheless makes him feel unsettled and uneasy.

This passage foreshadows the yearning, paternal, and yet inappropriate feelings Biff has toward Mick. He wants to care for her and shelter her, but as will be revealed later, his intense desire to be a parent bleeds into his other, competing desires.

At two in the morning, Jake Blount returns in the company of a black doctor whom Biff knows is related to Willie. Blount tries to order the doctor a drink, but the doctor quickly walks out of the bar. A drunken patron calls out to Blount, chiding him for bringing a black man into the bar. Blount drunkenly challenges the man, declaring himself to be every race and ethnicity under the sun. Biff tries to quiet Blount down, but Blount is worked up. Blount approaches Singer's table and tells Singer that he's the only one who understands all the things he "want[s] to mean." Biff wonders if Singer can understand what Blount is saying.

This passage introduces several new themes and concepts. With the arrival of the black doctor—as well as the the doctor's own hesitance to enter a white establishment, a drunken patron's cruel racism, and Blount's defense of the doctor's right to be anywhere he wants—McCullers foreshadows how racism and injustice will soon fold into the narrative.

Nearly an hour goes by as Biff observes Blount pontificating to Singer about the ills of the world. At last, Singer nods at the clock, indicating that it's time for him to leave, and walks out of the café. Blount seems saddened by the man's departure and follows Singer outside. Biff falls asleep at the counter—when he wakes up, Willie is shaking him and explaining that Blount is outside, slamming his head and fists against a brick wall.

Blount is so devastated to be left alone by the one man he thought was able to understand him that he begins physically harming himself. This passage shows that loneliness, within the world of the book, is a threatening and even physical force.

A group of policemen enter the café supporting the bloody and drunk Jake Blount—Singer is with them. They ask Biff if Blount is staying with him, or if he'd prefer they take him down to the station. Biff tells the policemen to leave Blount with him. After the policemen depart, Blount begins crying. Singer takes a pad out of his pocket and writes a note to Biff, offering to shelter Blount at the boarding house for the night. Biff brings Blount some food and some coffee, and Blount reluctantly eats through his tears.

Jake Blount clearly fears being alone. Luckily, Biff and Singer are two generous, empathetic men who want to help protect Blount from the trouble into which he seems so determined to get himself.

When Blount is done eating, Biff walks him and Singer to the door and bids them goodnight. He heads back in and sits at the cash register, thinking over the events of the night. Soon, morning customers begin streaming in for their coffee and breakfast. As Biff watches his customers, he notices that they all seem to be alone and estranged from one another. Biff heads upstairs to Alice, who is just waking up, and announces that Blount is gone from the property. He washes himself while Alice reads aloud from the Bible. When she gets up from bed to get dressed, he gets under the covers, wearily pondering Blount's apparent desire to "give up" everything inside of him.

This passage shows that Biff's work takes a toll on him—both physically and emotionally. Biff spends much of his time alone in the middle of the night—and even when there are people around, those people are often loners themselves. Biff spends a lot of time wondering about the nature of human connection and pondering whether giving oneself up to another, fully and authentically, is possible—and, if it is, whether it's even advisable.

PART 1, CHAPTER 3

Mick wakes up early, eats breakfast, and waits on the porch for John Singer to come down from his room with the paper like he does every Sunday morning. When Singer doesn't come downstairs, Mick asks her father where he is, and Mr. Kelly tells her that Singer came home late the night before—with company. Mick fetches her baby brother Ralph from the kitchen and waits for her second brother, George—whom everyone calls Bubber—to return from Sunday School. Once Bubber is back, Mick, Bubber, and Ralph, in a little red wagon, go for a walk.

This passage introduces the perspective of Mick Kelly, a feisty tomboy who's often lonely in spite of being surrounded by a huge family and a house full of boarders. Mick, like Blount, has a fascination with Singer—an attraction which will become a central motivation for her throughout the book.

Mick leads Bubber and Ralph to the construction site of their family's new boarding house. She leaves Ralph with Bubber while she climbs up to the roof and spreads her arms wide. Mick wants to sing, but can't choose a **song** out of the many coursing through her. Mick sits down on the roof's peak and smokes a cigarette. She daydreams about being "seventeen [...] and very famous." She begins humming one of the piano pieces that is almost always playing in the back of her mind. When the baby begins crying, Mick reluctantly climbs down from the roof, wishing she could have a little more time to herself.

Mick seems torn between loneliness and a desire for solitude. She doesn't feel connected to anyone around her and longs for peace and quiet so that she can be alone with her thoughts, her music, and her daydreams—but at the same time, her desire for a relationship with Singer shows that she does want to share some kind of connection with someone else.

Mick tells Bubber to comfort Ralph, then goes by herself into the empty, half-finished house. Though the Kelly family has recently put up several "Keep Out" signs to keep gangs of kids from playing in the house at night, the walls are covered in graffiti. Mick pulls some chalk from her pocket, writes some dirty words on the wall, and signs her initials. Mick hums a **tune** by a musician whose name she can't remember at first. As she continues humming the tune, the man's name comes back to her, and she writes "MOTSART" on the wall.

Mick isn't invited out with her peers and doesn't participate in the excursions which take them to places like the half-finished house—but she clearly wants to be a part of her peers' little games and rituals, even if she participates in her own off-kilter way.

Mick hears Ralph crying again. She goes outside to find him sitting in his wagon alone—Bubber is nowhere to be seen. Mick feeds Ralph a jelly bean from her pocket to calm him down and whistles for Bubber. Together, the three of them begin walking home. Mick talks aloud to her brothers, describing the strange dreams she's been having lately and telling them about how badly she wants a **piano** of her own.

Mick's brothers are too young to really understand what she's saying, but she talks at them anyway, longing to make herself known.

Back at the house, Mick puts Ralph in her parents' room and gives him a toy to play with. She goes into the room she shares with her older sisters, Hazel and Etta. Etta is primping, and Hazel is lying on the bed. The girls stop talking as Mick enters the room. Mick doesn't particularly like her sisters—she thinks Etta, with her dreams of making it big in Hollywood, is vain and dull, while she feels Hazel, as the eldest girl, is lazy and spoiled. Etta teases Mick for her tomboyish outfit. Mick defiantly says she'd rather be a boy than look like either of her sisters. She fetches a hatbox from under her bed and runs up to her older brother Bill's room.

This passage shows in greater detail just how isolated and removed Mick feels from the rest of her family. She doesn't particularly seem to like any of her siblings except for Bubber, and feels a kind of superior contempt towards her hyper-feminine sisters especially. Mick stands alone against her sisters' femininity and against her family's norms more broadly.

In the gangly and awkward Bill's room, Mick sets the hatbox down. She opens it as Bill works at his typewriter. Mick pulls out a cracked **ukulele** that she's been trying to transform into a violin by adding parts from different instruments. As she examines it, she becomes full of sadness and self-loathing—she realizes that the ukulele will never be a violin. Crying, Mick drops the ukulele back into the box, kicks it away, and runs downstairs. It is time for lunch, but Mick's mother tells her that because there are so many visitors at the boarding house today, she and her brothers will have to eat in the kitchen.

Mick's ukulele—and the dreams of artistic prowess that have spurred her to make it—represents her desire to differentiate herself from the rest of her family and indeed the rest of her town. Mick wants to be special and talented—and the idea that she might, like her ukulele, be fractured and doomed deep down frightens her.

In the kitchen, Mick and Bubber listen as Portia, a black woman who works as a servant in the boarding house, talks reverently about her Grandpapa's farm several miles from town. When Portia mentions that her grandfather has an organ and a **gramophone**, Mick perks up—she asks why Portia doesn't live there. Portia answers that while many members of her family do live on the farm, times are hard and she needs to work and save money. Mick asks if Portia's parents live on the farm, and Portia answers that her father is a doctor in town. Her father, she says, is a man who's "hard to explain"—studious and strict, he has a "wild" temper and has isolated himself from the rest of the family.

This passage foreshadows the ways in which the seemingly surface-level connections between the novel's many characters will deepen and entwine more profoundly as the book goes on. Portia, the Kelly family's housekeeper and cook, is isolated from her father—a fact that reflects Mick's own feelings of isolation from her family, in spite of the fact that the two situations are obviously very different.

Portia begins talking about how her father has abandoned religion, and Mick remarks that she doesn't believe in God "any more than [she does] Santa Claus"—she loves messing with Portia. Portia rises to the bait and states that Mick won't know love or peace if she doesn't find religion. Portia, her husband Highboy, and her brother Willie all have peace—as do Bubber and John Singer. Bored by the conversation, Mick leaves the kitchen and wanders up and down the hall, wishing she had a house of her own and a real piano to go in it. Mick is upset that Portia implied she's never known love—in reality, Mick has been in love with "one person after another," though she's never let anyone know.

This passage shows how Mick is complicit in her own loneliness. She's feisty, contrarian, and provocative, and she tries to alienate people by saying cruel things that she knows will upset them. Though Mick later admits that she has deep, strong feelings of love and desire for connection, she's too afraid to let them show.

Mick sits on the stairs outside the room of one of the boarders, hoping to hear the sound of a radio. Instead, Mick is flustered and excited when John Singer comes out of his room and goes across the hall to the bathroom. Mick privately wonders "what kind of **music** he hear[s] in his mind" and what he might say to her if he could talk. Singer comes out of the bathroom and returns to his room, giving Mick a small smile and a nod on his way. Mick wishes she could follow Singer into his room but knows it would be impolite to intrude on his solitude. Mick sits on the stairs and thinks about how odd it is that she's so lonely in such a busy, crowded house.

Mick's desire to know what goes on in Singer's mind is a large part of what draws her to him. Everyone else in Mick's life is familiar and predictable, but Singer represents mystery and unknowability. Mick, who doesn't seem to even know herself very well, is nonetheless determined to be the one to get to know John Singer the best.

PART 1, CHAPTER 4

Jake Blount wakes up in the middle of the afternoon confused by his strange surroundings—but comforted by the sight of John Singer sitting at a chessboard in the corner of the room. Memories of the night before slowly begin coming back to Jake as he drinks some water and dresses himself. At the sight of his suitcase, he recalls even more. Singer writes Jake a note explaining that he is deaf and mute.

Jake Blount's loneliness and despair from the night before are somewhat ameliorated by Singer's kindness and generosity.

Singer produces a tin of snacks—crackers, cheese, and oranges—and shares it with Jake. As the two men sip coffee, Jake asks Singer if he's the only deaf man in town—and if he finds being the only one lonesome. Singer responds with an ambiguous shake of the head. Jake stands to leave, asking if he can keep his suitcase under Singer's bed for a few days. Singer writes a note offering to put a mattress on the floor for Jake for a few days, but Jake refuses, explaining that he already has a place to stay. As Jake gets ready to leave, Singer hands him his dirty overalls from the night before.

Though Jake senses the fundamental loneliness Singer must experience, Singer isn't interested in sharing much about himself or his feelings. His private, quiet nature stands in stark contrast to the ways in which his companions openly vent their thoughts, fears, and frustrations throughout the novel.

Jake heads downstairs, asking a tomboyish girl sitting on the stairs if she knows where he can throw away his dirty overalls. Mick leads him to an alley at the back of the house, where two black men are sitting on the steps. Upon seeing them, Mick calls through the kitchen window to Portia, telling her that Highboy and Willie are outside waiting for her. Jake throws his overalls away, and Portia comes outside. Jake asks how to get to Main Street, and Portia tells him to follow her, Highboy, and Willie there. He follows them down the road for a while, listening as they make their plans for the evening—Portia wants to go to church and then visit her father.

Jake Blount throws away his dirtied, bloodied overalls. He is clearly ashamed of his behavior the night before—and, ostensibly, his behavior over the last several days. Blount wants to make a new start, and as he connects with Mick and Portia, he takes an early step towards getting to know the people in his community.

Jake picks up a paper from the fruit and candy store on Main Street and looks through the Help-Wanted ads. He finds an ad for a mechanic to work at an amusement park called the Sunny Dixie Show, and makes a mental note to go down and apply for the job. Jake decides to stop in at the New York Café and see Biff Brannon. He's embarrassed to confront the man, but knows he has to pay his tab. Inside, Jake asks Biff how much he owes him, and Biff replies that Jake is in the hole for 20 dollars. Jake promises Biff that he'll pay him back in time. Jake tells Biff he's planning on looking for work at Sunny Dixie, and Biff tells Jake that it'd be a good idea to do so.

Jake's embarrassment is still palpable in this passage as he goes through his day. He wants to make amends for his actions and get on a path to self-sufficiency—but he is still dependent on the kindness of strangers as he tries to get his life back on track.

Jake walks through the streets of town, passing through poor mill districts on his way to the abandoned lot where the Sunny Dixie park is set up. Upon arriving, he finds the manager and asks about the available job. The manager, Patterson, asks what Jake's experience as a mechanic is, and Jake tells him about jobs he's had in the past. Patterson shows Jake to the flying-jinny—another term for a kind of carousel—and tells him that if he takes the job, he'll be responsible not just for the maintenance of the machine but for controlling the crowds who try to sneak on without tickets. Patterson tells Jake that he needs to keep a close eye on black customers especially. Jake accepts the demands of the job, and Patterson tells him he'll start work tomorrow afternoon.

Jake's search for work at the Sunny Dixie Show—a place whose name romanticizes the South as a bright, happy place—exposes McCullers's readers to the rampant racism and willful amnesia about the South's true past that pervades the entire region. The South is a place full of poverty, prejudice, and division, but its institutions of entertainment and tourism aim to gloss over or erase these facts.

Jake wanders through the streets of town talking to himself. He feels lonesome, and longs for the company of John Singer—a fact he finds odd, considering Singer can't really talk back to him. Jake makes his way home through a poor mill neighborhood. He approaches some men sitting on the porch of a house and tells them he wants to share the "Gospel" with them. The men tell Jake to go tell his Gospel at a revival tent, but Jake insists he has a different kind of news to share. Jake begins venting to the mill workers about the evils and injustices of capitalism, asking them if they're angry to be working for the "bastard" billionaires who own the mills and pay workers paltry sums. The men laugh at Jake. Jake curses them and continues walking on.

Jake knows that society's problems are rooted in unfairness and injustice—but his attempts to galvanize poor workers fail. Ordinary people's everyday lives are too hard and too unstable to risk making worse by taking action against unseen economic and political forces. Jake, however, is only concerned with spreading his message—even if it falls on ears unable to process or use the information they're receiving. Jake's inability to clearly express his ideals to people who truly hear, understand, and support him is his character's central struggle.

Jake returns to the boarding house to find Singer sitting at his chessboard. Jake sits down with Singer and tells him that in spite of a hard afternoon, he's managed to secure a job. Singer brings out some wine and two glasses from his closet, and the men share a drink. The alcohol loosens Jake up, and he begins talking to Singer about himself. He tells Singer that while he's an educated man, studying only makes him mad. He's amassed a lot of knowledge but can't make others understand the things he's learned. All that's left for him to do, he feels, is "get drunk."

In this passage, Singer articulates the difficulty he had in the last scene—he knows that he's unable to get people to understand or appreciate his message, and yet he refuses to stop trying to motivate and galvanize his fellow southerners and fellow workers.

Singer, who has been eyeing Jake with "patient interest," takes out his pad and pen and writes a note. He passes it across the table to Jake. Jake looks at the note, which asks if he is a Democrat or a Republican, but he has become so drunk and angry that he can barely absorb the words. Jake crumples the note in his hand, looks at Singer, and tells him that he's one of the only people who understands him. Later that night, after the men have polished off the rest of the wine, Singer unrolls a mattress on the floor. Jake lies down on it and falls asleep almost instantly.

Even though Singer very clearly doesn't yet understand Blount's political message, Blount nonetheless feels that his words have been internalized and validated by Singer. This strange effect will ripple throughout the novel as people continue to seek validation from Singer—even when they only really care about the illusion *of such understanding.*

PART 1, CHAPTER 5

Benedict Mady Copeland, a black doctor, sits alone in his kitchen on Sunday night in the glow of his wood stove. He is reading the writings of Baruch Spinoza, a 17th-century Jewish philosopher, endeavoring to understand the man's ideas and arguments. While sometimes, late at night, a patient in need of emergency care rings Doctor Copeland's door, tonight the bell at the front of the house is quiet. Soon, though, Doctor Copeland hears the sound of a harmonica floating down the street—he knows his son, William, is playing it, and that his daughter Portia must be with him.

This passage illustrates what a regular night for Doctor Copeland looks like. The man is passionate about understanding philosophies and ideas of people very different from him—people of different religions, races, and eras—and always on call for any patient in need. Copeland is clearly kind, curious, and empathetic—but also quite lonely.

Portia enters the house alone, chiding her father for reading in the dark. Doctor Copeland asks how Portia's doing, and whether she, Highboy, and William are getting along all right. It's clear that while Portia visits her father regularly, Willie and Highboy do not participate in these visits. Portia insists that she, Willie, and Highboy are all doing fine—the three of them live together, and have come up with a system in which each does his or her part to keep all three of them afloat.

Doctor Copeland is isolated from his children, and it seems that only Portia ever comes to visit. As the novel continues to unfold, McCullers will delve deeper into the sources of Copeland's loneliness and isolation—much of which, it turns out, he has brought upon himself.

Portia asks her father if he's eaten, and Doctor Copeland says he hasn't. Portia says she's brought greens and pork. Doctor Copeland says that while he's not eating meat, Portia can cook the meat with the collards if she wants to. Portia begins cooking, and Doctor Copeland continues to ask her about her life. He asks if she's planning on having children, but Portia says the answer depends "entirely upon God." Doctor Copeland thinks about all the babies he's delivered throughout town, many of which their parents have named after the doctor himself. Doctor Copeland wishes his patients didn't have so many children, but his entreaties to them go unheeded.

Doctor Copeland is clearly eager to hear more about Portia's life and to keep from scaring her away. He longs for her company—even though he is beloved by his community and has achieved professional success and satisfaction, his family seems to be an area of his life in which he is disappointed and unfulfilled.

Doctor Copeland knows he is meant to "teach his people"—but some days, the work of educating, healing, and bettering his community feels tiring or downright impossible.

Like Blount, Copeland feels overwhelmed by the self-appointed task of educating and galvanizing his community in hopes of leading them toward revolution.

Portia breaks the silence by telling her father she doesn't want to quarrel. Doctor Copeland says they weren't quarreling, but Portia declares that a quarrel can unfold without words. Portia tries to cut the tension by telling a story about a black businessman who recently came to Portia's neighborhood claiming to work on behalf of a government pension fund for black Americans. He collected 25 cents a week from the community for many weeks before being exposed as a fraud. Doctor Copeland is upset by the story, but Portia says that even though she, Willie, and Highboy were taken advantage of, they're able to laugh at what happened now.

Even though Portia's life has difficulties and embarrassments in it, she finds humor in every situation and keeps her head held high. The things she views as minor setbacks, however, appear to her father as major injustices and transgressions.

Doctor Copeland doesn't find Portia's story funny at all. He laments the troubles "the Negro race" encounters of its own accord. Portia tells her father she doesn't like his use of the word "Negro"—according to Portia, "polite peoples—no matter what shade they is—always say colored." Portia begins arguing semantics with her father, insisting that she and Willie have "a good deal of white folks' blood," while Highboy is "part Indian."

Portia and her father clearly have different ways of thinking about their identities and their places in society. While Doctor Copeland is proud of who he is and wants better for his people, Portia is determined to think and operate within the confines of the status quo. She doesn't want any trouble, and seems to want to blend in or try to erase her blackness.

Doctor Copeland says he doesn't want to argue semantics—he just wants to speak the truth. Portia tells her father that the real "truth" is that everyone around him—even his own children—is scared of him. She accuses him of trying to talk in a way that obscures what's in his heart, and of trying to make his children behave just like him. Portia points out that she's the only one of Doctor Copeland's four children who comes to visit him anymore. Doctor Copeland begins coughing uncontrollably, and Portia laments having upset him. Doctor Copeland begins crying. Portia apologizes profusely, crying herself.

This passage deepens the contentious background that Portia and Copeland share. Copeland is so focused on getting the "truth" out there—in a sense of desperation that mirrors Jake Blount's—that he neglects his personal relationships and the practical impact of his words.

Portia goes back to fixing dinner. As Doctor Copeland watches his daughter move around the kitchen, he is struck by how much she looks like her mother, Daisy. Doctor Copeland thinks about his other children—Hamilton, Karl Marx, and William—and the high hopes he had for them to grow up into doctors, scientists, and lawyers. He reflects on the way he raised them and the things he tried to teach them, admitting that the austere and overly principled upbringing he foisted upon them has alienated them.

Doctor Copeland knows he has made his children afraid of him, but still doesn't understand how things went so wrong. He realizes that he has put his potentially hopeless mission before his own family—but he doesn't know how to repair the damage he's done over the years.

Portia serves dinner, and she and Doctor Copeland eat in silence. Doctor Copeland breaks the silence by asking Portia to tell him about her job. Portia admits that the work at the Kelly house is hard, and that Mrs. Kelly can't always afford to pay her on time. Doctor Copeland asks why Portia puts up with such treatment. Portia tells him that the Kellys are going through a hard time. She adds that she has a real "fondness" for the Kelly children. Doctor Copeland urges Portia to think of her own livelihood and put herself before the Kelly children, but Portia insists on seeing the family through their troubles.

Doctor Copeland believes that Portia should, on principle, abandon her job, which is in service of white people. Portia, however, is much more empathetic—and perhaps afraid of admitting to the indignities she does suffer at her job—and insists on sticking it out.

Portia continues talking about the Kelly house and mentions the only man out of all the boarders who pays on time—a "deaf-and-dumb" white man. Doctor Copeland asks if the man is tall and thin with light eyes, and if he seems like a Northerner "or maybe a Jew." Portia says that's the man she's talking about. Doctor Copeland says he's seen the man around town. As Portia begins cleaning up, Doctor Copeland thinks about the deaf and mute white man. He remembers an encounter in which the man lit Doctor Copeland's cigarette for him on a rainy night on a street corner in town. The interaction with the mute man was the first positive one he's ever had with a white person.

Portia sees Singer as a benevolent and upstanding person who always does the right thing—and in spite of Doctor Copeland's resentments toward white people, he, too, finds himself thinking fondly of his one interaction with the man. Singer is genuinely kind and open to all he meets.

Doctor Copeland speaks up and tells Portia he has a deaf and mute patient of his own—a young boy who went deaf due to twin ear infections. Doctor Copeland admits to Portia that he worries he has failed the boy. He wonders aloud if perhaps the deaf and mute man at the Kelly house might know of an institution Copeland's patient could attend. Portia assures Doctor Copeland that the kind Mr. Singer would help him out—she volunteers to give him any letter her father would like to write to him.

This passage illustrates the reason for a connection between Doctor Copeland and John Singer. Copeland wants to find resources for his patients—those who are disabled will face even worse discrimination, Copeland knows, than their disabled white counterparts do.

The sound of a harmonica on the street makes its way inside. Portia says that Willie and Highboy have come to collect her and bids her father goodnight. Doctor Copeland, pointing out that he has never met Highboy and has not seen Willie in three years, urges Portia to invite them in. Portia knows that Willie and her father don't get along, but reluctantly agrees. She goes out to fetch the two men while Doctor Copeland shakily lights a cigarette.

Doctor Copeland is clearly ready to swallow his pride and repair the relationships he's allowed to atrophy over the years. His ideals are still important to him, but he wants to find a way back into his children's lives.

Portia returns with Willie and Highboy. Doctor Copeland greets them warmly. Highboy is polite and respectful, but Willie is quiet and standoffish. The four of them sit together in the living room in silence. Portia tries to make some polite conversation, but Copeland, in spite of his desire to connect with his son, can think of nothing to say.

The difficulties Copeland has communicating with his children reflect his own loneliness and insecurity. Though he raised Portia and Willie, he's so disconnected from them that words can no longer bridge the gaps between them.

At last, Doctor Copeland addresses Willie and asks him, stiltedly and formally, if he remembers any of the things he was taught in his youth. Copeland says that he poured all the knowledge he could into his children, but that it has resulted in nothing. Portia reminds her father that he said he wouldn't start a quarrel, then stands up and goes to the door. Highboy and Willie follow her. Before she leaves, though, Portia turns and begs the men to settle their quarrel. Doctor Copeland apologizes to Willie, and Willie accepts.

Doctor Copeland wants to make things right with his children—but can't stop himself from bringing up the past, salting old wounds, and continuing to try to make his children into the thinkers and people he'd like for them to be.

After Highboy, Willie, and Portia leave, Doctor Copeland returns to the dark of the kitchen and sits by the stove. He wishes that he could remove all of his children from his mind. He turns on the light and resumes reading Spinoza. In the back of his mind, he wonders about writing to Singer, and reflects once again on their sole interaction over the cigarette with a kind of "peace" inside of him.

Doctor Copeland's loneliness is crushing, but he tries to ignore it by focusing on bettering himself and his mind. Copeland is clearly a man torn apart by his choices and decisions—and yet the events of this chapter suggest that he is on the verge of reorganizing his priorities.

PART 1, CHAPTER 6

By the middle of summer, John Singer has become the boarder at the Kelly house with the most visitors. Each evening after dinner at the New York Café, he returns to his room, where he waits for his guests to arrive. Mick, Doctor Copeland, Biff Brannon, and Jake Blount come to his room separately to air their problems.

It's somewhat ironic that all of these lonely characters seek out the same person for comfort; their relationships with Singer make them a kind of community, but they're so focused on their own individual issues that this connection isn't apparent to them.

To Mick, talking to Singer is "like a game"—when Mick is with him, she feels like she's discovering new kinds of **music**. She often plays with Singer's chess pieces as she talks, and no matter what embarrassing things she says or does, he always treats her kindly. Doctor Copeland begins visiting Singer after writing him a letter about his patient. Doctor Copeland senses none of the "quiet insolence" found in most white men in Singer, and, charmed and surprised by this fact, Copeland comes back to visit again and again. Jake Blount comes to visit each week, a sack of beer in tow. He talks loudly and angrily to Singer about politics and revolution. Biff Brannon visits on occasion, too, but never for more than half an hour so as not to abandon the café for too long.

Each of the four main characters have their own separate reasons for making their initial visits to Singer's room—but what keeps them coming back is the feeling of being seen, heard, known, and, above all, accepted. Singer is a mirror for their insecurities and anxieties, and he helps each of them to see themselves a little bit more kindly.

Singer tries to express the same quiet understanding to each of his visitors. On the rare occasion no one comes by, he goes to a movie. One day in July, he leaves town without telling anyone to go visit Antonapoulos in the asylum—a trip he's been quietly planning and dreaming of for months. Upon arriving, Singer greets Antonapoulos warmly and gives him several gifts. Antonapoulos, however, is uninterested in the gifts. Singer can barely move his hands fast enough to say all he's been longing to say to Antonapoulos for months, but Antonapoulos doesn't talk back or move his hands at all (except to fumble with the crotch of his pants).

As Singer visits Antonapoulos in the asylum, it becomes clear that the old dynamic of their relationship—one in which Singer makes all the effort and leads all the communication while Antonapoulos more or less ignores him—is unchanged in spite of the distance between them.

Upon returning to the boarding house, Singer finds that Mick, Doctor Copeland, Jake, and Biff are full of questions about where he's been and why. Singer, however, pretends not to understand their questions, and avoids answering them. He knows that even if he doesn't always respond to them, they'll keep coming—he knows they feel he will always understand the things they have to say.

Though Singer will listen happily to as much or as little as his guests want to share with him, he chooses to keep his private thoughts inside—perhaps out of embarrassment, perhaps out of politeness, or perhaps out of the fear that all the rest of them have: the fear that he won't be properly understood.

PART 2, CHAPTER 1

All summer, Mick Kelly is full of the feeling that she is on the verge of some kind of great change. She can't put her finger on what it is, but she is perpetually excited and ready to face each day. Most mornings she takes Ralph and Bubber out on an aimless walk. As the heat of the afternoon descends upon them, Mick finds a shady place for them to sit or brings them to the library or the New York Café to buy candy. On each outing, every day, Mick's head is full of **music**—and each night, after supper, she goes out to wander the streets in search of the sounds of her neighbors' radios.

Mick spends much of her time alone—or effectively alone, caring for her younger brothers. While music comforts and soothes her, it also symbolizes her desire to express herself to the world, and this hope for self-expression is what makes her feel excited and hopeful about the future.

One night in August, Mick is hurrying out of the house so that she can make it to a neighbor's lawn in order to surreptitiously listen to a program on their **radio**. Mick's father stops her in the living room and asks to talk to her a while. Mick feels sorry for her dad—after an accident last year, he's been forced to give up his job as a carpenter and start working as a watch repairman. As Mick waits for her father to say something, a silence descends. She realizes he has nothing to say—he just wants her company. As her father slowly starts talking about the mundanities of his days, Mick wishes she could tell him about her long, hot, joyous nights roaming the streets and listening to the sounds of her neighbors' radios wafting through the air—but she doesn't know how.

It's not just the major characters in the novel who have a painful, sometimes overwhelming longing to be seen, heard, and understood—everyone in the book suffers with the desire to express themselves and feel recognized by another. Mick herself struggles with these feelings, but fails to realize that her father is going through much the same thing she is, and so both characters remain somewhat isolated even while they're together.

Several weeks later, school has started. It is a Saturday afternoon. Mick is giving a prom party at the boarding house later that evening, and she, Bubber, Portia, and Mr. Kelly spend all afternoon cleaning and decorating the place with streamers. Mick has only ever been to a few parties and has never given one herself, but after feeling lonely and out of place during her first few weeks at school, she has decided to bring all her new schoolmates over for a gathering.

Mick's decision to give a prom party illustrates her desire to broaden her horizons, make new friends, and connect with others. She's tired of being alone and is ready to try to fit in, even if doing so doesn't come naturally to her.

Mick is anxious about the party. She fusses with the pictures on the wall in the hallway, rearranges decorations, and begs Portia to reassure her that the party will go off without a hitch. As the afternoon wanes, Mick takes a long bath and begins painstakingly dressing and primping for the evening ahead. By the time she's ready, she feels "different from the old Mick Kelly"—she believes that tonight is going to be the best night of her life.

As Mick prepares for the party, she doesn't feel like herself at all—she's taken on the same kind of stereotypically feminine identity that she recently mocked her sisters for. Mick, however, knows that in order to fit in socially and find the connection she's been longing for, she needs to change herself—and she's willing to do so, hopeful that it will pay off.

Later that night, the party is in full swing. All of Mick's classmates are laughing and mingling—until the moment she passes out the actual prom cards and encourages them to start pairing up. The girls and boys separate and become nervous—it is as if everyone has forgotten how to talk to one another. Soon, the silence and awkwardness break as a few boys start requesting promenades with the girls.

The breakdown in communication among Mick's party guests shows that everyone struggles—in ways big and small—with both the desire to express themselves to others and the fear of doing just that.

Amidst all the awkwardness, Mick notices Harry Minowitz, her next-door neighbor and a Jewish boy two years her senior. Harry asks Mick on a promenade and as the two set out for their walk, they begin talking. During a lull in the conversation, Mick begins humming a piece of **music**. Harry asks her what she's singing, and she tells him it's a piece by Mozart. Harry remarks that Mozart is a German name and asks if Mozart is a fascist or a Nazi. Mick replies that Nazis are "new," while Mozart has been dead a long time. Harry says he hates fascists and longs to kill one. Mick asks why, and Harry asks her to walk around the block again so he can have time to explain. Mick wants to accept the invitation, but as they come up to the house, she sees a commotion on the lawn.

Mick's burgeoning friendship with her neighbor Harry represents the potential for a new chapter in her life—one which broadens both her social and political worldviews. Just as Mick and Harry begin to really connect over something that matters, however, their new friendship is interrupted, showing in another small way just how hard it can be to foster genuine connections with other people.

A gang of neighborhood kids has crashed the prom party. There are kids as young as four and as old as thirteen playing on the lawn. Mick orders them all home, but it's no use—the party is "all messed up." Even though Mick is angry that kids she didn't invite have crashed her party, she admits to feeling a kind of excitement at all the fuss. As the kids grow increasingly wild and run through the streets, Mick joins them—but soon trips on her dress, falls, and gets the wind knocked out of her.

The intrusion of the kids on the lawn outside Mick's house serves as a kind of metaphor, externalizing Mick's conflicting feelings about growing up and participating in the high school social atmosphere. She longs to be a kid a while longer, but knows that the new trappings of adulthood are going to hold her back from returning to childhood—just like her sophisticated dress trips her up here.

Mick returns home, embarrassed by her torn dress. She longs to put her shorts back on, but has a feeling that this is the last night she'll ever wear shorts—she's getting too big to dress like a tomboy anymore. Mick orders everyone out, changes back into her shorts, and sets off alone into the street.

Even as Mick tries to stay present in her childhood a little while longer, she knows that the clock is ticking—and that her familiar rituals, such as wearing shorts all the time and roaming the neighborhood looking for music to listen to, must soon end.

Mick walks through the streets aimlessly until she comes to a more upscale neighborhood. She goes into a familiar yard and is pleased to hear that the owners of the nice house have their **radio** on as usual. Mick sits in the grass, lights a cigarette, and listens. As a Beethoven program comes on, Mick feels the music "boil[ing] inside her."

This passage cements music as a symbol of Mick's conflicting desires. She wants badly to be known and to express herself to others, but she has a true fear of opening herself up to the world—and the people—around her. In this scene, her emotional connection with the music is genuine and intense, but she can't share it with anyone; instead, she literally has to hide in order to even hear the radio.

As the **symphony** ends, Mick feels a "terrible hurt" inside of her. She begins punching her legs and scraping her hands with a loose rock. Exhausted, she lies down in the grass. She wishes she could hear the symphony again—if she could just hear it one more time, she believes, she'd be able to memorize it. Mick falls asleep and wakes up in the dewy grass, unsure of what time it is. She hurries home in the dark, noticing that the first whiff of autumn is on the breeze.

Mick's self-harm in this passage illustrates how intense her feelings are. She doesn't have a way of expressing the very deep and complicated feelings she has—as a result, she experiences anger, violent impulses, and intense sadness.

PART 2, CHAPTER 2

As October arrives, the days grow cool and clear. Biff Brannon installs a hot chocolate machine at the New York Café—the drink is a big hit, especially with Mick Kelly, who comes in four times a week for a cup. Mick always seems sad lately, and Biff wishes he could stroke her hair or comfort her, but he can barely even speak to her casually without his voice taking on a "rough, strange sound."

Biff's feelings toward Mick are paternal—but also vaguely inappropriate. Biff, like Mick, has a lot of feelings to express and a lot of love to give—but he's kept himself so tensed up and closed off that he struggles with finding a healthy way to express what's inside him.

Biff has a lot on his mind. His wife Alice has taken ill. She is exhausted all the time and begins making mistakes while working the till during the day. One afternoon, Biff hears Alice scream in pain. He runs upstairs and rushes her to the hospital, where doctors remove "a tumor […] the size of a newborn." An hour after the surgery, though, Alice is dead. In the days that follow, Biff feels hopelessly sad and lonely in his newly widowed state and even contemplates suicide.

Biff's wife Alice's sudden, shocking, and macabre death leaves him feeling more isolated than ever—and less hopeful than ever that he'll be able to make the connections he longs to make. It's also notable that Alice's tumor is compared to a newborn; Biff desperately wants to be a father, but his wife's visit to the hospital ends in tragedy rather than the joy of new life.

One afternoon, Biff visits Singer, who has offered to be a pallbearer at Alice's funeral. The two sit in Singer's room and smoke a pair of cigarettes. Singer dresses, and the two of them go out together so that Singer can help Biff run some errands in preparation for the funeral. When Biff returns home, he sorts through Alice's things and bundles them up to give to her sister Lucile Wilson.

Biff is, during his visits with Singer, the least verbose out of the four main characters in the novel. This speaks to Biff's emotional repression—but it also shows that Biff is perhaps the least selfish and most introspective of them all.

On the day of the funeral, Biff brings Alice's things to Lucile's. Though Alice was her sister, the two are very unalike in demeanor and appearance. Lucile readies her daughter, Baby, for the funeral. As she puts waves in Baby's hair, she tells Biff about how Baby is the only thing keeping her focused on the future. She prattles on to Biff about her dreams of taking Baby to Atlanta to get a perm so that Baby will be beautiful enough to be in the movies. Lucile has Baby enrolled in dance and acting classes even though Baby is only four, and she wants to keep her special, talented daughter away from the "brats" around town.

Lucile refuses to deal with the death of her sister, instead focusing on her own dreams of fame for her daughter. She wants to get herself and Baby out of their small Southern town and far away from all the difficulties they've endured there.

After getting Baby ready, Lucile goes off to get herself dressed. She leaves Baby with Biff, and Baby performs splits and dance routines for her uncle. When Lucile returns, she and Biff talk briefly about her ex-husband—an abusive, good-for-nothing man who hasn't been seen in town for a long time—and the three of them get ready to leave for the funeral. In a quiet moment, Biff and Lucile both state that neither of them is certain they want to ever get married again.

Biff and Lucile are both lonely people. Lucile wants to run from the pain of her past, but Biff doesn't yet know how to reckon with his own sorrow and grief. Notably, however, they're both pretty sure that they don't want to get married, which demonstrates how they're both hesitant to connect with other people—even though doing so might make them less lonely.

The following evening, Biff opens the New York Café for business. His regulars are all there, including Singer, Jake Blount, and Mick. Everything at the café seems the same as it's always been. Blount shouts drunkenly about his inability to make others "see the truth" while Singer quietly nods along. As Biff watches Mick play on a little slot machine at the back of the café, he wishes he could go talk to her—but can't think of anything he'd like to say. Biff is puzzled by the part of him that "almost wishe[s]" he could be a mother to Mick and Baby.

Biff's emerging paternal desires—or maternal ones, by his own admission—demonstrate just how intense his loneliness is. Biff was unhappy in his childless (and possibly loveless) marriage to Alice, and now he focuses on impossible wishes—instead of noticing how much support he already has from his café's patrons.

Biff turns his attention to the stack of newspapers that have piled up at the register. He plans to do a deep cleaning and get organized tomorrow, clearing out the junk in the café and the office. Biff tries to read one of the newspapers, but becomes overwhelmed when a **song on the radio** reminds him of his engagement to Alice. Biff shuts the radio off.

Biff's marriage to Alice was difficult and often unhappy, but he still mourns her loss because it means he is alone—in love, in business, and in life.

Biff watches as Mick timidly joins Blount and Singer at their table. He thinks it is an odd sight—a gangly 13-year-old tomboy sidling up to a drunk and a deaf man—and wonders at Singer's magnetic power over so many people. Biff longs to join the three of them at their table, but knows he has a café to run.

Though all of the characters in the novel have, by this point, found themselves drawn to Singer, none of them has yet verbalized Singer's strange magnetism in the way that Biff gives voice to it here.

PART 2, CHAPTER 3

The more often Doctor Copeland visits with Singer, the more he comes to realize that Singer is very unlike all other white man he's met. Singer is gentle and attentive and has some ineffable "oppressed" nature within him—Copeland wonders if Singer is Jewish. One afternoon, Singer even accompanies Doctor Copeland on his rounds through town, observing him as he visits with and treats patients at the height of the chilly, brutal influenza season. As the weeks go by, Doctor Copeland stays busy treating flu patients and often comes home very late at night, too exhausted to cook dinner for himself. His own health begins suffering, and he often feels chilled and feverish.

Though Doctor Copeland has felt mistreated by—and furious with—white people all his life, he finds solace in his new friendship with Singer. Copeland wonders if the "oppressed" nature Singer possesses is due to his religion, but it never occurs to him to think of the fact that Singer's empathy and isolation might stem from the misunderstandings or cruelties he's faced due to his disability and his resultant difficulties communicating "traditionally" with others.

One night, Doctor Copeland is surprised when Portia knocks on his door at a late hour. Copeland lets Portia in—he can immediately tell that something is wrong. Copeland asks his daughter what's happened. Portia begins explaining, through tears, that Willie and Highboy recently went together to a "wicked" nightclub called Madame Reba's Palace of Sweet Pleasure. There, Willie got in a fight with another man and slashed him with a razor. Willie is now sitting in jail. At the news, Copeland has a coughing fit. When he pulls his handkerchief away from his face, it is spotted with blood.

This passage sets up two major changes in Copeland's life: the incarceration of the only son with whom he's still in contact, and the worsening of his own physical health. These factors both serve to isolate Copeland within his own misery even further.

As the sky lightens into day, Portia tells her father her plan: she wants to get several white townspeople to write letters to the judge in support of Willie, stating what an "upstanding" boy he is. Doctor Copeland turns his nose up at Portia's plan—he doesn't like the idea of relying on white people to save Willie from jail. Later that morning, Copeland goes down to the jail with Portia to try to find out more about what is happening to Willie, but no one at the jail will answer their questions. Three weeks later, Willie is convicted of assault and sentenced to nine months of hard labor. Doctor Copeland and Portia are devastated as Willie is sent away to prison in another part of the state.

Doctor Copeland wants to help Willie—but he does not want to have to beg favors of white people in order to do so. Copeland doesn't allow Portia to enact her plan, and Willie is sentenced to time in prison—though it is impossible to say whether Portia's idea would have had any effect on the racist legal institution in town.

In the midst of his grief and worry, Doctor Copeland struggles to keep up with the unending stream of sick patients who come to his house. Copeland has himself been diagnosed with tuberculosis of the lungs. Though he tries to keep healthy and strong, he finds his work wearies him. Even more than his physical health, he finds his state of mind collapsing. Doctor Copeland visits John Singer often, talking with him about everything under the sun, from the "enigma of the universe" to the matter of race in America.

Copeland struggles against the forces which threaten to isolate him even further from his family and community, turning to Singer for comfort and support. Any time a character uses Singer in this way, they're usually just trying to excuse their actions or make themselves feel better about their situation, which may be what Copeland is doing here; notice that their conversations never include Singer's own problems or worries.

Two weeks after Willie's sentencing, Portia comes by Doctor Copeland's house to invite him to a family reunion the next day, which will be attended mostly by family from her late mother's side. Copeland tells Portia to borrow anything she needs to cook supper for the family, but he doesn't show interest in attending. Portia, however, goes on to say that Hamilton and "Buddy" will be at the reunion. Doctor Copeland corrects her, reminding her that her brother's name is Karl Marx. He laments that he hasn't seen Karl in five years. Portia asks her father to attend the reunion, and he assures her he will.

Portia invites her father to come back into the fold of the family—or to at least try. Copeland, however, doesn't seem willing to see his children as they want to be seen; for instance, he doesn't accept his son's choice to go by a different name. He is still determined to exert influence over them and define them on his own terms—a fact that will create tension as he reconnects with them.

After Portia leaves, Doctor Copeland sits alone, reflecting on the struggles he's been through to get to where he is now. He laments the suffering of his people, which inspired a "madness" in him—a madness which led him to be violent to his wife. As a result, Daisy took the children to live at her father's. Eight years later, when she died, his sons still refused to speak to him—and now, several more years later, he is still "an old man in an empty house."

As Doctor Copeland reflects on the cruelties and mistakes that define his past, he feels genuine regret—but he also attributes his violence and anger to the physical, emotional, and psychological violence that has defined his life under white oppression. Doctor Copeland's life trajectory is a stark example of just how devastating the effects of racism can be on individuals and families.

The next evening, Doctor Copeland goes over to Portia and Highboy's house. The room is crowded, and at first no one notices Doctor Copeland enter. When Portia spots him, however, the room goes quiet. Portia's Grandpapa greets Copeland stiffly but pleasantly. Copeland spots his sons, Hamilton and Karl Marx, and shakes their hands. The young men refuse to look their father in the eye.

Relations between Copeland and his sons remain strained—Copeland is something of a pariah in this setting, even though he is, to his community and his patients, a beloved and benevolent force.

When the conversation in the room turns to agitated worry over Willie, Grandpapa suggests Portia read from the Bible for a while to comfort everyone. Portia reads from the Book of Luke, and when she finishes, Grandpapa says he is looking forward to the return of Jesus to earth—he hopes Jesus will place his hand upon the heads of the whole family and turn them "white as cotton." Doctor Copeland grows agitated and feels an feels an "old evil anger" rise up as he listens to Grandpapa continue talking about God, Jesus, and Heaven's angels—all of whom he believes are white with yellow hair.

Doctor Copeland hates that Grandpapa—and seemingly many other members of the family—aspire to whiteness and believe that being white would solve all of their problems. Copeland wants his people—and his family—to take pride in their blackness and stand against whiteness rather than seeking to become complicit in it. However, Grandpapa's beliefs hint at just how difficult the racist culture of the Deep South makes it for black people to value their own culture.

The next morning, Doctor Copeland visits John Singer. After their visit, as he is on the way downstairs, he passes a white man carrying a paper sack. As the two pass on the stairs, the white man collides with Doctor Copeland. Doctor Copeland looks into the man's eyes and glimpses "madness" there for just a moment. The man apologizes and continues up the stairs toward Singer's room.

Copeland and Blount meet on the stairs for the first time—and both seem rageful at the idea that someone else has been visiting Singer. This brief moment of conflict is somewhat ironic in that the two men actually have a lot in common, as would-be revolutionaries who have a hard time getting others to listen to them.

PART 2, CHAPTER 4

Upstairs, in Singer's room, Jake Blount asks who the black man on the stairs was. Singer doesn't answer him, and instead begins building a fire. Jake loses interest in securing an answer to his question and begins telling Singer about his childhood. He describes running away from home at an early age to work and talks about becoming swept up in a religious fervor. Blount shows Singer a scar on his palm and explains that he drove a nail through his hand to give himself stigmata.

In this passage, Jake Blount talks about his onetime religious devotion. He explains that he saw religion as a way to differentiate himself and mark himself as special—even if he wasn't. It's possible that Blount is still using this tactic today in regards to his radical politics.

Singer prepares some snacks for himself and Blount as Blount continues talking about the problems facing America—a place where people must rob their fellow men in order to live. As Jake goes on and on, he gets angrier and angrier. He repeats his familiar refrain, expressing frustration about going "all over [the] place" but never being able to get anyone to see the truth. Blount tells Singer that Singer is the only one who understands him.

Blount is constantly getting drunk and repeating himself, going off on the same tangents and tirades but never making any real intellectual headway. This doesn't matter to him, though—or perhaps even occur to him—because he has Singer as a sympathetic mirror for all his rage.

Blount is no longer a stranger in town. He has worked at the Sunny Dixie all summer, fall, and winter, and has found a cheap room in a house to rent. He still drinks heavily, and, in his downtime, takes to roaming the town, talking about his beliefs to anyone who will listen—and even those who won't. He visits Singer regularly and feels that the man is his only friend.

Blount has managed to establish himself physically in town even as he remains ideologically, politically, and socially estranged from essentially everyone but Singer.

Blount wakes up on the floor of Singer's room, realizing he's fallen asleep. As soon as he awakes, he begins talking about communism. He doesn't identify as a communist but wonders if he should become one. He asks Singer his opinion on the matter, and Singer writes on his little pad that he doesn't know what Blount ought to do. Blount continues talking wildly about starting an anti-capitalist organization meant to stir up trouble and start riots—but the members of the organization could not divorce themselves from their capitalist impulses.

Blount doesn't really care about Singer's opinion—he just wants Singer to confirm his own beliefs and reflect them back to him. In this way, his friendship with Singer is profoundly and even dangerously one-sided.

Singer looks at the clock and signals to Blount—it is time for lunch. Blount follows Singer down the stairs, loudly talking to the back of Singer's head about the delicious things he's planning on eating for lunch. Blount eats lunch with Singer and then follows him back to his room, where he stays all day and evening, drinking nonstop and railing against the capitalist establishment. Eventually, Blount passes out drunk.

Again, as Blount talks to the back of Singer's head on the way down the stairs, this action only confirms that he doesn't care if Singer hears or understands him—he just wants a silent cipher to serve as company.

In the morning, Blount wakes up late. Singer is gone, but has left some breakfast on the table. Jake eats and returns to his own neighborhood, but as he walks past an empty warehouse, he notices a religious message scrawled on the wall. Blount takes a red pencil from his own pocket and writes a note on the wall himself, asking whoever wrote the inscription to meet him in this spot the next day—or the day after—at noon. Both days, Blount waits at the wall for an hour, but no one comes.

In this passage, Blount gets an idea for a new way to communicate his message—and thrills at the idea that there might be another person to whom he could spew his beliefs unendingly. But no one comes, reinforcing Blount's sense of his own isolation.

PART 2, CHAPTER 5

December brings heavy rain for days on end. On the first clear day of the month, the neighborhood kids rejoice in the nice weather—but Mick does not join them outside to play. She's been staying after school an hour each day to play **piano**, and pays another student named Delores Brown 50 cents a week to give her lessons. Mick takes the 50 cents out of her own lunch money, and, as a result, is always hungry.

Music remains a way for Mick to try to mitigate her feelings of loneliness and isolation, and she is so desperate to learn more about music and create it herself that she sacrifices her physical well-being in order to do so.

After eating, Mick goes outside to join the other kids. Bubber and his friend Spareribs are playing with a gun Spareribs has inherited from his recently deceased father. Mick spots Harry Minowitz on the porch next door and makes a Nazi salute at him as a joke—in response, he goes inside and shuts the door. Mick instantly feels badly for hurting his feelings. Over the last few months Mick and Harry, who have a few classes together, have gotten closer. Mick sits down on the porch and goes into her "inside room"—a private place in her mind that's just for her.

Mick remains childish, contrarian, and insensitive—even as she seems to be working on deepening her relationships and questioning her actions. Mick feels remorse for hurting Harry, but she doesn't even fully understand the weight her cruel actions have.

Mick soon gets annoyed with the kids' chatter and decides to go the library. Bubber is playing with Spareribs's rifle, and she warns him to be careful and not let anything happen to Ralph. As Mick heads down the steps, however, she spots Baby Wilson across the street dressed in a fancy pink outfit. Bubber calls Baby over, but instead of answering him, she does a handspring. He continues calling to Baby, but she ignores him. Bubber pretends to shoot Baby with the rifle—but the safety isn't on, and the gun goes off. Baby falls to the sidewalk in a heap. Mick and the others all run over to her—she is covered in blood. Bubber runs away.

Bubber's actions in this passage will soon have vast unintended consequences not just for him and Baby, but for both their families. Bubber's carelessness and shortsightedness—the stuff of childhood—will soon be impacted forever as this event forces Bubber to grow up quickly.

The next several minutes pass by in a strange blur. Mick feels her mouth and body move in slow motion as her father comes out to help carry Baby inside the house. Baby's mother Lucile comes hurrying over, and together, she and Mr. Kelly ride in an ambulance with Baby to the hospital. As all the commotion slows, Mick realizes Bubber is nowhere to be found. Later that evening, Mick's father comes home and reports that Baby has a skull fracture but won't die. He asks where Bubber is.

The intense and surreal nature of the accident isolates Mick from her body, her thoughts, and her family—it's like she goes into a version of her "inside room" to protect herself from the fear and trauma of what's happening around her. This indicates how isolation can be a defense mechanism, for Mick and for many other characters as well.

Mick knows exactly where to find Bubber—he is in their old tree house in the yard. She goes up to talk to him. Bubber is crying, full of regret over hurting Baby. Rather than comforting him, Mick decides to trick him. She tells him that Baby is dead and that the whole town is out hunting for him. Mick says she thinks Bubber's bound for the electric chair. She tells Bubber to stay in the treehouse—in a few days, she promises, she'll bring him something to eat. Mick climbs down from the tree house and heads back inside, proud of herself for teaching Bubber a lesson.

Once Mick realizes that Baby is going to be okay, she goes back to being her playful, feisty self—and yet as she teases Bubber in this scene, she doesn't realize that to her brother, the threat of what he's done is still very real.


There is an anxious air inside the house and the whole family is discussing the shame and hardship this incident stands to bring them. At one point in the evening, Lucile Wilson calls the house and says she's coming over to have a talk with the Kellys. Mr. Kelly says he's worried that Mrs. Wilson will sue them. Mick suddenly feels terrible for Bubber and worries that something bad actually will happen to him. Mick longs to run back out to the tree house and comfort Bubber but soon Mrs. Wilson arrives in a taxi.

As the situation once again grows grave, Mick realizes that her childish games have been cruel and irresponsible and longs to amend her actions—but she can't, which forces her to recognize that growing older comes with inescapable consequences.

Lucile Wilson comes inside—Biff Brannon is with her. The two of them sit in the living room and explain that while she isn't planning on suing the Kellys or pressing charges against Bubber, she's only refraining from doing either because she doesn't want Baby swept up in a "common lawsuit" that could damage her reputation. Mrs. Wilson says that she does want them to pay for Baby's care and convalescence. The Kellys agree to pay, and Mrs. Wilson departs, promising to be in touch with a total soon.

Lucile Wilson is clearly taking advantage of the Kellys—while she's not suing them in court, she's enacting an even harsher punishment on them by extorting them outside the bounds of the law.

Mick runs out to the tree house and climbs up to find Bubber—but he isn't there. Mick realizes he must be running away. Mick runs back inside and tells the others that Bubber has run away from his hiding place. Biff Brannon, who has stayed behind, takes a search party including Portia, Mick, Mr. Kelly, and John Singer out in his car to look at Portia's house, but Bubber isn't there. He has, however, been to the house, and has left a note explaining that he's bound for "Florada." Mick suspects that the note is a ruse, and that Bubber is really headed for Atlanta. The group gets back in the car and, together, they drive down the highway in search of Bubber.

Even though Bubber has done something terrible—and has brought even more strife into his family's life—everyone bands together to try to search for him when they fear real harm might come to him. The Kellys (and the other characters helping them) stick together even in difficult times, showing that there are opportunities for real connection in their town—even if many of the main characters don't recognize those opportunities.

After they drive half a mile out of town, Mick spots Bubber on the side of the road. He has a butcher knife on him, and Mr. Kelly gets out of the car to wrestle it away from him. Bubber kicks and screams the whole way home and has to be dragged inside. At the house, Bubber throws a tantrum and cries on his bed for hours. Mick sleeps in Bubber's bed and tries to hug and comfort him in the night, but when she wakes up in the morning, he is not in bed.

Mick tries to make Bubber feel less alone, but he continues to isolate himself from her and the rest of the family out of grief and shame. Even though he's a young child and essentially not to blame for what happened, Bubber's experiences show how trauma can lead to isolation, even when others try to connect.

As the days go by and Christmas approaches, Mick notices a change in Bubber. He insists on going by his given name, George—even as kids in the neighborhood cruelly start calling him "Baby-Killer Kelly." Once outgoing and genial, Bubber becomes quiet and lonesome. At Christmas, Mick sleeps in Bubber's room again. She begs him to stop acting so strangely, and though they enjoy a nice morning opening presents the next day, Mick can't shake the sense that things will never be the same.

Mick knows that things are changing forever—not just within her, but within the landscape of her family more largely. Her attempts to connect with her brother fail as he isolates and alters himself, communicating the feelings he's grappling with to no one.

PART 2, CHAPTER 6

At eight o'clock on Christmas morning, Doctor Copeland sits at his desk studying some papers. Everything is ready for the annual Christmas party he's been giving since his first year in practice. Portia is sitting with him, and she confesses that she's worried about Willie. Though she's been getting regular letters from Willie every week, last week, Willie didn't write. Doctor Copeland says he is too busy to discuss Portia's anxieties, and urges her to go to the kitchen and make sure everything is ready.

Though Copeland and Portia seem to be navigating a new, more open kind of relationship, Copeland still has a tendency to isolate himself with his work and dismiss the needs of those closest to him.

Doctor Copeland is poring over essays entered into a contest by black students from all over town for an award of five dollars. The subject of the essays this year is, "My Ambition: How I Can Better the Position of the Negro Race in Society." The winner is to be announced at the party today. Doctor Copeland is struggling with whether to award the prize to an essay written by a student named Lancy Davis who wants to form a "Secret Organization of Colored Leaders and Scholars," then claim land to create a "mighty country" for black people in the entirety of the territory east of the Mississippi and south of the Potomac. Copeland finds the essay childish, but notes that it is the best written of the bunch.

Doctor Copeland traffics in ideas—he loves reading philosophy, pondering the ways in which he can better his community, and trying to communicate with his patients about the injustices of their society. But then, he's contemptuous of Lancy Davis's radical idea for a black-only state—a position which reflects a degree of narcissism in Copeland's character and a contempt for ideas that are not exactly like his own.

Doctor Copeland recalls making an emergency house call to tend to Lancy Davis a year or so ago after an "unsuccessful attempt at self-emasculation." In spite of the boy's troubled history and impossible ideas, Copeland decides definitively to award the prize to Lancy.

Copeland's recollection of a visit to Lancy to treat him for self-harm shows just how passionate and unpredictable Lancy is—and also hits at Copeland's pity and empathy for the boy's frustrations and anger.

Doctor Copeland goes into the kitchen, where gifts donated by the community to be distributed at the party are in sacks piled all over the floor. Portia remarks upon how generous people have been this year, but Copeland scoffs at the gifts and insists they are "not a hundredth part of what is needed." As Portia moves the presents from the kitchen to the back yard, she laments that she's not going to be able to enjoy the party—she's too worried about Willie.

Though the community has contributed a sea of gifts for the party this year, Copeland is distressed that his community is not contributing their action and enthusiasm for his cause as well. He claims to want everyone to give what they can—but in reality, he wants more than his people are prepared to give.

By 10:30, the house, porch, and yard are full of guests. Children scramble for presents while Doctor Copeland, fighting his feverishness, greets a never-ending stream of people. When John Singer arrives, everybody stares at him—he is the only white person at the party. As the initial overwhelm of the party dies down, Doctor Copeland stands before his guests and addresses them. In a lengthy speech, he states that though it's Christmas, the story of Jesus Christ has been told to each of them more times than they could possibly count. In light of that, Copeland hopes to talk to his guests about another man whose "mission was for the living"—Karl Marx.

This passage illustrates once again how Copeland scoffs at religion and perhaps believes it to be a tool used to keep black people down. Instead of inspiring them with religion, he wants to inspire them with politics and philosophy—real, actionable ideas which he believes are actually in his community's best interest.

Karl Marx's mission, Copeland explains, was to make all humans equal and to live by the commandment: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." One of Doctor Copeland's guests interrupts to ask if he's referring to Mark from the Bible. More guests speak up to ask if Marx was religious, and if he was white. Copeland attempts to explain Marx to his guests, stating that the man saw himself as "a brother to all people." Copeland goes on to explain the machinery of capitalism, the plight of the worker, and the injustice of the wealth imbalance in America. Though everyone in the room is technically free from slavery, Copeland goes on to say, they are nonetheless "forced to sell [their] strength, [their] time, [and their] souls" just to survive in the cruel world built by white capitalists.

Doctor Copeland desperately wants to help change the landscape of the black community not just in his own town, but across the region and indeed the nation. Copeland knows that his people have been barred from education all their lives—and he wants to be the one to educate them, to galvanize them, and to free them. This scene illustrates how hard it will be for him to do that, since what he wants to teach is quite different from the kinds of teaching his community is used to.

Copeland says he hopes that "the injustice of need" might bring them all together—but looking around at the faces before him, he worries that his community will never truly understand what he's saying or act upon the things he's telling them. Copeland wraps his speech up and announces that Lancy Davis has won the essay contest. He remarks that the essays he read, though very different, all contained one sentiment—the desire to escape servanthood. Copeland begins pontificating again, urging his guests to see that all their labor is "wasted" in service of the white, the wealthy, and the more fortunate. As Copeland's speech intensifies, his guests begin shouting out in support of his sentiments. Copeland is full of love and gratitude.

At the very moment that Copeland seems to believe his speech is failing, his guests actually become deeply inspired and excited by his words. Copeland had begun to fear that he'd never be able to communicate his ideals properly, and that he would be trapped forever in the loneliness of his intellectual and philosophical isolation—but now, his hope is renewed.

Copeland explains that the Christmas party he's thrown each year for the last two decades is in service of Marx's hope that society's members will one day give, according to their best abilities, to those needier than them. He urges his guests to "walk with [...] dignity through the days of [their] humiliation," and the room explodes in applasse. The postman, John Roberts, begins distributing gifts while Portia serves coffee and cake. As Copeland talks with his guests, he is full of joy and pride. They ask him questions about his speech, about Marx, and about the struggle ahead, and he answers them. All he has ever wanted is to "teach and exhort and explain to his people—and to have them understand."

Copeland believes that his ideas are at last resonating with his community, and that change is really coming. As the novel continues to unfold, however, McCullers will show just how difficult it is to sustain these kinds of revolutionary feelings—and to keep a sense of community and collective action intact in the face of isolation's allure and society's oppression.

After the party ends, the house is in disarray. Portia washes up in the kitchen while Doctor Copeland cleans the rest of the house. As he places something in his filing cabinet, he looks in his own medical file and examines an X-ray of his lungs. He has no idea what his own prognosis is. Copeland is overcome with a feeling of helplessness, misery, and foreboding.

Doctor Copeland is afraid that he will run out of time before he's able to create the change he wants to see in his community and in the world. The fact he doesn't know his own prognosis reinforces this point and shows just how scared Copeland is to confront that possibility.

Copeland returns to the kitchen. Portia confesses that even in spite of the joyous party, she can't stop thinking about Willie—she has an odd feeling that something is wrong. Copeland tells Portia not to worry, and heads outside to make some house calls. As he starts up his car, he wonders how much of his speech today will live on in the hearts, minds, and actions of his people. He is full of hope, concern, and "angry, restless love."

Copeland is so energized by the party and his guests' response to his speech that he ignores his daughter's fears and pleas for connection. He is pursuing communication with those distant from him while ignoring the chance for connection with those closest to him.

PART 2, CHAPTER 7

After Christmas, the coldest winter the town has seen in years descends. In spite of the weather, Singer resumes his long walks through town each evening, and on these walks, he traverses all kinds of neighborhoods, catching glimpses of all walks of life. As the weeks go by, Singer becomes well-known by all kinds of people throughout town—but because of his mysterious nature, different groups of people start different rumors about him. The Jewish residents claim he's Jewish, while the rich townspeople claim he's secretly rich. One Turkish man believes that Singer understands the language he speaks and must be Turkish himself.

Singer is so pleasant, gentle, and kind that each person in town wants to claim that he is just like them. This passage further explores the ways in which everyone in town claims to love and care for Singer—even as no one really understands or supports him, or makes any effort to see him as more than a cipher.

Singer thinks often of Antonapoulos. One particular memory recurs often. Singer remembers when he and Antonapoulos tried to befriend another mute man, a mill worker named Carl. One evening, when Singer and Antonapoulos invited Carl to their rooms for dinner, the night took a dark turn when Antonapoulos suddenly and inexplicably began glaring and gesturing obscenities at Carl, scaring the timid young man away. After Carl left, Antonapoulos explained that he believed Carl had drunk all their gin—Singer had to remind Antonapoulos that he himself had been responsible for draining the bottle.

Even though Singer has plenty of awful memories where Antonapoulos is concerned—and seems to recognize that in preserving his friendship with Antonapoulos, he got in the way of his own burgeoning connections with other people like him—he still misses his friend, and the feeling of being known, very deeply.

As more and more "ugly memories" of Antonapoulos surface, Singer struggles to cling to his own happy remembrances of his friend. Sometimes, Singer finds himself thinking of Antonapoulos so often that he believes he can see the man sitting in the chair in the corner of his room in the middle of the night.

Just as Biff comforts himself with even his most unpleasant memories of Alice, Singer misses Antonapoulos so much that indeed even his worst memories of the man serve as a kind of balm against his loneliness. In passages like this one, McCullers suggests that any human connection—even conflict—is better than no human connection.

Singer is also bewildered by the four individuals who have now been coming to his room to talk to him for more than seven months—Doctor Copeland, Mick, Jake Blount, and Biff Brannon. Of the four of them, the quiet Biff is the only one who asks Singer himself questions. Though their presence sometimes tires Singer, he misses Antonapoulos so much that he feels it's better to have a company than be alone. Singer has no one, now, who understands him when he talks with his hands. As a result his hands have grown restless, and he often wakes in the night to find them moving of their own accord, forming words no one can see or comprehend.

Singer is lonely and isolated in spite of his many visitors. He can't communicate with any of them equally or authentically, and this fact is beginning to wear on him both physically and emotionally. He feels some company is better than no company—but with each visit he's reminded of just how isolated he truly is, even with the constant stream of "friends" he has coming through the door.

One evening, on one of his walks, Singer goes by the house where he and Antonapoulos once rented their rooms. He watches the new tenants move about the apartment through the window—a family consisting of a man, a woman, and a young child. Signer feels an "emptiness" within him and begins the walk back to the boarding house. The streets are bustling with people full of holiday cheer, and yet Singer feels profoundly alone.

Singer clearly longs for the kind of closeness, togetherness, and understanding he had—or at least believes he had—with Antonapoulos. He doesn't feel fulfilled, supported, or truly loved by his visitors—he perhaps even feels used.

One night, soon after Christmas, all four of Singer's visitors arrive to call upon him at the same time—it is the first time they've all met. Singer tries to entertain all four of his guests at once, but the atmosphere in the room is awkward and uncomfortable. Copeland, Mick, Blount, and Brannon are stony and silent—an oddity, considering how on their own they each have so much to say. Slowly, the four begin making stiff conversation as Singer watches quietly. Singer begins to sense that each is waiting for the other three to leave, but no one budges until, amazingly, all four stand to go at the same time.

This slightly comic scene shows that while each of Singer's four visitors longs for company and connection, they are all afraid of actually communicating with other people. They only want to talk to Singer—a man who reflects their own words back to them, serving as a sounding board for their fears and anxieties instead of responding to or even challenging them. Actually communicating with another person, this scene shows, is too much for each of them.

That night, confused and amused by the goings-on in his room, Singer decides to write to Antonapoulos at the asylum. Even though he knows that Antonapoulos is illiterate, he has been writing him letters regularly over the course of the last several months—though he can never bring himself to actually mail them.

The revelation that Singer writes letters to Antonapoulos—even though they go unsent—shows just how lonely and desperate for equal communication he is. Though his visitors get comfort and relief from talking to him, it's abundantly clear now that he doesn't get the same feeling from talking to them. Writing to Antonapoulos—who can't respond—actually puts Singer in a position similar to the one that his own visitors are in when they come to see him, and perhaps it gives him some of the same (somewhat selfish) satisfaction.

After his guests depart, Singer goes to the jewelry shop where he works to write in silence. He composes a letter to Antonapoulos full of reminiscences and sad, lonely details of his daily life. He also describes, in detail, his four strange companions. He relays their quirks, oddities, and problems to Antonapoulos, lamenting the loneliness and restlessness all four of them share. Singer closes his letter by writing to Antonapoulos: "The way I need you is a loneliness I cannot bear. […] I am not meant to be alone and without you who understand."

Singer's letters to Antonapoulos are much like Mick's music she composes in her "inside room." Both the songs and the letters are, ostensibly, for others—and yet really they're both ways for Mick and Singer, respectively, to confront their own loneliness.

Singer writes until the wee hours of the morning and returns to the boarding house in the middle of the night. In his dreams, he has disturbing visions of Antonapoulos, Mick, Doctor Copeland, Blount, and Brannon naked and kneeling all around him.

Singer's dream seems to reflect his anxiety about playing the role of the only person in the world who understands his visitors—while at the same time feeling disconnected from the only person in the world who understands him.

In the morning, perturbed by the dream, Singer decides to visit Antonapoulos. He brings with him a present he's ordered specially in the mail for Antonapoulos—a moving-picture machine that he hopes will brighten his friend's days. When Singer arrives at the asylum, however, he finds that Antonapoulos is not there. He writes a note to an orderly asking where Antonapoulos is, and when she says she doesn't know, he begins to panic. Eventually, Singer finds a nurse who informs him that Antonapoulos has come down with nephritis and has been transferred to the infirmary. Another nurse offers to lead Singer to his friend.

This passage—and Singer's abject fear at the prospect of losing his friend—foreshadows events that will transpire later in the novel. It also demonstrates just how heavily Singer relies on Antonapoulos, or at least the idea of Antonapoulos. Even though he's miles away from his friend at any given time, the idea that Antonapoulos is still there gives him strength.

In the infirmary, Singer finds Antonapoulos in bed, looking bloated and pale. Singer sits by his friend's bedside and begins talking to him, detailing all that's happened to him since their last visit. The more Singer talks, the better he feels—even though Antonapoulos barely reacts to Singer's stories. Singer excitedly gives Antonapoulos his gift—but Antonapoulos is more interested in his hospital dinner than the present. Singer sets up the projector with the help of a nurse, but Antonapoulos is, again, uninterested in the cartoons the machine plays.

In this passage, Singer experiences a bit of what it must be like for his own visitors to talk to him. He speaks desperately to Antonapoulos but receives barely any response. Singer is not discouraged, however—in fact, the lack of response encourages him to try even harder to connect with Antonapoulos and win his love and favor. This scene shows that Singer's approach to Antonapoulos is different from the other characters' attitude toward Singer because Singer at least tries *to engage his friend—even if the attempts fail.*

After the cartoons are over, Singer talks to Antonapoulos a while longer. He knows visiting hours will soon be over, but he is determined to express all he can before he's asked to leave. When at last an orderly tells Singer it's time to go, Singer grasps Antonapoulos's arm and gives him a meaningful look, but Antonapoulos seems far away.

Singer continues to try desperately to get through to Antonapoulos—but Antonapoulos, cold and disconnected to begin with, has drifted even further from Singer during his time in the infirmary.

Singer returns to town and resumes his late-night walks as January continues on. The rumors about him steadily grow more and more fantastical and diverse—each person in town describes Singer as they imagine or want him to be.

This passage encapsulates the way that the characters within the novel treat Singer. They see him as a reflection of themselves, taking advantage of his silence and patience as they make him into a living mirror of their own concerns.

PART 2, CHAPTER 8

As the weeks go by, Biff Brannon continues to watch Singer intently during the three meals a day Singer eats at his café. Brannon has many questions and concerns about the world around him. He is nervous about the rise of Hitler in Europe and the rumors of coming war. He is puzzled by Singer's abrupt and mysterious comings and goings from town by train. He is also in mourning for his wife, Alice, and has even taken to splashing her perfume on his neck and using her shampoo to comfort himself.

Biff ponders questions and problems both big and small, global and local. Even in the midst of his own personal turmoil, he still has curiosity about and empathy for the problems of others, which sets him apart from many of the novel's other central characters.

Even as the café steadily begins losing money, Brannon's regular patrons continue coming by each day. Blount visits each afternoon to drink. Brannon offers Blount a job at the café, but Blount refuses to work behind a "cash box." Brannon finds himself puzzled and often frightened by Blount, but can't resist the urge to try to help him. When he tries to talk to Blount about the man's life, past, and feelings, however, Blount skirts his questions. The only person Blount ever truly opens up to is John Singer.

This passage suggests that Blount won't open up to Biff because if he were to do so, he'd actually have someone ask questions and interrogate him back. With Singer, Blount can spew his ideas to someone whose response time is slower and whose patience is greater—he can get away with more with Singer than he could with Brannon.

One Sunday, Lucile and Baby come to the café for lunch. Baby still has a bandage on her head, and she is not her usual sweet self—she is combative and droll. Biff tries to soothe Baby by bribing her with candy and ice cream. As Lucile watches the two interact, she quips that Biff would make a "good mother." Baby says she wants to go to the kitchen and visit Willie. Lucile reminds Baby that Willie is in the penitentiary, and that a new young man works in the kitchen now. Baby goes back to the kitchen anyway.

The fact that Lucile tells Biff that he'd make a good mother rather than a good father speaks to the strange kind of love he has for Mick and Baby. He wants to parent them, but there's something unusual and perhaps impossible about his desire to give love to these young girls.

Biff serves Lucile and then returns to the register, where he watches his patrons eat. He contemplates the banality of life, so much of which is focused on eating. Soon, Singer and Blount enter. As Biff watches them eat, pay, and leave, he is reminded of Antonapoulos, and grows curious about the nature of the relationship the two men once had before Antonapoulos went away.

This peek into Biff's innermost thoughts reveals a deep curiosity about the nature of the world around him on both existential and quotidian levels. He wants to know the answers to the big questions about why humans are put on earth and what the purpose of life is—but he is also curious about the small, interpersonal dramas that define those lives.

As the afternoon drags on and Biff watches several families come into the café to enjoy their lunches together, he grows lonely and tired. Eventually, he asks a waitress to watch the café so that he can go on a walk. As he heads down the street, he feels a sense of shame—lately, he has been taking walks through Mick's neighborhood, hoping to run into her. Though he knows what he's doing is "not quite right," he can't stop himself. Biff's obsession with Mick has intensified lately, and he wishes he could "give to her." Though he's done nothing wrong or untoward, he feels a guilt deep within him.

Biff knows that the feelings he has for Mick are inappropriate—though he never names them as explicitly sexual. His desire to "give to her" seems to reflect his reasonable sadness over not having parented a child with Alice, and yet there is also something distinctly shameful and strange about his desire to observe Mick so closely.

Biff does not run into Mick on his walk, and soon returns to the café to find it empty. As the afternoon turns to evening, business slowly picks up, and the new part-time worker Biff has recently hired—Harry Minowitz—arrives for his shift. As Biff talks to Harry about his life at home and at school, he feels embarrassed for asking so many questions about Harry's schedule and habits.

Biff's feelings for Mick and Baby—and his desire to parent them—seem to extend to Harry in this passage. Biff has love and wisdom to give, but doesn't know how to share those things without feeling awkward.

Biff leaves Harry at the register and goes downstairs to his office. He sits in his rocking chair and strums a sad **song** on a little mandolin he keeps down there. He dreams of adopting a boy and a girl—sweet, round-cheeked children who will look like Mick and Baby. Biff begins looking back on unpleasant and embarrassing moments throughout his marriage to Alice, and soon starts contemplating death. At the depth of his sorrow, Biff hears the voices of his customers laughing and talking upstairs. Renewed and uplifted by the idea that later on, Mick might come by for a drink or a sundae, Biff heads upstairs—the hours pass by, and Mick does not come.

Biff longs for human connection very intensely—but the kind of connection he wants is vaguely bizarre and inappropriate. He is a man with a lot of love to give, but instead of dreaming of finding a new wife or partner, he dreams of giving his love to a child. Biff's feelings for Mick and Baby verge on the inappropriate—but there does seem to be a core of sweetness and earnestness in Biff's desire to parent a child. His appreciation of music also hints at his genuine wish to connect with others, if only he could figure out how.

PART 2, CHAPTER 9

In the wake of Bubber and Baby's accident, the Kelly family—forced to repay Lucile each month—has fallen on hard times. Mick hardly ever has any pocket change anymore, and her older siblings have had to take jobs to help out their parents. Mick is forced to stop taking her **music** lessons, and she and her siblings eat the boarders' leftovers for their suppers. All of this, however, occurs in the "outside room"—in Mick's "inside room," her wild dreams of playing music and traveling the world are still alive.

The Kelly family's already tenuous financial situation worsens considerably in the wake of Bubber and Baby's accident. Mick is affected by the goings-on in her family, but she tries harder and harder to shut the strife and tension out and focus instead on her own inner world. This inner world brings her joy, but it also isolates her from the people who might comfort her.

Mick has been writing **tunes** in her notebook all winter, struggling to transcribe the music based on the way it sounds in her mind. She struggles to do so—but is determined to get the songs in her head out. One of the compositions she's most proud of is one she's named "This Thing I Want, I Know Not What." While Mick works painstakingly each day on transcribing the melody, she daydreams of becoming a world-famous composer in charge of a symphony orchestra.

Music is a symbol of Mick's struggles to express her desires and her feelings—and indeed as she composes music lately, she finds herself confronting those unnamable, indefinable wants. The fact that she has to stop taking lessons, however, foreshadows the way that those wants may remain out of reach.

The other great presence in Mick's "inside room" is John Singer. Though Mick has allowed thoughts of other people into her inside room before, Singer is the first person who's been in her head in a long time. The schoolgirl crushes of her youth don't compare to the strange, ineffable feelings she has for Singer. She has told him more things about herself and her thoughts than she's ever told another person, and while he rarely talks back to her, she relishes learning small new things about him day after day.

Earlier in the novel, Portia accused Mick of being unfeeling and unable to love—but this passage shows that Mick has had many crushes and loves, and has simply been unable to sort out her feelings about them or act on her desires.

One afternoon, Mick asks Harry Minowitz for some help with her English homework. As they study together, Harry and Mick talk about the evils of fascism and daydream aloud together about fighting Nazis. Soon, Harry has to leave for work. Mick asks him if he likes it at the café, and he says he does. Out of nowhere, Mick says that she hates Biff Brannon. He is always talking to her in a "funny" way, and Mick believes he does so because he spotted her and Bubber stealing chewing gum one time. Harry insists that while Brannon is an odd man, he's a good employer. Mick laments that while boys can usually find good part-time work, girls are forced to choose between staying in school and working full-time.

In this passage, Mick and Harry discuss the different ways boys and girls are allowed to move through the world. While Harry finds Brannon odd but benign, Mick senses the older man's fascination with her—and can't let her guard down around him or write him off as merely eccentric. Mick also points out the different ways that work functions in the lives of boys and girls—she clearly has anxiety about having to make a choice between education and helping her family, an anxiety that will come to a head later on in the novel.

Harry tells Mick he has a secret for her. He admits that when he first saw pictures in the newspaper of people in Europe "marching and singing songs and keeping step together," he admired their sense of camaraderie. Harry says that when he was younger, he often tried to hide or forget the fact that he was Jewish. Harry now hates himself, he says, for the "moral wrong" of initially admiring fascism. All he can think about is finding a way to stop fascism. He admits that he can barely focus on school, so intense are his constant thoughts of killing Hitler—and his fears of being persecuted because of his Judaism.

Harry's admission highlights the immense impacts that societal injustice can have on individuals. He wanted to believe in the images of unity and togetherness he saw in the news at first—until he realized that they only existed because of the persecution of anyone who did not fit the norm. Harry clearly has anxiety about being persecuted or harmed himself, and has developed violent fantasies to stave off those fears.

As Harry's lip begins to tremble, Mick finds herself attracted to his "warm boy smell." Just as Mick is about to give into her feelings, however, she is suddenly repulsed by them. She reaches out and shoves Harry. Harry is stunned for a moment, but soon reaches out and shoves her back. The two wrestle, laughing as they do—when Mick was younger she always used to scrap with the neighborhood boys, and she's missed it. When Mick pins Harry to the ground by sitting on top of him, however, she notices something change between them. The two exchange a nervous laugh, then Mick lets Harry up. He bids her goodbye and heads home.

Mick and Harry are clearly attracted to one another, and definitely care for one another—but they're both just a bit too immature to surrender to their feelings, which signal their arrival in the world of adulthood. The wrestling match that unfolds here suggests that Mick and Harry both want to remain children a while longer, even though they know adulthood is coming.

After dinner that night, Mick goes upstairs in hopes of visiting with Singer—but sees that his door is open, and his room is empty and dark. She heads back downstairs and looks at her song notebook, feeling dissatisfied with each of her compositions. She tries to begin composing a **symphony** but can only focus on how desperately she wants music lessons and a real piano in the house. Mick struggles to transcribe the tune in her head, but before she can get anything down on paper, Etta and Hazel come into the room, get into bed, and shut off the lights.

Everything about Mick's life is changing. The goings-on in the real world as well as in her private "inside room" are too much for her to process on her own—she seeks company and comfort in both Singer and her own music, but struggles to understand her feelings as they change rapidly from day to day. As symbols of traditional femininity and maturity, Etta and Hazel's turning off the lights hints at the way that Mick will soon have to confront the standards they embody rather than continuing to avoid those standards.

PART 2, CHAPTER 10

As February arrives and a pneumonia outbreak spreads through town, Doctor Copeland finds himself overworked, exhausted, and increasingly agitated as Portia grows more and more despondent over not having heard from Willie. Doctor Copeland loses several patients to pneumonia—including the deaf and mute child—but tries not to blame himself for the losses, instead lamenting the structural injustices that contribute to poor health in his community.

Doctor Copeland has a hard job. As a physician he's forced to witness outcomes beyond his control—outcomes that he knows, however, could be changed if only things were just and fair for members of the black community.

At the end of February, Portia comes to Doctor Copeland's house early one morning looking ill. She tells her father she has news—one of the young men who was incarcerated alongside Willie, Buster Johnson, has been released from the penitentiary, and has arrived home "crippled for life." Portia tells her father that last night she went to see Buster, and he told her a harrowing tale. He and Willie were on the same roadwork project, and frequently butted heads with a white guard who constantly picked on the two of them and one other young man. After the third young man tried to run away about six weeks ago the guards locked him, Willie, and Buster in a cold shed for three days with no food or water. As Portia tells the story, Doctor Copeland remarks that he is "deaf," and "cannot understand," but she keeps going.

In this passage, Portia delivers terrible, disturbing news to her father. The news about Willie's torture so shocks Copeland that he claims to be "deaf," unable to understand what Portia is telling him. The news is so awful that Copeland can barely register it, and he invokes deafness as a kind of metaphor for his inability to understand or comprehend the cruelty and injustice of what he's hearing.

Portia goes on to explain that all three young men's feet began swelling in the cold. On the third day of their confinement, guards entered the shed, tied the men's feet to ropes hanging from the ceiling, and left them once again. Doctor Copeland tells Portia, again, that he cannot hear what she's saying, but Portia continues. She explains that when the guards at last removed the men from solitary confinement, their legs and feet had become gangrenous. While the runaway boy recovered, Buster was forced to have one foot amputated—and, according to him, Willie has lost both feet. Buster has no idea when Willie will be sent home, but since his sentence is up in a few months, he will likely be back sooner rather than later.

The terrible torture that Willie and his fellow prisoners were subjected to reflects the virulent, violent racism which is part of Southern society. Two men's lives have been forever ruined, and Willie and Buster's brutal treatment reflects their white oppressors' total indifference to—or, worse, perverse delight in—the suffering of black individuals.

After banging her head against the table in grief, Portia announces that she has to leave if she wants to make it to work. Doctor Copeland follows her out, unwilling to let her make the long trek to work in such a state. At the Kelly house, Portia tells Willie's story to the Kellys and the other boarders, and everyone listens in rapt, mournful silence. As Mick listens, she grows angry, and states that she'd like to round up the guards who tortured Willie and kill them.

Even in the midst of her grief, Portia knows she can't slip up and lose her job. While the Kellys are sympathetic to Portia and angry on her behalf, they can't begin to understand her or her family's suffering, since the racism she and her family face will never affect white people like them.

After drinking some coffee, Doctor Copeland says he needs to get to his rounds. Portia begs him to stay with her for the day, but he refuses. He heads out on his rounds and his errands and finds that news of Willie's suffering has spread quickly through town. His people's sympathy, however, is not enough—Copeland wants justice.

Copeland has long been relying on words and speeches to make action happen—now, though, he is determined to take decisive action on behalf of his son. He knows that words are not and will never be enough. At the same time, Copeland's commitment to action comes at a cost; he can't even pause to support his daughter in her pain.

Doctor Copeland walks to the courthouse, determined to visit with the judge—even though he has little faith that a white judge will serve justice for his son. At the courthouse, Doctor Copeland demands to see the judge, but the sheriff and deputy mock him and tell him to leave. When Copeland takes a seat in the hall outside the judge's chambers and refuses to budge, the sheriff accuses Copeland of being drunk. Copeland insists he never drinks, but the sheriff strikes him to the ground. Two officers arrest Copeland and bring him down to the jail. As they force him into a cold, dank cell. Copeland tries to resist, but the officers kick him in the groin and leave him writhing on the ground.

Copeland's efforts to stand up for his son, demand justice, and resist the forces of racism and cruelty are futile. The white policemen at the courthouse resort to dirty tactics and abuse their total power over the black community in order to weaken and silence Copeland.

There are five other prisoners in the cell, a mixture of white and black men. All of the black prisoners recognize Doctor Copeland and ask what the honorable doctor is doing in jail. Doctor Copeland begins coughing terribly, agitated both physically and emotionally. Copeland spends a restless, feverish night in jail, and in the morning, he is released to find a small group including Singer, Portia, and Highboy waiting for him outside. Portia chastises her father for "messing around at a white folks' courthouse," then helps him home and into bed. Copeland immediately falls into a deep sleep.

Copeland feels defeated and exhausted in the wake of his ordeal at the courthouse. The shame and injustice of being incarcerated on false charges while pursuing justice for his son's torture is nearly too much for the doctor to bear. It's also notable that Portia says the that courthouse belongs to white people; technically, the courthouse serves the whole community, but her words point to the way that real justice only exists for white people.

PART 2, CHAPTER 11

A month after hearing the news about Willie, Mick still finds herself plagued by nightmares about him—she has been rattled to her core by Portia's story. For the last several nights, Mick has been sleeping on the sofa to avoid sharing a room with a sick Etta, so her sleep has been even worse. As dawn begins to break, Mick gets up from the sofa and runs into George's room (as Bubber is now called), where she crawls into bed with him to get some more sleep.

Mick's fear makes her lonely, and she reaches out to George—himself in the throes of purposeful isolation—for comfort and company.

When Mick wakes up next, she realizes she's slept very late. She washes and dresses, then goes into her sisters' room. Hazel and Etta are poring over a movie magazine. Mick asks Etta how she's feeling. The irritable Etta—sick with pain from trouble with one of her ovaries—snaps at Mick. Mick pulls her hatbox full of **compositions** out from under the bed and warns her sisters that if either of them messes with her private things, she'll kill them.

Mick tries to be nice to her sisters, but the three girls clearly have some communication issues. They can never seem to speak nicely or calmly to one another. Meanwhile, Etta's sickness hints at the way being a woman comes with unique pains and costs—ones Mick will have to face as she grows older.

Summer is in the air, and Mick can't get a new piece of **music** out of her head. Mick takes her hatbox out to the porch, pulls out her notebook, and begins writing. Harry comes over and sits on the porch, and Mick finds herself distracted by his presence. The two of them walk home from school together almost every day now, discussing religion and politics and their places in the world. Harry complains about the heat, and Mick agrees that summer has come early. She suggests they go swimming in a creek in the woods, and Harry eagerly adds that they should have a picnic the following day, when he doesn't have to work. Mick agrees, and Harry promises to return with bikes tomorrow morning. As Harry walks away, Mick thinks about how good-looking he's grown up to be.

Even though Mick is having trouble connecting and communicating with the members of her own family, she's found a new outlet for connection, however unlikely, in the passionate Harry. The two are able to talk to one another with ease, even when it comes to difficult things, and this heightens Mick's sense of comfort with him.

The next day, Harry brings a set of bicycles over early in the morning, and he and Mick set out for the woods. The ride is several miles long, and at a filling station along the way, the two of them stop for a drink. Mick gets herself a beer, and Harry follows suit.

Mick is experimenting with what it means to be grown up and free.

At the creek, Harry jumps right into the cool water. Mick is self-conscious in her too-tight bathing-suit, which is borrowed from Hazel, and she worries that Harry will soon realize that she doesn't actually know how to swim very well. Mick tries to make herself feel more confident by telling Harry a tall tale about her prowess as a diver, but it only makes her feel ridiculous. Mick summons her courage and jumps in. She finds that she's a better swimmer than she believed herself to be, and she and Harry play in the water for over an hour. At one point, while drying in the sun, Mick suggests they swim naked. She and Harry sheepishly remove their suits and stare at each other's bodies for a long time before Harry, embarrassed, pulls his back on.

Mick and Harry's day in the woods continues to be—for both of them—an exploration of the possibilities of adulthood and its attendant freedoms. The two of them are also recognizing, however, that pushing their relationship to new heights will change the way they view one another and the way they communicate with one another—perhaps permanently. Decreasing one's own isolation, this moment suggests, can feel risky as well as rewarding.

After lunch, Harry tells Mick that he thinks she's pretty. Mick, flustered, suggests they head for home, but Harry asks if they can stay a while longer. They lie down together in the grass and look up at the birds flying overhead, making small talk for a while until Harry turns to her and kisses her. Soon, the two are having sex. During the act, Mick feels as if "her head [is] broke off from her body and thrown away."

McCullers writes the sex scene between Mick and Harry in sharp but abstract terms—it's almost as if it's over before Mick and Harry even realize what they're doing. They reach out to one another in their shared (and separate) loneliness, hoping to connect in a new way—but the act won't necessarily bring them together in the ways they're hoping for.

During the ride back, Harry seems sad and confused, and tells Mick that they've got to "understand" what they've done. He fumbles for words as he tries to express himself to Mick. She suggests they sit down a while—as soon as they do, Harry starts crying. He confesses that he'd never even kissed a girl before. While Harry talks, Mick toys with an ant, then squashes it between her fingers and buries it in the ground. Harry worries aloud that they have committed a sin and should get married to absolve themselves. Mick says she's never going to marry any boy.

Mick and Harry's conversation in this passage is strange and one-sided. Harry has remorse and anxiety over what they've done, but Mick still holds on to the childlike, destructive energy she's possessed all along as she tunes Harry out and crushes an ant to entertain herself. Though Harry and Mick have done something that should theoretically, bring them closer together, it's actually tearing their friendship apart.

Harry says he's going to leave town—he wants to get a job as a mechanic somewhere else. He knows that if he stays at home, his mother will be able to "read this in [his] eyes." Mick asks Harry to look at her and tell her if he can see a difference in her—he stares at her a long while, then nods. Harry tells Mick that in a month or two, he'll write her from his new address—he instructs her to write back and let him know whether she's "all right." Mick is confused, but Harry just repeats that that's all he needs to know. The two resume their 16-mile trek home—all the way back, Mick feels "very old." As the two reach their homes, Harry shakes Mick's hand awkwardly, then goes inside.

Mick and Harry are afraid that what they've done together has changed something in them fundamentally—and of course, they both claim to be able to see the act written all over each other's faces. Mick and Harry have isolated themselves in the world of adulthood—they don't seem to have crossed over together, but rather to have begun long, lonely, separate journeys. This turn of events reinforces McCullers's broader point that loneliness is in some ways essential to being human, no matter what individuals may do to try and get closer to each other.

Mick walks inside to find her family sitting all together in the kitchen and dining room telling stories and riddles. As Mick walks into the room, hardly anybody notices her presence. After eating some leftovers, Mick gives Ralph a bath in the kitchen sink. Alone with the baby and Portia, Mick asks Portia if Portia notices anything different about her. Portia says she does—and advises Mick to put some grease on her sunburn.

The fact that Portia cannot actually tell what Mick has done just by looking at her face shows Mick that adulthood is nothing special. She's just like everyone else, and what she's done this afternoon, though momentous to her, isn't really remarkable at all.

Mick goes out to the yard to be alone. While she's out there, her father calls her back inside, telling her she has a telephone call. Inside, Mick goes to the phone to find Harry's mother on the other end. Mrs. Minowitz asks if Mick knows where Harry is—he hasn't come home from their picnic. Mick says she has no idea where Harry is at all.

Harry has skipped town, just as he planned to. He is determined to isolate himself from his friends, family, and town rather than admit to the shame and disappointment of what he's done—even though, as Mick is already experiencing, the change isn't actually perceptible to anyone else.

PART 2, CHAPTER 12

The days have grown hot again as March has gone on, and the Sunny Dixie Show is always busy. Jake Blount hates the warm weather and is not looking forward to a long and stifling summer. He has not been feeling well of late, plagued by headaches and a bloating in his gut. He knows his troubles stem from alcohol, but he continues drinking heavily.

Though Jake Blount is a Southerner through and through, the heat perturbs him—and even serves as a kind of ill omen in this passage.

Jake has, at long last, met the man who chalked a Bible verse on the wall in his neighborhood. The scrawler is an elderly sidewalk preacher with "bright and crazy" eyes named Simms. Simms is desperate to convert Jake, and follows him around nonstop, often screaming at him about his sins. Jake is happy for any company at all, though, and often indulges Simms, sometimes even buying him snacks and drinks at the corner store.

Simms's preaching—which is loud and incessant, though he gets through to no one—mirrors both Blount's failed attempts to get his anti-capitalist message through to the townspeople as well as Doctor Copeland's repeated attempts to get the black community to organize and stand up against oppression.

As March turns to April, the weather continues to heat up. Tensions at the Sunny Dixie, too, begin to escalate, and quarrels frequently break out between white and black customers. Jake even gets into a brawl with two of the other carnival operators after he overhears them disparaging his "Red Bolshevik" politics. After tussling with the men, Jake becomes paranoid, constantly afraid that others are making disparaging remarks about his appearance and his beliefs. He starts feeling horribly lonely—the only thing keeping him afloat is his friendship with Singer, whom he believes is the only person in the whole world who understands him. Jake's behavior grows increasingly erratic. He takes to screaming his rants out his window at night, drawing the ire of his sleeping neighbors.

As Jake's loneliness escalates and begins to calcify, he tries desperately to communicate with those around him—even though his attempted methods include screaming out a window into darkness and leaving cryptic notes on walls. Jake's fatal flaw is that he simply doesn't know how to effectively or kindly communicate with his neighbors, no matter how much he wants to. It makes sense that he feels Singer understands him—Singer is the perfect person for him to communicate with, since Singer's silence mirrors the silence of the world all around Jake.

Throughout April, more and more disturbing and threatening happenings unfold. Jake finds the dead body of a young black man near the Sunny Dixie showgrounds, and frequent fights continue to break out at the park during operating hours. Simms takes to preaching in the middle of the showgrounds, and Jake begins chalking socialist messages on the walls around town and writing up pamphlets to distribute to the other townspeople.

Even as violence continues to escalate—demonstrating the white community's failure to hear, respect, or even afford basic humanity to the black community—Jake and Simms continue shouting their beliefs into thin air. Their failures to communicate allegorize the larger failures in communication between the people of the Deep South.

One afternoon, Jake goes up to Singer's room to visit him, but finds that the room is empty. As he heads back downstairs, though, he runs into Singer, coming in from outside. Jake asks where Singer has been, and Singer writes on his pad that he has been to visit Doctor Copeland's son Willie, who has returned from prison with his legs cut off. Jake becomes angry on Willie's behalf and knows something must be done. He asks Singer to take him to visit the Copelands, and Singer agrees to bring him around later that evening.

When confronted with a tangible kind of violence that hits close to home, Jake Blount decides to get angry—and yet all of the strife that's been occurring at the Sunny Dixie has seemed inevitable or unmotivating to him.

PART 2, CHAPTER 13

That night, Jake and Singer go together to Doctor Copeland's house. Portia greets them at the door and takes their hats for them, explaining that her father is very ill. There are several people in the warm living room, including a "boy without legs" lying on a cot in the corner. Portia asks the men to wait a minute while she goes to check with her father and see if he's able to receive visitors—but Jake insists he's come to talk with Willie.

Portia tries to gently introduce everyone in the room to one another, hoping to foster goodwill and peace rather than the automatic resentment that defines relationships between white and black people in this town, region, and era.

Portia introduces Willie to Jake, insisting to her brother that Jake is a friend of Singer who can be trusted. The other men in the room, she explains to Jake, are Buddy, her brother, and two friends of Doctor Copeland's: Marshall Nicolls and John Roberts. Jake asks Willie to tell him about his troubles. Willie explains that since he's returned home, he's experiencing phantom pain in his missing feet. He believes the pain stems from the fact that after his feet were cut off, they weren't given back to him—he has no idea where they were taken or what was done with them.

Willie's debilitating and torturous phantom pains aren't just physical—they're psychological, too, born perhaps out of the trauma of having been maimed so brutally by his white oppressors for no good reason. Willie knows he'll never be able to get back what he's lost, but his desire to know where, at least, his feet ended up allegorizes his desire for justice more broadly.

Jake asks Willie to give him the names and addresses of the other young men with whom he was locked up—as well as the guards at the penitentiary who tortured them. Willie says he's worried about Jake, a white man, getting him into trouble. Jake insists that Willie is already in a heap of trouble. He asks Willie what happened to the guards, and Willie says he heard they were fired. Jake asks what became of Willie's other "friends"—but Willie says he wasn't ever "friends" with the other boys. Portia explains that it's too painful for Willie to talk about the other two young men, or even think about seeing them again.

Jake doesn't understand the potential trouble—and the potential cost—that rising up or fighting back against white oppression could bring upon black individuals. Jake is, as always, quick to take a stand and make a scene—but slow to show empathy or rational thought.

Jake, overwhelmed with the trauma and injustice before him, becomes dazed. He wishes he could leave, but when he looks around for Singer, he realizes his friend has gone back to see Doctor Copeland. Highboy and Lancy come in through the back door bearing gifts of wine and peach puffs. Lancy says he's come to check on Doctor Copeland and send his regards. Portia leaves the room to tell her father that Lancy is here—she says he has a book to give the young man.

Jake wants to take loud, decisive action on Willie's behalf—he doesn't see that the smaller, quieter ways in which Willie's community rallies around him are both more calming to the young man and, unfortunately, a reflection of the only option that is often available to black people whose lives are constricted by white oppression. Jake's complete sense of overwhelm here suggests McCullers' broader point that, if white people really understood the horrors that black people face, they would be overwhelmed with sadness and fury as well.

After Portia leaves the room, Marshall turns to Jake and tells him that he believes the best course of action is to lay low, stay quiet, and try to "do [their] part toward extending *amicable* relationships." Jake says he doesn't understand what Marshall is saying. Willie plays a sad, dark **song** on his harp. Jake feels flustered and again wants to leave—but when the others begin passing around the wine and snacks Highboy and Lancy have brought, he becomes more comfortable.

Marshall's opinion reflects a course of action which is the lesser of two evils. He knows that black individuals have no power against their white oppressors, and that in order to maintain the barely-functioning peace in town, the black community must shoulder injustice and cruelty in silence.

Marshall brings the conversation back to what he had begun to explain to Jake a moment ago. He tells Jake that it is important for the "members of the colored race" to focus on uplifting their community rather than doing anything to "impair" the "amicable relationships" with their white neighbors. Jake, again uncomfortable, asks where Singer is. Portia explains that Singer left some time ago. Jake turns to Willie and makes him a proposition. He offers to take Willie, Buster, and the other boy with whom they were imprisoned around town in a wagon and tell their story—then explain why such horrors befell them to the whole of the community. Jake is still in a confused haze and loses track of his words. Embarrassed, he leaves the room and walks down the hall—soon, he finds himself standing on the threshold of Doctor Copeland's room.

This passage embodies Jake's entire way of moving through the world. He doesn't listen to Marshall's warning about the kind of behavior and demeanor needed to preserve the tenuous peace in town, and instead tries to get Willie, Buster, and their friend—three young men who have already been brutalized and tortured—to put their lives on the line once again. This scene shows that Jake is an ineffective organizer and agent of change because he can only talk—he can't listen.

Doctor Copeland, seeing Jake standing in the door, orders him to get out of his house. Jake asks why the doctor wants him out, and Copeland replies that Jake is "a white man and a stranger." Jake does not leave, however—instead, he crosses the room and sits in a chair near Copeland's sickbed.

Copeland, very rightly, doesn't trust Blount—he would rather be alone than risk the unpredictable company of this stranger.

Over the next several hours, the two men have "a long, exhausting dialogue." When it is past midnight, Jake suggests they have one final word about the "strangled" and "wasted South." Jake takes a long drink from a bottle of liquor and starts a lengthy, ranting speech. He declares the 13 states that comprise the American South "the most uncivilized area on the face of [the] globe." Jake rails against the billion-dollar corporations that exploit the labor of their workers, the disease, and the starvation which plague the lives of poor Southerners. Copeland tries to interject to discuss the problems black people face, but Jake continues railing against capitalism.

Even in a private conversation with Doctor Copeland, Jake is unable to respect or give any credence to the doctor's point of view. This passage cements Jake's failure as an organizer and an ally—though he claims to know the "truth" about the ills that plague the South and America more largely, he can't listen to or respect his comrades' fears and struggles. He can only see his own point of view, which is why he can't ever get anyone to really listen to him.

Copeland tries to tell Jake he's "getting off on a tangent" and "giving no attention" to the problems black people face, but Jake is on a roll—he ignores Copeland once again and continues railing against unfair wages. Doctor Copeland speaks up once again, agreeing that as far as black people are concerned, the South has always been fascist. He draws a connection between the plight of the Jews of Europe and the plight of black Americans. Copeland states that Singer is a Jew, and because of this, understands him when no other white man does. Jake is shocked and insists Singer is "pure Anglo-Saxon," but Copeland is certain.

In this passage, Jake even displays a bit of prejudice upon learning that Singer is likely Jewish. Again, this passage serves to show that Jake doesn't have room for any perspectives or plights that aren't his own. His politics are not intersectional—he cares only about the evils of capitalism and makes no room in his head or his heart for the struggles that racism and other kinds of prejudice create throughout the community he claims to want to change.

As dawn begins to break, Doctor Copeland tells Jake that he hopes they have not spent all night up talking "to no purpose." They have not yet discussed the most important thing of all—what must be done to correct the injustices they've discussed. Jake says that they need to expose people to the truth; only then will they rise up against oppression. Jake proposes starting a chain letter and trying to reach as many people as possible. Copeland, however, says that talk will get nothing done. What is needed, he believes, is action—he has learned this the hard way after realizing his failed belief in "the tongue instead of the fist."

Doctor Copeland has, for a long time, believed that he could change the world with his words. He has come to realize, however, that communication of ideals and entreaties alone will always fail—what's needed is action. He's come to see this fact plain as day—but Jake, unable to take his comrade's words seriously, doesn't believe him yet.

Jake doesn't believe that Copeland's ideas about actions and demonstrations will be effective. Copeland says he wants to try to get Jake to see eye-to-eye with him—but as Jake quiets down, Copeland seems too exhausted to quarrel any longer. He warns Jake, after several moments of silence, not to "stand alone." He then asks Jake if he believes in the injustice and inequality facing black America. Jake says he does. Doctor Copeland reveals that he has a plan to lead over a thousand of his people all the way to Washington. He offers Jake the chance to join the cause—but warns him that if he enters it, it must "be all" to him. He asks Jake, once and for all, for a yes or a no.

Though Copeland can obviously sense that Jake doesn't fully respect or understand his ideas, he still wants to try to get through to the man—and to help him learn that standing alone with his ideals will get him nowhere.

After thinking, Jake declares that Doctor Copeland's plan is not the right approach—he predicts a group of a thousand black people would be arrested before they made it out of town. Doctor Copeland is seized by a coughing fit and accuses Jake of mocking his plan. The men argue back and forth until Jake says he believes the only way to secure rights for black people across the South—and the entire country—is to dismantle capitalism first. The two men shout and scream at one another, hurling insults back and forth. At last, Jake calls Copeland a "short-sighted bigot," and Copeland calls Jake a "white fiend" before collapsing against his pillow, foamy blood pooling at the corner of his mouth. Jake sobs and runs from the room.

Jake is profoundly unable to respect Copeland's point of view. His own internalized racism—not a hatred of black people, but simply a callous, cruel dismissal of their intelligence, humanity, and authority on issues concerning their community—shows that Jake really is doomed to stand alone, shouting his beliefs on street corners without ever affecting any change.

PART 2, CHAPTER 14

Mick has recently found herself disconnected from her "inside room"—she feels the need to be busy and around people all the time to avoid the fear that comes over her when she's alone. Mick takes to following Singer throughout town whenever he goes out—but keeps as much of a distance from him as she can so that he doesn't know she's behind him. She also tries to keep her visits with Singer in his room to twice a week, to make sure he doesn't get tired of her.

Mick's inside room was her one refuge from the crushing pressure of her loneliness. Now, feeling barred from entry to that place, she seeks to ameliorate her loneliness in other ways—namely, by trailing Singer throughout town, desperate for his company.

Things in the Kelly house are unstable and uncertain—the family is strapped for cash due to their arrangement with Lucile Wilson, and on top of it all, the sickly Etta isn't able to work. Mr. Kelly tries advertising his watch repair skills by putting signs up around town, but the extra publicity doesn't do a thing for business. Mick does her best to forget about Harry. When he writes her a postcard, as he promised he would, she responds with a simple "O.K."

Mick's troubles swirl around her, creating a sense of strangeness and instability. She is caught in the middle, unable to do anything to help her family or change her circumstances, forced to insist she's doing "O.K." when she can barely feel the ground beneath her feet.

One of the boarders moves out, and Bill takes the man's room. Mick, who has been sleeping on the couch, moves into George's room, but still has trouble sleeping. She lies awake half the night most nights, full of terrible fears about calamity befalling her family. Because of her nighttime fears, Mick tries to keep George awake with her by talking to him and playing games with him. After George falls asleep, she tries to distract herself by doing math in her head. She wonders if Singer has ever felt the same fears she has, and she wishes she could talk with him about her frightening new feelings.

Mick is desperate to share her feelings with others and to have them reflected back to her. She seeks this comfort from George, but George is not the same "Bubber" he used to be—and though Mick longs to connect with Singer, she's afraid of using up her precious time with him or scaring him off. Of course, the truth is that Singer does often feel similarly lonely, but the novel's central irony is that even though these many lonely characters have so much in common, they can't quite connect over their shared challenges.

One night in June, Hazel announces that she's heard about a job opportunity at Woolworth's. Hazel asks Mick if she's interested. Mr. Kelly answers for her, explaining that Mick is too young to work—she needs to stay in school and finish growing. Hazel agrees that the question was impractical—Mick shouldn't go to work. Mick, however, asks how much the job pays a week. When Hazel tells her it pays ten dollars, Mick becomes determined to take the job. In spite of her father's initial hesitation, as soon as Mick says she wants the job, her parents both explode in happy laughter. That night, Mick waits on the porch for Singer to come home so that she can talk to him about the job, but after waiting several hours, she gives up and goes inside.

Though Mick's parents know that the right thing for her to do is to stay in school and hold onto her childhood a little longer, they're instantly ecstatic when the prospect of an end to—or at least more help with—their financial woes comes about. Mick knows that her family needs the money, but is desperate for someone to tell her she's making the right choice—since she knows that she'll be giving up a big part of herself by taking on the job.

The next day, Hazel and Etta loan Mick some nice clothes and get her all made up for the interview at Woolworth's. They pluck her eyebrows and rouge her cheeks, and by the time they're done, Mick thinks she looks at least 16. As Mick waits for Hazel to take her down to the store, she wanders upstairs to Singer's room. She doesn't want to take the job anymore, but has come to realize how much her parents are counting on her to do so. She hurriedly explains the opportunity to Singer and asks him if she should take the job. He doesn't answer her right away, but after a second, he nods. Mick and Hazel go to Woolworth's, and, after a brief interview, Mick is hired.

This passage shows Mick's fate: to become a cog in the machinery of capitalism in spite of all her attempts to be an individual and stand apart from society's norms. Mick's last hope was Singer—but she hews so closely to his word that after he encourages her to take the job, she seals her own fate and unthinkingly does what he tells her to, despite knowing what she's giving up.

PART 2, CHAPTER 15

It is time for Singer to make yet another journey to visit Antonapoulos. He brings with him several gifts and a crate of fresh strawberries for his friend. The long train journey on the crowded car does not agitate Singer—he is wrapped up in thoughts of his four visitors. He is perturbed by a recent quarrel between Blount and Copeland—they are both so heated whenever they talk to him about it that he hardly understands what has transpired. He feels guilty about letting Mick down, too—she came to his room one morning full of questions, but he couldn't understand her, and simply nodded. The speech of strangers, too, has become more frenzied and unintelligible to Singer lately, and as the train pulls away from the station, he falls asleep puzzling over these miscommunications.

The revelation that Singer told Mick to go ahead and take the job—but did so without actually realizing what she was asking him—is sad and painful. Singer's communication issues lately are strange to him, and seem to portend that something is very wrong. Singer is perhaps burnt out, tired of playing the role of mediator and sage—and on some level, perhaps he is rejecting his visitors' attempts to get through to him as a way of freeing himself from his responsibilities to them.

Singer wakes later in the afternoon and watches the countryside roll by outside his window. He is excited to see his friend, who will surely be out of the infirmary by now. He has been dreaming of Antonapoulos more and more lately, and can always see his face very clearly in these dreams.

Singer's love for Antonapoulos endures—the dreams of his friend's face that once frightened him now comfort him. He misses Antonapoulos more and more all the time, perhaps because he is increasingly burdened by being a mirror for his four visitors.

The next morning, the train pulls into the station and Singer disembarks. He orders himself a lavish breakfast at the hotel in town, then dresses and shaves for his visit with Antonapoulos. When he arrives at the asylum, he finds that Antonapoulos is not in the infirmary. He makes his way to the main office and writes on a piece of paper from his pad, inquiring where Antonapoulos has been moved. The young man behinds the desk writes a note back, and when Singer reads it, he grows full of despair. Antonapoulos is dead.

The realization that Antonapoulos is dead flattens Singer completely. Singer has been feeling connected to his friend in spite of the distance between them—and now realizes that this sense of being connected was false all along, a fiction he made up in his mind. In this moment, McCullers seems to question whether even seemingly meaningful instances of interpersonal connection are actually real.

Singer returns to the hotel and gathers his things. He steals soap, a pen, toilet paper, and a Bible from his room before leaving and adds them to his bags. The train back home doesn't leave until nighttime, and Singer finds himself wandering the town listlessly and aimlessly. While walking past the pool room, he spots a group of three deaf men signing at one another inside. Singer hurries in and greets them, and the men happily clap him on the back and order him a drink. Singer signs to them and asks if they knew Antonapoulos. When the men reply that they did not, Singer becomes drained and cold, and soon the men begin to leave Singer out of their conversation.

In this passage, Singer stumbles upon a chance for connection and community just when he needs it most. Rather than take advantage of the opportunity and make some new friends, however, Singer isolates himself within his grief and alienates the three men—the first people like himself he's met in years. It's also notable that Singer steals from the hotel, when he used to worry about Antonapoulos's stealing. It seems that Singer is inadvertently becoming more like Antonapoulos.

Singer nearly misses his train that night, catching it by the skin of his teeth. As the train pulls away from the station, he eats the berries he brought for Antonapoulos one by one. Afterwards, Singer falls asleep for the 12-hour remainder of the journey. When the train gets to the station, the conductor has to shake Singer awake. After stopping by the jewelry shop to collect "something heavy," Singer returns to the boarding house. Up in his room he drinks an iced coffee and smokes a cigarette, then pulls a pistol from his pocket and with it commits suicide.

Singer's suicide is quick, final, brutal, and perhaps unexpected. Singer has been the kind, gentle, affable glue at the center of the novel, but this act shows just how tenuous his connection to happiness, hope, and indeed his own life has been all along. Having Antonapoulos—another person who was the same as him, who recognized him, and who served as a sounding board for him—sustained Singer; now that Antonapoulos is gone, he feels he has nothing and no one.

PART 3, CHAPTER 1: MORNING

It is the morning of August 21st, 1939. Doctor Copeland sits in his bare kitchen wrapped in a gray shawl. Most of his furniture has been moved to Portia's house—everything is ready for his move to Grandpapa's farm "except his own mind." Portia tells Copeland it's time for him to go, but Doctor Copeland refuses to be rushed. Portia goes out to the hall, and her grandfather warns her that if they wait much longer, their journey will last into the night.

Several weeks after Singer's death, it's clear that things in town have changed—and that his visitors' lives have deteriorated. Without Singer—and with the added stress of decaying race relations in town, as portended by the argument between Blount and Copeland—Copeland's health has atrophied, and he is, however reluctantly, giving up and leaving town.

Copeland ignores the voices in the hall and sips his coffee slowly. He hears many voices in his head—the voices of Spinoza, of Karl Marx, of his "grief-bound" people, and, strangely, of Singer. As Copeland reflects on his tattered relationships with his own children and the children throughout the community who have been named after him, he wonders who will carry on the mission to which he has devoted his life. He has tried to live a purposeful, meaningful life—but now wonders what the value of all his days truly has been.

Copeland doesn't want to abandon his mission and leave his people behind, but he is utterly physically and spiritually defeated. This passage implies that Singer's death has shaken Copeland to his core—it was, perhaps, the final blow that necessitated Copeland's departure from town in order to recover.

Portia comes back into the kitchen and begins putting on her father's socks and shoes. Copeland asks why Portia is forcibly removing him from his house and sending him to live on her grandfather's farm. Portia reminds Copeland that in order to get well, he needs to let others take care of him. Copeland insists that he would have been able to recover better in his own house. Portia asks her father why he is "determined to grieve"—Copeland tells her he feels he has failed. Portia says that many other people are grieving Singer. Copeland urges Portia to be quiet—but privately thinks of how powerfully the loss of Singer has hit him.

Copeland doesn't want to leave his home—even though he knows he must. He continues fighting up until the last minute, even as he realizes that he's too physically and emotionally weak to do anything to resist his daughter's plan for him. Portia's comment that other people are also grieving Singer might have been a sign for Copeland that he's not alone, but notably, he doesn't take it that way; he just sees her words as a reminder of his isolation.

Copeland also regrets the horrible, angry feelings he's been wrestling with since his argument with Blount. Now, in the midst of his grief, he can't even remember what they were fighting about. His anger is also stoked by his grief over what happened to Willie—his twinned love for his people and hatred of their oppression has been wearing on him. At last, Copeland stands up and asks Portia to fetch his coat for him—he is ready to leave.

Copeland's feelings of loss and defeat are intense—but he knows that there's nothing to be done about them now. It's almost as if without Singer in his life, Copeland feels unable to handle or sort through these problems alone—and as the third part of the novel progresses, McCullers will show how this is the case for all of Singer's devoted visitors.

Outside, Copeland stares at his automobile, which is full of boxes of books, medical files, and his office furniture. Grandpapa has brought his ancient old mule, and it is pulling an empty cart. Karl Marx, Highboy, Portia, and Willie crowd into the automobile and attempt to get Copeland squeezed in too, but he says that he would rather ride in the mule's cart. Karl Marx warns Copeland that the journey will be bumpy and long, but Copeland retorts that he's ridden wagons before.

Copeland's desire to ride in the bumpy, uncomfortable wagon rather than his own automobile suggests he sees the journey as a kind of penance or test. He wants to isolate himself from comfort and ease either out of grief, shame, or defiance.

Copeland climbs into the wagon, and Grandpapa tells him that he is very glad to welcome him back into the fold of the family. Doctor Copeland insists that after a month or so, he'll be back in town. Grandpapa says that as long as their family sticks together, struggles alongside one another, and helps each other out, some day they will earn "a reward in the Beyond." Copeland scoffs and says what he wants is justice while he lives. Copeland feels motivated to speak the fire in his heart to his father-in-law—but he notices that the old man is not listening to him anymore and is instead focused on getting his old mule to start the long journey home.

Doctor Copeland has been welcomed back into his father-in-law's life in spite of his transgressions against Daisy, Grandpapa's daughter. Though Grandpapa cites religion as the reason for his forgiveness, Copeland scoffs at the man's words. Doctor Copeland has come to learn just how futile it is to try to galvanize someone to support an ideal, a message, or a dream through speech alone. Meanwhile, Grandpapa's focus on simply getting home is reinforces the idea that for black people in the Deep South, the necessities of simple survival often interfere with larger struggles for justice.

PART 3, CHAPTER 2: AFTERNOON

Jake runs through town, attempting to ignore the nausea rising in his throat. A riot has broken out at Sunny Dixie, and he is fleeing the violence unfolding there. After stopping to vomit in an empty alley, he continues running. Nobody could have stopped the fight that broke out today between two young men—one white and one black. Jake blames alcohol, the heat, and the tensions that have been simmering beneath the surface of Sunny Dixie all summer.

As a race riot breaks out, Blount flees rather than helps. This is the ultimate physical illustration of his ideology—he wants change and revolution in the abstract, but doesn't support the cause or show up as an ally when he's needed most.

Though Jake tried to stop the fight, even throwing himself into the fray at one point, he himself got hit hard in the head and retaliated, lashing out with his fists even as he kept his eyes closed tight. At least one young black man died in the fray while Jake was momentarily unconscious, knocked to the ground by a strong blow—and upon seeing the dead body, Jake fled.

Jake was willing to participate in the fight up to a point—but became too frightened for his own life to stay and fight or support the people he claims to be behind.

As Jake continues jogging through the streets away from Sunny Dixie, he runs into Simms preaching on a street corner. Simms spots Jake and shouts at him, warning him that God can see all of his transgressions—and will remember them when judgement comes. Jake taunts Simms and moves along, ignoring Simms's entreaties for him to return for a sermon that evening and get "saved."

Simms continues preaching, unaware of the violence unfolding just a few minutes away. His ignorance—accidental or willful—reflects Jake's own failures to listen or act, as well as the novel's broader theme of the wide chasm that often stretches between ideology and action.

As Jake wanders onward, he thinks of Singer's death, and of how sad and angry it has made him. He feels, in the wake of Singer's death, that all the private thoughts and feelings he shared with the man have evaporated. Now that Singer is dead, Jake is alone in the world.

Again, McCullers shows how Singer's death has left his visitors and friends feeling hopeless, alone, and defeated.

Jake runs back to the room where he's been staying and gathers up his things, packing his clothes and socialist pamphlets into his bag. He wonders where he will go next—he knows he won't leave the South, but admits that he is going to defy Copeland's advice to never attempt to stand alone. Jake has come to believe that he is better off alone. Jake laments that he quarreled with Copeland—the two of them, he believes, are two of the few men in the world who know the truth, and he is sad that they could not find a way to work together. Jake decides to go to Copeland's house to make amends before skipping town, and after packing his bags, he walks there—but finds the shutters drawn and the house abandoned.

Jake refused to listen to Copeland when it mattered, and nowhe has lost his chance to connect and organize with the man forever. Jake seems determined to continue on his path and try to keep sharing the truth throughout the South—but he hasn't learned anything about community or togetherness and remains intent on standing alone in spite of Copeland's warnings. Even in this situation where Jake explicitly realizes that he and Copeland should have been able to work together, isolation still *persists as the defining force in these characters' lives.*

Though going by the Kelly house—the place where Singer killed himself—gives Jake a bad feeling, he heads there next to ask Portia where her father is. Portia tells him that her brothers and grandfather took Copeland out to the country earlier in the morning, but refuses to give Jake the address. Copeland was so sick after their last fight, Portia says, that he nearly died. She begs Jake to leave her father alone and let him live in peace. Jake dejectedly leaves.

This passage confirms that Jake has shattered his black comrades' faith in him by failing to listen to them or act on their behalf when they most needed him.

A heavy rain begins to fall as Jake makes his way to the New York Café. Biff Brannon greets him happily, stating that he had a premonition Jake would arrive with the rain. Brannon offers to clean and press Jake's wet clothes for him, but Jake says all he wants is some food. Brannon gets Jake some meat and a drink. As Jake begins eating, he tells Brannon that he's never going to be able to pay him back all he owes him. Brannon says he doesn't care. He tells Jake he's read about the riot at Sunny Dixie in the paper, and reveals that Lancy Davis was one of the two young men killed. He also says that the paper cited "labor agitation" as the reason for the outbreak of violence.

Brannon's somewhat coy communication of the newspaper's headlines to Jake shows that Brannon wants Jake to admit to his involvement in the riot—but Jake, of course, is unable to do so even though he is, as the headlines suggest, the cause of the riot.

Jake tells Brannon he's skipping town, and Brannon says doing so is probably a good idea. He offers to shelter Jake for the night, but Jake insists on setting out right away. Even as he says he wants to leave, however, he wishes deep down that he could stay in the safe warmth of his favorite booth at Brannon's café. Jake rests his head on his arms and, without realizing it, falls asleep. He wakes up some time later and realizes Brannon is shaking him out of a nightmare in which he was wandering through a sweating crowd of people, searching for a place to put down a heavy basket.

Jake's dream reflects his fear and sense of exhaustion at the prospect of moving on to a new town full of new people and new challenges. Jake is weary of traveling alone—but he can't seem to get his act together to ever stay in one place.

Jake combs his hair and bids Brannon goodbye. Brannon once again tries to get Jake to stay a little while longer, but when he can't get Jake to budge, he simply offers him some money. Jake thanks Brannon for his generosity and walks out of the café. He walks through town, hating everything he sees, feeling glad to be leaving the dilapidated, poor little city. As he wanders down the highway, he is uncertain of where he'll end up—but again thinks to himself that he is determined to remain in the South.

Even though Jake has a palpable hatred for the South and what it stands for, he's determined to stay within its bounds. A part of him, perhaps, still believes he can affect change in the community—even as he ignores the ways in which he's failed to implement change and growth within himself, and even though he's seen first-hand how that failure has kept his attempts at reform from taking root.

PART 3, CHAPTER 3: EVENING

Several months into her job at Woolworth's, Mick is feeling despondent and hopeless. She fears that all the plans she dreamed and all the **songs** she wrote in the "inside room" are worth nothing—she has been caught in the "trap" of work. This evening, after working an overtime shift, she doesn't feel like going home. She decides to go to the New York Café to have an ice cream and a cigarette. She heads to the back and sits in a booth, where she removes her uncomfortable earrings and tries to get her face—pinched from hours of smiling at customers—to feel normal again. Brannon comes over, greets Mick, and offers to take her order. She asks for a chocolate sundae and a beer.

This passage shows Mick, now a cog in the machine of work and capitalism, reckoning with the changes that have come into her life recently. This scene ties in with the novel's theme of the individual versus society as Mick realizes that she's been swept up—perhaps forever—in the unending loop of labor and exhaustion that defines much of adult life.

Mick sits and thinks about the loss both of John Singer and of her own youth and innocence. She was the one to find Singer's body after sneaking into his room to play his **radio**. Mick has become unfeeling and robotic in the weeks following Singer's death—she goes to work, smiles through her shifts, then comes home and sleeps like a log until the next day.

Even though Mick is dealing with pain, grief, and trauma, she's forced to push it aside and focus on remaining sunny and employable—she's left school, and work (which requires her false enthusiasm) is all that's available to her now.

Brannon brings Mick her sundae and her beer, and she pretends to be absorbed in cleaning her fingernails so that she doesn't have to talk to him. As she drinks, she reflects on how she's been feeling "shut out from the inside room" lately—she barely ever hears **music** in her head anymore, and wonders if it's because the store has taken all her energy. She is always tired now, and even though she has Singer's radio for herself, she barely has any interest in playing it. She still dreams dully of saving up for a piano, but now her dreams are tempered by fears of worrying how she'd pay for the instrument and where she'd keep it.

The trauma of discovering Singer's body while trying to listen to his radio has bound music up with fear and grief inside of Mick's mind. Over the course of the novel, she's chipped away at her childhood in ways small and large, voluntary and involuntary—but this final blow to her youth and innocence has barred her from the inside room and forever changed her. Even her favorite fantasy of the piano is now marred by dull, adult concerns.

Mick beats her forehead with her fist. She hates that she is "mad all the time" in a way very different from the childish bouts of anger he used to feel. She feels "cheated" by her job at the store. She tries to stay positive about her prospects and stoke her dream of one day owning a real **piano**—but can't shake the feeling that all the time spent in her "inside room" has ultimately done her no good at all.

Mick's dreams are still alive, but they are just barely flickers when they used to be all-consuming flames. She realizes that her childhood has evaporated, and that the road ahead of her will be long, hard, and lonely.

PART 3, CHAPTER 4: NIGHT

It is 17 minutes to midnight, and the New York Café is deserted. Biff heads to the bathroom to put some of Alice's old perfume on his neck, then fetches some flowers for the kitchen and arranges them in the front window, saving one zinnia in his pocket for himself. He steps out into the empty street to admire his work, then takes a little walk down the block. He wonders why he is bothering to keep the café open all night when hardly anyone ever comes by—there is no profit in what he's doing. At the same time, he knows he'll never close the café at nights for as long as he runs it.

Biff wants to keep the café open because he always wants the lonely outsiders like himself, Blount, Mick, and Singer to have a place to go. Biff understands the pain of loneliness and isolation, and wants to take up the mantle Singer has left behind and become the member of the community who signals solidarity and support to others.

Biff returns to the register and does some work on a crossword puzzle he's been filling in all night. When he gets stuck on a clue, he takes the flower from his pocket and plucks the petals from it, playing she loves me/she loves me not. The last petal spells out love—but Biff knows there is no one around for him to love. He hasn't even been able to give his strange, ineffable fatherly love to Mick.

Biff still feels terribly alone despite his role supporting others, just as Singer once did. He hasn't figured out a way to express himself to anyone he loves or cares for, and he remains isolated with his feelings—the depths and nature of which not even he truly comprehends. He worries, perhaps, that all chances of understanding himself and the world around him have vanished with Singer.

Biff's thoughts turn to Singer—he wonders why the man killed himself. Biff was tasked with making all of Singer's funeral arrangements and was shocked and touched to see how well attended the funeral was, both by friends and acquaintances of Singer whom Biff recognized and by total strangers. Biff is lost in thought when he suddenly glimpses, all in one rush, a vision of "human struggle and of valor." He has visions of people who labor and people who love—but the very instant he begins to comprehend the questions on his mind, the answers all vanish again.

Seeing the way people loved, respected, and mourned Singer allows Biff—for just a moment—to understand the beauty of human life and human struggle even in the face of terrible loneliness, cruelty, and sadness.

As Biff calms himself down, he feels "throttle[d]" by terror and suspended between two worlds. He tells himself to pull himself together and behave sensibly. He splashes some water on his face, then goes out to raise the awning. After completing his last task of the night, he returns inside the café to await the dawn.

Though understanding his love and reverence for Singer—and the love and reverence the whole town felt for the man—has allowed Biff to come close to understanding many of the mysteries of "human struggle," the answers to these questions still elude him in the end, and his life, McCullers suggests, will go on as normal despite all that's happened.

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